

A woman wearing a woven hat, sunglasses, and a light-colored jacket stands in profile, looking out over a field of tall grass at sunset. The sky is filled with golden light and scattered clouds. The title 'Changing the Script' is written in a white, elegant cursive font across the upper right portion of the image.

Changing the Script

LEE WINTER



Chapter 1

Worst. Movie. Ever.

ALEX LEVITIN HAD JUST BROKEN the number-one rule of Hollywood. She was late. And not just a little.

Naturally her beat-up, elegantly rusting '97 Prius had chosen today of all days not to start. Then her Lyft driver had insisted on taking a “shortcut,” cavalierly waving away Alex’s long and exacting set of directions.

Bursting through the doors at the upmarket Lemontree Lounge and Grill, she scanned the room for the face of a film executive who was probably no longer here.

She’d researched rising-star producer Caroline Bassett in the past week and now knew about the woman’s nut allergy, shoe size, and the fact that two months ago she’d left a TV soap she’d been producing to join the film studio—after a flurry of executives had been shunted out the door.

Alex’s eye finally fell to an elegant, spray-tanned, sallow-cheeked woman at a corner table who appeared as though air was her favorite food group.

She waited? That was...unexpected.

Caroline Bassett wore expensive suits and ambition well. Her perfectly coiffed, highlighted blonde hair was a tribute to conservative news anchors and industrial-strength hairspray. She reclined against her white-washed wooden chair, waving around a cocktail in one hand and tapping away at an iPhone with the other.

Alex slowed her scrambling pace to a saunter, hands running down her black pants as if to erase the impossible stench of hopeless, late, and unprofessional.

Caroline glanced up, their eyes met, and her lips curved into a smile so fake it might have been airbrushed on. She dropped her phone to the starched white tablecloth.

“Alexandra.” She rose, air-kissing her.

“Ms. Bassett, good afternoon.”

“Caroline, please. It’s a delight to meet you.”

It is? Alex was pretty sure no one at a major studio would be thrilled to meet a relative unknown like her. “I’m so sorry I’m late. My car—”

“Never mind.” Caroline waved away her excuse. “My time’s short, I’m afraid, so we’ll have to skip the formalities.” She paused, gaze darting to someone at a distant corner table. “I had *no* idea Cade was with Byron.” She sounded gleefully scandalized.

Alex turned to see the A-listers in question canoodling in a small booth. “Um...”

“Did you receive our script?” Caroline asked, her tone and focus suddenly as sharp as the crisp seam on her cream silk shirt. “*Shezan: Mistress of the Forest?*” She rolled her tongue all over “mistress” as though speaking of a sexual thriller instead of a tawdry, B-grade flick that reeked worse than a gutter outside a pub on a Saturday night.

“I did. I’ve got to say, I was very surprised to get your message.” Alex had no clue what was in her indie-filmmaker repertoire of liberal, philosophical think-pieces that made any Hollywood studio think *she* should direct this movie.

Truthfully, Alex had never seen a worse script in her life. Oh, it wasn’t just the sleazy male lead character, the cheap violence, or the asinine dialog. Nor was it the excuse to have a lot of loin-cloth-wearing Amazons of color that, as a lovely bonus, added a weird racist tinge. Her biggest objection was the ending. It hooked up the unrepentant, creepy poacher with the sweet nymph who guarded the animals of her forest.

What. The. Hell? How was it even funded? By a major studio no less?

A twenty-something waitress interrupted, her ample bust straining against her blouse, a fourth, unopened button threatening to give up its day job. The nametag suggested she was called ‘Desire.’ Unless the restaurant had misspelt Desiree, this was undoubtedly another unemployed actress.

“May I get you a drink?” Desire’s eyes lit on Alex as though she was the tastiest morsel on the specials board. “Or something to eat?” She pointed to a paper menu on the table.

Alex ran her eye down the list of exotic dishes that included eighteen-dollar raw-beet and tofu appetizers with unpronounceable garnishes.

Caroline’s lips pursed.

Oh, right. Hadn’t she said she was in a hurry? “I’ll stick to drinks.”

The tight lips instantly ceased their puckering.

“Do you have any Ethiopia Organico coffee?” Alex asked.

“We have forty-seven coffee varieties, including that one.” Desire beamed.

“Good. I’ll take a cup. No milk or sugar.”

The waitress’s gaze lingered a beat too long before she turned to Caroline. “And for you, ma’am?”

Caroline waved her away wordlessly.

The waitress nodded and disappeared.

A smirk edged Caroline’s lips. “You have a fawning groupie.”

“Or more likely she’ll have a script she wants me to read. And a boyfriend.”

“No doubt.” Caroline’s smile finally spread to her eyes. “I thought you English only ordered tea?”

“I’ve been in LA fifteen years now. I’m adapting.” Alex cleared her throat. “As are you. From TV soaps to movie studios in five years. Impressive.”

“Yes,” Caroline agreed. Her smile became shark-like. “I am.”

Alex smothered a laugh at the lack of modesty. “So about *Shezan*... My main question is, why me?”

“We’ve seen your work. Loved it.” Caroline’s smile resumed its earlier fakeness. “Especially that climate-change flick. Bold. Brilliant, darling. Art! You’ve turned a lot of heads.”

Art? Riiight. Wasn’t schmoozing supposed to be a little more subtle?

The organic coffee arrived, along with a coquettish smile before Desire departed with a jaunty swish of hips.

Definitely an actress.

Alex reached for her coffee. “Are you talking to a number of directors or just me?” She choked down a swallow of the scalding drink, wishing she could convince herself to appreciate the slightly burnt, bitter flavor. She’d

read somewhere that the coffee beans deal had lifted a whole Ethiopian village out of extreme poverty so, on principle, she refused to hate it.

“You’re our first choice.” Caroline’s words would probably have held more weight if her gaze hadn’t been roaming the room restlessly, weighing up everyone in a suit.

Sure I am. Alex wondered how many others had turned this down before her. After all, *Variety*, usually the even-handed bible of the industry, had called *Shezan: Mistress of the Forest* the most toxic film ever green-lit, and had helpfully listed the assortment of directors and writers who’d said yes and later fled. No one smart would touch this dumpster fire now.

Hell, Alex was only here for the free lunch and networking. It wasn’t a shrewd move to say a flat no to a powerful studio. She half-listened as Caroline launched into a spirited defense of the wonders of *Shezan*. The executive dropped in carefully chosen keywords, although each came with an asterisk. Autonomy, *within reason*. Script rewrites allowed, *with studio input*. The sets had already been built and were ready, *using the previous directors’ visions*. And she’d get a big say in expenditure, as long as she *stuck to the limited budget*.

“How limited?” Alex asked curiously.

Caroline mumbled a small number before throwing a gulp of neon cocktail down her throat.

Surely Alex had misheard. “Seriously?”

“Look, it’s not one of our top-listed projects.” Caroline dabbed her lips with a paper napkin. The crimson smear left behind looked like a blood stain. “You’d be amply compensated, of course. But due to the situation with creative people linked to the project...ah...leaving us so unexpectedly, well, we’ve already sunk significant funds into it that we can’t get back.”

“Why did the others leave?”

“Various reasons.” Caroline gave a small shrug. “Who cares? They’re gone, and we want you. So, bottom line, we need someone talented and dedicated, who can make something feel larger than life on a tight budget. Someone who wouldn’t mind shooting in a distant location like New Zealand. That’s why we cast around for a well-credentialed indie director.”

Alex’s bullshit detector shot up. “There are plenty of indie directors.”

“Yes, but we need someone like you, who can bring to life a female-focused project, make it *worthy*.” She looked as if she was debating whether

to whip out a pink pussy hat to sell her point. “And we need someone who also can fix not only the film, but also the, erm, small image problem *Shezan* has at the moment.” Caroline swirled her cocktail.

Small image problem? *Most toxic film ever* was not a *small* image problem.

“I’m not going to lie to you; we need your talent, your eye. You’re a perfect choice for us.” Naked ambition burned in Caroline’s gaze. Despite Alex’s years in LA, she had never gotten used to seeing this. The rawness of it was unsettling. There was a reason you shouldn’t look directly into the sun.

“We can do bold things together,” Caroline concluded, patting Alex’s wrist with cool, spindly fingers. “And *I* want this deal.” Another shark grin. “Very much.”

Alex took a sip of her coffee and debated whether to be honest. Honest...in LA. “I believe you,” she finally said. “So would I be right in thinking you want this deal so much because you’re new to your job? You need a few quick wins? Maybe fixing the ‘worst movie ever’ is your play to be noticed? That’s ambitious,” Alex said lightly. “I’m curious...as the studio’s only female executive, was it your idea to be the one to win over the gay, feminist filmmaker?”

“Hmm.” Caroline’s expression sharpened but her lips twitched. “You know, Alexandra, I like you. You’re clever. Clever women go far in this town. Of course, they go much farther when people never realize just how clever they are.”

“Ah. Did I just break the fourth wall by pointing out the game in play?” Alex’s lips curled.

Caroline snorted and one immaculate eyebrow lifted. “I see your English streak’s still in you after all.” Her laugh was carefully curated. “You prefer to cut to the chase? All right: Tell me, shall we do this? Do you want a ‘quick win,’ too? One everyone will be watching? Big risk, but huge gain.”

Far too big a risk. Even though Alex was between jobs, and no one in her indie world had sent her anything exciting lately, her reputation was all she had. There was nothing she’d heard today that had convinced her to put everything on the line. For all the experience she’d get in working with a major studio, there was no avoiding the fact that this film was a reputation killer.

There was no nice way to say this. “Look, Caroline, I appreciate the offer and that you thought of me, but I don’t think...”

Caroline’s phone jangled to life. Glancing at the name on the screen, she rose. “Excuse me, I must take this call.” She left without waiting for a reply and strode into the nearby bar area.

Alex glanced around at all the networkers at adjacent tables. Then she turned her own phone off mute and scrolled through her mail. One new message made her scowl. She read her ex-girlfriend’s email, stomach plummeting, then read it again, much more slowly. *Holy...*

She dialed a number she knew by heart. “Bettina!”

“Alex?” The accountant’s crisp, professional voice had once made her melt into puddles. Those days were long gone.

“You... I...” she choked out. “You said my finances were ‘fab.’ You said you’d sorted everything for me!”

“What’s wrong?” Bettina’s unflappable voice asked. “Breathe and tell me.”

Breathe? I’ll give you ‘breathe!’ “You’ve forwarded me an IRS bill for \$45,000!”

“Ah that. Yes. It seems the IRS changed a couple of components of their tax act and I wasn’t aware.”

“What? Isn’t that your actual job?”

“Not exactly,” Bettina said in a dismissive tone. “They’ve tightened some areas on individual deductions related to independent film companies like yours, and reallocated certain write-offs into a new category for which you don’t fit the criteria anymore. No one could have predicted that.”

“Predicted... Bettina, it’s *\$45,000!* I don’t have that kind of money lying around.”

“No need to get hysterical.”

“Hysterical!”

“Not to mention glass half-empty. It could have been much more if I hadn’t found you some new deductions. Some of my film clients were hit with much larger bills.”

“Bettina, this is so damned typical. You’re all front. Do you even know what you’re doing?”

“If this is going to degenerate into insults, I’ll hang up. I did your taxes for free, you know. I think I’ll send you the bill now that we’re no longer together.”

“Which I will shred along with your phone number.”

“*So* dramatic. You’re obviously in the right line of work. And I don’t have to take this abuse.” The line went dead.

Alex dropped her phone back on the table and scowled. Quickly she ran through her options. She didn’t own much, so there was nothing to sell. It made no sense to accumulate things given her nomadic lifestyle, shooting all over the world. Her apartment was a rental. Her bank accounts weren’t bulging, either, because while her small production company’s movies broke even these days, any profits were reinvested into her next project. Her Londoner parents were retirees who made do on the pension, not that she’d ask them or anyone she knew for money.

So her options had just narrowed into one. She’d do a movie so far beneath her that her tattered dignity might never recover. *Christ.*

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. She’d come to Hollywood with dreams to make movies that *meant* something. What was *Shezan’s* message? How to devalue near-naked women via interpretive dance? How to keep a straight face while saying lines that boiled down to, “Hark, Forest Mistress, beware the white man’s fire stick”? Or was it actually some fiendishly clever metaphor about powerful, white, entitled men always winning, so don’t even bother fighting the system?

Alex rubbed her head.

But what if...she did the impossible? What if she took a leaf out of Caroline’s book? *Big risk, huge gain...if I succeed.*

A tiny flame of challenge curled inside. Imagine if Hollywood’s much-mocked “worst script” could be turned into something good? What would *that* do for her reputation? This could make or break a career. Besides, she’d never been to New Zealand before. So maybe it’d be fun, seeing somewhere new.

On top of that, hadn’t Caroline said in her email that Chloe Martin was its star? In one of those six degrees of separation things, Alex’s best friend, Bess, and Chloe’s best friend, Summer, were dating each other. That connection meant Alex had encountered *Shezan’s* star fairly often in her social circle.

The New Zealand woman was likable, laid-back, dry, and amusing. That was a relief. Divas were a nightmare Alex could do without, especially given the drama she'd have ahead with such a low-quality script. A script she'd make sure was improved drastically if she took the project.

So...really, taking this job would be like doing her friends a favor, wouldn't it? Ensuring Chloe's role was improved, not to mention helping all those poor chilly Amazons get a better shake. Hell, Alex was practically doing a service for humanity.

Ugh. So lame. She tapped her glass with a short fingernail... Maybe if she made a list. She was good at lists.

Alex set to scribbling on a napkin.

Cons:

Crash and burn if I don't pull it off. *Everyone* will know.

Hollywood is watching closely and I may not get a second chance after this.

Pros:

Chloe is cool—no diva drama.

I'll be seen as a genius if I succeed.

Pay off the IRS...happens even if the film tanks.

Amazons!!! (Scratch that. You are *not* fifteen.)

Her last point made her roll her eyes. That reminded her. Grabbing her phone, Alex looked up who was doing *Shezan's* costumes. Who would she have to growl at to get something less prurient on the design board?

The name staring back at her made her do a double take. Only recently signed to the production, apparently, was one Skye Storm—the brilliant costume designer Alex had worked with on one of her first films, *Heaven's Blood*. Never a more talented, warmer, or eccentric soul had she encountered.

It was weird that Skye was doing *Shezan* when she had her pick of films these days, but Alex wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. As she imagined the possibilities ahead, her stomach began to calm. Two wildly creative, un-mainstream brains working on this could actually produce something original.

Right. Alex added Skye's name to her pros list. She studied it for a moment.

Am I seriously thinking of doing this?

Caroline joined her again, looking suitably contrite. "Sorry about that. Studio VPs are like toddlers. They always want your attention *now*." She cocked her head. "So, you were saying something about how you don't think this is the film for you?"

Alex shook her head. "I was actually saying I don't think I can see a better way to challenge myself than with *Shezan*." She smiled. "I'm good to go. No doubts."

Caroline's eyes slid to the napkin with Alex's list scribbled over it, and her lips quirked. "Yes. I can see that."

"Well, no doubts now," she corrected with a grin.

"Excellent." Caroline signaled for the check, clearly done with the conversation, her mission accomplished. "I'll have the contract sent over in an hour. You'll need to be in New Zealand ASAP. *Shezan*'s EP, Quincy Blackman, has been down there already for a few months. He's going stir crazy without a new director to move things along. Be a dear and Skype him the good news and put him out of his misery. I'll send you his details." She rose as the check arrived. "Welcome aboard. The studio will be delighted."

Alex nodded, her stomach dropping in freefall at her fate being officially sealed, before remembering her manners. She thanked Caroline for that cup of bad, village-saving coffee and watched, numb, as the executive floated over to the counter to pay. She couldn't back out now.

Her phone beeped a reminder of an upcoming appointment. Already?
Time flies when you're selling your soul.

* * *

Alex was packing furiously early the next morning when her phone rang. She knew who it'd be without looking. Elizabeth "Bess" Thornton—Alex's best friend, fellow Brit, and formerly America's most-hated TV villain—often multi-tasked with calls at this time of day.

"Hello, Bess." Alex tossed rugged brown boots into her bag. "This is an ungodly hour, even for you."

"Did I wake you? I'm terribly sorry." Bess's voice came in tight puffs down the phone. Rhythmic footfalls on a treadmill slapped in the background.

“Not this time.” Alex held up two jackets before tossing the thicker one in with her boots. “Where’s the fire? It’s barely six.”

“I heard the news from Skye.”

Already? Alex should have guessed. “Of course you heard.” Skye Storm wasn’t just a costume-designing genius but LA’s networking queen. One of the side effects of Bess being involved with Skye’s daughter, Summer, was that Bess now got all the industry gossip first.

“You didn’t even think to talk to me first?” Bess asked. “Why not? Aren’t we friends?!”

“Ease up, love. I only signed the contract last night!”

“Contract?” The rhythmic running ceased abruptly. “Alex? Are you directing a new film?”

“Wait, aren’t you calling about *Shezan*?”

Bess’s hiss at the name of the movie was probably not a good sign. “No! I called because Skye says a lot of industry people are furious with Bettina for screwing up their taxes. I assumed you were caught out, too, so I called to check. What’s this about *Shezan*? Isn’t that the diabolical *Tarzan/Sheena* rip-off everyone’s shredding? That thing Chloe’s starring in?”

Alex winced. “Well, I think it’s more a ‘reimagining’ than a rip-off.”

“Oh, yes, they’re *reimaginatively* ripping off someone else’s ideas and making it worse.”

“It’s not *that* bad.”

“Not that...” Bess sucked in a deep breath. “You’re saying it’s not just pretty girls bouncing around in leather bikinis?”

“Well, no, not bikinis. It’s more like this tiny, skinny piece of leather loin cloth—”

“And *this* is what you’ve signed on to? This?”

“Well.” *Shit*. “Yes?”

A ragged breath followed. Then damning silence. Finally: “Good God, Alex, why?”

“It’s a challenge.” She hoped that sounded more convincing to Bess’s ears than it did to her own. “I want to see if I can take a movie everyone is writing off and turn it into something worth watching. If I do that, everyone will be talking. Besides, I won’t be alone. I’ll have Skye transforming the Amazon costumes into something powerful. And it might even be fun to try something new.” There, that sounded plausible, didn’t it?

“Alexandra, last time I checked, you create indie masterpieces about intense emotional journeys using esoteric societal metaphors. You don’t do *fun*.”

The upside *and* the downside of best friends was how well they knew you. “Fine! That isn’t the only reason I’m doing it.”

“So Bettina did mess up your finances?”

“Yeah. And now I have a tax bill only *Shezan* can fix.”

“Which is why I called. Why not come to me?” Bess sounded hurt.

Back when they’d dated, Bess sometimes got this tone to her voice, silently asking whether Alex would like any financial help. Alex’s gut reaction was the same now as then.

“Look, you’re my best friend. And *that’s* why.” Alex willed her to understand. “Money is complicated, and it creates a messed-up dynamic. People act weird. I don’t want that between us.”

“It doesn’t have to be weird. Money’s just...” Bess cast around for a word. “...a tool that can make problems disappear. I have more of it than I know what to do with now. I’d love to help you if you’ll let me.”

“No, Bess. It’s not that I don’t appreciate the offer, but it *would* be weird. For me. Every time I looked at you, I’d know that I owed you. Even if it was just a loan, still, I’d think about it all the time. I don’t want that. I love us as we are—equals. I’d do a hundred *Shezans* before I took a cent from you.”

“I really wish you’d let me help.” Bess sighed. “But I understand.”

“Thank you. And it’s better this way, trust me. Besides, if my bold, insane plan comes off, and I turn this trash into something good, this could end up being the best decision of my life.” She slapped on her most confident tone to sell it.

“All right. If you’re sure?”

Sure? Oh hell, not even close. “Yes. Absolutely. But thanks for the thought, love.”

“Well.” Bess sounded mollified. “If you change your mind, I’m only a call away.”

“I know. And it’ll be fine. One movie and everything’s solved.” How simple it sounded. Life was never that easy.

“Okay then. Keep an eye on Chloe and Skye out there in the wilds. You know how close they are. Chaos will be their middle names.”

“Oh lord.” Alex laughed, picturing them up to mischief together. Skye had virtually adopted Chloe as another daughter. “I’ll probably come back to LA having aged twenty years, with a shock of white hair.” Alex ran her fingers through her short red strands.

“If anyone could pull that look off, it’d be you.” Bess sounded affectionate. “I’ll leave you to it.” She rung off.

It was nice to have Bess’s solid faith in her. *She* didn’t doubt Alex’s abilities to pull off this impossible plan. If only Alex could convince herself as easily.

Chapter 2

Lost in Translation

AFTER THIRTEEN EXHAUSTING HOURS SQUEEZED on a plane watching more syrupy family movies than she had the stomach for, Alex now found herself cooped up in a rental car. Not ideal given what a nervous driver she was when off the beaten track. Still, New Zealand didn't have that many people, did it? So, she'd be fine.

Thick grasses; huge, jagged ferns; and fat, towering trees crept in on either side, with moss-covered trunks as shaggy as carpet. The vegetation was so densely packed up against the road that driving felt like being shot through nature's torpedo tube. Except twistier. And much colder.

Alex hadn't anticipated the way New Zealand's icy blue fingers could somehow claw their way right inside her jacket and button-down shirt until she felt the chilled hand flat upon her chest. Even with the heater on, she was shivering. Not for the first time, she considered detouring to the nearest town to pick up some thermals. If only she had any clue where the nearest town was. On account of the fact she was a little...disoriented. Sidetracked? Okay, *fine*, she was lost.

Somehow between Auckland International Airport and here, she'd gotten all turned around. She'd given up trying to figure out the confusing GPS two minutes after leaving the airport, and when she'd stopped to fill up her car and ask for directions, she'd merely been told to turn right at a nearby dairy.

Mystifyingly, no cow-milking farms had materialized, and the only business she'd passed for miles was a cheery convenience store. The car's map book had gotten her this far, but now nothing made sense.

She glanced around again, sure she'd been past here already. The road signs looked suspiciously like ones she'd seen half an hour ago. It made no sense. Alex liked things that made perfect sense. Logic, lists, and problem-solving were her middle name. Ordinarily.

A huge, gnarled tree jutted into the ominous skies. Okay, *that* she definitely recognized. Damn it. She was going in circles.

Her gaze swept the stunning landscape. Any other day, she'd slow right down and admire the vibrant green scenery, but she had a film set to get to. Specifically, a rented farmer's paddock just outside the tiny town of Ika Whenu, near the only slightly less tiny Te Aroha. She should reach it if she ever got out of Mangatarata Forest. Which was looking like a big if. She'd have to pull over and consult the map book again.

She remembered the road suddenly widening at a clearing in the next mile or so. So she'd be able to stop there, figure out her bearings, and...

Oh bollocks. There! Right there! Alex stomped on the brakes. She'd gone right by it.

Putting her car into reverse, she backed quickly into the small clearing, then turned off the engine and exhaled. Glancing around, she noticed she was blocking a small dirt lane beyond which lay dense forest.

Suddenly, a roaring black blur burst out of a hole in the scrubby bushes. The motorcycle looked about a second away from slamming into the side of her car.

No! Alex's eyes widened, her hands frozen on the steering wheel as she gasped.

Half a second to impact.

Hunching her shoulders, Alex braced herself for the hit.

At the last moment, the motorcycle swerved sharply as its owner wrenched the machine down on its side, flattening it to just miss the nose of the car.

Even so, it was so close that one spinning, horizontal rear wheel passed under the front and came back out again. The machine continued on its trajectory, propelled along in a sickening, screeching slide across dirt and

undergrowth before coming to a rest in the middle of the road in a fiery trail of sparks.

Oh fuck!

Alex flung open her door and sprinted over to the unmoving, black-leather-clad rider, who was pinned under the bike.

“I’m so sorry!” she called. “I didn’t know that was an actual road.”

Stupid comment.

“Well, now you do.” The reply was low, annoyed, and unmistakably female. It was accompanied by a pained grunt. “Forestry Road’s where the Maramarua Forest dirt-bike trail ends.” She looked past Alex to her car. “You’ve blocked the exit where bikes slow down before they turn onto the main road.”

“Sorry, I just got here.” Alex’s gaze swept the downed bike and its rider. “Are you hurt?”

“I’ll know when I’m vertical again.” The woman tried to shift and gasped. Her face contorted under the open-faced, black, retro-style helmet. “My leg’s stuck. Do you think you could make yourself useful and pull the front up a little while I...?” The woman stopped mid-sentence and peered up at Alex. “Oh. Never mind.”

“What?”

“You’re the size of a sparrow. It’d probably kill you. Even faster than you almost killed me.”

Alex glanced down at herself. Her thin, black, tailored pants, jacket, and white shirt didn’t exactly bulk out her frame. And okay, she was kind of...well...waif-ish. Genetics and all that. Her nerdy black-framed glasses didn’t help her look any more solid, she supposed. But she had muscles, if you hunted for them, and...

Who am I kidding? The last time a cameraman in the field had asked her to shoulder his unit while he changed a cable, it had almost pinned her to the ground.

Adrenaline was kicking in now, though. Couldn’t people do amazing acts of strength in a crisis? She’d read that somewhere. With a firm step forward, Alex grasped the handlebars, gave the woman a determined look, and said, “Don’t count me out. I may surprise you. Ready?”

With a skeptical look, the woman said, “Guess I don’t have much choice.” She bit her lip, braced her arms against the bike, and nodded.

Alex could do this. She would! She pulled with all her might. Astonishingly, the bike shifted. And then shifted again. It moved almost a quarter of a foot.

Yes! Sparrow, my ass!

Then, to her horror, her back gave out. The handlebars started to slip. Her strength left her like a deflating balloon as the weight of the bike wrenched down on her trembling arms. “No...nononono... Bollocks! Watch out!”

The metal deadweight dropped back onto the woman’s hip and thigh with a sickening thud.

Pain flared across her face, and this time her groan sounded like it had been wrenched out of her.

So much for adrenaline.

Silence descended for a few moments as they eyed each other.

“You’re right,” the woman finally spoke, irritation etched on her features. “That *was* surprising.”

“I’m really sorry!”

“Guess I’ll have to do it myself.” She suddenly flung her arms up and pushed the bike hard, baring her teeth under the strain. This time the machine lifted a full foot from the ground.

Jesus. Alex jumped in to help, despite the woman’s frosty glare, and between them, the chassis lifted enough for her to slide her leg out, then the rest of her.

For a moment, the woman lay there beside her bike, dazed, dragging in deep breaths, and staring at her dented machine. Then she made to stand.

“What are you doing?” Alex asked in alarm, waving her hands in frantic “stop” gestures.

“I have to get my bike off the road before it causes an accident.” Her voice became dry as she added, “Well, another one.” Her expression hardened. “Do you usually just fly off roads into clearings without looking? I saw you go past and thought it was clear, but the next second, you’re shooting backwards like a maniac to block my path, leaving me nowhere to go.” She gritted her teeth as she edged herself onto her knees.

“Um, should you be moving at all?” Alex fumbled through her pocket, digging out her phone. *Did I switch on global roaming yet?* She couldn’t remember. “I should call 9-1-1.”

“Fat lot of good that’ll do in New Zealand.” She placed one hand on the ground in front of her. “Calling 9-1-1... You’re American then? You sound English.”

“Born in London, now living in LA.”

The woman didn’t answer as she shifted her weight forward onto her hands and knees and took a deep breath. Then promptly vomited.

“Oh my God! It’s...it’s internal bleeding!” Alex cried out. *Isn’t that what they say on TV?* “What *is* the damned emergency number around here? Or the number for the cops—they’ll know what to do.”

“I wouldn’t bother trying the police.” The woman dragged herself unsteadily to her feet and wiped her mouth with the back of her gloved hand. “They’re not working today.” Gingerly, she tested her weight on her leg and grimaced.

“What?” Alex looked up. *Lord.* She was so tall. Maybe five-ten or eleven? Strong shoulders, straight posture, almost a military bearing, and she didn’t seem to be carrying an ounce of excess weight.

The woman took off her helmet and ran a hand through her collar-length dark-blonde hair. The sleek cut suited her chiseled face and its strong jaw and high cheekbones. She was about Alex’s age, in her late thirties. Drawing her sunglasses up to sit on the top of her head revealed probing blue eyes. That intense gaze stared right into Alex, then stared some more, as though deconstructing her at the cellular level.

Alex couldn’t decide exactly how intimidated to be.

The woman staggered forward with another pained wince.

Alex rushed over to put a steadying arm around her waist. “Hey, let me help. And why aren’t the cops on duty?”

“The closest station is shut today.” She gave Alex an impatient look and elbowed her hand away. “Don’t touch. I’m all right. I just need a second to catch my breath.”

“You were in an accident. You vomited!”

“And?” She drew in a deeper breath and rubbed the side of her thigh. After a moment, she looked a little stronger. Okay, maybe she really was “all right,” if her definition was merely being vertical.

“Vomiting’s a bad sign,” Alex persisted.

“My stomach just cramped and I drank too much water at my last break. That’s all. You watch too much TV.”

True. Her guilty pleasure was Summer and Bess's former hospital drama, *Choosing Hope*. Addictively bad, it definitely shouldn't be forming the basis of Alex's medical conclusions. She cast around for a topic change. "It's terrible your local police station's shut."

"Is it?"

"Of course!" Was this woman nuts? "How incompetent is this place?"

"Let me guess, there are 24-7 police stations where you're from?" The woman cocked an eyebrow.

"Well, of course." Did she think criminals took the day off because the police weren't around?

"Lucky you, having all your whims fully catered to."

Whims? Alex scowled. "Being safe from criminals is hardly a *whim*."

"I guess it depends on the crimes." The woman placed her helmet on the ground and dusted down her leather pants.

"If there are no cops, shall I call an ambulance?"

"No. I'm okay."

Alex glanced back to the road, her gaze coming to rest on the downed bike. "Will that be okay, too?"

"I don't know." Agitation crossed her face. She walked carefully back to her bike, this time without the unsteadiness of earlier, and studied the damage. Annoyance replaced the fear in her expression as she lifted it gently upright and wheeled it back to the side of the road. "Do you know how long I saved up to buy this?" She shook her head. "Three years. This is a Triumph Tiger XCX. It's my..." She stopped, and her face closed over. "It's important to me."

"I'm so sorry," Alex said again. "Truly."

"So you keep saying."

"I can't help it. Apologizing is an English pastime." She offered a grin but was met with an even stare. Alex's gaze flicked over the bike. Nothing seemed to be hanging off it, and the wheels didn't seem wonky as far as she could tell, but the scrapes and chips in that sleek black paint were an eyesore. "I'll pay, of course. For repairs. I mean, I should have looked before reversing across your path."

"Damn straight you're paying." The woman's fingers shifted restlessly over the machine, cataloguing its flaws, pausing over each scratch and dent. "I'd say you're very lucky the police station's shut today. You're a textbook

case of dangerous and reckless driving. That could mean a fine of thousands or up to three months jail.”

The hell? “How was I to know a tiny side road in the middle of nowhere would have motorcycles spitting out of a hole like some Bat Cave!”

“Ignorance is no excuse.” The woman walked around to the front of Alex’s car and studied the license plate. “A rental. So who are you and where do I send the bill... Ms...?”

“Alex Levitin.” Alex pulled out her ID to prove it.

The woman peered at it, as though memorizing the details, then nodded.

“And you are?”

She cocked her head. “Sam Keegan.”

“Okay, Sam Keegan, you can send the bill or the insurance details to my film set. It’s a bunch of trailers—what you’d call luxury caravans—parked on location at a farm, near...” She dragged her paperwork out of her pocket and had a stab at the name, Ika Whenu. “Ike-a When-oo.”

“It’s pronounced Icka Fenoo.” Sam squinted at her. “It’s disrespectful if you can’t even get the name right. Locals won’t be kind if you screw that up.”

Alex gritted her teeth. *Lovely*. “Do you need the full address for the set?”

“No, I know where it is. Everyone does. You movie people aren’t exactly subtle. And a lot of locals are starstruck that Hollywood has landed.” Her tone dripped with disdain.

“Not you? What have you got against movies?”

“Nothing, usually. But this one? What could I possibly have against an exploitative flick that puts our local women in costumes that make them look cheap and feel embarrassed, and has some of our less evolved young males calling them degrading names? I have seen more pub fights start in the past three months over that demeaning movie than all other topics put together.”

Oh crap. Alex squared her jaw. “Sounds like they’re spending a bundle around town. Can’t be all bad.”

“Money isn’t everything, though. Although I’m sure the entitled bastard running this show thinks it is. Would explain a lot.”

Right. So...now was probably not the time mention the *she* was the entitled bastard running *Shezan*. “Look, can you just tell me where the set is from here? That’s why I was pulling over—to check my map. I got so turned around. I’ve been trying to get there for ages.”

“How long have you been trying?” Sam walked stiffly over to Alex’s rental and cupped her hands against the glass, looking inside.

“Two hours. Or maybe, um, three.”

Sam turned back to her with an incredulous look. “That’s ridiculous. It’s only a ninety-minute trip from the airport *all* the way to your set. And you have a GPS in there.” She tapped the car window. “Come on”—she eyed her suspiciously—“no one’s that navigationally challenged.”

No kidding. “Yeah, well, I’m apparently the exception to that rule. See, I was aiming to get to Mangatarata first, which I know is a forest from all the green splotches on the map, and from there find the road to Ika Whenu. But I’m following all the local signs yet keep ending up here.”

“Tourists.” Sam barked out a laugh.

Alex glared and waited.

“You want to get to Mangatarata. But you’ve probably been going left at the sign to *Maramarua*. They’re not the same names. So, at the next T-intersection, go right at the sign, not left. Left is one long loop road.”

Some eye for detail she had. “The names *are* a mouthful,” Alex tried. “Thanks. I’d be stuck here in the middle of nowhere forever if you hadn’t come along.”

The other woman’s expression turned wintry. “You know, ‘middle of nowhere’ is still someone’s home. Like mine, for instance.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“*Sure* you didn’t. We’re not living in Middle Earth out here. If that’s what you want to see, do the Hobbiton tour at Matamata. Yes, another M-A-name. However will you find it?” Her lips tugged up at her own joke. Sam’s hand suddenly reached for her hip as she winced.

“You *are* hurt! Let me drive you to the hospital.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s nothing. I’m more worried about Tiger.”

Alex frowned. “Who?”

“My bike.” She picked her helmet up from the ground, slid onto the motorcycle’s seat, and settled.

“Oh. Of course. There are no tigers anywhere here. I knew that, obviously. You’d need CGI if you wanted them.” *Oh shit. I’m rambling.*

Sam slid her helmet back on. “Good luck with your movie.” She did up her chin strap. “A word of warning? That *Variety* story’s all anyone’s talking about. And to save you asking, yes, we do get the internet out here, too.”

That didn’t bode well.

“Apparently your film is ‘toxic sludge.’” Sam eyed her curiously. “You must really want the money. Is it worth it?”

Alex shot her a lethal stare, the one that made extras squeak and drop things. “Maybe I happen to think it can be turned into something good. You know, if the right people were committed to it.”

“Committed’s the word, all right.” Sam laughed. “Actually, I bet it’ll be as good as your driving.”

“For the last time, that was a damned accident!” Alex shoved her hands onto her hips.

“Much like your film.” Sam turned the ignition on her bike. After a sick sputter or two, it turned over. When she gave it a testing rev, it didn’t sound half bad for what it had been through. It was clear by Sam’s expression she thought the same. “I’d probably respect you if you turned around right now and headed back to the airport instead of working on that steaming pile of *pekapeka* droppings. That’s a bat, by the way,” she added in an over-bright, helpful tone. “For people who don’t care about learning local names.”

Right, that was it. “I’m sorry you and your bike got hurt, but you can just...get nicked now!” Alex inhaled in fury.

Sam choked out a laugh. “You know, that’s the only thing you’ve said so far that I completely agree with.” She sized Alex up, slid her sunglasses back on, then smirked. “You look so outraged. Look, tell your boss to look out for my bill. I’m sure he’ll love that—how long have you been in New Zealand? Quite a record laying out a local in three seconds.” She revved the bike again, waved like the fucking Queen, and roared away.

Alex was left, quite literally, eating dust.

She wished she could be completely consumed with rage. That would be so much easier if she wasn’t transfixed by the sight of Batgirl flying up the road. *Sexy as hell.*

She scowled.

Chapter 3

Setting the Scene(ry)

SHEZAN'S EXECUTIVE PRODUCER QUINCY BLACKMAN greeted Alex like a long-lost relative. He was at least fifty, and his disappearing hairline and expanding waistline had seen better days. His ruddy skin was beaten and crinkled from sun exposure, although she doubted he got much of that around here. She caught the look of desperation in Quincy's eye as he gave her a greeting hug. Yep, he was definitely going stir crazy out here.

The set was a short but muddy trek from the car park, past an enormous Maori security guard.

"The first director, Mitchell Finch, was here ten weeks before he took off over script issues," Quincy said. "The second, Bud Mackay, lasted a month and then slunk off in the middle of the night before sending me a good-bye email from his stopover in Denpasar. That was fun to wake up to. Hope the last-minute flight fees fucked him over." He shook his head. "And here we are."

A dozen trailers for crew, cast, and production facilities were parked on the farmer's property, only a few miles from the magnificent Wairere Falls, their film's main backdrop. She'd looked up the falls while she'd been waiting to board her flight; if nothing else, their scenery would be breathtaking.

"We have the influence of both former directors on our three current permanent sets—the poacher's tent, Amazons' base, and Shezan's tree hut. When Mitch was in charge, he insisted on the hero's set being built right next to Wairere Falls, which makes dealing with straying tourists and the

elements tricky. Not to mention the twenty-minute hike to get there with all our lighting gear, which involves wading through mud on bad-weather days. Don't start me on how often it rains down here. We've had to invest in a ton of wet-weather gear and umbrellas."

"You're joking, right?" Alex peered at him. "You haven't built a duplicate set on a nice, dry sound stage in Auckland to shoot our close-ups in a controlled environment?"

He shrugged. "Well, we have the editing team already set up in Auckland, but Mitch was adamant about needing realism for shooting his art."

"I'm all for the natural look, but how did he keep down the wildlife sounds? The noise of the waterfall and drizzling rain? Not to mention the issue of shooting drenched actresses, which makes Wardrobe and the talent miserable?"

"Yes, well, we didn't really solve those issues before Mitch or Bud left. Anyway, I'll take you to our more distant sets tomorrow. It's too late today. Gets dark early out here."

She nodded and glanced around. The grass paddocks the production team had taken over had obviously once been used for farm animals of some sort, if all the manure she kept dodging was any indication.

"Sorry no one was able to meet you at the airport," Quincy was saying as he led her to a giant tent in the middle of a paddock. "I was interviewing some locals. And the production assistants are out, buying up all the plywood. Don't ask. Let's just say, one gale and our wildlife ranger's office set ended up halfway to Hawaii. So I couldn't spare a driver."

"That's a shame. I had a run-in with a biker on the way here." The fiery flash of a certain blond's eyes darted into her brain. "My fault. Car meets motorcycle."

Quincy stopped dead. "Tell me you didn't kill a local in your first hour in New Zealand?"

"Not *kill*. She's still breathing...and riding. She knows where I work and said she'd send my boss her bill. So look out for it, okay?"

"How bad was it?" He sounded worried.

"Bike and rider got a scraping and she only just avoided hitting me. She had to lay her bike down to prevent impact. I promised we'd pay all

her damages. I tried repeatedly to get her on-scene medical attention. She wasn't interested."

"I...see." He gave a weary sigh. "So before my third director even sets foot on location, it's already a shit-show. Lord, I am being punished."

"Won't insurance cover everything?"

"Leave it to me. I'll make this all go away. You just focus on finishing this god-awful movie so I can go home to dry ground and sunshine and have a nervous breakdown in peace."

"Was that your welcoming motivational speech?"

"Pretty much."

"You're really bad at them," Alex said dryly.

Quincy snorted in amusement.

They reached a tent with rigging along one side. The rustic construct was done up to look like it'd been made from leather. Not bad. Solid. A little too shiny, though.

"Poacher's tent," Quincy said. "Come in. Set Design and Props have just finished with it. They're quite proud of it."

Alex gave it a critical eye. "How long has the poacher been living here?"

"Six months or so. Maybe a little longer."

"Seems a long time for a poacher, or any kind of hunter. He's killing, moving on."

"Love makes people do illogical things?" Quincy suggested with a rueful look. "Hell if I know. I didn't write the script."

Right. "So, six months then... Might want to scuff it up a bit more. Especially the tent pegs and flap. They should have mud and dust on them."

"Mmm." Quincy called over a young woman who'd been trailing them. "Your production assistant. Give her any notes. Alex, meet Alice." He laughed. "Ah hell, that won't ever get confusing."

"Hi," Alex said and regarded the diminutive woman. She was like a tiny blonde mouse in sneakers. Only shorter. "We've met, I think."

"Yeah," she nodded. "On one of your earlier films? *Tarnished Sunshine*. It's an honor to work with you again, Ms Levitin."

"Thanks. You, too. Call me Alex."

"Right." Quincy gave them an impatient look, ushering them into the tent. "Shall we?"

Stepping inside, Alex slowly turned her head, taking it all in. A neutral blue palette had been used. Rifles leaned against packing boxes. She stepped around an old brown leather chair in front of the tent flap which faced some strung-up photos from hunts. A pair of small beds sat on opposite sides of the tent; one for the poacher, one for his nineteen-year-old daughter. A faded privacy partition was next to her bed.

“Well?” Quincy gave her a hopeful look.

“No.” She inhaled. “Look, the color? It should be deep red or brown. Power. Blood. He lives on it. That chair? Shouldn’t be facing that way. He’s a hunter. It’s innate for him, never having his back to an entrance where he could be pounced on. And those photos? Don’t start me.”

She pointed to one picture of the actor who played the poacher with his arm around a bright-eyed blonde woman. They wore affectionate smiles.

“Definitely not,” Alex said. “He’s all about trophies. He’s dragged his reluctant daughter along to watch him slaughter animals so he feels powerful. You’ve read the script; you know the way he talks to her. She’s his trophy, too. Any photo of her would be him in a dominant position, and her subordinate.”

Alice scribbled furiously.

Quincy regarded her thoughtfully. “Anything else?”

“The obvious is tent size. How do you plan to get three actors, two camera guys, one hair, one make-up person, a boom op, a dolly grip, and me in one room? Why isn’t one wall detachable so we can get crane cameras in and so on? Isn’t that standard?”

“Well, Mitch wanted...”

“Realism.” Alex sighed.

“Mmm.” Quincy nodded.

She exhaled. “Well, I’d rather have access. Can we fix it, please? And given the weather conditions, can we still make it as watertight as possible?”

Quincy nodded. “Of course.”

Alice wrote another note.

Gaze roaming, Alex pointed under the bed. “The screwdriver? Not a prop, I’m guessing?”

Alice rushed forward and grabbed it. “Sorry.”

“Can we talk about the animal heads?” Alex said, gazing at the hanging trophies.

“You’ve got to admit, he’d be into collecting these,” Quincy suggested.

“A giraffe, a zebra, and a...snow leopard. Care to tell me what’s wrong with this picture?”

Quincy squinted at them.

“Where do they live? Not in the same place, that’s for sure.”

“So he travels,” Quincy said. “These are from previous hunts.”

“He’s not going to haul that lot out with him here. He’d keep them at home. It’s not practical for a man on the move. Alice, find us some more believable local carnivores, please?”

“Um, which ones?”

“Scariest the better.”

“But...” Alice stopped, then shook her head. “Never mind.”

Alex paused. “No, go on.”

“Where is this film set exactly? There was nothing about it in the info pack we all got.”

“Wait, don’t you know?” Alex glanced at the executive producer. “Hasn’t this been figured out two directors ago?”

Alice and Quincy exchanged loaded looks.

“Yeah, about that, no one reached agreement,” Quincy scratched the back of his neck, “so we’re keeping it vague...just some make-believe time and place.”

“That won’t work. We need to unvague it. We need to be regionally consistent or we’ll be a laughingstock. Well, more of one. It’ll help our costume designer, too. Cultural authenticity will help elevate us from ‘toxic sludge.’”

Alice nodded, pen poised for a verdict.

“Surely we start with a country?” Alex said. “If there are Amazons, I’m guessing that narrows it down.”

“The Amazons thing is just a filler name,” Quincy said. “Any tribe will do.”

Alex glanced between them. “Seriously?”

Quincy shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter, does it? Deepest darkest jungles stuff?”

It mattered if he didn’t want some weird regional Frankenstein monster. “Okay then, new project. Alice, I want you to do some research and find me a forest that most closely matches the flora you see around here. Similar

trees, bushes, and so on. Okay? And when you do, *that's* where it's set. After that, find me a predator from that forest, get me a fake trophy, and toss the rest of those." She waved at the wall of trophies. "And on that note, a giraffe? How is any he-man proud to have bagged himself a skittish, vegetarian, bean pole of an animal that wouldn't hurt a fly?"

"He *is* our bad guy for a reason," Quincy suggested. "He does asshole things like that."

Alex laughed. "Sure. Nice try. Alice, ditch the giraffe, would you?"

"Okay, what else?" Quincy asked.

"Dogs. A picture of his dog somewhere. Some big brute of a thing. He's devoted."

"He is?"

"Yes." Alex grinned. "He loves his dog more than his daughter."

"*Bastard,*" Quincy drawled.

This time even the mousy assistant tittered.

"Fix the rifles, too, will you?" Alex continued. "They look like props that fell out of a mail-order box last week. Make them look used but well-polished. Only thing the man loves more than his dog is his guns." She clapped her hands. "Okay, that's it for now."

She left the tent and gave Alice the go-ahead to get started on the list.

"You have a keen eye," Quincy said as Alice disappeared.

"Serves me well. Most of the time." *When I'm not running over stray motorcyclists.* "What else is set up?"

"Around here? Only other thing we had was the ranger's office, but like I said..."

"Halfway to Hawaii." Alex sighed.

"Yes." Quincy pointed to the sheer, green, ancient mountain behind them, pushing up into white, low-lying clouds. "Up there is what will make our picture beautiful. The falls have to be seen to be believed. I've wrangled one of New Zealand's best cinematographers. He's perfect. Knows how to get the most out of low and filtered light, which you get a lot of under foliage and on a rainforest floor."

"He's available? For *Shezan*? If he's that good, why isn't he doing something..." *Worthwhile? Excellent? "...else?"*

"He's newly retired. I convinced him to do one more flick. Got lucky he was already bored out of his brain after two months at home."

“Ah.”

“So the last issue is, we have an occasional tourist problem because we’re shooting in a public national park. Our permit allows us to shoo away any tourists. They go away grumbling, and we have Sid for when they don’t.”

“Sid?”

“The man mountain you passed on the way in?”

“Okay. So how are we on the schedule? How badly behind?”

“It’s bad but not atrocious. I’ll leave you some of my notes. Hoping we can pick up some time now you’re on deck.”

“Script status?”

“Not signed off yet. Our new writer’s been working on it back home. Goes by the name of Max K.”

Sounded like an energy drink. And Alex didn’t trust people without surnames. She’d side-eyed Cher plenty for years. “How far advanced is he?”

“That’s...a tricky question.”

At that moment, Alice scampered up. “I’ve let Props and Set Design have your notes. Oh, and the new Lighting PA, Kevin, managed to break a light.”

“Damn it!” Quincy scowled. “Fire him.”

“Over a dropped light?” Alex shook her head. “How new is he?”

“It’s his first week,” Alice said. “He’s never done a movie before. He was learning how to connect it, and it slipped from the rigging.”

Quincy muttered. “Figures. Look, you may as well know, the best film crews in New Zealand either passed on this production or are working on the new Peter Jackson flick in Wellington. We got what’s left over, the C-team. Truth is, I only hired Kevin because he had a forklift license and we don’t have anyone else with one.”

Well. Alex could hardly blame the top Kiwi crews for avoiding *Shezan*. They read *Variety*, too. “Look, Quincy, don’t fire the kid for one mistake. Maybe get his boss to impress on him how expensive those lights are and that if he makes a habit of it, we’ll be canning his ass. Okay?”

Alice eyed Quincy, who finally sighed and nodded his approval. Alice departed to deliver the good news.

“You’re too kind,” Quincy said. “Although I suppose we do still need a forklift driver. All right, come on, let’s sit and talk properly. The script is giving me a bug up my ass.”

Yours, mine, and the universe's.

Quincy led her to Craft Services, which comprised a gleaming trailer, a bunch of trestle tables and chairs, and an awning that covered the seating and serving area. He waved her to a seat. "Coffee? Tea? Anything else?"

Glancing at her watch, which read 5:09, she joked, "I'd kill for a beer."

"I hear ya. But we don't have catered alcohol on set. We're hitting the pub a little later, though, so you can grab one then."

"The pub? Any good?" She hadn't found a decent boozier in LA. One thing she'd really missed about home.

"Te Wharariki Hotel is an acquired taste. It's a bit tired, stuck in another time period, and the only game in town. Good chow, though. Cheap, too. So much so, we pick up the tab for the non-local cast and crew to eat there nightly rather than contract Craft Services to provide our dinners." He paused and reached into a folder. "So, the script. It still needs more work."

No kidding.

He slid a copy across the table. "I've highlighted the main issue everyone has with it. And there's a reason we can't fix it."

Alex flicked to a yellow Post-It note and read the page underneath.

Exactly what she'd first thought. Why would anyone want the heroine falling in love with the creepy poacher and leaving her forest to go be with him? "Hate it." Alex dropped the script back on the table. "Both her romantic interest in him and her leaving her animals and forest to be with him."

"Agreed. Max K's giving himself an ulcer over it."

"My other issue is her leaving traps for the poacher all over the forest. And not just because it reads like *Home Alone in the Jungle*."

"That might be a catchier title," Quincy muttered.

"Because wouldn't she catch her own animals?"

"Due to the wonders of movies, she doesn't."

"Mmm. And so she snares the poacher, drags his ass back to his tent to give him an excruciating moralizing sermon, and then...she falls for his seductive, middle-aged charms... Finally, she becomes the stepmother of his bratty daughter, who's almost the same age as her."

"Yes." He ran his fingers through his balding hair. "That's essentially it."

"So the moral is, what? Poachers win in the end? Might is right?"

“I think it’s supposed to be love conquers all, but yes, it’s problematic.”

“And the Amazons, her distant allies, throw her a going-away party. That was lovely, wasn’t it?” Alex tapped the script in annoyance.

Quincy coughed.

“So tell me, why can’t we change the whole sodding ending?”

“One of the studio’s VPs, Richard Howard, is insisting we keep it. He won’t budge on it. And he’s the reason this film is even being made in the first place. He’s the only one behind it.”

“He knows what year it is, right? Audiences will destroy this.”

“His daughter, Melody, is a budding actress and has her first role in *Shezan*. But her talent’s a little too thin to be the star, even if she did have the right look, which she doesn’t. So she’s playing Poacher’s Daughter.”

Alex recalled the photo in the poacher’s tent of the angelic blond.

“So if you slash most of the poacher plot, especially the bad ending, it automatically downsizes the daughter plot,” Quincy finished. “Since most of her lines come from welcoming Shezan into her father’s life, we can’t cut any of them without the studio VP kicking up a major storm.”

“So recast her as someone else. An Amazon?”

“Can’t. Melody refuses point blank to play an Amazon—something about the ‘objectification of women’—so there’s no way around our bad ending.”

“The woman has standards, and yet she’s doing this movie?”

“I gather it’s the only one that’ll have her.” He lowered his voice. “*More wooden than a pier*, the casting director’s notes said.”

“I want to meet her. Check out her range and see what she can do. Maybe I’ll get an idea?”

“Set your bar low. And remember, Melody and her father are ninety percent why this script can’t be fixed and also why it’s green-lit in the first place.”

“This is bollocks. Keeping that atrocious ending will hurt his daughter more by making her movie a joke.”

“I know. We all know.” He blew out a breath. “But now you understand all of it—the reason the film’s been approved, and the reason everyone keeps heading for the hills. Directors and writers blow in, think they can rewrite that ending and the film will be saved. When they find out it can’t be fixed, they bolt out again.”

“Why didn’t you bolt, too?”

“Alimony. Three ex-wives. Expensive business, marriage. Stay single; there’s good advice for you.” He gave her a rueful look. “This is one club it’s better off not being a member of.”

She chuckled at his expression. “Well, I’m not planning on ever getting a husband.”

“Well, no wives, either. Same deal.”

Ah, so he had done his research.

“So, your turn?” Quincy prodded. “Why are you involved in this *Shezan* sludge? Your credits are excellent. Better than we deserve, to be honest.”

“Thanks,” Alex murmured, suddenly doubting herself all over again. “I wanted to make a name for myself as the person who turned the most slammed movie into something decent. A lot of eyes are on this. Imagine pulling off the unthinkable.”

Quincy blinked in surprise.

Oh. Right. A little too optimistic. “And I have a tax debt,” she admitted.

“Ah. Thank God.” He smiled and raised his coffee in salute. “Now it all becomes clear. I thought you were nuts for a second.” He chuckled. “It’s ambitious what you’re planning. Most of the LA people are here for the pay day and don’t care too much about the end result. And, aside from the cinematographer, the locals comprise mainly people with enthusiasm but not much experience. So we have that, a bad script, a low budget, and we can’t write out the daughter plot. Thank God we have a *Shezan* who can act.”

“Chloe’s good?” That was a relief. Alex had had a sudden nightmare thought on the flight over: What if Chloe was dreadful and she had to fire a woman so close to all Alex’s friends?

“She’s solid. Not great, not yet, but it’s her first big role. For a former model, she’s pretty good. Camera loves her, too. Might even make a decent career out of acting if this film doesn’t sink her for life.”

“Is Chloe here yet?”

“She was, but while we’ve been prepping, I cleared her to visit her family for a few days in Auckland. She’ll be back tomorrow. You know her, don’t you? Didn’t you say that in our Skype call?”

“Met her a few times. She’s cool. Should be easy to work with.”

“Good. I think we’ll have our hands full placating the high-strung Melody Howard.”

“Right.” Alex yawned, and hid it behind her hand.

“Sorry. Forgot you’ve had a long day.” Quincy stood. “Let me show you to your trailer. Maybe you’d like a rest before dinner and that beer you’re holding out for.”

“Good idea.” Now that he said it, the fatigue started sliding in behind Alex’s eyeballs.

He led the way to a bank of gleaming silver trailers and pointed. “Yours is that one. Over there’s mine. Production over there, Costumes and Wardrobe there.”

“Is Skye on set?”

“Yes. She’s been redesigning the Amazon outfits while muttering about them being ‘preposterous eye sores unfit for a porn film.’” He smiled. “It was our second director, Bud, who had the idea to give the Amazons costumes so skimpy. He argued that if we can’t fix the script, why not make it so full of eye candy that people will go in spite of it?”

“There’s a progressive point of view.”

Quincy shrugged. “Well, he’s gone, and he took his designer with him. Skye’s going to fix it, so we’re back on track with that, right?”

He had a point. Although the widely mocked exploitation of the Amazons had done more to harm the movie than anything else.

“And here you are.” Quincy brought her up to her trailer and passed her a note. “Your pin code.” He tapped the numbers in for her and opened the door.

“Right, it’s just a standard-issue, film-hire trailer,” he said, waving her up the stairs in front of him. “Big bed, tiny bathroom, tinier kitchenette with microwave, bar fridge down there, and tea and coffee supplies in the cupboards up there.” He waved above the kitchen sink. “Also you get TV, a sofa, fold-out table, and the lasting smell of *eau de luxury trailer*.” He snorted. “I’ll get Sid to bring your bags in from your car so you can decompress for a bit.”

“Right.” Alex dragged the car keys from her pocket and tossed them to Quincy.

She looked around. It was actually far nicer accommodation than she'd become accustomed to hiring for her own movies. What a difference a studio budget makes, even a smaller one than usual.

"Bring your appetite to Te Wharariki Hotel," Quincy said. "The serving sizes are insane, even by American standards." His eyes slid down her sparse frame. "Though I'd be happy to have your leftovers," he joked, and patted his stomach. "They think everyone's in training for some rugby team. Actually half their customers look like it: huge bastards, no necks, and they blot out the sun when they walk."

Alex wondered what this movie would do to her diet. "Right," she said, her whole body flagging with exhaustion.

He gave her a wave. "I'll see about setting you up with some time with Melody tomorrow."

"Great." She watched him leave, and then stood at the top of the stairs, taking in the chaotic set in its various states of readiness.

And so it begins.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

CHANGING THE SCRIPT

BY LEE WINTER

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com