

Dare to Love

A.L. Brooks



Chapter I

“YOU WANT TO DO *WHAT?*” The cappuccino in Carmen’s hand wobbled precariously as Felicity’s words sunk home.

“You heard me.” Felicity sipped from her own coffee, then put her cup down on the table.

“And you’re only just telling me now?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while.” Felicity grinned. “I want one before it’s too late.”

“It appears our definitions of ‘too late’ are very different.”

“Oh, sweetheart, don’t be like that. *Loads* of people have them!”

“Yes, they do.” Carmen held up a finger. “When they are much younger and their bodies don’t have the—” She caught herself just as Felicity frowned.

“No.” Felicity’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t think you want to finish that sentence.”

Carmen shook her head. “You’re right, I don’t.” She paused. “But... really?”

“Carmen, I love you, but sometimes you can be a complete stick-in-the-mud. I’m not ancient—I’m forty-four!”

“I know, and I didn’t mean to imply you were ancient. But, well, isn’t it a bit of a cliché? I mean, a middle-aged woman who’s just divorced husband number two and—”

“*Middle-aged?*” Felicity screeched.

Several heads in the café turned.

Carmen's ire rose. She gave everyone a wave that she hoped suggested they could turn their attentions elsewhere and glared at her friend of over twenty years. "I apologise. But you do know what I mean."

Felicity huffed and sipped her drink once more. She blew out a loud breath as she lowered her cup. "I suppose so. But I'm still going to do it. You only live once."

"Well, that brings up yet another aspect to this. Isn't it awfully dangerous?"

Felicity snorted. "They use a needle, Carmen, not a carving knife."

Carmen rewarded her friend with a withering stare, which was blatantly ignored. "I know that, but don't you have to be concerned about the transmission of diseases if the needles aren't clean?"

"Of course—if you go to some backstreet, unlicensed hack. Funnily enough, I don't plan to do that."

"But how will you know if they're safe?"

"Carmen, please, give me some credit. I've researched! I know exactly where I'm going." Felicity cleared her throat. "The appointment is at eleven."

"Eleven? You mean *today*?" Carmen stared at her. "You didn't think to mention that when you invited me for coffee this morning?"

Felicity did have the grace to blush. "Well, yes, I may have left out that little titbit of information. But I want you with me! And I thought you might not come if I told you what was going on. Please, darling, I want to do this. And if nothing else, I'd value your opinion on the design."

"I... But... You..." Carmen stopped talking since she was clearly incapable of forming complete sentences.

Felicity leaned forward and patted her hand. "Close your mouth, darling, you look like a fish. And drink up; it's nearly time to go." Her eyes shone with excitement.

Carmen downed the last of her cappuccino, knowing there was no point in arguing any longer.

Ten minutes later, they stood outside the tattoo studio.

"Okay." Carmen turned to Felicity. "I'm only going to ask this one last time. Are you sure?"

"I am."

Carmen looked at the studio frontage and read aloud the name emblazoned on the window. “Phoenix Tattoos.”

The banner was, she had to admit, artfully done, with a small image of a phoenix placed between the two words, which themselves were stylised flames in a wide range of oranges, reds, yellows, and gold. The window was tinted, so she couldn’t see inside, but the exterior of the studio was spotlessly clean and the wood-framed door was polished to a beautiful shine.

Okay. Not a total cesspit, then. Maybe Felicity had researched properly.

Felicity let out a small squeak that Carmen hoped came from excitement. “Come on.” She grasped Carmen’s arm and pulled her up the step.

The inside of the studio was as surprising as the outside. The tattooist’s chair sat towards the back of the room, centred on a shiny, cream-tiled floor and surrounded by stainless-steel counters. On top of those stood plastic boxes of all sizes, clearly labelled and organised into neat rows. Nothing was out of place, and everything looked immaculately clean. It was more like the kitchen of a fancy restaurant than how Carmen would ever have imagined a tattoo studio to be.

At the entrance was a small desk. To the right was a waiting area decorated with two large brown leather sofas which sat opposite each other on what looked like a real wood floor. A low table between the sofas held a selection of magazines and large folders. A water cooler took up one corner of the room and a machine for making hot drinks the other.

Wow. This looks nicer—and cleaner—than my doctor’s waiting room. Carmen’s preconceived notions about tattooists were diminishing by the second.

“Be with you in a second!” a velvety voice called from somewhere beyond the tattooist’s chair.

A woman? The tattooist is a woman? Carmen sat on one of the sofas. *Well, why not? God, and you call yourself a feminist.* She shook her head at herself.

“Are you okay?” Felicity’s brow was furrowed.

Carmen sucked in a breath. “I am. Just berating myself for walking in here with a bunch of preconceptions that I really should have known better about.”

Felicity’s smile was smug.

Carmen ignored her and reached for one of the folders on the table, intrigued as to what they contained. Her eyes widened as she flipped through the pages. Every page—or rather, plastic wallet—contained a beautifully drawn template for a tattoo design. There were mythical creatures, symbols, animals, plants, landscapes, cars, motorbikes, and every single one was drawn with an attention to detail that was incredible.

“Oh, wow.” She’d come to a drawing of a phoenix, a copy of the bird that adorned the studio window. Up close like this, she could see the feathers and colours in all their glory; somehow the artist had even managed to capture the glint of triumph in the phoenix’s eyes. “God, these are so good.”

“Thanks.”

Carmen snapped her head up; she hadn’t heard the woman approach.

“Hello.” The woman held out a hand. “I’m Ash.”

Carmen stood and returned the handshake. “Hi, I’m Carmen.”

“And I’m Felicity.”

Felicity and Ash also shook hands, and Ash smiled. “Ah, you’re my eleven o’clock.”

Ash looked to be a few years younger than Carmen’s forty-three, though it was difficult to tell—her skin was smooth and young-looking, but slight creases around her brown eyes told a different story. She was about the same height as Felicity, so perhaps 5’6”. Her dark brown hair, shaved at the sides but left longer on top, flopped down to a loose, mind-of-its-own fringe. She wore a plain red T-shirt over black jeans. To Carmen’s surprise, no tattoos adorned her arms. Another preconceived notion fled.

“That’s me!” Felicity sounded like a giddy little girl. “How does this work?”

Ash gestured her back onto the sofa. “First, we have a chat about what you’d like.” She sat next to Felicity, then looked across to Carmen. “Are you getting one too? I only have Felicity’s name in the book, but—”

“No!” Carmen’s response came a little too quickly, and she grinned sheepishly at Ash’s raised eyebrows. “Sorry, I didn’t mean that how it sounded.” She exhaled. “I’m her moral support. As if she needs it.”

Felicity snorted. “She’s tagging along because I asked her to. I do actually value her opinion on the design.”

“Okay, that’s fine.” Ash turned back to Felicity. “So you said when we spoke on the phone that you have a design in mind?”

Carmen liked Ash's voice—it was calm and gentle, but it was more than that. Her natural tone was easy on the ear, just a hint of her background—east London or maybe Essex, Carmen would guess—showing through. At the same time, it definitely didn't sound as if she was trying hard to cover up her roots. And while that meant her voice contrasted widely with both Carmen and Felicity's more upper-class accents, Ash didn't seem remotely bothered. *Nor should she be.* Carmen had lost count of the number of young actors, both male and female, she'd counselled over the last fifteen years for trying to hide where they were from with ridiculous put-on accents.

"I do." Felicity rummaged in her handbag and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "I was hoping for something like this." She pointed at all the folders on the table. "I know you have your own designs, and I hope it isn't too cheeky to turn up with my own, but—"

Ash held up a hand. "It is totally okay to turn up with your own. Those designs in the folders are there as inspiration, but I'm always excited when a customer knows exactly what they want. It sounded pretty simple when we spoke last week, but I just need to take a look at it to see if it's something that can be rendered by tattoo. Not everything can, okay?"

"I understand."

Felicity handed over the slip of paper.

Carmen watched as Ash unfolded it and studied it in silence. She seemed very serious about her work, and Carmen's respect for her climbed another notch.

"Okay, yes, this is definitely something I can do and in the timeframe we talked about. But first, some questions. Colour?"

"I'm happy with just black. I don't think it needs anything else."

Ash nodded slowly. "I think you're right, but I'd suggest adding a little grey shading here and here, just to emphasise it."

"Oh, that sounds good."

Carmen craned her neck to look at the picture. Although Felicity had briefly shown it to her in the café a few minutes earlier, she was intrigued by Ash's shading suggestion and how it would work.

Ash seemed to be aware of Carmen's movement; she twisted a little in her seat and turned the paper towards Carmen.

"Thanks," Carmen said, and Ash smiled.

Carmen stared at the picture, impressed once more with Felicity's choice. The piece of paper had been cut from a magazine and held a photoshopped black-and-white image of a small bird escaping a dark cage and heading up towards the sun above it.

With this second, longer viewing of the picture and with the knowledge of all that Felicity had gone through in the last few months, sudden realisation dawned. Carmen gazed into Felicity's eyes. "This...this is you, yes?"

Felicity, blinking rapidly, nodded.

"It's perfect." Carmen held out a hand, and Felicity took it. She squeezed it tightly for a moment before letting go.

"Okay," Ash continued after a second or two, clearly sensitive to the moment and earning yet more unspoken appreciation from Carmen. "Next question, where?"

Felicity sat upright and placed a hand on her left hip. "Here."

"Good, that area is a great choice. There's more fatty tissue there."

"I do hope you're not calling me fat." Felicity arched an eyebrow, but her eyes gave away her tease.

Ash's mouth quirked. "I would never." She tapped Felicity's leg. "It's just that you won't feel too much discomfort on a more, um, padded area."

Felicity looked relieved, and Carmen realised that for all her bluster, her friend was a little nervous.

"And finally, what size? Just like this"—Ash pointed at the picture—"or smaller? Bigger?"

"What do you think?"

Ash looked back at the picture for a few seconds. "I think this size is fine. Any smaller and I won't be able to get some of the detail in. And I don't think larger would have the same impact."

"Perfect."

"Ready to get started?"

For a moment, Felicity hesitated, then she straightened her shoulders and smiled broadly. "Hell, yes."

Ash chuckled and stood. "All right. Follow me. Want a drink of something? Tea? Coffee?"

"Just water would be good."

"I'll get that." Carmen stood, glad of an excuse to do something useful.

“That’s great, thanks.”

Ash smiled at her again, and Carmen noticed for the first time what an attractive face she had. It was striking, with a strong jawline and a slightly wide forehead. But her deep brown eyes and full lips softened those edges, and Carmen smiled as she wondered just how many admirers Ash had to beat off in any one day.

Would it be prejudicial of me to assume those admirers were mostly female?

It seemed obvious Ash was a lesbian or queer by some definition. Carmen could just imagine Maggie, her go-to person for knowledge of the queer world, tutting at her about judging based on stereotypes. She grinned as she headed over to the water cooler.

While Carmen poured out two cups of water, Ash directed Felicity into the chair. When Carmen joined them in the tiled part of the room, Felicity was reclined on her right side, her left hip upwards. Her skirt had been pulled down just far enough to expose the area that would be worked on.

“Are you sure I’ve left you enough room?” Felicity asked. “I can easily pull the skirt down further. I’m not shy about these things.”

Carmen snorted. “That’s true.” She placed the water cups down on one of the counters.

“Shut up.”

Ash chuckled. “Well, okay, a little further would be good. I have towels to cover anything else that’s revealed, if you’re uncomfortable.”

“I’m fine.” Felicity tugged the skirt down further over her hips.

“That’s great, thanks.” Ash moved Felicity’s left arm back. “Let’s just tuck that under there for now. If you get cramped or tired, just shout and we’ll take a break, okay?”

“Okay. How long will it take?”

“It shouldn’t take longer than the hour you’ve booked. We’ll do thirty minutes first, unless you want to stop earlier, then have a break.”

“Thanks.”

Carmen watched in fascination as Ash pulled on latex gloves, then set up her equipment and prepared Felicity’s skin for the tattoo. All the while she explained what she was doing and why. Everything was sterilised, and all of the inks and needles were in single-use packages.

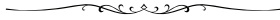
“It’s like going in for an operation.” Carmen pointed at everything lined up on the table.

Ash nodded. “Exactly. I’m basically creating a small wound each time the needle enters her skin. So I need to take the same precautions anyone in the medical community would.”

After completing her preparation, Ash reached for the tattoo machine, which looked like some kind of ray gun from a bad sci-fi TV show. She carried out a dry test with the gun on Felicity’s skin, probably assessing how it would feel, before loading it up with the ink.

“Ready?” Ash asked.

Felicity nodded enthusiastically, and in the next moment the loud buzz of the machine filled the air.



“And remember, no matter how tempting it is, don’t pick at the scabs!” Ash’s face was stern.

Felicity saluted. “Understood!”

Carmen shook her head. “I’m sorry, normally she *is* a grown-up.”

“Trust me, I’ve had worse.” Ash threw them a sly grin. She showed them to the door. “Ladies, it’s been a pleasure. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Carmen smiled up at her. “Thank you, Ash. This has been a wonderful education. I really admire the way you work.” She meant every word—she couldn’t remember the last time she’d watched someone at their work and been so impressed.

To her surprise, Ash blushed. Up until now, she’d seemed so laid-back and unflappable. “Thanks, that’s...that’s nice of you to say.”

Felicity shook Ash’s hand. “I second what she said. If I ever decide to get another one, I know where I’m coming.”

Ash grinned. “I’d say there’s a very good chance we’ll meet again. They’re addictive, you know.”

“So I’ve heard.”

Carmen stared at Felicity. That was Felicity’s flirting voice; she’d know it anywhere. *What the...?*

Ash’s grin widened, and she held open the door. “Bye. For now.”

Felicity threw her a stunning smile, then sauntered from the shop.

Carmen stumbled after her. When the door closed behind them, she said, “What the hell was that?”

“What?” Felicity feigned innocence, swinging her handbag strap over her shoulder.

“Don’t give me that butter-wouldn’t-melt look. You were *flirting* with her!”

“Perhaps I was.” Felicity laughed and looked up at the sky. “Gosh, what a glorious day!”

Clearly, she wasn’t going to get anything more from Felicity on the subject, so Carmen dropped it. But it wasn’t forgotten. Later, over lunch, she’d get to the bottom of this.

Felicity slipped her arm through Carmen’s and tugged her down the street. “Come on. I’m starving. Let’s go somewhere nice to celebrate. And I think we need champagne too!”

Carmen laughed. “All right, Ms ‘I’ve got my first tattoo’. Let’s celebrate.”

Chapter 2

THE SMELL OF BURNT TOAST woke Ash on Sunday morning. Then swearing reached her ears from the kitchen area, and she chuckled. Her niece clearly hadn't yet mastered the art of making breakfast. Although her cursing was coming along nicely.

Ash pushed back the duvet and climbed out of bed. She dressed in casual clothes and made a quick trip to the bathroom. When she walked into the kitchen, Sophie was busy scraping the burnt bits off a slice of toast into the bin.

"Morning," Ash said.

Sophie spun round, eyes wide. Ash noted the dark circles beneath them and realised that wasn't the first time her niece had looked so ragged in the last few weeks. "S-Sorry, Auntie Ash. Did I wake you?"

"Not really. I was just dozing. Everything okay here?" She pointed at the toast.

Sophie blushed. "Um, no. Your toaster's a bit fancy, and I kind of didn't know what I was doing."

Laughing, Ash walked over, took the piece of toast from her hand, and launched it into the open bin. "Let's try this again. You sit at the breakfast bar, and I'll do the toast."

"Can I make you a cup of tea first?"

"That would be magic."

They set about their tasks in comfortable silence, moving with ease around each other.

"Jam?" Ash asked as she added two more slices of lightly browned toast to the pile on the plate.

“Got any Nutella?”

Ash laughed. “Definitely not. I’d weigh a ton if I had that in the house. It’s jam or nothing.”

Sophie sighed. “All right. Jam.”

“Cool. It’s in the fridge. Top shelf.”

Sophie retrieved the jar of strawberry jam and brought it over to the breakfast bar. They munched the pile of toast Ash had made and sipped their tea.

“You look a bit tired. Didn’t you sleep well on the sofa bed?” Ash asked after a while.

Her niece wouldn’t meet her eye. “No, it was fine. What time are we going out?”

Well, that was a deflection if ever I heard one. But she’d cut Sophie some slack. She was fourteen, after all.

“Whenever you like. I need to shower first.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Well, you go first, and I’ll have another tea while I wait. I bet you take ages anyway.”

Sophie stuck out her tongue but headed for the bathroom.

Ash’s phone pinged, and she glanced at the screen. Another notification from the dating app. Online dating wasn’t Ash’s thing, but a woman she’d met at a party recently had insisted this app was different. She scrolled to it and opened the alert. Her heart lurched. *No way.* The woman looked so much like Vikki, Ash couldn’t close the alert quick enough. Before she could overthink it, she deleted her profile and uninstalled the entire app. It wasn’t as if she was in a hurry to date anyway—or lacking in offers. She smiled as she remembered the very flirtatious behaviour of that woman, Felicity, yesterday after her appointment. Clients often flirted with Ash; sometimes she was even tempted to follow up on it. But not with Felicity. Sure, she was definitely beautiful, but she’d worn just a bit too much make-up for Ash’s liking. She’d actually found Felicity’s friend Carmen far more attractive. Despite the posh accent, she had a more natural, wholesome look. More real.

Yes, but she is clearly straight. And we don’t do straight women, do we?

She finished her tea, then retrieved her book from the bedroom and slouched on the sofa, reading. As expected, she had a decent amount of

reading time as Sophie did indeed take an age. Eventually, however, Sophie appeared looking much fresher than she had earlier, wearing ripped jeans with a Princess Leia T-shirt, her long, blonde hair brushed and shiny.

“Finally.” Ash rolled her eyes in an exaggerated fashion.

Sophie laughed as she flopped onto the sofa beside her. “What you reading?”

“Nothing you’d be interested in.” Ash smirked. “It’s a lesbian romance. All swooning femmes and tough butches.”

To her surprise, her niece flushed bright red. Sophie had known Ash was gay since she was old enough to form words. It had never been an issue, and her reaction now was baffling.

Before Ash could say anything, Sophie leaped from the sofa.

“You okay?” Ash asked.

“Yep. Forgot my phone. Be back in a sec.” She shot off in the direction of the bathroom.

Ash shook her head. As much as she and Sophie got on well, these past few months her niece had been a bit of a mystery. *Remember, she’s fourteen. They’re all like that at that age, aren’t they?*

When Sophie returned to the living room, Ash headed off to the bathroom. To her pleasant surprise, she wasn’t greeted by a room that looked as if a tornado had ripped through it. *Hub, so in that respect, she isn’t like most fourteen-year-olds.* She showered, dressed, and styled her hair. As she exited the bathroom, Sophie was perched on the edge of the sofa, Ash’s book in her hands.

“Hey, I’m not sure that’s age-appropriate,” Ash called. The novel contained some of the steamier sex scenes in her collection of lesbian romances.

Sophie jumped as if she’d been shot, and the book flew across the room to land with a loud *splat* on the floor beside the breakfast bar. She whirled round, her cheeks a vivid red.

“Hey.” Ash walked over to her, hands held out. “It’s okay. It’s just, you know, got some adult content.”

Sophie bit her bottom lip. “I...I know. I-I read some of it.”

Oh crap.

“Er, right. Well, just don’t tell your mum, okay? And, um, maybe stick to books more for your age.”

Sophie shuffled from foot to foot; her gaze darted to the book and back again. “What if...what if that’s the kind of book I want to read?”

Her voice was so quiet, Ash had to strain to hear it. When the words registered, she nearly fell over from the shock. “I... What?” *Surely she doesn’t mean what I think she means. Does she?*

Sophie was shaking.

Ash strode over and gently took hold of her shoulders. “Hey, are you okay?”

Her niece shook her head, and tears pooled in her eyes. “I need to tell you something.”

“Okay. Want to sit down?” *I need to, even if you don’t. I’m not sure I’m ready for this.*

Sophie nodded and practically collapsed onto the sofa.

Ash opened her arms, and her niece came willingly into a hug. She tucked her head under Ash’s chin, and her tears dripped onto Ash’s collarbone.

“Hey, come on. Whatever it is, you know you can tell me, okay?”

Sophie sniffed. “I know. You’re the one person I can tell. But it’s still hard to say it.”

Ash waited her out, holding her close.

Sophie still shook but not as badly as before. “I...I think...” She wiped at her eyes. “No, I know it. I...I like...girls.” She whispered the last word, but Ash heard it loud and clear.

Oh. My. God. was her first thought. Her second was: *Shit, Courtney’s gonna go mental.* “You do?”

“Yeah.” Sophie finally looked up at her. She was biting her bottom lip, her eyes wide, as if somehow expecting Ash to have a negative reaction to her announcement.

“Well, thank you for trusting me with that.”

Sophie’s smile was wobbly, but her eyes said it all; relief shone through them. “I-I’ve known for a while. I just, you know, wasn’t sure.”

“But now you are?”

“Yeah. Pretty much. I mean, there are some boys I still like. They’re cute, I suppose. But it’s... Girls are just different, you know? They...make me feel different.”

“Well, you know I understand that.”

Sophie spat out a laugh. “Yeah, well, that’s why I’m telling you and not Mum.”

Ash couldn’t say a lot to that. “What about Trina, does she know?”

“No! Nobody else. Not yet.” Sophie looked as if she’d rather jump into an ant nest than tell her best friend about her sexuality.

Trina definitely had her head screwed on right, and Ash wished Sophie would trust her. But maybe one day soon she would.

“Okay, fair enough.”

Sophie hugged her closer. “Thanks. I knew you’d be okay with it.”

“Of course.”

And I am. But what the hell is going to happen when her mother finds out I knew long before she did?

Chapter 3

SORRY, SOMETHING'S COME UP. FRIDAY instead? Dinner at Georgio's, 8pm? x

Gerald's last-minute cancellation would have annoyed Carmen if she was any kind of "normal" girlfriend. But their relationship had never been conventional, so it didn't surprise her when her main reaction was one of relief. Her day had been long—in fact, she was still at her desk, and it was past seven in the evening. Realising that she now didn't have to retouch her make-up, change her blouse, and slip into her going-out heels made her ridiculously happy. *Pyjamas and a glass of wine, here I come.* She fired off a quick text in return.

Fine by me. See you then x

Forty minutes later, she was home, a bottle of wine open, her business suit exchanged for soft yoga pants and a T-shirt.

She sank into the sofa and put her feet up on the coffee table. *Oh yes, that's better.* Her first sip of wine made her moan, the second elicited a sigh. *Much better.*

Her phone rang, and she groaned. *God, no, I'm done for the day!* She glanced at the caller display anyway, unable to break the ingrained habit despite her exhaustion. When she saw the name Tamsyn Harris, her mood lifted, and she quickly answered. "Hi, Tam!"

"Hello! Have I caught you at a bad time?"

"No, not at all. Just got home. I have my feet up and a glass of wine in my hand."

Tamsyn chuckled. “Sounds perfect.” She cleared her throat. “So, um, Maggie and I were wondering if you were free to visit us tomorrow evening at any time.”

Why did her star client, the winner of multiple acting awards and one of Britain’s best-loved actresses, sound nervous? “You okay? You don’t sound yourself.”

“I’m fine. More than fine.” She paused. “So, are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Free tomorrow evening.”

“Oh! Sorry. Hang on, let me check.” Carmen tapped into the calendar app on her phone. “Okay, my last meeting finishes at seven thirty. I’m bound to have a few more bits to do after that, so I could be at yours perhaps eight thirty.”

“That’s absolutely fine.”

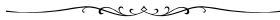
“Do I need to bring anything? Is this a work meeting?”

“No. God, no. We just... Well, there’s something we need to tell you.”

“Is everything really okay, Tamsyn? You’re acting very odd.”

Tamsyn laughed. “God, sorry. Yes, everything is fine. We’ll explain when we see you, but honestly, it’s nothing to worry about.”

“Well, okay, then.” Carmen was mystified, but she’d known Tamsyn long enough to trust her when she said everything was fine. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”



“I’m sorry I’m late,” Carmen said as Tamsyn opened the door. “I don’t know where the time went.”

“Come on in.” Tamsyn stepped aside to allow Carmen to enter the house. “And you’re not that late. Don’t worry.” She led her through to the living room and motioned her into a seat on the sofa.

Carmen gratefully relaxed into it, and every muscle in her body sighed with relief. Another thirteen-hour day with no breaks. Had she eaten at all during the day? Probably. She wasn’t hungry now, so that meant she must have found time for something.

“Maggie’s out walking Gizmo before bedtime. She’ll be back soon.” Tamsyn moved to the centre of the room. “Sorry, when you were a little

late, we couldn't wait as the poor little bugger would be holding on too long."

Carmen chuckled. "Look at you, Tamsyn Harris, all domestic and everything."

Tamsyn blushed to her roots. "Shut up."

"I'm only teasing. I think it's wonderful."

The sound of the front door opening reached Carmen's ears, and seconds later, Gizmo trotted into the room. He rushed straight up to her and leaned in for an ear rub.

"Well, hello there, young man. How were the streets tonight? Did you make sure we're all safe?" Carmen lavished some serious attention on the gorgeous little dog, and he lapped it up.

"He did," Maggie said as she entered the room.

Carmen extricated herself from Gizmo's attention and stood to give her a hug. "Hi."

"Hello, you. Long time, no see."

Carmen pulled back from the embrace. "I know, I'm sorry."

Maggie smiled, then turned to Tamsyn and gave her a lingering kiss.

After pulling back from their embrace, Tamsyn walked over to a small table on which stood a bottle of champagne in a cooler and three glasses. Carmen hadn't even noticed that so far. *Wow, my brain must be really fried to miss champagne right in front of me.*

"Are we celebrating something?" she asked. "Or is this just your regular Thursday night champagne?" She smirked when Tamsyn rolled her eyes.

"Ha ha." Tamsyn finished pouring the three glasses and handed one each to Maggie and Carmen. Tamsyn and Maggie shared a look that Carmen couldn't decipher as they took each other's hand.

"So, we asked you over because we have an announcement." Tamsyn paused and seemed to be collecting herself. Were those tears she blinked back?

Maggie leaned in to Tamsyn. "Want me to say it?"

Tamsyn visibly swallowed. "No, I can do it." She turned back to Carmen. "We're getting married!"

"Oh my God, that's fantastic!" Carmen rushed over to them both.

Mindful of their champagne, the three of them shared a clumsy hug.

“That’s just the most wonderful news.” Carmen was genuinely happy for them. Delighted, in fact. Their story was almost a fairy tale, and she couldn’t have wished for a better ending for them both.

Once again she wondered just what she and Gerald were doing, playing at being in a relationship when it was nothing of the sort. It didn’t help that everyone else she knew in her age bracket was either engaged or already married. She pulled away from the hug and ensured she had a smile on her face when she met their gazes. “So, when and where?”

“September 26th,” Maggie said. “And at the cottage.”

“Oh, I love that! It’s perfect!”

“Will you come?” Tamsyn asked.

“Of course! Wouldn’t miss this for the world.” Carmen grinned. “Tamsyn Harris saying, ‘I do’, and to a *woman* at that. I assume you’re not inviting the Daily Mail?”

“Ha bloody ha. No, we’re not. In fact, none of the press are invited, and Tony’s hiring a top-notch security firm to make sure no one attempts to trespass.”

“Good!” She gazed at them. “God, I’m so pleased for you both!”

“Thank you.” Maggie gave Carmen a warm smile. “And I’m glad you could pop over tonight. We wanted you to be one of the first to celebrate with us. After all, you played a major role in making sure this could come to pass.”

“Oh, that was nothing. Well, nothing much once I’d got this one to admit she had a heart.” Carmen thumbed in Tamsyn’s direction.

“Whatever,” the actress said.

Maggie chuckled.

Tamsyn raised her glass in a toast. “To Carmen. Friend first, agent second.” Her brown eyes were filled with affection, and Carmen’s cheeks heated. “I will be forever grateful for what you did two years ago, my friend. Thank you for teaching me that there was definitely more to life than a career and for helping me bring this amazing woman back into my life.” Tamsyn turned her gaze to Maggie, who took her hand and brought it to her lips to kiss.

The depth of love between the two women was like a living, breathing entity holding space in the room, so palpable Carmen could almost reach

out and touch it. She shivered as an intense wave of longing washed over her.

After a few moments, Tamsyn seemed to remember there was someone else in the room, her blush adorable as she looked back at Carmen. “Um, sorry. Where was I?”

“Thanking our friend.” Maggie threw Carmen a warm smile.

“Oh yes.” Tamsyn held out her glass, and Maggie followed suit.

Carmen clinked hers against theirs, and they drank.

After a couple of sips, which gave Carmen time to compose herself—her emotions were all over the place after what she’d just witnessed—she raised her glass. “To the greatest love story I ever heard. Long may it continue.”

Tamsyn’s eyebrows rose; Maggie let out a soft “oh, my,” and Carmen smiled even as she still fought back mysterious tears that wanted to spill down her face.

She focused with all her might on tapping each of their glasses and sipping some more of the delicious vintage.

Tamsyn and Maggie stared at each other over the rims of their glasses, once again lost in their love. The purity of what they shared touched Carmen in so many unexpected ways, and she couldn’t begin to fathom what was happening to her. She never felt things like this. For years now she’d been all business, focused on her career, not fussed about things like love and emotion. And yet what these two friends had together seemed to be releasing something in her she didn’t know how to deal with: envy and longing. She was happy for them, of course, but a deep ache for what they had burned in her chest. Sadness filled her and set her tears free.

“Carmen!” Maggie set her glass down. “What’s wrong?”

Carmen waved her off when she would have approached. “Nothing.” She wiped at her eyes. “I’m just so happy for you both.”

Neither of them looked convinced, but it seemed they respected her need to pretend that was the only reason for the tears.

Tamsyn motioned her towards the sofa again.

While their backs were turned, Carmen dabbed her eyes some more and swallowed down the rest of her emotions. *Shit, how embarrassing!*

“So, I assume work has been full on again?” Tamsyn asked once they were all seated.

Shooting her friend a grateful look for the change of topic, Carmen relaxed back into the sofa. “Yes! But all good. Well, mostly. I have one or two difficult clients, but nothing I can’t handle.”

“I bet.” Maggie raised her glass in Carmen’s direction.

“Ooooh, anything you can share?” Tamsyn asked.

“Absolutely not.” Carmen gave her a smile. “But believe me when I say that I’ve spared the British public from a couple of TV disasters waiting to happen.”

“Your country will never know how much it owes you.”

“This is very true.”

Now back on an even keel, Carmen opened up a little about her week. She would never name names; she always respected every celebrity’s need for privacy, no matter how obnoxious or difficult she herself found them.

Tamsyn was on a long break before the wedding—and delighted about it. It was something that still took some getting used to for Carmen, given how much of a workaholic her biggest client had been for so many years.

“I still want you to let me know if any juicy new role for me comes across your desk,” Tamsyn said. “But it needs to be *really* juicy to tear my attention away from the wedding planning.”

Maggie patted Tamsyn’s arm. “You’d think we were getting married in Westminster Abbey. It’s a hundred people in our back garden.”

Carmen laughed. “Yes, but she’s won BAFTAs, don’t you know? It has to be done *just right*.”

“Do you two want me to leave the room so you can talk about me without the inconvenience of me being here?” Tamsyn said archly, but there was a smile in her eyes.

“Oh, no, where’s the fun in that?” Maggie batted her eyelashes in feigned innocence.

Once again it struck Carmen how at ease Tamsyn and Maggie were together. The casual playing and teasing and all of it wrapped in a layer of warmth, love, and affection that was impossible to miss. *Have I ever had that? With Lewis, yes, she mused, but that was a long time ago.*

“Oh, and who will be your plus one?” Tamsyn asked. “Gerald, I presume?”

Carmen startled, then sipped her drink to give herself a moment to respond. “I suppose so. I mean, I would need to ask him, so as long as he doesn’t have plans for that date already...”

Of course they would think she’d bring Gerald. Although their relationship was less than conventional, they *were* a couple in the eyes of everyone they knew. Tamsyn and Maggie had met him a couple of times, and they’d seemed to like him well enough. Yet somehow, the thought of taking him to something that special felt...off. As if it didn’t quite fit the picture.

“Lovely,” Tamsyn said, and for the first time in all the years Carmen had known her, she knew without a doubt that Tamsyn was one hundred per cent acting when she said it.

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DARE TO LOVE

BY A.L. BROOKS

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