

A.L. Brooks



*Write
Your Own
Script*



Chapter 1

“YOU LOOK TIRED, DARLING.”

The words were delivered in a tone oozing with false concern, and Tamsyn instantly tensed. Melinda, the young actress who had spoken, leaned forward and stared at her in the large mirror before them, cool blue eyes seeming to bore into every pore. Tamsyn resisted the urge to squirm under the scrutiny.

Pulling gently at her own face, the skin soft and pliable, Melinda grinned and sat back in her chair. Marie, the make-up artist, glanced quickly from one to the other, then picked up a brush and feigned disinterest.

“Have you ever thought of getting any work done?”

It took every ounce of professionalism Tamsyn had not to retort with the venom she wished she could really exude.

“I was amazed when someone told me you’re still all natural. As soon as this fades,” Melinda pointed at her soft cheek, “I’m getting everything possible done.”

She really was crass and—Tamsyn hesitated over the phrase but decided it fit—as common as muck. Melinda seemed to revel in hitting the front pages of the trashiest magazines. With her brassy blonde hair—clearly from a bottle—large but apparently totally natural breasts, tiny waist, and long legs, she was the tabloids’ favourite, and played up to that fact with alarming skill.

“How many scenes do you have today?” Tamsyn asked, a poor attempt at diverting the conversation, such as it was, away from their disparate looks and age. She raised her chin when Marie gently pushed it upwards, and closed her eyes as the soft brush skittered over her cheeks.

“Just two. I’ll be done by lunchtime, so I’m heading back to the hotel for an afternoon in the spa.”

Lucky you. I’ll be filming a fake rainstorm and it’ll be amazing if I don’t come down with the flu afterwards.

Marie started on Tamsyn’s eyes while Melinda sipped at her coffee, her narrowed eyes watching Marie work. Tamsyn tried—but failed on a number of occasions—to avoid that gaze.

“Marie, you’re a genius,” Melinda said smoothly, a few minutes later. “You’d never know Tammy had all those little wrinkles now.”

Tamsyn gripped the armrests of her chair, willing her anger to subside. These little digs had been going on all week, ever since Melinda turned up on set. Twenty-five years younger than Tamsyn and obviously the director’s favourite, she seemed to feel the need to make that point every five minutes of every day. She had been pushing all of Tamsyn’s buttons, sapping her energy in the battle to resist rising to the bait. Tamsyn was already tired, and dealing with this little bitch really wasn’t helping.

Marie, thankfully, ignored Melinda as she finished Tamsyn’s make-up. It probably helped that Marie wasn’t that much younger than Tamsyn and could probably empathise with her discomfort.

“There,” she said, squinting at Tamsyn in the mirror. “All done.”

Tamsyn turned her head left and right, then nodded. “Thank you, Marie. It’s perfect.”

Marie smiled, turned Tamsyn’s chair around so that she could exit gracefully, and stepped back to let her do so.

“See you on set, Tammy!” Melinda called.

Tammy. Who the fuck does she think she is? No one has ever called me Tammy.

Marie’s soft touch on the small of her back helped ground her, and knowing she had an ally kept her walking forward rather than turning around and slapping the younger woman.

She rolled her shoulders as she exited the room. *God, I’m so tired.* She knew it was all self-inflicted, but she couldn’t seem to stop the momentum of what she’d started two years previously. Turning fifty had affected her in more ways than she’d anticipated, and none of them good. A fear of what the future could entail for an actress her age had suddenly consumed her, and she’d been battling against it ever since, taking on more and more,

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insisting on doing ever more physically demanding roles, and trying to prove to herself and the rest of the world—which was extraordinarily fickle when it came to its love of celebrities—that she was still a viable force.

It had worn her down, and she knew that deep down inside, but she couldn't seem to admit it openly. Carmen had expressed concern only a few weeks ago, and Tamsyn had brushed her off. Today, however, facing the rainstorm scene, her arms already aching from the multiple re-takes they'd done of the canyon scene the day before, Tamsyn wondered if she shouldn't actually listen to her agent once in a while.

She smiled at the crew as she passed them. She had always made a point of being approachable, remembering her early days in the business when she'd seen some of the top stars treat the crew like something less than human, and had vowed never to stoop that low. The smiles she received in return always made her feel good.

"You're late," Don snapped, his voice loud across the enclosed set. He wasn't even looking at her, just standing with his arms folded across his broad chest, his gaze on a cameraman moving his rig into position.

Don Speed was one of those young, hotshot, everyone's-talking-about-me directors who thought he was God's gift to everything. He was tall, good looking, and exuded an air of haughty disdain for everyone and everything. Tamsyn had disliked him from minute one, although she could begrudgingly admit that he had a fantastic eye for a scene. It was such a shame he had to be a total asshole as well. He'd made it perfectly clear he didn't think an actress of her age was suitable for the role, but he'd been outgunned by the producers, who had wanted to work with Tamsyn for some time now. Everyone on set had picked up on the tension and tiptoed around them both.

"Sorry," she replied, breezily professional over the subsurface tension. "I was in make-up."

"Trust me," Don snipped, finally looking over, then looking her up and down, "there isn't enough make-up in the world to hide how old you are. But don't worry, love, we'll use a soft-focus lens."

Tamsyn's brain went into a deep freeze; her mouth wouldn't function. Her simmering anger suddenly threatened to boil over. Melinda giggled as she strolled over to where Don stood. That was the flame, along with the

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satisfied smirk on Don's face as he realised how much his comment had hit home, which was the touch paper.

A large cup of orange juice sat on a high table behind the sound boom, close to where she was standing. Her arm moved almost without thought to grab it and, in one smooth motion, fling its contents straight into his face.

"Fuck you," she snarled, before turning on her heel and walking serenely off set.

Chapter 2

“WHERE THE HELL ARE WE?”

Tamsyn pushed her sunglasses up into her hair and stared out of the window. The scenery that was trundling by as the car humped and bumped its way down the country lane was pretty, that much she could begrudgingly admit.

Carmen exhaled loudly. “North Norfolk. You know that.”

Slouching back into the comfort of the plush leather seat, Tamsyn glared at Carmen but said nothing. Their driver, Heather, the consummate professional, also said nothing, but Tamsyn couldn't help wondering what she must think. She'd driven Tamsyn before, of course, but not to anywhere like this.

The Mercedes lurched as it ran through what must have been a crater of a pothole. The suspension on the expensive car was good, but not *that* good.

Tamsyn winced. She'd need a good yoga session after this to ease out the kinks and creaks in her spine. Thank God she'd remembered to bring her mat.

They rounded a bend in the lane and swept through a pristine white wooden gate onto a gravel driveway which curved around a wide lawn filled with trees. Beyond that stood a large house, its flint walls gleaming in the bright April sunshine. The woodwork surrounding the door and windows was painted a beautiful sage green, contrasting nicely with the two elegant bay trees flanking the front door.

To her consternation, however, at a murmured word from Carmen, Heather took them past the beautiful house and down yet another narrow

track to the side of it. This one was closed in by trees; their thin branches swished and scraped at the sides and roof of the car as they passed. Tamsyn stared longingly back over her shoulder as the house receded out of sight. When she turned back to the front window, she swallowed back her nerves. The lane was dark, and a little creepy, and although she knew she was being irrational, she suddenly wondered just what Carmen had meant when she'd said Tamsyn needed to hide away from the world for a while.

She was about to speak, to put on her best haughty tone and confront Carmen about whatever this insane plan was that she'd cooked up, when the car rounded yet another bend and her words died in her throat. The lane opened out from the gloom of the enclosing trees into what she could only describe as a picture-perfect scene. Immediately in front of them was a lake, partially ringed by reeds and rushes, with a deck on the far side that led perhaps twenty metres out into the water. Tied up to that were four single-person kayaks with their oars laid on the boards of the deck. Beyond the deck, sitting about a hundred metres on either side of it, and therefore a good distance apart, were two cottages. Backed by a line of woodland that stretched as far as Tamsyn could see, the cottages were symmetrical, each having a single door flanked by two windows. A curl of smoke rose from the chimney of the cottage on the right, and a small red car was parked in the gravel driveway.

The lane split at the edge of the lake; Heather took the left branch and a minute later pulled the Mercedes up alongside the unoccupied cottage. She hastened out to open Tamsyn's door.

"Thank you," Tamsyn murmured, pulling her sunglasses back down onto her nose even as she stared around her at the gorgeous scenery. Of course, only one thing marred that view, which was evidence of another human close by. Before she could speak, Carmen held up a hand.

"Yes, I know. It isn't the total privacy I wanted to get you." She glanced over at the other cottage then back to Tamsyn. "But at this short notice it was the best I could do."

"I thought the idea was I would be alone." Tamsyn tried to hold back the acidity in deference to the presence of Heather, who could more than likely hear every word even as she busied herself unloading suitcases and boxes from the boot of the car.

From the look on Carmen's face, she failed.

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“Tamsyn,” Carmen said, her exasperation evident, “I am your agent, not Wonder Woman. Besides, in the UK today, there are very few places where you can truly be in solitude and yet still have many of the comforts you are used to.” She walked over to Tamsyn and placed a gentle hand on her forearm. “This will give you the time you need. And my aunt has assured me that the other tenant is after just as much peace and quiet as you are. I doubt you’ll even see her.”

Relief swamped Tamsyn at the mention of the other person’s gender. At least she wouldn’t have to deal with the unwanted advances of some middle-aged man who’d “*always been a fan and always wanted to meet you in person*”. She received enough of that any time she walked into a restaurant or café, even when trying to be incognito.

Knowing she was being unreasonable, and knowing just how hard Carmen had worked to set up this retreat for her, Tamsyn let out a slow breath and smiled.

“Thank you. I know you’ve done wonders in making this happen. You are *my* Wonder Woman. Always.”

Carmen blushed and dipped her head, scuffing her shoe against the gravel at their feet. “Shut up.”

Tamsyn smirked. “Come on, let’s get me settled in, shall we?”

She leaned into the car to retrieve her handbag and coat, coming upright just as Carmen attempted to lift one of the suitcases and yelped as the weight of it nearly brought her to her knees.

“Shit, this weighs a ton! What have you got in it?”

“Your next bonus payment,” Tamsyn purred. “So keep quiet and carry it.”

Carmen huffed and lugged the suitcase over to the cottage’s front door. Heather, who was exiting as Carmen approached, took one look at her struggling and held out a hand.

“Careful, it’s heavy,” Carmen said, passing it over.

Heather, much to Tamsyn’s merriment, grasped the case in one very competent hand and carried it into the house as if it weighed no more than a bag of feathers.

Carmen glared at her. “Shut up.”

Tamsyn laughed out loud.

“Right,” Carmen said, rubbing her hands together. “I think that is you sorted.”

Tamsyn matched her in looking around the cottage. The living area and kitchen had been combined into one big room, warmed by a larger-than-expected fireplace set in the end wall. They’d lit the fire as soon as they’d finished bringing in all the luggage. Then, while Heather waited out in the car, Tamsyn and Carmen had inspected the kitchen, checked that the fridge and pantry had been stocked with everything Tamsyn had requested, and taken a cursory look at the bedroom and bathroom. Everything was appointed with enough luxury to keep Tamsyn in the lifestyle to which she’d become accustomed, and she’d witnessed Carmen’s barely-disguised sigh of relief when she’d announced she was very happy with the place.

“Yes, everything else I can do myself after you’ve gone. And please, you must thank your aunt for me,” Tamsyn said, as they strolled towards the front door. “She has done an amazing job at such short notice. You’ve spent my money well.”

Carmen laughed. “Oh yes, trust me, she’s been very well reimbursed for this. I’m sure she thought I was joking when I asked for a case of champagne along with everything else. You certainly are like no other guest she’s had here.”

“Are you sure we can rely on her not to go to the press?” Panic fluttered in Tamsyn’s stomach.

“Of course!” Carmen was wide-eyed. “Really Tamsyn, you do need to trust my judgement on things like this. Have I ever let you down?”

Tamsyn’s panic transmuted to shame. “No.” She pulled Carmen into a hug. “You never have and I seriously doubt you ever will. Sorry.”

Carmen gave her a squeeze before pulling away. “Forgiven.” She looked around once more. “Sure you’re going to be okay?”

Tamsyn took a deep breath. No, she wasn’t sure, not at all, but that wasn’t what Carmen needed to hear.

“I’ll be fine. This is, as you said, just what I need. And I will do that thinking you suggested. I promise I won’t just wallow in champagne for two weeks.”

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Carmen chuckled. “That’s good to hear. Okay, mobile reception can be a little patchy up here, but you’ve got Wi-Fi in the cottage, so you can always email, okay?”

Tamsyn saluted. “Understood, ma’am.” She laughed as Carmen rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. I’m a grown-up.”

Carmen’s expression turned serious, her forehead creasing into a frown. “I really hope so, Tam. I... We can’t have a repeat of what happened with Don. I know you know that,” she raised her hands as Tamsyn started to object, “but I’m serious. Get this sorted out in your head. I understand, you know I do. But this is the industry we work in, and this is the way it is. Baby steps, Tam. You’re not the only one wanting to change it, but there are ways and means. Right?”

Tamsyn’s frustration came from knowing both that Carmen was right and that it was ridiculous *she* was the one who’d had to run and hide with her tail between her legs. It should be Don having to “think things over” not her. She gritted her teeth and smiled.

“Right. Got it. I’ll be a new woman when you come back to collect me. Trust me.” She crossed her fingers behind her back, hoping Carmen couldn’t see.

With a shake of her head and a rueful smile, Carmen walked out the front door. Moments later, Tamsyn heard the car pulling away and flopped down onto the small, red leather sofa, facing the fire. The flames mesmerised her, and soothed her, banishing the troubled thoughts from her mind.

She woke sometime later, an awful crook in her neck from falling asleep sitting up. A quick glance at her watch told her she’d only snoozed for about an hour. Her rumbling stomach told her she had missed lunch.

Well, that’s easily remedied, and at least it will get me up and moving. God knows I can’t sit here for two weeks doing nothing.

She found a carton of organic tomato soup in the fridge and heated it up while she organised the food she’d requested. It would be so tempting to ignore her healthy diet while on this retreat, but she knew she’d only regret it. So, into the cupboard went her organic granola, seed mixes and dried fruit, her Asian ingredients, and her vitamins. In the fridge there was already plenty of low-fat yoghurt, vegetables, fruit, organic chicken, organic soups, and fresh juices. And champagne. It was her one concession to being forced—as she saw it—into this position.

After pouring the hot soup into a bowl and placing that on a tray, she ate in front of the fire. It was more soothing than she would have imagined not to be surrounded by the noise of the radio or TV, her usual accompaniments at home. There was a TV in the cottage, and probably a radio somewhere, but somehow she didn't need them. The crackling of the fire kept her company, and she was surprised at how calm she already felt. She knew there was only so long a person could maintain anger, but she hadn't expected it to dissipate quite this quickly.

She smiled. Maybe, like Carmen had said, this place *would* do her good after all.

* * *

Why the hell did I pack so many?

Tamsyn swore loudly for the third time as she lugged the case into the bedroom, cursing herself for being old school. All of this would have been so much easier if she'd ever invested in an e-reader. But no, she had to go all traditional and buy paperbacks.

Stupid.

Giving up on even the idea of lifting the thing onto the bed, she opened it on the floor. The sight of all the books that awaited her instantly wiped the scowl off her face.

Hello, my beauties.

Slowly, almost reverently, she lifted each book from its resting place and laid them out on the bed. Spreading them into two long rows widened her smile. So much joy to be had in the coming few weeks. Her secret pleasure, to be indulged at a rate of a book a day with any luck. She probably could have brought more, but knew it would better for her health if she made sure she actually left the cottage each day, so she'd planned to split her time between reading, yoga, and long walks around the estate. Carmen's aunt owned fifty acres, all of it encircled by private woodland with walking paths woven throughout. Tamsyn couldn't remember the last time she'd actually taken a solo walk. Back in London, or any of the cities where she was usually based around the world, she was too recognisable to risk it, always ensuring she had someone with her to fend off her wide-eyed fans or offer a quick escape from the more persistent ones. Here though, she had

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every hope that some quiet time would be hers. Time amongst the trees, the birds, and the sounds of the wind.

But first, finish the unpacking, then some yoga to ease out the kinks.

In the end she decided to leave the books in their suitcase. While there was a small bookcase on the wall facing the bed, it was already filled with a pitiful collection of trashy novels supplied by the owner and she couldn't be bothered rearranging it all.

After changing into soft yoga pants and a loose T-shirt, she unrolled her mat on the polished wood floor of the bedroom. The area at the end of the walnut-framed bed, between it and the bookcase, was plenty wide enough, and it meant she almost faced the window. She cracked it open, delighting in the swell of birdsong and cool, fresh air that immediately filtered into the room. At each standing pose she only had to swivel her eyes a fraction to see the trees and the weak afternoon sunshine casting a golden glow across the sky.

Dropping into Downward Dog, she revelled in the slight pull of her spinal muscles, the easing out of her hips and hamstrings. At fifty-two, her body was in better shape than she might have anticipated in her late teens, when she had still been trying to lose the last of her puppy fat, feeling awkward and gangly in her still-developing body. Now, after years of being in the public eye, and the adoration and abuse—in equal parts—that exposure bestowed on her, the yoga she'd practised all that time had enabled her to maintain the slimness that was expected of her, as well as a suppleness that, for her, was far more important.

Easing back into Child's Pose, she moaned with pleasure as her spine stretched, her arms held out in front of her on the floor. Damn, that felt good. She held it for a little longer than usual, then came upright to sit on her feet; finished with her breathing exercises, she let her shoulders roll and lower as the glow of her workout warmed every inch of her skin. Almost better than sex.

Almost.

She smiled to herself, stood up, and walked to the bathroom to pat down her warm body with a small towel. Once she'd changed back into sweatpants and a hoodie, she hauled her big slippers from under the bed and wriggled her feet into them. Tonight was all about making a delicious dinner, drinking a couple of glasses of champagne, and curling up on the

sofa with a good book. She shivered in anticipation and turned to the suitcase holding her books.

Okay, which one of you is first?

Two minutes later, her choice in hand, she wandered through to the kitchen, dropping the book on the sofa as she passed by. She stoked the fire and added another large log; that would see her through the evening, she suspected. After pulling some vegetables and chicken from the fridge, she went in search of a chopping board and a knife. She had just grabbed both implements when a sharp bark out back had her gasping and almost dropping the knife.

She crept over to the door. Not being a huge fan of dogs, she hoped this one wasn't right on her doorstep. A quick peek out of the glass that formed the top third of the door gave her a sense of relief; the dog—a small, brown, wiry thing—was in her garden but not that close to the door. How had it gained access to her garden? She glanced around. Oh, there—an open gate where the garden adjoined the path that led to the woods. So where was the dog's owner? Oh well, not her problem. Not unless the little mutt came any closer.

She stepped back and continued with her chopping. A minute later a woman's voice called, "Gizmo! Gizmo! Where the hell are you, you little shit?"

Tamsyn snorted. Gizmo, what a name. Although, on reflection, perfectly suited to the scrawny little beast. And at least the voice confirmed that the neighbour was indeed female.

"Gizmo! Get back here!"

A couple of quick yelps, their volume receding as the dog clearly scampered away, signalled that peace was restored to Tamsyn's corner of the world.

Perfect. Just me and the latest Maddie Jones. She glanced over at the book where it lay, enticing her, on the sofa.

Soon, sweetheart. Soon.

Chapter 3

MAGGIE STARED DOWN AT GIZMO, her scolding face on. “You, young man, are in a heap of trouble.”

Gizmo blinked, then licked his chops. Was he actually grinning at her? Little git.

She shook her head, then laughed. Gizmo barked and jumped up a couple of times.

“All right, all right. God, why can’t I resist you?”

She crouched down and accepted his licks and snuffles all over her face. Stroking his head and back, she sighed. He was a cheeky little sod, but his love for her always made her feel better.

“Come on, that’s enough fresh air for today. Time for snuggles by the fire.”

Strolling through the trees had become her new favourite thing this past week. Usually they were confined to the local park near her house in Putney. Having such an expanse to play in had sent her beloved Border terrier into paroxysms of delight, and his enthusiasm was infectious. So what if she hadn’t written a single word since she’d arrived here?

They reached the gravel driveway of her cottage and shimmied past the car to get to the front door. She glanced back at the other cottage, the single light coming from what she knew was the kitchen, and hoped that whoever was staying there hadn’t been too disturbed by Gizmo’s antics.

Gizmo squeezed through the door before she’d even got it fully open, and ran straight to his water bowl where he lapped noisily for a couple of minutes while she removed her coat and shoes. It was nicely nippy out, and her face was tingling now that she was back in the warmth of the cottage.

She walked over to the fire and added some more wood, noting that her pile was diminishing but it would at least last her through to tomorrow morning.

The bottle of red wine she'd opened the night before was standing on the kitchen counter, and moments later she was sipping a large glass by the fire. She'd taken to sitting in the single armchair. The sofa was comfy enough, but there was something even more comforting about being embraced completely by the chair—Gizmo usually either laying on the floor by the fire or wedged between her folded legs and one arm of the chair.

She stared at the flames as they danced in the grate. Her eyes felt tired. Hell, the whole of her felt tired. The burnout had hit her hard and fast, and although she knew her recovery would happen at its own good pace, she couldn't help but will it to go faster. She had deadlines to meet, fans to keep happy.

Yes, but you also need to keep yourself happy.

She could almost hear her sister's voice, her gentle yet firm pleas for Maggie to slow down, stop working so hard, to find some time for herself.

She snorted and Gizmo, who had passed out in front of the fire after guzzling down his water, twitched in his slumber.

Well, now she was realising Ruth had been right all along. Writing under two pseudonyms, in two entirely different genres and markets, had seemed like such a good idea when it first started. And the money it earned, and the plaudits and awards she'd garnered in both markets, had only spurred her on. She'd been churning out three books a year, on average, for the last four years. Of course, in doing so she had barely seen her family, or friends, and her last girlfriend had disappeared six months into that first year, claiming—quite rightly—that she never saw Maggie so they could hardly call it a relationship, could they?

She'd convinced herself none of that mattered. It was the acclaim that fed her soul, fired her up. Finally she was something. Someone. From being nothing at school, and not much else in her twenties, when she'd first started dabbling with writing—having always felt it was in her—her early successes in short story competitions and submissions to magazines had lit a fire beneath her for something more. That first novel, in her early thirties—*God, was that fifteen years ago already?*—had only made her burn faster and harder. It had sold reasonably well, and although it took her

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another three years to write the sequel, she'd found her audience from the first book desperate for that follow-up, and a new audience had discovered her thanks to a new agent and the change of personnel at her publisher. Suddenly, she was a name. The new face of historical romance.

Then she'd had the bright idea of switching personas. Of keeping her original pen name, Jessica Stewart, for that genre, and inventing a new name to explore a market more true to herself. The historical work had almost been a fluke, utilising elements of her studies from her time at university. But the other, the romantic lesbian fiction, *that* came from her heart. Her soul. And much to her own surprise, she'd been an instant hit there as well. Maddie Jones was a big name in the lesfic market these days.

But now, bizarrely, all of that had dried up. She hadn't written a word in three months. Both publishers were clamouring for new titles, but she didn't have it in her. The ideas weren't there, and sitting in front of a blank screen wasn't conjuring up any inspiration.

So, here she was. On retreat, as she was calling it. She'd agreed with her agent that she would take a month off, see if she could free the block. She had no idea what would happen if it didn't work.

The warmth of the wine and the fire were making her drowsy, and her head dipped. This was the other thing she couldn't quite get used to—she was tired. Constantly tired.

Of course you're tired. You're burned out. You have nothing left in the tank.

Burned out. She'd thought that only happened to city workers, the people making all the big deals in the financial market. It had never occurred to her that it could happen to a writer. A writer of romances, for crying out loud.

She chuckled and Gizmo raised his head, his liquid brown eyes blinking at her.

"Relax," she said, and took another sip of her wine. "It's just me, going slightly bonkers."

No, not bonkers. Not really. Just a bit...lost.

* * *

"Stand still, you little bugger." Maggie grabbed Gizmo by his collar and hauled him back towards her. "I thought you loved walks. Why are you fighting me on this?"

She finally managed to clip the lead into place and stood upright again. As soon as she did, Gizmo strained the leather leash in his eagerness to reach the front door.

“Good God you’re fickle.”

Stumbling after the little dynamo, she grabbed the keys from the small table in the entranceway and locked the door behind them once they were on the front step. The cold pricked at her ears, and she smiled. Another beautiful morning in this small piece of paradise. And to her, it *was* paradise—nothing but nature all around.

After yet another restless night, she knew the fresh air would do her good. It was crazy, she thought, as she let Gizmo lead them towards the path that squirmed through an opening in the trees about a minute from the back of their cottage, that for someone so worn out she couldn’t get a decent night’s sleep. She hadn’t done since the first night here; the speed with which she’d booked the trip, packed, and closed up her house had worn her down to the point where not sleeping was impossible once she’d arrived at the cottage. But since then, all of the doubts about her writing had plagued her brain, and so far none of the remedies she’d tried for easing her mind before sleep had worked.

They were in the trees now, and the change in the sounds around them, and in the very air itself, soothed her. Maybe she should try sleeping out here one night. She snorted. *Yeah, so not going to happen. Imagine all the wildlife skittering around!* She’d give herself a heart attack before daybreak wondering if she was going to be eaten by wild animals. Even though she knew it was ridiculous—there were no carnivorous predators in Norfolk—the thought of exposing herself to the rawness of nature that way did not appeal.

A yelp from Gizmo brought her sharply out of her reverie and she looked around to see what had him so worked up. Then she stopped, and stared, because standing on the path ahead of them, looking concerned at the noise and the rather agitated little hops Gizmo was making, was Tamsyn Harris.

Maggie shook her head. No, there was no way that could possibly be Tamsyn Harris standing in a Norfolk woodland, all alone, only twenty paces or so in front of her. Tamsyn Harris was a world-famous actress who split her time between London and Los Angeles, eating out at all the best

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restaurants and being seen in all the most fashionable places when she wasn't working on a film or TV series. This woman, whoever she was, just bore a remarkable likeness to her, that's all.

Mind you, it's extraordinary how much her double she is...

"Good morning," Maggie called, yanking Gizmo back on his lead and pointing a finger at him that said "Behave!" when he turned reproachful eyes on her.

"Is your dog safe?" the woman replied.

Maggie was affronted. Safe? Of course Gizmo was safe, what a ridiculous thing to sugg—

"Only I'm not exactly a fan of dogs."

She *sounded* like Tamsyn Harris too, with that hint of huskiness in the posh-but-not-too-posh tone that Tamsyn Harris used. Maggie stared at her again, taking in all her features. The chestnut brown hair was mostly hidden by a stylish woollen cap, but it was the right shade. She wasn't close enough for Maggie to see her eyes, but the height seemed about right, even in the flat walking boots she wore, and the body shape was too, although many women were as slim as Tamsyn so that wasn't much of a clue.

When Maggie let her gaze drift back to the woman's face, Maggie realised she was still waiting for a response.

"Oh. Sorry. Gizmo's fine, don't worry. All bark and no trousers this one."

Gizmo whimpered, as if offended.

Finally the woman smiled. It was weak, but even so it transformed her face and suddenly, right then, Maggie knew. That smile was unmistakable.

Holy. Crap.

The actress walked slowly towards her, then gestured to the path. "I'm just going to pass by, okay?"

"O-Of course." Maggie's heart was thundering beneath her ribs. *Tamsyn bloody Harris!* Maggie's celebrity crush since she was eighteen years old, only yards away from her and about to walk within inches of her—how was that even possible?

Tamsyn approached, gave Maggie a half-smile, then side-stepped around Gizmo with caution. He stared up at her, his mouth open, tongue lolling, and for a brief moment Maggie wondered if she was standing in the middle of the pathway in much the same manner. A quick check confirmed

that, to her relief, her tongue was still contained within her closed mouth. She knew, however, that her eyes were as wide as saucers.

She should say something. Ask her—are you *really* Tamsyn Harris? But her brain wouldn't engage properly and when it did, her overwhelming sense was, much to her surprise, to protect this woman. To keep her secret. Because, clearly, Tamsyn was here incognito—there was no entourage, no sign of any companion. And for someone as famous as Tamsyn Harris to do that, there must be a significant reason behind it. As someone who was in Norfolk dealing with her own demons, Maggie could respect that.

No matter how desperate she was to run after her and ask for an autograph.

* * *

Shit. She recognised me.

Tamsyn kicked at the path with her boot and grunted. *Damn it!* She risked a quick glance back over her shoulder, and was relieved to see the woman and her dog had moved on; they were now mere specks in the distance, only visible by the scarlet red of the woman's coat.

Well, it had probably been naive of her to think she'd avoid her neighbour the entire time she was here. They did occupy the only two holiday cottages on the property, after all. And braving a walk had seemed like such a great idea when she'd thrown back the curtains and seen the cold, bright day that she'd forgotten all about the woman and the dog across the lake.

She huffed out a breath, and listened to the birds tweeting somewhere high above her. At least the woman hadn't pounced—her eyes had been so wide Tamsyn feared they were going to pop out of the poor thing's head, but she'd kept her distance, and kept her mouth shut. Tamsyn smiled. It had been a long, long time since that had happened, and it felt good.

I wonder if she walks that dog at the same time every day. I could always make sure I walk in the afternoons, if that's the case.

As soon as she thought it, she felt a bit daft. It was only one woman, and they were sharing this space for however long their breaks overlapped. Trying to avoid her was ridiculous. Not that she'd be inviting her over for dinner or anything crazy, but perhaps to say hello to on the path, especially if the woman didn't go all fangirl on her, wouldn't be that bad. Besides, if there was one thing Tamsyn had noticed, it was that the woman

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was delicious to look at. She grinned. Oh yeah—honey-blond hair that dropped just past her shoulders, hazel eyes with just a hint of crow's feet at the corners, pitching her age within a few years of Tamsyn's own, and a face of simple beauty, made even more so by the lack of make-up. She was the same height as Tamsyn, and although she'd been bundled up in that red coat and jeans, appeared to have a similar build.

Tamsyn breathed in a deep lungful of the woodsy air. It had been quite a while since she'd looked at a woman. Properly looked. Most of her assignations over the years had required the utmost discretion, meeting in dim hotel rooms, arrangements made by Carmen through her extensive channels. Some lovers had lasted more than a week or so, but rarely. Tamsyn was too public, and too much in need of protecting her image to be seen with a woman on her arm. She made sure she was photographed regularly enough with a beard, usually some other actor, or a musician—always younger than her, of course, and grateful enough for the publicity to keep his mouth shut.

It was the most bizarre Catch-22 these days—just when more and more celebrities were embracing the new dawn and coming out left, right, and centre, Tamsyn was having to do even more to stay in the closet. Roles for a fifty-two-year-old were hard enough to come by without being the fifty-two-year-old lesbian. She was already sick of directors telling her she couldn't play a love interest anymore—imagine how they'd react if she attempted to read for such roles having just announced her sexuality to the world? She'd never work again, she knew that—at least, not in the roles she wanted. God knew she wasn't anywhere near ready to be the new Miss Marple.

Unbidden, thoughts of her friend, Lesley, came to mind. Lesley had taken a different path and come out when they were in their early thirties, nearly twenty years ago. She was just beginning to make a name for herself on British TV dramas and had seemed completely taken by surprise when those roles began to dry up. After working the off-West End theatre scene for a few years, and even trying her hand at hosting a reality TV show for a couple of seasons, in the end she'd admitted defeat and walked away from acting entirely.

Tamsyn had tried to support her through every step—their friendship stretching back to their late teens and their first breakthroughs in the cut-

throat world of acting—but she'd never been in agreement with Lesley's need to come out. Lesley always maintained that she wasn't bitter about what had happened, but there was a tightness in her eyes whenever she said it and Tamsyn didn't believe her for one minute. She wouldn't say "I told you so", but Lesley's experience had only strengthened her decision to stay closeted.

She spotted a fallen tree trunk just off the path and wandered over to it, perching on it at first to make sure it was steady, then relaxing back fully when she realised it would hold her.

Now that she was at the top, winning awards and able to cherry-pick her roles, it only made the current situation all the more infuriating. That little shit of a director had no right to treat her the way he did. But he was the upcoming star, never mind her reputation, or the glittering list of roles on her résumé. '*A short illness*' was the excuse fed to the press to explain her sudden departure.

Bullshit, all of it. Don was threatening to have her axed completely, and Tamsyn knew Carmen was doing everything she could to make sure that didn't happen, calling in favours from all over the place. If Tamsyn didn't care so much about the film, and the story it was telling, she'd have told Don to shove it even harder. Still, throwing that orange juice into his face *had* been rather satisfying.

She smirked as the image of him with orange bits dripping off his nose came back to her. The snorts and sniggers around set had also been rather pleasing, although they'd been cut short by his threatening, steely-eyed glare.

A blackbird landed almost at her feet, sticking its beak into the undergrowth to search out a snack. *What a simple life*. No egos to deal with, no tantrums to throw. She heard a bark, somewhere in the distance, and her smirk, much to her own surprise, transformed into a smile. That dog was pretty cute, she had to admit.

And then, of course, there was its owner...

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BY A.L. BROOKS

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