

*No. 4*

*Fallulah the Drama Queen*

By Rosamund Fleming

Tallulah was a beautiful and charming young woman, with hair as red as an autumn leaf, as black as a winter night, as blue as a stormy sea. Depending on how the mood and the hair dye took her. She was also intelligent and highly ambitious. As soon as she was old enough, she went out into the world to seek her fortune.

Unfortunately, this didn't work out and she came back home to live with her parents. It wasn't a happy situation for any of them, and one day Tallulah returned to the house to find the locks changed and her bag packed, with a housing benefit application form tucked into the handle. She took the hint, and went and sought cheap, rented accommodation.

She found it in a semi-detached house owned by a completely detached man. Jack was quite old – even older than her parents. At least fifty. After she'd been lodging with him for a few weeks, she realised that no friends ever came to visit, he never spoke to his neighbours, he never spoke on the phone. He seemed uncomfortable having her in the house. Which was somewhat unfortunate, as he was a writer who worked from home, and she was unemployed and didn't go out much. On one of his more talkative days, he told her he wrote dramas for television but was having trouble finding work. He blamed this on the popularity of reality shows. Tallulah listened politely. She wasn't terribly interested in other people's problems or in television. All her friends had moved away and there were no real jobs to apply

for. She just wanted to stay in her room with her music and DVDs. She'd become as detached as her landlord.

One morning, while brushing her teeth, Tallulah heard the doorbell ring. When she came downstairs, there was a girl in the kitchen with Jack. A stranger but her face was insistently familiar. Jack worked in television; maybe she was an actress. "Tallulah, this is Rachel," said Jack. He appeared ill at ease. The girl looked directly at Tallulah but didn't quite make eye contact and though she replied in a friendly manner to Tallulah's "hello", the timing was wrong. Tallulah was unnerved. She excused herself as soon as possible and went to her room.

A little later she heard Jack showing the visitor to *his* room. She was obviously staying for a while. Desperate for coffee, Tallulah decided to risk going downstairs but immediately bumped into Jack on the landing, carrying some belongings out of his bedroom. Embarrassed, Jack asked if she would take his things down to the study for him. He then quickly returned to his guest.

Tallulah entered the study and placed the items on the sofa bed. On his computer screen, Jack had left a document open. She was old enough to know she shouldn't but young enough to be curious – Tallulah read the document. It was a script. About a girl called Rachel. Apparently Jack didn't look far afield for inspiration. He wrote well though. He'd really brought the character to life. In fact, as Tallulah made her way through the story, the idea crept into her mind that the

young woman in Jack's room actually was his fictional heroine. Ridiculous – but she couldn't rid herself of the thought. The screenplay came to an end and she looked up to find Jack watching her. It was her turn to be embarrassed and, without thinking, she blurted out, "She's this character, isn't she?" Jack nodded, relieved. The previous night he'd completed his piece about Rachel. (A girl based on Tallulah, as he hesitantly explained.) This morning she'd arrived at the door. It made sense to Tallulah. The world of imagination had become full of reality, so a fictional character had been displaced into the real world.

Tallulah was thrilled she had a share in this secret but it still unsettled her. She avoided Rachel entirely. Some days later she found Jack desolate. "She's gone." "Can't you get her back?" Tallulah asked uncertainly. He showed her the script. There was something subtly different. The writing was lifeless. Tallulah felt sick. "She needed an audience to survive," said Jack. "But," Tallulah pointed out, "you saw her every day." Jack sighed. "I'm just her writer."

The doorbell rang and, reluctantly, Jack went to answer it. He returned with a man and a woman. They smiled at Tallulah but couldn't quite make eye contact. Tallulah turned and looked into Jack's anxious eyes. "May I introduce Marius and Hilda?" he said.

Full of guilt about Rachel, Tallulah dutifully sat in the living room every evening and watched Marius and Hilda bickering with each other. It was all just beginning to feel somewhere in the region of

normal when other characters started to arrive – more and more of them each day. They came from rejected scripts, unmade scripts, cancelled productions. The doorbell would ring and they'd find yet another well-crafted specimen waiting on the doorstep. Marius and Hilda, the only couple, had Jack's room. The single women shared Tallulah's room with her and the single men bedded down in the living room. Every one of them required an audience and Tallulah was it. She watched them all day and all evening. It was overwhelming. She urgently wanted to be out of the house. She had to look for work, if nothing else. She informed Jack she was going to talk to the neighbours.

Most said no or wouldn't listen to her but Tallulah was blessed with the gifts of beauty, charm and the gab. A few were persuaded by her story of being a drama student learning about audience reactions and they agreed to come over and watch her "classmates". Tallulah – and Jack- were delighted to find that their neighbours thoroughly enjoyed these performances. Word spread and people started to volunteer to come. Tallulah was pleased to have some free time again and, to her surprise, she found some new friends amongst the members of these audiences. She went out with them, joined a couple of groups. And started to hear about interesting, available jobs.

One Saturday evening though, it was just Tallulah and Jack sitting on the couch, half-listening to Marius and Hilda argue. Tallulah was preparing for a job interview. Jack was sorting out the following week's audience rota. Tallulah took the opportunity to

mention something that had been on her mind. The characters needed a more permanent solution. She was suddenly distracted by the realisation that the characters in front of her had altered their dialogue. Jack looked sheepish. "I've reworked it a little." Tallulah was thoughtful. The characters could be changed.

She had an idea.

Jack and Tallulah began rewriting the scripts as short stories. They sold them to magazines, posted them online, posted them through letterboxes – anything to get readers. Tallulah had wondered if their house guests would just disappear like poor Rachel but as each story was completed and read, the relevant characters said goodbye and left by the front door. Jack found that work started to pick up again and he handed over all responsibility for the stories to his co-writer. Soon after, Tallulah got a wonderful job but she soldiered on with the writing too. New characters stopped arriving and after six months hardly anyone was left. She booked a week's holiday to finish off the remaining stories and four days in, she was done.

The last characters, Marius and Hilda, had left that morning – still fighting- and Tallulah and Jack were having a celebratory cup of delicious, expensive coffee in the kitchen. Tallulah brought up the subject of her moving out too. "You don't really need me any more." Jack looked into his coffee. And the doorbell rang. Startled, he looked up at Tallulah and went to answer the door. Despite her earlier relief,

Tallulah felt a small tingle of excitement that the adventure wasn't over yet. Jack came back into the room with a man Tallulah's age. His face was perhaps too interesting to be actually handsome but it was still making a pretty good stab at it. The young man smiled at Tallulah. She found herself smiling back at him a little too broadly but couldn't get her face to stop it. He looked her straight in the eye and for once she felt directly connected to one of Jack's creations. "This is Nathan," said Jack.

Tallulah said she needed a few days to get to know Nathan before writing his story. This wasn't the first time she'd fallen in love with a fictional character but it was certainly the first time the character had returned her feelings. They discussed his leaving. "I want to stay with you," he told her. Tallulah was tempted but knew he shouldn't stay. Reality limited him; he needed an imaginary world. Jack's script had Nathan unhappily enduring unrequited love. Tallulah wrote him a story in which he met a nice girl and they lived happily ever after. She saved the final version and, not giving herself time to consider, immediately posted it online. Looking up, she saw Nathan standing next to her, waiting.

Together they walked in silence to the front door. He embraced her and then he kissed her. Just for one moment she wanted to obliterate every word of that wretched story and keep him with her forever. But instead she let him go, and watched as he left the house and closed the door behind him.

Tallulah found a flat and Jack helped her to move in. As a house-warming present he brought along a packet of the delicious, expensive coffee and they had a cup in Tallulah's tiny kitchen, for old times' sake. Tallulah chatted enthusiastically about her new place and about work. Talked a little too much. Jack knew she was missing Nathan. He suddenly wondered if he could construct a happy ending for his friend. "I'm going to hold a house-*leaving* party for you," he announced. Tallulah grinned. "I knew you were keen to get rid of me."

That night Jack phoned an old friend to invite him along as the first guest.

She'd been called in to work unexpectedly and by the time Tallulah reached Jack's house, the party was in full swing. Jack apologised. "I thought it would be better than everyone standing around awkwardly waiting for you." He gestured towards a man standing nearby. "I'd like you to meet someone." Tallulah's heart jumped. Nathan was there. Her heart quickly sank back down again. The man did look a lot like Nathan but he was much older. Jack guided her across and introduced the two of them. "This is Thomas, a friend from university. I partly based my character, Nathan on him." The man who looked like Nathan smiled and shook her hand. Jack continued to talk. She wished he'd shut up. "I thought you might prefer to have a few more people your own age here, so I asked Thomas to bring his son." Jack's friend called over to a younger man, who came and joined them. He grinned at Tallulah. He only had a

slight resemblance to his father. Heavier on the “interesting”; less heavy on the “handsome”. But he had Nathan’s smile and she felt the same immediate connection to him. “I’m Jonathan,” he said. He offered Tallulah his hand, and she took it.

The more she got to know Jonathan, the further Nathan moved to the back of her mind – though she never forgot him completely. Jonathan was funny and intelligent, and constantly surprising. Far more complicated than a fictional character could ever be. After a while she couldn’t imagine her life without him.

And they both lived – well, they lived together for a bit. Then they split up for a bit. Then they got back together. Then they had a baby. Then they got married. And then – they lived happily ever after.

*The End*