

THE OASIS HEALING CLINIC, known to locals as “The Oasis,” is forced to operate just south of the Mexico-U.S. border. The United States, having outlawed cancer treatments that involve all-natural practices, without chemotherapy or medications, made it impossible for those seeking such treatments to stay near loved ones, near their homes and the communities that supported them. The long trek south, over the border, is the only way to secure such treatments, and although more people are choosing to make that trek daily, the clinic is chronically underfunded. It depends on big-name clients to help support its natural healing efforts.

So when the call came requesting check-in information for international singing sensation Tammy Ryan, the staff had to deal with mixed feelings of apprehension and relief. Depending on its outcome, treatment of a megastar could bring the clinic either financial ruin or widespread success—success that could fund the clinic for years to come. After closely examining the patient’s medical history and tests, the nurses decide the megastar is a good candidate for the clinic.

Tammy is accompanied by the usual entourage that fame and stardom trail behind it. “Good morning,” Teresa Newland says to Tammy, as she and the group of support people enter the clinic’s foyer.

Immediately, a woman in a tight black skirt and jacket moves between Tammy and Teresa. “Yes, we are here to check Ms. Ryan into the clinic.

Teresa looks around the tight woman at Tammy.

Tammy Ryan has red hair—today, anyway—and she wears it tied in a French twist. Diamond-studded earrings, worth more than the clinic’s annual revenues, hang from Tammy’s perfectly formed earlobes. Her face is beautiful but sunken and exhausted looking. Her white skin has a translucence to it, allowing Teresa to see blue veins running up to the temples on each side of her large, grey-blue eyes.

“Hello,” Teresa says, extending her hand to shake Tammy’s.

Tammy reaches out and smiles.

“Welcome to the The Oasis Clinic,” Teresa smiles.

Tammy nods appreciatively toward Teresa, but the tight woman continues to talk.

“I’m sorry,” Teresa says, interrupting Tight Woman, “but you will all have to leave, and we can only speak with the patient and no one else about her treatment.”

Tight Woman drops her hands in exasperation. “Excuse me? I don’t think you know who you are talking to. My name is Leslie T—” but before Tight Woman can finish, Teresa moves over to take Tammy’s arm and asks a porter to bring in her suitcases.

“She will be very well cared for,” Teresa says over her shoulder, leading Tammy away from the throng.

“You can’t just ignore us!” Tight Woman yells after Tammy and Teresa.

“Leslie,” Tammy says, raising her hand as if to say *Stop*, “that’s enough. They’ll take good care of me. Go check into a hotel if

you're staying—or better yet, go home to your family. There is nothing we can do but allow the process time to work. I'm sure these good people will bring me no harm."

Leslie squeezes her lips together, as if to match the tightness of her outfit, and turns to the two men behind her before turning back to Tammy. "Are you *sure*, Tammy?"

"Yes, Leslie. You've been great and thank you, but I'm okay. You go on home."

"Just the same, I think we will check in across the street and keep an eye on things." Looking up at Teresa, she meets the woman's calm, dark-brown eyes. "No harm is to come to this woman—"

"We are a healing clinic," Teresa replies genially but firmly. "People come here when harm has already happened to them. We will take good care of Ms. Ryan, I assure you."

The Tight Woman, completely put off, brushes Tammy's cheek with a fast fake kiss. "Well, you better be right about that. You do know who—"

"Leslie, go!" Tammy scolds.

Leslie and the two men turn toward the double-glass doors and walk out into the receiving garden. As they stroll past the hundred-year-old cactuses, yuccas, and aloes that grow along the walkway, no one takes notice of the garden's beauty. "Ungrateful bitch!" Leslie says to the two men as they climb into the limousine. The men chuckle, and the black car drives off.

Tammy walks alongside Teresa as she is led further into the clinic's living quarters. "You handled Leslie quite well," Tammy says. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone shut her down like that. You'll have to teach me how you did that."

Teresa smiles. "Yes, learning to hold our boundaries with those who don't respect us is part of our healing process."

Tammy looks ahead of her, pausing before she replies. "I like that. That'll really come in handy in my line of work."

The two women continue walking until they reach the women's healing room. The room is large, with lots of windows. The walls are painted a beautiful shade of peach, and the whole room pops open like a sunburst of warmth. Other women are lying in the beds, some are sitting in chairs in the gathering areas, and still others are out on the porch, reading or knitting.

Tammy surveys the women's faces as she walks down the aisle between beds. Some of the women know who Tammy is, but others do not. Whispers of, "She's famous" and "I think it's her," can be heard as Teresa guides Tammy toward a large bed and an oak dresser at the end of the aisle. Covering the bed is a beautiful, handmade, quilted coverlet with images of fruits and vegetables sewn onto its surface.

"This will be your bed area," Teresa says to Tammy. Tammy looks around at all the women sleeping, sitting, and living in the same room she is supposed to live in.

"My dear woman," Tammy says to Teresa. "Do you know who I am?"

Teresa looks directly at Tammy. "Yes, you are Ms. Tammy Ryan. You have been diagnosed with cancer in your throat. You are a patient at The Oasis Clinic, and you are my twelfth patient, so I must be moving on and start seeing to some of the others."

Tammy clears her throat. She looks around at the whispering people. "I am a famous person," she says to Teresa. "I play to stadiums of people all over the world. Last year I netted approximately twelve million dollars in revenues."

Teresa smiles. "There are no famous people here at The Oasis, Ms. Ryan. There are only people who are trying to heal. No one is more important than anyone else."

Tammy looks around the room at everyone, still whispering. "Tell that to them," she says, nodding toward the other patients.

Teresa looks around to see everyone staring. "Okay, everyone, time for us to prepare for afternoon meditation," she announces.

“Please respect our newest patient’s privacy.” And with that, she leads the way into the large meditation room at the end of the hall. Everyone follows her except Tammy, who is left sitting on her bed, alone.

“Just people trying to heal, huh?” She looks down at her hands. Just hands; not famous hands. She looks at her face in the small mirror next to the bed. Just a face; not a famous face. “I like that,” she says to herself, as she lifts her bag to the bed to start unpacking. A lightness comes over her that she has not felt in a very long time. “I like that a lot,” she says, as she places her clothing into the oak dresser drawers. Her insides are giddy with anticipation. She has not felt this free in years, and the realization surprises her.

She looks around at the sunny, peach-colored room and sits down on the bed. The need to cry wells up in her throat, but she does not allow herself the luxury of tears. Years of stuffing her emotions have taught her how to keep that flood from breaching the dam. Her hands tremble as she fights the urge to cry.

The famous woman sits alone in the healing clinic room, realizing she has forgotten how to let her tears fall.