

A watercolor illustration of an artist with long blonde hair, seen from the back, painting on a canvas. The canvas is titled 'Still Life' in a large, black, cursive script. On a table in front of the canvas is a small square container holding several brushes. The background is a vibrant watercolor wash of yellow, orange, and red, with purple and pink washes on the left side. The artist's hand is visible, holding a brush to the canvas.

Still Life

L.T. Smith



Chapter 1

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I WAS BORED. BORED, BORED, bored. Nothing moved me from my apathy about everything. Work was living up to its name, and it seemed as if all I ever did was get up, go to the office, fart about on computers all day whilst talking to potential clients on the phone, come home and do bugger all for the rest of the evening until it was time to go to bed. The next day would appear with the crowing of an impatient alarm clock, and that day was the same as the previous. I was living through my personal Groundhog Day. Deep down, I knew I would probably do the same thing over and over again until I keeled over, hand gripping my chest, my expression a contortion of agony, splatting my face on the flat screen of my computer monitor as the final act of a woman whose life was shite.

It was a Wednesday. Actually, it was Wednesday, 8th September. Or 08/09/10 for those who think it is cool to see the chronological progression of dates through numbers—and yes, I am a sad bastard. Pity I couldn't say it was 11:12 and 13 seconds when I had the epiphany about how crap my life was, but I didn't notice the time. Sorry for getting your hopes up.

I remember it being a Wednesday, because on Wednesdays the canteen served curry for lunch. I hated curry, even the smell of it, and I hated the fact that everyone in the office knew I hated it, so on Wednesdays they would make a beeline for sitting with me whilst grinning idiotically and offering me forkfuls of the stuff. I was back in front of my computer before our allotted hour for lunch was over.

A good time to write some personal emails, don't you think?

A grin slipped across my face as I opened Hotmail and typed in my user name and password. Many junk mails had slipped through the filter, and I was silently hoping that the IT department had missed the ones asking if I needed a penis extension, when I spotted the mail from my friend Sophie.

Sophie and me went way back. Her grinning face, sans one front tooth, was the clearest memory I had from Primary School. To say she adopted me would be the easiest way to sum up our relationship, even though she was only three and a half weeks older than I was. I say “was” but in fact it should be “is,” as both of us are very much alive. Carrying on... It was Sophie’s personal goal to make sure I was fully integrated into school politics: where to hang out, who not to make eye contact with, which dinner lady gave the biggest portions, what teacher to suck up to, which one to play up, and the blinding one—don’t touch the curry. It was made from all the things they should throw away but were too tight fisted to bin.

Leaving Primary, we advanced to High School together. Moved on to makeup, bad fashion sense, acne, and boys. Well, Sophie moved through the boys like lightning, while I was only too happy to be her alibi when she stayed out all night. It wasn’t until we both went to college that I came to some kind of self-understanding. Boys just didn’t tickle my proverbial fancy, although it still took me a while to understand why. No. Actually I didn’t even work it out for myself. Once again it was Sophie who led me, this time to the realisation that girls were more my bag. And here was an email from her.

Oi! Lezza! What’re you doing later? Fancy meeting up at The Dog for a snifter? Text me and let me know. I’ve a cunning plan!!!!

SophX

I loved seeing Sophie. Loved her infectious laugh, her twinkling brown eyes, her zest for life. However, if I did go to The Dog, that would mean I would have to break the monotony of my existence. Could I, or should I say “Dare I” break away from eating a meal

for one, having a soak in the tub, and then tumbling into a solitary bed at 9:30?

I slipped my phone from my bag and saw that I had a message, the very same message Sophie had sent via email. My, she was eager. Three times I wrote the reply, changing my mind each time. No. Yes. No. And then a fourth and final time:

C u l8r say 7? Btr b gud. Jess x

What has happened to the English language, eh? Sometimes it would be far easier to write with the correct spelling and grammar instead of wondering how on earth you can write “See you later, about 7? Better be good. Jess x”, without blowing apart a handful of neurons. Weirdly enough, most of us still sign the bloody thing when it is obvious who sent it, as our names appear on the other person’s phone.

Yes. I know. Waffling.

Seven o’clock saw me walking into The Dog—sounds strange, but I mean the pub and not our canine friend—and easily spotting Sophie chatting to the barman. Her laughter tinkled over to where I was standing, and it seemed almost instinctive on her part for her to stop her flirting, turn, and bless me with a huge grin before waving her hands wildly as if I hadn’t already seen her.

As I stepped up to the bar, a vodka and lime was placed in front of me. I hadn’t planned on having a drink, as just being out of the house after dark was more than my Puritan lifestyle could easily handle, but one wouldn’t hurt, would it? Or two? Maybe three, just to shake off the shackles of a working day and the smell of fucking curry.

By the fourth, I was feeling relaxed. Actually, more like on the verge of passing out. I had worked my way through the giggly stage and was approaching “Homing Mode” when Sophie landed me with it.

“How’s about you and me going back to school?”

And do what? Burn it down? Graffiti “Ms Edwards is a twat” over the windows in the Maths block?

“Night school, I mean.”

My face took on the “I don’t understand” look that I always thought made me look semi intelligent, although in reality it probably screamed, “Idiot here!”

Sophie shifted closer to me, looking over her shoulder in a conspiratorial way as if the KGB were tuning in on our conversation. “Art Class.”

“What the fu—”

“Art. Class. As in Life Drawing. As in...” another look over her shoulder, “naked men.”

Of course, I wasn’t interested. What kind of lesbian would I be if I went to night school to see men flashing their pecs? Men who likely couldn’t get anyone else to look at it, even if they exposed themselves to women in the subway. I opened my mouth to tell her as much, but she spoke over me.

“And naked women.”

My mouth was still on the verge of rejecting her suggestion, but I didn’t. I slowly closed my mouth. Was this the only way I was ever going to see another woman naked again for the rest of my life? I can’t believe I hesitated about turning her down, can’t believe I didn’t look affronted and say as much, but I didn’t.

“Look. I was joking, Jess. I thought you might want to do something together instead of you sitting at home every night all on your own.” A small smile crept over her face. “I know breaking up with Sam was hard, but holing yourself up won’t make you feel better.”

Sam? Why on earth had she brought Samantha James into the conversation? I had broken up with her, mainly because she felt the need to cop off with anything that barely resembled a woman. Even some that at a second glance a person could be misguided into thinking was a bloke with tits.

“Sam?”

“I know, honey. But you have to learn to let go.”

“What on—”

“Night class. That will do it.”

“But I wasn’t—”

“No. You weren’t the one to blame. She was a slut.”

Fuck this for a game of soldiers. The alcohol was making me too slow to carry on what was apparently a monologue rather than a conversation. Sophie had never liked Sam, never trusted her. Funnily enough, neither had I. We had only dated for five months, and in that time, I think she aged me. As you may gather, I am not, and never was, a party animal. I am perfectly happy with a good book and an early night swaddled in my flannelette pyjamas.

“You want another?” Sophie nodded at my half full glass, and I shook my head. “Just me then.” And off she toddled to chat up the barman.

I lifted my drink, then paused with the cool, sticky glass touching my bottom lip. I had always enjoyed drawing when I was at school and, if I say so myself, I was pretty good at it. On the other hand, Sophie’s art gave the distinct impression she was drawing with her eyes closed. So why on earth would she want to go to night school to study art?

Looking over my shoulder, I saw my friend chatting happily to the same barman. No. Going to an art class couldn’t be because she wanted to see men’s winkies—with her looks and personality, she could see as many as she wanted to. As the thought trickled through my head, Sophie turned and flashed me one of her radiant smiles before turning back to the bar to pick up her drink.

For me. That’s why she wanted to take an art class. She was looking out for me again.

“So, are you game, Ms Taylor?” Sophie leaned over me, her face so close it surprised me for a moment. “Come on, Jess. Let’s do it. It’ll be fun.” Her smile was gentle, beckoning, and so typically my best friend.

“Okay. When do we start?”

Everyone in the pub turned at Sophie’s triumphant whoop, but soon returned to their pub conversations which usually consisted of football, wrestling, who was shagging whom, and the price of petrol. The hug she gave me was fierce, and she mumbled a “thank you” into my ear before she ripped herself away and plonked herself on her chair.

“I think that deserves a celebratory drink, don’t you?”

Aw shit.

Chapter 2

ONE WEEK LATER, I WAS standing outside Stockport College of Technology waiting for my art partner to arrive whilst tutting at the drizzle that was fucking up my hair. Granted, I was thirty minutes early, and I could've waited inside the foyer, but I was too nervous. I don't know why, as it was just a night school class on still life. That was probably it. Still Life. And by the brochure I had picked up the previous Thursday when Sophie and I had enrolled, it wasn't just oranges and nuts—although I did believe there was going to be a different selection of nuts on offer, not forgetting the bananas.

What if the person came out and I knew him? Or her? What if it was Sam? Nah. She was the type to get her kit off at any given opportunity, but not in the “Jack, I want you to draw me like one of your French girls. Wearing this...and only this” kind of way. What if it was someone from work? Neil from Accounting? Bile rose in my throat at the thought of the sweaty leech who always tried to cop a feel of all the young girls. What if it was Clive from Human Resources? Or Terrence from the mail room. God. What if it was James Jackson, my boss!

Stop right there. Why on earth would my boss strip off and let complete strangers draw him buck naked? But then again, why would complete strangers want to draw him in the first place? Shit. I was taking myself on a one way trip to Complete Mental Breakdown City. Yes, Jess. Stop. Go with the flow. Go with the... flow... Deep breaths...deep...breaths.

“Evening, Dali.”

I knew it was Sophie, so why did I jump? More to the point... why did I scream and hit her with my art pad?

“Jesus, Jess, I'm not going to molest you.”

The red mark on the side of her face was glowing against the greyness of the evening behind her, and I did feel bad. Pity I couldn't show it instead of gripping my chest and swooning like a 1920s silent film star.

"Apology accepted," preceded a muttered, "if one was given."

I was still gripping the lapels of my raincoat.

"Shall we?"

"What?"

A sigh, one of the ones reserved for complete imbeciles, came through Sophie's pursed lips. "Go inside." When I didn't move, she said, "What the fuck is wrong with you? Anyone would think I was sending you to your death." She leaned forward. "You been on the sugar, Taylor?" I shook my head. Sophie laughed and grabbed my arm. "You definitely need to get out more."

If she wanted me to get out more, why was she taking me in? Rhetorical *and* stupid, I know.

* * *

It was packed inside. Well, there were about twenty people waiting to begin, but I hadn't thought there would be even that much call for coming out in the evening to draw pictures. Shows how much I knew, didn't it? The male/female ratio was pretty equal, especially after Sophie and I turned up.

The room was pretty much what one would expect an art room to look like—tables, chairs, pictures of people in agony on the walls...the usual. Maybe I could put my face up there on the wall next to the three legged man and the screaming banshee. Something to consider if any of my previous thoughts about knowing the nude model came to fruition.

Selecting vacant chairs beside each other, Sophie and I placed our bags on the desks, claiming ownership. To my relief, there was a table with pots, pans, and other miscellaneous kitchen stuff placed in the centre of the room. Even though the items were naked, I felt as if I had received some kind of reprieve. No naked men...better still, no naked men that I knew.

In the final few minutes before class was to start, people started getting their stuff out and slapping it onto the tables in front of them. Obviously, being a lemming, I followed suit. Placing my art materials on said desk, I finally admitted to myself that I was looking forward to getting in tune with my more artistic side, probably because I had spent a small fortune on gearing myself up for the occasion.

“You got a pencil I could use?”

For fuck’s sake. Considering it was her idea in the first place, I couldn’t believe Sophie hadn’t brought a pencil. Opening up my pencil case, I selected one of the new ones—friends are friends, after all.

“And some paper?”

Turning to tell Sophie that she was a waste of time and space, I was cut short. A voice— not a loud voice, but a distinctly female and alluring voice—pulled me around to face the front. It was a pity that my open mouth didn’t catch up as quickly, and close itself.

Standing before the class was a woman I can only describe as artistic. Long, tousled hair and a crisscross middle parting framed the thick glasses she wore. Her eyes seemed huge, and images of Emma Thompson playing Professor Trelawney in the Harry Potter films sprang to mind. Scooting my eyes downwards, I was not disappointed by the flowing, multi-coloured cardigan and brown ankle length skirt that made a not so fashionable combination. One more thing: sandals. With socks. But this woman couldn’t have been the same woman who had spoken, could it? That voice was sexy. Finally, why was my mouth still open and in fly catching mode?

“If you would all like to take your places?”

No. No. I didn’t mean “no I don’t want to take my place,” as I was already in it. I meant, no, the voice didn’t belong to Barbara Hepworth on a bad day. It came from off to the side of her. I shifted my gaze slightly and...and...

“You okay, Jess?”

It may have been because my mouth had been open too long that my tongue felt like sandpaper, or it may have been that all the moisture in my body had scooted to other, needier places.

“Ug.”

Ug? Where had my ability to speak gone? Why hadn't I turned to my friend and said, “Yes, Sophie. I am perfectly fine, thank you for asking. And by the way—get your own fucking pencil and paper.” But no. “Ug” it was, and that's where it was staying.

“Good evening, all.” There was the music again. “I'm Diana Sullivan, and I will be leading this course for the next twelve weeks.”

Diana Sullivan. Di-an-a Sul-li-van. What a wonderful name. What a beautifully wonderful na—

“Oi. Dolly dreamboat. You okay?”

All I could do was move my head slowly up and down in affirmation.

“Well, close your mouth then. The flies are getting antsy.”

I heard the snap of my lips as they seemed to clang together.

“And where's my paper and pencil?”

That seemed to snap me out of the daze that had fallen over me, and I finally tore my eyes away from the woman who was now standing in the place the “artistic woman” had been and rummaged through my new art pad.

“Here you go.” My voice was a whisper, almost reverent. We were in class after all. It wasn't just because I believed if I spoke any louder, I would probably be told off or sent into the corner. I didn't want to disturb the flow of the woman who was still talking. Before you say it, it was not because she was the most perfect woman I had ever seen either.

“So... We'll all start with a brief introduction then. Is that okay?”

Fuck. And fuck. And triple fuck. That would mean I would have to look at her and speak at the same time. I know women are known for having the ability to multitask, but I didn't think I was capable at that moment.

What the hell was happening? I had been in the room less than twenty minutes, and I was going through a mid-life crisis at thirty-one years of age. Was it the smell of paint? Had a rebellious pencil escaped the confines of a spanking new pencil case and lodged its tip in the part of my brain that made me a quivering wreck? Art class was supposed to be the place where I could do something

other than work and sleep; a place where I could spend time with my oldest and dearest—although badly organised—friend; the place where I could dip into the more artistic part of my psyche. The class was not supposed to be where I turned into a love-struck, mute teenager.

In my mental meanderings, I had missed the first three people who had kicked off the introductions, and only tuned in when it was two people away from where I sat.

“Hi. I’m Dave.”

Sophie mumbled, “Well, hello there, Dave,” which she followed with girlish giggling.

At Sophie’s comment, I looked up to where the teacher was standing and wondered what she would think about someone flirting with another class member. And then a surge of jealousy raced through me. Diana was looking at this Dave with such affection that I wanted to get up and slap him around the head. Now, I could have understood if it was just a feeling of disappointment, but jealousy? Since I had been focused on her, she had not even looked in my direction, never mind professed her undying love.

“I’m Diana’s brother.”

I leaned forward and looked at his face. He was half man, half beetroot by this stage, as all eyes in the room were on him. Just like his sister, he was handsome. Well, his sister wasn’t handsome, as such, she... I stopped myself from going into ramble mode there. They both had dark brown hair—although hers was long—chiselled facial features, and stunning blue eyes, but he had a moustache and goatee where she didn’t. I think the last was obvious without my having to write that, but some women do have a ’tache, although they don’t usually trim them and have a chic, styled strip of hair on the tip of their chins. Do they?

Turning back to the instructor, I witnessed something I would describe as one of the most amazing things I had ever seen—Diana’s smile. It may have been my overactive imagination, but I was definite I witnessed rays of light sparking from her mouth. Or should I classify that as corny? Whatever it called itself, I would bet my left butt cheek I saw rays of light. It gave her face the appearance

of something that came straight from a pre-Raphaelite painting—so womanly, so captivating, so goddamn gorgeous. I felt myself smiling in response to the smile that wasn't even aimed at me, and even though I was having difficulty breathing, I felt wonderful. I also felt like I could just sit and stare at her all day, whilst wishing I didn't have to blink.

A voice was coming from near me, a voice I recognised, but couldn't quite place. It seemed as if I was underwater and listening to the muffled sounds of the world above. Then came a sensation...a knocking sensation...a tapping, insistent sensation on my thigh, then on my arm, and then...

WHACK!

“Jess!”

And that was the wakeup call I really didn't need. The impression of water vanished, and I was back in the classroom with about twenty pairs of eyes staring at me, one of which belonged to an attentive teacher and another set to a friend that was trying to glare me out.

“Everyone is waiting for you, you dick head!”

The lovely epithet was squeezed through clenched teeth, and Sophie turned and flashed the fakest smile I had ever seen her use.

“Erm... I...” I was finding it difficult to breathe again, but not in the delectable way I had before when I was floating underwater in an almost Millais' *Ophelia* way. I felt more like Lichtenstein's *Drowning Girl*, wishing I had the ability to splutter, “I don't care! I'd rather sink than call Brad for help!” or even Sophie, for that matter. “I...erm...” Jesus. This was going from bad to worse to downright intolerable.

Diana came over to where I was seated and leaned over the table. I could smell her perfume—light and engaging, and exquisitely addictive. When I lifted my face, I was met by perfect blueness. Not light blue, but a deep, rich blue, the blue you see when you picture perfection. Her eyes looked as if they were made of liquid, vibrant liquid that constantly changed in reflection of the events around them. Like water. Probably the same kind of water I felt I was drowning in.

“Hey, you. Don’t worry. We can skip this part.”

I doubt anyone else in the room heard her say it, but her voice seemed to seep into my skin, every word leaving an imprint as it wound its way inside me.

Diana turned back to the waiting group and opened those perfect lips to speak.

“Jess Taylor. Serial dick head, and paper and pencil loan shark,” I blurted.

The teacher’s eyes met mine in a flash, blue meeting green and making a sea of aqua turned turquoise.

Amidst the hoots of laughter, I grinned at her and she smiled back. A slight tilt of her head, and the grin turned into something I can only describe as a clicking sensation. Her brow furrowed slightly, and a fleeting look of confusion scattered over her flawless face. Maybe she could hear the rapid beating of my heart, or see it trying to thump its way through my ribcage.

A slight shake of her head, dark hair fluttering with the movement—a definite move to clear her thoughts—and the grin was back. “Well, hello there, Jess Taylor.” Diana pushed herself back from the table and straightened to her full height, her eyes never leaving mine. “But I think I will reserve judgement on the ‘serial dick head’ tag until after you’ve witnessed my attempt to claim the title of ‘Serial Dick Head’ when I start teaching you all.”

More sniggers from around the room.

Diana turned and looked at Sophie. “And you must be the cadger.”

For the first time in a long time, Sophie blushed. I knew it wasn’t because the beautiful art teacher held her fancy, far from it. Sophie was straighter than a laser. It was because she knew that the delectable goatee-toting Dave was looking in her direction. Even I could taste the testosterone in the air—something I avidly avoided, so God knows how Soph was feeling.

“Not a cadger, per se.”

Aw fuck, no. Sophie was going to try and sound like she had English degrees falling out of her arse. The last time she had done something like that, it was like listening to *The Bluffer’s Guide to*

Being a Twat. Everyone in the museum at that time knew she knew bugger all about the exhibition—well, everyone but her.

“It appears that after reaching this facility, I have come to realise that the receptacle I had purchased for the storage of my equipment is in absentia.”

What the... She was going for gold here.

“Furthermore, I—”

“So you need to cadge paper and a pencil, is that right?”

Diana’s voice was light, amused. Her right eyebrow rose to accompany her question, and she looked drop dead gorgeous. And yes. I was beginning to drool again.

Sophie went a shade darker, her mouth opened, and all she managed to squeak out was a high pitched “Yes” followed by a cough, then a gulp, then, “Sophie Harrison.”

Brown eyes darted over to where an amused Dave was sitting, and for the life of me, I thought Sophie was going to add, “Single.” Thankfully, the person next to her began speaking, as if she had waited long enough for her ten seconds of embarrassment, most certainly not aware of what had preceded her except that when it should’ve been her turn, it was delayed by a beetroot and a dick on a stick.

“Serves you right,” I whispered to my glowing friend before I slapped the paper and pencil down in front of her and turned smugly back to my overflowing pencil case and huge pad. I was definite I heard the word “anal” muttered under her breath, but I just kept fiddling for the sharpest pencil I had.

“You can sit there and look as smug as you want, git, but you’ve already given me paper and a pencil.”

I ignored her and carried on in my serenity.

It wasn’t long before the introductions were finished and Diana was bringing the class’ focus back to the front, although, to be truthful, mine had not really moved from that vicinity. However, I do pride myself on being subtle. Subtlety is my forte.

“As if she needed to tell you to give her your attention,” Sophie whispered, and followed it with a snort, then a yelp, as I nipped her thigh—hard.

Diana looked over quizzically, and thankfully Sophie muttered something about a cramp whilst rubbing her leg in an overly dramatic way as I looked appropriately concerned.

A hesitation, a gathering of thoughts, and then Diana was on a roll. She explained the nature of the class, and how we were there to learn how to study form. I didn't turn to my friend at that point, because I knew I would be greeted by immature nodding and grinning.

"However, we will not be drawing nudes for a few weeks. We have to come to grips with the basics first."

At that I lifted my chin higher and smiled a serene smile at the teacher before tilting my head to the right and nodding once in smugness at Sophie.

Diana continued to explain our lesson objective, and how to create form, we had to dabble with perspective. "Therefore, at timed intervals, we will be moving around and drawing the various items I have assembled on the table here." She pointed at the pots, pans, and other miscellaneous kitchen stuff I had noted upon entering the room. "Picasso used a similar technique. The trick is to draw quickly, get a feel for it, then when you change perspective, move back to an item you can relate to." She paused, her eyes sweeping the class for understanding. "It will seem odd at first, and challenging, but the effect is impressive."

Each drawing stage was no longer than five minutes, then Diana would tell us to get up and move one seat to the right.

I was so engrossed in the activity that I was startled when I heard a voice in my ear. No. That's wrong. It wasn't her voice that alerted me, or startled me, for that matter. It was the sensation rippling down my spine that told me she was there. It was that clicking again, the way I held my breath in anticipation as she drew nearer. Then her voice. Or was it? Could it have been the scent of her? The warmth of her? The sheer presence of the woman behind me that made all the small hairs on my body stand to attention? Or was it the sensation of being watched? I don't know the answer; it wasn't something I noted consciously. One thing that did stick in my mind was how much I craved her closeness.

“Well done, Jess. That’s excellent work.” Then she was gone, and I was left feeling the chill of empty air.

A snigger spurted from next to me. “Well done, Jess.” Jesus. Sophie sounded like she did when she tormented me at Primary School. “Who’s the teacher’s pet?”

I leaned over and looked at the splattered objects on her paper, if they could even be described as that, then turned to look into my friend’s grinning face. “Well, it’s obviously not you. She said to draw it, not kill it.”

Sophie’s retort died on her lips as Diana brought everyone’s attention back to the front of the room. “Break time.”

Thoughts of running around the playground chasing each other rushed through my head.

“The canteen is open on the ground floor.”

Maybe not. Although I wouldn’t have minded a bit of tumbling around in the long grass with a certain blue-eyed teacher.

* * *

I should have known. Sophie wanting to come to night school to spend “quality time” with me should have made bells go off inside my head like an oncoming fire engine. But no. I once again proved that being naïve was a way of life for me and not a just phase.

And the reason I came to that conclusion? There we were, lining up for a lukewarm coffee, and who walked up to us and started a conversation? Dave. As in, Dave with goatee and chic ’tache. I thought he wanted to push in line, and was beginning to close the gap between me and Babs Hepworth. Shit coffee or not, I was a stickler for the British “We must queue” way of thinking.

“Sophie, is it?”

Huh? He remembered her? Well, she was pretty hard to forget after her blushing furiously and stammering out excuses.

“You work at Pickard’s, don’t you?”

Huh? Again.

But before Sophie could shove me out of the way to get closer to him, he was talking again. “So do I. Accounts.”

I was beginning to feel like the piggy in the middle, as he was now in front of me and Sophie was behind me. I know I'm not the tallest of people in the world, but it still didn't give them license to talk over my head. I tried to move to the side, but I couldn't shift out of the way because all the other people were thinking exactly what I had thought when Dave came up. As if I would ever be a queue jumper!

"Now that you mention it, I think I have seen you about before."

I knew by the tone of her voice that she was lying. Spending twenty-five plus years with someone gives you the edge on details like that. Because I was so near to him, all I could see was the bottom of his chin and part way up his nose. He must've been about six three, if not taller. How had I got this close? I had been able to see all details of him when he first arrived, so why was he appearing like something from a magic eye puzzle? Then I realised that we were, in fact, moving. Slowly, granted, but moving all the same. Dave, however, seemed to be nailed to the spot. At this rate, I would soon be inside his stylish jacket and living under his wing for the rest of my life.

"David!" A voice came from a ways behind him, and as he turned, his chest smacked me in the face.

Instead of feeling sorry for myself, I sneaked around him and got myself out of the increasingly claustrophobic situation. Sophie stayed where she was, and I wished that I had too, as the voice that had called to her love interest turned out to be Diana's.

"Shit." The reason I said shit right about there is because of what happened next. You guessed it. Dave introduced my friend to his sister, and I was left looking at stale muffins and ordering a latte from a teenager who looked as if she would rather be scooping up dog mess with her bare hands than serving a bunch of luvvies on a night out. If I had just stood my ground, or even reacted to the thump in my face, I, too, could have been in deep conversation with the gorgeous Ms Sullivan.

Taking my coffee, I made my way over to an empty table and thumped the cup down with enough va va voom to make it spill

into the saucer. Not exactly the action of a woman who was out to create destruction, but just enough to piss me off a little bit more.

As I was cleaning the mess, I heard another cup placed delicately on the table. Part of me was hoping that I would hear the resounding thud of more cups, as that would mean Sophie had brought her new best friends back with her, but, alas, it was just the one.

I was upset. Who wouldn't be? I had assumed that Sophie wanted to spend time with me, wanted me to have more out of life than I had been getting, cared enough about me to drag me out to do something other than read in bed before falling asleep. But it wasn't like that at all. It had been me helping her get something, or someone, she fancied, without the embarrassment of coming to class on her own.

"I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong. I didn't come to meet Dave."

I flicked a glance in her direction and continued to wipe at the already clean saucer.

"I know you don't believe me, but it's true."

Another flick-cum-glare.

"Okay." Sophie's deep sigh resonated through the space between us. "I overheard him telling someone about it at work...about his sister holding the class."

I didn't answer. I just settled myself into my seat and looked at her expectantly.

"My first thought was of you. You loved art when we were at school. I always thought you would be a designer or something."

She waited for me to say something, but I wasn't in the mood.

"I was always so proud of you."

I wanted to stay mad at her, I really did, but her expression told me that she was, in fact, telling me the truth as she knew it. Because she had praised me, even stroked my ego a little, a small smile crept over my face.

"So, are you going to go out with him?" It wasn't an accusation, just interest, and also a step in the right direction.

For the second time that evening, Sophie was blushing.

I leaned closer, enjoying that the usually confident woman seated in front of me was looking uncomfortable. “Are you?”

“No.”

Huh? “Huh? No? You must be losing your touch.”

“I said no. He asked, and I turned him down.”

Fuck me. That was a first. I had never known Sophie to turn down a night out with a hunky guy. Don’t get me wrong. Sophie wasn’t a loose woman, or, to use even more clichéd expressions, a bike or a slut/slag/manizer, if there is such a word, since men can be called womanizers. She just liked to go out with good looking men, have a laugh. You know, enjoy herself.

“You turned him down?”

“We’ve got to get back to class.”

“Why?”

“Because its ti—”

“Not about class. Why did you turn him down?”

She didn’t answer, just got up, finished off her coffee, which was probably still hot, and made her way back to the counter to drop off her cup. “Are you coming or what?”

With that, she was gone, and I was left with half a cup of coffee and a thousand questions. I couldn’t work her out. Actually, I couldn’t work myself out. Initially I had been mad at her for making me come to a class so she could cop off with a dishy bloke from her office, and then I was confused when she had turned him down. All I could muster was a shrug of the shoulders to dispel the fogging of my brain.

I lifted the cup and saucer and followed in Sophie’s footsteps. Five minutes later, I was back in the class, my best friend seated next to me, diligently working over her mishmash of blotches and distorted lines.

* * *

It was weird. Yep. Weird. After class finished at nine and we went to the pub, Sophie didn’t even mention Dave or the class. We had one drink, and then she feigned a yawn and said all the excitement had tuckered her out. She seemed reserved in an “I feel

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so embarrassed yet I don't know why" kind of way, so I just went along with it, but I knew then and there in the car park that this wasn't over. I would let her sleep on it. Only one night, mind you. And in the famous words of Scarlett O'Hara, "After all, tomorrow is another day."

Chapter 3

PFFFT. WHAT A WONDERFUL WORD, if it can be described as such. Pfffft...nearly as good as brrrrr and grrrrr. You may be wondering why I am using such silly expressions here. Simple. Sophie. Could I get hold of her? Not a chance in hell. It was Saturday morning that I eventually came to grips with the slippery one herself, and that was by pure luck. I had left her countless messages, both on her voicemail and through texting. I had even emailed her about ten times. Nothing. I was just giving up the will to live when I bumped into her. Literally. I bumped into her in Tesco, in the feminine hygiene aisle of all places. To say I smelled a rat would actually seem out of place here. Not because of her expression when I whacked into her with my shopping trolley as I was turning into the aisle, no. Mainly because talking about smells when it is linked to a setting that involves lady bits seemed a tad coarse. I was in the process of texting her again when the collision happened, and if I'd been paying attention, I could have saved myself the price of a sms, could've just told her. But no. The velocity with which I cracked into her trolley inadvertently made me press send.

"Hey, stranger!"

Sophie seemed surprised in more ways than one.

"I've been trying to get hold of you." I wasn't the one saying this. "Where've you been?"

"Bumchickawowow!"

Once again, that wasn't me. Well, it was, but not. It was the sound of Sophie's phone notifying her that she had received a message. Part of me was glad she had got rid of the chickens repeatedly clucking that signalled the arrival of a message, whilst the other half of me was totally fucked off big time that here she

stood, as bold as brass, I might add, and had tried to pass it over on me for her—yes *her*—lack of communication.

“Me? Me not contacting you?” Seemed a little obvious, me saying that, but what else could I say?

“I’ve been trying to contact you since Thursday. Wanted to know your plans for tonight,” Sophie said.

I looked into Sophie’s trolley and saw three bottles of wine and the ingredients for an evening of entertaining. I raised my eyes to meet hers. “Looks like you’ve already got plans.” Yes. I admit it. It did sound bitter. “And, for your information, I’ve been trying to get hold of you for the last three days.”

Sophie looked confused, I’ll give her that. Instead of taking art classes, she would have excelled at drama. “But...I’ve sent you about fifteen messages.”

Yeah right. Where were they? Cyber Land, just past I Don’t Give a Fuck? “Look, Soph. I don’t know what’s going on and to be honest, I don’t give a flying fu—”

“Ohhh, ohhhh—your text is on fi-re!”

And then again and again and again, until my phone was going crazy.

“I think you have a message.”

I glared at her and pulled my phone back out of my pocket. Another text. Another. And then another. All from Sophie, and all from different times and days. Scrolling through her messages, it was apparent she had been answering mine and was wondering why I was getting increasingly pissed off. But why hadn’t she called my landline? Or answered my emails? And why couldn’t I ever be satisfied?

“I’ve been away—conference in Leeds. Don’t you remember? I told you on Wednesday.”

Nope. Not a spark.

“I don’t have your landline number on my mobile, or I would’ve called you.”

I squinted in disbelief.

“I haven’t. Look.”

She thrust her phone my way, and I pushed it back to her. “But you could’ve called my mobile.” Simple, don’t you think?

“I was on a course, Jess. We didn’t finish until late, that’s why I sent the texts.”

Why was I being such a twat with her? Why was I being so insecure? I had known Sophie most of my life and she had never done anything to hurt me, so what was going on? Was I going through a “poor me” phase? To quote Scarlett O’Hara again, “I can’t think about that right now. If I do, I’ll go crazy. I’ll think about that tomorrow.” Jesus. I was paralleling my life with a Margaret Mitchell character.

“So, what are your plans, oh gorgeous one?” Sophie was waiting for me to return to the present and out of the pages of the American Southern saga. “You up for coming for dinner at my place? I have a surprise.”

I began to speak, but she knew me too well.

“I’m not telling you. Just be at my place at seven, and dress smart but casual.”

Again I opened my mouth.

“Can’t stop. Can’t tell. Just be there or else, okay?”

With that, she was gone, and I was left looking at panty liners and feminine wash.

* * *

I was tempted to stay home, tempted to wait for her to call at 7:01pm and demand to know why I hadn’t turned up. But then I wondered, why smart / casual? Usually when I ate at Sophie’s, it meant pizza from Dominos or Chinese takeaway. So, why dress up? And what was the surprise? I wouldn’t have to wash up after? There was only one way to find out, and that was to get my butt in gear and go ’round to her house. Early. That would give me time to pump her for information.

* * *

I had been there for less than five minutes before the sound of the bell interrupted my interrogation. “What? Who?” That’s all I got out before Sophie almost skipped off to answer the door, bringing back memories of her on the playground just before she caused trouble. My gut was giddy, and it wasn’t with excitement. Anticipation? No. More like dread.

Voices filtered through the doorway of the kitchen where I was standing like a spare prick at a wedding. I straightened my back. I knew that voice. Not well, but I knew it. And then another, a female voice. A man and a woman. Jeez. I should give up my life working in an office and join CSI.

“Jess!” Sophie’s high pitched voice broke through my reverie, and the only thought I knew for definite was that Sophie was shitting a brick. And I hoped it came out sideways. “Come and say hello.”

It was when my legs were moving me towards the doorway and into the hallway that it came to me: It was Dave. Dave and Diana. A number of emotions vied for supremacy—anger being the initial one. Sophie had told me she had not made arrangements to meet Dave again. I also knew she would try to get out of it by saying, “I didn’t go out with him. He came around to my house.” What a load of bollocks. Then second emotion? Curiosity. Why had he brought his sister? Was he too scared to be alone with the man eater? Did he need a chaperone?

FUCK! His sister was here! And I was being a doddering dickhead in the cusp of the kitchen and hallway whilst there was a gorgeous woman waiting for my handshake less than five feet away. Panic shot through me. Did I look okay? Had I actually given a shit about what I looked like when I got ready to come to my supposed best friend’s house tonight? I knew I should have worn the top that accentuated my cleavage instead of the fucking crew-necked jumper I was wearing. What about my ass?

“Jess! Are you coming?”

No. I’m having a fashion crisis and imagining the fashion police about to hammer down the door and arrest me for mixing cotton with wool.

Before I had a chance to run back into the kitchen and try to see my reflection in the side of the kettle, Sophie appeared, looking anxious. Hissing through her teeth, she ground out, “What the fuck are you doing?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but was interrupted by the decidedly too close voice of Dave. “Hi again, Jess.”

A blush eked its way up my throat, as if it, too, wanted to say hello.

“I think you already know my sister Diana.”

Fuck, do I. And as if by magic—just like Mr Ben, the Shopkeeper in the defunct kid’s program of the same name, Diana appeared.

“Hi there.”

God. That voice. A smile broke out across her face, and I mirrored it. Well, nearly. I mustered a smile, granted, but mine was more the kind of smile that typically denoted the village idiot.

“What a nice surprise.”

Surprise?

“When Dave said he wanted me to come to dinner with a work friend, I didn’t expect to already know her...well, both of you.”

Back to me smelling a rat—a big, bright red one. Scrap that. Two bright red ones. Dave and Sophie were both trying unsuccessfully to hide their glowing faces. What I couldn’t understand was why? Why would they be embarrassed about having dinner? Was it because they were uncomfortable about being alone with each other? Why didn’t they knock it on the head then and not meet at all?

“Yes. It is a surprise, isn’t it?” I gave Sophie a quick glare, and she took that moment to fuck off and sort out the wine glasses.

Dave scampered after her, and if you’ve ever seen a six foot three man scamper, it is not the easiest, or the most elegant way to move. He almost looked like a newborn fawn chasing its mother.

“A lovely surprise, though.” Another smile slipped effortlessly across Diana’s face, making her eyes twinkle and reintroducing those adorable rays of light I had seen from her lips when she had first smiled in class.

When the penny dropped, I’m sure the whole street could hear the clunk of the metal against the tiled floor. I could try to claim

that it was the recently discovered skills that made me believe I could work for CSI that were enabling me to see the wood for the trees. But, like Sophie, then I would have been a liar. It was actually the simple phrase Sophie yelled from the kitchen that alerted me, which, I hasten to add, had been preceded by whisperings between her and Dave.

“Why don’t you two make yourselves comfortable in the living room and get better acquainted? We’ll bring the drinks in.”

I should have known Sophie was trying to fix me up. But how on earth did she know that Diana was a lesbian? She couldn’t have found out from Dave in the short space of time she had spoken to him in the canteen, and I couldn’t imagine Diana introducing herself as the one and only lezza teacher who wanted to get up close and personal with her absent friend. That would be too wacky for even my deluded imagination. So, what gives?

“Shall we?” Diana said, snapping me out of my inner forensics.

She was wearing an expression of confusion. Diana was trying to read my face, and I wished her luck. If I couldn’t understand what was going on inside my head, she had no chance.

“Sure,” I eventually answered.

I slipped my hand under her elbow to lead her in the direction of Sophie’s living room. God. I honestly couldn’t tell you what happened when I grasped her arm, but I experienced the weirdest sensation I’ve ever felt. It seemed as if a jolt of electricity raced from her and into me. Springing away from her, I saw the same expression flash over her beautiful face as I knew I was sporting.

“What the...?” I was so glad I didn’t spout the epithet that was trying to slither through my clenched teeth.

“Is it this room?”

Diana recovered more quickly than I did, that was for sure. Her face turned away, and she was crossing the spacious living room at an alarming speed.

I was hovering in the doorway like a prize one tit, wondering why I felt the need to run.

Before I regained my ability to move, preferably rapidly towards the front door, Diana turned around to face me, a smile fixed solidly in place. “So, shall we?”

Shall we what?

“We can’t start to get better acquainted if we are in different rooms, can we?” One eyebrow raised itself into the darkness of her hair.

I snorted at the comical expression on her face. Relaxing, I stepped through the doorway and into the room.

“Close the door.”

Close the... Huh?

“I think we need to talk.”

Shit. Didn’t this conversation typically happen when you were actually dating someone and not when you had been invited to someone’s house for dinner and realised that you were half of a couple who was being set up? Now that is what I call a long and complex question. However, I didn’t say anything to her, just turned, closed the door, and sidled to the sofa nearest the window. At least I could just jump out, if it got too uncomfortable.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

I doubted it. Unless she, too, was eyeing up the pros and cons of diving headfirst from a ground floor window. “Urg!” Please translate that as, “Although I think I am aware of what you may be thinking, the rational side of me disagrees.”

Diana seemed unfazed by my lack of ability to formulate a sentence, and she sat next to me on the sofa. “I think my brother is trying to play matchmaker.”

I was going to say urg again, but decided against it. I didn’t want to overstimulate her brain with my witty repartee.

“I’m sorry, Jess.”

Did she actually remember my name, or had someone reminded her? Dave. He had. Bollocks. Why was I finding it difficult to stay focused? And the reason I thought the last bit was because I know for a fact she had continued to talk, but I wasn’t listening.

Blue eyes turned to me, the bluest eyes I had ever seen so up close and personal. How easy it would be to drown in those eyes. A sigh left my lungs, and I know my shoulders hitched with the effort.

Hang on a minute. She apologised? For what? Crap. I felt my eyes widen, giving the impression that I looked surprised by what she had said. Maybe if I knew what it was, I would've been. Should I just go for a grunt again?

“So what do you think? Do you think that's silly?”

Shit. I could've just gone with the “I'll agree with what you think” or the bloke response of “absolutely,” but I knew that Diana would see straight through it—whatever “it” was.

“Can...”

Honestly, I was going to ask her to repeat her idea, but the door popped open and two smiling faces walked in carrying wine.

After much subsequent reflection, I believe I missed one of the most important conversations I could've had in my sad little life. Pity I didn't think to ask her to tell me again what she had planned. It might have stopped me making a total fool out of myself.

All through dinner, Diana paid me attention. Everything I said was marvellous, and she found even the crappiest joke to be highly hilarious. It was a bit disconcerting at first, as I had never had that overwhelming feeling of being so popular. However, as time and courses went on, I was beginning to feel something that must have resembled what it felt like to be high. It was intoxicating to hear that musical laugh ring out at my delivery of too many jokes that could have been gleaned from Christmas crackers. I was having a ball. I wish I could have said the same about my interfering hostess. At one point in the evening, I saw Sophie glare at me and gesture sharply with her head for me to follow her into the kitchen. I grinned and ignored her.

After dessert, Sophie verbalised her need for me to go with her on the pretence of getting coffee started. Her tone was clipped, and there was no way she was taking no for an answer.

In the kitchen, I felt the air change from friendly to “Jesus Christ, Jess! What are you playing at?” in mere seconds.

“Jesus Christ, Jess! What are you playing at?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean?”

That’s what I said, isn’t it?

“You. The way you’re acting. Did you slip something into your drink?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean?”

This was getting monotonous.

“All the joke telling—the bad joke telling. What’s gotten into you? Is this payback or something?”

I felt the giddiness disappear. Had I make a dick out of myself?

“Okay, I admit it. I invited Dave and Diana over so I could...so Dave and I could fix you two up. Happy?” Turning away from me, she slammed cups onto the saucers before filling the coffeemaker with water. “It was so obvious that Diana was playing along.”

Obvious?

“Dave said if she got wind of it, she would pretend to like you to get him off her back.”

Pretend to...like me? Pretend. Pre-tend? Wasn’t I worthy of being liked without the pretence?

“*I’m sorry, Jess*” followed by a “*So, what do you think? Or do you think that’s silly?*” That must’ve been what Diana was saying. As soon as she had realised what her brother and Sophie were up to, she had wanted an out. “*Or do you think that’s silly?*”

No. I’m silly. Actually, I’m a fucking idiot. I had pushed all that to the back of my head and gone with just feeling good in someone else’s company for once.

Without saying a word, I left. Left the kitchen, left the hallway, left the house. Left everything behind without a by-your-leave or a backwards glance. Quite possibly, I cried all the way home too. How sad is that?

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BY L.T. SMITH