



A
Work
in
Progress

L.T. SMITH



Chapter 1

The sun reflected off the window, obscuring the view of the shop inside. Still, Jamie (or Jane?) was hyperaware of the products on display. She shuffled her feet and coughed, but didn't move towards the door. In the window she caught the reflection of Brittany's easy smile, as if she frequented sex toy stores all the time.

Brittany? Brit-ta-ny? Why I'd chosen that name to grace the character of one of my leading ladies in my new novel I would never know. It wasn't a bad name, but anyone reading the jumble of words on my computer screen likely wouldn't find *Brittany* a fitting appellation for the strong, silent butch I was aiming for. Not that Jane or Jamie or Joanna, or the myriad of other names beginning with J used to christen the other member of the love-struck duo was any more forceful.

It wasn't just the names I was struggling with, it was everything—the setting, the opening, the deciding on each precise word to use. All these things had come quite easily in the past, but now crafting each syllable, each word was like pulling teeth—my own teeth, without anaesthetic and using rusty slip joint pliers.

In just over three hours, I'd written fifty-seven words, fifty-five if I deleted the choice of name. The rest of the time had been consumed by three coffees, two restroom breaks, side trips to the Internet to watch cute or/and funny dog videos, and a fixation with the small hole left by the

removal of a picture that used to hang in the space just above my computer screen. And therein lay the rub.

It was ultimately because of that empty space, that small hole, that missing picture that I was having so much difficulty writing a tale about two women who had fallen in love. The vacant spot was a constant reminder that, in actuality, I was not the romantic type, not the kind of woman who could commit fully to a relationship. The missing picture had been a gift from my now-ex, Jenny—a name that, uncannily, started with the letter *J*—but the pieces of that gift were now in the wheelie bin outside. My former girlfriend had taken it upon herself to snatch the picture from its place on the wall and hurl it at my head. The frame had tried to hold everything together, but the glass had smashed into tiny pieces. The picture, a smiling shot of the both of us on a day where I mustn't have pissed her off as much as I usually did, was ruined. Like our relationship, as it happened. There was no amount of glue that could patch us back together. The mending of our relationship or the picture both seemed to require too much effort, especially on my part, although judging by Jenny's parting words, she wasn't up for the challenge either. Being called "a cold-hearted waste of time" might be classed as pretty tame by today's standard of insults, but it still hurt, even more than the picture frame that smacked me on the back of the head.

I didn't respond. I tried to rise above name-calling, believing myself above degrading myself in a war of words, hoisting myself to almost nun-like spiritual levels whilst delivering my most pitiful look.

The look was maybe not the best thing I could have done at that precise moment, as it could have given the impression that I was pitying her rather than pitying myself. I was just glad there were no more pictures hanging near her as she was leaving. I was even happier she had her back to me and hadn't seen the look I'd shot her.

She stopped on the doorstep, hesitating only a moment before turning and delivering a tirade that encompassed her view of life, love, the world, and, ultimately, the reason why humans were on this planet in the first place. And what the future held for a loser like me.

“You’ll end up a lonely old spinster, Brynn.” Jenny’s finger waggled at me as if she was an annoyed parent talking to a naughty child.

I ducked away, as her hand could have easily made contact—and not in a positive way.

“Fuck sake! I’m not going to hit you. That’s not my style.”

I didn’t remind her that she had pitched a heavily weighted, possibly concussion-causing object at my head not five minutes before. Instead, I cupped the spot and winced, letting my action speak for me.

“Do you know what your problem is?”

I didn’t bother with a reply. I knew she was going to tell me, even if I did actually come up with the correct answer.

“You want the fairy tale, the stories you write, but let me tell you this...”

I pressed my lips together, suppressing the urge to just tell her to fuck off.

“Love like in the fiction you write doesn’t exist. It is a dream, an ideal. Love doesn’t just fall into your lap and you both live happily ever after. You have to work at a relationship!”

I stepped towards her, and her expression shifted from annoyed to intrigued. I think she believed I was going to make some huge romantic gesture, and that was exactly what I did, for me.

“But Jenny, I would work at a relationship, if I believed the relationship was worth it.” The air between us seemed to still. “You may think I am cold-hearted, a waste of time, but I know one day I will find the one woman I will give my all to. And that, apparently, is not you.”

Not waiting for her response, I closed the door in her face. Jenny didn't react, didn't kick or bang on the door whilst hollering insults. She stood on the step for a moment whilst I watched her through the frosted glass, then she turned and left me to begin my search for Ms Right—the woman I was meant to spend the rest of my life with.

But that was then, and this was now, and I was seated at my desk, faced with fifty-seven words and not much else., Now was the moment I was beginning to believe that maybe Jenny had been right: Ms Right was a figment of my imagination, and my imagination, it appeared, was as dead as a dodo.

Chapter 2

It was just over three weeks since Jenny had left, and for three weeks I'd avoided everyone. There seemed no point in telling people that, once again, I had fucked up a relationship. I didn't need to announce my shortcomings to all and sundry; social media was more than capable of doing it for me, with a little help from Jenny. It didn't take a rocket scientist to work out that changing her relationship status from "in a relationship," surrounded by love hearts and kisses, to "single," with a tumbleweed rolling dismally and tirelessly next to the word, meant that we were no longer a couple. If that emoji wasn't enough to inform the masses that we were no longer together, every photograph of us together, and any with just me in it disappeared into the cyber black hole that swallowed broken relationships, at least until someone reposted it and tagged you again.

Still struggling with the writing, I had increased my word count to sixty-four. The detailed description of a window wasn't actually getting me anywhere, but I couldn't seem to move past the opening paragraph. I knew I should change it, set the story someplace else, but somehow that would feel like I'd failed. Stupid. Very stupid. But very real. Weirdly, I had never classed myself as a stubborn person, although most of my exes certainly did, and for once I was beginning to see things from their perspective.

With a swipe of the mouse, I highlighted all the text, then pressed Delete. The starkness of the white screen seemed to burn my eyeballs. Sixty-four words were not *War and Peace*, but they had at least given me hope that I had a smidgeon of creativity left.

“Fuck!” My cursor moved to Edit and Undo, bringing my words back like Lazarus rising from the dead. Relief settled over me, a strong emotion considering I had banged out three times that number of words just describing the eye contact between my two lovebirds on their first meeting when writing my previous stories.

This was not good. Actually, this was shite. It was a good job I didn't rely on writing to pay the bills and put food on the table. Teaching creative writing at the local college fulfilled that responsibility.

Ding dong!

And the last thing I needed at that precise moment was for my creative flow to be further stymied by an outside interruption.

Dinga dinga dong!

Clamping my teeth together, I leaned forwards to stare more intently at the computer screen, as if staring at the smattering of words would distract my attention from the person or persons ringing my bell as if they held shares in the company that made them.

Dinga Dinga Dinga DONG!

My jaw was beginning to ache, but I continued to ignore the persistent ringing. The ringing turned to banging on the door, then slamming with the knocker, then back to ringing the bell. The whole process was beginning to really fuck me off. Why couldn't whoever it was just get the message that they were not welcome? They must know by now that there was no way in hell I would be answering the door.

“Open the door! I know you're in.”

The words shouted through my letter box were ordinary, simple, and they changed everything. The gritting of teeth turned into a slackening of jaw; the intent stare at the computer screen shifted to the door leading to the hallway. My heartbeat picked up tempo, crashing against my ribs and making my breath catch. I knew that voice, and the person delivering the

words was neither ordinary nor simple and would never be classed as plain by any stretch of the imagination.

“Brynn?”

I couldn’t remember standing, or moving around my desk and towards the door to the hallway. I would have been hard pressed to explain how I moved down the hallway and opened the door without conscious thought. It was the cool air on my face that made me realise I was standing on the doorstep in my pyjamas at four-thirty on a Sunday afternoon.

She had her back to me, but I knew for certain sure that it was Gillian Parker. Even though it was just shy of eighteen months since I’d last seen her, there was no way I would ever mistake anyone else for her. From behind, she might have been classed as “average” by any passer-by, and they could have been forgiven for thinking that. But no one would ever say the same about Gillian Parker once she had fixed her attention on them. Or on me, for that matter.

“Gill?”

The woman spun around, her expression shifting from blank to ecstatic in the blink of an eye, her mobile phone held aloft as if to indicate that she had been in the process of texting.

I didn’t get the chance to say anything else before I was enveloped in strong arms, the warmth of her seeping into me. My senses came alive, her scent pervasive and captivating, and I couldn’t get enough of the smell of her hair, her skin, her essence. It consumed me, and I was utterly intoxicated by her once again.

After all this time. That was the thought that made me pull away from her and hold her at arm’s length. I couldn’t allow myself to become absorbed by her all over again. I’d been down that road, and it wasn’t the best journey I’d ever taken. I think the words heartbroken and devastated came close to describing the feelings I had experienced as a seventeen-year-

old budding lesbian who had suddenly realised her feelings for her best friend were a tad more than those expected for a BFF. The words didn't completely nail how my world had disintegrated when I had grasped that Gillian Parker did not feel the same way about me as I did about her.

Fifteen years had passed since my vulnerable heart had been shattered. Given the way my heart was reacting at finding her standing on my doorstep, I apparently wasn't over her yet.

"You look..." Gill's eyes half closed in thought before she delivered the stinger, "...tired." She tilted her head, a smile creeping across her lips. "But, tired or not, you are still one gorgeous woman, Brynn Morgan."

A wisp of flattery, and I was like putty in her hands. "And you are still a silver-tongued charmer."

I tried to make the compliment lighthearted, but I wanted her to know that she couldn't just waltz into my life and make me believe I was anything more to her than a friend, not that she had ever done otherwise. The love and adoration had been agonisingly silent and definitely one-sided. Gillian Parker had never known I was in love with her when I was a teenager, or if she did, she had never let on that she knew that I was a total dickhead who was mooning after someone she could never have. Her being straighter than a laser put paid to that.

She opened her mouth to rebut the "silver-tongued" label, something she had always done in the years I had known her, but I cut her off.

"So, what brings you here, Parky?" The moniker slipped out with familiar ease, and Gill's short laugh made me grin, but then I had to go and fuck it up with, "Not heard a peep from you for way too long."

I cringed immediately after I'd said it. I didn't really want her to pick up on the underlying accusation inherent in my statement, and wanted to take it back.

“At the moment, I’m living up to my name.”

“Huh?” I shook my head, unsure whether what she had said was a dig at me having a dig about her, or was in some way linked to her being a charmer or sweet-talker.

“Parky. I’m parky. Cold.”

Patently thickheaded, I still didn’t understand what she was trying to get across.

Gill tutted and shook her head. “Are you going to let me in, or do you want me to freeze to death on your doorstep?”

“Oh shit! Sorry. Fuck!” I staggered backwards a step, my body turning slightly to give her room to slip past me.

Gill laughed and stepped forwards. Her hand landed on my arm and delivered a small squeeze, inadvertently creating a sensation way beyond what a simple squeeze should incite. She leaned nearer to my face, and her mouth came dangerously close to mine. “Come on. Get me warmed up, woman.”

The heat emanating from my face could have done just that, but Gill moved past me and into my house. I tilted my head skywards and thanked whoever was listening for letting me off the embarrassment hook for once.

“And whilst we have a cuppa, you can tell me why you are still in your jim-jams at nearly five in the afternoon.”

Maybe I had expressed my thanks a little too soon. Instead of asking what she would like to have, I scuttled off into the kitchen so she wouldn’t see the darkening shade of crimson colouring my face.

Chapter 3

I could hear her moving about in my office as I prepared the cups, teabags, and hot water. Even though I knew what beverage Gill would opt for, I was halfway through making it when I poked my head through the kitchen doorway and shouted, “Tea?” like I was a fishwife.

“Milk, no sugar!” she called back.

A sense of familiarity washed through me, and a lump of emotion welled in my throat. I was mortified. I imagined Gill coming through to check on the progress of her anticipated brew and finding me blubbering over the mugs. Instead of giving in to my emotions, I stared at the cups—well, more specifically, I stared at the tea bags bobbing in the mugs. I tentatively caressed the rim of Gill’s cup, and the warmth of the brewing beverage heated the tip of my fingertip.

“You trying to hypnotise the poor little buggers?”

“Fuck!” I jumped and poked the cup with some degree of force. The mug scuttled sideways and wobbled precariously like a pissed-up ballerina before steadying itself. My overzealous, and slightly delayed, brain failed to understand the emergency had passed, and thus became the instigator in the demise of the cup when I lunged out to grab it.

The smash was very loud, quite onomatopoeic. Weirdly, the initial silence after the smash of the cup sounded louder than the breaking. I froze, my arms outstretched and my hands dangling motionless like those of a pianist preparing to warm up. I stared at the pieces of the cup, the tea

trickling over the work surface like the embarrassment painting my face at my acting like a twat.

“Fuck?” Gill’s voice was soft, questioning...close.

That one word melted my reluctance to show my emotions, and just like the cup, my insides seemed to shatter. Emotions that had been welling beforehand burst upwards and outwards, and my sob resounded in the silence. There was no going back, no embarrassed apology that could mask the stark admission of my sadness.

“Hey, Brynn, come here, love.”

Gill’s arms wrapped around me and pulled me close, the scent of her overwhelmingly familiar and just as intoxicating as when she had hugged me not ten minutes earlier. This time, I melted into her. My tears flowed in wet rivulets that left their mark on my friend’s shoulder, and I clung to her whilst she made shushing noises and held me close.

Gill’s hands swept up and down my back, the heat from her palms seeping through my pyjama top almost as if the material wasn’t there.

The tears stopped just as suddenly as they had started. It wasn’t just the thought of having Gill’s hands on my naked back that made my sobbing cease; it was much worse than that. It did involve hands, and skin, and touching, but not just my back. The thoughts had generated very real sensations, evoking the very real erection of my nipples.

To say I was mortified would have been an understatement. To make matters worse, I knew if I pulled away at that precise point, I would be exposed. So I held on to her and considered waiting until the embarrassing body faux pas had subsided, but the closeness, the heat of her, the scent of Gillian Parker was just making it worse.

“Are you still cold?” My voice sounded a little muffled, as it was a close to her hair.

“Not so much, no.”

The rumble of her reply seeped through her chest and into me. I didn't want to break away from her, but it would look odd if I carried on gripping on to her now that I had stopped crying. And I needed to stop my body reacting to her, my body and everything else. I pulled away sharply, the swiftness of my action causing both of us to sway.

Before she had the chance to say anything, I brushed past her and went to the thermostat on the wall.

“No wonder I'm freezing.” I rubbed my arms for effect, a *brrr* accompanying my action. “It was only on low.”

Gill just stared at me, her arms sagging at her sides as if all her energy had been sapped from her.

With a last manic rub of my arms, I moved past her and towards the kitchen counter, grabbing a dishcloth on the way. “Better clean this up before... Well, I guess it can't get any worse.” I let out a sharp laugh and began to collect spilt tea and fragments of cup.

Gill moved behind me. I could sense her unease and confusion, but I continued to clean the counter as if it was the most important job in the world and couldn't possibly wait.

Instead of drawing away, Gill sighed as she reached around me and grabbed the roll of paper kitchen towels, ripping off a few sheets before putting the roll back.

We worked together to clean up the mess and had the bulk of it done in a couple of minutes. As I rinsed my cloth under the tap, Gill wrapped the pieces of the broken cup in paper before putting them in the bin. The air was expectant. I knew she was confused about how quickly I had moved away from her. I also figured that she knew that the thermostat comment was a cover-up, but that was likely where her awareness ended.

Gill probably thought I had moved away because I was embarrassed about crying. I had moved away because my body was reacting to a woman I could never have, whose body would never react in the same way as mine when I hugged her close.

“How’s Tom?” I forced my voice to stay low, controlled.

Even though I wasn’t looking at her, I knew she had turned to face me at the mention of her fiancé.

“It’s about time he walked you down the aisle, isn’t it?” I pushed my lips into a smile and glanced in her direction.

She was standing next to the bin, her hand resting on the lid.

“Must be going on two years since he popped the question.” I managed a laugh and gave the counter a final swipe before slapping the cloth down on the side of the sink.

“Just over eighteen months.”

That was about when I had last seen her, and I swallowed down the guilt of my avoidance and picked up the cloth.

The noise of the bin being slammed by either a foot or a fist was followed by, “Fuck it!”

I turned to face her, my back resting against the counter. Gill was staring at the bin as if it was the most interesting object she had ever seen. Instead of interrupting her fixed absorption on the trash can, I waited for her to expound on her expletive.

“I don’t think...” Gill lifted her face until her pain-filled eyes met mine. “I don’t think Tom will be walking me down the aisle any time soon.”

Her fingers tapped the lid of the bin, then stilled. I watched her fingers twitch as if she wanted to continue her drumming, but she resolutely scrunched her hand into a fist and dropped it to her side.

A selfish part of me released a tinny cheer. Just because I wanted to be the one walking Gillian Parker down the aisle didn't give me license to be happy that maybe her wedding plans had fallen through. When all was said and done, she was still the closest friend I'd ever had.

I was next to her in the blink of an eye, my hand grasping hers as if to pass some of my strength to her. Her hand was cold. I cradled it between mine and rubbed vigorously.

"Of course he wants to walk you down the aisle," I said, forcing the reassurance from my tightened throat. "Tom Griffiths loves you to the moon and back."

I dipped my head and tried to look into her face, but she turned her eyes away, her bottom lip bulging slightly as if she had filled it with air. "What's the matter, Gill?"

She shook her head, the air escaping from her mouth in a long sigh. She gave my fingers a quick squeeze, then pulled her hand from mine.

"I came around to catch up, not to burden you with the downturns of my love life."

I shrugged. My mouth moved but no words came out, so I grinned and nodded, looking even more like a twat.

Gill looked past me to the counter. "I suppose that was my cuppa you beat the shite out of, wasn't it?"

I nodded again, but this time my voice box was up to the challenge of actually working. "I'll make you another. You go sit at the table and prepare to spill the beans."

"But—"

"Yes. Get your butt over there and think about what you are going to say."

"What—"

“What you are going to tell me.”

Her eyes narrowing and head tilting, Gill’s expression bordered on amused but still held a smattering of unease. Instead of pushing her to begin unburdening herself, I rested my hand on her forearm and gently nudged her towards the table.

“Go, sit.” I nodded at the small oak table as my hand delivered a gentle push in that direction.

With a sigh, Gill slipped from the urging of my hand and made her way to the table.

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PLEASE PURCHASE

A WORK IN PROGRESS

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