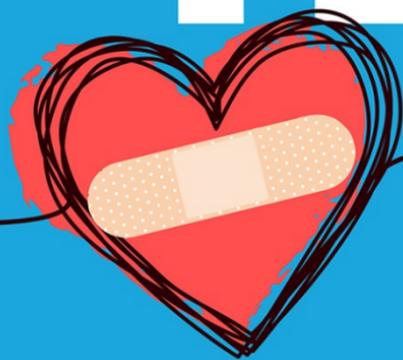


# SEE RIGHT THROUGH ME



*a lesbian romance novel*

*L.T. Smith*



# CHAPTER 1

Tuesday. Five-forty pm. Sitting in a room with sniffers and moaners and not feeling too bloody happy to be amongst the germ ridden, I can tell you. But it couldn't be avoided; there was no other way. If there were, I would have done it. Believe me.

Radiology. That's where I was, cramped in the smallest waiting room I think has ever been built, unless mice actually have waiting rooms; then there would be competition. Ward G. I think the G stood for Git, because that's what I was feeling like at that moment. People of all different shapes, sizes, and *smells* surrounded me, and all I wanted to do was up sticks and flee. I was okay when I first came in—well, apart from not being able to move my arm to scratch my head and lacking the strength to move my chair away from the leech who was leaning over me, pretending to read my newspaper. Riiiiight. Grabbing an eyeful of what was down my bra, more like. I had serious doubts whether he actually had anything wrong with him in the first place. A huge part of me honestly believed he was there just to leer at the women who came out half naked from the dressing room.

And that was the reason why I wasn't too chuffed now. Not because of him, because of the changing rooms. Why on earth some dickhead architect would think that putting a dressing room inside the tiniest bloody waiting room in existence (okay, mice, you're not included) was a good idea beats me. I wouldn't have been surprised if there had been a shoehorn behind a pane of glass with a sign above it that read "In case of emergency, break glass. Ease person carefully

from cubicle. Deposit at reception.” Every one of us sardines was privy to the moans and groans of the poor bastard behind the plastic curtain. Then, to add insult to injury, literally, the patient would have to saunter past all of us “cripples” to go to X-ray, with his or her backside hanging out of the hospital gown for all the world to see. Not a pretty picture and one I didn’t want to experience. Ever.

“Mrs Sheila Simpson.”

Not me, thank fuck.

A middle-aged woman struggled to her feet, her face the colour of clay, and was directed to the dressing room by the nurse. I could hear her emphasizing that all she needed X-rayed was her shin, but the nurse insisted she strip from the waist down, slip on the gown, and then come along to the room at the end of the corridor.

Bollocks. I had to have my shoulder and neck looked at. That meant I was definitely on the verge of a beetroot makeover.

Eventually Mrs Simpson garnered enough courage to enter the cubicle, and the waiting room fell silent again. Grunts and huffing sounds were audible as the poor woman struggled to disrobe. It was at that moment—you know, that time of absolute silence that if someone would have dropped a pin at the far end of the hospital, it would have seemed deafening—that Mrs Simpson farted. All heads spun around to stare at the place the noise had originated and, if I’m not mistaken, I’m sure I saw the curtains flap.

Everything went quiet. Impossibly even more quiet than pre-fart. It still amazes me that no one laughed, but I think the adage “There but for the grace of God go I” was paramount. A muffled “Excuse me” surfaced through the crack. I think I should rephrase that. Okay. A tiny voice whimpered, “Excuse me” through the spot between the curtains where there was a gap.

Letchy bloke couldn’t resist and answered, “Better out than in, luv.” I bet that made her feel like a princess, and as I turned to him

to deliver a look of disgust, he grinned at me and nodded his head. “I wouldn’t like to be the one that goes in after her.”

Twat. Didn’t he understand that getting your kit off and walking past morons like him was bad enough without the added sound effects? Honestly, I *was* going to put him in his place, but just as I opened my mouth, the curtain was drawn back tentatively and a very red face appeared. I could tell he was going to say something else, so I did the only thing I could think of—I stretched. You heard me right. Stretched. And even though the pain in my shoulder stung like a bitch, it saved the day. All his focus was on my breasts, and this gave Mrs Simpson the opportunity to slip away and down the corridor, clutching her clothes in her arms.

That was another thing. Once the poor saps had struggled out of their clothes and scurried off down the passage, they weren’t seen again. Was there a huge hole down the corridor, one big enough to swallow you whole and save the NHS money on X-rays? Did they flog your clothes after, and that’s why they wanted you to get undressed? Crap. I was formulating my own conspiracy theory, and I didn’t like what my brain was trying to conjure. As if it wasn’t bad enough that I had to be there in the first place.

Are you wondering that yourself, why I was there? Or don’t you give a shit? I bet you wanted to read this story on the off chance that it included rudey scenes or the declaration of true love, didn’t you? Well, give me a minute. I am just about to tell you about the events that changed my perception of love...and maybe a little bit more than that. So hang on a tad longer and let me get this out.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Three Weeks Earlier*

Time does shift in funny ways, especially when you have the power to flit from one scene to another, maybe even shift from one place—or planet. But if you are expecting sci-fi, I'm sorry, although the events later on in my tale I would classify as out of this world. And not just because I had taken too much medication, either.

Okay. Three weeks earlier. What did I do? Did I hurt my shoulder and neck by performing some heroic deed? Land badly when I jumped in front of a moving car to stop a small child from being mowed down? Lift a heavy object off a trapped woman? Or man? Child? Dog? Stop a fight? Step into the shoes of an airline pilot and land a plane full of terrified passengers? I wish I could say “yes” to any of the above, but it has to be a “no”, I'm afraid.

Here goes. Just remember one thing before you take the piss—it hurt, okay? They always say hard work can't kill you, and part of me still believes that to this day, but it *can* hurt like buggery, though, as I found out. Now you are thinking I have a strenuous job. Well, I do, but most people wouldn't think so. I teach. Teenagers, to be exact. And no—I wasn't in the midst of a catfight or stopping an intruder from entering the school. In fact, I wasn't even at work at the time. I was at home. Home. The place where most accidents happen. But it was work related, so the waffling I have done does actually key in somewhere along the line.

We had just gotten back from the Christmas vacation, two weeks of doing nothing—no planning, no marking, nothing. And

if you teach or know a teacher, then you also know being idle over a holiday is not the wisest of plans. Mainly this is because when you get back, you have to run around like a dipshit—chasing your tail in the process—trying to get things in order to get you through the half term. Usually, this is accompanied by the “For fuck’s sake. Why didn’t I do a little bit when I had the chance?” The same thing, over and over again. Some day I would learn, and it’s a pity I didn’t remind myself on the last day of term, as it would have saved the ultimate embarrassment of sitting in a hospital waiting room with a bloke who would make the original Peeping Tom look like an innocent bystander.

I had been working on some resources, trying, if you will, to make the following week a little easier, when it happened. Sitting in the same position for hours on end whilst staring at a computer screen is not my idea of fun at the best of times, but at least I had the opportunity to catch up with some overdue emails (although we usually call that procrastinating). Eventually I’d had enough, saved the work I had done to a memory stick, and clicked to log off. Then it happened. The “incident” took place. I thought I was being eco-friendly, saving energy and all that, but look where it landed me. All I did was lean over and click the button on the front of my computer. Click from Vista, and then click from somewhere in the Region of Agony. Or should I say “lock” instead of “click”? Because that’s what happened. A pain and noise shot through my neck and shoulder, followed closely by a cry from me, and it wasn’t along the lines of “Ouch! That stings.” It was loud enough to set off the dogs in the vicinity, and all I could do was bounce around with my arm extended and my head canted to one side. I looked as if I was either Morris Dancing or semi-interested in the Nazi party. Do Morris Dancers shout “Fuck!” whilst clanging their bells together?

Two days later I was at the doctor's and being examined by a bloke who didn't suit pink and gave the impression that he read horoscopes on the side.

"I think you may have trapped a nerve."

Well done. Here's your medical certificate. Now, what do the stars say?

"It would be for the best if I recommended you for an X-ray, and then we can go from there."

Where? Uranus? I know I sound like a bitch, but I was in pain, and all he could do was state the obvious. He could have told I had something wrong just by the way I had buttoned up my coat.

Two weeks later I received the letter with the authorization for the X-ray. To say I was surprised would be an understatement, as the NHS was not renowned for speed. The appointment was for the following Tuesday. And that brings us back to the beginning, the part where things could, or could not, get rather interesting.

Six-fifty. Still Tuesday. I think. Letchy bloke had gone, and the waiting room was beginning to look a little bigger than it had. Maybe because there was only me still there, and because the air was definitely a little sweeter. At least if I did have to take my clothes off, there would be no one there to get a glimpse of my arse. Bonus.

"Mrs Hughes?"

I looked around the waiting room and then realised the nurse was talking to me. Hughes, yes, but Mrs? Was this like the old-fashioned family planning clinics where everyone was addressed as if they were married?

"Mrs Gemma Hughes?" She was staring at me intently by now, knowing full well, as did I, there was only her and me left, and I think she knew her own name. Unlike me, as it appeared.

Somewhere deep inside me, I dragged up a grin and nodded, wincing straight afterwards. "That'd be me." No shit! "But I'm—"

“Pop in there and slip out of your top.” She shoved a hospital gown into my hands. “Put this on, and then bring everything with you to the room at the end of the corridor.” Then she was gone, and without a broomstick, either.

After a struggle, I managed to get my top off and the gown in place. Why do people insist on putting the ties at the back? Even if I weren't lame (sympathy vote here), I would've found it impossible to do them up. With the thought of “Aw fuck it”, I gathered my clothes in a one-armed grip and made my way down the ominous passage, looking like a pigeon flying home from the chippy.

All the time I was walking, I was dreaming up scenarios of huge holes appearing and gulping me down. But nothing. Then I went into *Silence of the Lambs* mode. You know—the bit where Jodie is walking past all the cells and they fire abuse at her (and other home grown ingredients), and for the life of me I wouldn't have been surprised if lechy bloke had appeared at the side, playing with his dinglele and chanting, “I can smell your fart.”

Yep. My imagination always amazes me. I'm just surprised I haven't been banged up in a mental hospital before now.

“In here.” Miss Personality of the Year was back and waiting for me to enter the examination room. “Give those to me.”

I would have, too, if she hadn't snatched them out of my hands. The name I called her under my breath is not worth repeating, but I imagine you get the gist of it. I think she did too, as no sooner had the epithet left my tight lips than she turned back to me and gave me a look that would have frightened terrorists. Slam. Down went my clothes on the table near the door, and she was gone, and I was left sticking two fingers up behind her back.

“If you've quite finished.”

The voice came from somewhere on the far side of the room. In retrospect, it was a very nice voice, but that's the hindsight of

me talking. At the time I honestly believed I hated everyone in the vicinity and would be within my rights to give them a piece of my mind. Whether it was verbal, or in the shape of a well-drafted letter.

Walking farther into the room, I still couldn't see anyone there. Did the voice belong to a vertically challenged person? Was she hiding somewhere near the skirting boards, and for once in my life I was too tall to see her? Yes. Didn't I mention that before? The voice was definitely female. And if her voice was any indication, a very sexy female. Maybe this wouldn't be as bad as I—

“You need to actually be in the room before I can take an X-ray.”

Scrap the last bit. She must have given the nurse training in rudeness. Trust me to get the Simon Cowells of the medical world. I can hear it now. Both of them looking at my X-rays, shaking their heads in unison (hers decidedly lower—'cos she's a midget) and saying, “That is absolutely dreadful.”

“Well, if you actually told me where to stand, I might have a clue.”

A tutting sound came from the back of the room, and I saw a shape appear. Talk about getting my facts wrong. If the shadow was any indication, this woman was a giant. Part of me wished I'd kept my mouth shut.

I quickly moved towards a machine that gave the impression it would be good for looking right through me and waited patiently, and worriedly, for the next set of orders. Unfortunately, as it turned out, I was facing the wrong way. I knew this for a number of reasons. One—I could read the instructions for the doctor. Two—my shoulder was nowhere near the machine. And finally, three—the huge sigh from behind me that indicated I was an idiot. It was at this point that I felt even more stupid than I had, which is an achievement in itself considering I was waltzing about with the back

part of me on display to the world. I thought, “She is going to have a field day with this.” Gritting my teeth, I was ready for her.

But no. That’s not what happened at all.

Unexpectedly, she placed her hand on my shoulder with, if truth be told, the gentlest touch I believe I have ever experienced. Her warm hand landed on my semi-exposed back and stayed there, almost as if it was there to cure and guide. I waited for her to say something, but she didn’t. I waited a little longer, then, before she had the chance to speak, I turned around, her hand staying on my skin and trailing around the overly sensitised flesh.

My eyes fluttered—I couldn’t help it—as the sensation ripping through me made me forget why I was there in the first place. And though I was facing in her direction, I couldn’t seem to raise my face to look into hers.

A white coat. That was the first thing I noticed about her. Such a clinically clean, white coat. The vee at the top exposed delicate flesh, smooth and slightly tanned. The hollow of her neck was pronounced and shapely and sitting snugly at the base of a soft neck. It wasn’t until I noticed I was staring at her jaw line that my gaze had started to drift upwards, and part of me began to panic. Why? I don’t know. Breathing started to become a problem. Maybe it was expectation. Or asthma. Or both.

“I’m sorry for being rude.” Gentle breaths hit the top of my head. “A long day, I suppose.” The voice was even more magical from up close and definitely not what I was expecting...that is, if I had been expecting anything in the first place. “Here. Face this way.” Fingers slipped underneath my chin and lifted my face higher.

And as my face went higher, the picture of the woman became all too clear. It wasn’t her mouth that captivated me, sitting there curled in a half smile encased by red, nor was it the wonderfully

straight nose. It turned out to be the epitome of everything you honestly believe can swallow you whole in one perfect moment: her eyes.

Those eyes. God, those eyes. Have you ever looked into eyes that seemed to know you? Read you? Digest you? Looked into eyes so clear and honest that you believe they will never hurt you? Lie to you? Or cheat you? Eyes that were as blue as the clearest of skies in the middle of a summer's day? So much so, you almost believe you can smell the newly cut grass? The same eyes that were now widening in surprise, as they looked straight back into my own startled green ones.

"I'm not married." What the fuck? Where did that come from? "I...I mean...erm...the nurse...erm...Mrs." I sounded as if my voice box was deliberately shutting off the volume or completely missing the words out for a prank. I sounded like an idiot; I looked like an idiot; I *was* an idiot. It was those eyes, you see? They made me react in a way I didn't know I could. Her fingers were still tucked underneath my jaw, as if they, too, were in on the act. We were a tableau, and I believe if the nurse hadn't come back in at that very moment, we would still be standing there today.

"Ready to shoot?"

I think that had already been done, as I could definitely feel something lodged underneath my breast bone.

"Dr Moran? Are we ready?"

Dr Moran. That was her name. Dr Moran. Perfect. I just wished I knew her first name so I could rattle that around in my head too.

"Sorry...I...yes." Dr Moran pulled her fingers away, and I felt their absence acutely. Next step was her moving backwards and away from me, and all I wanted to do was relive the moment, catch those fingers and put them back. It was amazing to realise that all the time

she had been touching me, captivating me with her blue, blue eyes, I hadn't felt any pain in my shoulder or neck. But the further away from me she moved, the more intense the ache became. Funny thing was, it seemed to be coming from somewhere inside my chest.

Watching her trying to collect herself should have been amusing, but it was anything but. Slender fingers brushed the front of her immaculate white coat, as if she was trying to smooth out non-existent wrinkles. She swallowed once, twice, three times before she directed her questions at me.

“Neck and shoulder, yes?”

All I could do was nod, as my voice box appeared to have given up completely.

“Anywhere else?”

A slight shake—both of my head and, if I'm not mistaken, her voice, too. I wanted to show her I was in control, but I couldn't. It seemed as if everything had either shut down or closed off... everything apart from my intense fascination for the woman standing in front of me. Did she feel something too?

“How did you do it?”

*I didn't do anything. It just happened as soon as you looked at me.*

“Did you lift something heavy?”

*Apart from my jaw off the floor, no.* Obviously, I didn't say that, I just shrugged my shoulders and then winced.

“Looks painful. You have no idea at all how you did that?”

It was at that moment when I knew I could have impressed her. Any story I wanted to spin was there on the tip of my tongue, as the truth was a little more embarrassing. Could I stand there and admit I had been clicking off my computer when I pulled something? No way. “I just turned off my computer and something clicked.” Why did it have to be at that precise moment that my voice decided to

come back from the Land of the Mute? Why couldn't it have stayed there for a little while longer? You know—grabbed a cocktail...stood at the bar of the resort...maybe lounged about in a deckchair... But no. The truth decided it was too big to be contained, and it didn't stop there. "I'd been sitting in front of the screen for hours and when I finished, I thought I would save electricity." So, now I am officially an idiot *and* a tight arsed git.

"You'd be surprised how many people come in with exactly the same complaint." At this point she turned to pick up her clipboard. "Do you play games?"

*Hub? Like what?*

"Online games...Mrs...Mrs..." Her eyes were glued to the sheet in front of her, and I wondered why she couldn't say my name. "Mrs Hughes?"

Was it my imagination, or did she look disappointed?

"No. I'm not one for games." That should have come out as light-hearted, but it sounded as if the statement I had spoken held the meaning of life. "And it's Miss." She mustn't have heard me announce I wasn't married before.

"Excuse me?" And it looked as if she hadn't heard me again.

"Miss." Fuck the games. "As I said, I'm not married." I wanted to say "*Or in any kind of relationship, either*", but how would I explain that? "Or in any kind of relationship, either." What was the matter with me? Can't I have an internal monologue without it turning into a dramatic monologue? An audible dramatic monologue, at that.

Looking up from the clipboard, she seemed to absorb what I had said before she nodded curtly and crossed something out.

Slipping the board on the desk, she slowly walked over to me.

All the moisture collected in my mouth before being loudly swallowed. This woman was too beautiful, too beautiful for mere

words. She was tall, but not in a giantess kind of way—more like an Amazon. Black hair was tied back into a ponytail and collected rays of light before dispersing them back into the atmosphere. A slight smile played along her lips, and I wanted to ask her what she was thinking. Thankfully, the mechanism for voicing my thoughts aloud decided to keep quiet. For a change. Inwardly, I sighed.

“We need to take a couple of shots from different perspectives.”

Dr Moran was in front of me now, and I could feel the jittering of butterflies dancing inside my gut.

“And if you don’t mind waiting...”

*For you to finish work? Not at all.*

“...so I can check that everything’s as it should be, and we have a clear shot of what’s going on inside you.”

I hope they didn’t get a clear shot of what was happening inside me; how would I explain that one away? I had no computer to blame this time.

“Here. Just move...” As she was telling me where to stand, she placed her hands on my shoulders and gently manoeuvred me into position, and I moved like a lamb. “There you go.”

She was at the side of me now, and I couldn’t help but turn my face to hers once again.

Freeze. We were back to the statue pose of minutes before. What was happening? Why was it that every time we made eye contact, we both stood frozen like rabbits in the headlights? I could sense something moving rapidly somewhere below her face, and it was an effort to drag my eyes away. But there it was.

Her chest was heaving as if she was having difficulty catching her breath.

It was at this moment that I realised I had been holding mine.

“Dr Moran?”

Why couldn't the nurse just fuck off back to her coven?

"We need to get the shots down to the lab before they close."

My gaze moved back up to her face, and at that instant I saw her click off the fascination and replace it with professionalism. Disappointment flooded through me.

"Okay. *Miss Hughes*, I will be just in there, if you need me..."

As her words trailed off, a little voice inside me, deep down inside me, whispered, "*I do need you*", and I involuntarily shuddered it away. Was I cracking up? Was this the after-effects of a lack of sleep? Before I had a chance to answer her, she was gone. Back to the darkroom with the first witch from Macbeth.

I didn't hear anything else, probably because I was too caught up in my own mental musings to pay attention. The machine had performed its function, and it was completely pain free. Thankfully. Because if anything would have happened, anything else unexpected, I don't know how I could have handled it. All the time she had been in the back room, I had watched her, watched her fiddling with the controls I didn't understand until just before she pressed something. As she did it, she stopped and stared at me, her face showing a definite confusion, the same confusion I was feeling inside. What was going on here? Why did I seem to feel a connection with a woman I had just met? Especially when all I knew was her surname?

As the questions were rattling around inside my head, I saw her move towards the doorway again. Her actions were slow, and this enabled me to capture everything about her—the grace of her movements, the way her ponytail bounced slightly with the momentum of each step, the way the smile began to curl itself around her mouth and finally settled into some divine pose as she stood in front of me.

A small laugh delicately slipped from her lips before she said, "You can move now; the first one is out of the way."

But didn't she realise I wasn't staying still because of the X-ray? The reason why I was stationary was because physically I couldn't do anything else?

"Right. You have to turn slightly more to the side, the injured shoulder facing the panel."

An easy set of instructions to follow, but I couldn't seem to move. Still.

"Here. Let me help you."

Maybe it was the anticipation of her hands touching me again that had made me reticent about moving in the first place.

Strong, yet delicate hands cupped my shoulders and turned me away from her.

I could feel her standing against my back, my bareness exposing me more than I ever imagined it could.

A soft breath was next to my ear and her words drizzled down onto my skin. "Did you know you're not fastened at the back?"

I nodded, gulped, and then whispered a "yes."

"Seems stupid to fasten you up when you'll be taking this off in a minute."

At that, my heart seemed to kick start again. I knew it wasn't what it sounded like, but you can't blame a girl for having an overactive imagination...when it's not thinking about *Silence of the Lambs*, that is.

"Okay. We're set."

I felt her move away, and once again I missed the contact. The situation was surreal, to say the least. Considering I had dreaded this moment ever since I had received the letter, I can honestly say this was not panning out the way I had foreseen.

Standing there on my own, a myriad of emotions rushed through me...and thoughts, too. Can't leave out those little snippets, can I?

Fear, anticipation, elation, anxiety, confusion... Do I have to list them all? I think you understand this was a weird moment, one of the weirdest I think I have ever experienced. Why was I being attracted to someone so quickly? Nothing like this had happened to me before, so why now? And what was I going to do about it? Nothing, I should imagine. What could I do? Tell her that I thought her touch divine, her eyes magical, and how I wouldn't want these newly found sensations raging through me to ever stop? It was not just about the doctor-patient relationship, although that was a factor; it was the insecurity of not knowing why I was feeling like this in the first place. Was it lack of sleep? Pain? The onset of madness?

As these thoughts were presenting themselves for inspection, I hadn't noticed where the doctor had gone. I couldn't see her from the position I was standing, mainly because I was facing the other side of the room.

"All done."

Strangely enough, it wasn't just her voice that told me she was back. A sensation I can only liken to a jolt of electricity raced through me just before she spoke. Was it the residual effect of radiation? That would just be my luck: I come in with a bad shoulder and leave with a third eye or an extra nipple.

"Are you okay?" The voice was soft and situated to my right side.

A slow turn of the head and there she was standing there in resplendent glory, blue eyes half closed and taking me in.

"Huh?" Sometimes it is good to act stupid; whilst at others to have some semblance of an IQ could be highly recommended. This was not that time. Regrettably. "Done?"

"And dusted. We're just checking that the pictures came out clearly. It saves time in the long run." A slight pause. "That way we don't have to call you back and do it all over again."

*I wouldn't mind. If it helps.* Helps what? My libido? It didn't need any help—especially since ten minutes ago, *that* I could guarantee.

“I doubt you would be happy traipsing all the way back here, would you?”

My lips moved, but that's all they did. Nothing came out. I looked like a ventriloquist's dummy without the ventriloquist.

“So...” Her eyes left mine briefly and searched in the air for something. “Did you come straight from work?”

Was she trying to make small talk, or was she interested?

“Traffic must've been bad at this hour.”

“Not bad.” The ventriloquist was back! Hallelujah!

“What do you do? Computers?”

Is this a boring conversation, or is it me? I wanted to spice things up and answer “What would you like me to do, baby?” But...nah... that isn't me. “I teach. English.”

“Sorry.”

“I teach. English.”

“No. I heard you. I'm just sorry.” One eyebrow rose, and her face showed a hint of challenge before breaking into a grin. “Couldn't resist. That's a difficult job. What age?”

In truth I was still a little shocked by her response and attempt—I stress the word *attempt*—at humour, to answer straight away.

“Teens?” Why did I say it like a question? Was I turning into an Australian, or worse, a pupil?

She opened her mouth as if to speak, but she didn't have the chance. The Worst Witch was back, and I wanted to tell her that the next Harry Potter book needed an evil character, but as you can guess, I said nothing.

“Everything is fine. That's it for the day.”

But instead of bugging off, the nurse stood there and waited. Was she expecting a tip? *Don't polish brown shoes with black shoe polish. Look both ways before you cross the road. Don't overstay your welcome.* Yes. The last one fit nicely.

“Do you need me for anything else?”

Did I need you in the first place?

“No. You go. I'll finish here.”

Without another word, she was gone.

Dr Moran turned to me, her face apologetic. “Sorry about that. She's a good nurse, but rather brusque sometimes. I like to tidy up everything after she has gone. Makes me feel like it's all done the way I want it.”

Brusque? Spiky, more like. Nurse Porcupine, in the flesh.

“Now, let's sort out your clothes.”

*Huh?*

“Are you okay getting dressed behind the screen? I can help you if you wish.”

What an offer. Her and me behind the screen, me coming to grips with my clothes and her coming to grips with...

“I'm a doctor, after all”

...my medical notes.

“That's okay; I'll manage.” Turning around I saw the screen in the corner of the room. So the other people hadn't fallen down a huge hole. Shame really. The NHS really does need the money. When I turned back to her, I was certain that I saw disappointment on her face, but her expression changed so quickly into a grin, I couldn't stake my life on it.

“I'll just be in the back, okay?” With that, she was gone, and I was left standing there with my gown flapping and my jaw hanging slightly.

In a matter of minutes I was behind the screen with my clothes, the hospital gown hanging in my hands. Funny things, hospital gowns. When I first realised I would have to wear one, I was mortified, but now it looked so innocent. Green and floppy; used and abused; worn once and thrown aside. Apart from the green bit, it was a little how I was feeling. Why? Fuck knows, but that was the truth of it.

Getting dressed was a little more difficult than I had thought it would be, mainly because the space behind the screen was even smaller than the fart-sized changing room in the waiting room. Grunts and groans came out as I lifted my arm to slip my top on, and anyone listening would have thought I was masturbating. As if. If I didn't have the strength to write the date on the board in my classroom, self-love was definitely out the window. More's the pity. It was like the pleasure/pain theory...being there, I mean. On one hand (the one attached to the sore shoulder—well, separated by an arm. Thought I should clarify in case you had the idea I had a hand sticking out of my armpit), I was not a happy bunny. Sitting in the tiniest room known to man for the best part of an hour and a half, then getting undressed in a shoebox, followed by a meeting with the Cowell twins (okay, okay—I know the doc wasn't a Simon wannabe, but the nurse...definitely), who provided an in-depth insight into hospital staff cuts, naturally keeping the ones that should have been sacked. That was not the way I wanted to spend my evening. But—and this is a big “but”—on the other hand, meeting the woman who was by now turning off everything in her office and wishing I would get my arse into gear and leave, was a definite bonus. Can I have three hands? We could put it down to overexposure to the radiation if we have to. The pleasure part did have a fault. After I dressed and bade her adieu, I knew it would be the last time I would see her.

Or I could ask her to go for a coffee. Couldn't I? There was no law against asking. Just one cup. Maybe talk about things other than X-rays and school. Get to know each other a little better...maybe even ask if she would like to meet up another time.

Whoa! What was I doing? Just because I was a lezza didn't mean every other woman in existence was one too. Ignore Freud, or whoever said we all had the tendency to be attracted to people of the same sex. If, and I mean IF, she said yes to a coffee, that didn't mean she would fall for my charms and fall into my arms. For a start, I was injured, and would most likely drop her, just before she metaphorically dropped me.

"Are you okay in there?"

*Apart from having an internal debate, yes.* "Yes!" A little high pitched, even if I do say so myself.

Five minutes later I was ready. Stepping out from behind the curtain, I had the sudden urge to catch my breath, maybe because that way she wouldn't realise I was there.

Dr Moran was leaning against a table and reading the chart on the wall. Her body was relaxed, yet not. Her elbows were supporting her and her chest was pushed out, her head slightly tipped back.

What an image! It was like she was absorbing everything, yet allowing nothing to penetrate. I just stood there and watched her adjust herself slightly, like she was getting comfortable as she waited. The white coat was gone, and she was wearing a brown leather jacket that hung loosely over dark trousers. A firm breast was peeking through and that's where I was staring as she turned to me. Even though I wasn't looking at her face, I knew she was looking at me. I could feel it...just before I felt the hot blush skim from the base of my neck and glow all over my face. I shot a quick look at her before looking away, embarrassed.

“Ready?”

Didn't she notice? Why didn't she say something? Glancing back at her, I saw the vestiges of a grin on her face before it was completely gone and the professional face took over.

“Would you mind if I walked down with you? It would be nice to have a little company for a change.”

“Y-yes. Yes.”

She cocked her head to one side, and I realised that I had actually refused her offer.

“I mean, no, not at all.”

The grin was back and I couldn't help joining her.

As she pushed herself up from the table in one fluid movement, I couldn't seem to tear my eyes away. If I had felt something more than a doctor-patient connection beforehand, now was a new ball game. She was beautiful, even more so than I had previously thought. Her hair was freed from the ponytail, and it came just below her shoulders, framing the elegant face in the process. Blue eyes watched me, but I couldn't move. It felt as if pixies had sneaked in and stapled my feet to the floor.

“Are you okay? You seem a little...erm...out of it.”

One nod, that's all I could muster. Maybe the X-ray had bugged about with my chemical balance. Worth a shot.

Before I knew it, she was in front of me, her hand touching my forehead. “You seem hot and sweaty. Maybe you need something to eat or drink.” After a pause, she added, “Have you eaten today?”

Loads, actually, as I had remembered to take my own lunch rather than risk poisoning from the school canteen. I nodded slowly. Well, I couldn't lie, could I?

“But I am thirsty, now you come to mention it.” Should I say that I was worried I might pass out if I went to the cafeteria

all by myself? And if I did say that, would she escort me like my own personal medical guard? Nah. However much I wanted her to accompany me, I wouldn't stoop to feigning illness to get her alone for a little while longer. I wasn't ill—just caught red handed staring at her tits.

“Maybe I should take you to the cafeteria and make sure you're okay.” That capable hand was now on my cheek. “If...if you don't mind, that is?”

I shook my head slowly, as if any more effort would see me off. Talk about a drama queen. I even wheezed out a “thank you” with what sounded as if it could have been my dying breath.

“That's settled then. Would you like me to get a porter to wheel you down in a wheelchair?”

What the fuck? As if she would be enamoured by my charms if I was being wheeled along in a wheelchair to the café, not that there was anything wrong with being in a wheelchair... Aw fuck. I was racing down a one-way street the wrong way with no brakes. I couldn't take this illness thing too far or else I would shoot myself in the foot and end up in a wheelchair anyway. And it is amazing that from one moment to another, I had changed my mind about using illness as an excuse to get her on her own. Shallow. That's what I was. But needs must.

“I think I can manage walking. Maybe if I feel a little woozy...” (who the fuck uses woozy?) “...I could hold on to you?”

“Here. Grab my arm; I don't want you going down on me.”

Not the response I was looking for, but I slipped my good arm through hers and allowed her to lead the way.

Being with her seemed the most natural thing in the world. Allowing her to support me all the way to the cafeteria also seemed to be one of those situations where it was the thing to do. Dr Moran

may have thought she was helping a sickly woman, but I had other thoughts racing through my head. Linking arms with her was not done in the way of a person that was just about to keel over. Nope. It was like we were out on a date. My arm through hers felt perfect. Our connection was as if I had ordered it and we fit like a hand in a glove. That wasn't all of it, though. All the time she was linked with me, little shocks of delight kept racing along my skin. If this was what it was like to touch this woman when all we were doing was linking arms with our clothes on, imagine what it would be like if—

“Here we are. You sit here and I'll grab us both a drink. Coffee? Tea?”

*You. No sugar.* “Tea, please. No sugar.”

Then she was gone and I was left grinning like an idiot, all by myself at the table. I felt good. Alive. Pain free. *Huh? Pain free?* A quick jiggle of my arm and shoulder...nothing. No pain, no cramping, no nothing. Another wiggle and stretch. Nothing. The pain had gone. Kaput. Disappeared into the walls of the hospital. How on earth had that happened? Ten minutes ago I could barely move because of the nearly constant pain, but now...

I felt like a fraud. I had made that poor gorgeous woman help me down to the café when all I was suffering from was a bad case of Caughtmeitus. Who would have guessed that staring at someone's boobs would have qualified as a disease? I looked over at where she was standing and, bugger me, she was staring right back at me. Was it contagious? Like in *Outbreak*? Or had she seen that I was waving my arm around like a mad woman without the usual signs of any pain? Should I go for the pain-filled look now, just to cover my back? Grip my shoulder and scrunch up my face in agony?

No. What I did do was grab my handbag and rummage around for too bloody long as if I was valiantly searching for something—

like a misplaced pulled muscle, or even the ever faithful “trapped nerve” who was probably down at the bottom, encased by fluff and fighting for its life.

“There you go.” She was back. And with a huge mug of steaming tea. “Thought you might want a cake, too. Help with the sugar levels.”

How thoughtful. I could manage a cake; I could always manage a cake of some description.

Dr Moran pulled the chair out opposite mine, the legs screeching in defiance over the tiled flooring. “I’m starving. Been a long day.”

My heretofore injured arm was outstretched at this point and grabbing for the plate which held the little brown pocket of delight, when I realised I wasn’t making any agonised face pulls. Therefore, the face I did pull was one of surprise, and she noticed.

“Hey.”

*Fuck.*

“You shouldn’t be doing that. Let me.”

Considering she was a doctor, I thought she would have realised that my arm seemed a damn sight better than it had.

“You’ll knock your tea over.”

Maybe she had noticed my miraculous recovery. *Bugger.* And why couldn’t I make up my mind if I wanted to go for sickly or bodybuilder?

“I’m fine. Look.” With that, I lifted my hand over my head and waved wildly. The look of shock on her face was priceless, and I wanted to continue with a one-armed handstand, just to nail the point home. “My shoulder...and neck...they’re okay.” At this point, someone on the far side of the café waved back. *Bollocks.*

“I can see that.” Dr Moran leaned over the table and her eyes narrowed. “But what I don’t understand is why? You couldn’t even fasten your blouse up a few minutes ago.”

I looked down and, sure enough, my blouse was buttoned up all wrong. But then again, it would have been more unusual if I had done it up right. I wasn't going to tell her that. My mouth opened and I mentally checked what was going to come out of it before continuing. "I don't know what happened. As soon as I sat down, it seemed to just...erm...just go."

"That's usually the way. Injuries like that usually go as quickly and silently as they appeared." A soft smile was forming along her lips, then it slipped away and I was left wanting more. "But that doesn't mean your shoulder is okay. You still need to go and visit your GP and get the results of the X-rays." Leaning back into her chair, I saw the professional come back. "If the injury is left untreated, you could end up with a lifetime of X-rays."

Well, that didn't sound so bad. As long as they were with her.  
"And physiotherapy."

Maybe that was going a little too far. It would be easier to just do what the doctor ordered after all.

"Or it could have gone."

Had she seen the flash of thoughts skid across my face?

"You won't know until I get the results back to your doctor in about five days...maybe a little longer because of the weekend."

Her hand came out and she lifted the cake nearest to her, and with a swoop she had bitten off a good quarter. A muffled "good" came out and she closed her eyes briefly to savour the sweetness. Then another bite, and I was so mesmerised by the contentment on her face, my hand hovered over the remaining treat. Dr Moran's chewing slowed as the desired effect took over, and I could actually see her energy levels increase as the sugar hit home. Swallowing, she focused her attention back on me, and I witnessed an idea take shape in her mind, just before a smile flitted on and off her face.

“Or, you could just call the ward if you want. I could give you the results quicker, if you’re interested.” Blue eyes waited for my answer, and I don’t know if it was me, but there seemed to be a little bit more than “getting test results” being offered with that phone call.

It was so quiet in that cafeteria, so bloody quiet, though there were quite a few people around—including the person who thought they must know me. Were they, like her, waiting for my answer? Shit. She *was* waiting for my answer.

“Yes!” Why did it sound so loud? Was it because I half screamed, half squawked it? “Yes...that would be great.” A lot better, and a lot quieter. “Would save me the trip to the doc’s, at any rate.” Was I fucking things up? “You know...parking and all that.” Yes. I was. I could tell by the way she looked down at her half eaten cake, and then looked back at me with a look of resignation at my stupidity. “I mean...erm...that would be great.” Would I ever learn?

Placing the cake gently back onto the plate, she leaned down and lifted her bag off the floor. After a minute of rummaging, she plucked out a piece of paper and a pen. Magical, eh? Was I expecting flowers? Probably. Thirty seconds later she was offering me the aforementioned piece of paper with her number on it. Small, neat writing sat pride of place on the once pristine whiteness, her name glaring out above everything else. I didn’t even read the rest.

Dr Maria Moran.

Maria.MM.Ifyou said her initials it summed her up completely... mmmmmm. It could almost feel like a kiss, if performed correctly. A smacking of the lips; a readiness for something tasty...

“You okay?”

Was I moving my lips in a cannibalistic fashion? Knowing me, yes.

“Miss Hughes?”

“Gemma. Call me Gemma.” Better than the “call me anytime,” which I was thankful didn’t come out instead.

“Okay.” A full out grin.

Why were there butterflies flapping their brightly coloured wings in my belly?

“As long as you call me Maria.” The last part was spoken in a normal voice, but for some reason it seemed to resonate everywhere.

Now, stop me if I’m wrong. How often do you go to see a doctor and she walks you down to the cafeteria, buys you cake and tea, gives you her phone number, and finally, tells you to call her by her first name? I don’t know about you, but this was definitely a first for me. And I wouldn’t care if it was the last time either—in a good way, of course.

“So...Gemma...”

Just the sound of my name on her lips was stirring up the beast within me. That and the delectable smile she favoured me with as the word popped out, I should say.

“...how are you feeling now?”

*Like I am in a dream. In heaven. In my own romantic novel and not wanting it to end.*

Lifting the cake from the plate, I took a huge bite and chewed dramatically. After swallowing, I grinned, and I’m sure I had bits of it jammed in my teeth, but I didn’t care. “A lot better. Thank you, Doc...erm...Maria.”

She grinned full out and grabbed the remaining half of her cake, raised it up in salutation, and then started to eat again.

It was comfortable. The silence, I mean. Even though we were eating and people usually don’t talk when their mouths are full, it didn’t seem weird that I was there with her in the first place. Actually, it seemed the perfect place to be, as if we had known each other for a

lot longer than an hour. When the cake was gone, we still sat quietly, sipping tea and looking around the now emptying café. Now and again, we would catch each other's eye and smile. I felt like a teenage girl out on a first date, you know, that sensation where you are not too sure what is expected from you. Then I received a text message from my brain.

*"y dnt u spk 2 her?"*

"I'm good." Shit. I said mine aloud. Why couldn't I select "reply to message" and conjure up my own cyber speak like "I'm gud"? Probably because I was crap with mobiles.

Maria was looking straight at me by this stage. "Good for what?"

Nothing? Anything? Erm...*something*? I cleared my throat and hoped the words would present themselves as I opened my lips, words I actually wanted to be there. "I'm feeling a lot better. Must have needed sugar, like you said." At this point I realised my brain had sent another text and I was stubbornly trying to ignore the beeping noise. "So...you worked here long?" It was a start; however weak, a start nevertheless.

"Just over three months. I moved here from Cambridge." And that was it. Conversation flowed between us so easily it made the point about feeling I was in the most natural place on earth seem even more apt.

An hour later we were still gabbing about anything and everything, and I came to the conclusion that she wasn't just gorgeous, but a wonderful person, too. I also knew that I should let her get home; she looked tired. One of the very first things she had said to me was that it had been a long day, and there I was taking up her spare time. The next thing I said was the most difficult thing I had ever said in my life, as there was no way I wanted our time together to end. "I suppose I should let you go. You've had a long day."

In the blink of an eye, her face changed from the smiling one to a brief look of disappointment.

“Do you need a lift? I can drop you anywhere, I’m easy.” And by the looks of it, I was. But not in the taxi driver way, unless you count Robert DeNiro’s role, although I wasn’t going to exclaim “*Are you looking at me?*” Or was I? Anything was possible this late in the evening, especially with the way I had been acting up until now.

“You’re okay. I’m parked just out the front.” Maria slipped her mug back onto the table and then lifted her jacket from the back of the chair.

Cleaners were working their way over to us in the hope we were at last pissing off and letting them close up for the night.

“Right. Want to walk out the front with me?” Maria asked.

*I want to walk anywhere you want me to walk to, as long as I’m with you.* I think I was in danger of turning into one of those blokes with cheesy lines, but thankfully, most of mine stayed inside my head. Most.

Within five minutes we were standing in the brisk February air in the parking lot of the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital, and I knew that in another five, I would be saying goodbye to the only person I had felt any kind of connection with for years. Or ever, if truth be known. I’m not saying I hadn’t dated, just saying that I wanted the kind of connection I had felt with Maria to continue, as part of me was scared stiff that I would never feel this again.

“I’m over there.”

Turning, I saw where she was pointing and my heart dipped a little lower. My car was on the other side of the parking lot, clocking up time on the parking meter. The sigh I had stuck in my throat was insistently begging to release itself into the air and become mist, and it tried every way to stop me speaking. It nearly succeeded, too.

Maria faced me fully and looked down into my eyes, and I believe I was mesmerised again.

“You should wear a hat in this weather.” A hand shot out and flicked my blonde hair off my shoulder, then a laugh popped out of her mouth. “Sorry...just the doctor in me.”

*Wish there was one in me.*

“Look. You’ve got the piece of paper I gave you, the one with my numbers on it?”

I patted my handbag and gave her a smug look.

“You can call me whenever.” Maria stopped abruptly. “I mean... about the...erm...results.”

“When can I call? Erm...I mean...when will they be ready?” No. That’s not what I meant at all. What I meant was: “When can I call and ask to see you again?” But that wasn’t the done thing, was it? Well, it was the done thing, but not with your doctor. Part of me wanted to bite the bullet and just ask her out. I didn’t know whether she was gay or not, and I wouldn’t know unless I asked her out. And even then I wouldn’t know if she was gay, unless I told her I was and wanted to see her on a more personal level. That did it. There was no way I would be outing myself in the car park of the hospital. I was way too cowardly for that.

But I wanted to. Ask her, I mean. My mouth tried to move into the position of saying “I like you...” but that lump of sigh was battling against the admission. Therefore, the only thing I could do was watch the air collect into mist and float away, just like my hopes of ever seeing her again.

“Friday or Thursday. Just give me a bell and I will let you know if we have the results back.”

That seemed such a long time away. At least two days before I could speak to her again, hear that beautiful voice again.

“Or you could just go to your doctor’s next week.”

I could ask him what my future held, have him read my tea leaves, tell me if I was going to ever again meet the tall, dark, gorgeous woman who had been a stranger until six fifty-five tonight.

But what did I do? I thanked her. Thanked her for her time, her skill, her patience, her hospitality. Thanked her for the tea, cake, conversation. Then thanked her for walking me to the car park. How twattish. And all the time I was thanking her, I could see she was becoming more and more embarrassed, and that made me gush even more. Eventually, after realising I was getting on my own tits too, I stuck out my hand in farewell. Slowly, gently, she took mine within hers, and I had the most electrifying experience I had ever had. Literally. Sparks shot up my arm and dispersed themselves around inside my chest. I quickly looked into her face in the hopes that she had felt something too, and by the looks of it, she had. Were we standing on lay lines? Did the connection between two people have special powers and that’s why they built the hospital there? There was nothing else to do but pump her arm up and down like a maniac and grasp it as if I was clinging onto the side of a cliff.

“My...you have one hell of a grip on you there.” Her laugh rang through the air as clear as crystal being chimed. “And it’s your bad one, too.” More laughter, but this time joined with my own. “But don’t overdo it. Remember what I said.”

*I will remember everything, Maria. Everything.*

“Now, unfortunately, I will have to let you go.”

*And I, you, it appears.* I let go of her hand, and I felt empty. Again.

“It has been lovely meeting you, Gemma. Just a shame it wasn’t under different circumstances.”

I nodded and whispered, “Same here.”

She turned slightly away before turning back, licking her lips and repeating, “Just give me a bell and I will let you know if we have the results back. Thursday, okay?”

“Okay.” And then she was gone. Striding over the tarmac, she was moving away from me, whilst my voice was begging me to call her back and my brain was texting me like crazy. It wasn’t until she was out of sight that I turned and made my way to my car, the same car whose windscreen was frosted up by now, and I didn’t have any de-icer.

By the time the windscreen had cleared, I was feeling totally dejected. It wasn’t just the fact that the only woman I felt something for had just walked away; it was because I hadn’t even made the effort to ask her out. Story of my life, really. Good ideas, but shite at putting anything into practice.

Slipping my car into gear, I eased out of the space, eased out the car park, and eased out of her life.

Waiting until Thursday was torture. Too many times I had taken the once white and neat piece of paper out of the compartment of my purse and just looked at it. All it had on there was her name, the number and extension of the Radiology Department, and another number. It was the other number that intrigued me. It appeared to be a mobile number, but I wasn’t sure. Maybe it was a pager number. Doctors had pagers, didn’t they? The thoughts of her giving me a direct line to reach her were quashed. If it was her pager number after all, I would look even more idiotic than usual if I called her on Wednesday.

So, Thursday it was.

All day at work I found opportunities to lift the phone and start to dial: before registration of my manic tutor group; during break, even though I should have been monitoring the playground. Lunch

time saw me slipping out of GCSE revision group to lift the phone again. Even at the end of the day, I sidled into the staff room to attempt to dial the number again. Someone came in as I was halfway through it, and I put the slim white receiver sharply into its cradle. I would just call her when I got home. At least I wouldn't have the school listening in.

That decided, I made my way home. Sounds easy, doesn't it: "made my way home". It should have been too, if the traffic hadn't decided to go all frenzied. By the time I pulled up at home, parked, and got inside, the hallway clock read six-thirty-one. She would still be there, wouldn't she? It had been later than that when I had gotten in to see her. It must've been the knowledge that time was of the essence that made me actually dial all the numbers and then ask to put through to extension 137. The phone rang about four times before I heard it clang against a head.

"Radiology."

I knew that voice. God, did I know that voice. It was the nurse. Bollocks.

"Could I speak to Dr Moran, please?" I was crossing my fingers that the nurse didn't go all doctor's receptionist on me and start asking a million and one questions before telling me that—

"She's not here. Can I help you at all?"

That would be a first. I wanted to ask if the doctor had just popped out, ask if I should call back. But no. "It's Miss Gemma Hughes here. I was just calling to ask about my X-ray results from Tuesday's examination."

"Sorry. I can't divulge that information on the phone. You will have to make an appointment with your GP."

Was that because she wasn't a doctor? Or didn't they usually give out that kind of information over the radio waves? And if that was the case, why had Maria asked me to call?

I didn't ask her why not, or tell her I had been told to call. "Okay. Thank you." I just hung up the phone and stared at it for what seemed like too bloody long. Turning away, I leaned against the wall. Fuck it. Dr "I See All" it was then.

Not until I was lounging in the bath did it hit me, something Maria had said when I had seen her on the Tuesday. The nurse had just come in and said that everything was done, and Maria told her to go, then apologised to me for her being brusque. But it wasn't that bit that made me sit up sharply in the bubbly water and splash all over the floor. It was what she had said after. Remember? "I like to tidy up everything after she has gone. Makes me feel like it's all done the way I want it"—that bit. The nurse was still there, and by the good doctor's own account, the nurse always went home first. What was going on? Had the nurse purposely lied to me? Or had Maria gone? Or, worse still, told the nurse to lie to me? And was I turning into Jessica Fletcher from *Murder She Wrote*? Part of me felt hurt, part of me felt angry, but the biggest part of me felt miserable. I knew now that the call was nothing more than a getting of results, even though I had wanted so much more.

Sighing, I leaned back into the water, hoping the aroma from the bath salts would soothe me. Closing my eyes, there was only one thing I could see...blue eyes twinkling. Another sigh, this one voicing the disappointment I was feeling. Well, there was nothing I could do about it now, the hour was late, and I knew that tomorrow I wouldn't do anything about it either. It was over before it had begun.

## CHAPTER 3

### *One Week Later*

The week hadn't been a good one, to say the least. Work was a bitch, and so was I. But most importantly, I couldn't seem to shake off the image of Maria's smiling face. It was as if she was haunting me, sneaking into my head and haunting every thought I had. Asleep, awake, daydreaming, in mid sentence, there she would pop, and I was captivated all over again. Not the best scenario when you have thirty teenagers waiting for you to continue speaking and you are standing at the front of the room with your mouth hanging open.

Saturday night saw me at The Castle Pub, hoping to get to grips with a poor unsuspecting female who might help dispel the demon that tormented me. But I couldn't even do that right. Every woman who came over, I rebuffed. Every drink bought for me, I left untouched. I wasn't in the mood for anything, or should I say anyone, but her. I was home by ten-thirty.

All the next week I promised myself I would go and see the stargazer and find out my results, but as I said—work was a bitch.

It wasn't until Wednesday evening when I received a message on my answering machine from the local surgery that I should make that appointment. I stopped feeling sorry for myself and began to panic instead. All it said was that my results were back and I needed to make an appointment. They might as well have said, "You are going to die. Painfully," because that's how the message made me feel.

Thursday morning saw me making a call and fixing a date with Destiny. Five-forty. I smiled when the investigator, I mean receptionist, pronounced the time.

Obviously I was early. Who wouldn't be if you thought your ticket was up? I wanted my last hours on this earth to be memorable, so the sooner I found out, the better. Of course, just because I was early, that didn't mean they would be early, too, or even on time, and I had digested three copies of *Woman's Own* before I heard my name being called. Amazing to read your star signs from different years, too. It beats me why they couldn't bin all the ones that were three years out of date. So, I wasn't expecting a windfall after all, or meeting with a blast from the past. Just my luck.

Less than five minutes later, I was on my way out again. No near death experience, no tidings of bad news, just a clear result. The X-ray had come back to say there was nothing wrong with my shoulder, well, nothing I should get my knickers in a twist about. I don't know why I had been twisting them in the first place, because I hadn't had any pain since the moment I had been with Maria—Dr Moran, I should say, now that there wasn't a cat in hell's chance of being anything more than a memory for her—in the cafeteria.

That made me stop next to my car, the keys dangling loosely from my hand. This was the time when I should put all the memories of her to one side, maybe out of my head for good, and start over again. But just as that thought came into my head, another one took control. It was of her standing in front of me, her hand on my cheek, her face impossibly close to mine and leaning in closer. It felt so real, the kiss she delivered, so soft and real, so perfect and real, so much so I felt my legs give slightly and felt my body lean against the car door. Even the coldness of the metal didn't deter me. It was all so real, you see; the kiss, I mean.

However, real life has a way of forcing its way in to bite you on the arse, and this came in the voice of a bloke who must have been just getting into his car. “You okay, luv?”

My eyes fluttered open and I saw him moving in my direction, evidently concerned that I was going to flake out in the car park of the local GP’s office. “Need any help?”

“No... No... I’m fine. I was just...” What? Daydreaming about snogging a doctor? Falling for the charms of my imagination? Humping the side of my Seat Ibiza? “I was just getting my keys out.” As if! It looked no way like I was getting my keys out, and I could tell he wasn’t convinced either. But, he seemed to get the message that I wasn’t going to tell him anything else. Therefore, he did the totally British thing—didn’t get involved—and left me to get on with opening my car door.

It was when I was settled in my seat that I noticed something on my windscreen, something rectangular, something dark, something that resembled a letter. *Don’t tell me I got a parking ticket for being made to wait for my appointment.* I thought my stars said I was going to have a windfall, not line the pockets of the local council.

Stepping out of my car, I leaned over and snatched the envelope from behind the windscreen wiper. Small, neat handwriting was centred on the front, and part of my brain sparked up. I knew that handwriting, knew it as well as I knew my own, though I had only seen it once. Rummaging in my bag, I pulled out my purse and dived straight into the compartment at the side. There it was. The week and two days old piece of paper. Sure enough, the same hand had written both.

“Miss Gemma Hughes.” And it was for me too. Added bonus.

Ripping open the envelope—well, actually, not exactly ripping; more like carefully peeling back the flap to make sure I didn’t destroy

anything—I pulled out the card. A hand drawn teddy sat on the front, a rose in one hand and a tag around his neck which read “Would you be my Valentine?” Valentine? It was Valentine’s Day? Fuck. No wonder I had spent all day stopping kids from kissing, breaking up scraps, and also using a whole box of tissues in one morning. I should have guessed, like when I had written the date on the board. That should have been a huge clue, shouldn’t it? February 14th, with sobbing coming from one of the students behind me.

Opening the card was a task in itself, as my hands were shaking. My brain was chanting, “*Please don’t let me be wrong. Let it be from Maria and not the bloke who is staring at me from his Skoda.*”

“*Gemma,  
Well. Will you?*”

A question mark and kiss finished the note, and I was half filled with happiness, but also half filled with something that seemed like despair. What should I do now? I didn’t have any way of contacting her, apart from the numbers she had given me. But then I would have to get past the nurse and her clipboard. I could drive to the hospital and see if she was still there; hang about a bit until she had finished; look casual instead of desperate, like usual.

Hang on. The card had been slipped underneath my windshield, and if my knowledge of the Royal Mail was up to scratch, didn’t they usually put the mail through your letterbox? That would mean only one thing. She had to be around somewhere. Head up, eyes engaged, night vision on, and I was searching. Every corner of the car park was scanned, and I believe if I had had a heat detector on me at the time, I would have used it. But there was nothing there. Even Skoda man had gone and left me alone in my mental breakdown.

I looked back at the card in the hope that there would be some secret message written at the bottom ... but no. The message stayed the same; it was only me that was changing into a madwoman. Although the situation of not knowing how to contact her was still paramount, I couldn't resist the rush of joy that raced through me, and I pumped my arm up and down whilst shouting "Yes!" into the air. Whatever I had to do, I would let this woman know that I wanted her to be my valentine, wanted her to be more than my valentine, or for her to give me the opportunity to be both, or one... And I'm rambling.

"Good. I was hoping you would say that."

Maria. She was here! Or was I hallucinating?

"And you shouldn't do that with your injured arm."

She was here. She must be. Shooting around, I looked to the place where I thought the voice was coming from. But nothing.

"And what did I tell you about wearing a hat?"

Turning back to face my car, I looked straight into blue eyes. How on earth had she sneaked up so quietly? And did I care?

For once in my life I didn't think about the consequences of my actions; for once in my life I went on gut instinct. For once in my life I did the only thing that mattered at that moment in time. Blame it on excitement, on expectation, you could even blame it on relief. But I knew the blame wasn't really blame at all. It was want that made me do the next thing I did.

No thoughts, just actions. Act don't react, as they say. And I did. Seeing her standing there in front of me was like a gift, and I for once wasn't going to make the same mistake as I had done the last time I had seen her. I had to show her that I wanted her. Grabbing her face between my hands, I pulled her to me. I hesitated briefly to look into her eyes before I kissed her mouth ardently, trying to

press home everything I was feeling onto those startled lips. All the daydreaming I'd had about kissing her paled in comparison to the real thing. Her lips were softer, harder, more delicate, more delicious than I could ever have imagined. And the best thing was they were kissing me right back. God. Could this get any better? Could I feel more than I was feeling at that precise moment?

Her hands were on my face, in my hair, over my skin, down my back. And yes...I could feel more. Lips were leaving my mouth, kissing my cheeks, my eyelids, my neck... So again, yes, I could feel more. I didn't even feel her turning me; didn't feel the coldness of the car touching my back. All I could feel was her body over mine; her hips between my legs, her hands on my hips and pulling me into her. All I could feel was the growing wetness between my legs, the growing need in my heart, belly, and core that was screaming to be satisfied. Grabbing her hips, I pulled her against me more fully, the crux of her pelvis hitting the spot where I needed her. Maria pulled away, and I wanted to pull her back again, but I didn't have to. She pushed back and hit the spot all over again, and then again, and again, and I thought I would cum just from her kisses, her touches, her presence.

But that was something I didn't want to happen, not this soon, not in the car park of a doctor's surgery. And definitely not before we had even had a first date, although I hated to be the one who broke the news to my rampant libido. However, I didn't have to say anything. The kisses slowed down; the pressing against me became less frantic and more gentle; the caresses became almost reverent.

Lifting her face away from mine, I looked into those eyes that had followed my every move for the last nine days, both awake and asleep. I watched, enraptured, as she licked her lips slowly and then moved her mouth as if to speak.

“Did you know you have the most amazing green eyes I have ever seen?”

Was she reading my mind?

“I have done nothing but think about them ever since I met you.”

She could! She could read minds! Now all I had to do was to think of something I wanted to tell her and maybe she could see right through me and save me the embarrassment of actually saying anything.

“Fancy a coffee?”

Well, that wasn't what I was thinking, but it was a start.

“And maybe we could get to know each other better.”

That was more like it. I was beginning to worry that she couldn't read my mind after all. “I'd love to.” And I would. I couldn't wait to get to know the woman standing in front of me, and part of me was waking up to the realisation of what had transpired moments before. For the life of me I couldn't understand why I had tried to jump her bones in the middle of the car park. I couldn't work out why I had pounced on her the way I had. Never in my life had I kissed someone so rapaciously after only knowing them a matter of hours. Shaking my head, I saw Maria look questioningly at me. “Name your place.”

The confused look disappeared and she leaned forward, her face coming closer.

I couldn't resist her, and all internal admonishments evaporated as we kissed gently again before making arrangements to meet at the café two roads away. And as she pulled away in her car, the thought popped into my head. *How on earth did she know where to find me?* With a grin, I said aloud, “I can just ask her.” Yes. I liked the sound of that.

Turning the key in the ignition, I felt my future come alive again. What a day! Clean bill of health followed by the reason to live at all. What more could a woman want? And that was a loaded question. It was when I walked into the café, saw her look up from the menu and smile at me, that I knew the answer.

Dr Maria Moran. That's all I needed. All I would ever need. It was her eyes, you see. Her eyes. Looking into them I could see everything, see right inside her as she had looked right inside me.

Now I want you to imagine something. If it was like this after meeting each other twice, what would it be like when we actually got to know each other? And to tell you the truth, I couldn't wait to find out. Now was the time to start knowing, to start building on what we already had. It wasn't much, but actually, I felt it was everything at that precise moment. Only time would tell if we had a future, and the future I wanted was looking at me expectantly from the table, a delectable smile on her lips, a gleam in her eye, and me finally finding the momentum to move forward and join her.

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# SEE RIGHT THROUGH ME

BY L.T. SMITH

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