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A Lesser Evil

Lesley Pearse

'I want to sit down, not eat you!'

At the young man's jocular remark Fifi blushed and quickly shut her gaping mouth. 'I'm sorry, I was miles away. Of course you can share the table.'

She had in fact been dumbstruck because the man was so incredibly good-looking. Men who looked like Red Indians didn't normally frequent Carwardines coffee shop. He might be wearing a donkey jacket, jeans and desert boots, but his face was pure Apache.

'So where were you?' he asked as he sat down. 'In the South of France? Dancing with Fred Astaire or planning a murder?'

Fifi giggled. 'Nothing so exciting, I'm afraid. The only thing I need to kill is some time till my friend gets here.'

'Well, you could kill it talking to me,' he said with a wide smile that revealed perfect white teeth. 'Or has your mother warned you about speaking to strange men?'

Fifi knew her mother would throw a fit if she saw her daughter talking to a man like this one. For a start, it was obvious from his clothes and callused hands that he did manual work. His hair was jet-black and a little too long; he had amazing angular cheekbones and a wide mouth that screamed to be kissed. An over-protective mother's worst nightmare!

'I think even she'd imagine I was safe enough in here,' Fifi replied, glancing round at the many middle-aged ladies who were having tea and a cake after a hard day's shopping.

'Got any idea where Gloucester Road is?' he asked. 'I was directed this way from the station and told to ask again.'

'It's sort of over that way,' Fifi replied, pointing in the rough direction. 'It's a long road, though - have you got any landmarks or other street names?'

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He pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and looked at it. 'Opposite the junction of Zetland Road,' he said. 'D'you know that?'

Fifi couldn't help but smile at him. His accent might be rough Wiltshire, but there was humour in everything he said, and such a wicked sparkle in his dark eyes. 'Yes, it's only a longish walk or a short bus ride. I could draw you a map if you like.'

'Great! I can make out I'm Dr Livingstone going up the Amazon. Will the people around Zetland Road be cannibals?'

'Why, are you one?' she giggled.

'I could be tempted. You look good enough to eat,' he shot back, his dark eyes sweeping over her with appreciation. 'Anyone ever tell you that you look like Tuesday Weld?'

People often likened Fifi to the blonde American film star and it always made her glow with pleasure, for the actress was very pretty. But as Fifi's entire childhood had been overshadowed by being considered very strange-looking, she was never entirely convinced that she'd changed.

'It has been said by those who need glasses,' she joked. 'But has anyone told you that you look like a Red Indian?'

'Yeah, now and again. The truth is, I'm the Last of the Mohicans, abandoned as a baby in Swindon,' he said.

The waitress came over at that point and took his order for coffee.

'So you come from Swindon? What brings you to Bristol?' Fifi asked him.

'To seek my fortune,' he smiled. 'I'm starting work at a building site here. I'm a bricklayer. I've got a room to see in Gloucester Road. What's it like around there?'

'Okay. Good shops, pubs, plenty of buses, lots of students live there. It's not rough, but not smart either.'

'I bet you live somewhere smart!' he said, appraising her tailored office suit with a crisp white blouse beneath.

'Suburban. Roses in the gardens and lots of trees,' she said briefly, not inclined to talk about herself and her family. What she wanted was to find out everything about this intriguing man before Carol arrived. 'I'm Felicity Brown. But I'm always called Fifi. So what's your name?'

'Dan Reynolds,' he said. 'And Fifi suits you. Pretty, like a little fluffy poodle.'

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'I'm not fluffy,' she said indignantly. Her blonde hair was poker-straight, she was five feet seven, and she didn't go in for fussy clothes. At twenty-two, she also had the distinction of being the youngest legal secretary ever to be taken on at Hodge, Barratt and Soames, one of the best solicitors in Bristol.

'I think the word I should have used was chic,' he said, but he pronounced it 'chick'. Fifi smiled. She liked that description.

'So, Fifi, are you meeting a boyfriend?' he asked.

The waitress came back with Dan's coffee.

'No, just a girlfriend,' Fifi said, watching him stir in four spoonfuls of sugar. 'I usually meet her after work on Thursdays and we go to the pictures.' She was already hoping that Carol wouldn't turn up or at least that she'd be late.

'Have you got a boyfriend?

'No,' Fifi said truthfully. 'What about you?'

'No boyfriend,' he said, and laughed. 'I'm not that way inclined. I did have a girl a while back but she left me for a rich bloke.'

'And were you heartbroken?'

'My pride was bruised, but it wasn't going anywhere, just habit really.'

They chatted easily for some time after Dan had finished his coffee. He didn't use any of the normal chat-up lines, not asking her about what music she liked, films she'd seen or even what she did for a living. He didn't talk about himself either, instead he made observations about people around them and told her little fictitious stories about them to make her laugh.

Fifi's mother, Clara, was always saying that the most outstanding thing about her oldest child was her nosiness. She claimed that as soon as Fifi could talk she was asking questions about people, and it had caused her much embarrassment. Fifi was still every bit as nosy, but she had learned to phrase her questions in a way that sounded caring rather than prying. It was lovely to be with someone who appeared just as fascinated by others as herself.

When the waitress came back to clear their table and rather pointedly put down the bills, Dan said he would have to go or he might lose the room.

'Could you do that map for me?' he asked, casually picking up her bill and paying it along with his own.

Fifi thought fast. 'I could show you the way,' she said. 'It's on my way home.' It wasn't, but he wouldn't know that.

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