

Sad Lisa Sample Chapter

June 15-16, 1984

I hummed along with the haunting tune that I loved so much as I put the finishing touches on the two place settings in the stately Baroque dining room. Cat Stevens' Sad Lisa was my favorite song, bar none, even though it was probably because of my name as much as the early junior high loneliness I was going through when it came out in 1970.

Later, it would seem like an omen that it was playing on the radio at that precise moment. But that night, my mood was in complete opposition to the tune. My boyfriend, George, was coming over for dinner and Sid was out for the night.

I couldn't wait. I hadn't been on a date with George in almost two weeks. We'd been dating off and on for over a year at that point, and the past three months, we'd been going out pretty steadily at least three nights a week. But just after Memorial Day, my work had put a stop to that. George had been getting a little sulky about it, and I could hardly blame him.

But, finally, we were having dinner at the house where Sid and I live. It's Sid's place, and living there had been a condition of working for him because he was really recruiting me for an ultra-top secret organization called Operation Quickline in addition to being his secretary. So, technically, I am his secretary and he is, technically, my wealthy freelance writer boss. But we'd been acting more like teammates both in the Quickline and the writing business. And Sid and both of our businesses were the last things I wanted to be thinking about at that moment. I took a deep breath, lit the two candles, dimmed the lights, then changed the radio station on the wall intercom to a classical one.

The doorbell rang. Motley, my springer spaniel, barked from my bedroom, where he'd been sequestered for the night. Sighing happily, I went to answer the front door and found George Hernandez on the doorstep, tall and broad-shouldered, with black hair, and dark brown sensitive eyes.

"Hi," I said.

"Do you look gorgeous," George said, grinning.

I was wearing a nice little flowered chiffon dress that bared my shoulders. George had on a nice sports jacket over an open Oxford shirt with dress jeans. He also had one hand behind his back. His grin changed to a shy smile. He brought his hand around to his front and presented me with a bouquet of red, long-stemmed roses.

"For you," he said. "Even though they are not nearly as beautiful as you are."

I blushed. "George! Thank you. You're so sweet."

I reached up and kissed him. We stood there, just necking, for several minutes.

I finally untangled myself. "I'd better get these in some water. Come on."

"Great. When's dinner?" He followed me down the hall, past the dining room to the kitchen.

"Right away. It's all ready. I just have to bring it in. Oh, and I sent Conchetta home a bit early."

Conchetta is the housekeeper. She works from ten a.m. to six p.m. weekdays and that is it. She would have been heading home at right about that time, but since Sid had left early, I really wanted to make up the previous two weeks to George and have the house to ourselves.

Motley let out another bark, this time, his pathetic one.

“Where’s Motley?” George asked as I got a vase from the cupboard.

“In my room.” I filled the vase with water and put the roses into it. “He’s such a nuisance when he’s begging at the table.”

[I notice that you did not point out that the only time Motley begged was when George came to dinner, and that only happened because George kept feeding him at the table even though you kept telling George not to over and over again. - SEH]

After getting the roses in the vase and handing the vase to George, I pulled the main course from the oven. Conchetta had made a gorgeous braised brisket for us, along with roasted potatoes. A pan with creamed spinach was waiting on the stove with the serving dish next to it. A salad waited in the fridge.

I sent George ahead of me to the dining room so that I could get everything onto the wooden service cart. When I wheeled the loaded cart in, George was still standing next to the table with the vase in his hands.

“Where do you want these?” he asked.

“Why not at that end of the table?” I said, pointing at the empty chairs on the side away from where I’d set our plates.

George did as I asked, then looked around. “Your boss isn’t around, is he?”

“Sid left around four-thirty,” I replied, the relief heavy in my voice. “The doctor officially pronounced him cured and clean and he’s out celebrating.”

“The poor girl”

I chuckled. “Angelique didn’t seem to think so. I talked to her this morning and she seemed to be looking forward to it.”

George made a point of seating me and I couldn’t help sighing as I sat down.

“Tired?” he asked after we said grace.

“Yeah. I’ve been running around all day.”

“Doing what?”

“Research. What else?”

I wasn’t going to tell him what I’d really been doing. George didn’t know about Operation Quickline. Actually, no one does except the people who are in it and a few select liaisons. What we mostly do is get documents from one point to another, documents that are so sensitive and valuable that they need to be hand-carried rather than risk postal services losing them. But every now and then, the FBI gets a hold of something a little too hot to handle, so we get to deal with it.

What had been keeping me busy those previous two weeks was just that. The winter before, it had been discovered that there was a leak somewhere in one of the West Coast FBI offices. It’s a little hard to send in undercover agents when your target can track who those agents are. However, we’d caught a break in May. Someone, I don’t know who, had discovered that a certain attache to the Rumanian consulate in Los Angeles was working as somebody’s handler or contact. There were phone taps on the consulate phones and possibly in the man’s home, but he was far too cagey to use those phones for anything other than consulate business or personal stuff.

So, since Quickline doesn’t supposedly exist, we had been asked to keep a tail on him in the hopes that he’d lead us to his contact. But there were two problems. The main one was that he was a diplomat and if we got caught tailing him, it would get really sticky diplomatically. So, we couldn’t stick that closely to him. The other was that even a civilian can spot that kind of

surveillance unless you have a whole crew of people changing things up randomly. While we had the crew, the diplomat was really good at what he did and kept ditching us. We were pretty sure he hadn't spotted too many of us because he wasn't doing anything unusual when he ditched us. If anything, he was using the same tactics most of us used when we wanted to be sure no one was following us.

That day had been my turn to tail the diplomat, along with two other people, each from a different line. It had been exhausting, physically grueling work. And while we didn't get ditched that day, we didn't catch the diplomat doing anything questionable. He didn't even go near a payphone, let alone use one. All of his meetings were with people we knew to be innocent because we'd already checked them out. In short, it all felt like a big, fat waste of time, even though we knew it wasn't.

"So, why are you doing so much research?" George asked.

"We've been selling a lot of stories," I said with a shrug. "As Sid says, we have to grab the work when we get it."

"But he doesn't need to work," said George, reasonably enough.

Sid had inherited the larger part of his money. Freelance writing does not pay that well, trust me.

"I know. But he needs something to keep him busy." I grimaced. "You know what he's been like these past three weeks."

I could see George biting his tongue, and it was justified. About three weeks before, Sid had been exposed to a little social disease. He was really careful, and it has only happened one other time since I'd come to him. But you can't fool around as much as he does and not pick up something. [Christ, the things we did before AIDS - SEH] He'd had to wait to fool around for a week and a half to not spread it. But just as that week and a half was up, he'd developed symptoms, which meant another week and a half of antibiotics and no sex. Which meant an incredibly grumpy Sid. Fortunately, he had kept me up to date on what was going on and tried to keep to himself. But it did mean that the tailing job and the research for the freelance business were Godsend of the highest order. The only thing worse was the day before and that morning. With light at the end of the tunnel and a date for that night, Sid began teasing me. It wasn't mean, but it was really the pits and almost worse than the grumpiness.

"Look," I continued. "I really do not want to be talking about Sid or work right now."

George smiled.

We finished dinner, then moved to the rumpus room to talk and watch a movie on the TV. Only we ended up necking. I got out a bottle of wine from the wet bar and we cuddled up in the bean bag chairs, sipping our wine and chatting comfortably, and then kissing.

Maybe it was the wine. I don't drink a lot, never have and especially not as a member of Quickline. Maybe it was because I was so tired. I also think it was because I was so fed up with Sid. Anyway, when George asked me to marry him, I didn't even think about it. I said yes.

Needless to say, the necking got a lot more intense and just barely on the side of decent.

"Well, well, well," cut in a familiar voice.

I jumped, bumped my head into George's nose, then scrambled back.

"Sid!" I glared at him.

He was standing in the doorway, grinning. He's a very handsome man, with dark, wavy hair, a cleft chin, and piercing blue eyes that, at that moment, were twinkling with mischief. He's not a big man - just under average height. He may be slender, but it's all perfectly proportioned. That night, he had on an off-white linen jacket, a pink broadcloth shirt and tie, and khaki dress slacks.

“Hello, George.” Sid stepped behind the bar. “Nice to see you again.”

“Hello, Sid,” George replied in a tone that was unusually genial for his interactions with Sid. “I hear you’re feeling better.”

I winced as Sid chuckled lecherously.

“Much better.” He sighed and bent down behind the bar to open the little refrigerator there. He popped back up. “Lisa, did you take my Chablis?”

“There wasn’t a note,” I said, taking a sip. Since the rumpus room was considered open space in the house, anything in that fridge was fair game unless there was a note on it. Only we often forgot to write the notes. “Which is what you said last month when you ripped off my amaretto.”

“I told you I’d buy you a new bottle.”

“Do you see it there?”

“Alright, alright. Put it on my list. I’ll have to make do with the riesling.” He set the bottle on the edge of the bar, then reached up to get two glasses off the overhead rack. He picked up the bottle, swung around to the door of the room, then turned back to George and me, a not-so-innocent smile on his face. “You two behave yourselves now. Remember, necking is like playing with fire.”

“Sid, shut up,” I growled.

George laughed. “Sid, I have every right to neck with my fiancée.”

Sid, who had already turned to leave, stopped and slowly turned back. He looked at me, utterly bewildered.

“Your fiancée?” he asked.

“Yep.” George squeezed my shoulders protectively. “Lisa and I are getting married.”

“Hm.” Sid looked at me. “Wedding bells on the brain.”

He had tried to warn me this was coming and I had refused to believe him.

“Sid,” I said softly.

“This is quite a surprise.”

“It is to me, too,” I said softly.

“Well, that’s some consolation.” Sid forced a smile. “Congratulations.”

He left. I glared at George.

“George, why did you have to tell him?”

“He’s got to know. You were planning another way?”

“I hadn’t even thought that far. I guess I wanted to break it to him gently.”

George shrugged. “It’s not like you two are going together.”

“But he is a very close friend.”

“I think it’s better this way. Everything up front, no sweat.”

“I guess maybe you’re right.” I snuggled up next to him, laying my head on his broad shoulder.

This man was going to be my husband. I was going to spend the rest of my life with him. We would be having sex together. A major spasm of doubt took hold in me. I looked up into George’s brown eyes and pushed the doubt aside.

Later that night, after George had gone home, I thought about it some more. There was no doubt that I loved the man. I kept thinking about it, and the more I did, the more I convinced myself that marrying him was the thing to do.

The next morning, Sid didn’t show up for our morning run. We run six days a week. I loathe it, but it is important to stay fit when you’re in the spy business. It was pretty unusual for Sid to

skip it, although I didn't question it. I just went back to bed for some extra sleep. When I finally got up, Angelique Carter was at the breakfast table, looking very sleepy and wearing Sid's bathrobe.

In addition to being one of Sid's more frequent girlfriends, Angelique and I are good friends, too. She works at the FBI, not as an agent, but as the civilian secretary to Henry James, who is an agent and public information officer. He's also Sid's and my immediate supervisor for Operation Quickline. Angelique knows nothing about that, however.

"Morning," I mumbled.

"Morning." She yawned. She's tall, with very full brown hair.

I blinked and went into the kitchen to get some cereal and milk. I brought my bowl into the breakfast room and plopped down next to Angelique, who was eating fruit salad.

"Where's Sid?" I asked after a couple minutes.

"Still conked out," Angelique said. "I tried to wake him for breakfast."

"He doesn't wake up."

"I know."

Moodily, we both continued eating.

"By the way," Angelique said. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." I looked at her, a little surprised. "Sid told you?"

"Mm-hmm." Angelique yawned again. "We spent a lot of time just talking last night."

"You're kidding."

Communication is not Sid's thing. We communicate really well because we have to, but I have never known him to spend much time talking with his girlfriends.

"Not about you and George," Angelique continued. "Anything but that. Still, he's bugged."

"Huh." I thought that one over. "Well, George was awfully abrupt about telling him. It's kind of too bad."

"Not for me, it isn't." Angelique smiled at her fruit salad. "I'm behind this one-hundred percent."

"You haven't even met George."

"I don't care as long as he's marrying you and Sid isn't."

"Sid would never get married, let alone to me."

Angelique just looked at me. "Come off it, Lisa. I know where my competition is. You just marry your friend and stay out of Sid's bedroom. With any luck at all, Sid will be so broken up, I'll be able to move in permanently.

"With any luck," I said, grumpily. "You'll probably last the usual two weeks, then Sid will get bored, you'll get hurt, and you'll move out."

It was the usual way it happened when Angelique moved in, which she did every now and then. Actually, it was the usual way it happened when any of Sid's girlfriends moved in.

"I don't know," Angelique said. "We did do a lot of talking last night. I think that's the key."

"That's it alright," I said, trying to figure out how I felt about Sid talking to someone else. Not that it made any difference. "You can have him and good luck."

"Thanks." Angelique stretched and got up. "I'm going back to bed. As soon as you set a date, let me know. I want to come dance at your wedding."

I watched her go. Poor Angelique has been in love with Sid since I've known her. Sid likes her as a friend and took her to bed with him more often than any other woman that I knew of, but that was it. Angelique decided she'd take what she could get. Somewhere along the line, she had

gotten into her head that if I ever moved into Sid's bedroom, Sid would pretty much stick with me. I was skeptical. Granted, Sid and I are very close friends. But Sid is about the last person in the world who could handle a permanent relationship, even without strict fidelity. He is just not the settled in, married type. And the only way I'd ever move into his bedroom would be if he married me first.

That definitely wasn't going to happen, I reminded myself. I was going to marry George, sweet, innocent, bear-like George. I smiled and went to call my sister with the good news.

If Angelique was enthused by my engagement, Mae was less so.

"That's that boy you've been dating a lot lately," she said.

"He's hardly a boy, Mae. He's six feet tall and two years older than me.

"I suppose. How's Sid taking it?"

"George told him last night when Sid surprised us. Sid seemed pretty shocked."

"I can imagine. You've been screaming you didn't want to get married for so long."

"Well, I changed my mind. I love George. He's very sweet and cuddly and he loves me very much."

"I'm sure he does. Bring him with you tomorrow for dinner. I want to meet him. Is Sid coming?"

"I don't know, Mae." I fidgeted with the phone's cord. "He's got a girlfriend with him and I think she's staying the weekend."

"Have him bring her."

"Okay. Listen. I've got to call Mama and Daddy. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Mae said good-bye and hung up. I just held down, then released, the switchhook and punched in the numbers for my parents' place in South Lake Tahoe. Mama was ecstatic when I told her the news.

"That is the best news that I've heard in years!" she squealed, her South Florida accent getting even stronger. "Bill! Come talk to Lisle! She just got engaged!"

Daddy got on the line and asked if I was happy.

"Of course, I'm happy, Daddy," I said

"Well, Lisle," he said, quietly. "I've always said it's your life. I just wish I could have met him first. But if you like him, then I'm sure he's a fine man."

"Thanks, Daddy," I said, sighing with relief.

For Daddy, that was wholehearted approval. Mae said later that Daddy was just glad it wasn't Sid. Sid and Daddy were getting along better than they used to, but they are not friends by any stretch. I heard the click as my mother picked up an extension.

"Now, Lisle, when's the date?"

"Mama, we just got engaged last night," I said, laughing.

"Well, you just hurry up and set one. Maybe I'd better fly down so we can get the plans started right."

"Fly down?" My heart stopped and I checked my watch. Sid's son, Nick, was due in at the airport in just about an hour. "Mama, I just remembered something, and I've gotta run. Don't fly down just yet. We'll talk about it when the date is set. I've got to go. Now."

"Alright, honey. Talk to you later."

I hung up and rushed out of my room, almost bumping into Sid in the hallway. He was fully dressed in a tan linen blazer, dress slacks, plaid shirt, and tie.

"Oh, there you are," I said. "I was just going to go find you. One of us has to get Nick from the airport."

“I’m going,” Sid said blandly. “If Angelique wakes up, tell her where I am and that I’ll be right back.”

“Alright.”

Sid left. I sighed. He was acting completely indifferent, which meant he was very bugged. Nick was going to be spending the week with us, as he was out of school for summer vacation. I hoped Nick’s presence would distract Sid a little.

Sid and Nick had met very belatedly when Rachel, Nick’s mother, decided that Nick was old enough to know his father. Sid hadn’t seen Rachel since Nick’s conception twelve years before. Rachel didn’t tell Sid she was pregnant, so when they showed up on Sid’s doorstep this past spring, Sid was perturbed, to say the least. He hadn’t wanted to acknowledge Nick, and Nick, surprisingly, hadn’t necessarily wanted a father. However, the two eventually resigned themselves to each other and were getting very close. They occasionally needle the other that there isn’t any real proof that the two are related, which is a little ridiculous. They look just like each other.

About twenty minutes after Sid had gone, a buzzing on my hip startled the heck out of me. It took me a moment to realize what it was. About a month before, all the Quickline agents had been assigned pagers. I know. It had taken so long because there was a problem with getting a secure radio channel. It’s why we don’t use radios to communicate. Anyone with the right receiver can pick up the signal. However, they finally got some super-secure way to scramble codes and the like on the pagers, and so we had them. I had to admit, they were convenient. No more calling a contact twenty times before I could schedule a drop. If a pick up had to be changed at the last minute, all I had to do was send the number of a nearby payphone as my call back number, and I could get things changed. The problem was, I was having a tough time getting used to having the darned thing on me all the time.

I hurried to Sid’s office, checking for Angelique as I went. I didn’t see her, but I slid the door to Sid’s office closed and locked it just in case. I pulled the pager from my shorts’ waistband and then dialed the number on the read-out from the Quickline extension. Sid has multi-line phones in just about every room in the house, but only the phone in the office has the line for our hidden business.

A woman picked up on the other end. I gave the caller code and she returned the receiver.

“I’ve got a priority two, code one pick up for you,” she told me.

I held back my groan. All Quickline business is given a priority and a code, with levels between one and five. Priority is obvious, but the code level indicates how much contact you can have with the person dropping the item. Code one means no contact at all, and you sometimes have to pull off some real sleight of hand to keep an enemy from finding the item. Code five, you can take the item directly and hang around and chat. Priority ones were absolute emergencies and relatively rare.

“Where do you want to do this?” I asked.

She named a drugstore that was actually pretty close to me. I agreed even though the timing would be tight.

“Okay. Got it. In twenty,” I said.

“Good. I think I’m being watched.”

I hung up and this time really did groan. But there was nothing I could do. I left a note for Angelique on the breakfast room table to let her know where Sid and I were, then grabbed my monster purse and headed out.

I spotted my contact browsing the greeting cards but couldn't see anyone else in the drugstore. I made a show of checking my list, then headed for the aspirin. I checked a few of the bottles. The green plastic wallet was next to the extra-large bottle of the store brand. I did what anyone would do upon finding a wallet. I opened it up to look for some I.D. and in doing so, managed to slip a register receipt out and into my purse. I still didn't see anybody, but that didn't mean someone didn't see me.

I took the wallet to the register, letting them know that I'd found it, paid for my aspirin and left. My contact had already gone, but as I passed the greeting card aisle, a man with dark hair was rifling through the cards my contact had been looking at.

When I got back to the house, Sid and Nick had just arrived. Nick slammed into me with a big hug, then ran off to put away his suitcase.

"Where did you go?" Sid asked.

"Priority two," I said. "I was just going to the office to read it."

Sid followed me there, and I got out the microdot reader. It looks just like one of those single slide viewers that you can pick up at a camera store, only the magnification is a lot stronger.

"The worst of it is, she thought she was being followed, and I think I made the guy," I said.

Sid sighed. "Just what we need. Another line down."

The previous spring, we'd lost one of our distribution lines thanks to that leak in the FBI offices.

"We don't know that it is," I pointed out. "People pick up tails all the time."

Sid nodded and we turned our attention to the magnifier. The drop was a description of the man they suspected of being the leak.

"Well, there's a help," Sid grumbled.

I couldn't blame him. The target was supposedly average-sized, with brown hair, brown eyes, and no distinguishing marks, apart from a scar on his left hand.

"I suppose it's something." I thought back to the man rifling through the cards back at the pharmacy. "And it wasn't the guy I saw this morning. He had black hair."

Sid shrugged and went off to find Angelique so that we could all go to lunch. When we got back, Nick followed me into my outer room. I have a little suite, including bathroom, near the kitchen. The outer room I use as my sewing room. It was originally supposed to be a sitting room with a mini-office. I did leave the couch, but that's jammed up against the far wall. I have two sewing desks under the one window, one with my regular machine and one with the new serger. Sid had actually talked me into buying a top-of-the-line model that used five threads and sewed the seam, as well as finished it.

"What's that?" Nick asked, pointing to it.

"My new serger," I told him. "It helps me sew faster."

I shook out some dark brown heavy twill that would eventually become a pair of shorts and laid it on the cutting board that took up half the floor space in the room.

"You already sew an awful lot," Nick complained.

"It's good therapy," I said. "Lord knows, I need it around here."

Nick laughed, pushing his glasses up on his nose. He was just as near-sighted as Sid, but Sid wore contact lenses.

"What's with Dad?" he asked suddenly.

I frowned and continued folding the fabric, then smoothing it out as I evened up the edges.

“What do you mean?” I asked slowly, hoping Nick didn’t mean what was going on with Angelique. I had assumed she and Sid were up to something again, but didn’t know and didn’t want to know.

“He’s acting funny. I thought the doctor said his V.D. was all gone.”

“He’s, um, had a mild shock. You remember George, right?”

“Your boyfriend.” Nick rolled his eyes with the disdain only an eleven-year-old can muster.

“Yes. He proposed to me last night.”

“Like, marry him?”

“Yes.” I made sure my edges were even, trying not to watch Nick.

“No kidding. Dad always said he was going to. I bet you set him straight.”

I took a deep breath. “It depends on what you mean by that, but I accepted.”

“That big old goop?”

“Nick! I love him!” I put my hands on my hips.

Nick shrugged. “You’re copping out.

“Marriage is not a cop-out.” I went back to laying my pattern pieces on my fabric, looking for the best fit.

“Whatever. Dad must be really jealous. He’s got the hots for you.”

“Your dad has the hots for every female he’s ever met.”

“True, but you’re not just any female.”

“Whatever,” I grumbled. I adjusted a piece or two, then looked around for my measuring tape. “If he’s jealous, that’s his problem. I’m marrying George and I’m very happy about it.

“You don’t sound very happy.”

“Well, I am.”

I found my tape measure where it belonged, hanging next to my machine, and went back to laying out my shorts. Nick watched without comment. I glanced at him and wondered who I was trying to convince.