

A romantic winter scene featuring a couple in formal attire standing on a wooden bridge over a stream. The trees and branches are heavily laden with snow, creating a soft, white atmosphere. The couple is positioned in the middle ground, looking towards each other. The stream flows through the foreground, with snow-covered banks and rocks. The overall mood is serene and festive.

Twenty-five Days to Christmas

An Our Girl FanFiction

Miss Piony

25 Days to Christmas

November 29, 2018

An AU Christmas story evolving around a Christmas Eve wedding at a countryside hotel in seasonal fluffy spirit, including as many OG characters as possibly can fit in.

As you may have noticed, I've developed an addiction to writing fanfic. Another weakness of mine this time of year is romantic Christmas movies, everything from great "classics" like 'Love actually' to substantially lower-quality Netflix productions. I can put up with them being totally cheesy and predictable as long as they leave a warm fuzzy feeling. I just love it, and my husband sighs because he thinks I'm watching crap – lol. My favourites are those that begin like many separate stories which weave together somehow.

This is intended to be a story in that spirit with one chapter for every day until Christmas. Actually, I had planned to take a break from writing in December but now when this idea emerged, I can't resist it. I can't promise for sure I manage to write them real time, but I'll try between juggling work, family and Christmas preparations (and watching Christmas movies). I realise I start a bit early but that increases the chance of finishing by Christmas.

I hope you share my weakness for fluff this time of year, I already know you share my weakness for Our Girl.

x

CHAPTER 1: FRIDAY, DEC 1 - MOLLY 5

CHAPTER 2: FRIDAY, DEC 1 - CHARLES 14

CHAPTER 3: SATURDAY, DEC 2 - GEORGIE 29

CHAPTER 4: SUNDAY, DEC 3 - ELVIS 39

CHAPTER 5: SUNDAY, DEC 3 - CHARLES 50

CHAPTER 6: SUNDAY, DEC 3 - MOLLY 61

CHAPTER 7: MONDAY, DEC 4 - CHARLES 82

CHAPTER 8: TUESDAY, DEC 5 - GEORGIE 95

CHAPTER 9: WEDNESDAY, DEC 6 - MOLLY 105

CHAPTER 10: THURSDAY, DEC 7 - RAB 116

CHAPTER 11: FRIDAY, DEC 8 – MOLLY & GEORGIE 128

CHAPTER 12: SATURDAY, DEC 9 – MOLLY, GEORGIE & CHARLES 142

CHAPTER 13: SATURDAY, 9 DEC - MOLLY 159

CHAPTER 14: SUNDAY, DEC 10 – CHARLES & MOLLY 176

CHAPTER 15: MONDAY, DEC 11 - ELVIS 186

CHAPTER 16: TUESDAY, DEC 12 - BONES 197

CHAPTER 17: WEDNESDAY, DEC 13 - MOLLY 205

CHAPTER 18: THURSDAY, DEC 14 – MOLLY & CHARLES 217

CHAPTER 19: FRIDAY, DEC 15 - MONK 232

CHAPTER 20: SATURDAY, DEC 16 – CHARLES & MOLLY 244

CHAPTER 21: SUNDAY, DEC 17 - MOLLY 252

CHAPTER 22: MONDAY, DEC 18 - GEORGIE 268

CHAPTER 23: TUESDAY, DEC 19 - BRAINS 278

CHAPTER 24: WEDNESDAY, 20 DEC – CHARLES & MOLLY 288

CHAPTER 25: THURSDAY, DEC 21 - MOLLY 304

CHAPTER 26: FRIDAY, DEC 22 - MAISIE 315

CHAPTER 27: SATURDAY, DEC 23 - MOLLY 327

CHAPTER 28: SUNDAY, DEC 24 – ALL 345

CHAPTER 29: SUNDAY, DEC 24, PART II – CHARLES & MOLLY 367

CHAPTER 30: SUNDAY, DEC 24, PART III - ALL 384

CHAPTER 31: SUNDAY, DEC 24, PART IV – BRAINS 404

CHAPTER 32: SUNDAY, DEC 24, PART V – ALL	410
CHAPTER 33: SUNDAY, DEC 24, PART VI - ALL	418
CHAPTER 34: CHRISTMAS DAY - MOLLY	434
EPILOGUE: DECEMBER 26 - MOLLY	458
CHAPTER 36: P.S.	479

Chapter 1: Friday, Dec 1 - Molly

I criss-crossed between puddles, simultaneously trying to avoid colliding with the many early Christmas shoppers filling the street. December 1, and half the city already seemed to be on the hunt for Christmas presents. A bit previous, if you asked me. I always bought my gifts last minute.

Not a single snow-flake in sight, though, and *that* was about time. I would love some snow instead of the cold rain that now was drizzling. Almost invisible, yet there and it slowly made me wetter and wetter, as it was impossible to use an umbrella in the crowd without poking someone's eye out. Despite the Christmas lights hanging above, hundreds of them across the street and the beautifully decorated shop windows, it was difficult to get *that* feeling yet, the feeling of excited Christmas joy. Maybe it was not due to the lack of snow, maybe it is only because I'm not a child any longer. Maybe this is how Christmas will feel for the rest of my grown-up life. I hope not, I want to feel giddy like that again.

Finally, I reached my destination – a café where I was to meet my sister Bella. I hurried inside and tried to shake off the water in manner of a dog, but with limited success and I still felt damp and cold as I sank down in a chair by the table where Bella was already seated.

"There you are, I was beginning to despair."

"All these people, it's driving me nuts. And the rain! It's December today – where's the freakin' snow?"

She laughed.

"I guess we should be glad if we get *any* even on Christmas Eve. I hope we do, then it will be the perfect winter wedding."

"It will be the perfect wedding, snow or no snow, Bella. I'm 100% sure about that. Now I need a large cuppa before anything else, or I'll freeze to death."

"And we can't have that, can we? That would leave me without my maid of honour and that would be disaster. I probably wouldn't get through the day. I'll get you one."

My younger sister, Bella, is getting married on Christmas Eve. One could be surprised at that she has managed to make people break up from their usual Christmas traditions, but everyone loves Bella, so I think nearly everyone they invited has accepted. It will not be a small modest wedding, but a huge one in an exclusive country-side hotel, the kind we only could dream of when we were kids growing up in Newham. No wonder she is excited beyond belief, but of course not only because of the hotel and other superficial stuff, but because she is truly marrying her soulmate, Matthew.

Bella and I come from a large family, where I'm the eldest and she the second one of six siblings. We grew up in half-misery in a small council house in East Ham, with an alcoholic father who was unemployed for much of our childhood and a mum who always was knackered from taking care of all us kids and being pregnant with the next one, while trying to keep everything together. She and my Nan were the anchor points, as dad constantly ran off to the pub spending the household money and leaving little left for necessities like food and clothes.

Early on, Bella and I both knew we wanted something else, that we had to find a way to get ourselves a better life than this. At night, we used to lie in our shared bed and whisper fantasies of our fantastic future dreamlives and how we would achieve them. As little girls, it was fairy tales we made up but over the years they became more adapted to reality, not including so many princesses and princes. Our plans to reach the dreams also became more concrete and, in the end, we had done quite well. Bella had even found her prince, I think I'm still waiting for mine, but both of us have managed to leave Newham behind.

We had both realised that being good in school offered a way to a life different from mum's, so we fought hard and helped each other with homework as there was not really anyone else helping us, at least not at home. A kind teacher thought she had found two tiny pearls among the many pupils that were completely disinterested in school and helped us, first with the studies, then to get scholarship to a better school and it went on from there. In the end Bella decided to be a teacher and I studied medicine. Initially I had intended to train for becoming a nurse, but my biology teacher in upper secondary school encouraged me to aim higher.

"Nothing wrong with being a nurse, Molly, they're a very much needed skill, but if you'd like to be a doctor I don't see why you should limit yourself. You're brilliant, never doubt that."

So, with that encouragement, a lot of stamina, the fortune to land a scholarship for uni and getting accepted to med school, and then after working hard, I now, years later found myself actually being a doctor. For the past six months, I had been in a hospital as part of my two-year foundation training. A real hospital where they

allowed me to practice as a doctor! I still could not believe it sometimes, thinking that someone would find out I was a fraud any day. I had to pinch myself to make sure I was not dreaming – but I really was a doctor.

Bella's studies to become a teacher were shorter, so she had already been working a couple of years in a primary school. During uni and her first years working, she shared a room with a new-found best friend from her class, a girl named Ginny Geddings. Over the years, Bella got to know Ginny's older brother, Matthew, too and they also got along really well. So well, that Matt finally summoned his courage and asked Bella out on a date and since that day they were inseparable. He had proposed a year ago and now they were getting married.

The Geddings family were wealthy. I'm not sure exactly how wealthy, but enough for his parents to arrange this huge country wedding and insist paying for it. They all loved Bella, completely ignored her simple background and knew she was not into Matt for his money, so there was no weirdness about them arranging the wedding. They wanted to do it as a gift to Matt and Bella. However, like me with my Christmas presents, Bella is a bit of a late planner, even if she likes to plan, and there were still a lot of things to arrange before the wedding could take place. As only twenty-four days remained to Christmas Eve, time was beginning to run out. She was starting to get slightly stressed and had asked to meet today for some planning and advice. After discussing the seating and menu, she went on.

"On Wednesday I need you to come with me to the bridal shop for the final dress fitting and help me decide on veil or not."

"I thought you had decided you wanted veil already?"

"I'm not sure anymore. I have to try it again."

We had already spent countless hours in the bridal shop, but I loved my little sister so of course I would come with her.

"Then there's the cake tasting."

"Isn't it enough if you and Matt agree it tastes good?"

"It has to *look* good too and he doesn't have any sense of taste for such things."

"You may have a point there."

Matt was an army officer, captain, and despite his somewhat posh upbringing, he was more in his comfort zone roughing it on muddy training exercises, than selecting between posh cakes in a fancy bakery.

"Will there be a hen party?", Bella abruptly asked.

Oh, the little minx was trying to ambush me into telling her something. Of course, there would be, but I did not intend to disclose anything.

"I don't know."

"Of course, you do, you're the maid of honour."

"Okay, I know, but I won't tell."

She looked very annoyed. Bella does not like surprises much, she likes to be in control and a surprise hen would be far from that. The thought of being kidnapped

and put through things she had not planned herself terrified her. She sighed, vexed but defeated, changing subject.

"Matt and I have the most amazing idea."

I nodded, so she would tell me, thinking it had something to do with the decorations, the food or something like it.

"We thought it would be awesome if you and the best man sang a duet."

I nearly choked on my tea, then burst into fits of laughter.

"You *do* remember how I sing?"

I could sing all right, but absolutely not fantastic and I only did it in public after one too many beers.

"You think too low of yourself, you have quite a beautiful voice."

"Not beautiful enough to sing solo for some hundred wedding guests!"

"You won't sing solo, it will be a duet with the best man. A love song, I thought."

There she revealed herself. '*I thought*', of course this was her idea, not Matt's.

"I really don't want this, Bells. And *he* probably won't agree to it anyway."

I know how persistent my sister is, but pulling that card gave me some hope to get out of this.

"Matt has already asked him, and he said yes", she said triumphantly. "You must too. Please, please, please Molly, do this for me. It would be so cute with the maid of honour and the best man signing a duet. Matt and I would adore you for always."

I wonder what wanker of a guy it was who had agreed to this and put me in this spot.

"You can choose any love song you like."

As if that would make things much better. She looked at me with pleading eyes and I knew that if this was what she really wanted for her wedding day I would not be able to deny her that. I would make sure it would happen late during the reception though, so I could drink plenty of champagne before. Or maybe whisky would be better, that might loosen up the vocal chords a bit in addition to dampening my inhibitions.

"Okay, I'll do it", I said with a sigh.

She jumped up from her chair and gave me the biggest hug.

"You're the best sister in the world. This will be so great."

I was sure the wedding would be great, the singing not so much.

"I'll get you his mobile number so you two can get in contact and rehearse."

She was really serious about this, 'rehearse'. Did that mean I would have to spend time with this bloke and sing already before the wedding? Apparently, she thought so. I was already beginning to feel the pressure rising, what had I just accepted?

"You think it's necessary, really?"

"You need to agree on which song, of course, and Charles is apparently a good singer, so if you feel unsure about it, it will be great to practise together with him."

"Charles?!", I snorted.

Now it made perfect sense that he had accepted singing. With that name, I could picture him singing in a church choir, dressed in a knitted jumper with Christmas motive and well-combed hair. No wait, he would be a bit bald, and probably chubby. And I would have to sing a love song duet with him. If I was unlucky, he would fancy me, and I would have him as a shadow for the rest of the evening. Eeeek! Yes, whisky would definitely be required to live through this.

"I've only met him a few times but he's quite nice actually. Matt and he go way back, since they went to the same boarding school."

Matt had managed to get out as a normal and nice person on the other side of that experience, but I felt quite sure this *Charles* would turn out not to have been as fortunate. Beside the knitted Christmas jumper and baldness, he would most likely be a stuck-up twat wanting us to sing opera or something.

"Bella, I do this because I love you terribly much, but don't expect me to like this Charles-guy, it's too much to ask."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"If you say so. I'm happy as long as you sing a song."

"I'll be very happy once I have delivered it."

I glanced at my watch.

"I need to get going now. I start at the hospital in half an hour, evening shift."

"Then I'll see you on Wednesday for the dress fitting."

As I took the metro to work, I already regretted my promise bitterly. Why could I never resist Bella? It was not the first time it had gotten me into trouble and it probably would not be the last either. I might as well take the bull by its horns and send that *Charles* a text message later this evening to get this madness started.

A/N: Thank you for the very warm reception of the first chapter! I don't think anything I've written before got so much immediate response, so it seems I'm not the only one in the mood for an OG Christmas story.

Already adjusting my plan a bit, as I realised that it will not be only one chapter per the 25 days of the story. That would make it difficult to fit the pieces of the story together when I want things happening to different characters simultaneously. In the end that probably only means more chapters, so maybe not bad news.

X

Chapter 2: Friday, Dec 1 - Charles

Leaning against a Land Rover, the two men gazed out over the moorland, more autumn grey than winter white even though it now was December. They shuddered despite their winter adapted outfits, noses and cheeks red from the cold as they had been outdoors for hours. The humidity had a way of creeping in between the layers of clothes, together with the icy wind creating the impression that it was colder than the thermometer indicated.

There were some similarities between the two, both were dressed in army camouflage gear, had dark hair, brown eyes and were undeniably very handsome young men, but there the likeness ended. For someone who did not know them, the shorter of the two, captain Geddings would seem more approachable. His

features were friendly and relaxed, his straight short-cut hair giving him a boyishly mischievous appearance, reminding of a monchichi. In contrast, the only boyish feature of the nearly four inches taller major James was his unruly curly hair, while everything else about him seemed sharp somehow, his looks as well as his body language. His intensive dark brown eyes, his brow creased as he focused, the chiselled chin and high cheekbones, his whole statue as he stood with arms crossed over his chest. There was nothing soft about him. Yet under the surface, the two officers shared the same sense of humour and were not only colleagues but best friends ever since childhood.

Major James raised his binoculars to watch as another section came into their field of vision.

"That's the last one coming in, exercise is finished."

The platoon's field exercise had lasted a week and despite that the two officers would never admit it to the men under their command, they were both longing to get away from the cold and hit a hot shower. It had been a successful exercise but even these hardened soldiers were tired of the weather forces after a week in ice-cold rain.

"About fucking time, my feet are freezing. Some tea?"

James nodded and Geddings poured him a mug from a thermos.

Matt Geddings was eager to get this over and done with and get home to his fiancée who he was missing desperately. However, he also knew that time was now running out and he no longer could postpone something he dreaded slightly. Even if he and

Charles James were friends since forever, and Charles soon was to be the best man at his wedding, he was also his superior ranking officer and Matt was uncomfortable asking him what he now was about to. On the other hand, he knew that his girlfriend Bella would be very disappointed and annoyed if he returned home without a positive answer, and even more so if he had not asked at all. Lying about it was not an option, partly because he did not like the idea of lying to her, partly because she anyway was like a Bloodhound who could smell a lame excuse from miles' distance. He had no choice but to get to it. It was like choosing between plague and cholera and he chose the least bad option, which was doing as Bella wanted.

"Charles, you know that Bella is a very stubborn woman, right?"

Charles turned to him, putting down the binoculars, reaching for the mug that Matt offered him.

"So, I've heard", he smirked. "What with her stubbornness, are you having second thoughts?"

He took a sip of the hot drink and felt it warming his insides.

"No, nothing like that, but Bella's got this idea for the wedding and I need to run it by you."

Matt felt his cheeks heating despite the cold.

"By me? Surely, she must have others that can give better wedding advice than me. Especially as my own ended in disaster. Well, not the wedding itself but the marriage."

He turned his gaze towards the distant horizon and seemed lost in memories until Matt cleared his throat to bring him back.

"I need to run it by you, because the idea involves you..." he squirmed uncomfortably, silently cursing that Bella was putting him through this.

"That sounds dangerous. Don't keep me in suspense, what marvellous idea has your lovely wife-to-be come up with this time?"

Matt often shared the small torments that Bella put him through with Charles. She had him wrapped around her finger and so it happened, that he often found himself in situations he was not 100% comfortable with to fulfil the wishes of his girlfriend. It made him a happy man, because he loved when she was happy, and she did so much for him too, but it was still good for his mental health and masculine confidence to at times share some frustration with another man. Charles on his end always found this very amusing. He found it impossible to comprehend that any man could be as spellbound by a woman as Matt by his fiancée. Luckily, she was a lovely woman albeit capricious and he knew that after all she was the best thing that ever had happened to his friend.

"Bella knows that you can sing..."

"When did she ever hear me sing?"

"She didn't, but I might have happened to tell her about when you were goofing around singing for the lads as entertainment on tour. Apparently, she remembered. When she wants to she has a memory like an elephant, even if she is very absent-minded when that is more convenient. "

"I don't see how you found it fitting to share that with her", Charles muttered, feeling slightly embarrassed. Some things that happened on tour, one wished would stay on tour.

"It was before she knew you, she thought you seemed a bit stiff and arrogant and I shared that, so she'd know there are other sides to you."

Charles shook his head.

"Stiff and arrogant, glad to hear I made such a great impression on her."

"Well, you know how you can come across when you're not in your best mood. You can seem a bit harsh and distant."

Charles answered only with a frown, wondering if that was really the first impression people got of him. Sometimes he wished he was more like Matt, easier with people who did not know him well.

"Anyway, she knows you can sing...and she got this idea that it would be nice if you and the maid of honour sang a duet together."

Charles snorted out a mouthful of tea.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. Like dead serious."

"The singing on tour was very different from singing something in front of all your wedding guests."

"Yeah, I get that, and I tried to tell her, but she insisted that I asked. Said if you can sing completely sober on tour, it should not be a problem singing slightly drunk on our wedding."

"For fucks sake! I thought my duties would be done once I had delivered you to the altar, but this...What kind of song?"

"What do you think? A love song, naturally."

"Oh, my god, I will be the laughing stock around barracks."

He knew he was not the only one from their regiment who would attend the wedding, so if there was a performance word would get out, without a doubt. He could only too well imagine the smirks that would greet him when returning to work.

"Does it mean you'll do it?"

"Haven't said yes yet, thinking about it. Does *she* want to do it?"

"Who?"

"Who do you think? The maid of honour."

"It's Bella's sister. She'll do anything for her."

Charles sighed and scratched his neck, as if to stall having to give a final answer.

"You will owe me big time, Matt."

"Thanks!" Matt grinned and let out a sigh of relief. "You have just increased my chances of sleeping in the same bed as Bella tonight."

"That's a little bit more information than I need. "

"I can sing at your next wedding in return."

"I don't plan on any more weddings. No more women *at all* right now, they make life too complicated."

Despite the light tone between them, Charles was being serious now.

Matt gave him a sympathetic glance, well-informed about his friend's past.

"How are things with Becs?"

"Icy. Divorce papers are signed now, but we only talk to each other to manage the essentials around Sam."

"I'm sorry we had to invite her to the wedding, but you know Ginny and I have known her even longer than we've known you, and we could not *not* invite her. We had to invite her new bloke too."

"It's fine Matt, really. It's not a war, we're just not very relaxed in each other's company. Not yet, but I hope it'll come. It's not like any of us have had any feelings for each other for a very long time, but even if she has a new man in her life she is

blaming me for not wanting to live my life like she wanted me to, so she stopped loving me. Blaming me for not loving her enough to change. She holds the divorce against me even if she took the initiative. I've not said to her, but I think she's at least partly right. I wanted out before she did, but I postponed dealing with it by going on tour. I see that now."

"It's difficult to imagine that. You're not one for avoiding the difficult otherwise."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess it's different when it's personal, and because we have Sam and I didn't want him to get hurt. In the end he seems to think it's better now too, as Becs and I only were fighting when I was home."

"All well that ends well, right?"

"Yeah, suppose so. I just never thought I'd be a divorcee before I turned thirty-five. It feels like a failure even if I don't miss her. Is that weird?"

Matt shook his head.

"Not really, I guess we all have a picture of how our lives will pan out, but it doesn't always work out like we thought it would. Good thing is you're still young enough to start over."

"I told you, no women right now. Period. I have Sam, I have friends, I have work. That's quite enough."

"If you say so. Anyway, I'll tell Bella it's a yes then."

"A yes?"

"To singing!"

"You can tell her a very reluctant yes. And we get to choose the song ourselves."

"Deal."

"Time to head back. Last section in and exercise finished, no point standing here freezing."

Matt nodded in agreement, they got into the Land Rover and headed back to headquarters.

Later, while driving home, Matt called Bella.

"On my way home now."

"Can't wait to see you. I have dinner and wine waiting for you, and me. Did you talk to him?" she eagerly asked.

"I did."

"And?"

"He accepted. I did as you said and said that Molly already said yes."

"Yay! She said yes when I said he already had."

"You're such a devil in disguise, love", he laughed.

"Sometimes you just have to nudge people in the right direction."

"How often are you nudging me in the right direction?"

"All the time", she giggled.

He snorted at the response, but she ignored it.

"Now just hurry home, I've missed you like crazy."

Obediently, Matt accelerated the car.

Charles arrived home late that evening. Home was right now his parents' house in Bath where he had moved back in after the divorce. He had not gotten around to finding his own place yet. He spent much time at barracks and this house was so big that he had a whole floor to himself, plus his parents were travelling much anyway so it was a convenient solution. Still, it made him feel a bit like a loser to be staying with his parents at this age and in that sense, it was a relief every time he returned to barracks. Living there had other downsides, but all in all it worked out well. Anything was better than sharing a loveless home with Rebecca. His parents were away at some ski resort in Austria and would not return this side of New Year, so without the presence of his mum's disapproving eyes, he just ditched the Bergen in the hallway, peeled off his muddy uniform and headed for the shower. Nothing as good as a hot shower after a freezing cold field exercise.

Afterwards he lighted a fire, made himself some sandwiches and found a cold beer in the fridge and prepared for a relaxing evening, hopefully a complete weekend of relaxation. Suddenly his mobile phone buzzed, alerting him to a new text message.

From: 07340XXXXXX

Hi Charles,

You don't know me but got your number from Bella. I'm her sister Molly, maid of honour. Seems like we're going to sing a duet together :)

He added the number to his contacts, while sighing. What had he gotten himself into? She seemed eager. Maybe she was one of those bridesmaids that would like to be the star of the evening, trying to steal the thunder from the bride and groom. He had seen it before and it always irked him. The wedding day should be all about the couple and their love, not anyone else.

He wrote his answer, could not resist being sarcastic even though it would not come through in text.

From: Charles

An offer too good to be refused. Ecstatic to be singing with you.

From: Molly

Heard you're fantastic singer

From: Charles

I heard so too. You?

From: Molly

Amazing. Just love performing in public

Was she serious? Most likely. Scary.

From: Charles

Then we'll be a perfect match. Love it too. Sing in choir ever Sunday.

He had no reason for writing that, except that it amused him she would believe that.

From: Molly

Perfect. I practice karaoke as often as I can. How do we prepare? Meet up before and rehearse?

Shit, she seemed serious about this. He played along, while imagining this tense perfectionist girl on the other end of the text, afraid of underperforming.

Charles:

We should probably rehearse weekly up to wedding.

The little dots that indicated that she was typing, yet not sending, appeared. She was probably deliberating if once a week was enough. More enough if you asked him, he already regretted suggesting it.

From: Molly

Let's start and see how many times we need. Where are you?

From Charles:

In bath

From: Molly

Sorry, will not bother you more while bathing

He briefly considered if he should abstain from correcting the misunderstanding, so she would leave him alone for tonight, but he did not feel comfortable at the thought that she would believe he had been texting with her while lying naked in the bath.

From: Charles

Not in the bath. I'm in Bath.

From: Molly

Sounds a bit shit.

Was that an attempt of a joke?

From: Molly

Sorry, could not resist. Bath probably very nice, hope you have bubbles ;) Can you come up to London someday soon?

He was still not sure if she had understood he was not bathing but thought it better to just leave it.

Right now, he could only do weekends as he was on duty during the week. He would have a longer permission over Christmas this year, but a few weeks remained until then. Maybe just as well to get this started so he could focus on more important things, like buying Christmas presents and being with Sam the weekends ahead.

From: Charles

Can do this Sunday.

From: Molly

OK. Works for me too. Will send you address where to meet.

From: Charles

OK

From: Molly

Good night

So much for a relaxed weekend. Now he would have to go to London on Sunday instead, to prepare for signing a love song duet he was not the least in the mood for. Bella could not have chosen a worse victim, he thought. A recently divorced man who was not sure he believed in love anymore, and if it did exist he intended to do his best to avoid it, so his life would remain as uncomplicated as possible.

A/N: Again, thanks for all the encouragement! Now time to introduce a few "new" characters in the story and love to hear what you think of it.

X

Chapter 3: Saturday, Dec 2 - Georgie

Georgie laughed so hard her stomach hurt as Molly was telling the story of how Bella had set her up to sing a duet with some chubby wanker in Christmas jumper at the upcoming wedding. Molly was a great storyteller and never spared herself by leaving out any embarrassing details on her own part.

"So, you see I'm bound to make a total arse of myself at this wedding."

"Do you really reckon it will be *that* bad?"

"You know I'm not a very talented singer and before such a big audience I'll probably lose it completely out of nervousness."

"But you said Bella claimed he's a good singer?"

"Yeah, and then I texted him last night and he lived up to every expectation I had. Said he was ecstatic to sing together, that he's a fantastic singer AND, ha! - I was right, he sings in choir every Sunday."

"Sounds like an angel."

"Sounds like a total wimp. Anyway, he suggested we rehearse every bloody week until the wedding. As if I don't have anything else to do. There's a thousand things Bella want my help with, then there's work and I haven't bought one Christmas gift yet."

"Did you agree to once a week?" Georgie asked, incredulous.

"Nah, suggested we get started and then we'll see. I'll meet him tomorrow, he's coming here from Bath."

"Skipping Sunday choir? Then this must really be high priority for him."

Both giggled.

"Worst thing was when I thought he was texting me from the bath tub. I pictured him lying there, this midget with his wobbly belly and bath foam on his bald head and other parts poorly covered. Sometimes my imagination is too vivid."

"Midget?" Georgie snorted, tears of laughter emerging in her eyes. "I thought he was just short."

"I've changed my mind, now he's a midget. Must be. Me and a Christmas midget in a Santa's hat singing a duet. How beautiful it will be."

"You're killing me, I can't take no more, my stomach hurts too much, and I'll pee my pants any second."

"Time to get back to work anyway", Molly grinned.

"I suppose it is, but I want to hear *everything* after your date tomorrow."

"NOT a date! But believe me, I don't plan on keeping this to myself, I need to share this misery with someone. Shared sorrow, half sorrow and all that."

Their evening break was over, and it was time to return to the duties until their shift ended at midnight. Molly and Georgie were not only colleagues, working as doctor and nurse in the same hospital, but also good friends since the student years. Nowadays they were flat mates, so they would meet up after ended shift and take the metro home together.

"See you later, then."

Molly headed towards the ER where she was stationed during the current period of her foundation years, rotating between different wards within the hospital.

Georgie went down the corridor in the other direction, still chuckling at the thought of Molly performing a duet with a Christmas clad midget. She would get to experience it first hand as she was invited to the wedding too, since Bella and Matt were friends of hers. Now she was not sure what she was looking forward to most, the wedding ceremony or this duet that promised to be hilarious. She did wish for someone more attractive for her friend to pair up with, though. Someone attractive and kind and head over heels in love with Molly, because her friend deserved that.

Unfortunately, an on-and-off-relationship with a teenage boyfriend, Artan, had left Molly a bit wary when it came to love. He was a creep and Georgie always thought of him as Abominable Artan, even if she never called him that to Molly's face until the relationship finally ended in disaster. He had been Molly's first boyfriend, from

the same Newham block, and somehow, he had managed to cling on to her life for far too long in Georgie's opinion. He had treated her badly, used her and managed to keep a grip around her heart for many years by making her believe she was not worth anything better. He never abused her physically but there are other kinds of abuse. He pushed her down and manipulated her to believe that she was much less than the bright, funny, caring and beautiful girl her friends thought her to be. Both Bella and Georgie had tried to strengthen Molly's self-confidence, so she would manage to leave this relationship that obviously was not healthy for her, but it was like Artan had her in a leash always pulling her back when she tried to stray. Suddenly showing a more affectionate side, making promises that he in the end never kept at the same time as he let her know how lucky a useless girl like her was to have him.

At last, Molly had seen him for what he was when she caught him cheating with one of her 'friends'. One evening when a group of friends, her old as well as new ones from uni, had been celebrating Molly's birthday in a club, she had walked in on Artan and her childhood friend Mary, just as Mary was wanking him off in a toilet cubicle. Artan was cheating on Molly for the simple reason that he was an asshole, and it was likely not the first time even if there never had been proof before. Mary was with Artan as a misguided revenge for feeling left behind by Molly when she started uni while Mary was stuck with her Newham life. It was a painful ending to the relationship, as it was a double betrayal that cost Molly both a boyfriend and a friend. In the end the loss of her friend hurt most, because friends are supposed to be there and support you when a relationship crashes to pieces, not be the ones breaking it. It had triggered her to leave her parents' home in

Newham and move in with Georgie to get away from it all and, most importantly it finally led to a complete break with Artan. Nothing bad that does not bring any good, but it had left her with scars, made it difficult for her to trust men even a few years later. She had dated since, but as soon as things started to get serious she always fled, shrugged her shoulders and said he was not the right one as that was easier than trusting someone with her heart and risk having it broken again.

Georgie sighed. Her own love life was only slightly better, it was far easier to give advice to others than living by them oneself. She was in a relationship but uncertain where it was leading to. She had been going out with Elvis for a few years now and she was very much in love with him, but she was not sure where she had him. He loved her, he both said it in words and showed her in his actions every now and then, yet he did not seem ready to commit. He did not want to move in together or talk much about the future at all, just said that 'were they not fine as they were?', and 'could they not just enjoy that without complicating things?' He was often going out to pubs and clubs without her and Georgie was not sure he did not cross a line in his flirting every once in a while, not sure he always went home alone when he did not come to sleep at her place. He was a charming force of nature and women tended to adore him. It would not have been a problem at all, had she felt secure that he was hers alone in his heart - but she did not feel that. She did her best to bravely keep up the pretence that she was fine with a relationship that was a bit blurry around the edges, but the truth was that he hurt her time after another and she was growing tired of it. Still, she loved him and was afraid to give him an ultimatum, as she did not know if she was prepared for the possibility he would say that was the end of it all.

So, her situation was not much better than the one Molly had been in, even if Elvis was a far kinder and more loving person than Artan ever was. Sometimes she hated herself for not being stronger, for needing Elvis and not just walking out on him, but maybe that day would come if things did not change.

Often, she tried to channel her frustration and sadness into her work, so one thing that had come out of this was that she had made herself a reputation as an excellent and dedicated nurse.

"Nothing bad that doesn't bring anything good, at least", she muttered to herself.

"Sorry?"

Caught up in her thoughts, she had not realised she had entered a room where an old, sick woman had a visitor. Georgie had met both many times before. The woman was diagnosed with terminal cancer, now close to the end and palliative care the only remaining option. Her son, Mr. McClyde, often visited her. He used to sit here through the evenings holding his mum's hand and talking softly to her, which she seemed to appreciate even if she did not say much. Georgie liked them both and felt so sad for them. There were some patients and their families that touched her more than others, touched her beyond what her duty required, and the McClydes were among them.

"I'm sorry, Mr. McClyde. Didn't realise I was talking out loud."

She sat down, as she often did with them lately. It never felt right leaving immediately after checking on her, because he was always here alone, and she wondered if he had no one to share his grief with.

"You can call me Bones, if you like. No need to be so formal, after all you're taking care of my mum."

"Bones? Is that your name?" It seemed like an odd name.

A smile lighted up his face, a rare sight as he had not had much to smile about in this room with his mother close to death.

"My name is Alexander, but my friends call me Bones for reasons I don't even remember. Nickname since I was in the army."

"Okay then, Bones it is. I'm Georgie."

"Nice to meet you, again, Georgie." He smiled, and she thought that he was very likeable when he smiled like that.

If she only had seen him somewhere, she would not have guessed he was a man with a soft side to him. He was tall and athletic, always dressed in well-fitting suits which he looked great in but also a bit terrifying. She imagined that he was a barrister or a business man of some kind, he looked like he could be tough when needed – but in here, he showed nothing but a good heart, filled with kindness and affection for his mother.

"Can I ask you something?", she now said.

"Go ahead."

"Are you alone with your mum? I mean, are there any other relatives?"

"If you mean why I'm always here alone? I have a sister, but she lives in Edinburgh and has small kids she can't leave that easy. We've agreed I'll call for her when it seems close to the end. Because we all know there's only one end to this, don't we?"

Before he said that, he glanced at his mother to make sure she was asleep, apparently wanted to avoid making her sad, or sadder than she inevitably was. Georgie swallowed, pressing back the tears that threatened to emerge when faced with this compact sadness.

"Then I think it might be time for you to call her now. It's a matter of days, you see."

Spontaneously she had reached for his hand. He did not shake her hand off, let it remain partly covering his bigger one where it lay in his lap.

"How do you know?"

"Comes with the profession, I suppose. There's something special towards the end of a life, you get the feeling that *something* is preparing to leave the body. I don't know if it's the soul or what it is. I can't explain it better than that."

"I understand, and I trust you. Thanks, I'll call for my sister, so she comes tomorrow."

Bones looked at the nurse beside him, liked that she held his hand. The light touch had a strangely comforting effect on him. Of all the hospital staff that passed through this room when he was visiting, she was the one he liked most because she genuinely seemed to care. Genuinely seemed to feel for them. Suddenly he wished

that he had met her under other circumstances, where it would not have seemed odd to ask her out on a date. He glanced down at the small hand holding his. No ring. It did not mean she was not in a relationship, but it meant it was not serious enough for her to be engaged. For some ridiculous reason it made him happy, amid all this sadness.

"Do that, no one should be alone with *this*." He knew she meant pain, grief, death, loosing someone you loved, someone who had been there always. He was hit by the enormity of it all and felt that she was right, he needed his sister here to share their mother's last days. Now she removed her hand and his felt cold, alone.

"I'm sorry, I have to go but I'll see you tomorrow if you're here then."

"I'm here. Thanks again."

She gave him a killer smile that reached all the way to her beautiful brown eyes and he inappropriately felt butterflies in his stomach. It was such an odd situation to experience something he had not experienced anywhere in a very long time.

When Georgie left the McClydes behind, she felt confused too. There was something about him, Bones, Alexander, that made her want to hug him and comfort him even if he was many sizes larger than her and seemed like a self-confident man. It was not only that his mum was dying, there was a flicker of *something* at the bottom of his blue eyes. She shook her head. She had trouble enough trying to figure out her future with Elvis without developing inappropriate feelings for the relative of her dying patient, a man she would most likely never see again once his mother had passed away in a few days.

Her mobile phone buzzed from a text message and she felt a passing annoyance over the interruption, even when she saw it was from Elvis.

From: Elvis

Hi babe,

In a bar with some friends. Can come by your place when you quit work?

XXX

He was in a bar getting drunk. It seemed like an absurd contrast to what she just had shared with Bones. She considered not responding, but then she did anyway.

From: Georgie

OK. Home 00:30, see ya.

XXX

Her heart jolted as it always did at the thought of seeing Elvis. That was why she was with him after all these years, despite the uncertainty of it all, because he played on strings inside her that no one else did. Now she only longed for her shift to be over, so she would get to come home to a bed with him in it. Have him hold her and make her forget the sadness from tonight, make her forget the sadness she felt when he was not with her.

A/N: So glad so many are following me on this AU story. In case anyone wonders why I place most of my stories outside the army the reasons are two; I know absolutely nothing about the British army beside what OG and the excellent google has taught me. I have a brother who is an officer but that is of little use since it is in the Swedish army and luckily, we have not fought a war since I don't know when and anyway, no one I know knows that I write OG fanfic, so I wouldn't ask him for advice - lol. Secondly, such amazing stories have already been written in the army setting, so I feel that if I shall be able to contribute with something new I need to think outside the box. Won't keep you from the story by babbling on, here we go and as usual hope you enjoy and thanks much for reviews!

X

Chapter 4: Sunday, Dec 3 - Elvis

1:15 am and Elvis Harte was wondering what he was doing in this bar when he should have been in Georgie's bed hours ago. When he actually *wanted* to be in her bed hours ago, at least half of him. The other half somehow struggled to accept he was in a relationship, a serious one and made him linger here with the guys, flirting with the dark beauty across the bar. He knew he would go home to Georgie eventually, but the feel and taste of freedom was too sweet to leave just yet.

Being a ladies' man was natural to Elvis, part of who he identified himself as being. If he could not be that anymore, would he not lose himself? He spent much time thinking about his and Georgie's relationship. He did not take it lightly, as some might think, he was just not sure what to do about it. It was the old 'both wanting to have the cake and eat it' dilemma. He wanted to be with her, but he was not fully prepared to give up his life as he had known it up to now.

His thoughts were disturbed by Spanner putting down two beers in front of him.

"Help me out", Spanner said. "Am I so drunk that I have double vision, or are there actually two guys looking exactly the same over there?"

Elvis looked the direction he nodded and laughed.

"You *are* totally pissed but there are two identical guys, they're twins. I know them, Geraint and Smurf."

"Now that's a relief. Then I can keep on drinking."

"Sure that's a good idea?"

"We're off on a new operation in two days and I don't know when I'll have a proper drink next, so I intend to make the most out of this evening."

Elvis and Spanner knew each other from the army and had worked alongside for many years in a special forces unit where Elvis was Spanner's commanding officer. Spanner was still doing the same, but since two years back Elvis was based in UK, working with selection and training of new SF soldiers after he had injured his leg.

He had recovered quite well but was no longer fully fit for the tough demands of active service. Sometimes he missed it despite that he was quite happy with his current role, sometimes he was grateful because he would not have met Georgie if it had not been for that injury. Spanner and he had stayed friends even when they no longer worked together, and he was glad to keep the connection to his life in the SF. Even if Spanner could tell him very little of the operations now when he no longer was entitled to the classified information, it did not bother him. His feelings were more of the 'been there, done that' kind.

"You won't be there for Matt's wedding then?"

Both of them were also friends with Matt Geddings who was getting married on Christmas Eve.

"Hope we'll be back by then but can never know for sure. I've told him I want to come but have to keep it open. Same for Peanut."

Peanut had been part of the same unit and like Spanner he still stayed in. He was standing in a corner talking to a girl, obviously trying to make the most of his last night out before the next mission in a different way than Spanner.

Elvis nodded and simultaneously locked eyes with the pretty girl across the bar again.

"No matter how delightful your company is, Spanner, there's a girl I need to talk to over there."

Spanner looked surprised and echoed the question Elvis had asked him earlier.

"Sure that's a good idea? What with Georgie?"

"No harm talking to a girl, is there?" Elvis grinned and moved towards the girl.

Spanner shook his head. He could not quite understand what Elvis was doing. He was clearly in love with Georgie, crazy about her even, judging from the way he sometimes talked about her, but it seemed like he could not quite admit it to himself. He was not willing to let go of his image as a womanizer and whenever they were out together he had to push the limits. As a minimum he was always flirting with a few women, but there were occasions when he did more than that. Out in the open it was never more than talking close to someone's ear or placing his hand at the small of the back, but on more than one occasion during his relationship with Georgie he had sneaked away with company. In Spanner's opinion, he was a great mate but lousy boyfriend material. He had met Georgie many times and thought she deserved better than this. He had considered telling Elvis but, in the end, concluded it was none of his business. He had better stay out of it and let Elvis deal with his own mistakes. He felt pretty sure that sooner or later Elvis behaviour would backfire on him, for the simple reason that he cared about Georgie more than he admitted to himself and there was always a price to pay for foul play.

Elvis confidently approached the girl he had been eyeing for the last hour. She had a skin tone like milk chocolate, curly hair, beautiful features and a killer figure. He moved himself to stand close to her and when she noticed him there, gave her a cocky smile.

"Can I get you a drink?"

"Thanks, but I have one." Words were dismissive, but she gave him an inviting smile.

"From the other end of the bar it looked like you might need another. Or some company."

"Did it really?" She kept smiling.

"Definitely. I'm Elvis."

She raised her eyebrows at the name but did not comment it.

"I'm Maisie."

"Beautiful name on a beautiful girl."

"That's a sleazy line even after a few drinks"

"Maybe, but it's true." He could see that despite what she said, she liked the comment. She was the kind of girl that would appreciate cheekiness.

"So, do you come here often?" she responded with a standard pick-up phrase in return.

"Nah, the first time. It's nice though. Good drinks, nice company." He grinned and looked down her body.

Maise could not deny that she had noticed him long before he came over to talk to her. Tall, athletic, good-looking in Italian style. His manners were a bit too confident for someone she would consider for a boyfriend, she actually preferred

shyer guys, but he would easily do for a snog or a one-nighter. He would probably be excellent for both and she had no one at home waiting for her as she was a happy single.

They kept chatting for a while, Elvis got them each another drink and this time she did not say no. She noticed how he moved closer, touched her lightly every now and then, protectively put his hand at the small of her back when a group of drunken guys bumped into them. She could not deny that she enjoyed it and felt her belly twist in anticipation. It would be nice to kiss those full lips, it would be nice to feel him touch her more than this.

"Want to go outside for some air?" he asked.

"Sure it's air you need?" she cocked an eyebrow.

"Come with me and we'll see."

She could not resist that. When they came outside the cold air immediately hit them and Maisie shuddered. He opened his arms.

"Come here, let me keep you warm."

She stepped into him, feeling the excitement of being so close to a stranger, felt his warmth, his strength and smelled the scent of his appealing aftershave. They just stood like that for a moment and then she looked up on him, he simultaneously looked down on her and they let their lips meet. His lips were warm, soft, tasting of beer and gently tried her out. He was a promising kisser and she prepared to put her arms around his neck and deepen the kiss, when he pulled back.

Despite that the girl was lovely and the kiss exhilarating it all felt wrong to him.

"Sorry Maisie."

"Did I miss something?"

"I shouldn't be doing this."

"Because?"

"I have someone waiting for me at home."

"I didn't see that coming. Not really the impression you have given me the last hour."

He looked away, embarrassed.

"I know. I don't know why I did like that... I didn't mean to. I really like you, you're a gorgeous girl but I love someone else."

"You have a really strange way of showing it mate."

She was not pissed off. He was attractive, but she was not emotionally invested in him and what he told her now made her despise him a little. He was the one who had taken the flirt to this point, the one who had driven innocent glances to chatting her up and proposed they came out here.

"Yeah. I don't know what's wrong with me." Suddenly he seemed deflated and sad, disappointed at himself. "I'm sorry for leading you on."

"No offence taken. You should be sorrier for the girl you have at home."

Her words made him feel pathetic.

"I've got to go, I should get home to her."

"You should. Good luck with that Elvis."

"Again, I'm sorry."

"Get over yourself, Elvis. It's not like you're breaking my heart", she laughed, and he knew it was true. He had been snogging with a girl who did not really care about him, unlike Georgie. Totally pointless. "I'm going back to my friends now, take care - and an advice, behave better next time if you want to keep your girl."

She turned around and went inside again without looking back.

Elvis spilled no more time, hailed a cab and asked the driver to take him to Georgie's place. His mind was spinning as he sat in the backseat; guilt, regret, questioning himself why he did like this time after another. As he finally called on Georgie's door phone he felt that his whole body was longing for her and he hoped she would not be mad at him for coming so late.

He pushed the button a few times but first no one answered. Of course, she was asleep, so it might take some time for her to wake and come to the door.

"Georgie, it's me. Open." Just in case she thought it was some other drunk.

It remained silent.

"Georgie?" He suddenly felt insecurity come over him in a way which was highly unusual for him. Then suddenly she was there.

"I'm here, Elvis." Now her voice almost startled him.

"Open then, baby."

But the familiar buzz from the door unlocking did not come. Instead, she spoke again, her voice sounding very tired.

"I needed you tonight Elvis. I needed you here in this bed to hold me and show me everything is fine. I really did... But it's not, fine I mean, is it?"

"What are you talking about? Just let me in, will you."

"No."

A simple, clear answer that filled him with fear.

"No?"

"I don't want this. I don't need this. To wait for you, wondering what you're up to. Feel insecure about your feelings for me... where we're going. *If* we're going anywhere."

"Georgie, let me in and we can talk", he pleaded.

"I don't want to talk now, I need to sleep. I don't need you to come anymore because it's too late. Don't bother. Go home Elvis."

He was alarmed and the urge to be with her suddenly seemed overwhelming.

"Come on! I'm so sorry, I..." He suddenly did not feel like pulling one of his usual excuses, felt this was a moment that demanded honesty. "I made a mistake not coming sooner and I regret it. There's nothing I want more than being with you."

It had not been entirely true earlier this night, but it was true now.

He was only met with silence and did not even know if she had listened to the last he said or if she had left before that. He rang on the door phone again but there was no answer. It seemed like she had done what she said she needed to, gone back to bed. Calling again would probably just annoy her.

Elvis sank down on the door step, not quite knowing what to do. He leaned his head in his hands wondering to what extent he had messed things up. What had she meant by 'too late'? Literally too late in the night, or too late in any other sense. Something in the tone of her voice, a finality to it, made him feel it was the latter. He had pushed his luck too far and she had had enough, she meant that it was too late for them. He had not expected that. Would she be serious about it tomorrow morning? Right now, he was not sure. He had fucked up, *that* was for sure and he regretted it badly already.

He was drunk, he was cold and right now there was nothing he could do as she did not want to see him. Finally, he got up to find himself another cab and go home and in the back seat he sent her a text message.

From: Elvis

I love you

There was no answer, despite the dots indicating she had read it. He had truly and well fucked up this time.

Chapter 5: Sunday, Dec 3 - Charles

That obnoxious Molly-woman had texted him again yesterday wanting to work out the plan for the Sunday meet-up in London. He had tried his best to forget about this whole business and his heart sank when the mobile buzzed, announcing a text from her and he was faced with it again.

From: Molly

Hi Charlie

Hope you have a splendid day! Suggest meet up for lunch tomorrow and plan fab event.

/Molly

Did she have to be so bloody cheerful? Obviously, she could barely wait to plan and perform this duet.

From: Charles

Lunch OK. Where?

BTW, no one calls me Charlie really

People called him Charles, but more often major James, boss or bossman. Never Charlie. Only one good old friend was allowed to call him Charlie, or not really allowed but he did not care what Charles thought about it. Everyone else had learned they had better not use a nickname that was not to his liking unless they

were prepared to receive his famous 'stern-face'. He just did not identify himself as a Charlie and preferred people did not use it.

From: Molly

I know a nice place called Leo's, can send you address. 1 pm?

See you there, Charlie

P.S. I think they may even have chairs for small people

She clearly was not the sharpest tool in the shed. What was she babbling about small people? She seemed quite confused. He was grateful she was not a private under his command, she would have driven him mad if he had had to endure prolonged exposure. This brief one promised to be hard enough.

From: Charles

OK, 1 pm.

/Charles

From: Molly

It's a date

X

His eyebrows raised in surprise when she sent him a kissing emoji. It seemed a bit uncalled for, and it seemed she thought so too because it was corrected the next second.

From: Molly

Ooops, sorry, supposed to be :)

Fingers slipped - could have been worse though, like the turd emoji ;)

Also, don't mean date like a date

Have a great evening, Charlie!

He tapped in:

DON'T. FUCKING. CALL. ME. CHARLIE!

But had second thoughts and deleted it. Mental or not, she was after all a wedding guest, sister to the bride, not one of his recruits and using such language was probably inadvisable. Instead he texted;

From: Charles

Can't wait to get started! Have already started rehearsing a classic.

See you tomorrow

/CHARLES

In a way it was true, he *had* been singing a favourite love song which he thought might be just perfect, in the shower - repeatedly. Though 'rehearsing' was something of an exaggeration.

From: Molly

Brilliant! Well done, Charlie! Gotta work now, cheerio!

He could not help laughing at her. Damn woman, was she stupid or just very annoying? Anyway, he felt relief that she proposed a restaurant instead of her home. It would make it easier to leave sooner. Just get down to the essentials of planning this spectacle and then leave. When Charles was in someone's home he always felt like common courtesy compelled him to stay longer. A restaurant was a more neutral place where it was acceptable to leave once the meal was finished. He was not at all looking forward to spending time with this woman he knew almost nothing about. Matt had just said it was Bella's older, yet unmarried sister and he pictured her like a needy spinster, wanting a portion of the limelight. He only hoped that her mentioning of 'date' was not a Freudian slip, that she did not see this as a chance of some kind of romantic blind date, god forbid. Once again, he asked himself why he had accepted.

This morning he had caught an early train from Bath to arrive when the shops opened, to take the opportunity to do some London Christmas shopping when he anyway was there. Find something nice for his parents and Sam, and maybe a wedding gift for Matt and Bella while he was at it.

During the weekdays in the army, he usually got out of bed much earlier than he had this morning so making an early departure had not been an issue. However, he always needed a morning coffee to be a fully functional man and first thing he did upon arrival at Paddington station was to go buy a large take away coffee. He preferred the Nespresso Rosabaya he usually prepared himself at home to this Starbucks' watery oversized kind any day, but it would fulfil its purpose. Mug in hand he then strode towards the Metro he intended to take to Oxford street.

Suddenly he bumped into someone, the large mug slipped from his hand, lid came off and the whole content of his mug spilled on her wool coat.

"Oh, for fucks sake!", the girl he had crashed into exclaimed.

She was understandably upset over the hard collision and accompanying mess. To make bad things worse, she was not wearing a sensible dark coat like most people, one which coffee stains would have been practically invisible on. No, of course her coat was a husky pink which had been beautiful until the brown liquid covered the front. *Murphy's law* - if it can go wrong it will.

When she turned her face up and looked into his eyes, he was taken aback as he met her green ones. Both because he found her almost disturbingly beautiful and because of her expression. She looked so devastated, like the world was coming to an end, rather than having had an accident which could be remedied with a dry-cleaning. He resisted an unexpected urge to step into her and pull her close to him and tell her everything would be all right.

"Shit, I'm so sorry!"

He continued to take in the sight of her. She was petite compared to him, only tall enough for her head to be level with his chest and her figure was slender even in thick winter clothes. She had long dark, wavy hair and an expressive face which did not look the least happy right now, even if her mouth seemed to be designed for smiling he thought. Not made for being a straight angry line like it was now. She apparently had a vivid body language, her hands now gesturing to emphasize her upset feelings.

"Why can't tall people like you just walk in a little slower pace and look where you're going!? You should have a good view from up there."

He was sorry but also felt half the blame was hers because she obviously had not been looking where she was going either. After all, they were two who had collided, and her disproportionate reaction provoked him.

"I *did* look but it's difficult when short people appear out of nowhere."

It came out harsher than he had intended it to.

"So now it's my own fault? How charming!" she snapped back, and he felt irritation build up.

"No, but we were two in this collision, it's not like I collided with myself."

"No unfortunately not, then it would be you standing here with all this coffee on you. I don't even like coffee!"

He was still annoyed and did not think it was very relevant if she liked coffee or not, but she had a point, she had come out of the collision in a worse way than he as none of the liquid had spilled on him

"Look, I am sorry about that. I can pay for the dry cleaning."

She did not say anything, just breathed rapidly and reached for a pack of wet wipes in her hand bag to try to clean away the worst.

"Here, take my number, just let me know what it costs, and I'll take care of it."

He scribbled his mobile number on a piece of paper and handed her. Their hands touching a split second. She put it in her pocket without looking at it and without saying thank you. Her features had softened slightly, but she still looked like she was on the verge of crying, her large eyes suspiciously glossy.

"Hey", he said, his voice gentler now. "It can't be that bad, can it? Not so bad it makes you cry?"

"I'm not crying! And don't flatter yourself, there are far more important things to be sad over than you and your stupid coffee."

With that, she was gone, leaving him feeling like a deflated idiot. He hoped she would get in touch to let him pay for the dry-clean, so he could leave this behind him with a clean conscience. He did not like unfinished business and he always preferred to behave like a gentleman rather than a jerk. Not a good start to a day he was not looking forward to even to start with.

He finally arrived in Oxford street and swiftly moved in and out of shops trying to get his errands done but found himself distracted by the events of the morning. He could not let go of the girl, her tearful green eyes and her words.

'Don't flatter yourself. There are far more important things to be sad over than you and your stupid coffee.'

What had it been about, then? What were the other straws that he had added to, to break the camel's back. Not that she had any resemblance with a camel, he reminisced the sight of her. Silky hair looking so soft that one wanted to reach out a hand to touch it. Full lips made for smiling, or kissing. For some reason he wished that he knew what had made her sad and that he, instead of making her day worse, could have helped her by easing her burden somehow. He would likely never know what battles she was fighting, he had a feeling she would not call him to take up the offer of having the dry-cleaning paid. He wished had her number, but he did not so he would just have to let go. Anyway, it was a silly reaction wanting to behave like some knight in shining armour just because a beautiful girl seemed to be on the verge of crying. Although, to be honest he felt there had been something special with this specific girl that made him feel that way, not just the tearfulness.

His thoughts were interrupted by a call from an old friend. Last night he had texted Elvis to say he would be in London over the day and maybe they could meet up. He had gotten no response then, but now Elvis called him back.

"Charlie, great to hear from you, mate. How come you're in the big city? It wasn't yesterday."

Elvis was the one person who did not care shit if Charles liked if he called him Charlie, or even worse Charlie-boy but Charles just smiled at the familiar sound of his Essex accent. Elvis was right, with everything going on with work, at the regiment or when he was away on tour, his divorce and Sam, it was long since he had been to London even though it was fully possible to go for the day. He had only met his friend on rare occasions over the last two years, but they stayed in contact over the phone.

"I have some business to attend to. Or business, I don't know what I should call it - unwelcome duties maybe", he smirked. "Then I thought maybe I could mix some pleasure into it by seeing you. Are you free later this afternoon? I'm taking the train at six."

"I am, and it would be great to see you. I've put myself into a mess, so it would be great to talk to you, just juggle some ideas what I should do."

"Is it possible that it has anything to do with a girl or two?"

Charles knew Elvis very well, and girls was usually the main source of his troubles.

"One really, one that matters. You know I've been going out with this girl Georgie for quite some time. You haven't met her, have you?"

"No, we never got around to it, but you've talked about her."

"She's great. In fact, I think she might be the one, but I also think I have fucked it up."

"Sounds serious."

"It is."

Elvis sounded unusually morose.

"Then we should definitely meet up over a beer or two. I could need that too after what I'm about to do. I'll tell you all about it when we meet. I can give you a call once I'm done with my other stuff?"

They agreed he should do so, and Charles thought to himself that he at least would get *something* enjoyable out of this day. Elvis company was always amusing even when he had a crisis involving a female, which was the Elvis normal. Some things never seemed to change.

He tried to return his focus to the gift shopping and was partially successful. In the end he managed to buy some toys for Sam, a scarf for his mum and a book for his dad, but the wedding gift had to wait until another day when he was more devoted to the task. It was time to find the restaurant, so he would not be late and get a bad start with Bella's sister, Molly, on top of everything. This singing disaster could be challenging enough anyway. TripAdvisor told him the restaurant was within walking distance, so he headed towards in its direction with his usual purposeful stride, thinking that he could allow himself that without another disaster now that he was not carrying a coffee. Again, the morning's accident replayed in his mind

and he felt that his curiosity about this girl just grew for every time he thought of her. Those green eyes would not leave him be.

He stopped outside Leo's. It seemed to be an Italian restaurant, a nice one judging by appearances so at least Bella's sister had good taste in that aspect. He took a deep breath before entering. Okay, it looked like he could expect something nice to eat for lunch and then he had meeting Elvis to look forward to, so maybe, just maybe, he would survive this.

I can't help myself, I'm partial to these two, so a chapter with both of them in it will inevitably be longer than others but I hope you don't mind. THANKS for all the lovely reviews of his story. They truly spur me to try to keep updating despite everything going on in real life and losing some sleep, even if I'm date-wise already one day behind now.

X

Chapter 6: Sunday, Dec 3 - Molly

First Sunday in Advent is usually a favourite day of mine, because when the first advent candle is lit I feel Christmas approaching for real. I do not come from a family that has been regular visitors to church, but some symbols are beautiful no matter what you believe in. Today however, I had had the worst day from the first minute, literally.

I was supposed to end my shift in the ER at midnight and had a perfect plan to go home and get some hours of beauty sleep to get a needed boost of energy before the lunch with the insufferable Charles. ' *I have already started rehearsing a classic*' - come on! He was just too much, but I had to play along and seem encouraging. The more effort he put into this, the less would be needed on my part. Maybe he would be pleased to do a solo with the right encouragement. If I was really lucky, I might be able to just stand on the side while he sang, hopefully looking pretty in contrast to the Christmas midget.

However, half an hour before shift was due to end, an alarm came about a multiple car pile-up. The casualties started coming in and they asked everyone who could to stay on. I never hesitated, my bed could wait. A car had spun around due to black ice on the motorway and others followed. It was so bad, not just the regular whip-lashes and broken ribs, it was life-threatening injuries and some of the involved never even made it alive to the hospital. They were so many, a few of them children. We did everything we could, but some passed away during the night despite our efforts. I was on the team trying to rescue a boy, maybe ten years old, but he went off and we could not resuscitate him. His mum was in the room down the corridor and would survive, but only to receive the news her beautiful boy had died. How do you survive that? The only thing that kept me from crying, that made me hold myself together, was the knowledge that I was desperately needed. I had never experienced trauma like this before and once I finally left the hospital in the morning, I was in a state of slight shock. I had missed a whole night's sleep and seen so many things I wished I had not. It would have been horrible anytime, but for some stupid reason it seemed even worse in the proximity to Christmas as this was supposed to be a time for joy. I was only able to make it home still standing on my feet due to the adrenaline that had not subsided and the knowledge that despite that people had died, I had also been part of saving many.

I had to go home and try to get a few hours of sleep. I would have liked to cancel the lunch with Charles, but he would have left Bath already and it felt rude to cancel when he was taking the trouble to come here, so the best I could do was to get home as quickly as possible and try to recharge my batteries, if only for a short while. When I exhausted walked through the Metro station at Paddington to change line,

I was in my bubble of sadness, barely taking in the Christmas decorations and music coming from the loudspeakers or anything else, until I collided hard with someone and abruptly was awoken. It hurt, and I was so unprepared that it scared the shit out of me and then I realised that, as icing on the cake, I had coffee all over my favourite coat.

"Oh, for fucks sake!"

What had I done to deserve this shitty shitty day? Of course, compared to the injured people in the hospital this coffee accident was nothing, but it was the last thing I needed right now, and the tears that had accumulated inside me during the night threatened to start pouring over the brim. I looked up to see the culprit's face, although my gaze had to do some climbing first because he was damn tall. If I had not been so sad and angry at the same time, I would have been intimidated because he was so bloody gorgeous. Seriously, no one is that good-looking. In addition to being seriously tall, he was broad shouldered, had an annoyingly perfect face, brown eyes that looked at me expressing concern and thick, dark curly hair as topping on this dishy man. For some reason it almost made me even angrier. A man like that, you want to meet when you are to your advantage, not like this, knackered and sad and half-drowned in coffee.

I almost did not catch him saying sorry because I was so mad with the whole situation and, quite unfriendly, told him that tall people like him should watch his step as they had been gifted with a good view of things. Then he said that he *was* looking where he was going, but it was difficult when short people appeared

out of nowhere. Like I was some fucking little ant mingling around his feet. So typical of people looking like him to be that arrogant.

After some further verbal exchange, he seemed to come around a bit, so he at least offered to pay for a dry-cleaning and gave me his number. I thought that if he had given me his number after a nice chat in a bar, I would have considered myself to have hit jack pot, but like this – not so much. When he spoke again, with a soft voice, like he actually *cared*, telling me not to cry, it was just too much to take. I felt I would start ugly-crying any second, so I finished off in a very rude way, told him he should not think this was about him and his stupid coffee, that there were far more important things to be sad about in this world. It was true, though hardly his fault, but I spun around and left him with that.

I regretted it as soon as he was out of my sight. He had not meant to bump into me, he had apologised and tried to offer to make it up to me. And he might be the most handsome man I ever had seen up close, even touched as he handed me the note with his number. *I had his number*. That was food for thought. Maybe I ought to use it on a day when I was in a better mood (and had spent hours in the bathroom making myself pretty), but now all I wanted was to sleep until I would have to drag myself to the luncheon with Charles. Maybe I should call him 'Charlie' today too, despite that it was obvious that it bothered him. I could need some little means of amusing myself to survive this day. It was not past ten yet and I already felt like I had been hit by a bulldozer.

A few hours later, I was sitting at a table at Leo's, feeling slightly better. Sleeping had improved things by miles, strengthened me, made me feel less vulnerable. Seeing people injured, dead or grieving their near ones like I had witnessed this night, had a way of stripping me of my skin. Not literally, but in the sense that it made me vulnerable. I did not allow myself to be usually. Growing up like I had, there had been little room for it and I still found it hard to show emotions. Not happy feelings, but the difficult ones. That was one of the reasons I could not stand the thought of crying in front of a total stranger, let alone a gorgeous one. That made me think of the phone number he had given me, and I reached for the note which still lay in my coat pocket. I could as well add his number to my contacts, just in case I needed to contact him. I could pay a dry-cleaning myself but if my favourite coat had been ruined I would consider having him pay for it. And if cleaning went well I could send him a text to let him know it did. It would probably make him relieved not to have a possibly ruined coat on his conscience. Maybe he would text me back and... well, no point letting thoughts stray too much. Now I had to focus on my midget "date" who by the way was late, adding to his other negative traits.

I picked up my mobile and added a new contact *Rude Boy*. 'Rude man' was a more accurate description, and in the end, he had not even been especially rude, but I liked the sound of 'rude boy'. I entered the digits he had scribbled down (in quite beautiful handwriting actually) and clicked save. Strangely, this resulted in a notification '*Number already exist under different contact name. Do you wish to update contact?*'. It seemed to indicate this number was saved under the contact named '*Charles*' already.

My brain circuits were working intensively to figure out how this apparent error was possible, when the door to the restaurant opened and Rude Boy surprisingly was standing there. Was he stalking me somehow? Seemed highly unlikely, yet here he was and what other explanation was there? He had not noticed me, so I could watch him undisturbed for a few seconds and it caused me to draw in a breath of air. When he was not standing so close, right in my face overwhelming me as he had this morning, it was even more apparent how handsome he was. He now let his gaze sweep around the room and when it landed on me, he looked as surprised as I felt and then he came over. I was not sure if I wanted this or if it was more like a horror movie playing.

"Hi again", he gave me a hesitant smile. Oh, I liked the smiling version of him. "I'm not stalking you if you think that."

"No, no."

No, really? Anyway, I shook my head like I never would assume such a thing.

"I'm here to meet someone... I mean... it was decided before I bumped into you this morning. I had no idea you'd be here, of course." He stuttered slightly, which just made him cuter. Otherwise cute was hardly the right word to describe him, he was too masculine for that.

"Of course... but do you think you'll be able to have your meal with me in the same room? Without any disasters like food flying around?" I said with a smirk, oddly could not help myself even though a man like him would normally result in a mute version of me.

He laughed.

"Fair question. I really am sorry about the coffee. I had a bad conscience afterwards, because I wasn't sure if it really came across how sorry I was."

"It did, in the end, and I had a bad conscience because I was a cow. I was in a bad mood already before and took it out on you. I'm sorry too."

"Apology accepted." His warm brown eyes twinkled, and I desperately wished it was him I was having lunch with instead of the midget. Could I have that as an early Christmas gift, pleeeeeease, Santa?

"I should find out who my lunch date is, but it was nice to meet you again in a little bit less abrupt and hostile circumstances. Please give me a call when you have had the coat dry-cleaned, I mean it." He looked at me sternly, brows frowned, dark eyes drilling into me, like I was a child and he was giving me a lecture because he knew better than me. I had to suppress a giggle.

I was about to say that it seemed like he might have written down the wrong number, when he beat me to it, reached out his hand saying;

"I'm Charles by the way."

I wonder what I looked like in that moment. Like a fish on dry land, gaping for oxygen? Like Bugs Bunny, eyes popping out? Like someone winning on lottery and not quite believing their fortune? I hoped I looked way cooler than any of those alternatives, but I could not be sure.

No. Fucking. Way. No fucking way this was *Charles*. I was expecting this bald, chubby midget and here was this curly-haired giant made of lean muscle. Extremely good-looking, shitty hot giant. This must be a mistake, or had Santa just fulfilled my Christmas wish?

"I think this is where you're supposed to tell me your name unless you want to come across as impolite", he smirked, and I realised I had not said anything out loud, which probably was for the better considering what had been going through my mind.

"Yeah, I know... It's just that I'm Molly."

My small hand was still wrapped in his, large warm one, a handshake clearly lasting longer than normal politeness required, and I could see him processing the information I had dropped.

"You are *Molly*. Like Bella's sister Molly?" he said slowly, apparently trying to make the pieces of the puzzle fit.

"Yes."

"The Molly I'm having lunch with?"

"Well, I thought I was having lunch with a bald, chubby midget named Charles, but it seems I only got the name right." I said with a smile and regretted it the second after, maybe I should not have told him that. Maybe he would be offended.

Instead he threw his head back in relieved laughter.

"A midget? Why?"

"You had a knitted jumper with Christmas motive too... I don't know why, sometimes my imagination just plays tricks on me and it seemed to fit with *Charles*."

"What's so fucking hilarious about Charles? It's a perfectly normal name."

"I agree... for His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and for a midget", I giggled.

"You're nothing like I pictured you either, Molly."

He had pictured me. *How* had he pictured me? Maybe as bad as I had pictured him. Suddenly I was reminded of that I also had imagined the chubby midget in the bathtub covered only by a little bit of foam. Now, imagining *this* man in the bath covered only by a little bit of foam, that was a completely different story. I had better not go there if I did not want to experience hot flushes.

He took his black coat off and pulled out a chair to sit down, now that we had realised he was not going anywhere else and managed to fit his long legs under the table. He certainly would not need a chair for small people. Unfortunately, he seemed to remember that joke now and connected the dots.

"*That* was why you texted about chairs for small people, because you pictured me as a midget? I thought you were completely confused."

"Sorry, I was just trying to make fun of this miserable situation."

He cocked an eyebrow.

"You're saying it's a miserable situation to have lunch with me?"

"Yes. No. Yes. I thought it would be, but mostly I meant this whole thing about singing a duet at the wedding. Bella convinced me, but I really don't want to."

He looked at me intently and my cheeks were growing hotter by the minute.

"*You* don't want to sing?"

"No, it's the last thing I want."

"I thought you were desperate to do it. I thought you would be that kind of bridesmaid who want to have everyone's eyes on her."

"Nooo! It's Bella's and Matt's day. I would be perfectly happy sitting in a corner sipping champagne, but she won't let me. She said you already had said yes and was a good singer and eager to do this."

Again, he laughed, this soft dark laugh that made my toes curl and my stomach twist for unknown reasons.

"Matt told me *you* already had accepted, it seems they played us."

"So typical Bella. She's adorable but manipulative. Once she's got an idea into her head she won't stop at anything to make it happen. Wait - *do* you sing in a Sunday choir?"

"No", he said with emphasis, "definitely not."

I really had not gotten anything right when it came to him, to his advantage one had to add.

The waiter came with the menus, so we interrupted the conversation to order.

"I know it's only lunch time, but I think I need some wine. Would you mind making this a wine lunch?" I asked him.

"No, not at all. I could need that too and I'm not driving anyway."

Once the waiter had brought us a bottle of red and we were waiting for the food, we resumed the conversation.

"So, do you think we should call their bluff and say we won't do this?" he asked.

"I'd like to because she tricked me, but at the same time she's my sister and if this song is what she really wants for her wedding, then I'll do it for her. I understand if it's different for you though."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe it doesn't have to be that bad. Now that we know who we are, not a midget and a needy spinster..."

"So *that* was how you were picturing me?"

"Errrr... yes. Matt said you were Bella's older unmarried sister and then I thought... I guess my imagination played me too. Should we call it even? A needy spinster for a bald midget?"

"I guess we should", I smirked, pleased to see that *he* now looked a bit embarrassed. Also pleased that he did not seem to think of me as a needy spinster in this moment.

"Deal then. Anyway, maybe we can have some fun doing this? Maybe it doesn't have to be that awkward."

I fidgeted with my napkin weighing the pros and cons. I really did not want to sing a song at the wedding, but I wanted to make Bella happy and I would very much like to meet Charles again. Maybe an unexpected win-win was hidden here.

"Yeah, maybe it could be fun", I smiled at him and was rewarded with one in return, making my heart skip a beat or possibly two. It was completely surreal that I was sitting here drinking wine with his ridiculously attractive man and I was not sure what to make of it, except enjoying myself.

"It's a nice place you chose", he said taking in the room.

"Thanks, it's a favourite." I looked around the small *trattoria*, which always was cosy and now even more so due to the Christmas decorations. It seemed like there was not a spot in the city that did not have decorations of some kind. "Although I must admit that I proposed it mostly because I didn't want you to come to my place. I thought if we met in a restaurant it would be okay to..." I interrupted myself realising I was telling him how rude I had planned to be.

"Okay to leave if I was really boring?"

"Yeah", I admitted embarrassed.

He took a piece of bread from the basket the waiter had placed in front of us and cocked his eyebrow again. It seemed to be something he did unintentionally quite often, and it resulted in a wicked, sexy look but he seemed unaware of that.

"And are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Planning to leave soon?"

"No, this was nicer than I had imagined."

Nicer than I ever could have dreamed of and wild horses would not have been able to drag me away right now. I was not sure he felt the same though.

"Okay, I can admit I was thinking along the same lines, about leaving." He poured some wine into our glasses. "But I don't feel like it now either."

His eyes met mine over the brim of his glass as he raised it.

"Cheers to a nicer than expected company."

I let my glass touched his and then took a large gulp of wine. Those eyes were not to be trifled with.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Yes. Anything as long as you don't ask me what I was thinking just now, I thought."

"Tell me if I'm wrong, but you seemed upset this morning, or sad, over something else than the coffee incident. Were you?"

The memories from the night came flooding over me again and it suddenly seemed inappropriate that I was sitting here, enjoying myself, when the pain and grief was still there for all those people. For a moment I felt ashamed that I had allowed myself to forget, but deep down I knew that if I was to survive as a doctor I would not be able to absorb the pain of all my patients. I should feel *for* them, but not feel *like* them, then grief would engulf me.

He saw my mood shift.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

"It's okay, I had just managed to forget for a while. I had a really rough night. I work in the ER at the hospital and there was this huge accident on the motorway last night, so I was up all night taking care of the casualties. I've never... not like that... people died on me."

I looked down in my lap, felt the tears return, burning behind my eyelids. I did not want to cry in front of him and ruin this nice lunch. He would not want to see me again, the dramatic crying girl.

"It's hard to explain if you haven't experienced it."

"I know."

I looked up at him again, expecting him to look awkward, but he did not. He looked like he was feeling compassion, he looked like he understood.

"Did Bella tell you what I do?" he asked unexpectedly.

"No, she just said you and Matt are friends since childhood." Come to think of it she could have been far more generous with information about him, she had shared nearly nothing resulting in this huge surprise.

"True, but we're also working together, in the army. I'm a major."

I just stared at him, trying to wrap my head around this. I had barely gotten used to the thought that he was not a midget, now I had to process that this nice guy was an officer, commanding people. He cleared his throat.

"I'm just saying, because I *do* know what it feels like when people die in front of you."

I bit my lower lip.

"It would be easier if you weren't so nice right now."

"Why?" He looked utterly astonished.

"Because it will make me cry, and I really don't want to."

He took my hand and I felt so extremely silly.

"Why not, Molly? Maybe it's what you need."

"Did you? When people died on you?"

"No, not in a long time, not until I realised that *I* needed to cry to stay sane. There is no shame in crying."

It is just that where I grew up, one needed to be tough and crying still does not come natural to me, but with his sympathetic chocolate eyes on me I could not hold back anymore and started sobbing. To my dismay, he pulled his chair closer to mine and put his arms around me, not at all caring about the other lunch guests (and to be honest they did not seem to care much either). First, I mostly felt embarrassed, then I slowly let myself sink into him, let the tears come out and it just felt...good. This day, this lunch was full of surprises. I never could have imagined, but being held by him, wetting his shirt with my tears, felt right, felt natural and comforting. He was perfectly warm, he smelled fantastic and he felt safe.

Someone cleared his throat next to us and it was the waiter standing there with two steaming plates, one pasta, one risotto. We moved apart, and I dried away the tears that now had ceased. I *did* feel a bit lighter.

"Thanks. Thanks for putting up with a sniffling wreck."

"No problem, although 'sniffling wreck' are your words, not mine. Do you think you can eat something?"

"I'm starving actually. Haven't had a bite since last night." I took a spoonful of mushroom risotto and it was delicious, like the food here always was. He smiled and dug in on his pasta.

"So, you work in the ER. Are you a nurse?"

"Doctor", I slurred because my mouth was full of risotto. I knew it was impolite to talk with a full mouth, of course, but it disturbed me he would so quickly assume that I had the more feminine of the two professions.

He creased his brows. "It's just that you look too young to be a doctor, so I just assumed..."

Oh, fair enough.

"I'm barely finished, still have most of my foundation years to go."

"You can't be much older than Bella? You don't look to be her elder sister."

"We're born the same year actually, eleven months apart. Our parents were very productive."

"And you're from Newham?"

I gave him a surprised look, but he gave me the natural explanation.

"I know that Bella is."

Of course, he knew Bella and Matt.

"And you? Where are you from?"

"Bath. No brothers or sisters, uneventful childhood. Newham sounds much more interesting."

I got the feeling he was not keen on talking about his life in Bath, past or current one, but it was anyway nice that he was so interested to hear about mine and somehow, he got to know surprisingly much about the Dawes family. Like personal stuff. I don't know how really but it just flowed out from me, the story of the half-misery I had grown up in, difficult yet filled with love, and how I had left Newham behind but of course still was close to my family. Even dad, who had sobered up in the last years, so it was possible to have a proper relationship with him, and he even got himself a job and kept it. Things were better than ever in the Dawes household, and now Bella marrying her Prince Charming.

"Sounds quite nice even if it seems like it was hard too. I wish I had brothers and sisters, but Matt and his sister Ginny is the closest to it I've ever had." Briefly he looked sad, but quickly snapped out of it. "Speaking of Matt and Bella, we're here to plan a performance, we mustn't forget."

"Oh shit, yes we are. You had already rehearsed something, or were you just kidding me?"

"I was a little bit, but I actually had one song in mind."

"Which one?"

I loved to see that his cheeks now flushed, he looked embarrassed again.

"Don't go breaking my heart."

I wasn't sure I knew it.

"Is that a *One direction* song?"

"Nooo!" He shuddered and sounded like I had committed blasphemy. "Elton John! That's part of the general education."

"Not in Newham, not in my generation at least." I spat my tongue at him. It was hard to tell how much older than me he was, but maybe eight to ten years so technically another generation. Not that it bothered me.

"It's a great song!"

"Okay, I'll have to listen to it, obviously, and google the lyrics."

"You should."

"*If* I like it we can sing that one..."

He leaned close to me and said in husky voice; "If you don't like it, there's clearly something wrong with you."

The proximity of him gave me goosebumps, and I did not want him to think that there 'clearly was something wrong with me'.

"I'll listen to it and let you know. Should we meet up again before the wedding and rehearse? I know we were kidding both of us about rehearsing every week, but once at least?"

His eyes were locked in mine.

"Yes. Once, at least." The way he said it felt like a promise of something, I don't know what. Rehearsing a stupid song, but what else?

"Can you do next weekend?"

He gave it approximately two seconds' thought.

"Yes, Saturday."

"It's a... plan then." I so nearly had said 'it's a date', but in contrast to when I joked about that in my text message the other day, I would feel embarrassed for real if he thought I thought it was a date now.

"It is", he beamed.

We had finished our plates and the wine bottle as well. I was feeling slightly drunk which was not strange since it was mid-day and I had had very little sleep, but it was a very pleasant kind of tipsy. I wished this lunch would not end, but it felt like it was time to break up. This had already lasted much longer than any of us had expected and he had said he was to meet an old friend before he took the train, so I did not want to keep him.

We said good bye outside as we were headed in different directions. He seemed to hesitate a second, then leaned in and kissed me on the cheek.

"I had a great time. It was... unexpected."

"It was, unexpected and nice."

I really did not want to go, but we had said good bye and lingering would seem strange, so I just gave him another smile and turned and left. I was wondering if he was looking after me but did not turn to check. This first advent had turned out quite wonderful after all. I was already longing for next Saturday in manner of pathetic needy spinster.

Chapter 7: Monday, Dec 4 - Charles

Monday and he was back to barracks. Not that he actually lived at barracks, as a major he had the privilege to live in a small house off base, but he spent his working days here unless he was on tour. He did not really consider that house as home anyway, because he had never bothered to make it personal. For now, home was his parents' house, but he wanted something of his own that felt more like it too. Someday.

In contrast to last week when they had the field exercise, this one would be mainly desk work. Usually he was fine with that as long as the proportion of it did not exceed the more active service, but today he got nothing done. If anyone entered his office, he would look as focused as ever on the task at hand, with eyes fixed on some papers, brow creased, fingers raking through his hair every now and then or scratching his neck as if he was deliberating some tricky work-related issue. Truth was, he did not really see what he had in front of him and his mind was drifting off elsewhere.

The past weekend had been so different from how he had expected it to be, in a good confusing way which was impossible shake off. The collision at the metro station which had continued to disturb him long after the girl disappeared out of sight, then unexpectedly meeting her again and the greatest surprise of all when she turned out to be *Molly*.

When he first had seen her sitting there in that little nice *trattoria*, his heart had started beating erratic. He had no idea what he would say to her as he made his way over to her table, he just knew he could not *not* go there now when he had

stumbled over her again after thinking about her the entire morning. He was not even sure what he had said in the end, but she had answered something funny about if he really thought it was safe to have a meal in her proximity or if she could expect food to start flying around. She had smiled at him and confirmed what he had suspected already, that she had a mouth made for smiling rather than for looking angry. She had the loveliest cheeky smile and for the first time since he was a teenager, he had found himself stuttering as he tried to ensure her he was not a creepy stalker. His usual self-confidence was gone, together with his resolve to avoid *all* women for a foreseeable future. He wished intensively that he could sit down with her and have lunch instead of with the spinster and when he took her hand in his, he hoped the brief contact could somehow transfer a wish to use the number he had given her. And then it turned out that he already had her number too, because *she* was Molly.

He still could not quite believe this coincidence. That it was her, this intriguing girl, who turned out to be both hilarious and vulnerable during the hours they spent together, hours that passed by much too fast. He had a feeling she did not understand neither how funny nor how beautiful she was, she seemed totally unaware of her own magnetism and charm. She was everything he had *not* imagined her to be and he wanted more of her company. This morning he had re-read all her texts, twice, and now when he read them hearing her voice in his head, he realised she had been making fun of him the whole time. As she said herself, tried to make fun of a situation she found miserable.

She had pictured him as a bald, chubby, midget in a knitted jumper with Christmas motive. He snorted to himself in the silence of the office. Surely, he must be one

notch better than that, even if he was a 35-year old divorcee and father. Not that he in any way thought it was a bad thing that he had a son and was a dad, he would not change Sam for anything. It was just that such a baggage, an eight-year old boy, might not seem very appealing to a young single girl. Of course, he did not know for sure if she in fact was single. Matt had said she was unmarried and she did not have an engagement ring (he had checked), but that was not the same as being single. Anyway, he for some reason had chosen not to talk about his past even if this was simply a friendly lunch to plan a performance, nothing else.

Funny thing was, that when he met Elvis half an hour after reluctantly saying bye to Molly, it turned out that *he* knew her.

They had met in a pub of Elvis choice and first they had talked about Elvis dilemma. For once, he had been both serious and sad, very unusual for Elvis.

"You know I've been going out with Georgie for nearly two years."

"Yeah"

"It's the longest relationship I've ever had."

Charles just nodded, it seemed unusually difficult for Elvis to find the right words to describe his feelings.

"It may seem stupid, but I've been struggling to accept that this is where I want to be, with her. I've been thinking that it doesn't suit me to be committed to one person when there are so many lovely girls out there – and I have not always been faithful."

This was not news to Charles. He disliked this side of Elvis, but he knew it had always come as part of the Italian stud package.

"It's just that lately, it has felt more and more like I only want to be with her, not with anyone else."

"How can that be a problem? It sounds great that you want to be with the girl you're going out with?"

"Yeah, it does, doesn't it? It's just that I haven't been able to accept that somehow, so I've kept hanging in bars more often and for longer than I should perhaps, flirting and sometimes more, even when I don't really feel like it. It's like I can't stop myself, have to prove I'm still the same."

"But you're not." Charles stated the fact.

"No, I guess I'm not. The only one I want to be with is her. Problem is, I think I realised a bit too late. Last night I was out and suddenly it all just felt completely wrong and I went to see her. Came to her place in the middle of the night and she didn't let me in. Said it was too late and I got the sense she wasn't talking about just then. I think she meant too late for us, that she's tired of it all and in a way, I can't blame her because I have playing this game for long. She hasn't answered any of my texts today. What should I do, mate?"

"You've always been good at talking Elvis, but to me it seems like it's time to *show* her you're for real. If you want to be with her, you need to let her know there's no one else. That she's all you want."

"And hope it's not too late..."

"Yeah, but then at least you have been honest with how you feel about her now."

Elvis smiled.

"I knew I could trust you to give me some good advice."

"Not that I know why you think I'm trustworthy on the topic of love, divorced and all."

"We both know that was more down to Rebecca being a bitch than anything else."

"There are always two sides to everything. I think she was deeply disappointed that I wouldn't give up the army for her. Maybe I would have if I had loved her enough, so in a way she was right that I chose to destroy things. But that's in the past now, thank God."

"And what about now, are you seeing anyone, Charlie?"

He smiled to himself when Elvis called him Charlie, as it reminded him of the text conversation with Molly.

"If you had asked me yesterday, I would have said no – not seeing anyone and don't want to. It's just such a relief that everything with the divorce is over and done with and the only thing I want is to make my bloody life stay on track with Sam and work."

"I sense a 'but' here?", Elvis asked, curious.

"I came to London today to meet up with Bella's maid of honour because Bella and Matt have set me up to sing a duet with her at the wedding."

Elvis almost choked on the beer.

"*That* is one sight I'm looking forward to!"

"Yeah, I bet you do. Anyway, I had this idea that she would be this really annoying person and I was so not in the mood to meet her. When I just had arrived at Paddington, I ran in to this other girl that I..."

"That you what?"

"Really liked. We collided, and I spilled my coffee on her, she was angry, and we talked for a while – and I just liked her."

Elvis looked at Charles with surprise, it was very unlike him to have sudden feelings for a woman, normally always in control of everything and emotions in check. Elvis was the impulsive one of the two.

"Are you telling me it was love at first sight?"

"No! Of course not, I don't even believe in that, but I could not stop thinking about her. And then when I was going to meet with the bridesmaid, it was *she* who turned up. *She* was Molly."

"Now wait, so I follow. It was the girl from the station?"

"Yes."

"And the station girl, the girl you're going to sing with, is Bella's sister Molly? I didn't think of that she is the maid of honour."

"She is."

Elvis whistled.

"What?"

"No, I just didn't connect the dots first, but I know Molly. She's flat mate with my Georgie and she's really great. Witty, funny, pretty. I can see why you liked her."

Charles felt like saying he found her more beautiful than pretty but refrained as he knew Elvis would tease him.

"What happened then?"

"When we realised it was each other we were supposed to meet, we had lunch, had a really great time and we're to meet again next Saturday. Only to rehearse the song."

He was not sure why he felt the need to clarify that.

"Of course, only to rehearse. And now you're already looking forward to Saturday?"
Elvis looked at him searchingly with a smile at the corner of his mouth.

"I suppose I am. Surprisingly much. As I said, I just liked being with her."

Elvis grinned at him.

"It seems you need to be careful, or you might fall head over heels."

"You know that's not really me."

"It has never been, but that doesn't mean it couldn't happen, does it? After all, it's Christmas and then there is a lot of magical things going on", he winked.

Charles elbowed him in the side, reached for his beer and thought it best to change subject to talk about what they were to do at Matt's stag night in two weeks.

He returned to now. He had almost felt jealous when Elvis had said he knew Molly, which was quite stupid as it had been evident from their talk that he loved Georgie. It was just that Charles wished he knew her better and had been part of her life earlier, a silly illogical wish and he did not know where it originated from.

He sat with mobile in hand and considered if he should text her. Would it be a nice gesture, or seeming too eager somehow? Finally, he could not resist.

From: Charles

Hi Molly,

Just wanted to say thanks for a nice time yesterday. How are you feeling today?

With everything you told me?

/Charles

He hesitated briefly, then pressed send. No answer came, not then not in the next hours no matter how many times he checked his phone (which in all honesty was *many*) and he regretted sending the text. Then, as he was getting ready to go home for the day, his phone finally buzzed from a text.

From: Molly

Sorry for late answer. Been working. Thanks, had a great time too.

Thanks for asking. Quite fine but have scheduled appointment with our counsellor.

He was considering what to answer and how soon he could answer without coming across as desperate. She had not asked a question in return, was that meant to be dismissive? Before he had decided a second message came.

From: Molly

BTW, listened to your Elton John song. Not complete crap. OK, we can do it.

He laughed silently.

From: Charles

Not complete crap?! It's bloody excellent!

From: Molly

If you insist :)

Looking forward to Saturday anyway. My place this time? Or do you want to make a quick escape?

His heart jolted at the thought of being in her home. He immediately pictured her flat. Pictured her in it, pictured him there too and suddenly his imagination was playing tricks with him and he had to pull himself back to reality as he felt his body reacting instantly. This was completely ridiculous. He was a major on duty, not a love-sick puppy of a teenager and he needed to snap out of this. Yet, there was a silly smile on his lips as he answered her.

From: Charles

Your place sounds good, no need for escape plan this time.

Looking forward to Saturday too.

He was still smiling when Matt knocked on the door and poked his head in, wearing a Santa's hat. He looked silly but happy.

"It's not Christmas yet and I doubt it's according to regulations to combine your uniform with a Santa's hat", Charles commented dryly.

"Don't be such a bore, it was a gift from the section. A few of the guys wanted to take me down to the pub as they realised I only have a few weeks left as a free man. Care to join?"

"On a Monday?"

"As I said, time is running out.

"Do you really think life will be that different once you get married? Charles smirked.

"No, not at all, but it's a good reason to go to the pub on a Monday. I've done nothing like it this weekend, Bella says we're too busy with the wedding preparations, and I think it will be like that up to the actual wedding day. I like it, but it's nice to get a break from it too. Please come."

"Okay, I'll join you."

Charles thought it might be a good opportunity to find out a thing or two about Molly, so even if he did not feel a surge for drinks after the wine lunch with Molly and beers with Elvis yesterday, he decided to come along.

Even on a Monday evening the pub was filled with people, quite a few which they knew, but also locals they had no connection to. Like everywhere else, Christmas songs were playing in the background and they could not quite decide if they liked it, or if they hated it and feared it would make their ears fall off before Christmas. It was annoying, yet somehow created a warm fussy feeling, like the world was embedded in cotton. Then *Feliz Navidad* started playing and they finally agreed on that they hated it.

Charles wanted to ask Matt about Molly, but hesitated. He did not want Matt to think he was interested in her, he was just a bit curious, that was all - but he was not sure Matt would believe that. Suddenly something caught his eyes.

"I'll be back in a minute", he told Matt.

Matt's gaze followed his friends as he strode over to an unknown bearded man in a hideous knitted pullover and talked to him. Next, Charles took up his wallet and seemed to give the man a few bills and then, surprisingly, the man took off his pullover and handed to Charles who brought it back with him, carrying it in hand like a trophy.

"That's an irregular method for buying clothes. Have you heard of shops or the internet?"

Charles grinned and looked extremely pleased with himself.

"It's just that this jumper was so perfect, I got it for a special occasion."

Matt wondered if his friend had lost it. This ugly jumper with Christmas motive was very unlike anything Charles ever would be seen wearing. When he was not in uniform, his taste was always impeccable. It must indeed be a very special occasion, both because he was prepared to put it on and as he had used such unconventional methods to get it.

"*How* can this jumper be perfect for *anything*? Will you tell me what it is for?"

Matt thought he saw a bit of redness on Charles' high cheek bones.

"Just a bit of fun."

"Okay, if you don't feel like sharing. Anyway, good to see you planning for some fun and having bit less of a stern-face. I don't think I've seen that in you or looking this mischievous since way back before the divorce."

"Really?" Charles said surprised and slightly alarmed that people around him would think he had lost his sense of humour.

"Really. This evening you seem more like you used to be when we were at uni, like you're having fun for once, like you're happy."

He did not like the thought that he slowly had changed into a more serious and stern man over the years, but he knew what Matt said was true. It had come gradually as the result of a combination of what he had experienced on tour, the increased responsibilities as he raised in rank, the constant arguments with Rebecca, the divorce and missing Sam when he was not with him. Those things had changed him little by little despite that he did not want to. Strangely, it felt like something had changed in him a bit in the opposite direction in the last twenty-four hours, something that made time turn back to feel more like the young, carefree man he had been before all that.

"I'm not complaining", Matt said. "Whatever it is that has caused this change, you should just keep doing it."

"I'll think about it", he said with a smile and knew that he most definitely would.

A/N: Apologies for any spelling errors but have written this chapter on mobile. I'm on family trip to Copenhagen this weekend. Despite that it's been grey, rainy and cold, Copenhagen is the cutest city around Christmas with all lights and Christmas markets, putting me in the perfect spirit for this story.

x

Chapter 8: Tuesday, Dec 5 - Georgie

"Now I want to hear *everything* about your close encounter of the third degree with the midget", Georgie said.

The two girls were snuggled up in the sofa under a blanket, tea mugs in hand. They had not really had a chance to talk since the Saturday evening break at the hospital, as Molly had stayed on due to the massive accident and they had not been home together during their awake hours since.

"It was close encounter of third degree, that much is right, but hardly with a midget."

"No midget? That's disappointing", Georgie giggled.

"I'm not sure I would call him a disappointment", Molly said hesitantly.

"Go on, tell me then."

"First, something else happened when I was on my way home from work Sunday morning. At the metro station, this man ran into me and spilled a whole mug of coffee over me. I was so mad, my favourite coat and all and after that horrible night, I was prepared to strangle him, and I wasn't very nice to him."

"No wonder."

"No, but then he was really kind and offered to pay for dry-cleaning and he was also bloody gorgeous."

"*How* gorgeous on a scale of one to ten?"

"Twelve!"

"For real?"

"Tall, dark stranger in the most cliché way possible."

"So, what did you do? Ask for a snog as compensation?"

"No, that was a brilliant idea actually, but I just left after being rude to him."

"Molly!"

"I know, I couldn't help it. I was so tired and close to crying and I had to get out of there quick, not to make a spectacle of myself. But there's more..."

Georgie nodded expectantly.

"Later, I went for that lunch with Charles. We had agreed to meet at Leo's."

"Did you take the midget to Leo's?! Molly, that's the kind of place you should save for a nice date, not waste on someone you don't want to see in the first place."

"I just figured I should make the best of it, and it turned out to be a good thing because when I sat there waiting, the guy from the train station appeared out of nowhere."

"At Leo's?"

"Yes."

"So you ditched the midget and had lunch with him instead?"

"Yes and no. The amazing thing was, *he* was the midget, so I had lunch with him."

"The tall dark stranger was the midget?"

"He is Charles, yes. It seems like we need to forget the midget."

"You're kidding me?"

"No, I promise! I just can't believe Bella didn't give me any hint of it."

"How was he then, besides being a looker? Was he nice?"

"Second impression was that he's a top bloke, for real. Nice but not so nice that he's a boring whimp, if you get what I mean. There's definitely an edge to him too. He's hot, kind and funny, all in one."

"Sounds like a Kinder egg for adults; surprise, chocolate and toy", Georgie smirked.

"Hmmm... Not sure he's to be toyed with, but there was definitely a surprise and his eyes are like chocolate, dark brown... I haven't had such a great time with a guy since..."

She tried to think of a time when an actual date had felt this good but could not remember one.

"I haven't had such a great time with a guy for as long as I can remember", she sighed.

"Are you telling me you're falling for him, Molly Dawes?"

"I've only met him once, so that would be a bit previous, wouldn't it? But I liked him, and I'd like to see him again."

Georgie noticed her friend's rosy cheeks and twinkling eyes and felt quite convinced there was more to it than just 'liked', but *that* Molly would have to figure out for herself.

"And will you see him again? I mean before the wedding, when you'll obviously meet."

"On Saturday", Molly beamed.

"Like a real date this time?"

"No, for rehearsing. He'll come here, so we'll obviously need to clean before Saturday."

The girls' flat was cosy but not the tidiest place.

"A rendezvous with a tall dark stranger here in our flat", Georgie said, dreamily gazing far away.

Molly hit her with a cushion, nearly knocking her tea mug over.

"Don't say like that! You'll make me nervous, I prefer not to think of it as a date - and it's not. It's terrifying enough already that he's so good-looking, but somehow the start we got off to has made me not be all intimidated when I'm with him and I'd like to keep it that way."

"Good for you, no reason to be just because he's handsome."

"No, but you know what I'm usually like. I can be funny when I don't like a guy particularly, but when I do and want him to like me I always get embarrassed and mute. Not with him so far."

"This sounds so promising. I can't wait to hear what happens on Saturday."

Truth was that neither could Molly. Since they had said good bye Charles had been on her mind *a lot* and when she got the text from him yesterday, her stomach had made a happy somersault.

"And remember something, you're a catch. Any guy should be lucky to have you."

Molly smiled at Georgie, grateful for the confidence boost.

"How about you then, and *your* dark handsome man? Elvis hasn't been around this weekend?"

"No." Georgie's voice changed from happy to sad and Molly could easily see something was bothering her. "Or, he *was* here Saturday night, but came many hours after he had promised to, drunk of course, and I didn't let him in. I'm so bloody tired of feeling that he's never really there for me, you know. When I need to cuddle up with him, he's usually off to some bar doing God knows what. He never wants to talk about the future, if he'd like to move in together at some point. I don't know for sure if he even sees a future for us together and last night I was fed up with it all. I love him, but I don't think I can take this anymore, hanging around in limbo waiting for him to make his mind up."

"You mean you will break up with him?"

"I don't know, maybe. I think I need some space, to think through what I need and not just let my life evolve around him. I have the feeling love shouldn't be this hard, that I shouldn't feel alone so much of the time.

Molly liked Elvis, but he was unpredictable and over time she had seen Georgie bending herself to be with him on his terms, at the cost of becoming sadder somehow. Molly did not always appreciate the way he treated her friend and was not sure if he would change. She moved over to give Georgie a hug.

"I think you're right to give yourself some space and figure what *you* need. And as you said to me, remember you're a catch. He's so lucky to have you."

"If he only could see that... but thanks. Right now, I have to get ready for work though, figure out my love life has to wait until later."

Later in the evening, Georgie was walking through the hospital corridor, her mobile burning in her pocket from yet another text message from Elvis, which she had not responded to. She was not sure exactly what she wanted to say to him, so for now she just let it be.

She came to the room where the McClydes were. Strangely enough, she always enjoyed being with them even though it was so sad. Bones always seemed to appreciate when she came and the last days his sister had been there too. It warmed Georgie's heart to see that he had someone to share this difficult moment with and that they seemed to be close. This evening she found him alone with his mother, though, as the sister had gone to the cafeteria for something to eat.

When she entered the room, he met her with the same warm smile as always.

"Hi Georgie."

"Hi Bones."

She hesitated slightly before she said the name, as she found it a bit difficult to get used to calling him that. She liked Alexander more and that was how she thought of him, something that happened every once in a while.

"How is she tonight?"

"Sleeping now, but she seems so happy to have both of us here. I think maybe she feels ready to go now."

"I'm glad your sister made it in time."

"So am I, thanks for telling me it was time. Will you stay until Jane gets back?"

Georgie knew she ought to continue her round and move on to other patients, yet she sat down beside him, and they continued talking in low voices, not to disturb Mrs. McClyde.

Mary McClyde was dozing, her pain alleviated by the morphine drip. She knew her time was up, and she was ready to leave. She had lived a happy life. She would not have minded if it had lasted longer, but she thought she had been fortunate already to live more happy days than a lot of people ever did. She had married the love of her life and they had so many fantastic years together and two amazing, loving children. She had lived to see her daughter marry and give her grandchildren. She had sometimes worried about Alexander but now she felt hope for him too. She had watched him with that sweet nurse, Georgie, and she had listened to them even more. Like she did now when they thought she was asleep. She did not listen to the words so much as to the sound of their voices, rising and falling. Her voice sounding as if she genuinely cared for them, his soft and warm when he spoke to her. Mary loved to hear her son sound like that. Now he laughed a low laughter which warmed her insides. She knew she would leave her children tonight, but she had faith in that she was leaving them in good hands, with each other, with people

they loved, or maybe could fall in love with. Now she heard Jane's voice as she returned to the room and Georgie left them. She opened her eyes, now was time to say good bye.

"Are you awake mum?" Alexander asked.

"Only to say good bye."

She opened her two hands, so her children each could take one. Jane sobbed and Alexander's eyes were glossy too. They did not want to lose her.

"It's not the end", she told them. "It's just the beginning of something different."

"But we'll miss you so much."

"And I you. You know I love you, you're the best thing that happened to me."

"We love you, you've been the best mum ever."

"Don't make me cry now. Alexander, come here. I want to say something."

He leaned over, and she whispered something in his ear which made his eyes widen with surprise.

"Promise?" she demanded, surprisingly firm with her weak voice.

"I promise, mum."

"Now, will you just hold my hands till I fall asleep?"

They did and for a moment she felt like she did when she long ago had been a much younger mother holding her toddlers' hands and with that feeling she fell asleep and an hour later she was gone, peacefully and silent in her sleep.

Bones and Jane stayed as they were for a long time, wanted to keep feeling the warmth of their mum's hand for as long as they could as this was the last chance.

"What did she make you promise?" Jane asked, curious.

"Oh, that. Just that I would ask a certain girl out on a date."

"And will you?"

"I have to, don't you think?"

"But do you want it too?"

He smiled.

"Yes, for the first time in a very long time I feel like asking a girl out on a proper date."

He was not sure how he would summon the courage to do it. He was normally a self-confident man, known for his cheekiness and he did not have any problems to charm women. This was different because she mattered to him and even his mum had noticed. He had no idea how to ask her out without seeming strange for thinking about such things on his mother's death bed. Somehow it seemed to him that life, living this life as it should be lived, now was more important than ever and he just had to find a way to ask and hope for the best - that she would say yes.

A/N: I really love writing this story, as always living a bit with the characters while I do, so I remain grateful that you keep reading and reviewing. Thanks! Hope you have a cosy second advent, although the story is a bit behind in time and has not reached there just yet.

x

Chapter 9: Wednesday, Dec 6 - Molly

This afternoon I had promised to meet Bella at the bridal shop for a final fitting of our dresses, to see if any further adjustments by the seamstress were needed. Some brides insist that their bridesmaids wear hideous dresses, so they can shine themselves. Bella was confident enough not to need that and instead wanted me to look as fabulous as ever possible, and she had ordered me not only one dress but two, just like for herself. Her intention was that the first part of the wedding would be very winter and snow themed. She would wear a white dress to church, naturally, and I a silver grey and all flower decorations in the church and during the champagne mingle would be in white, silver and green. Later, for the dinner and party it would change to be more Christmas themed with red dresses for us both and flowers and other decorations would match in red, gold and a bit of tartan plaid. She would have Matt change too (obviously not his idea), so he would wear the no. 1 dress uniform for the first part and a black suit for the second. Beats me why you ever would want anyone to get out of the no. 1, except for stripping them naked but Bella has her ideas.

The fitting started with the wedding dress, of course, as Bella in that was to be the star of the show. I really liked this shop because they generously offered Prosecco during the fitting and I now sat sipping mine while watching my beautiful sister. The whole shop interior reminded me of a Twenties' decadent boudoir, in gold and pastel velvet and silk drapers with large tassels.

"I need to get out of this one soon, because Matt is coming at half past and he mustn't see me in this before the wedding."

"He's coming today?"

"Yes, I wanted the seamstress to adjust his suit slightly too, it's a bit on the large side in the back."

"So, you had him drive all the way from Pirbright on a working day just for this?"

Sometimes Matt really does let my sister boss him around too much.

"Nah, his car broke on Monday so it's at a garage getting fixed. He had a friend drive him, they should be here soon."

My heart skipped a beat. Was it possible that the friend would turn out to be Charles? Not very likely, after all a major probably has more important responsibilities than acting chauffeur to a friend with whimsical fiancée, even if he happens to be the best man of said friend.

Bella's first fitting was ready, and she stepped down from the small podium where she had been standing for the convenience of the seamstress.

"Your turn."

She went to take the dress off before Matt arrived and I climbed up instead, not very agilely as dresses like the one I now had on - tight and without a slit - only are designed for horizontal moves, not for any vertical climbs. I loved it anyway, this knee length, discreetly shimmering grey dress which clung to my curves in a very flattering way. I was a bit out of my comfort zone wearing it because I'm not used to expose so much of my body, but what the heck, my sister would only marry once and that was a festive occasion if any. Now Bella was telling me it was not tight enough and I sighed. She was deliberating with the seamstress over my head, or more accurately around my feet where I was posed at the podium.

"I think you should take it in a bit in the back, there's a bit of excess fabric here."

The seamstress seemed to agree and started pinching together the fabric yet some more using needles, while I watched myself in the mirror and sipped my Prosecco. Today I had come directly from work and was not dolled up one bit and still this dress made me feel like a movie star.

The little bell above the shop door jingled, indicating the arrival of new customers. I could not turn as the seamstress was working on my dress, but I tried to glance in the mirror and saw that it was Matt, and odd sight in his uniform here in this ultra-feminine shop.

Bella stepped over and kissed him and said;

"Couldn't you have changed into civvies before coming here?"

Matt sighed.

"Come on, Bells. I'm here, am I not? We have driven quite far for your sake and I thought it would be better to come as quickly as possible than bother changing clothes. How about saying thanks for showing up instead?"

Bella realised she had behaved unappreciative and pushed him too far.

"I'm sorry, baby. Absolutely thrilled to have you here and thank you major James for driving him." She used the title in a teasing tone, suggesting this was someone she knew quite well.

I briefly lost balance in my high heels, sidestepped and the seamstress pricked me with a needle. If someone had been assessing my vital signs, they would have noticed a remarkable increase in heart rate.

"Ouch!"

"I'm so sorry, nearly ready and then you can come down."

Now Charles was in my field of vision too in the mirror and his eyes met mine as he gave me a faint smile. Maybe he also wondered how to acknowledge that we knew each other, if only superficially. Exactly how superficially was very apparent to me, seeing him today.

I would not say that I find the camouflage green uniforms of the British army very exciting in general, but on him it was a whole different ball bag. Dressed in this, he looked an army man to the core. The uniform fit his tall frame perfectly and made

his back look even straighter and shoulders broader than when I saw him last. I could easily picture him giving orders to his men, shouting at them to follow his command, or imagine him facing an unknown enemy without fear, gun in hand. He looked fierce, he looked incredibly hot and he looked completely unapproachable. Was it even the same man I had had lunch with? It seemed highly unlikely that he would have allowed me to wet his shirt with my tears, even encouraged it.

I had not yet told Bella that we had met the other day. I had wanted to and wanted to ask her things about him, but I did not want her to smell a rat. And her olfaction is disturbingly well developed when it comes to things like possible romantic gossip, so I had kept quiet.

"This is your partner for the duet, Charles."

She now happily told me. I saw she was waiting for my reaction and I did my best to seem unaffected meanwhile I tried to figure out what to say. He beat me to it.

"We already met", he said in his deep, posh voice.

"You did?" Her surprise complete as I had not told her. I knew the cog wheels of her brain were working fast now.

"A secret meeting to prepare for the wedding. We take our task seriously", he smirked.

She clapped her hands together and looked extremely pleased.

"Oh wonderful, I know the two of you singing will be just perfect!"

I doubted that but did not say. In fact, it felt like my lips had merged together or I possibly had swallowed my tongue.

Then she turned to Matt.

"Let's go in there so you can try the suit out. I guess you want to head back as quickly as possible." Then to me and Charles; "And you two can entertain each other in the meantime. Plan your performance maybe."

No! I wanted to shout as the two of them and the seamstress disappeared into the other room, because I felt I would not be able to entertain Charles at all. Now that he was major-freakin'-intimidating-James I doubted I would get a sane word over my lips, let alone something entertaining. My most immediate issue turned out to be something more physical though. Getting up on the podium had been difficult enough. Stepping down would be impossible unless I hoisted the tight skirt up above my hips and I had no intention doing that with him watching. So, I stood there hesitating, wondering what to do as staying up there seemed very silly too, now that I had no purpose standing there. I looked up and met his eyes. I could see that he understood my predicament perfectly and it seemed to amuse him enormously, because he was smiling tongue in cheek. On top of already feeling exposed up there in my very feminine dress, this made me feel really annoyed, igniting a spark that finally enabled me to talk.

"Will you help me down?" I hated that I had to ask.

"My pleasure."

In two long steps he was in front of me and when I was standing on that podium my eyes were level with his. He did not drop his gaze as he placed his large hands around my waist and I placed mine on his shoulders and he swiftly lifted me and placed me on the floor. It was a quick move and yet it felt like he held me in the air a few seconds longer than necessary, only to tease me.

He stepped away and I kept feeling a tingling sensation in the area where he had applied some pressure on my body and I muttered thank you.

He sat down on a pink velvet pouf, tried to stretch out his long legs in front of him and looked completely misplaced in here. The rough and camouflage coloured fabric of the uniform stood in stark contrast to pastel velvet and white silk. His tall, athletic frame made the room appear smaller than before. I did not feel like getting changed with him on the other side of a thin curtain, so I just tried to sink down gracefully on another velvet pouf and grabbed my Prosecco glass again. It was possible that repeated exposure to him would turn out to have negative side effects on my liver because I would feel the need of Dutch courage. Note to self to make sure I had some alcohol at home on Saturday.

I said the only thing I could think of.

"You really don't fit in here."

It was not meant as an insult, just stating the facts.

"No, this is for sure one place where camo doesn't blend in", he smirked. "Maybe a knitted jumper with Christmas motive would have been better."

"Only marginally", I smiled.

"You do, though."

"What?"

"Blend in. Very nice dress."

I stared at the bottom of my now empty glass, trying to hide I was blushing.

"Thanks."

It was quiet for half a minute, an uncomfortable half minute during which I was trying to think of anything to say.

"Kind of you to offer to drive Matt", I finally squeezed out of myself.

"He pleaded. Said Bella would sleep in another bed on the wedding night if he didn't make it."

"Poor Matt, sometimes Bella is hard on him."

"I don't think it's too bad, he seems happy anyway. He loves her and loves doing things for her, he just likes to joke about it too."

"You're probably right. She's really lucky to have him."

"They're both lucky. Not everyone finds that, the perfect one to be with."

Again, I found it hard to meet his gaze and would have liked to break eye contact, but it seemed impolite when his eyes were so firmly locked in mine.

Before I could answer anything, and I'm not sure what I would have said, Matt and Bella returned to the room. He was done so it was time for the guys to leave.

"See you on Saturday then", Charles said to me.

"Wait, you're coming to London on Saturday?" Bella asked.

"I'm meeting Molly to rehearse. It seems I'm going to all sorts of trouble on your account these days, Bella", he smiled.

"Can't you stay for dinner? Both of you could come to our place. As we won't celebrate Christmas home it would be so nice to have a small get together before. We could invite some other friends too." Now she turned to Matt, expecting him to rejoice in the idea.

"You don't think we have enough on our plate as it is already with the wedding?", Matt asked.

"Nonsense, we mustn't forget what's important - which is hanging with our friends. Please Charles, say yes."

His eyes met mine again. I tried to stay blank and not let my eyes beam with hopefulness. It seemed like such a nice proposal and maybe he would be less intimidating the more I met him in the company of friends.

"Are you free Molly?"

Yes, absolutely one hundred percent yes!

"I need to check my calendar, but I think so."

"Of course, you are. You told me earlier you had no specific plans for the weekend."

Aaaargh, Bells, sometimes your tactfulness is like that of a bulldozer.

"Yeah, that's right but I realised there might be this event I had forgotten...", I saw their questioning eyes on me, "...but it's not that important, I think I can get out of it...errrr... I can definitely make it."

Please someone beam me out of here, preferably to another galaxy.

"You come too, then, Charles?" she demanded.

"Okay", he finally said looking strangely at me, like he thought I did not want this. I wanted to tell him how wrong that assumption was but could not without making an arse of myself.

"Now we need to get going Matt", he then said abruptly, his tone dismissive like he had spent far too much time in this boudoir for a major.

It seemed completely unthinkable that this man had given me a kiss on the cheek last time we said good bye, now he just nodded courtly to both me and Bella. They left, and I was not sure if I now was longing for Saturday or dreading being alone with him. Singing! With this stern officer of a man.

Bella turned to me.

"Now, dear sister, I want to hear what you think of Charles."

"I don't think anything."

She stared at me.

"I mean, he seems fine. It will probably be okay to sing with him."

She just kept giving me that stare. I swear, MI5 ought to recruit her because she can make a wall talk applying that.

"Christ, what do you want me to say?! That he's bloody gorgeous and intimidating and I can't believe you set me up to sing with him without warning me, not the slightest little hint! Bella, what were you thinking?!"

"Now that's more like it! I knew you would like him. Hope you'll have a fun rehearsal and then I'm looking forward to have you for dinner."

She giggled and went to put on her second dress. My sister certainly knows how to try my patience and I was starting to wonder if she had plotted this whole duet idea to try to set me up with Charles. Her plans usually work out, but if that was indeed her intent, I felt sure that for once she would fail. This dreamy man was so clearly out of my league.

A/N: Fire lighted, a cup of tea and now weaving another OG character into the story. Hope you enjoy!

X

Chapter 10: Thursday, Dec 7 - Rab

Christmas was supposed to be a time of harmony and peace. Rab Khalil did not feel very harmonious, though. This time of year, he always found himself feeling a bit torn between his two worlds and this year more than ever.

Born in UK as the child of first generation Pakistani immigrants, he both felt like a Brit and a Pakistani – but his parents kept insisting he was more Pakistani than he identified himself as being. He looked Pakistani, but he spoke English without any foreign accent and most of the time felt very British on the inside, although proud of his origin. Yet, his parents expected him to walk in their footsteps when it came to culture, traditions, religion, profession – and love. Or rather marriage, as their expectation was that marriage was something arranged between two families rather than a consequence of anything as capricious as love between two individuals.

As a child, Rab had felt that having access to two cultures only had made him richer. When he grew older, he frequently experienced that his two worlds were colliding with him caught in the middle. He loved his parents and wanted to make them proud and happy, but it was hard to combine with staying happy himself. His family were quite secular Muslims and, in many ways, had assimilated to living in

UK, yet many traditional expectations remained on him as the eldest son and he struggled with how to live up to them. When he could not, there were inevitably conflicts between him and his parents, and he hated it.

The greatest conflict up to now had started two years ago and was still ongoing, even if it was not as infected as when it first began, and they did their best to sweep it under the carpet. The conflict had been sparked when Rab announced that, instead of joining the family business, he wanted to enlist in the army. This had been followed by many hard conversations, his father shifted between being disappointed and so angry his face turned red, his mother sad and tearful. They could not understand how their beautiful, intelligent boy would want to become a soldier, killing people, rather than working with them, building on their legacy. Rab on the other hand, felt that he wanted to make a choice of his own rather than just walking in their footsteps, and that he would be proud to defend the country that had welcomed his family and which he considered his home.

After many lengthy discussions and outright fights, they had capitulated, realising they would not be able to change his mind, but they only accepted reluctantly and to Rab's disappointment they had refused to attend his passing out ceremony. He felt quite certain that his mother had wanted to attend, but that his father had forbid it and as the patriarch his word was the final one. It had saddened him, and it continued to be a thorn in his side, knowing that they kept hoping he would leave the army sometime soon, instead of feeling an ounce of pride over what he did. They had reconciled before he went on his first tour, because they loved their son and could not bear the thought of him leaving without making up, but they would never fully accept his choice.

Today, Rab had been able to get a day of compassionate leave approved. Not because anyone close to him was sick, but for the joyous occasion that it happened to be his father's sixtieth birthday and the extended family was gathered to celebrate him. The celebration took place at Rab's uncles restaurant, where an assortment of traditional dishes now was served accompanied by classical Pakistani music, which Rab thought was a welcome break to the Christmas songs played everywhere else. Food was great, company was great, everyone was happy - except Rab who lately found himself having a constant knot in the pit of his stomach because something did not feel *right*.

Rab was a handsome young man, although his Brit friends used to tease him that it would be possible to hide an elephant in his schnauz, which just made him confidently shrug his shoulders and say that it was a perfectly sized and chiselled nose. Large nose or not, he usually received his fair share of female attention and did not hesitate to flirt every now and then, but he had never let anything turn into something serious except with the girl that his parents had set him up with. There was no better description for it really. Years ago, his parents had agreed with Aisha's parents that it was a great idea if the two of them got married one day and they had grown up with that expectation.

Aisha was a nice, pretty, quite shy girl but with a lovely sense of humour once one knew her well, like Rab did. He liked to spend time with her, so he had never opposed to that, on the contrary. It was only lately that it had dawned on him that he would actually be expected to *marry* her soon, share her bed and have kids together. Preferably many of them. Problem was, that even if he liked her it was in a strictly platonic way and she did not evoke any feelings of passion or love in him

except like for a friend or sister. This was bothering him increasingly. He had never been in love for real – and he very much wished to be, but he knew he would never feel that for his fiancée.

He could only imagine how his parents would react if he would tell them. It was expected that he would marry a nice Muslim girl. It did not matter that his family were all secularised Muslims, this was what they expected. If it had been difficult to tell them about and make them accept his career choice, that would be a breeze compared to the storm that would blow up if he said he wanted to marry a girl of his own choice. Maybe they would cut him off, he could not be sure. He did not know how he would be able to live with that, live without his family, but he did not know how he would be able to live in a loveless marriage either.

During the noisy lunch celebration, Rab was listening with half an ear to his family, relatives and friends chatting around him, while he gazed out through the large restaurant windows facing the street. It had started snowing outside, the first snow was finally here, adding a touch of magic to everything. He was hypnotised by the large snowflakes slowly falling and wondered if it was true that not a single one looked exactly the same as another if one looked at the crystals up close.

Suddenly something bright red caught his eye. It was a girl in a red coat, coming out from a doorway in the opposite building. He watched her as she brushed off snow from her bike and then struggled to unlock it. Seemingly the lock had frozen and he smiled when he even from a distance could see from her expression and lips moving that she was cursing it. Finally, she gave the lock a kick and that seemed to do the trick. He could not help being fascinated by her. The colourful coat, a

beautiful face and black curly hair in a dark halo around her head as she was not wearing a hat, despite the snow. He wondered where she originated from, because just like himself she had another skin tone and features than the regular winter pale Brit, looking exotic. Not Pakistani for sure, maybe some African nationality mixed with something else. A very fortunate mix anyway. Now she agilely jumped up on the bike and was off and he thought she was either brave or stupid to bike, since the risk of slipping on ice seemed high today.

He returned his attention to the table company, as his aunt touched his elbow saying something. Aisha gave him a smile from across the table and he smiled back at her and again felt the knot in his stomach noticing the complete lack of excitement this generated on his part. How could he marry a girl when he did not feel for her? How would it be possible to undress Aisha and get *it* up when he was *zero* attraction to her? He tried eating a *naan* but the thoughts nagging him made him lose his appetite.

Outside, the girl in the red coat now returned, maybe she had forgotten something. She parked her bike and hurried inside again, her body language signalling frustration and anger. He was still looking for her when his mobile rang. The display told him it was his CO, which meant he had to take it even on a day like this, especially as the captain had been kind enough to grant him this leave. He signalled to his table neighbours that he would take it outside the noisy restaurant and went outdoors despite that his mum gave him a disappointed look as he left the table.

"Khalil", he answered.

"Captain Geddings here..."

The CO called to brief him in preparation for an exercise that was to start tomorrow, as he had missed the live version of the information this morning. Rab liked Matt Geddings. He was a fair CO who did not find it very important to separate himself, a commissioned officer, from the privates under his command as long as they respected him and followed his orders when it mattered. For that reason, they always did. Now Geddings had even invited the full section to his posh Christmas Eve wedding and as Rab's family did not celebrate Christmas anyway, he had accepted without hesitating. Then he had done something he was not proud of. He had told Aisha that girlfriends and wives had not been invited, only the section as a group. He felt such a strong need to get out and away without her, just have some fun with the lads. Even if he was not a practising Muslim, he rarely drank alcohol, did not see the point of it, but he was looking forward to having some unrestricted fun without having to take care of a shy girlfriend who did not know anyone else. He did not mean to do anything mean to her, but he desperately felt the need to *breathe*.

Just as captain Geddings gave him the final instructions, the girl in the red coat came out through the doorway again. She seemed to be in a hurry as she grabbed the bike again and headed off in the snow, which now was falling more intensively. She had only gone a short distance when the bike slid on some ice. Like in slow motion he saw her tumble and finally hit the ground.

"I'm sorry Sir, there's been an accident. I have to go help... I'll call you back, sorry."

He hung up on his CO, which was highly irregular, but this was an emergency, and then rushed to the girl. She was lying on the ground, but obviously had not hurt herself too badly because he heard her mutter profanities of the kind that would make his mother appalled.

"Fuck fuckety fuck, I hate this bloody shit day!"

"Are you okay?"

She looked up.

"Do I look okay?" she snapped.

She did actually, she looked absolutely amazing lying in the snow in her red coat and dark hair. Even though she was not seriously injured she seemed to feel pain where her bum had hit the ground and grimaced. Her handbag had flown away through the air, its contents now spread in the thin snow layer covering the ground. He reached to start collecting them for her.

"Don't touch my things!"

"What?"

"I know your type."

She brusquely took a lipstick and a pack of tampons from his hand and he backed off, now a bit annoyed.

"What type? The one that tries to help?"

She just gave him an angry stare and continued to collect her lost items.

"Sorry, I was just trying to be kind."

He watched as she got to her feet, got the bike up and lead it to the pavement.

"Don't stare at me! What are you, some voyeur taking pleasure in other's misery?"

Now he had had enough of this rude girl and just gave her a cold look expressing that, before he turned his back to her and started walking in the direction back to the restaurant. Then he heard a sigh behind his back and felt a hand touching his arm, and he turned around to face her again. Her face now looked softer, apologetic.

"I'm sorry... It's not your fault I'm having a bad day and I shouldn't take it out on you."

When he turned around she added.

"I mean it, I'm sorry. Thanks for the help."

"Are you hurt?"

"My bum and my pride, nothing I won't survive. It's just been a shitty day... I was waiting for news about something and it didn't come, and I think that means *bad* news and just because I waited for the mail to come I was late to work, and then the lock to the bike was frozen, and I forgot my handbag and then I slipped..."

She smiled faintly.

"...then this nice guy tried to help me, and I was being a total asshole."

"It wasn't *that* bad."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, maybe it was, but you're forgiven now that I know your story."

"Thanks. I really should get going. I'm soooo late for work, I'm totally stressed out."

Despite her words, she made no sign of moving away, suddenly seemed reluctant to leave.

"Yeah, you seem very stressed", he smirked.

"Probably will have stress breakdown any minute", she smiled in return. "What are you doing here in this cold anyway, without a coat?"

He nodded towards the restaurant.

"I'm having lunch with fifty people of my closest family, to celebrate my dad's sixtieth birthday."

She looked at the sign above the restaurant door, *Little Karachi – Pakistani restaurant*.

"I've never been to a Pakistani restaurant. Is it any good?"

"I should hope so, my uncle owns it."

"Ah, nice. Maybe you could take me some time?"

He felt butterflies in his stomach at the thought of taking this girl anywhere, as his date, but that was obviously something that never was going to happen and the mischievous grin she gave him indicated she was only joking with him anyway.

"I hope you have a great lunch then, I need to go now."

"And you have a great life until next time we run into each other by coincidence."

"Why does next time have to be by coincidence?"

If the talk about the restaurant had not been an invitation, this clearly was, but he found himself unable to respond to it. How could he, when he was promised to another girl who was sitting just on the other side of the wall? He was not that type of guy. He was a good and decent guy who did the right thing. Something inside him told him he wanted to meet this girl again more than anything, but he just remained silent and looked at her like he did not notice the invitation. She shrugged her shoulders and nodded good bye again and turned to walk to her bike. He kept looking after her and she only had walked a few feet when she slipped and fell again, this time landed flat on her back staring up in the sky.

She started giggling.

"I give up, I'm apparently not supposed to get to work today. I'll just stay here."

He went over to give her a hand, but then slipped too on the ice that was hidden under the snow layer that was growing thicker by the minute. Both of them burst into fits of laughter and she said;

"Come on, let's do it. It's not that often you find yourself lying on your back in the snow."

He felt a surge go through his body.

"Do what?"

"Snow angels!"

She started moving her arms and legs, creating the silhouette of an angel around her in the snow. He had not done this since he was a kid and felt a bit silly, but he could not resist joining her and he felt an easy happiness he had not felt in a long time. Private Khalil making snow angels with an unknown girl - a swearing, definitely non-Muslim girl that his parents would never approve of. Yet this felt so good.

Finally, they got to their feet, carefully, not to slip again and not to destroy the angel patterns. One small angel next to a larger one, almost looking like they were holding hands.

"Thank you", she smiled. "You have made my day."

And she had made his, maybe his entire week. They said good bye again and she jumped up on the bike, started biking more careful this time, and he turned around to go inside but then came to think of something, turned and shouted after her.

"I'm Rab by the way. What's your name?"

"Maisie!"

She was gone, and he returned inside. Felt more like a stranger in his own life than ever, looked at Aisha and knew she would never make him feel a surge in his body like Maisie had.

When they all left the restaurant a few hours later, the intensive snow fall had erased his and Maisie's angels and his heart filled with sadness at the loss.

Chapter 11: Friday, Dec 8 – Molly & Georgie

"Do you have any plans tonight? If not, maybe you want to join me to mum and dad's place. Bella has something planned for the whole family."

Molly and Georgie were having breakfast before heading off to work.

"What has she planned this time?"

"She has planned a DIY session, we are to help her make the name cards for the table seating." Molly rolled her eyes and sighed. "I don't know why she doesn't let a professional do that, but it seems like she has an idea it will be this family bonding activity. I'm just wondering what those cards will look like, especially the ones dad make."

Georgie laughed, it was difficult to imagine Molly's dad Dave busy himself doing beautiful cards.

"Why at your parent's place? Bella's and Matt's house is both more spacious and tidier."

"I think she realised she would not manage to get everyone to come there on a Friday night. Sometimes even Bella has to be flexible to get what she wants. Anyway, I'm sure it will be quite nice, and we could need your help because I think it's around 120 cards to make."

"It sounds nice but..." Georgie looked embarrassed, "I have a date."

"A date? A date with Elvis?"

"No, a date with someone else."

"Now you need to fill in the blanks! What has happened since Tuesday? I know you were hesitating what to do with Elvis then, but hadn't decided and now you have a date?! Talk about acting fast."

Molly did not say that in an accusing way, she was giggling and curious.

"It's not like that. I mean, I had not planned to go on a date, but I couldn't say no."

"Okay, start from the beginning. What has happened with Elvis since we talked last?"

"We only texted. He wanted to meet and talk but I said no."

On Tuesday evening, after leaving the McClydes, Georgie had finally answered Elvis texts.

From: Georgie

I'm here, I just haven't felt like talking.

From: Elvis

And now?

From: Georgie

Still don't feel like talking but guess we must sooner or later

From: Elvis

I'm so sorry Georgie that I came home late on Saturday

From: Georgie

It's not only about that. If it was, I would have forgiven you long ago

From: Elvis

What then?

Georgie waited a while to answer. Not because she wanted to string him along, but because she wanted to think carefully about what she said before she said it.

From: Elvis

Hello? Are you there

From: Georgie

Yes. Just needed to think. I've done a lot of thinking lately and I really don't know where we're going.

A few seconds later he called, she saw his name on the display, but she did not answer. She did not want to talk, then this would be too hard.

From: Elvis

Georgie, please pick up. I don't want to have this talk only in text messages!

From: Georgie

You must, cos I don't wanna talk. You're so much better than me at talking, always so smooth, making me change my mind. I'm tired of you cajoling me.

From: Elvis

What are you saying?

From: Georgie

That I'm tired of being with you without knowing where we're going. If we're serious. We never plan our future, you're too busy hanging in bars.

From: Elvis

I love you!

From: Georgie

That's only words Elvis. I've needed you to show me for a long time, but that's not happening.

From: Elvis

Are you breaking up with me?

From: Georgie

I'm not sure. I need some space to think. Let's call it taking a break.

From: Elvis

I don't want a break from you

From: Georgie

This is about what I need. I need to think. I need space. I need not to hear you talking a lot of crap but never living up to it – because that's not love. You may think it is, but it's not.

From: Elvis

Can we please meet?

From: Georgie

No, not now. You must give me time. Please respect that.

From: Elvis

OK, if that's what you really wish for. I love you, that's true.

From: Georgie

I have to get back to work.

"So, you really are on a break now?"

"I suppose so."

"How does it feel?"

"I'm not sure. Empty, sad, but also a relief not have to relate to Elvis all the time. I really need some space."

"But you have filled the space with a date?"

Georgie blushed.

"It just happened..."

Wednesday, at the hospital, Bones had come to see her. His mother had passed away quietly the evening before, after Georgie left them, and he was sad but composed. She could not help herself but had to give him a hug.

"I was so sorry to hear about your mother, she was a wonderful woman and you seemed so close."

"We were, and I'll miss her, but I'm glad too that she's not in pain anymore. I know she was happy with her life."

"I'll miss you around here", Georgie smiled at him. "I've appreciate our talks."

"So have I...", he hesitated before he continued as he felt quite awkward, but this was the one chance he would get. "I need to ask you something. It may seem very weird considering the circumstances, but it was actually one the last things my mum said, that she wanted me to do this."

"Do what?"

"Ask you if you wanted to go on a date with me."

"She wanted you to ask *me* out on a date?"

"Yes, but only because she thought I wanted to but wouldn't dare."

"And was she right?"

"Yes, I think she was." He cleared his throat, his blue eyes locked into hers. "Will you, Georgie?"

She had barely broken up with Elvis, they were on a break, but she had far from left him behind emotionally. Yet, she liked Bones very much, was attracted to him even and she would like to get to know him better instead of saying bye this evening. And it had been the last wish of a dying woman, how could she turn that down?

"Okay... Okay, I'll go on a date with you."

He gave her the biggest smile.

"When?"

The sooner the better probably, because otherwise she would likely change her mind and have to make him disappointed.

"This Friday? Or is it all too much with your mother and all?"

"I think I need to get away from it actually, it would do me some good. I've spent so much time in this hospital over the last months, so it's time I start to live a bit again. Friday will be fine. Dinner or drinks?"

"A drink first, then dinner maybe?"

"Sounds like a plan."

They exchanged numbers and then he left. Georgie could not help feeling like she was doing something forbidden even though she technically was on a break from Elvis – and she had a feeling this was something he might have been doing several times even when they were not on a break. She was also looking forward to the date, she could not deny that.

"OMG! What's he like?"

"Tall, athletic, blue eyes, dark hair, kind and considerate... I don't know much more. I guess I'll find out tonight."

"Are you excited?"

"I'm nervous!"

"That's a good sign."

"Is it?"

"If you're not nervous then there's no sexual tension."

"Molly!"

"Just saying. It doesn't mean you have to jump into bed on the first date, but if you wouldn't feel like it at some point, then the date is quite meaningless."

"How about your date tomorrow?"

"It's not a date, we will just be rehearsing the stupid song."

"But if it *was* a date... would you want to end up in bed with him sooner or later."

Molly sighed, she had barely admitted this to herself despite that the feeling had been there at the back of her head practically since she first looked up at him and saw his face at the station.

"I would want to end up in bed with him, sooner rather than later – but it's not going to happen."

"Why not?"

"If you had seen him in the bridal shop you would understand. He's absolutely gorgeous and completely unapproachable. I totally freaked out when I saw him in uniform, he looked so tall and stern at it was completely unthinkable we had had lunch together. A nice lunch even. I'm back to where I always am when I like a guy. Not that I've ever liked that many, but I've dated even fewer of them because I just make a fool of myself."

"Wait a minute – uniform? You didn't say before."

"He's an officer, a major. He and Matt works together."

"Maybe he knows Elvis then. I can't ask now of course, since we're not talking to each other. But think like this; Matt is an officer too, and so is Elvis. You don't think they're intimidating, do you?"

"No, but I know them as boyfriends of you and Bella, that's different."

"I don't agree. He's a normal person too, when he doesn't have the uniform on."

"Still gorgeous though..."

"Can't you just pretend he's that bald midget again? Whenever you look at him, you pretend he's the midget in knitted Christmas jumper and all."

Molly laughed.

"Great suggestion, I think I'll do that tomorrow. I would never want to sleep with him then, but at least I'd be able to talk to him like a normal person."

That evening, Georgie prepared herself for her date and Molly took the bus to good old Newham. She did not go to the council estate where her parents lived very often these days. Now when she was not in the neighbourhood daily, it seemed rougher than when she lived here, or maybe she had just become older and more sensible than when she used to run around here drunk, in a sequin mini skirt. Now she tried to blend in best as she could but was relieved when she finally opened the door to the Dawes household.

Bella had already occupied the large kitchen table with all the stuff she had brought for a successful DIY session and amazingly enough, she managed to engage even Dave. After all, it was the first of his children getting married and it was uncertain if he ever would get to attend such a posh event again.

"We will prepare 126 cards, but it's quite easy", Bella said. "You take one of these cards where I have written the name already", she pointed on cream coloured cards where each name was written in gold. "Then you glue it on top of this larger green one, so it becomes like a frame to the white one. Finally, you glue two of these little snowflakes on and add a little sparkle. It's not difficult but it would take me forever to do by myself, so I'm so grateful if you help me."

Molly had the feeling that it was not so much the help she was after, as wanting the family to feel involved in her wedding preparations. It was quite touching really to see how Dave focused to get his cards right and as the instructions were not that hard to follow, everyone's cards turned out beautiful.

Once they were done and Bella packed them away, Dave went down to the pub, the younger Daweses disappeared to their rooms, Nan went early to bed and Molly and Bella were left with their mum, Belinda. She looked happier these days than they ever could remember her doing when they grew up. She was working part time, helping at a school and felt she had another purpose in life than taking care of her little bleeders, as she used to call the kids, and looking after a drunk husband.

"You look well, mum."

"Oh, thanks, I feel well. Not as knackered as I used to be. Work is fun and gives some extra cash and your dad and I have sort of revived our feelings for each other."

"Really? How?"

"Well, you know he's not drinking as much anymore, and he has started taking me out on dates – like when we first met."

"Dad has been taking you on dates?! What did you do?"

"Nothing big, but it feels special to me. Like last week he took me to an ice cream bar for ice cream floaters, and said he wanted to relive our very first date. Of course, on our first date he only got a kiss at the end, but this time we..."

"Mum, please spare us those details! We're thrilled to hear you're dating but we don't want to hear about your hot sex life."

"It is hot, though", Belinda mused. No surprise, really, that was the one thing that always had worked between Belinda and Dave even when everything else was misery and that was what had resulted in all the little bleeders.

"How about you, Molls? Bella is marrying her Prince Charming, but are you dating anyone?"

"No, I focus on work right now", Molly hoped rather than believed that Bella would let her get away with that answer.

"But you have a date tomorrow...", Bella's voice was very teasing.

"How many times do I need to tell people it's. Not. A. Date? *You* have set me up to rehearse a song for the wedding with this guy, but it's far from a date. I think he would tell you that too if you asked him."

"Are you sure? I thought it seemed like he couldn't stop looking at you in the bridesmaid's dress."

"He wasn't doing anything of the sort. He was just looking strangely at me because I was too shy to say anything coherent to him."

"Oh, I think it sounds like someone *is* a bit interested", Belinda smirked.

"Mum, he is a looker. Every single woman with a pair of eyes would be at least a bit interested, but he's for sure not interested in me, so can we just drop this now."

"Molly", Bella said, suddenly serious, "you need to start having a little more faith in yourself. Forget everything Abominable Artan used to say to you. You're pretty, you're funny, you're a doctor for Christ's sake. You're a catch and you're worth the best!"

"Thanks, I suppose", Molly muttered, embarrassed by all the praise. "But Bella, I still don't think this particular man is interested in me, and can you promise not to embarrass me tomorrow night by acting a match maker and make a fool of me? It's bad enough to be single on a dinner with your smug married friends. If you do, I'll not sing at your wedding. I would probably not show up at all, just stay under the duvet at my nice hotel room and drink champagne and eat tons of chocolate."

"Okay, I'll try not to – but if there's a really good opportunity..."

"No! Please, Bells, let me handle my love life myself."

"It's just that when you handle your love life yourself, you don't have one, so I think it may be time for someone else to take charge of it. What do you say mum?"

"Well, I don't want to take sides here, but it seems to me Bella is a tiny bit right."

Molly sighed, hoping she would survive the dinner tomorrow without any major embarrassments, but she could not help looking forward to it too.

Chapter 12: Saturday, Dec 9 – Molly, Georgie & Charles

Molly's planning for this day had so *not* worked out. Everything was chaos and Charles would call on her door any minute. It was only that knowledge that kept her from a nervous breakdown.

Molly and Georgie had volunteered to bake Christmas cookies as part of a charity project for the hospital. They had planned to do it this Saturday morning before Georgie was scheduled to start work around lunch time. Problem was, that the two pretty inexperienced bakers gravely had underestimated the time it would take to make the cookies. First preparing the dough, then it had to rest for two hours (!), then rolling it and punch out the different shapes with cookie cutters, this was when Georgie had had to leave Molly to go to work and now she was on her own with dough for some hundred unfinished cookies, a kitchen that looked a mess and Charles arriving any time.

They had had fun though, through the morning. Georgie read the recipe aloud.

"Whisk together the measured flour, baking powder and salt in a medium bowl..."

"We only have a small one and a big one. Does it have to be medium?"

"I'm sure the large one will do. ...*in a large bowl to aerate and break up any lumps.*"

"How do I know when it's aerated? And these lumps won't go away."

"Then you'd better keep whisking."

Molly whisked frantically.

"Then what?"

"Set aside."

Molly obeyed.

"Place the butter in a bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment and mix on medium speed until creamy, about 1 minute. Fuck, we don't have any mixer or paddle-thingy."

"I guess we'll have to mix by hand."

One minute by hand for sure did not make the butter creamy as described and the girls had to take turns for ten minutes until the texture seemed creamy.

"With the mixer running... It seems you need to keep stirring Molly. Gradually add the sugar... Damn, I poured everything in at the same time, nothing to do about that. Keep stirring! ... and mix until the butter is lighter in colour, about 1 minute total.

"Does that mean another ten minutes? I'm all sweaty and my arms hurt."

"Then you probably need to start working out more."

"Hrmpf, if it's so easy please go ahead and try yourself"

"Okay, then you read."

Soon Georgie too was swearing because the stirring was exhausting.

"That makes two of us who need to work out", Molly smirked, then continued.

"*Stop the mixer.* Oh, you're allowed to stop now. *And scrape down the sides of the bowl and the paddle with a rubber spatula.* Do we have a rubber spatula?"

"I think so. I think mum got me one when I moved."

"She got you a spatula as a house warming gift?"

"She got me all sorts of practical things, one was a spatula."

"Couldn't she had gotten you a mixer with a paddle while she was at it?"

"Here it is", Georgie said triumphantly, as she now had localised the spatula. "No, I guess she saved that for if I'm getting married one day."

Now eggs and vanilla were to be whisked together, this time in a small bowl according to the recipe which pleased the girls as it was the only kind of bowl left – but then the mixer was to be used again to add the egg mixture to the rest, and then the flour and they cursed as they had to work the dough by hand again. They were now far behind in the time schedule they had in mind to be able to complete this by lunch.

"Okay, what's next? Can we make the bloody cookies now finally?"

"Scrape the dough out onto a piece of plastic wrap and pat it into a 1-inch-thick disk. Wrap tightly and refrigerate until firm enough to roll, at least 2 hours or up to 3 days."

"What?! They're supposed to pick the cookies up this afternoon and then they'd better be ready."

"We have to go for the two hours rather than three days then."

"But I have to go to work in two hours Molly."

Molly suddenly looked bit desperate, as she realised she would have to finish up the baking herself and that the likelihood she would be done by the time Charles arrived was minuscule.

"Dear God, but we can't leave the patients without homemade cookies when they've been promised that, I just have to make it."

They put the wrapped dough in the fridge and sat down to take a deep breath after the ordeal.

"Next year we don't volunteer, right?"

"Unless we have a mixer by then."

"Not sure I want to even then. This experience has scarred me forever", Georgie giggled.

Up to now they had been completely focused on the baking, but since they had a break it was gossip time.

"So, tell me now, I've been patient long enough, how was your date yesterday? What's his name by the way?"

"Alexander McClyde, but his friends call him Bones. It was nice."

"A cuppa is nice. Sure the date was just *nice*?"

"Okay, it was great. I had a great time. He seems like a top bloke. First, we had drinks in a cocktail bar, then he had picked a restaurant I really liked. He was easy to talk to, attentive and funny. Time just passed, I came home much later than I thought I would."

"Any butterflies?"

"What?"

"In your stomach?"

"A few I think. He's really hot and it's not difficult to imagine kissing him."

"And did you?"

"No. I don't know, even if I thought about it, it doesn't feel right to do it so soon after Elvis, and when we're only on a break."

"A break is a break."

"Haven't you ever watched the episode of *Friends* when Ross and Rachel, was on a break and he kissed someone else and had to regret it for a loooong time when they got back together?"

"Yeah, but this isn't *Friends*. Maybe it would be a good way for you to figure out your feelings for Elvis? If it feels wrong, then you know you're still too invested in Elvis to move on with someone else, no matter how *nice* he is. If it feels right, then you should probably go for it and forget about Elvis."

"Is it really that easy?"

"Probably not, but you could try."

"I'll think about it. Anyway, yesterday nothing happened. He was quite the gentleman and followed me home, asked if I wanted to see him again and then kissed me goodnight on the cheek."

"Will you see him again? And did the cheek kissing feel good?"

"I *will* see him again and cheek kissing made me want to kiss him on the mouth, before all those thoughts kicked in."

"Aaaaw! I'm dying, this is so exciting! Have you decided anything, for a second date?"

"No, we'll just stay in touch. He already texted me today and thanked me for a lovely evening."

"So, he's not playing hard to get."

"No games at all with him, and it feels wonderful. Nothing like Elvis. One could think it would take away the excitement, but he's interesting enough anyway."

"What does he do?"

"Ex-military...", she rolled her eyes, "Yes, another one, British army guys seem to pop up like mushrooms wherever we go. He left a couple of years ago and now he's some kind of business man, working as a venture capitalist whatever that means."

The girls kept chatting about Bones and pros and cons Elvis versus Bones over a cup of tea and nearly forgot about time, so Georgie suddenly had to throw herself into the shower to get ready for work, meanwhile Molly had no choice but to resume the baking.

"I'm so sorry I have to leave you with this, Molls."

"You can buy me something really nice for Christmas and we're even."

"Deal."

Giggling Georgie was out the door.

'Flour a work surface and a rolling pin. Unwrap the dough and set the plastic wrap aside.'

"Do they really think one would start rolling the dough with the plastic on if they didn't tell you to?", Molly said to herself, already missing Georgie's company.

'Place the dough disk on the work surface and lightly dust both sides with flour. Roll out the dough to a 3/16- to 1/4-inch thickness, frequently dusting the work surface and using an offset or flat spatula to gently slide under and release any dough that sticks to the counter.'

"Sounds easy enough."

She had about thirty minutes until Charles was due, so she wanted to do her best to get this out of the way.

It turned out not to be easy at all. Either the dough got stuck on the counter or was sliding around because there was too much flour. When half the time had passed, she had only managed to roll out the first piece of dough and not started cutting cookies out. Then the doorbell rang, and her heart raced. She had thought she would use the last five minutes before he came to fix herself and the kitchen up a bit. Obviously, he was early, and another part of today's plan went to shit. Nothing to do about it but to take a deep breath and open the door.

Once again, his height took her by surprise. Was it possible that this man grew taller for every time she saw him? Today he was clad in the black wool coat he had on the first time that she saw him on the station, which felt a bit more familiar and less terrifying than the uniform. When he saw her, he looked first very surprised, then gave her a big smile.

"Are you baking? I thought we were singing today?"

"Yeah, me too. Things didn't exactly go as planned here this morning."

Earlier this week, Matt had come to him and said he had a huge favour to ask.

"Could you drive me to London and back tomorrow afternoon? My car broke and is at the garage and Bella wants me to come for a fitting of my suit."

"You're not wearing your no. 1? That would make things easy enough."

Matt cleared his throat, a bit embarrassed.

"I will, at first, but later I'm changing for a suit. Bella will change dress and she wanted me to..."

"I get it."

He was just about to say that he could not spare the time, but Matt could borrow his car and go, when Matt added, half joking, half serious;

"Bella and Molly are trying out their dresses too, so we have this appointment scheduled with the seamstress already and if I don't make it I'm not sure if she'll forgive me in time for the wedding night."

Charles swallowed the words he had intended to say. *Molly would be there*. His stomach twisted in a strange way. It would be nice to see her again, already before Saturday. Maybe he could spare the time after all.

So, they had gone, and he had found her standing on that little silly podium, in a dress that was anything but silly. He had barely been able to take his eyes off her.

Even if she did not wear much make up and her hair was in a ponytail, she had looked amazing, like this silver shimmering goddess. So different from when they had lunch, even more beautiful but also unapproachable and he had felt himself go all stiff and boring and military. Especially as it was obvious that she did not appreciate having him there, probably thought he interfered in their girly dress fitting. She had even commented on how he did not fit in there. Yet, when he had helped her down from that podium, there had been this moment of tension – at least for his part. Holding his hands around her delicate waist, his palms only separated from her skin by the thin dress fabric meanwhile her eyes met his. A few seconds only, but he had relived them many times in his mind.

He hoped meeting her today would feel better, that he would not feel like a complete arse. Not when he came home to her, not later when they went to dinner. She really did not seem like she wanted to go to that dinner, at least not in his company and he hoped he would not feel like an unwanted appendix all evening and regret that Bella had convinced him.

When her door swung open, he was happily surprised. She looked kind of disorderly wild and absolutely adorable, dressed in apron, with flour more or less everywhere, flushed cheeks and her hair in a messy bun. She also looked slightly desperate and far more approachable than she had done in the bridal shop. He really liked this version of her.

"Things didn't exactly go as planned here this morning."

"*How* did things not go as planned?", he asked in response to what she said, smirking, even though it was quite obvious from her attire.

"Georgie and I volunteered to bake Christmas cookies for the hospital, but it was more time consuming than we had expected and then she had to leave for work and I'm left here with this mess and have to have the cookies ready this afternoon when a guy comes and pick them up. I'm not an experienced baker."

"I could almost guess."

"Oi! No need to be cheeky."

"Purely based on your appearance."

Molly glanced at the mirror next to the door, took in the flour, the messy hair. This was not how she had planned to look when receiving him.

"Oh, I see. Come in anyway. Would you mind helping me? You can also just watch, but then it will take longer before I'm ready."

Desperation and hot flushes from the damn baking had made Molly forget most of her reservations towards him, even if she was slightly shocked at how handsome he was, this time too. It was like her memory could not quite do him justice, so his chiselled face and brown eyes were a pleasant surprise each time.

"Of course, I'll help."

He stepped inside and with a mischievous grin, pulled his coat off.

"You didn't!?" Molly said, when she saw the knitted jumper with a happy reindeer with a huge red nose, surrounded by snowflakes.

"I don't know what you mean", he said teasingly. "This is my favourite Christmas jumper, I wear it daily this time of year."

For one second uncertainty flashed over her face, wondering if she had put her foot in it, but his grin told her he was kidding.

"I love it on you." It was true. If anyone could pull off wearing this ugly jumper and make it look fashionable, it was him. It also made him seem much less distant than in his uniform. "Did you get it specially for me?" she joked.

"I did, as a matter of fact. I couldn't resist."

Her reaction to it was what he had hoped it would be. On his way here, he had feared he might just feel silly, but it was like a joke bonding them instead.

Molly kept smiling both at that he had done this for her and that it appeared he had a sense of humour and self-distance. Maybe he was more of the man she had lunch with, less of the man in the shop than she had thought.

Surprisingly, Charles turned out to be a more efficient baker than Georgie and her, skilfully rolling dough to the perfect thickness and after Molly cut out the cakes, used a flat spatula to transfer them to baking sheets. They kept up an easy banter as they worked, both very aware of the other but not thinking that the other felt the same. Whenever they happened to touch by accident they bounced back like they had been magnets of the same kind of pole, repelling each other, when it was really

the contrary. They were just too occupied hiding their own feelings for the other, to notice one another's reactions.

Charles had taken off the knitted jumper, to only wear shirt as the oven made the kitchen too hot for double layers. He had rolled up his sleeves and Molly kept glancing at his forearms and hands as he applied a rolling pin to the dough. She thought to herself that she could probably spend the rest of the day, or the week, looking at him at work, the muscles and tendons playing, his long fingers holding the rolling pin firmly, without getting bored. She almost unconsciously wondered what it would feel like to have those hands on her body, for more than the short seconds when he had held her in the shop. She also noticed he was quite tanned compared to her, making his hands even more beautiful.

"Have you been on vacation recently?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You're so tanned, at least compared to me."

He laughed.

"No vacation, unfortunately, if you don't call six months in Afghan vacation. It's a memory from my last tour."

"Do you like it, being on tour?"

"I do, it's all I've ever wanted, to live my life out of a bergen."

"So, a life style you wouldn't change?"

He suddenly got afraid he would manage to scare her off, in case there was even the slightest chance she was interested.

"I didn't say that. I just haven't had anything that made me want to change it up to now."

Molly's heart took a little roller coaster ride as he spoke. Downhill when he said he wanted nothing but the army life, up again when he said he might change his mind if the right thing came along. Right person? Silly ideas.

"Why do you like it so much?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I come from a privileged home, a good one but also a bit stiff, everything so correct. In the army I feel like I can be myself suppose. Especially on tour."

"And here I thought the army was stiff, then your childhood really must have been."

He laughed.

"I suppose it can seem so, but even if the army has its regulations, there's freedom too."

"I'm glad you have something you like anyway."

She smiled at him and his insides warmed. He felt the need to fill the silence.

"I have to ask, are we supposed to decorate them too?", he nodded to the ready cookies.

"No, thank God, then we would be busy half the night. It's meant that the patients, especially kids, will get cookies, glazing, sprinkles and stuff and decorate their own cookie if they like to."

"I won't pretend that's not a relief."

"Not in the mood for glazing?"

"One cookie maybe, but not hundred."

"Same here, so no need to pretend you're disappointed", Molly smirked. "Now let's just get them into boxes so they're ready for pick-up. Then we can clear this mess away and get down to business."

"Business?"

"Singing, that's what you're really here for, remember?"

Truth was, he had nearly forgotten. He just enjoyed being in her company. He had not baked since he was a kid and did it with his mum, who had taught him the tricks of rolling. He was grateful for that talent today even though it never had been the way he would have guessed that he would impress a girl.

"Of course."

"You can have a cookie and tea first, just because you've been so nice and helped me. Thanks, for real. I'm not sure what I would have done without your help. And you were good at it. Funny, I didn't figure you as the baking type."

"What type did you figure me as, then?" he said in a challenging tone.

Molly blushed.

"The stern officer type?"

"It seems like you like to place people in boxes; bald midgets, stern officers... You *do* know that few people really are that stereotype?"

"I suppose so. I *should* know, because I've moved out of a box myself. No one expected a girl from a council estate in Newham to become a doctor. It's just like I said before, my imagination tends to go astray sometimes. If I get one piece of someone, my imagination fills in the blanks, for better and for worse."

He shook his head, tongue in cheek.

"Which one do you prefer then? The midget or the officer?"

"The combination, you in this Christmas jumper."

The words came out of Molly's mouth spontaneously and when she heard the words out loud, she felt completely embarrassed. She did not want him to think she had a crush on him when she did not.

"I mean, I like that your tall and not bald and chubby, but also that you're not so deadly serious like you looked in the shop, so I can talk to you, and that you can bake and that you got the jumper for fun..."

Shit, she was just babbling on and had to stop herself to prevent complete humiliation.

"Anyway, do you want that cuppa?"

He just stared at her for a few seconds, wondering if anything of what she said maybe meant she liked him just a little bit. Like he liked her.

"Thanks, that would be lovely."

A/N: Not my intention to tease by cutting Saturday off in half, but don't have time for more today and the chapter is anyway long, so Saturday simply will continue in Chapter 13. Hope you enjoyed first half – who would have thought Charles could bake? In Sweden we make gingerbread cakes, but I suck at it and buy mine. If CJ had offered to help I might have changed my mind - lol. As always, thanks for reviewing!

A/N: Hope you all have a cosy third advent and as always, I hope you enjoy the read and appreciate if you review.

x

Chapter 13: Saturday, 9 Dec - Molly

"So, how do we do this then?"

We had finished our tea. Half-way through our cups I remembered that judging by the incident at the station, he was more of a coffee man, but as he politely was drinking his tea I chose to ignore it and only made a mental note for any possibly future tea/coffee moments. Now we could no longer postpone the rehearsing, even if I desperately wished we could. Rain deer jumper and baking had made me more comfortable in Charles company, the thought of singing with him had the opposite effect. He seemed enthusiastic about starting though, almost as enthusiastic as I once had imagined that the midget would be.

"I have the song on Spotify, so I can play it on my iPhone. We have the lyrics and take turns signing along for the verse, then sing together in the chorus."

"How about the music at the wedding? We can't have Spotify with Elton John in the background then, wouldn't seem very professional."

"They have a band, remember? I got their number from Matt, so I'll give them a call and ask them to be prepared to play this. It's a classic, so it shouldn't be a problem."

Bummer, I thought that might have been one way of getting out of this.

He had taken the effort to print out the lyrics and now tapped his mobile to get the song playing, humming while waiting for it to start. His happiness was intoxicating, but I did not feel very cheerful once he started singing.

"Okay, here we go", and he sang his first line.

Don't go breaking my heart.

Next line was mine, but I just looked at him, feeling a hint of panic.

"Now it was your turn." He paused the music.

"I know, I just can't."

"Why?"

"Because you sing like a bloody choir boy who hasn't done anything else his entire life! That's why."

Not that he sounded like a boy, but like a man with a very pleasant deep voice who absolutely knew how to hold his tone perfectly. How would I be able to sing after that, now or at the wedding?

He laughed.

"I don't sing *that* well, and I'm sure you sing perfectly fine."

"I can sing okay, but not when I'm terrified."

"You can hardly be terrified when it's just the two of us?"

I was but could not admit that.

"I *will* be, singing in front of all those people and just the thought of it..."

"But it's only you and me now, and at the wedding you can pretend it is too."

Well, that was another part of the problem. That I would sing the words of a love song to *him*, this lovely man. How would I be able to do that without turning pink up to my ears?

"Now, let's start over. Okay?"

"Okay."

Don't go breaking my heart.

I couldn't if I tried.

My voice sounded weak and I was singing slightly out of tune for sure, but he smiled at me encouraging like I had hit it perfectly, then sang back to me.

Honey if I get restless.

Baby you're not that kind.

Singing this and looking into his brown, twinkling eyes at the same time, made my knees a bit weak I must admit. I wanted to pull back into myself, but he would not drop his gaze and when I tried to step away a bit, he took my hand. My cheeks were

so hot now that I thought they must be flaming red. I hoped he connected it only to the signing, but most of it was because of the closeness to him. He looked so amazing with this broad smile on his face as he sang and his large hand, now entwined with mine, felt dry, warm and safe, yet thrilling. Mine was probably sweaty out of nervousness, but even if I would have wanted to retract it, he held it in a firm grip, so I could not.

Nobody knows it

Right from the start

I gave you my heart

I gave you my heart

We sang the chorus together and I had the passing thought that it would be nice if the lines meant something to him. When we reached the end of the song, he let go of my hand to pause Spotify and I felt empty, without the song and his hand. Strange, as I just now had wanted him to let go of mine. What had I gotten myself into? Up to now, I had fervently denied having a crush on him, but in this moment, it dawned on me that despite that this was only the third time I met him, or fourth if one counted the station and restaurant as separate, I was maybe falling for him - just a bit. How pathetic was that? My sneaky sister setting me up for a duet with a stranger with the hope to interfere (positively) with my love life, and I'm falling for the guy. It would be perfect – if there had been any chance what so ever that he would fall for me.

"You want to do it again?" he asked.

"I think we had better. I will probably have to practise a lot on my own too, so I don't freeze and forget the words at the wedding. I need to learn the lyrics by heart. It seems like you already know them?"

"I do, been singing this for years", he grinned. "This time, try to relax a bit and look like you have some fun."

"I'm relaxed."

He put his hands on my shoulders. A heavy warmth.

"Relaxed people don't have their shoulders up by their ears, and they usually manage a smile."

"Didn't I?"

"No. I might exaggerate if I say you looked terrified, but not quite comfortable either. Try to relax your shoulders first."

Easier said than done with his hands there.

"Take a deep breath. That's it. Then another one."

We stood there, his hands on my shoulders, me taking deep breaths, and finally I relaxed a little bit.

"Now, let's give it another try."

He looked around for something and an empty bottle caught his eye.

"Here, take this and pretend it's a mike. A mike is always a great way to get rid of some inhibitions."

"Or whisky. My plan was to have a whisky or two before we do this at the wedding."

"Oh no, Ms. Dawes, I'm not going to let you get away with being drunk when we perform." He gave me a stern look, probably the one he would use on his men if they did not please him.

"I was thinking more along the lines slightly intoxicated."

"I think a mike is a better option."

We sang again. This time he moved with the music, surprisingly rhythmic for such a tall man and he elbowed me softly in my side to join him, turned up the volume for more feeling.

"Come on Dawesy! Let me see some moves."

Dawesy? Suddenly I remembered Georgie's advice, to try to picture him like the midget to take the edge of my nervousness. Yes, it was definitely a bald, little man dancing opposite to me and now I felt a big grin on my face. I was still embarrassed about singing but now enjoying myself, dancing close to him, singing in the fake mike.

"So much better already the second time – and we didn't even have a live band. This will be great."

"You *are* actually looking forward to this."

"I wasn't, but now I am. It will be fun with you, don't you think?"

"Maybe, I'm still scared shitless, but you're right, there's no one I'd rather do this with than you."

He gave me a look which was difficult to interpret. He really was a person who quickly shifted between being approachable and distant, like he could choose when to show emotions or not. Maybe it is one of those things they teach officers at Sandhurst. A very handy capability which I would not mind adopting myself, as I feel like an open book most of the time.

"One last time for today?"

"Yeah, let's. Then I need to get myself ready for the dinner at Bella's and Matt's place."

Time had passed quickly with the baking and rehearsing.

The third time went even better, and I started to think that I would be all right with the singing, as long as it was the midget who sang with me. When we were done, I told him to make himself comfortable in the sofa and locked myself up in the bathroom. It is not like we have a big apartment, Georgie and I, so the bathroom is next to the living room and I did my best to forget that he was there on the other side of the door because I was not 100% comfortable having a shower with him there. He would not let me forget though, because he tried to have conversation through the door, half-shouting from the sofa.

"Have long have you lived here? It's really a nice flat."

"Three years now. Since I dumped my boyfriend and left Newham."

Don't know why I added the last piece of information.

"And you share it with your friend Georgie? Is she single too?"

"I've never said I'm single." It disturbed me that he would so readily assume I had not managed to get a new boyfriend in three years.

"Matt said you are. Aren't you?"

Gossiping Matt, thanks.

"I suppose I am."

I wanted to add that plenty of guys had been interested and turned down but could hardly do that without seeming strange. It would also have been a slight exaggeration. There had been some, but not a long line of men fighting for my attention.

"Georgie is too, right now, I think", I added.

"You think? You don't know if your flat mate is single or not?"

"She's been going out with this bloke for a couple of years but they're on a break now."

"Ah, a break, that usually doesn't end up with getting back together."

"No, I guess not, and now this other guy has asked her out and it seems she likes him, so if Elvis doesn't want the break to be permanent, he'd better step up to the plate. Quickly."

"Elvis?"

"Yeah, that's his name for real. I think his mum had a thing for Elvis Costello. They're Italian."

He was quiet for a while, probably thought the topic of my flat mate and her relationships had been exhausted and when he spoke again he changed subject.

"This book here, is it yours?"

"Since I don't see it, it's hard to tell", I smiled.

"Of course, I'm just looking through your book shelves. I think that always says something about a person, but since there's two of you living here it's a bit more difficult. It's Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*."

"Yeah, that one is mine. I got it as a gift once and wasn't sure I'd like it, but I did."

"*We are not wholly bad or good, who live our lives under Milk Wood.*"

"Planning to recite it to me while I'm in the shower?"

"No, it's just one of my favourite lines. I've read this so many times, I know part of it by heart. I think those lines are so true. I'm always thinking of that especially when I'm on tour."

He was full of surprises, a soldier who liked poetry.

"How do you mean?"

"No one is ever just good or just bad, we're all both. I think we must remember that our enemies are human too, with both good and bad sides, just like us, to stay human ourselves in situations of war. That's will keep us from crossing the line and use unnecessary violence. Even a Taliban is a father."

I liked the way he was thinking, there was a beauty to it. Maybe he thought he had exposed too much of himself, because he changed topic again.

"You don't mind too much that I accepted this invitation to the dinner?"

I had showered and gotten dressed, only makeup and combing my hair remained and this was such a curious question that I had to go out and talk to him, so I could see his face.

"No, why?"

He sat on the sofa and looked up on me when I came to stand in the doorway. The expression that quickly passed on his face made me pleased that I had gone for a little black dress rather than slacks and blouse.

"When Bella invited me, in the shop, I got the feeling you didn't want me to come."

"Sorry, it's not like that. It's true I wasn't sure if I wanted you to come, but it's nothing personal. It's just that Bella likes to meddle with my life, or rather my love life and I don't like it. I don't need her to set me up with someone, especially

someone who doesn't want it either and I know she's very likely to embarrass me tonight. She will for sure put us next to each other at the dinner table and make all sorts of hints and in the end it's not very helpful at all, but she doesn't get that because she's so damn stubborn. You're a truly nice person so it has nothing to do with you. I'm sorry that Bella involves you in her scheming when you're not interested in being set up with me either. What was it you called it, that you were afraid I would be? Needy spinster? I really don't want you to feel you're stuck with a needy spinster, so no need to feel obliged to hang out with me tonight. Just behave like any dinner where you came like a single."

I inhaled after delivering my speech, had almost forgotten to breathe meanwhile convincing him of my disinterest in him. He looked at me with dark eyes and cleared his throat.

"I'm not looking for a relationship right now, for various reasons. Matt knows that but I'm not sure he has conveyed it to Bella."

Even if I already knew he was not interested, it was still a bit sad to have it confirmed.

"Or maybe she doesn't care because she thinks she knows better, like with me", I smirked.

"That seems like her." He smirked too. "Glad we cleared this out, none of us looking for anything. Maybe we can just relax and have a nice evening then, never mind Bella."

"Sounds good, I'm also glad we had this chat. I'll just put on some makeup and then I'm ready to go."

I went into the bathroom and took a few deep breaths. Good. We had cleared the air and he was probably massively relieved to be off the hook now that he knew I did not assume he was interested in me. He did not know I thought it would have been awesome if he was. Best to keep it that way to avoid embarrassment.

I looked quite nice when I was ready, way better than the messy version of me that had welcomed him this morning. As my pink coat was at the dry-cleaners to get rid of the coffee stains, I put on a red puffer jacket with a hood brimmed with white fake fur. I had bought it because I liked the colour and only afterwards I realised that it made me look like I belonged to Santa's entourage.

"Very Christmassy."

"I know, but since some tosser spilled coffee over my favourite coat I'm out of options - and it hardly beats your jumper."

"I like it, red suits you."

We walked to the nearby metro station. It was already dark, and it had begun snowing again, a slow snow fall which was quite pleasant to be out in and I liked walking side by side with him, the sound of our steps muffled by the snow. He adapted his stride to my more short-legged pace, so I had no trouble keeping up with him and we talked and laughed as we went. It was nice to have company to a dinner, even if it was not my boyfriend. I realised how long it actually had been since I had a boyfriend to go with to social events, and truth was it had never been

like that with Artan really. He was not very interested in it and my friends did not like him particularly and for good reason, even if I did not realise that until it was over. It was a part of my life that was missing, Bella was right in that, even if I did not want her to try to solve it for me. I had been mending my heart after Artan treating me badly and focused on studies and work for too long. Hiding was maybe a more correct description. Even if it was scary, I would have to put myself out there in the dating jungle at some point if I did not want to end up a spinster. For now, I was just glad that our talk earlier had made us both more relaxed, so this promised to be a great evening after all.

Bella and Matt have a quite small but beautiful house, even more so now that it was brimmed with garlands of lights, and perfect for them and a first baby once it comes. If I know Bella right it will likely be nine months after the wedding night. This evening we would be eight for dinner and Bella welcomed me and Charles like we were a couple.

"Bella, please, cut it." I hissed.

"What do you mean?", she said innocently.

"Don't treat Charles and me like we're a couple. We came here together, but we're not *together*, please remember that and try not to embarrass me - or him."

"Just because you're not, nothing says that you couldn't be."

"Yes, there's is - this tiny thing called being interested in one another."

"You're telling me you're not attracted to him? For real?"

"Yes. No. I mean I *am* attracted to him, a little bit, I can't deny that, but it doesn't matter. He's clearly not interested in me and if you try to push us together it will only be very awkward for me. Please Bella."

"Okay, okay", she muttered.

She actually managed to keep her promise most of the evening. The guests were mostly couples but there were two other singles. Luckily none of them threw themselves at neither me nor Charles. I knew nearly everyone, and it was a very relaxed company and apart from Bella's annoying matchmaking trait, she is a great hostess who always makes everyone feel welcome. Charles was seated beside me at the table (of course, would have expected nothing less from Bella) and through the dinner and glasses of wine that seemed to appear from nowhere, I was enjoying myself. I liked Charles even more in the company of others, his way of being entertaining without taking over the show completely because he combined it with being a good listener. I don't know when I last laughed this much. I saw Bella scrutinize me together with Charles and could not resist poking my tongue at her. Charles saw it and smiled like we shared a secret joke, then leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"Now, let's make Bella believe I whisper something very romantic or sensual to you, something that gives you goosebumps. I think that's not more than fair."

It did not matter what he said really, the fact that his lips nearly touched my earlobe and that I felt his warm breath against my cheek, caused me to have goosebumps for real. *All over*. Nothing to do but to play along, so I whispered back, now nearly touching his earlobe in return.

"And now I'm saying something to you that makes you wish we could leave the table and go somewhere where we're alone."

He pretended to have to gasp for air and moved back, but only slightly so we looked at each other instead, so close our breaths were mingling. I knew we were just pretending, but it was intense. Like the little gap of air between us was charged with electricity.

"And what do I respond to that?"

"That it's the first time you're a guest in my sister's house and you need to behave, so we have to wait out even if you clearly don't want to."

"That sounds like something I could say, always trying to be a gentleman and all that. What do you say then?"

"Wait out if you want to, but you're missing something."

He cocked an eyebrow.

"What exactly am I missing?"

This game was far too hot to play at a dinner table. I would like to whisper a sexual fantasy in his ear, tell him he was missing me undressing slowly in front of him, but I was more excited than I should be, I needed to stop this. Right now. It took some willpower though.

"I think I will let *your* imagination fill in the blanks this time, but let's say it would be something worth sacrificing your good manners for." I smiled and hoped I was

coming across a bit like a temptress, but then put an end to it. "Since we both know we're not interested in each other and we have played Bella now - I swear her ears have grown an inch as we speak, and her eyes are nearly popping out - maybe we should end this whisper game now."

He pulled back, increased the distance between us.

"You're right. I enjoyed it though, playing Bella", he smirked.

To be honest, Bella had been the last thing on my mind the past minutes. We returned to the conversation with the others, but in the background my mind replayed his whispers in my ear.

Much later, Bella asked if I wanted to stay the night instead of taking the metro home alone. I often stayed in their spare bedroom, so I said yes without much thought. I was in a tipsy, very good mood and it would be nice not having to go out in the cold.

"You will have to sleep on the couch though, because I've given Charles your usual room."

I had not realised he would stay over too, but of course he would not travel back to Bath tonight.

"Unless you're planning to share it with him?"

"What? No, I told you, we're not into each other."

"It sure looked like it during dinner."

"We were only kidding with you."

"Maybe you thought you were, but I saw it."

"What?"

"The undeniable chemistry."

"Shut up will you. I'm taking the couch and I have no plans to go elsewhere."

Once the other guests had dropped off, before Charles headed upstairs, he came over and pecked me on the cheek.

"Thanks for today, I had a great time. No awkwardness", he grinned.

"I had a great time too. Sleep well."

"I bet you'll dream about singing."

"Maybe so." There was also a possibility I would dream about a hot dinner table conversation but with a different ending to it than in reality. When he said good night and I felt the smell of his amazing aftershave as his lips briefly touched my cheek, I was not even sure how I would be able to fall asleep with him in the same house. In the end the long day, full of stress, tension, happiness and fun and some wine on top of that, took its toll on me and I fell asleep almost as soon as my head touched the pillow. I did dream though, and it was not about singing.

A/N: Some pure fluff to follow.

Chapter 14: Sunday, Dec 10 – Charles & Molly

When Charles woke up, the room was pitch black and first he did not remember where he was, in Afghan, in his house in Pirbright or in Bath. Then, with a smile on his lips, he remembered he was in neither of those places. He was in Matt's and Bella's house in London, in their guest bed and on a couch downstairs Molly was asleep. After remembering that he was fully awake, surprised that he had been able to sleep at all. Yesterday, what a day. He had enjoyed himself so much with Molly. She made him feel ten years younger and with a whole lot less of baggage. The conversation at the dinner table, Christ! He turned and drilled his head into the pillow, muffling the low groan that involuntarily slipped from him. He had been so turned on, by her smile, her green eyes, the proximity of her and her words. *Now I'm saying something that makes you wish that we could leave the table and go somewhere where we're alone.* Right there, she had said the words that made him wish he could take her somewhere else and kiss her senseless. It had made him gasp for air and he had felt his jeans become tighter, grateful that the table hid it. *I will let your imagination fill in the blanks this time, but let's say it would be something worth sacrifice your good manners for.* He did not doubt that. If he had thought she meant it for real, he would have gotten up from that table, taken her by the hand and led her out the door, hailed the first cab he saw and snogged her all the way back to her place and then... But she was only having a laugh at her sister's expense. He had filled in the blanks though, there at the table as the evening

went on and before he fell asleep. If she only knew what she was doing to him. He could not even remember when a woman had had this effect on him. Rebecca at some point, maybe, but it was so long ago and no one else after her. She had made it very clear she was not interested in him, that Bella's attempt of matchmaking only annoyed her, but that only made her more intriguing. He wanted her in every way, wanted to get to know her more, be the one to make her laugh, be the one who took her to bed at night. What the bloody hell was going on?

He lighted the bed side lamp to look at his watch. It was nearly eight, so by his measures a sleep in and he knew he would not be able to fall asleep again. Surely, it must be okay to go downstairs and make himself a cup of coffee now. He pulled out a white t-shirt and a pair of joggers from the small holdall he had brought with him. As an army man he was an efficient packer and never carried much luggage when he went for a private trip, just the essentials. Then he tiptoed down the stairs. The house was still silent which was no surprise really, as they had been up late last night. The dinner had been a success, the other friends of the hosts really nice people all of them and he was looking forward to meeting them again at the wedding. Still, they had all been secondary to Molly and it was her he wanted to meet most of all.

He familiarised himself with the kitchen and put on the coffee machine. The lovely smell just started to spread in the kitchen when he was startled by a voice behind him.

"Do you know how to make tea too?"

He turned around, and there she was. She was dressed in a west Ham t-shirt, her hair a bit messy after sleeping and her face also had the expression of someone who has not quite woken up yet. Her legs were bare and, he could not help but noticing, very well-shaped and actually long for such a petite person.

"All it takes to make tea is hot water and a tea bag, so I think I can manage. Coffee on the other hand, is an art."

"Tell that to those Japanese people who spend years learning the tea ceremony, and it takes four hours to perform."

"Are you telling me it takes you four hours to prepare a cup of tea?"

"No, a tea bag does me. Just saying tea making can be as advanced as your pony coffee", she grinned, and he loved the way she was teasing him already before being fully awake.

"I'm not saying one is better than the other, but I'm not a fully functional soldier, or man, before I've had a cup of coffee in the morning."

"And yesterday you were only drinking tea because you were polite, right?"

"There you got me."

"Sorry, I knew coffee was your thing, I was a bad hostess."

"You did?"

"You spilled it all over me. Hard to forget."

She put on the kettle and soon joined him by the kitchen table. He was a bit relieved when she tucked her bare legs under it, so he did not see them, he found them quite distracting.

"Are you going back to Bath today?"

"I'm not sure. I might stay in London and take the train directly to Pirbright this evening instead, have not decided yet."

Rebecca had taken Sam to Paris this weekend, so he would not meet him anyway and there was nothing else pulling him to Bath. Staying here on the other hand was tempting, but she probably had plans.

"And you?"

"I'm off this entire weekend so today I will just find ways to recuperate from yesterday, the chaotic baking and singing and dinner with Bella watching over me."

"Did anyone mention my name?", Bella appeared in the doorway.

"We just said what a lovely hostess you were yesterday."

"Yeah, right."

"But it *was* a great evening, thanks for inviting me. Is Matt still asleep?"

"Yes, he likes to sleep in on the week end, says the early mornings in the army are killing him. Were you talking about plans for today?"

"Yes."

"I have an idea."

"Why am I not surprised?"

Bella frowned at Molly.

"There is a Christmas market nearby, and they have this ice rink there where one can rent skates and drink hot cocoa. Matt and I have talked about going but it would be even more fun if we have company. I think he needs a break from the wedding preparations, I might have been pushing him a bit hard lately." Bella almost looked remorseful.

"You're probably right there, that Matt might need a break."

"So, are you up for it?"

Charles and Molly looked at each other, both hoping the other one would say yes, neither of them wanting to appear too eager and say yes first.

"Please, please, please."

"Please, what?"

Now Matt appeared too and gave Bella a kiss good morning.

"Please come skating with us."

"That's a great idea!" Matt jumped at anything that would divert his fiancée's mind from the wedding for a few hours. The closer the big day came, the more she was turning into a bridezilla.

Molly gave in first.

"Okay, if I can borrow some clothes from you Bella. My dress from yesterday would not be very fitting for the occasion."

"Of course. And you?" Bella looked at Charles with puppy eyes, but now that Molly had accepted he did not really need more nudging even if he did not let it shine through.

"Well, I was thinking of staying in London for the day anyway, so I might as well join."

Matt looked at him sharply. He knew Charles very well, since long before he joined the army. He had always been good at hiding his feelings, but Matt knew what small signs to look for. When Bella had had this idea of trying to pair up Molly and Charles, he had first thought it ridiculous. He loved them both, but he knew that Charles was not looking for anything so soon after the divorce, he had mentioned it on more than one occasion and the few times they had been out together since he did not as much as look at the women around them, although the majority would gladly had joined him to bed – something he seemed totally oblivious to. Yet, something had happened to him lately and come to think of it, it was after he met Molly. He seemed lighter somehow, cheerful even and that was not a description that had fit him for quite some time. He had accepted driving him to London the other day, *after* he had mentioned Molly would be there and they really had seemed to get along yesterday at dinner. Now Matt noticed the almost invisible smile at the corner of his mouth when Molly accepted the skating proposal, and it remained there as he accepted to. Sometimes it was annoying how right Bella was,

but no need to tell her yet. It was not sure Charles even had figured it out himself yet, but Matt was willing to bet money on that he had a crush on Molly. Molly on the other hand, the sweetest girl in the world but a hard one to catch because she would not let herself fall for anyone. If Charles was interested in her, he would have to work for it. Skating today might be a perfect way.

They all got ready and then walked to the ice rink as it was not far away.

"Do you know how to skate?" Charles asked Molly.

"Not really", Molly confessed. "It was not something people frequently did in Newham and when we grew up dad was too drunk most of the time and mum too pregnant to be able to stand on a pair of skates, let alone teach us how to do it. You?"

"Matt and I used to play bandy when we grew up, so yes, I know how to skate."

'Of course, he does', Molly thought to herself and already begun to regret this idea. So typical of him to be good at skating, but on the other hand, maybe it was not as difficult as she remembered it from the previous time she had tried. When they had rented the skates, Charles quickly laced his on with the skill of someone who had practised many times and then threw himself out on the ice. Molly struggled with hers, trying to find the balance between not lacing so loose they would not be stable, or so hard that blood would not reach her feet. She looked up to see Charles sweep off, looking like a poster boy for winter sports in the knitted scarf and hat he had borrowed from Matt.

"Come on, Molly!", he shouted happily. "What are you waiting for?"

"A third leg to grow out so I will be more stable", she muttered.

"It's not that hard."

The moment she set foot on the ice, she slipped. When she tried to get up, she slipped again – and again, until Charles reached out his hand to her.

"Here, let me help you."

When she looked up at him, he had tears in his eyes from laughing so hard.

"You're laughing at me", she said offended.

"Sorry, I can't help it. There's this old Disney movie with Bambi, the deer, when he gets out on the ice. That's you in a nut shell, Bambi on ice."

"Thanks mate, I'll remember that for a time when you're not good at something."

It was difficult to imagine something he would not be good at, he seemed to manage most things with ease, annoyingly enough.

"Hey, think of it as a compliment, Bambi is cute."

"Cute and helpless, not how I prefer to see myself."

He smirked.

"No, I had figured as much. Then you just have to learn. Come, take my hand and I'll support you. As soon as you get some speed, it's easier to keep the balance."

"So, you mean I should try to go fast? But then it hurts more if I fall."

"Don't fall then."

He knew how to skate backwards and did so in front of Molly, facing her and holding both her hands. He did not skate often, every now and then with Sam, but he always enjoyed it. With Molly more than ever. It was like whatever he did with her, it was a laugh. He loved that even if she was insecure, she was willing to put herself through things. She could be reluctant, but still did it, like with the singing too. Now she was growing more confident on the skates by the minute, giggling hysterically and screaming no when he threatened to let her go, her cheeks rosy from the cold. When she nearly slipped again, he was quickly there and caught her, held her in his arms for a moment. Held her to his chest and felt her pant for air and felt his own pulse beating rapidly, despite that this was not much exertion for him really. He knew he never wanted this to end, it was one of those magical few moments in life when there is nothing but pure happiness. Molly for her part, wondered how many more times she could possibly fall without seeming ridiculous, if being held by him was the pleasant result.

"You two love birds", Bella yelled, bringing them both back to reality and stepping away from each other. "My feet are freezing. How about some hot cocoa?"

Both just nodded, and Molly thought that Bella's timing was impeccable. *If* she wanted to be a matchmaker, she would need to work on that. As reluctantly as Molly had laced the skates on, she now laced them off, but she could not deny that it was nice with cocoa after. It was served by a fireplace, so they could warm their hands on the mugs with the hot drink and their feet by the fire. Charles looked at her over the brim of the mug.

"Way to go Bambi, you're a fast learner."

Afterwards, they strolled through the Christmas market. Looking at the small stands, buying candy canes and candied almonds, for the second time today feeling more like kids than adults. When it was time for Charles to leave for the train, everyone was sad to say good bye but reminded each other that they would meet soon again. Molly gave Charles a small packet, something she had bought in one of the stands when he was talking to Matt.

"Open it at the train. It's a small thanks for being patient and teaching me skating."

"My pleasure."

It really had been, patience had nothing to do with it.

When he sat on the train, he opened the packet, slowly because he wanted to savour the moment and smiled when he held a miniature snow globe in his hand, complete with a skating couple.

Chapter 15: Monday, Dec 11 - Elvis

There was one thing Charles had realised the past weekend, besides that he wanted Molly and that was that he needed to talk Elvis straight. Tell him that if he did not fight for Georgie now, then he would for sure lose her forever. He had not spoken to Elvis since they met in the bar a week ago, but Molly had told him that Georgie and Elvis were on a break and she was dating someone else. He knew that was not what Elvis wanted, but the question was – did Georgie know that?

After lunch in the mess, he closed the door to his office and gave Elvis a call. It took a while before he answered.

"Elvis speaking."

"Hi there, it's Charles."

"Hi, mate. What an honour on a dreary Monday to get a call from Major James. How are you?"

"How are *you*? You sound like you're hung-over, or even drunk?"

"Indeed, I am, called in sick. I'm in agony, Charlie..."

"Cut the crap, Elvis!" Charles interrupted him with the stern voice of a commissioned officer, not the pitying one of a friend, and Elvis for once *did* shut up in surprise. "It's about time you stop being in agony and do something about it instead. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, for a mess you surely created over a long time and do something about it before it's too late."

"I don't know what to do, she doesn't take my calls."

"Are you calling 'calling her' trying, when it's about winning or losing the woman you claim you love? I would call that a pathetic excuse of trying. If you really care, go to her house, sit on her step until she comes out if she won't let you in, pretend you're a pizza boy and sneak your way into the building or whatever, but don't give up just because she doesn't take your calls."

Elvis remained unusually quiet, a bit shocked at his friend's outburst.

"Do you know what Molly told me?"

"No?" Elvis voice now anxious.

"She told me you're on a break. I know you don't want a fucking break, but does Georgie know that? I don't think so, because she's dating someone else."

"WHAT?"

"You heard me right."

"Who is he?"

"I didn't ask for details. She just happened to let it slip, she doesn't know I know you. But does it matter who it is? Isn't the important thing that she is dating someone who isn't you?"

"Hello, earth to Elvis Harte?"

"Yeah, I'm here. I'm just thinking."

"Stop your bloody thinking and *do* something! You're an action man in the army, why can't you show some of that in your personal life too?"

"You have not been able to complain about action in my life when it comes to ladies in the past."

"Has it been action really? Has it been conscious choices? Or are you just going with the flow, see what happens, without making difficult choices, without fighting when things start to burn?"

"You are one to talk! With Rebecca and all that, don't tell me you haven't been running." Now Elvis was agitated.

"I have, I don't deny that, but Rebecca did not mean that much to me, she was never *the one*, if there is any such thing. Still, I think I would have done it differently if I had the chance all over again. I don't want you to make the mistake of running from someone that actually means something to you, instead of fighting for her. You always say; 'all is well in the world'. Well, I don't believe that things will be well in your world if you let Georgie go."

Elvis swallowed hard, trying to get rid of the growing lump in his throat caused by the combination of his friend's stern bollocking, Charles had never applied that tone on him before even if Elvis had seen him in action in front of his platoon, and the information that Georgie was seeing someone else.

"I need to hang up, thanks for telling me about it", he said.

"Do something, before it's too late or you'll regret it for always."

Elvis sunk back on his couch, looking at the mess in front of him. Empty cans of lager and take away boxes. He had been pretty much stationary here since Friday evening, drinking and feeling sorry for himself as Georgie did not contact him and had not responded when he had tried a peace offering in the form of another text message. He knew she was mad, he knew she needed space, but he had never imagined that she might use that space for dating. He had thought she needed it to think about them, to come to the conclusion that they belonged together – like he had. The more days that passed since he saw her last, the surer he got. She was *the one*, like Charlie had called it.

Suddenly he felt irked by it all, not only about the garbage surrounding him, but about himself. About his self-pity and he knew Charlie was right, this had to come to an end and he needed to take action instead. He got to his feet and went to take a shower. First let hot water cleanse his muscular lean body, looking fit despite that he felt like a blob after three days of drinking on the couch, then ended with ice cold water to make his brain fully functional again. He dressed himself, made some strong coffee, opened the windows for some fresh air even if it was freezing cold outside meanwhile he cleaned up the mess. Finally, he felt he was starting to get back on track again. He was not prepared to face Georgie today, though. There was another woman he needed to see, the one who had been his first love in life and always would remain so.

He knew that maybe he ought not to drive but chose to ignore it and jumped into his Volkswagen Golf and headed for his parent's home, the woman he needed to see was Allegra Harte, his mother. Despite her name, Allegra could be just as stern

as she was happy, and Elvis was partly dreading talking to her, but he knew he needed her advice and support.

When he opened the door to the small, detached, homily house and she poked her head out through the kitchen door to see who the unexpected guest was, she looked utterly surprised to see him.

"Elvis! What are you doing here on a Monday?"

As most Italians, his parents always kicked off Christmas by letting their decorations go up on the Day of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, on Dec 8, so the house that now welcomed him was twinkling with lights, the door mat was changed to one saying *Buon Natale* and he knew that on the sideboard in the living room the small nativity display would be placed. Just like when he was a child. He loved the familiarity of it all, he needed that now.

"Elvis?"

He realised he had not said anything, busy as he had been taking in the familiar impressions.

"I needed to see you, mum."

There was a dip of concern between her brows, she realised this was no common social call.

"Come in then, *figlio mio*. I'm making *gnocchi*."

He saw now that her hands were covered in the sticky dough, as she had been in the midst of mixing the egg into the flour and mashed potatoes. He sat down beside her and silently watched as she skilfully kneaded the ingredients to a dough of perfect texture, then started rolling to long "snakes", which she cut off into smaller pieces. He loved *gnocchi* with tomato sauce and *parmigiano*, comfort food from his childhood.

Allegra did not say anything, just waited for him to speak when he was ready. He was not sure how to begin, but when he finally did he did not go easy on himself.

"*Mama*, I think I've been a total idiot."

She raised an eyebrow but kept her eyes fixed on the dough she was cutting.

"Has it got to do with Georgie?"

"Yes."

She sighed.

"What did you do then?"

"It's both what I did and what I didn't do. I haven't been there for her. I haven't let her feel that I love her for real."

"And do you?"

"I do. I know that now."

She looked at him searchingly.

"Yes, I think you do. I've seen you with her and I've seen the way you look at her when she doesn't see, and I think you love her. Why haven't you shown her?"

"I'm not sure, maybe I was afraid of the commitment. Of *forever*, of letting everyone else go. What I've seen on tour, life is so fragile, it can end any moment – and I think I had the thought that when we have so few moments on earth, should they all be spent on one person."

"And now?"

"Now I'm starting to think, that when we have so little time, any moment wasted on a person that doesn't mean anything to me is wasted. I want to spend all my moments with Georgie."

"But you have not told her? Why?"

"I made her disappointed, she got tired of me and has not spoken to me for over a week."

"You need to tell her."

"Yes."

"Before it's too late."

There was an intensity to her voice which made him wonder if there was something more to it than worry for him and Georgie. Allegra rinsed her hands clean under the tap, dried them and came to sit in front of him.

"Listen, I'm going to tell you a story, a story about me which your father does not know, but you need to hear it now."

Elvis looked at her attentively, had no idea where this was going.

"When I was young, before I met your father, I was going out with this other boy in our town, Gino. Oh, Gino, he was such a handsome boy. All the girls loved him, his black wavy hair, his brown eyes and his smile." Her gaze was lost somewhere in the past.

"All the girls loved him, but he chose me as his girlfriend – and I loved him. I loved him in the way you only love your very first love, the pure, trusting whole hearted and untainted love you feel before you have been betrayed or had your heart broken. He chose me, and we were going out, but like you, he found it hard to let go completely of all the other girls that wanted his attention. I knew he was flirting, I tried to ignore it, but it hurt every time when I saw him exchange a glance with someone else. It was like I was not enough for him, in the way that he was enough for me. I was only seventeen, but I knew that I wanted to be his wife."

"What happened? Because you're obviously not his wife."

"That summer when I turned eighteen, he told me he would be away the entire summer. Staying with his uncle and aunt in a coast village, working in their shop. To earn some money he said, but I knew he also would be looking at the beautiful girls on the beach, maybe take them out for ice cream. I cried for days after he had gone. Then I met your father. He was living in UK already then but had come to our village to visit his relatives for the summer. He fell in love with me the moment

he saw me. I saw it and he told me. He never let me doubt his feelings. He asked me to the cinema, he asked me for a walk, or for a soda. First, I said no, I had a boyfriend, but the letters from Gino were scarce and when they came they told about happy days on the beach, friends he got to know – girls I could read between the lines. He never said he missed me. I wrote him that I loved him, but he did not say it back. It took weeks before he even answered that letter at all. So, after a few weeks when your dad never gave up asking me, I finally said yes, I would go to the cinema with him. He did not push me, he was behaving like a gentleman, but I had such a great time in his company and he made me feel special. He made me feel special that first date and he has continued to make me feel special ever since. Like I'm the only girl in the world to him."

Elvis could see that telling this still made her emotional after all this time. After a month, we kissed for the first time and when Gino returned from his summer fancy a month later, I was very much in love with your farther and we had made plans for me to come to England. He made no secret of that I was the girl he wanted to marry, and he had asked for my father's permission. It was quick, yes, but he was leaving after the summer and we could not imagine being apart."

"And Gino?"

"When Gino returned, he realised what he had been missing and he thought we would resume where he had left off, but I had changed. What he could give me was not enough anymore, not when I had realised that a man could make me feel special, make me feel loved. I wanted that, I needed that. He tried to tell me he had changed and that he wanted only me, but it was too late. I still remember him

crying, those brown eyes that always were so happy, flooded with tears. He asked me to take him back, asked me not to go, said he would regret for the rest of his life he had gone this summer. I believed him, and it broke my heart, but I had given mine to your father by then and I did not want to take it back. So, I went, and I married your father and we had you and your brothers and sisters and I've had the happiest life I could imagine."

She smiled at Elvis.

"I think about him sometimes, I even met him when I went home to visit. He married someone else and I'm sure he is happy, but when he looked at me I could see he still regretted what he had done. Or not done. Of course, I have wondered how my life would have been with him, but I always come to the conclusion he would not have made me as happy as your father, because there would always have been a small doubt that he was only mine. That I was all that he wanted. I made the right choice."

She took Elvis' hand.

"Don't be Gino, my boy. You will regret it. She would be fine, but you would regret that you did not make her feel special until it was too late. Don't do that too yourself if you love her."

Elvis eyes were brimmed with tears, both because of the simultaneously beautifully sad and happy story his mother had told, giving him a previously unknown piece of herself, and out of fear that it already might be too late for him too. Now he knew

what he had to do, he had absolutely nothing to lose – except Georgie, and that would be the worst loss of all.

Chapter 16: Tuesday, Dec 12 - Bones

Alexander McClyde, aka Bones, was sitting in the waiting room outside the undertaker's office together with his sister Jane. Waiting for their turn. In the last days he had realised how many different choices that needed to be made when a near one passed away; what kind of coffin, what flowers, what music during the funeral service, if they wanted a DVD photo presentation, and so on. He had learned there was something called a funeral arranger that could help planning and executing all this. He had known there were wedding planners, but he had never guessed there was a corresponding role for the event your life ended with.

He knew his mother had feared she would be the one planning this for him, during the years he was a soldier. Despite that he was sad doing it for her, he very much preferred it like this to the other way around. Like his mum had used to say, children should bury their parents, not the other way around. He had left the army when she became too sick to take care of herself. Even though they had arranged for people to take care of her, he wanted to be around, not away on constant covert operations where he hardly could contact her at all. It had been hard to give it up, yet he did not hesitate. He was glad he was sharing this with Jane, alone it would have been far too depressing.

While they waited, he got lost in his thoughts and a smile played around his lips. He was thinking about Georgie Lane and the date they had had. He had liked her when he met her in the hospital, but if his mum had not put him up to it, he likely would not have asked her on a date. Not that he had been shy in the company of women in the past, quite the contrary, but they had not exactly met during

circumstances when dating was the first thing that came to mind. He was glad that he had asked her, though, and now he wanted to see her again. Very much so.

Before Friday evening, he had only seen her dressed in a nurse uniform, her hair in a neat ponytail. That evening, in jeans and top and her hair loose, she had been stunning. She was so petite, with beautiful bone structure and features that were almost surreal in their perfection, warm brown eyes with long eyelashes, combined with a hoarse voice and wicked sense of humour that took the edge of all that beauty in a good way. She seemed very down to earth and more focused on doing a good job than looking pretty. At times she appeared a little bit guarded though, even if she seemed to enjoy herself in his company. That made him curious about what her story was.

He had spent some time thinking about what places to go to and in the end chosen a cocktail bar a colleague had recommended and a restaurant that was a longstanding favourite of his own. He had never taken a date there before. The truth was that he had not dated that much. In the past it had more been so that he met women in different settings; through work, through friends, at a museum or whatever. Through eye contact they confirmed a mutual interest, a sexual one, and then one thing led to another. It had worked out very well, to the pleasure of him and them and for long he had not wished for anything else, but in the last years he had begun to feel differently. Maybe it had started when mum got ill, both because it made him realise how fragile life is (strange considering he had been facing death through the years as soldier, but mum was more personal), and because he knew how much she wished for him to find someone he loved. It is just that, that only because you start looking for real love, it does not mean that you will find it

instantly, or not even in a few years. He had stopped his pure sexual relationships at some point, because they did not give him anything anymore. It was not so much a conscious choice to live in some kind of celibacy, as a decision to abstain from something that now felt pointless. He was not missing the sex, but he was longing for making love to someone who meant something to him. Now he had this tingling sensation it might be Georgie, not because he wanted to take her to bed immediately (well that too) but because he wanted to be with her in so many other ways. He was not sure what she wanted though.

"Tell me about yourself", he had asked her.

"I'm from Manchester, mum and dad still lives there... have three sisters; Marie is a stay at home mum, Lulu claims she studying psychology, Sammy is a medic in the army and on a humanitarian mission in Kenya right now... moved to London six years ago when I started studying to be a nurse, thought it was time to see something else than Manchester..."

He liked to hear her talking and soaked up every word. He also noticed what she did *not* say. She did not talk of any relationships in the past. That meant that there had not been any (unlikely), they had not been important to her, or there had been something important that was still a hot potato to talk about. He was not sure which of the last two options that was more likely, but he hoped there was not a ghost from the past that had so much substance to it that it could come in the way for them. Because he wanted to see her again, he knew that for sure. It would be going too far to say he was in love with her by the end of the evening, but he had a crush, no doubt about it.

"What about you?" she asked. "You mentioned you're a venture capitalist, what is that?"

"I work for an organisation who invests to provide capital to start-up ventures or small companies. If the companies are a success we get massive returns."

"And are they?"

"If we bet on the right ones, yes."

"Sounds like risky business."

"I like a job that involves some risk taking. I used to be a soldier, in special forces. This is as close as I get to taking risks in a white-collar job."

"You too", she said.

"What?"

"Nothing, I just know someone else who used to be a SF soldier. Maybe you know each other then, Elvis Harte?"

"I know him by name, but our paths never crossed. There are quite a few people working in the good old British Army, imagine."

She smiled and seemed relieved.

"I suppose there is."

He wondered if Elvis was her ghost from the past. Beside his reputation as a damn good soldier until he was injured and had to go for medical discharge, at least from the role as SF captain, he also had a reputation as a ladies' man, but he did not want to pry if she did not volunteer the information.

"Why did you leave the army?"

"I wanted to be close to mum when she got sick."

"And do you miss it?"

"I do. There are things about that life that you can't get elsewhere. But there are also things I do not miss and some things about life are easier not being in the army. Like relationships."

"Is that why you've stayed single?" she asked boldly.

"Partly, and also, I'm quite picky."

They both laughed at that, but he felt that it was true even if he had joked.

"And you, how come a girl like you are single?"

She looked down.

"Because the right guy never popped the question."

He got the feeling that they were close to the hot potato and did not dig deeper when she did not seem willing to expand on it further spontaneously.

After dinner, Georgie said she had had a great time but had to go up baking with her flatmate for some charity project, early in the morning before heading to work, so he took her home. He let the cab wait while he followed her to the door. He wanted to ask her if he could come in, he wanted to lean in to her and give her a deep kiss, but he did not see a sign in her body language that she really wanted that, so he did not try. If she wanted it later on, he knew it would be worth the wait.

"I won't ask you in tonight", she said.

"No, I guess it takes something more than a man inviting you to dinner for you to ask him to come with you" he smirked.

"Yeah, something like detonating a bomb and saving my life perhaps", she smiled back.

"You're a few years late then. That was the kind of stuff I did back in the days."

"And did it work?"

"Work for what?"

"For bedding women?"

He felt himself blushing, which was an unusual experience for Bones.

"Yes... well, sometimes... it did not scare them off at least", he stuttered.

"You need to find a new trick then."

"I guess I do, in the meantime I will take my cab home and drink a single-malt in my own company and I wish you a good night's sleep, Georgie."

He pecked her on the cheek and felt this surge go through his body when he felt her lovely scent up close, shampoo, perfume and underneath that just *her*.

"Are you not going to ask me if I want to see you again?" she smirked.

"Do you want to see me again?"

"I do. I had a great time tonight and I'd like to see you again."

He felt a little jolt of joy in his stomach.

"I'll give you a call then."

He turned his back to her and started walking away.

"Bones?"

"Yeah?"

"Is it okay if I call you Alexander, or Alex instead? Bones is... a bit weird."

"You can call me what you like", he smiled and hoped in that moment that there would be a day when his name would be on her lips when she came for him and then he did not really care which of them she used as long as he was the only one she was thinking of.

"Alex then. Good night, Alex."

"Good night, Georgie."

He had left, feeling giddy and the next morning he decided – no games – and had without hesitation texted her that he had had a great time and wanted to see her again.

Jane took his hand.

"Are you okay? You seem kind of far away in your thoughts? Are you thinking about mum?"

"I was thinking of more worldly things, I must admit."

"Like?"

"A nice date which I'd like to repeat."

"Are you kidding me? A date, finally? When we get out from here, I'm taking you for a coffee and then you're telling me everything."

His sister behaved like they rather were teenagers than two adults, but it was fitting because he felt a bit like a smitten teenager when he thought about Georgie. Best thing was, they had agreed to meet up again later this week. He was already looking forward to it.

A/N: Someone wrote in a review that this feels like an advent calendar with the different stories within this story. This was exactly the feeling I hoped to achieve so I'm happy if I manage that, even if I have the feeling that both mine and your favourite chapters might be the Molly and Charles ones. It is a bit tricky to get them together as long as he is working, but I'm thinking he will have a holiday leave soon.

I try to stick to English Christmas traditions rather than Swedish in the story but for Dec 13, I cannot resist including and making fun of one of my favourite Swedish traditions; the Saint Lucy/Lucia celebration which is at the same time quirky (when performed by the kids in day-care and school) and solemn (in church).

Thanks for reviews, PMs and well-wishes!

x

Chapter 17: Wednesday, Dec 13 - Molly

Because my mind had been occupied with the wedding preparations, the singing and maybe a tiny bit by Charles James I had forgotten something else I had promised to do.

Charles, part of my distractions, had by the way texted me last night.

From: Charles

Thanks for the snow globe. I like it."

From: Molly

Thought the guy looked like you. The girl was obviously not me because she can stand on her skates.

From: Charles

Can you walk today, or are your muscles too sore?

After the skating, muscles that I did not even know existed hurt like hell and I was limping like an old lady, but no need to admit that to Mr. Fitness.

From: Molly

No idea what you're talking about, I'm sprinting around in the hospital corridors.

From: Charles

Great. Then you won't mind going skating sometime again.

It was not a question. It was a confident statement, but it did not annoy me. Instead it put the biggest grin on my face and I knew I would love to go skating with him again even if it made my muscles so sore I never could walk again.

From: Molly

I'll think about it.

From: Charles

Don't think too long.

From: Molly

Then what?

From: Charles

Spring will come and ice will melt :)

I definitely would not think about it that long, but I did not want to seem too eager.

From: Molly

Doesn't a major in the British army have more important things to do than harassing poor girl to force her to learn how to skate?

From: Charles

Apparently not. Have orders to engage with ordinary citizens to teach them the art of skating, specifically with females named Molly Dawes.

From: Molly

Very specific mission I must say. Might be mission impossible. When were you planning on trying next?

My heart was thumping in my chest meanwhile the little dots indicated he was answering, hoping he would say sometime soon.

From: Charles

Would suggest this weekend if I was not busy with Matt's stag and being hungover after that. But have Christmas leave from Friday, maybe meet next week?

Next week was so far away, but of course better than waiting for the weekend after and then it was time for the wedding anyway.

From: Molly

Grateful and amazed you offer to use your leisure time to complete this mission. An offer too good to be refused.

From: Charles

I take this task very seriously. I'll let you know when I'll be in London then. Now, return to sprinting in the corridors.

From: Molly

Will do. Suggest you return to do whatever majors do.

From: Charles

Right, will return to very important major stuff. Take care.

From: Molly

You too Major James

It was difficult to imagine him sitting in his uniform, looking the stern officer and texting me, but I loved that he did. Just like that we had another date decided, one that had nothing to do with rehearsing a song. Or maybe not date, but I was ecstatic never the less.

Anyway, because of all those things; wedding preparations, singing and maybe a tiny bit Charles James, I had forgotten that I had "volunteered" to another event at the hospital. One of the nurses, Anna, comes from Sweden and already during a staff meeting in October she had launched they idea that it would be nice to arrange a festivity of light on Dec 13 to cheer the patients up. Apparently, this is a tradition in Sweden. Everyone agreed it seemed like a nice idea this dark time of the year and Anna was naturally assigned to be the project leader of the event, as she was the only one who knew how it was to be done.

During lunch a few days later, she came to sit with me. Anna is this stereotype Swedish girl, tall and slender, with long and thick almost platinum blonde hair, blue eyes and beautiful features. I think most men at the hospital have her as a secret free card, but she is happily married to Robert, a very average English bloke who obviously hit jackpot. She claims that it is not true that everyone in Sweden looks like that, but I'm not sure I believe her.

"Molly, I have a favour to ask of you, for the Lucia procession."

"Lucia procession?"

"You know, the festivity of light we decided to have on Dec 13."

"Oh, that. Is it a procession?"

"Yes, and we need a Lucia to lead it. It should preferably be someone with long hair. Doesn't matter what colour really but I always think it is beautiful if it is someone with dark hair. You would be perfect."

"You have beautiful long hair, can't you do it?"

"No, I'll be busy managing the whole thing."

This seemed more advanced than it had during the staff meeting.

"You need to tell me more, so I know what I accept before I say yes."

"Okay. It's quite a schizophrenic tradition, but very beautiful."

"Schizophrenic?"

"Well Saint Lucy, or Sankta Lucia, as we call her, was a 3rd-century martyr who lived in Syracuse in Italy, who according to the legend brought food and aid to Christians hiding in the catacombs using a candle-lit wreath to light her way. The Christians were persecuted in those days and she got caught and they tried to burn her to death, but the flames did not harm her, so they killed her off with a sword instead. She was declared a saint later."

"Nice... I didn't know you were Catholics in Sweden?"

"No, that is what I mean by schizophrenic, for starters. We are protestants on paper but in reality, the second most secularised country in the world, so this is the only

time of the year that anyone ever cares about a saint. Anyway, her feast coincided with the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year, which the pagans used to celebrate before the missionaries came to the North and tried to save our souls, so they inventively combined the two into a festivity of light."

"Interesting. So, what would I do? Serve food to the patients?"

"No, no. You would be dressed in a white dress, a red sash - that symbolises the blood of her martyrdom - and a wreath of candles on your head and then you would lead the procession."

"What procession is that?"

"Well, I have to recruit some other staff to be your maidens, star boys, elves and gingerbread men."

"Gingerbread men?!"

"Yes, I have absolutely no clue why they have joined the procession of a martyr saint, but they're there anyway. There's even a special song for them."

She started humming a tune.

"Maybe they baked some gingerbread cakes on the fire when they did not manage to burn her?"

"That's a thought, but I think they joined much later", Anna laughed.

"And elves?"

"No idea."

"And what's a star boy?"

"A man, or boy, who wears a white dress, a wand with a star and on his head a white cone with stars on."

The thought of any of the male staff wearing such an outfit made me giggle.

"That will be a sight."

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but it is quite moving when they all come into a dark room, carrying their candles and singing."

"We have to sing?"

"I will play a recording of some of the traditional Swedish tunes plus some of your regular carols. I don't trust that we can conjure up a choir that will sing decently enough so the patient's ears don't fall off."

"And that's it? We just walk inside, the music is played and then it's over?"

"You leave again and then we serve saffron buns, called "Lucia cats" and gingerbread cakes."

"And it's because that's what she used to serve to the poor people in the catacombs?"

"Probably not, but the whole thing is supposed to symbolise bringing the light of Christianity throughout a world of darkness. I think that nowadays, everyone just

appreciates all the candles and the singing in the darkness. We have very few hours of daylight in Sweden in December. Please Molly, you'd be perfect and it's an honour all the school girls in Sweden would die for."

It seemed like a weird tradition, but since I would not have to sing and as it appeared that the Lucia had one of the least strange outfits, I had agreed to the whole thing.

On Dec 13, I was not as convinced that it had been a good idea. Anna had given me instructions to be there at 7 in the morning, the procession would start at 7.30. I got this long white dress and the red sash that was to symbolise me being pierced by a sword and so far, all was well, and I was mostly laughing at my colleagues. The maidens were fine too, in similar dresses to mine but with glitter around their waists and in their hair. The elves were not that strange either, even if grown men in Santa's hats always is fun. But the full size gingerbread men and the star boys... I could not stop laughing when I saw the chief thorax surgeon in dress and a cone with stars on his head.

"I'll kill Anna for luring me into this", he hissed.

"I'm sure it will be very appreciated by the patients."

The day before, Anna had had us all practice how we should walk, with me first, enter the cafeteria where patients would be gathered and place ourselves in the room, me in the middle of a half-circle. I thought I was on top of everything until

last minute when Anna came with the wrath with candles, put it on my head and lighted the candles.

"You mean I'm going to walk with this, candles burning on my head?"

"You just have to walk slow and majestically, as is fitting for Lucia."

"What if my hair is set on fire?"

"Such incidents have happened, but if you just walk slowly..."

"And if the candles drip on my head."

"It will just hurt a little bit. You'll survive"

Yes, and have stearine in my hair through the Christmas.

I was beginning to think this was madness, with the grown-ups in sort of kids costumes and the fire hazard, but then she arranged us all in the procession, lighted the maidens' candles and the elves' and gingerbread men's lanterns, and before we entered the cafeteria put on the music. When we came walking slowly with all the candles, through the darkness and clear voices were signing the special Lucia hymn, I had to admit it was all so solemn and beautiful that it made my eyes tear. It was truly a celebration of light in the darkness, it seemed like those crazy Swedes knew what they were doing after all.

Afterwards, Anna blew out the candles in my wrath and lifted it from my head. It was a relief. I was very happy I had not started burning and got to keep my long hair for Bella's wedding. Not that I wanted hair to look good for any particular

reason, but I just think I'm more comfortable in my long hair than in a burnt scalp. Would not be a very good match, Charles and me singing, if I was the one bald instead of the midget and he had all that lovely, thick, curly hair.

"So, what did you think?", Anna asked.

"I loved it, except for the fire hazard. Except for this, you celebrate Christmas like us, right?"

"I don't know about that. I mean we decorate like you and have the Christmas tree, but our big day is Dec 24. That day Santa comes in person in the evening and hands out the gifts, not in the night when everyone's asleep."

"How's that possible?"

"Ask Santa", she winked. "And we don't have turkey or Christmas pudding. We have this huge smorgasbord with ham, meet balls, herring, salmon, you name it. Once again, I think the traditional food comes from a pagan feast that was there long before the Christians came and said this was Jesus birthday. A quite clever way to get the Vikings to convert actually, let them keep their traditions with a Christian touch."

I just shook my head.

"You're crazy."

"Not really. I mean, what does a turkey have to do with Jesus' birthday anyway? Probably nothing either, in case there weren't any turkeys strutting about around the crib."

I had to give her that I had absolutely no idea why we ate turkey at Christmas, so we ended the discussion with that and went to have some of those saffron buns. They were not bad, I had to admit. I would not mind celebrating Lucia next year too, but then I'll let someone else be the Lucia. Once was more than enough.

A/N: If you got curious what a Lucia celebration may look and sound like, try a search on YouTube for 'Lucia Goteborg' and the first hit will be from a church in my city a few years back, but it essentially stays the same. In the church version there is generally no gingerbread men or elves though, but it is what my 3- and 7-year old boys prefer to be during their celebrations.

Chapter 18: Thursday, Dec 14 – Molly & Charles

Bella called Molly in the morning.

"You know the cake tasting this afternoon?"

"Yeah?"

"Matt says he won't drive here from Pirbright."

"I guess it will only be you and me then."

Molly was not surprised that Matt would not drive all the way here, again, to try out cakes that probably were equally tasty all of them anyway.

"No, I won't let him get away with that. I just wanted to let you know we're going there instead."

"To Pirbright?"

"Yes, exactly."

"You'll bring all the cakes there?"

This seemed too stupid an idea even for Bella's more whimsical moments.

"Not the whole cakes, we wouldn't eat all of it anyway, but I've arranged with the baker, so we get a decent piece of each cake in coolbags, plus he takes photos of the cakes before he cuts them, so we see how they look."

"So, you, me and a bunch of cakes are going on a road trip?"

"Yes. Who knows, maybe Charles feels like joining us", she said casually. "I'll pick you up later."

Maybe Charles feels like joining us. Or maybe, he would think that Molly was stalking him and run the other direction. Two days ago, he had said he would not have time to see her until next week, for something she did not even think was a date as much as just hanging out. Showing up at his doorstep, or rather his job would feel awkward, but Bella had apparently made up her mind that her husband-to-be would not get away with not trying out cakes and she would not let her sister off the hook either.

"Charles?"

Charles looked up on Matt from the papers he had been reading, where he sat by his desk, a slight frown on his face.

"Yeah."

"I have a favour to ask", he said bashfully, and Charles immediately guessed it had something to do with Bella, again.

"No, I won't drive to London this time, if that was what you were about to ask", he said flatly.

"It wasn't. I was wondering if we could borrow your office later? My captain sized office is apparently too small."

"Who is *'we'*? And for what?"

"Bella is coming here later. I said I wouldn't come to London for the cake tasting and then she said she would bring it here. I tried to talk her out of it..."

"...but it's not possible."

"No."

"For Christ's sake, Matt. This is an army facility, not a bakery."

"I know that but try tell Bella."

Charles sighed.

"And she wants my office?"

"She wants somewhere big enough to plate all the cakes."

"The mess?"

"Too public. I would rather keep a low profile, or I'll be Captain Cake for the rest of my career."

Charles smirked, because he knew Matt was right. Something like this would certainly render him a long-lasting nickname.

"All right then, but let's keep it low profile here in my office too, or I'll be Major Muffin instead. The things Bella puts us through..."

Now both laughed.

"You seem to be in an unusually good Christmas spirit this year", Matt changed subject.

"How so?"

"I've never seen you having any Christmas decorations in your office before. Didn't think it was your style, but apparently I was wrong."

Matt nodded towards the small snowglobe on Charles' desk.

"Right, well, there's a first for everything."

Charles' cheeks had turned slightly pink.

"Now, double away, Matt. I need to get some work done before Bella arrives."

"And Molly."

"And Molly?"

"Yes, she was going to be part of the cake tasting so Bella's dragging her here."

Suddenly Charles was looking forward to the cake tasting for other reasons than the opportunity to eat cake but tried to stay blank under Matt's gaze, which seemed to scrutinize his reaction.

"Anyway, got to work. See you later", Charles dismissed him.

Charles remained seated by the desk, but instead of continuing working, he picked up the snowglobe and shook it, so the glittery fake snowflakes swirled around.

When he and Molly had agreed to see each other next week, it had felt like too long a wait, but he had not known how to make it happen earlier. Now he would surprisingly get to see her today and he felt all giddy with happiness. For once, he was grateful to Bella and all her ideas. He only wished two things different; that it had not been at work and that they had been alone.

Bella had visited Matt before and knew her way around the regiment, but Matt anyway came to meet them at the guardroom, so the guard would let them in. Bella sometimes drove him half mad, but despite that it only was four days since he last saw his fiancée Matt's heart skipped a beat when he saw her. He both loved her and was crazy *in* love with her and he could not wait for this amazing woman to become his wife. If putting up with a bit of Bridezilla was what it took, he could handle it.

Molly was a bit nervous. If they ran into Charles, what would he think about her coming here? She really did not want to feel like she was bothering him at work.

Matt, now carrying a coolbag in each hand, nodded in direction to the left.

"This way to Charles' office."

"Charles' office?", Molly said in dismay.

"He agreed to lend it too us, so we would have enough space", Bella explained.

Molly felt like escaping but as it would have been difficult to explain why, she reluctantly stayed in the other's tracks until Matt knocked on a door to an office.

"Come in."

His dark voice was enough to give her goosebumps and she felt incredibly nervous as they entered. He looked as impressive in his uniform as he had the last time, but the broad smile he gave her immediately removed Molly's doubts that she was welcome, and if that had not been enough she also noticed the snowglobe she had given him in his otherwise undecorated office. Then he turned his gaze to Bella and gave her his most stern-faced look.

"Bella Dawes, I have to tell you this is probably breaking quite a few army regulations."

"Come on Major James, aren't our troops allowed to have cake?" she gave Charles her most irresistible smile.

He raked his fingers through his hair and knew this was just for show, because he actually thought it was terribly nice to have both there, especially Molly.

"We're supposed to stay fit", he grinned "and you're making it harder."

"I think that tall body of yours can handle some cake before you go chubby", Bella smirked in return. "Can we clear your desk to plate it all there?"

While Molly helped unpacking the cakes, five in total, she watched Charles do the same. She liked how he carefully handled the delicate pastries, in no way behaving like he thought this was just silly. He looked up on her as he removed the paper box from one of the pieces and his warm brown eyes met hers.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just that the combination of your uniforms and these cakes is nearly as odd as the combination with the bridal shop."

"Yeah, but this time it was *you* intruding. It's the cakes that don't fit in, not me."
His smile took the edge out of his words.

Bella took the task seriously and showed a photo of each cake as it had looked when it was whole, before they were allowed to taste the piece she had brought.

"I liked this one", Matt said.

"Blueberry white chocolate?"

"Mmmm", he had his mouth full and found it difficult to speak.

"My favourite is chocolate raspberry", Molly said.

"And yours Charles?"

"I think I have to go with the raspberry chocolate too."

"Well, mine is the one with passion fruit mousse", Bella said and then everyone knew that would be the final choice. In the end it did not really matter because all were delicious.

"Are you heading back now?" Charles asked.

"I need to talk over a few things with Matt", Bella said. "Why don't you show Molly around? Give her a guided tour of this place?"

Molly felt embarrassed by the, to her, indiscreet way of pushing Charles together with her.

"I'm sure you have other things..."

"Loads of them actually, but I'd rather show you around. Should we?"

Hands in pockets he nodded towards the door. Molly put on her jacket and off they went. Charles glanced at her sideways. She had on the red puffer jacket again and it made her look like one of Santa's elves. A beautiful one.

"Have you been here long, in Pirbright?" she asked as they walked.

"No, I transferred here after last tour so it's quite new."

"And do you like it?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It's pretty much the same in of the regiments. I'd like to get closer to Bath though so in that aspect Bulford would be better."

He wanted to live closer to Sam, but right now it was quite convenient that this was closer to London. He hoped he would have reason to go there more often. He enjoyed walking here side by side with her, just talking. but had to fight the urge to take her hand and kept his hands safely tucked in his pockets.

"So, Bath is the place that feels most like home to you?"

"As far as a house is concerned, my parents place in Bath feels more like home than my house here. I haven't bothered to make it feel like home."

She stopped and turned to him and he looked at her.

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-five."

"I thought as much. Isn't odd not to have your own place that feels like a home that age?"

"You really know how to make a man feel old", he smirked. "I guess you're right but with tours and transfers I haven't gotten around to it."

He knew this was an opportunity to tell her about the home he had shared with Rebecca, the one he had fled from due to all the fighting, but he could not bring himself to do it out of fear to scare her away. If marriage and divorce were mentioned, the question about kids might come up as well. He wanted her to know him better before she would have to think about what it would be like dating someone with a son. Maybe if he got her to like him first she would not back away. She just nodded to his response and changed subject.

"When we were baking the other day, you said the army was the place you feel you could be yourself most..."

"Yeah?"

"I find that strange because to me you seem stiffer when I meet you in uniform than in civvies. Especially compared to in rain deer jumper." She giggled, but he sensed that there still was a seriousness to what she said so that she actually expected him to respond.

"I attribute part of it to the uniform itself." He smiled too. "I'm always most relaxed on tour, there's a special freedom to it, but maybe I have become less relaxed in my role since I became a major, because it's another step between me and the privates."

"Do you ever wish you could go back?"

Her question took him a bit by surprise.

"I haven't thought about it that way. I've always wanted to make a career in the army, but I've also always liked hanging with the lads in my platoon, liked the banter and goofing around. Sometimes they are like a bunch of kids that can drive me mad, but they also make me laugh. There's less of that now, and I miss it I must admit. So, both yes and no, I wouldn't go back but there are things that comes with the higher rank that I could do without."

"I guess you just have to make sure your spare time is more fun then."

"I guess I must. I think I'm well on my way with the singing and skating."

"And a stag party to look forward to on Saturday."

"Yes, that too, although I think Sunday will be dreadful."

"Probably. We will have Bella's hen on Saturday too. I don't think it will be as intense as Matt's but I'm planning for a very calm Sunday anyway. I'll be glad when it's out of the way because she's nagging me to tell her about it. She doesn't like not being in control."

"I can imagine."

As they walked, Charles pointed out different buildings to her, explained what they were, and that phase 1 military training was done here.

"But you went to Sandhurst, right?"

"Yes, officer training is different. More focus on strategical aspects."

"I bet you're a good officer."

"Why?"

"Because of your combination of traits."

"What would those traits be?" He was both amused and curious about what she saw in him.

"You can obviously be this stern and commanding type, but you're also kind and compassionate and understanding. I saw that side of you when I was crying in the restaurant. You're funny too and willing to give of yourself and I have the feeling your men know they can trust you one hundred percent. That they would follow you anywhere."

"I don't know what to say, except thanks. That was a very nice judgement of me."

"Not true then?"

"That's how I would hope to be but I'm not sure I always manage."

"You don't have to do perfect all the time you know."

"No, maybe I don't."

They had stopped again, and he had removed his hands from his pockets, but crossed his arms over his chest instead because he wanted to stay in control, so he would not have the impulse to touch her. What she just had said had made him incredibly happy. If she saw him like that, was there a chance she might like him? Not already, but if they saw more of each other. The thing was, he even liked himself more with her. With her he was like he was on a good day with his best friends, or with Sam. For some reason she brought out the best in him. It made him want to be with her all the time.

"So, what do you think of it? Has this guided tour made you want to join the army?"

"Nah, I think it would go against the doctor's oath to save lives and do no harm."

"There's doctors in the army too, you know. Very much needed - to save lives."

"That's true, but for now I'm fine where I am."

"Yes, you seem to be, I'm just testing the thought on you", he smiled.

The things that smile did to Molly's insides. She wanted to be the one to make him smile like that all the time. Wanted to place her lips to those smiling ones, touch them softly, kiss him but she knew she would never dare. Especially not here, in this surrounding. Of course, he would have wondered what the hell she was doing, and everything would have been awkward, she would not want to ruin the pleasure of merely being with him. She appreciated that she had had the chance to see this place and spontaneously said.

"Thanks for showing me around, it was nice to see it. Now I can picture you at work."

He gave her an intensive look, then smiled.

"You will picture me at work?"

"I mean, the fewer blanks to fill the better. You know what happens when I use my imagination, you become bald and all that."

He shook his head, laughing at her once again but he liked the thought of her thinking of him, no matter in what context. Molly wished she had not said that, not wanting to disclose that the thought of him more or less constantly.

They had started walking again and were getting closer to his office, both slowing their pace as they were reluctant for this to end, wanted to stay in each other's company.

"I guess this is it, but I'm looking forward to seeing you next week."

"Me too. You're off for the entire Christmas?"

"I have leave until after New Year and it's only fair because I've been away on tour for the last two Christmases."

"Sounds like you deserve it. I'm off too this year, no shifts over Christmas and New Year."

Molly hoped this meant she might see a lot of him and she already knew she would see him over Christmas due to the wedding. The thought of staying in the same hotel as him, was thrilling. She did not know that Charles was having the exact same thought in this moment.

"Will you celebrate in Bath then, after the wedding?"

"I will. My parents' house is magical at Christmas. You should come around."

"You're inviting me to come to your parents' for Christmas? You know that after the wedding you're not forced to hang with me for rehearsing purposes anymore?"

He felt himself blushing.

"I know, I just thought it's a very nice place and I'd like if you saw it."

"Thanks then. I think I'd like that."

Charles' heart was pounding, he could not believe he just had said that. It had just slipped out of him, but he very much wanted her there.

Molly's heart was pounding, she could not believe he just had said that. It would be a bit terrifying going visit his parents, but there was nothing she wanted more than to see his home and to meet him again after the wedding.

In that state they entered his office and found Bella and Matt snogging. It seemed they had finished discussing all their wedding business and now it was time for the girls to drive home.

A/N: I suspect this is the last chapter I'll manage before Christmas, and you may not have time to read anyway, so I take the opportunity to wish all of you Merry Christmas.

X

A/N: Sorry for the long time it has taken since the previous update. I got an idea for another Christmas story (The Christmas card) and could not resist writing it in between and then I somehow lost touch with this story. I have been trying to feel inspired for this chapter for weeks, then suddenly realised that maybe I should just let go of the plot I had outlined for it and write something else, and then it worked. I know the Molly CJ chapters are the most appreciated, but this has been intended to be one of the in-between stories and it still is, just with different characters than I first had planned. This is based on something we only got to hear about in the last season (nothing related to a chest of drawers! lol)

X

Chapter 19: Friday, Dec 15 - Monk

"What's troubling you?"

"Nothing."

"Come on, we've spent far more time together on tour than I wish we had, with all your farting when you sleep. I know you and I can see something's wrong."

"Liar, I don't fart when I sleep and *if* I did it would smell roses."

"Yeah, right. Now tell me."

"You're an annoying bugger but okay... I'm not sure but I have this feeling. I'm off to meet a friend this afternoon and I think she may be breaking up with me."

"Breaking up? Interesting choice of words for a friend."

"Yeah, well... friends with benefits and all that."

"Aha...how long has it been going on?"

"We've known each other since school but first we were just regular friends, without any benefits I mean. Then it's been on and off between other girlfriends, boyfriends (hers, of course) and tours."

Rab whistled.

"That's a long relationship. And now you think she's ending it?"

"Just a feeling I got when she called. Said she had something important to talk about and I know she has this new really nice colleague at the school since a couple of months back, always keeps mentioning how funny he is. Good-looking too."

"If you're just friends with benefits it had to end that way sooner or later, hadn't it?"

"I suppose. It's just that..."

"What?"

"I'm in love with her."

"You're in love with her? For how long?"

"Probably for as long as I've known her."

"Why on earth did you never tell her then?"

"I was afraid to scare her off. We've agreed we're just friends."

"That obviously doesn't hold true for you. You've really got yourself into a mess."

"I know."

"Maybe you should tell her?"

"I think she's already occupied with her teacher bloke."

"If you don't take the chance you'll never know."

"Know what?"

"If she could love you too if you dared to leave the friend zone. Got to go now. Good luck, Monk."

"Thanks, mate."

Sean Stephens, aka Monk, was on his way to meet up his best friend Rosie. Well, at least she was his best *female* friend and better than most male ones too, including his squaddies. They had known each other since middle school, twelve years and counting now. They were each other's opposites in essentially everything

that met the eye. Sean was tall, broad-shouldered and dark, Rosie short and thin, with large blue eyes and blonde hair. He had grown up with a struggling single mum as only known parent in a somewhat shabby neighbourhood, she was from a stable middle-class home. He had been the class' troublemaker, she the best pupil of them all. Yet they had been drawn to each other almost from the first day and become and stayed friends, there was an undeniable kinship although they were the only ones aware of it. It had always been like that and the relationship was precious to him.

Things had become slightly complicated when he grew tall, got a six-pack, pubic hairs and a voice that went roller-coaster riding before it stabilised into a grown man's voice at last, while she grew boobs, got a bit moody and mature and interested in older guys. It made them suddenly realise they were of the opposite sex in addition to all their other differences, and neither of them unattractive which drew other girls and boys to them, competing with their friendship. Even if they did not admit it they were attracted to each other, but both knew they valued their friendship too much to put it at stake and made a silent pact not to cross the friendship limits. They managed until one drunken evening when they were seventeen.

A group of their friends hung out at the house of Tonya Archer, not really having a party but socialising and getting pissed. He had a girlfriend who got too drunk early in the evening and went home, meanwhile Rosie was single for the moment. Someone came up with the brilliant idea of 'Truth or dare'. It all felt like innocent fun until Tonya said;

"I dare Sean to kiss Rosie"

Sean had felt his mouth go dry. Despite that he was drunk, this made him nervous. Not so much because of the girlfriend who had gone home, but because it was Rosie. His bestie Rosie. Kissing her would be like kissing a sister, or so he thought.

"...for at least one minute! And I want to see a real snog, not some chaste kissing with closed lips" Tonya added.

Rosie looked at him in horror.

"Come on, that's not fair! I've got a girlfriend."

"And I have a boyfriend, but you had me and Marcus kiss for thirty seconds! You didn't think *that* was awkward. Now it's payback time."

He knew the rules of the game and he had not minded playing others, but he had not expected him and Rosie to be paired up. Now there was no escape. They stood up, facing each other and he saw in her eyes that she was as nervous as him, which gave him some confidence.

"It's just a kiss", he said to her.

"I know, but it feels all weird when it's you."

"Let's just get it over with."

He bent his head down to hers, softly touched her lips.

"Clock does not start until you snog for real."

Oh, if that annoying Tonya could just shut up, but they still obeyed her and deepened the kiss. Rosie's hands went up to hold around his neck and he pulled her closer to him and then they lost themselves in each other until someone shouted in their ears;

"Time's up!" and they flew apart, confused about what they felt in this moment. Lines had been blurred because he knew it was the best kiss he ever had, with the girl that meant much more to him than any girlfriend. He wanted to kiss her again.

They did not that evening, they barely even looked at each other after that, but that night he dreamt of her a dream that made him have to sneak his sheets into the laundry next morning and get new ones.

A month later he had dumped the insignificant girlfriend and they found themselves at a funfair, again slightly intoxicated and as we all know, that is not when the wisest decisions are made but sometimes, only sometimes, the ones we really want. So, they had ended up snogging again, behind the popcorn stand and this time he walked her home and she sneaked him into his bed. It was not his first time, but it could have been because it was the first time that counted for anything. When they woke up to the cold, sobering morning light, both were as anxious as before to ruin their friendship and had *the Talk*. They promised each other that this was only an addition to their friendship, not something they would let destroy it. Both agreed this was only physical needs, not love - because if they fell in love and then out of love they would hardly be able to stay friends.

Over the years that had passed by since then, they had always stayed friends and sometimes ended up in bed again, always between relationships so never hurting

anybody. It was only before Sean went on his last tour, a short-lasting one of eight weeks, that he had realised that this was all he really wanted. She had called him, asked him to come over after she had been out with her girls one evening. She had fallen asleep after sex that was amazing as always as they were completely compatible, but he had lay awake, let his fingers stroke along her spine, the dip of her waist, heard her snore faintly and come to the realisation that he loved her. Her and no one else. He had panicked because he was sure she did not feel the same. In the morning he had written her a nice, *friendly* note and left before she woke up. Shortly after he left for tour and even though they had been in touch since, not seen her until today. Two months, two weeks and three days had passed, not that he was counting.

Today they were to meet at a café. He would have preferred a bar, so he could start drowning his sorrows without delay when she told him she was in love with the guy at work and they had to end the extra benefit part of their relationship. Maybe she would even ask him if he would be her maid of honour when they got married, he was her best friend after all. God, he needed a pint only at the thought of it but here he sat nervously sipping a bloody cinnamon latte. The cinnamon had been a bad choice but the girl behind the counter had said it was their very popular Christmas special.

The door swung open and in she came, his Rosie. He did not know how it was possible, but she was even more beautiful than she used to be, her cheeks flushed like she had hurried here, and she seemed to be glowing with happiness. Shit, he was not sure how he would be able to handle this, but he stood up and gave her a big bear hug.

"So good to see you! I'm always relieved when I get to eyeball you and get solid proof you came home in one piece when you've been on tour. I can't quite believe it until I set eyes on you. And you didn't call me when you got back, I heard it from your mum. I thought you knew I always worry."

"It was only a humanitarian mission this time, nothing much to worry about. Told you that before I left so I didn't think it was a biggie. I thought you were busy with, you know, your own life."

She looked at him, now serious and a bit disappointed.

"You're part of my life. You're important to me. I wish you could see that Sean, even if you don't think the same about me."

"Well, I hardly need to worry that an IED will blow you up at work."

Only worry that some nice guy will come and snatch you away, he thought to himself. He had hugged her, but that was not enough, he was aching to reach out his hand and touch her cheek. Ask how she *really* had been when he was gone, but he was too afraid of the answer. Afraid he would not be able to stand hearing her tell about that she had fallen in love with someone else without vomiting. Strangely, she looked like she did not appreciate his joke.

"I would not mind if you worried a bit about me sometimes. You know, friends do that. Care about what happens in the other's life even if it does not mean imminent danger."

He wondered where the sudden sharpness came from. There was a silence, not a completely comfortable one and he was deliberating what would be the correct thing to say next to please her.

"I've been thinking about us", she suddenly blurted out, gaze fixed at the table instead of at him.

Now she would say it, he felt it and his insides twisted with angst.

"It was a shitty thing you did before you went on tour. Left when I was sleeping."

"I didn't want to wake you up, thought you'd be hungover."

"It made me feel like it had been some cheap shag when I woke up."

"It's not like that. It's never like that. You know that Rosie."

"Do I? Then why did it feel like it?"

"You were the one calling me when you were drunk."

"Well, it won't happen again. What we've had, this on and off casual sex – it doesn't work for me anymore."

"You've met someone?"

"What? Why would you think that?"

"You looked so happy when you came in here, like you're in love."

"I was happy because I was meeting *you*, but when I do, I realise I'm only your friend. Your friend that you sometimes sleep with but really you see me like a little sister."

"And you don't want that?"

"No."

"You want to be just friends, never sleeping together."

She stared at him like he was the daftest man on earth.

"No, I want to be your girlfriend, always sleeping together."

While his mind still was processing her words, trying to figure out if he heard her right, she added in a whisper;

"I'm pregnant. We're pregnant. Two months, two weeks and three days. If we don't want it, we don't have that much time to dec..."

He was up from his chair in a split second, to kneel in front of her, wrap his arms around her and lean his cheek to her still flat belly.

"Are you crazy, Rosie, there's only one possible decision here."

"And that is?" Her voice trembled, hoping but uncertain still.

"Keeping our baby, of course."

"We don't have to do it just because you feel a sense of duty."

He looked up on her. "I love you. I probably have for as long as I've known you, but I didn't understand it until our last night together. I was scared to bits because I was sure you didn't feel the same. I thought you wanted to see me today to share the good news about some other bloke." He grinned, still not completely able to grasp the turn of events.

"There's only ever been you", she smiled. He reached out his hand to stroke softly over her lips, then kissed her. This time better than all the previous ones because now he knew she was his, and he was hers.

"Are you sure you want a baby with me? Half of it will be me, driving you mad", he whispered to her ear.

"One hundred percent sure."

"And you've been okay? Morning sickness?"

"I've been fine. First scan is next week if you want to come along and see it?"

"More than anything. I think I need to fully understand we're having a baby."

"Me too. Christ, we're going to be parents!", she grinned.

"Now that we've cleared this out, would you mind if we don't finish this cinnamon shit and go home and snuggle up instead?"

"You've always been such a romantic, Sean."

"I promise you, now that I'm allowed to, I'll show you more romantic than you could dream of, starting by kissing you from top to toe and do absolutely nothing else unless you beg me to. Then you won't be able to accuse me of just wanting to shag with you ever again."

Her eyes twinkled in response and both knew there was a substantial chance she would beg him to do a whole lot of other things than just kissing her all over.

A/N: I warned you from start this would be a fluffy story. I'm also trying to stay true to my initial promise, that I will try to include as many OG characters as possible. If you have a favourite who is yet missing and would like a story about, you could let me know. I will obviously return to the ones already included and tie together their stories.

Chapter 20: Saturday, Dec 16 – Charles & Molly

Charles was on his way to London as today was the day of Matt's stag do. He was looking forward to it but already dreading how hungover he would be tomorrow. A stag where the majority of the participants were soldiers on leave could only end in one way. If he succeeded in his mission, Matt would be worse though.

All sorts of creative ideas had popped up when they started planning the event, from heading to Ibiza for an extended weekend (off season though) or to somewhere in Eastern Europe (cheap beer), to gin tasting and hiring a stripper. Charles had averted all those ideas for different reasons. It would be difficult both for Matt and several of the others who also were in the army to go away for several days and he knew that Matt was not too keen on Eastern Europe after his latest tour to Estonia. He also knew that Matt did not fancy gin much and the last thing he wished for was a stripper, especially if it ever became known to Bella. (Charles did not like the idea of a stripper either, the one time he had been to a stag party where there was one, he had found it totally embarrassing and humiliating and did not understand where either the fun or the sensuality in it was, paying a girl to take her clothes off in front of a bunch of drunken men.) What Matt wanted was a day to without demands, get completely pissed and have fun with his friends, no complications needed. Finally, they had landed on being in London, have one arranged activity – bubble football (while drinking, naturally), followed by more drinking, perhaps eating something so it did not end in total disaster and then hang out in a bar. Matt was not one for dancing either.

He had been up early to catch the London train and it almost started to feel like a habit now. The only thing that bothered him was that he had had to leave Sam behind. Yesterday, Charles extended Christmas permission had started. It was something of a first. He had either been on tour or on duty for most of the past Christmases since he joined the army. Now he would have the luxury to be off until the other side of New Year. When he got back to Bath yesterday, he had picked up Sam from Rebecca and they had fetched Thai take-away, bought large amounts of snacks and watched *Grinchen*. Not because it was their favourite movie, but because it was Christmas tradition. Due to work and Rebecca taking Sam to Paris, a few weeks had passed since Charles last saw his son and now he felt like he had grown an inch or two in that short timeframe, reminding him he was seeing too little of Sam. What he wished for most was to work closer to Bath, so he could go home in the weekday evenings and Sam could stay with him every other week, not only weekends. But he was not there yet, before the practical arrangements were done there was not point discussing it with Rebecca. He knew she would not jump with joy, but the important thing was that Sam would. For now, he was looking forward to spending a lot of time with him over Christmas.

He arrived at Paddington station and thought to himself that from now on, he would probably always connect it with Molly, bouncing into her followed by a bollocking. He smiled to himself before he hurried to the metro line that would take him to Matt's house, or rather the café around the corner where he would meet up the rest of the guys. They would be twenty-four including Matt, so they would be more than enough for two football teams.

Nearly all of them were already there when he arrived and took charge, both out of habit and because he as bestman was the one arranging the whole thing.

"Before we go get Matt, I just want to make one thing clear." Amused, he saw that those of them who were privates nearly stood in attention when he, a major, spoke. That would not do on a day like this, he wanted them to relax.

"Today is about Matt, celebrating he will be a married man soon..."

"I thought we were having a funeral feast for his days as bachelor", Elvis interrupted, and Charles shot him an annoyed glance.

"If you'd just let me finish. We're here to celebrate Matt, you chose your reason. What I want to say is we're not at work and I'll be pissed off if anyone calls me 'Sir' or think about what appropriate behaviour might be or not. Army regulations are not part of this day and I'm here to have fun like the rest of you. Okay?"

"Yes, Sir", a guy called Fingers said. Charles had been his CO before he was promoted major and that was one of the reasons he had delivered his little speech, to ease any possible tensions.

"Charles is fine for today", he now grinned, "but I'll kill anyone who tries calling me Charlie. Except Elvis of course, but he has something wrong with his speech centre, we all know that."

"Not just the speech centre, I would say his entire brain", Spanner smirked, and everyone laughed except Elvis who put on a sulking face but really was amused too. That was the ice-breaker they had needed and now they all went to get Matt.

Matt was loitering in robe and slippers, reading the newspaper and had a toast and tea. Life was perfect. Bella had been picked up for her hen half an hour ago and now he was looking forward to a calm day, until the doorbell rang, and his hallway was invaded by twenty-three noisy men, laughingly forcing him to have his first tequila shot before he even had a chance to get proper clothes on. He instantly knew this would be a day of lots of fun, but he was not entirely sure he would survive it.

Around ten in the evening, the remaining part of the troop were hanging in a bar, but quite a few had had to drop off because they were too hammered to take anymore.

"Bubble football was a bloody brilliant idea", Matt slurred to Charles.

Charles was about half as drunk as Matt, yet *very* drunk too and just grinned in response. Playing football in zorb suits had been a laugh. Just the sight of them all with upper bodies enclosed in plastic bubbles, which made them play equally bad disregarding how skilled or not they normally were at football. A highlight had been when Elvis nearly had panicked because he really had to pee - NOW! - and did not know how to get out of his suit. It was quite easy actually, if one was not as drunk as Elvis and they cruelly delayed showing him how to do until it was very close that he peed inside the bubble, which would have been both gross and humiliating as it was transparent. A bit like bathing in one's own pee while others were watching. Almost a pity they had helped Elvis before it happened.

"So, you've enjoyed yourself?"

"Best day ever... needed to get away from wedding preparations. Thanks! And I'm seriously relieved there was no stripper, Bella would have killed me."

"There could still be one, night is not over..."

"You didn't!"

"No, I'm just teasing. I know you don't want any ladies undressing themselves."

"Only if it's Bella. You know, the other week..."

Charles held his hand up as a sign for Matt so stop.

"Whatever you were about to say, I'm quite sure I don't want those details about your wife-to-be."

"Okay, I'll keep it to myself. Since we're talking about women..."

"Yeah?"

"What do you think about Molly?"

What he thought about Molly? In this moment when his mushy brain was not quite capable of thinking in coherent sentences... pretty... funny... hot... wonderful... worst skater he had seen... He managed a full sentence after all.

"What about her? That she's Bella's sister and bridesmaid." Was all he said out loud.

"Nothing more?"

"She's nice I suppose."

"Nice? You can do better than that! She's a fucking gem and I think you know it! You just don't want to admit you have noticed a girl so soon after the divorce."

"Don't try to be a match maker, it does not suit you and I certainly don't want to be subject to it."

Matt grunted, not satisfied with the answer he got. He considered how he could tease Charles into saying something more, admit he liked Molly, when the room seemed to tilt, and he fell off the stool and landed as a pile of legs and arms on the floor. He made no sign of getting up, so Charles announced that it probably was time for him to bring Matt home.

They (Charles really, Matt was still decked) had said good night to the others and Charles got them a cab to take them to Matt's empty house. He had no idea what the girls' plan had been, if they would bring Bella home tonight or not, but he assumed that no one would mind if he stayed in the guest bed after having half carried Matt up the stairs to his bed. He swiftly got undressed, then slumped onto the bed and pulled the duvet over himself. The world kept spinning even though he now was still, telling him how wasted he was, and then he fell asleep.

The girl's day had been classier. They had brunch with Prosecco, followed by a day-spa where they had more Prosecco, then went to a restaurant for dinner, wine and – surprise - Prosecco, then ended with dancing (strawberry daiquiris and Prosecco) at a night club. The result was that now they found themselves nearly as drunk as the guys even if the alcoholic beverage of choice mainly had been bubbly instead of beer and booze. When Bella announced that she intended to replace one of the professional dancers who were located at small podiums in the corners of the night club, and perhaps remove a bit of her clothes to practice some sexy moves to surprise Matt with on the wedding night, Molly knew it was time to take her home.

She got them a cab despite Bella's protests.

"You're spoiling all the fun! It's my party and I can do what I want!"

"I won't let you do anything I know you'll regret bitterly tomorrow. I know you would kill me then."

Georgie helped Molly get Bella into a cab and the bridezilla fell asleep already during the drive. Molly had to pull her, still half sleeping into the house and up the stairs, where a completely wasted Matt already was lying across the bed, fully dressed and snoring. Molly thought to herself that the air in this bedroom would be toxic in the morning from the combined alcoholic fumes from the two of them. She knew Bella would panic when she woke up hungover, because she would have lost both Saturday and Sunday when it came to wedding preparations.

"You needed that, sis. Needed a bit of fun", she said softly, kissed Bella's forehead and tucked them both in gently. She loved them both so much and hoped she would find what they had one day.

Then she headed for the guest room and knackered as she was, quickly wriggled out of her dress and jumped into bed without turning on the light. She fell asleep before the springs hit the floor.

Chapter 21: Sunday, Dec 17 - Molly

I had always liked Bella's guestroom. For one thing, the bed is big and super comfy, so much nicer than my own which to be honest could do with a new mattress. Secondly, there are these great thick curtains, that leave the room pitch black even in day time so one can have a sleep in. I needed that this morning. I glanced at the red digits of the digital alarm clock on the bedside table. It was 09:13 but I felt far from rested. Good, I was so hungover. Or perhaps still drunk. Probably both simultaneously if that is possible. It was like I had a little man pounding with a hammer inside my head and my mouth felt like I had been chewing on sandpaper. I desperately needed a glass of water and some Advil, but I did not know how because I was unable to move, it would hurt too much and likely provoke me to vomit. I needed to lie very still. Worst kind of catch 22.

I tried to produce some saliva using willpower, but it did not work. There was no point shouting for Matt or Bella to bring me anything because they were surely feeling even worse than I did. Maybe I should try to get up just to... no really, really bad idea. I could not stand raising my head from the pillow. I just had to try to enjoy the lovely bed until I felt well enough to move. I stretched out to fully take advantage of how spacious it was and that was when I felt *it*. My foot touched something warm and furry. My first thought was if Bella had gotten a cat without telling me. Carefully I let my toes touch it again. It seemed to be hairy rather than furry and longer than a cat for sure, I could not feel the start and end of it. It reminded me of a... LEG! A FUCKING LEG! I panicked at the realization that someone was lying beside me in the bed and I had absolutely no idea who.

I sat up with a scream and knocked the bedside lamp over when I tried to turn it on. I heard the bulb break.

"Fuck fuckety fuck!"

Then a hand grabbed my arm in the darkness and I thought I would shit my pants because I was so scared, preparing myself to fight off an assault.

"Molly, is that you?" It was a raspy, tired, yet familiar voice asking.

"Yes. Shit! Is it you, Charles?"

"Guilty."

"What are you doing here?!"

"Trying to sleep but someone won't let me."

Did I hear a slightly annoyed tone in his voice? Excuse me! It seemed uncalled for, after all this was *my* sister's bed.

"I get that, but why in the same bed as me?"

"You sure weren't in it when I went to bed. I would have noticed. I think. I was very drunk."

"I would have noticed if you were here when I went to bed!"

"Sure?"

"Well, I never turned on the lights and I was also a tad drunk, but..."

It occurred to me that Matt already was in bed when I put Bella there, which made it likely that Charles was in this bed when I jumped in. I was still unwilling to admit I had been the one intruding.

"How could you not notice when I jumped into the same bed as you? I don't think I was very discreet."

"I was probably asleep. Drunken asleep. How could you not notice even if lights were out?"

"I was drunken awake." Now I laughed but realised that using face muscles was too painful and quickly lay down. Laying down sharing one duvet, I suddenly got worried.

"You're not naked, are you?"

His leg was, I had already felt it and was eternally grateful that it was not some other "furry" part of him I had happened to touch. God, just the thought if I had touched him *there* and he had woken up. It would have meant a life-time of embarrassment. Lucky it was dark because I felt my face heat up just thinking about it.

"What if I was?" he said mockingly.

"Please don't tease, my head can't cope with that."

"Okay. I'm not naked. I'm wearing my trunks."

A completely naked Charles would have been awkward, a nearly naked Charles was intriguing. The thought of his delicious body stretched out next to me in only trunks was tantalizing. Unfortunately, I was not in a state to attempt being a temptress even if I had thought he would have been receptive to it, which I was quite certain he was not. Both because he would be hungover and tired too, and because he was clearly out of my league any day. Anyway, it was the second annoying catch 22 of the day: being in bed with gorgeous man and unfit to even attempt seducing him.

"That's a bloody relief."

I let out a sigh and heard him laugh softly.

"And you Dawes?"

"What about me?"

"Do I have to live in fear I have a naked woman next to me?"

"No! I have bra and knickers, no nude sleeping here. I never sleep nude. Well, except when I, you know..."

I interrupted myself, no need to give out more information than asked for.

"Good to know."

He still sounded amused. I would have loved to see his face, but it was quite nice lying here chatting in the dark and I had no wish for him to see mine. I had not washed off my party makeup yesterday and in addition to looking exhausted, I

could guarantee that smudged eyeliner left-overs would have turned me into a panda. A scary one, not a cute one.

"What kind of bra and knickers?"

"What? Why would you want to know?"

"It sort of makes a difference if it is a sensible cotton set or if it's just a tiny scrap of lace."

I wondered what he would prefer that I was wearing in this moment. Perhaps giant granny pants so I would be as covered up as possible. I was not wearing granny pants, but not a flimsy lace thingy either.

"If you must know it's a satin bra with a little lace trim. Black. After all it was a party night yesterday and I always like to feel nice from inside out then, and it matched my little black dress."

He did not say anything, but I got the feeling he was smirking in the darkness. I did not know what to say next, so we lay quiet for a while and I felt that I still was in desperate need of a glass of water. Or perhaps a jerrycan and a tube, that would be nice.

"So, did you have a good time at the hen then?"

This was really the least ideal situation for small talk I had been in, with this throbbing headache but I had to try. I wanted to be funny and witty but only managed to croak;

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"That's it? I was expecting something more. You don't sound very enthusiastic." I could definitely hear him smiling.

"Prosecco. There was so much Prosecco I'm not able to talk now."

"Hungover?"

"Hungover and still drunk, I think."

"Funny, I actually feel much better than I deserve."

"Of course, you do."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're Mr. Perfect. It's only natural that you should feel fresh and rested even after a stag do."

"I think 'fresh and rested' is exaggerating a bit. I just said it could have been worse. And what do you mean with *Mr. Perfect*?"

"I'm not sure. You strike me as this perfect person, always in control, always looking good, great singer, brilliant skater, Major..."

"It does not sound like you're giving me compliments."

"I'm not *not* giving you compliments. It's just that you can make people around you (me) feel like they don't quite hit the mark."

To be honest I don't know why I said that. Not only that it was not a very nice thing to say to anyone, but most of the time he did not make me feel that way. On the contrary he made me feel safe and appreciated and he was kind, helpful and had a great sense of humour. It was only now that I was lying here nearly naked and half-drunk that I felt self-conscious and inadequate. Even more so after saying those words. I wanted to take them back and tell him he was wonderful, the most amazing man I had met, but I could not without seeming like a lovesick cat.

"Do I? Is that how I make you feel?"

He sounded hurt. I hated myself.

"I'm sorry. It didn't come out like I wanted it to. It's just that you seem so perfect compared to me."

"You're telling me you're not perfect, Ms. Doctor?"

"Everything but. I don't do perfect."

"Molly, I can promise you I'm everything but perfect. If you really knew me, you would see I'm quite flawed."

"So now you're trying to impress me with your alleged flaws?"

"Seems so."

"Tell me one."

"One what?"

"Tell me one of your flaws."

"I don't know..."

"You see, you can't even think of any."

"Okay, okay!"

He was silent for a while, I got the feeling he was deliberating what to expose. Maybe he thought this was a bit like during a job interview when they ask for your weaknesses and you need to come up with one that is not too bad and can be turned into a strength in some way.

"I haven't always been there for people I care about", he finally said. "Partly because my job took me away, but I also consciously stayed away, ran, when things got emotionally difficult, instead of dealing with it. I'm not very good at emotional stuff, better at boxing it up inside and keep from getting emotionally involved. It suits well in the army but not so much in my personal life."

"Sounds quite convenient. Me, I get too emotionally involved all the time, like with patients. Have to tell myself to cut it off."

"Maybe, but I also miss out on things. I try to change it, but it's not done in a day."

I wondered who the people were, that he had not been there for. Parents, friends, past girlfriends? I did not dare to ask though if he did not volunteer the information.

"Any other flaws?"

"I'm stubborn. I like to be right..."

"Doesn't everyone?"

"Yeah, the difference is that I *know* I'm right most of the time..."

I could hear he was making fun of himself, so he did not come out as obnoxious.

"...and I have a jealous streak."

"You're really getting warmed up, aren't you?" I laughed, as he seemed to be pouring out his own flaws now.

"You see, I'm not perfect."

"I think you have proven your point", I laughed.

Unfortunately, I felt a wave of nausea and realised I had no choice but to very quickly leave the bed.

"I'm sorry!"

I jumped up (NOT good for my head or nausea, getting worse by the second) and stumbled towards where I knew the door to the en-suite bathroom ought to be,

desperately fumbled for the handle in fear of vomiting at the bedroom carpet, finally found it, got inside and sank to my knees in front of the toilet chair as soon as I had locked the door. Could not risk a curious Charles to appear when I was at it. I had enough presence to keep my hair away, but otherwise it was not beautiful. Vomiting is truly humiliating. The way your entire body engages into throwing up whatever content you have in your stomach, leaving your muscles exhausted, your throat sore and the mouth tasting of bile. The upside is you actually feel a bit less nauseous afterwards.

I had turned on the light to ensure I did not miss the toilet and now peered in the light, heaved myself up to the basin and looked myself into the mirror. I should not have done that, it was a sight scary enough for a horror movie and I was immensely grateful that it was dark in the bedroom, so Charles had not seen me like this. I washed my face with large amounts of ice cold water, to remove all traces of smeared makeup and make my eyes look a bit less puffy. I ended by putting a dollop of toothpaste in my mouth, vastly improving the taste. Compared to some minutes ago I felt much fresher but as the starting point was low, I still felt pretty miserable. I was ready to return to the bed anyway.

I was completely blind in the darkness and fumbled towards the bed.

"You want me to turn on the lights?"

"No! No, please, I still can't stand the light with my headache."

And I did not want him to see me even if I had freshened up.

"Would you feel better if I stroke your hair? My mum always used to do that with me when I was ill."

I had no idea if it would make any difference to me being hungover, but it did not matter. I would *love* if he stroked my hair. Mum always did too when we were kids. This would be different, obviously.

"Maybe."

"Come here, then."

I heard him shift in the bed and I moved closer, carefully, a bit nervous to collide with his face or touch him somewhere I should not. I felt that he had stretched out his right arm, and now pulled me to him at the same time wrapping it around my shoulder, so I ended up in a position where I rested my head half on his shoulder, half on his arm, held by it, close to his side. He started smoothing over my hair with his free hand. The rest of our bodies did not fully touch, because we had some duvet tucked between us, but he was so close. The lovely warmth from him, his scent, the soft and slow touch. Things could not be better, except for my headache and that he surely had heard me puke.

"I wish you hadn't seen me like this. Or heard."

"It happens to all of us sometimes. Look at like this, Molly, I've seen you like this and I still really like you."

He liked me.

"Surprisingly much."

I was not sure what that was supposed to mean but I could not be bothered to care. This felt so good. I felt so comfortable, safe, happy, sleepy... I did not want to fall asleep, I wanted to stay awake and keep enjoying this, but I felt myself relax more and more into his body at his soft touch, maybe even his lips, to my hair and at some point, I dozed off.

When I woke up again it was still dark, the curtains ensured that. I had to remind myself of where I was once again and then the whole situation with Charles came back to me. Unexpectedly sharing bed with him. That was when I realised that the space next to me was disturbingly empty and cold. Charles seemed to be gone. I turned the lights on and it was confirmed. His clothes were gone, the bathroom empty. It seemed like he had found it fitting to leave (escape?) when I was sleeping. Oh, if I had not fallen asleep, but it had been so lovely. Possibly my best moment in bed with anyone ever despite that it had not involved sex.

Could he not have left me a note at least?

I got dressed, the little black dress that had felt so right yesterday was not what I would have liked to put on now but the only clothing I had. I knew I would feel like doing a walk of shame on my way home, without even had had the benefit of getting a good shag. Not that shags that preceded a walk of shame necessarily tended to be good and I would not have changed the time with Charles for that. Unless the shag was with him. I could feel my entire body respond just at the thought of it. He was

probably great in bed, just like he seemed to be good at basically everything else except getting emotionally involved. His own words. Was that the reason he was single?

Anyway, all I longed for was coming home to my own place, get changed to t-shirt and joggers, or maybe pyjamas and go back to bed. On my way out, I peeked into my hosts' bedroom and they were still asleep, now cuddled up with Matt holding Bella. Aaaaaw, they were the cutest and soon they were to marry. Charles nowhere to be seen in the house and his shoes and coat were not in the hallway. I wish I knew why he had gone without saying good bye.

I kept thinking about him all the way home. How I liked him more and more, but would he still want to see me next week or had I scared him off making a fool of myself throwing up and telling him he was so perfect he made me feel inadequate? If I had nothing clever to say, why could I not just keep my big gob shut? Sometimes I was really tired of myself. A classic Molly Dawes fuck up way of scaring away the loveliest man I had ever met.

I was still slightly nauseous, and the journey home took ages. Once I finally was inside the flat, I looked in at Georgie in her room. She was still asleep. She and some of the other girls had stayed in the club when I brought Bella home, so it was possible she had been up all night. I got changed, put my dead mobile phone in the charger, prepared myself a sandwich (even if I was not sure I would be able to eat), a cuppa, a huge glass of water and (finally!) the head ache pill I had craved, then crashed in the sofa.

After a couple of minutes, my iPhone came alive and absentmindedly I entered the pin. My heart nearly jumped out of my chest when I saw that a text from Charles appeared. Then another. And another. Why had I not thought of that – who would leave a note these days when you can send a text. Well, I probably would but I'm a bit of a slow adapter.

From: Charles

Hi Sleeping Beauty,

Hope you feel better now. Sorry I was not there when you woke up but had to return to Bath to meet someone.

Wondered who he was meeting that was so important. A date?

From: Charles

You snore like a truck driver when you're drunk

Oh, no. No no no. Wish I did not snore at all and if I did only very lady like.

From: Charles

I like being with you anyway

From: Charles

I hope your silence means you're still asleep and not that you think I'm an annoying stalker

No chance in the world I would ever think that. He liked being with me? He liked being with me! Best not interpret too much into that but I could not help it made me giddy with happiness. The last was sent an hour ago. I had better respond, not to be impolite.

From: Molly

Hello stalker

Awake now and feeling better. If you had seen me, you would have known I was sleeping but hardly a beauty. Thanks for being so nice when I was hungover, sorry for bathroom incident. I like being with you too. Even if you're almost perfect.

From: Charles

You're alive!

Who says I didn't turn on lights to have a look?

From: Molly

You didn't?

From: Charles

I did. Curiosity is another of my flaws.

From: Molly

Guess I have myself to blame as I told you I don't do perfect.

From: Charles

Exactly!

Still want to see me later this week?

Absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt, fucking, yes. Maybe he did not have a date today after all.

From: Molly

Sure you won't have an overdose?

From: Charles

I think I can handle it. Arriving in Bath now, but I'll call you. OK?

From: Molly

OK

From: Charles

BTW. I liked what I saw when I turned on the lights.

A/N: Thank you for the overwhelmingly positive response to the previous chapter. Getting closer to Christmas and the wedding but still nearly a week to go for Bella and Matt. I should try to wrap this story up before next weekend when Christmas officially ends in Sweden, let us see if I manage that. Returned to work today and that was hard after all lazy mornings, especially as it is so dark here this time of year.

x

Chapter 22: Monday, Dec 18 - Georgie

Monday and back to work. Georgie did not feel like a Sunday of rest had been enough to return her to normal after Bella's hen. It had been such an amazing girls only day and evening, exactly the break she had needed from her currently somewhat confusing love life. The first date with Alex had been wonderful and left her longing to have another try. There had been a second one, this past Friday and it had been so good it scared her.

They had gone eating sushi, followed by cinema. It had been such easy fun, but not only superficial banter. She already knew that he was the kind of person she would be able to talk about anything with. Maybe it was the slightly odd way they had met that had somehow bedded for that and she found herself more and more attracted to him. Not only by his looks, but by the way he smilingly looked at her, talked to her like she was the only one in the room. So different to Elvis, who felt like a capricious butterfly in comparison, spreading his charms to any woman he

stumbled upon. She knew that was not a completely fair description of him, but at times it felt like it. Yet, she missed him too.

After the cinema, Alex had walked her home through the snowy streets and it had been natural to hold hands. Their fingers touched as they walked and spontaneously became entwined. His hand felt different to Elvis', but surprisingly enough just as good to hold. She had hesitated what to do when they reached her doorstep, but in the end, she did not want the evening to end there and asked him to come up to the flat for a glass of wine.

Molly had been working late so they were home alone and once Georgie had him there, in the flat, she was unsure what to do next. The easy thing to stall any decision making was to do what she had promised when she invited him in, and she poured wine into two glasses and handed him one. First decision; kitchen chairs or the living room sofa. One was more intimate than the other and she had almost decided for the kitchen when he took the lead to the sofa and she found that she did not mind.

"It's a really nice place you have here. I hope I get to meet your flat mate some time."

She liked the way he did not pretend like he did not already know that he wanted to meet her again, and her friend too.

He did not try to seduce her by sitting too close or touch her before she was ready. He leaned back and relaxed in the sofa, glass in hand and whether he had intended it or not, seduced her by not trying too hard, by just being there, present and

interested, talking softly, listening, laughing, until she no longer heard what he said, just saw his lips moving and felt that she wanted to kiss him. She put her own glass down, took his and put away too, resulting in a slightly surprised but expectant look on his face. Then she pulled him to her, coiled her arms around his neck and kissed him. The unfamiliar feeling of kissing someone else than Elvis, gently exploring a new pair of lips. It felt so much better than she ever had imagined, so good that she forgot Elvis and wanted more, sliding down in the sofa with him over her. His lips on hers, then moving to her neck, making her skin feel heated. She pulled him even closer, arched against him, felt his evident want, heard him breathing heavier and herself do the same. She wanted him in this moment, wanted him completely, but she also knew that the minute she let him inside her knickers, it would be over with Elvis for real. No turning back. Even if she could not be sure if Elvis had overstepped in the past or not, she *would* know if *she* did and that was not a foundation she could build a long-lasting relationship on.

She did not know if she and Elvis had a future, if she wanted them to anymore, but she was not ready to let go of the possibility yet. With her last ounce of willpower, she paused snogging Alex.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, not really. This is all just lovely and exciting and I want to, but it's a bit early for me to go any further. I think maybe we should stop here tonight."

He looked a bit disappointed but smiled.

"Don't worry, I can wait as long as you need me to, even if I hope you won't want to wait very long."

He kissed her softly again but let his body shift so the pressure of it was no longer on her and then sat up in the sofa.

"I think I'll go now or it will be difficult to keep my hands off you, but I want you to know that I'm already looking forward to seeing you again." He leaned forward and whispered in her ear; "Maybe it's obvious, but I want you to know that I'm really into you."

She turned her head and kissed him again, and again she found it hard to break away. She was into him too, but she could not make herself say it. It somehow felt false both to him and Elvis as long as she had not had more of a closure with Elvis than she had. Clearly, she needed to see him again before she could move on with Alex.

"You want to meet up next week?" she asked before he left. "I'm going to a hen tomorrow and then I think I will be completely exhausted on Sunday."

"I'd like that. I'll give you a call on Monday."

Bones left Georgie's flat feeling both happy and slightly disappointed. He was not sure where he had her. It had been a great date, she seemed to think so and she seemed to enjoy their fumble too, but it was obvious that something was holding her back. He did not think it was simply the fact that it was the second date, but

something else that had kept her from giving in to the passion he had felt was there. He hoped that whatever it was, it would go away because he really fancied her.

Funny she was going on a hen. He had actually been invited to the stag party for an old friend tomorrow, a guy he had been working with some years ago. They had stayed in contact over the years and Bones was invited to his wedding on Christmas Eve. He had already had things planned for tomorrow, so he could not attend the stag, but he would go to the wedding and was looking forward to it. It was a pity that him and Georgie had not met earlier. If it had not been such early days for their relationship, he would have loved to bring her with him.

When Alex had left, Georgie felt a combination of happy and sad. Happy because such a great bloke was obviously interested in her and she was attracted to him, sad because it was painfully obvious after tonight that she had not let go of Elvis. She wondered what he was doing this Friday evening. Maybe he was out in a random bar getting drunk, maybe he was on a date. She was not sure how much he cared about that they were not seeing each other. She briefly considered if she should text him but resisted. She decided that if he wanted her, he would have to make an effort to truly show her that. Otherwise it was time to close that chapter and move on.

Elvis was not out in a random bar getting drunk this evening. Earlier in the day, he had visited a certain shop and spent several hours there choosing the item he finally

bought. Now he was sitting on his sofa, fidgeting with a velvet box and hoping he would not be too late.

When Georgie finished working Monday evening, she was still confused about her feelings. She and Alex had agreed to get in touch today and she could call him just as well as him calling her, but for some reason she was hesitating. She felt she ought to take the bull by its horns and meet Elvis before she met Alex again, but she hesitated to call him too because she was fearing it would be the end of *them*. She wondered to herself how it was possible to simultaneously both want and not want to be with two different men.

When she approached the house where her and Molly's flat was located, she saw a familiar figure sitting on the steps apparently waiting for her. She slowed down when she was close to him.

"Hi", Elvis said hesitantly, looking up on her trying to read her reaction to him sitting there.

"Hi", she said, unsure what she felt but thinking that no matter what the outcome was, here she had him and now she would get answers to where they were going. Not that she expected him to be the one giving them all, but she hoped that *she* would know herself, so she would be able to decide.

"Will you talk to me?"

She nodded.

"Let's go inside."

She watched him agilely head up the stair before her two steps at a time, his dark locks looking as soft as ever making her long to touch them and she realised how much she had missed just the sight of him.

They got inside, and Georgie kicked off her shoes and removed her puffer jacket. Elvis was just standing there, looking a bit lost, his dark eyes fixed on her.

"You wanted to talk Elvis, so you'd better talk. I won't do it for you. "

She saw his Adam's apple move as he swallowed, he seemed nervous. She had probably never seen Elvis nervous or out of words before.

"Look, this break, pause or whatever we call it, it drives me mad."

"You should have thought about that earlier, when you always were running around town instead of being with me. I don't say that we would have to be together *all* the time, but I felt like I always came second, or third. Not even sure second to what, or *who*."

"I know. I've been a fool and I think I realised that already before you said you didn't want to see me. I've been trying to tell you."

"It's not like I'm asking you to give up your life."

"No, I know. You're asking me to be there for you."

"Yes."

"And you're asking me to show you I love you."

"Yes." Georgie's eyes suddenly filled with tears. She was not sure why. Maybe because when he said that out loud, she was reminded that that *was* what she wanted more than anything. No matter how wonderful Alex was, he was not her first choice, but she was not prepared to be Elvis' second choice anymore.

He stepped closer to her, hesitantly because he was not sure if she would flinch or if she would allow him to touch her, but she did not back away, and he softly touched her cheek.

"I've had a strange way of showing it in the past, I know that and I'm so sorry I've put you through doubting me, but the truth is I love you Georgie. I think I've loved you from the first moment I saw you, and I'll love to my very last. There's nothing I want more than being with you."

Tears were running down her cheeks now. She loved what he was saying to her, but she did not yet trust that it was not only words.

"You haven't even been able to talk about a life together Elvis. About moving in together someday, making plans together. You just leave me hanging in the air, waiting for you. I can't take that anymore. I won't. It hurts too much and I'm not happy. If that's all you can give me, I'd better move on... even if I love you to."

"You love me too?"

"Yes, you idiot. Or maybe I'm the idiot for doing it, but I can't help myself. I'm so hopelessly in love with you."

Now his arms were wrapped around her, holding him to his chest.

"I'm sorry if I've hurt you. I never wanted that."

"You were just an immature bastard?"

"Yes", he admitted without trying to defend himself because he knew that had been the truth.

"But if you love me, despite my flaws I will try to make you happy. Will you be my wife?" he whispered.

"What?" Uncertain she had heard him right.

"Will you marry me, Georgie?"

"Is this just some spontaneous spur of the moment thing because you're afraid you're losing me?"

"I *am* afraid of losing you, I won't deny that. Terrified, in fact. I'm afraid because I know for sure I want you in my life like I've never wanted anyone there. But it's not spur of the moment..."

He took a step away and fumbled in his coat pocket and finally got the velvet box out. Georgie's eyes widened when she saw it.

"You're serious?"

"Indeed, more serious than I've ever been about anything. I told you, I love you and I always will. I just took me some time to realise that is was the best reason in the world to ask you to be my wife. Will you?"

Georgie was overcome with emotions. When she had seen Elvis, she truly had not known if this was then end or a new beginning for them. Now she knew, and it was like a wave of happiness and relief flowing through her, almost too strong making even more tears flow.

"I will", she smiled through the tears. "I might be crazy, but I will."

With a huge grin on his face, Elvis opened the box and took out the beautiful engagement ring and put it on the finger she held out. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her, whispering to her lips;

"Now all is well in the world."

"Can you please stop saying that, or I might reconsider."

"But it *is*! This is all I ever wanted."

"Okay, I might have to agree with you this time. All is well in the world."

When Georgie's mobile displayed a call from Bones half an hour later, no one answered because it lay forgotten in the hallway.

A/N: Time for the side story of yet another character. This is a slightly re-written version of the chapter I first posted, as I learned that his 'real' name is Harry Wiggerty. Thanks, those who let me know!

For the impatient one, next is Molly and CJ – all in due time... I have a plan. Hope you enjoy this in the meantime and as always thanks for the reviews.

x

Chapter 23: Tuesday, Dec 19 - Brains

He could not quite believe he was sitting here. Not like 'not believing his luck', rather 'not believing his misfortune'. Here he finally had some well-deserved Christmas leave and he had to be stand in for his uncle at work – so not what he had planned. It was not any work, it was one which his uncle absolutely loved, but that he himself was completely embarrassed about.

Harry Wiggerty, or to his colleagues and friends better known as private Brains, had returned home in hope of a few peaceful days before he was headed for his CO's wedding on Christmas Eve. Unfortunately, his uncle had caught the flu and as Brains anyway was free from his own job, everyone in his family thought it was a great idea if he replaced the uncle as Santa in the big shopping galleria. Everyone except Brains himself. He hated costumes, he hated wigs and fake beards and he was not keen on sitting on a throne receiving kids' wish lists all day long when he could have met up some old mates, bought Christmas gifts and had a few beers.

Problem was, that he always found it hard to say no when someone asked him for help and now he was here. Fortunately, no one would be able to identify him.

After a while, he discovered one upside to the whole situation. In addition to hiding who he was, the Santa disguise allowed him to watch beautiful women passing by without anyone being offended. Brains was not famous for his skills in winning girls' attention. On the contrary, his squaddies often ridiculed him about it. He still could not think of an incident that happened in Belize without blushing. They had all been having a good time in a local bar before a training exercise, when he had tried to hit on a girl working there. She had not been the least interested and the boyfriend that had appeared from nowhere with a gang of thugs in his tow, had sent all of 2 section running from the bar. They lads had teased him about that countless times. Especially Fingers, the piss-taker number 1, made sure it was never forgotten.

Even when it did not end with nearly being beaten up, Brains had far less luck with the ladies than he deserved. Among his friends and squaddies, he was known to be kind, loyal, smart and a good listener. All good traits but combined with a body and face that was far from alpha male, he easily ended up in the friend zone and had a larger number of female friends than he wished he did. Or, he would not mind the friends if only *one* of them wanted to be his girlfriend. He was a romantic at heart, even if his parents' divorce a few years ago had shaken him to the core. He had been devastated when they told him they were separating and for a while lost his belief in love. As the shock subdued and he saw that his parents stayed friends and were actually happier than before, he regained his faith in happy ever afters, even if he realised it was not always what one had thought it would be. He was hoping that

the HEA that had been absent in his own life, would soon come his way. Maybe he would get lucky on Christmas Eve, when he was invited to his COs wedding. Hopefully there would be a lot of single girls, all in a romantic and maybe slightly desperate mood, in case they were not the one catching the bridal bouquet.

As he sat on his Santa throne, with one ear listening to a little girl wishing for a kitten or a little brother (and a mum who looked like she did not want to give her either), he saw one especially beautiful girl pass by. She had dark hair, a really pretty face and at a distance he would guess that her eyes were brown. She reminded him of someone, but he could not quite place her. He instantly liked her though. She was not alone but had two kids in tow. She looked a bit young to be their mother, but one never knew. The second time the little group passed, he noticed that she also seemed a bit inexperienced taking care of kids, which he hoped indicated they were not hers, mostly because that would make it more likely that she was single. Not that he was in a position to flirt anyway, but he just liked the thought of her as single.

The third time he saw her, she was being dragged in the direction of him by the kids who now seemed determined to talk to Santa.

Ginny Geddings, cursed her luck. Here she had one day off from work and had since long planned to go shopping a wedding gift for her brother Matt and his bride-to-be, Bella. Bella was also one of her own best friends and Ginny took pride in that she had been the one to bring the couple together. Buying them the perfect wedding gift was a challenging enough task, but then her older sister, Angela, had

found out that she was 'free' and insisted she brought her nephews because Angela had a doctor's appointment to which she only wanted to bring the kids as a last resort.

"Ginny, I'm having a rectoscopy! It must surely be easier to bring two kids to the galleria than bringing them to that. Would probably scar them for life."

"You would never bring them with you inside?!"

"I don't know if I dare to leave them alone in the waiting room. It's not like I can run out there and check on them once they have started the assessment: They might tear the place down."

Even if Ginny was not the least keen on babysitting her wild niece and nephew, her conscience would not let them join their mum for a rectoscopy, even if she wondered how Angela would have solved it if she had not happened to be off work. She felt sympathy for her sister who needed to have this examination done due to recurrent stomach pains, but her nephews were the kids from hell, so she was very reluctant to be alone with them. Especially while trying to get anything done, like buying a thoughtful and perfect gift.

So far, everything had panned out as could be expected. The moment they arrived at the galleria, the kids wanted to eat, no wait - have ice cream, then go to the toy store, had to pee in between, then back to the toy store, then the other one needed to pee and now they were dragging her in direction of Santa. Ginny had not had once glance at wedding gifts and was yet waiting for a disaster to happen.

"I want to tell Santa all my wishes!", Claire yelled pulling Ginny's arm, so she thought it would come off if the surprisingly strong girl pulled any harder.

"I wull tull hum I wunt a tructor", James tried to articulate, his mouth full of the bonbons Ginny had tried to bribe him with, in the vain hope of getting one small step closer to any of the shops she wanted to go to.

Now she hoped that talking to Santa would both please the little bleeders and remind them that they had to be nice in order to get any Christmas presents, so she came with them. Both kids jumped up and down when they had to wait in queue for a short while, then Claire boldly sat down in Santa's lap. Ginny thought that she could have needed to sit there herself for a while to rest after this endeavour, but Santa would hardly appreciate if a grown woman flung herself onto his lap. She smiled at the thought and suddenly met Santa's eyes over his big, white synthetic beard and was surprised. They were very bright blue, kind-looking as could be expected on a Santa, but the surprise was that they seemed young. Maybe her own age. Somehow, she had had this idea that these galleria Santas always were older men. Now she wondered what he looked like underneath that costume, and what he did when he was not impersonating Santa. Claire kept taking in his ear, delivering her loooong list of wishes and James kept bouncing up and down like Tigger beside Ginny, impatient for his turn, but Ginny's and the Santa's eyes were locked into each other in a silent conversation, although she was unsure what was said. It was impossible to let go and Ginny felt her cheeks turn hot and her skin prickle. Going by the eyes only, this was one hot Santa.

Brains could not believe his luck when the two children decided that they wanted to meet him and came running with the beautiful girl in reluctant tow. Not only was she pretty, but she also had the appearance of an incredibly nice person. *Femme fatales* had never been the thing for him (well with the exception for the one in Belize, but that had nothing to do with her, rather with her lethal boyfriend). *Nice* girls were what made his knees weak – and this one more than anyone he had met. He could not stop looking at her. He was grateful for the beard because it covered his blushing cheeks, but he was frustrated to be in a situation where he could not talk to her, being himself. On the other hand, as that had never been a winning concept in the past maybe it was just as well that he had this outfit and could keep staring into those big brown eyes without saying anything.

Suddenly they were disturbed by a strange sound. Like someone tried to talk but muffled, not quite getting the words out. Instinctively they broke eye contact and turned their gazes in the direction of the sound. It came from the boy. He had stopped jumping and in addition to the sound, he was waving his hands and gasping for air. His face had started to shift into a slightly bluish colour.

"Oh, my God!", the loveliest girl he had ever met screamed. "He's choking! It must be the bonbons, one is stuck in his throat. He's going to die! Angela will kill me! We must help him!"

She was clearly freezing with panic, her vocal cords excepted, and unable to help the boy.

Brains brusquely threw away the girl from his lap and got to his feet, came up behind the boy and swiftly performed the Heimlich maneuver on him, by giving

several forceful abdominal thrusts. The boy made another strange sound and then coughed up the offending candy. With his airways now free, he took a few deep breaths then started crying. Lovely Girl immediately took him in her arms.

"Santa threw me on the ground!", the sister yelled from where she lay sulking on the floor. Brains wondered if she always were yelling like that. Five minutes in her presence and he felt like strangling her already, or maybe offering her the bonbon her brother just had choked on, but that would have been bad for his uncle's Santa reputation.

"Oh, shut up Claire!" Lovely Girl snapped. "He saved James' life. If you have to say anything at all, please say thank you."

"I think he's a bad Santa anyway!" The girl apparently named Clair turned to him. "I don't believe you're the real Santa. I think you're fake."

"Well, you can think but you'll never know for sure, so you'd better be really nice to your mum and brother – and me, otherwise you'll be put up on the 'naughty list' and you know what happens then."

"Ginny's not my mum, she's just my auntie", Claire said grumpily but then saw it best to remain quiet, just in case it was the real Santa, or at least someone connected to him.

If Brains' face had been visible, it would have beamed with happiness at the information that Lovely Girl, named Ginny, was *not* the mother of these two hooligans. Now standing up face to face to her, they looked at each other again.

"Thank you! I don't know how to thank you enough. You saved his life, probably mine too because my sister would have killed me if anything had happened."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I only did what anyone would have."

"Yet, it was only you who did it. I was around and lots of other people too and everyone else just froze. Let me give you a hug...no, wait..."

Before he could react, she had lifted the bottom part of his beard and gave him a quick kiss on the lips, then backed away and smoothed his beard in place again, now with a pinkish tone to her own cheeks.

"Auntie kissed Santa! Auntie kissed Santa!"

That Claire was really getting on Brains nerves, but after the kiss nothing would be able to ruin his day. He had liked Ginny before, now he was in love – if that was possible after meeting someone shorter than ten minutes. His thoughts were interrupted by a thin man in glasses.

"Sorry, I'm from *The Gazette*. I witnessed your heroic action just now and would like to make an interview."

"Erm... I don't know", Brains said.

"Please, everyone loves Santa coming to the rescue!"

"Go ahead", Ginny encouraged him. "You deserve the praise. We must get going unfortunately."

Brains would easily had changed the interview for talking to her another five minutes, or preferably for another kiss.

"Can I take a picture of you with Santa?" the journalist asked James, who happily accepted and came to stand close to Brains.

"Thanks again! And I'm Ginny", she stretched out her hand for him to take.

"I'm Harry."

"Is Santa named Harry?" James asked, confused.

"Yes, but don't tell anyone", Brains said and winked to the boy.

"We were very lucky to meet you Harry. I hope you'll have a great Christmas and not only get to sit here."

"No, you know, people to see, gifts to deliver, a sleigh to drive, reindeers need feeding and all that", he smiled under the beard.

"Well, Merry Christmas Harry and I hope you leave something nice in my stocking", she smiled.

"Merry Christmas, Ginny."

He would not mind leaving himself in that stocking, if it only was large enough and looked after her with longing as she walked away, and the journalist started asking him questions. Replacing his uncle at work had not been so bad after all.

Chapter 24: Wednesday, 20 Dec – Charles & Molly

On Sunday, Charles had returned to Bath, tired but happy albeit a bit frustrated that he had had to leave Molly when he would have loved to stay. He had promised Sam to return and he did not intend to let him down now when he finally had the opportunity to spend time with him. He could hopefully meet Molly during the week when Sam anyway had school and rugby practice. First and foremost, he was a dad, secondly an officer in the British Army, even if he knew that Rebecca would argue he had not always prioritised in that order. That might have been true in the past, but he did not want it to be.

Only after fulfilling those two roles, could he (maybe) allow himself to be a man who had a serious crush on a woman he could not stop thinking of. Was he not too old, too divorced and disillusioned, too much of an army man to feel like this? Apparently not. Whenever he thought of her, it left him smiling. Each time his mobile buzzed from a text message, he instantly had to check if it was from her and if it was, he had this warm, fuzzy feeling and smiled even bigger. Thinking of that they had been lying in the same bed dressed in only underwear... Christ, he almost did not dare to let his thoughts stray in that direction when he was in public because he feared it might have visible effects on his body.

It had been so lovely to lie next to her, touch her silky soft hair and feel her fall asleep, hear her breathing and hold her to him. He had longed to wake her with a kiss and then cover her entire body with kisses, strip her of the lingerie she so temptingly had described. He had abstained from trying, both because she was deadily hungover and needed to sleep it off and because he was quite certain she

would be appalled when they had not even been near to kissing each other with full clothing on. The fantasy was wonderful though, and he could not stop himself from returning to it again and again.

When the digits on the alarm clock showed it was noon she had still been sound asleep, and he felt he had to return home to Sam. Reluctantly he carefully wriggled away from holding her and put her head down gently, so he would not wake her. Before leaving the bed, his curiosity had gotten the better of him and he turned on the bedside lamp. She lay with the dark hair spread in a fan shape over the pillow. Her face was stripped of makeup and naturally beautiful and innocent. Her cheekiness lost during sleep and she looked calm and happy with faint smile on her lips, the black eyelashes resting peacefully on her cheeks. The duvet had slid down a bit and showed a glimpse of perfect small breasts cupped by black, laced satin. He felt like he was perverting, watching her without her knowing but let a minute pass before he could make himself turn the light off again. He was tempted to bend over and touch her lips with his own, just very softly and not even wake her, but it did not feel right without her being in on it. Anyway, it would have been a very foolish thing to do. She probably would have freaked out if she had woken up. He hoped maybe one day he would have the chance again and she would want him, like he wanted her.

After his series of text messages without response in return he got a bit nervous and regretted sending half of them during the hours of radio silence. It made him both relieved and happy when she finally texted him back later in the afternoon, saying that she liked being with him too. He wished that she meant it, but he did

not really dare to hope. It was not that he used to have bad self-confidence but after the divorce he felt a bit like second quality goods and *she* was so far from that.

In hindsight, he also regretted a bit that he had not been more forthcoming when Matt asked how he felt about Molly last night. If he had been honest about that, he would have been able to ask Matt more about her. Charles knew she was single, but he did not know much about her past love life and relationships; if she was fresh out of something that hurt or gladly had left or had been single for long; if she was just looking for some fun without strings attached, for a serious relationship or nothing at all. He sometimes got the feeling she was a bit guarded but did not know if it had to do with him or something in the past, but maybe Matt could enlighten him. He was not sure when he would get another opportunity to talk to him about it. They would not meet again until the wedding.

Charles also wanted to come clean with Molly about his own past, that he had been through marriage, then hell and a tough divorce and that he had a son he loved more than anything and who would always be part of his life. Preferably before the wedding, which meant the only possibility was when they met next week. He just had to summon the courage and find the right moment and hope it would not make her turn on the spot and leave because it had killed the tiny interest in him she might feel now.

He texted with her briefly again the same evening, when Sam was on the phone with a friend and he had a moment to himself. They agreed to meet up on Wednesday and he started to look forward to it in the same instant.

From: Molly

Starting to feel a bit sorry for you always travelling to London. Sure you don't want me to come to Bath this time?

He would have loved that, but there was the chance of running into Sam, Rebecca or his parents and he could not risk that before he had talked to Molly about all that. He could definitely not bring her to the house either as it would be very apparent that a child was living there, if only part-time and that would be an odd way of bringing up the subject. Not that he knew what a good approach to it was. How does one work an ex-wife and a child into a conversation?

From: Charles

We said we would go skating again. Would love [he deleted and replaced with] like if you came here some time, but this time you won't get out of skating :)

From: Molly

Are you always this bossy?

From: Charles

Only at work and with you

From: Molly

OK, bossman, come here then and we'll go skating if we must, but you'll have to bribe me with hot chocolate afterwards

From: Charles

Pinkie promise. Must go, see you Wednesday

Sam had returned from his call.

"Dad, why do you look so happy?"

Now he was here again, by the ice skating rink where they were to meet, and he was searching for her when someone pinched him in the side and there she stood right in front of him, causing a rush of adrenaline to go through him the way she always did at first sight.

"Hi, boss."

"Hi, Dawesy. I didn't see you."

"*You* are easy to spot, standing out like a flagpole."

"You saying I look like a flagpole?"

"No, not the least, just tall like one. Well, maybe you are a bit on the thin side too", she grinned, and he already wanted to kiss her.

There was a brief awkwardness when they were not sure how to greet each other. What was the appropriate way after sleeping nearly naked next to one other? It was also the first time they met without either rehearsing as an excuse or the company of Matt and Bella (if one did not count their accidental meetings on the station and

in bed), so they were breaking new territory here. In the end he bent down to pecked her on the cheek at the same time as she stepped closer to give him a hug, making them collide with their foreheads.

"Sorry!" Why did he have to be so clumsy around her, he asked himself.

"Ouch, you're making it a habit to bump into me", she said rubbing her head.

"Did it hurt much?"

"No, fortunately my head is hard as flint", she smiled but then put on a more serious face.

"I have some bad news..."

Fuck, she would say she did not want to spend time with him after all or had to cancel for some reason.

"...we can do this skating now, but then I had forgotten I had promised Bella to do something so I'm not free for the evening. They have this nativity play at the school where she's working tonight. She has put in hours and hours in the preparations, in addition to planning the wedding. She's so proud of it and will be terribly disappointed if I don't come."

He was glad they did not have to cancel their skating plans but disappointed they could not do something afterwards, he had hoped she would agree to let him take her for dinner.

"But you're welcome too, if you'd like. Matt will be there", she looked at him with pleading eyes. "And I'd like if you came."

He tried to look unmoved but felt ridiculously happy. He would get the whole afternoon and evening with her after all and he did not care the least if it meant attending a school play.

"Sounds nice, why not?"

"Great – then we have a plan. Now, I guess I'd better take the bull by its horns."
She nodded towards the rink. "Do you realise this is angst-filled for me?"

"For real?"

"I feel so stupid, a grown-up who can't skate."

"You learned a bit last time, Bambi."

"I'm sure it's all forgotten by now."

It turned out it was not. When Molly set her skate-clad feet on the ice she did not fall immediately like last time, her body remembered surprisingly well and soon she was moving forward. Unsteady and slowly, but forward.

"You see, you've got the hang of it!"

Molly beamed proudly at him.

"I have, haven't I? I'll have to thank my bossy teacher."

He shook his head, laughing.

"Now that you can stand on them, you need to learn how to go faster."

"Nooooo!"

Despite her protests, he grabbed her hand to both help her keep the balance and pull her with him, so she got up to speed.

"Help!"

"You're doing fine!"

"I'll fall."

"And then you'll get up, or I'll catch you. You'll survive either way. Try not to think you'll fall, try to enjoy yourself a bit instead."

After a while she managed to relax. The speed made her feel free, Charles laughter made her want to laugh too, holding his hand did wonderful things to her insides. When they finally paused, both had rosy cheeks and were panting. Standing on the ice still holding hands, they stayed silent for a while, just looking at each other. Charles wondered if this was the moment he should dare to have a try at kissing her, or would it just ruin everything. Molly was thinking to herself that if he had not been so damn tall, she would have liked to try to kiss him, but besides that she would not reach his mouth she would never dare. In situations like this, Artan's words from the past echoed in her head, saying that she was a worthless girl who would never attract any man but him, discouraging her from taking the first step.

Then a bunch of kids skated right into them and Molly found herself sprawled over the ice instead of looking into Charles eyes. With his superior balance he had remained standing and smilingly offered his hand to help her up, while thinking those kids had probably prevented him from making a fool of himself.

"I'm rubbish at this", Molly said, first putting on a sulky face but then could not hold back a grin, totally happy despite the fall.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I just love falling tits over arse in public so I'm in my right element here."

"I think you're just perfect on the ice Dawesy, and it takes a fair bit to impress me", he grinned in return. "So much more fun to skate with you than with someone who is up on their feet the whole time."

"Glad I can amuse you. Anyway, you've promised to bribe me with hot chocolate. I think I've deserved that now."

"You've proven yourself as a skater. I agree, you've earned your chocolate."

They got off the rink, sat down on a bench and removed the skates. Both rubbed their cold and slightly sore feet.

"Almost like being back in Afghan and wearing in new boots in the heat, but there I have a medic to take care of my feet."

"Well, if you had told me to I could have brought an emergency kit with me and attended to your blisters like you're used to, but unfortunately no chance of that happening."

"No, I'll have to make do with a hot drink, I suppose. You stay here, and I can go get it."

Molly watched as he walked over to the hot chocolate stand. Heads were turning after him, not only because he was tall and handsome, but he had a special air about him. He seemed completely oblivious to it, just focused on the task he had set out to do and returned to her with two steaming mugs. She smiled appreciatively as he gave her one and noted a group of girls staring jealously at her out of the corner of her eye. They did not know this was not really a date, but she enjoyed that they thought it was.

"This is proper nice", she mused, warming her hands on the mug and noticed he sat close to her on the bench which warmed her even more.

"Yeah, it is", Charles beamed with delight.

"Except I burnt my tongue on the chocolate."

He smiled, tongue in cheek.

"You want me to get you some snow to put on it?"

"No, you numpty. Dogs could have been peeing here for all I know."

"Then it would be yellow."

"It could be white on top and yellow under."

"Well, then I guess you have to put up with a hurting tongue."

He would have liked to ask her if she thought a kiss maybe would help, but again he was afraid he would only ruin an already perfect moment and they just sipped their mugs and watched other skaters until it suddenly was time to leave for Bella's school.

"So, what can we expect from this nativity play? Will it be the crazy kind with lobsters like in *Love actually*, or the more traditional kind?"

"The more traditional kind for sure, adding lobsters isn't really Bella's style. I'm surprised you've seen *Love actually*. I did not have you down for the romantic movie type of guy."

It nearly slipped over his lips that Rebecca had watched it every Christmas, in the beginning of their relationship made him watch too but towards the end grumpily preferred to watch it alone even if he happened to be home over Christmas, but he stopped himself in time. Now was not a good time to bring the marriage and divorce up as they would not be able to talk it through for real and it was not the kind of thing he wanted to mention 'by the way'. They just arrived at the primary school where Bella was working and stumbled on Matt by the gates. He raised his eyebrows in astonishment at the sight of Charles.

"Major James, you were the last person I had expected to see at Bella's and Ginny's nativity play – and in the company of our lovely Molly. Are you two on a date?" he said mockingly.

Neither of them had told Matt or Bella about their accidental bed share or that they had made plans to meet today. Somehow, their instinct had been to keep it between them. Now they could not, of course, and they had not thought about preparing for that. Molly blushed, thinking that in the few weeks she had known Charles her blushing frequency must have spiked considerably. Charles cleared his throat.

"No, no. We were rehearsing our song for the wedding this afternoon and then Molly told me about this fantastic nativity play I couldn't miss. Didn't you?"

She quickly found herself and played along, simultaneously relieved and disappointed that Charles so easily had dismissed this being a date.

"Yes, exactly. We've rehearsed so much you're in for a real treat at the wedding and I couldn't let Charles return home without some fun too, so I invited him for this fantastic show."

Matt looked at them suspiciously, with a strong feeling they were bull-shitting him. He felt quite certain there was something more going on here than just rehearsing, especially as it was so fervently denied.

"A bunch of primary school pupils singing out of tune?"

"With Bella in charge I'm quite sure they won't dare anything but sing in perfect harmony."

"You may be right about that", Matt snorted. "Anyway, time to go inside or we'll be late. Did you know that Ginny works here too?" he asked Charles.

"No."

"She and Bella studied to be teachers together and then they ended up working in the same school. They have been in charge of this play together, as if Bella would not have been stressed enough only with the wedding. I'll be relieved when tonight is over and can go back to worrying only about the wedding."

The auditorium was filled to the brim with siblings, parents and grandparents who wanted to see their talented off-spring perform. For a primary school nativity play it was surprisingly good, almost no one singing false, almost everyone singing at the same pace and Joseph and Mary remembering their lines. Bella and Ginny had reason to feel proud. Apparently, the families too, because the applause was deafening when the show ended. Molly and Charles had not paid very good attention, though. They sat beside each other, both staring at the stage, looking like they attentively watched the performance but all they could think of was the person next to them, their thighs touching in the narrow seats, the hands nearly touching but not quite. When the lights went on they were both a bit dazed and confused and not wishing to break up yet.

All three of them headed towards the stage to find Bella and Ginny and congratulate them to their success. Both girls beamed with happiness and were holding flowers given them by some of the parents. Matt had been thoughtful enough to bring one bouquet for each of them too. Bella's gaze shifted between

Molly and Charles and Molly could see that her mind was working intensively to figure out what was happening.

"Charles, how nice that you're here too. I didn't expect to see you today."

"We were rehearsing and..." he repeated the story they had told Matt, but Molly could see that Bella did not buy it and knew she would be interrogated later.

"I'm glad to hear you're so eager to do this performance", she winked at them and both just hummed, embarrassed. "Anyway, now that you're here, and it's a lovely surprise, would you like to join us for dinner? We're going out to have a bite."

"I need to return home tonight", he glanced at Molly and it seemed like her eyes told him to stay, "but I could catch a late train. I'll join if you want me to?"

"Oh, I'm sure we do. Don't we, Molly?"

Bella elbowed her sister, who wanted to sink through the ground because she thought Bella so unsubtly was implying something was going on between them when it was not. Charles had made it so clear today was not a date. Just hanging out, very casually, with an absolutely gorgeous newfound male friend. Nothing strange about that.

"Erm, yes, it would be nice if you want to come."

"Proper nice you mean?" his dark eyes twinkled.

"Proper nice."

They walked to a nearby restaurant, Ginny and a few of Bella's colleagues joined so they were a group – but magically Molly and Charles still ended up next to each other at the table. Food and wine was ordered, and everyone was chatting and having fun. Charles enjoyed himself immensely but could not help thinking he would have preferred a dinner with Molly alone. There were so many things he wanted to talk to her about when it was just the two of them.

"When you said we were rehearsing today it reminded me we probably should have", she now hissed in his ear.

"You know the lyrics by heart, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"And I assume you'll arrive at the hotel the day before?"

She nodded.

"So will I, since I'm the bestman. I'm sure we'll find time to rehearse then. I'm actually glad we did something else today. It was nice to meet you without everything being about the wedding."

Their eyes locked and there was a moment of *something*, feeling like they were the only ones there.

"I think so too."

They joined the others in the conversation again and had so much fun that Charles lost track of time. When he realised that he would miss the train he needed to catch

unless he left immediately, he abruptly hurled himself up from the table with an apologetic look at his company.

"I'm so sorry, I have to leave."

"You can take our spare bed... or maybe Molly's", a tipsy Bella teased.

"Very kind of you to offer both your own and your sister's bed, Bella, but I really have to get home. I'll see you on Saturday." He turned his gaze to Molly and put his hand on her shoulder. "Thanks for today, I had a great time... "rehearsing" and I'm looking forward to this weekend."

Molly was deeply disappointed he had to leave and wondered what pulled him to Bath, but it was not like she had expected him to want to stay over at her place anyway. Sleeping together once was obviously enough.

"Thanks, you too. I had a great time and I'm glad you joined tonight. I'll see you Saturday."

His warm palm was removed from her shoulder and then he left the restaurant. Molly thought it was still all nice, but not the same without him.

A/N: Thanks to those who shared the well-kept secret that Brains' name is Harry Wiggerty. Chapter 23 has been slightly rewritten due to that.

Now we are back with Molly, but the lovely CJ has returned to Bath. It seems like the bride and groom are not the only ones longing for the wedding.

Chapter 25: Thursday, Dec 21 - Molly

I had had a mad day at the hospital and yet I had managed to think about Charles unreasonably many times. He seemed to pop up in my head in all kinds of situations which was both pleasant and disturbing. Flashes of his brown eyes looking into mine for an instant, his gloved hand holding mine when we were skating, his warm thigh pressed against my own during the nativity play, leaning towards me while talking to me during dinner, so close that our breaths mingled, the lingering touch on my shoulder before he left for Bath. The thoughts made my lower abdomen clench in an unwanted reflex. I could not deny it anymore, I had feelings for him and I had not felt anything even close to it since in the very beginning with Artan. The difference was I was only thirteen then, almost a child still, falling for a boy who would treat me bad, step on me and use me, soiling the small scraps of beauty there had been to it initially. Now I was a woman with a history and a different, more complete and mature palette of emotions, falling for someone who definitely was a man in every way imaginable. A man who took my breath away and awoke needs that had been slumbering for long or never even been fully awake at all until now, but who also left me filled with self-doubt that I could

possibly attract him in any way. If Charles had wanted to kiss me, he had had plenty of chances – in bed not least of all but chosen not to and it seemed like he had someone in Bath that was important to him. It could be an old sick aunt, but it could also be a gorgeous blonde he was dating. On the other hand, if that was the case, why would he want to go skating and going to my sister's nativity play when absolutely nothing forced him? And was it only me who thought we had so many special moments together? With my famously vivid imagination I could not be sure.

When my shift ended, I met up with Georgie in the lobby because we were going for some Christmas shopping including buying a Christmas tree. We had barely met since the hen because we had been working different hours and when I saw her she seemed to beam with happiness in a completely different way than when I saw her last.

"Hey girl! You look happy?" I gave her a hug.

"I am!" Her eyes twinkled, her entire body language one of jubilation.

"Let me guess... A new date with Alex?"

Georgie frowned briefly.

"No, not a new date with Alex. He's my bad conscience. I'll tell you about that too, but first I want to share the good news."

"And that is?"

Georgie reached out her hand to me and I felt my jaw drop. To my surprise there was an engagement ring on her finger, the very last thing I had expected.

"What!? How? When?"

She giggled.

"Yes, it's quite unexpected considering the last weeks."

"Or years?"

"Well, yeah, there's that."

"But it is from Elvis? You're engaged to Elvis?"

"Who else should it be?"

"I have no idea, but it's just... You didn't seem to be there or let me rephrase; he didn't seem to be ready for this."

"Turned out he was after all."

The girls walked out the revolving doors but did not stop talking.

"He showed up Monday evening, when you were at work. Sat on our stairs waiting for me."

"Let me guess, with a giant bouquet of red roses."

"No, nothing like that. I know it would have been classic Elvis style, but he was very low-key."

"Until he pulled out the ring?"

"First we were just talking. He was acting all nervous, I've never seen him like that. Told me he was truly sorry he had hurt me, not just now but over the years. He has realised he wants nothing more than for us to be together, that he always has loved me and don't want to lose me."

"And you believed him?"

"You know he's always such a smooth-talker and then he has been out the door when you really need him. I told him this time I need more than words, need him to really show me he's there for me and loves me – and then he proposed. He had the ring with him and all."

"And you said yes? Just like that, after all he has put you through?"

"I know it's mental, but yes. I realise it may seem naïve or impulsive, but I had to, it felt completely right. You see, the moment I saw Elvis sitting there waiting for me, I felt there is really only him and when he proposed I knew it's all I want. I love him, and I truly think he loves me too. I sensed a difference in him, he has decided this is it for him too. What's in the past is in the past and now we look forward."

I stopped to give Georgie another hug. I knew that I probably would not have been able to be as trusting or forgiving, but I have always liked Elvis despite his shortcomings in the capacity of boyfriend and I wished Georgie happiness. I hoped

he had changed, or maybe realised something that always had been true. Judging by how happy Georgie seemed now compared to some days ago, this was probably the right decision for her.

"Then I'm happy for you Georgie. Congratulations to the engagement - and congratulate Elvis from me."

"You can say it to him yourself, he'll join us to buy the Christmas tree. I thought he can carry it for us."

"Great thinking. Now, before he comes, what happened with Alex? You said he was your bad conscience? Did you just dump him when Elvis returned?"

"I did not dump him, if you mean in the sense I did not talk to him. I called him the day after I got back with Elvis and told him I can't see him anymore. He deserved to know."

"No explanation?"

"I said I had realised I have feelings for someone else. That I did not mean to string him along, because I thought that was over, but realised it isn't."

"And that was the truth, so you've been honest with him. Why the bad conscience?"

"He sounded so sad and he's this top bloke that I really didn't want to hurt. It was the last thing he deserved. I wish I could split myself in two to make him happy too."

"You didn't date for that long, so I dare say he'll get over it."

"Of course, he will, but I felt bad about it anyway. His mum just passed away, it's soon Christmas, I wish something good happened to him."

"Maybe it will, you just don't know."

We dropped the subject for now to focus on buying Christmas gifts as it was the last chance we had before it was time to give them away. I do not know why I always save it for the last minute. Both me and Georgie would be at the hotel for the wedding over Christmas and my family would of course be there all of them, meanwhile Georgie would travel home to her family in Manchester on Christmas Day. I had more gifts to buy because I have so many siblings and I wanted to get them really nice gifts as I know mum and dad cannot afford that much, not even these days when they are better off than when I was a kid. There were some Christmases when Bella and I practically got nothing in our stockings because gifts came lower down on the priority list than food and clothes – and dad's beers obviously. I want to spare the little ones from that disappointment. Not that they are *that* little anymore, but young enough to appreciate gifts in the stockings and I'm lucky enough to afford a bit more on my doctor's salary. Nothing makes me happier than sharing it with them.

After a couple of hours of successful shopping, we were both carrying numerous bags with parcels and decided to drop them off at home before buying the tree. We met up with Elvis at a place around the corner where trees were sold. I noticed that he seemed a bit hesitant when he saw me, like he was unsure what my reaction to them being together would be and it mattered to him. That was a first, Elvis being sensitive to other's reactions. I liked the change.

"Hi Molls."

"Come here and give me a hug, so I can congratulate you." His expression changed to one of relief and pride.

"You cheeky bastard, you do know you're getting the best girl in the world, don't you?"

"I do", he said seriously. "I'm the luckiest man in the world."

"Then I'm very happy for you, but if you ever treat her badly... Just let me say that it won't save you that you're SF."

"Message received, loud and clear", he smiled.

"That's said, I've missed having you around. Life is a little bleaker without you in it, Elvis."

"Thanks, I've missed you too. You're my second favourite girl to Georgie."

As we went strolling between the lines of trees, Elvis wrapped his arm around Georgie's shoulder and pulled her to him. They both seemed more at ease and in harmony than I had seen them be together for a long time, like they both were exactly where they wanted to be in this moment. There had always been passion between them, now I thought I saw something more profound and it made me terribly happy for them. Watching them, walking joined together a few steps ahead of me, inspecting trees, I also felt a bit sad, bordering to jealous. All these years they had been together, I had hoped they were heading somewhere and now when

they finally were, it left me with the conflicting feeling of being left behind. Now they were engaged. Likely they would want to move in together soon and while I thought it was about time, that also meant I would lose my flat mate. It would be 'the end of an era', as Rachel and Monica in *Friends* once said when they moved apart for the same reason. They would move together, and I would be alone, or maybe not alone but still single without any specific plans for my life other than to finish my foundation years which was demanding enough but not very romantic.

Charles. He flickered by in my head. Well, I would not mind if he was part of my life but there was nothing indicating he would be after the wedding.

"What do you think of this one?" They had stopped in front of a tree.

"Too asymmetric."

"And this?"

"Too big, it would take up all the space in the living room"

"Aren't you a picky one, both with trees and men", Elvis smirked. Given the mood I was in, I would have found that comment funnier any other day.

"Molly might have found someone", Georgie said, over-sharing in my opinion.

"No, not really."

"You fancy him, and you were on a date yesterday. You haven't told me how that went?"

"I don't fancy him, I just like being with him like with any friend and it wasn't a date for real. We were just hanging out, went skating."

"Just the two of you?"

"Well, yes."

"Sounds like a date to me. Tell me more."

I did not feel like sharing much more, knowing they would meet Charles at the wedding and Elvis could be such a tease. He would surely embarrass me, but Georgie apparently felt free to update him with the things she knew.

"His called Charles."

"Charles!?"

"Yeah, and he's apparently gorgeous and can sing and bake and is a major in the army."

Now Elvis was grinning.

"I wasn't aware he can bake and sing, but one of my best friends is a major and called Charles. Will he possibly be bestman at the wedding?"

"Yes", I said weakly, appalled that Elvis seemed to know him well and Georgie had shared that I fancied him.

"Then it's one and the same! God, Molly, I would love if you and Charles got together."

"You're a bit previous there. I never said I fancy him and he sure does not feel anything for me. As I said, yesterday was *not* a date. We've just been seeing each other because we're preparing a song for the wedding", I said through gritted teeth.

"And you don't like him?"

"I didn't say that. I just said you shouldn't jump to any conclusions."

"*If* he asked you on a real date, would you say no?"

I hesitated what to say. I did not want to share with Elvis that I would die to go on a date with Charles, but I did not want to lie and say I did not want to either in case he would forward it to Charles and kill any possibility he would ever ask me on a date.

"I might say yes."

"You're just playing hard to get Molly, I can see by the way you're blushing you like him."

"My cheeks are just red from the cold."

"Yeah, right. You *do* know he's a good guy? One of the best there is."

"I figured as much."

"He's just got a bit of bag..."

I never got to know what Elvis had intended to say, because he was interrupted by Georgie.

"This one, it's perfect!

It was; symmetric, perfect size and the needles seemed to be fixed on it rather than dropping to the ground already, but I was a bit annoyed Elvis had been interrupted.

"What were you saying Elvis?"

"Eh, no nothing important, better he tells you if you actually get to the point of dating."

I understood that Elvis was not teasing me on purpose now, but this was far worse. He had intended to say something about Charles but had second thoughts. I could not be more curious, but for once Elvis' mouth seemed zipped.

"Are we buying this one, or what?" he now said.

"Yes!"

"I agree, it looks perfect, let's take it", I sighed, hoping that whatever Elvis had decided to keep to himself was not something too negative.

The tree got wrapped in a net and we brought it home and decorated it with an insane amount baubles and lights and it felt like Christmas truly had arrived in our little flat.

A/N: Someone thought it would be time for arrival at the hotel in this chapter, but sorry to disappoint – we are only at December 22 so one more chapter to go before that. Time to return to another of the characters.

Chapter 26: Friday, Dec 22 - Maisie

Maisie Richards was sitting on the couch staring at the unopened envelope in front of her. Impatiently, she had waited for weeks for it to come and now when it finally had, she did not dare to open it. An hour had passed, during which she had shifted between just staring at it like she did now, biting her finger nails, walking over to the kitchen for a glass of water, downed it in nervous gulps, returned to staring and drumming her fingers against the table top, picked it up and put it back on the table again like it was a hot potato. If she wanted to know what it said, she eventually would have to open it, but she did not know if she was prepared for the disappointing news it might contain. She did not even know if she was prepared for it containing the positive news she was hoping for as it would mean a completely new direction to her entire life.

She closed her eyes and tried to think of something else for a while and then saw the face that had reappeared in her mind numerous times over the last weeks. A pair of kind brown eyes, placed over a well-defined, slightly large nose and a smiling mouth, all in all a strikingly handsome combination even though she first had been too annoyed to notice. *Rab*.

Rab, the Pakistani bloke who she, for the first time since she was a child, had made snow angels with. The guy who had not taken the bait when she had asked if meeting a next time could be something else than by coincidence. Obviously, it would have been best to forget him, and Maisie usually was not one to cry over spilt milk when it came to men, but somehow, he stuck with her. Not like the wanker she had met a few days earlier, who had flirted with her in the bar for an entire evening, snogged her and then suddenly remembered he had a girl waiting for him at home. He had been a looker for sure, but the kind she would have had a good shag with and then forgotten and she had cared little when he walked away instead. Rab, on the other hand... It had been easy to see he was not the kind who would ever do anything rash with a girl. He would probably not do anything in his life without it being a deliberate choice, which would make it mean so much more if and when he did it.

How long had their chance meeting lasted? Fifteen minutes maybe. Fifteen memorable minutes which she would have loved to return to. Talking to him, lying beside him in the snow. His uncle's restaurant was straight across the street from where she lived, so theoretically she *could* walk in there and ask for his number, but something had held her back. She had sensed a connection and that he liked her too, but she had also sensed a distance. She had a feeling that it was not because he was shy that he had not said he would have liked to meet again. Maybe it was because they were from different cultures, even if he had appeared to be as much Brit as her. Despite Maisie's exotic looks, thanks to a Mauritian mother and Thai-English father, she was a Brit girl through and through. If his family was from Pakistan, it probably meant he was Muslim. She had done some googling over the

last week and learned a few things about Pakistan, a country she had never thought about previously.

The impression that something was preventing him from asking to meet again, had held the usually courageous Maisie back from walking into the restaurant and ask for his number. Until today.

Over the last weeks, Maisie had desperately tried to keep her mind occupied not to be a complete nervous wreck in anticipation of the letter, or a lovesick puppy over a guy she had only met briefly. She had been working out and running long distances, she had put in hours of overtime at the school where she worked as an extra resource, even volunteered to sew costumes for the nativity play they set up, but she still had been restless and edgy.

"What's the matter with you?" Her colleague and friend Bella had asked.

"Oh, it's nothing."

"I can see that there's something. You know, shared sorrow..."

Maisie really liked Bella and she was one of those she intended to stay in contact with if everything worked out as she hoped, and she quit working at the school, and when she now looked at her with genuine interest and concern, Maisie felt like sharing.

"Okay, there's two things..."

"And one of them is a guy?"

"How did you know?" Maisie smiled.

"It usually is when someone looks like you do."

"One is a guy. I just met him briefly, but I can't stop thinking about him."

"Will you meet again?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. In one way it didn't seem like he wanted to, but in one way it seemed like he enjoyed being with me. I sort of worked the conversation, so it would have been easy for him to ask me out, but he didn't anyway. I probably should let go, but I can't. It's ridiculous – I met him like fifteen minutes, we didn't kiss or anything and yet I'm more interested in him than in any other guy I've met. How crazy is that?"

"Not crazy, it's cute. Is there a way you can find him?"

"There probably is, but I'm not sure if I want to. What if he's not happy at all when I contact him?"

"Then you know and then you can let go. On the other hand, he might be thrilled. You don't want to miss out on that."

"I guess you're right."

"I know I am, I'm always right. You'll be doing yourself a favour – and me, because now I'm really curious how it will pan out."

"I bet you are."

"And the other thing that bothers you, what's that?"

"You have to promise not to tell anyone."

"I promise."

"For long, I've had this dream about joining the Army."

"The Army!?"

"Don't sound so surprised, don't you think I would make it?" Maisie felt a bit offended by Bella's reaction.

"I'm sure you would do splendidly, but my boyfriend is in the Army, remember? I just can't understand why anyone would join voluntarily to be honest. On a good day they wear camouflage gear and are covered in mud from some field exercise, on a bad day they are deployed, and risk being killed. If it was me, they would have to drag me by the hair and force me to enlist."

Maisie laughed at the thought.

"Well, I'm not you and I've thought about it for a long time. A while ago I went to an Army assessment centre for two days to go through different tests to see if I'm army material. Physical and mental tests, team exercises to check if I can work with others."

"And?"

"And nothing. I'm waiting for the damn letter to come. I've been waiting for weeks and nothing. The longer it takes, the more certain I feel that I didn't pass, and my dream is dead."

"I would be surprised if you don't pass Maisie. I've met many of the privates working under Matt. Some of them are brilliant, but some of them honestly don't seem to be the sharpest tool in the shed. If they can make it, I don't see why you wouldn't. You're one of the most intelligent girls I've met, definitely a team player and fit too so you would no doubt pass those tests."

"I hope you're right. All I want for Christmas is a letter telling me I'm welcome to Pirbright."

"You know, Matt is in Pirbright, so if you end up there I can ask him to look out for you. Not that I think you need it", Bella giggled. Then she became serious again, as she understood this was important to Maisie. "Look, I'm sure there's a good reason why it's taken time, but I would be very surprised if you don't get a positive answer. Don't give up, eh?"

Maisie nodded, slightly strengthened and feeling a little bit better.

"But are you really sure that army letter is all you wish for Christmas?"

"What?"

"I think you wish for a date with a certain bloke too. Make it happen, Maisie! You've got nothing to lose."

Bella's words had encouraged her. This afternoon when she got home from work, she had parked her bike, locked it and after hesitating for a while, walked across the street and entered the restaurant *Little Karachi*. A kind-looking middle-aged man greeted her when she entered. There were not many guests at this hour, between the lunch rush and dinner guests arriving.

"Table for one?"

"Eh, no thanks."

"Take-away then. Here is the menu for that."

He handed her a colourful menu and she began looking at the dishes, partly to postpone what she really wanted to do. She noticed that some things seemed similar to Indian food, which she loved, and as she had been curious about the Pakistani kitchen ever since she ran into Rab, she ended up ordering one dish a naan to go.

"It will be ready in ten minutes", the man told her after passing her order on to the kitchen.

Maisie fidgeted with the menu she still was holding.

"Actually, there was something I wanted to ask."

"Okay?"

"I think you know a friend of mine. He once said a relative of his owns this restaurant. I lost my mobile phone and with it all the numbers in my contacts list, so I don't have his anymore. I wondered if maybe you could help me?"

"What's his name?"

"Rab."

"Rab Khalil?"

"Yes." She had no clue what his surname was but hoped it was him.

"That's my nephew! You know Rab? He's a fine boy, doing his parents proud. Well, they were not thrilled over his choice of work but he's doing very well, and I think they'll come around."

He started scrolling through his own mobile phone as he talked, found Rab's number and scribbled it down on a paper which he handed to Maisie and she put it in her pocket. She could not quite believe it had been this easy once she tried.

"It was a pity though with the break-up, his parents were very disappointed about that."

The uncle sadly shook his head and Maisie's heart nearly skipped a beat.

"The break-up?"

"Him and Aisha were promised to each other, as I'm sure you know. Lovely girl."

Maisie nodded like she knew everything about a girlfriend, eager to hear more.

"Everyone was expecting them to get married soon, they are of the right age and they seemed to get along so well."

"But?"

"Last week both asked to meet with their parents and told them they will not marry! The wanted to break off the engagement."

"Both of them?"

"It seemed so, seemed like they had agreed it – but Aisha also said she had met someone else. A man she's working with and he's not Muslim. Poor Mr. and Mrs. Jamali."

"And Rab, has he met someone else?"

Maisie held her breath while waiting for the answer.

"Not as far as I know. Poor Rab, no fiancée, but I'm sure it will be easy for his parents to find another girl for such a fine young man."

"Can't he just find her himself?"

"That's not how it's done."

"No, no of course not."

"Your food is ready. It was nice talking to you miss...?"

"Maisie. Thanks for the phone number."

"Say hi to Rab from me when you talk to him."

"I will."

Maisie went home and tried to digest all this while she enjoyed the take-away food. When they met, Rab had been engaged - no wonder he did not ask her on a date - but it seemed like it had been a relationship arranged by parents, how anyone in their right mind could accept that. What if he had not been in love with that Aisha? Judging by the uncle's story, both seemed to have wanted out of the engagement. Maybe her own feeling that there was a connection between them had been right, maybe he had wanted to see her again but not been free to ask. If that was the case, maybe he would be happy if she called. Or, was he just waiting for his parents to set him up with another suitable Muslim girl?

Before Maisie had come to any decision as to whether she ought to use the number she had got or not, someone rang the doorbell. It was Mr. Atkins, her neighbour who had been away to Gran Canarias for a couple of weeks.

"Hi Ms. Richards."

"Hi Mr. Atkins." He was a bit stiff and they were not on a first name basis with each other despite being neighbours for many years.

"We just got back from our holiday today."

"Oh right, was it nice?"

"Lovely, lovely." He embarked on a lengthy description of the climate and their marvellous holiday apartment, until he remembered he was there for a reason.

"Anyway, when we went through our mail we found this letter. It seemed the mailman left it with us when it should really have gone to you. I hope it was nothing too important."

He had handed her the letter and Maisie just stared at it, barely managed a thank you before she closed the door.

Now, an hour later, she was still staring at it.

Finally, she took the envelope, opened it with a kitchen knife and reverentially pulled out the letter inside. After all, it would decide her future.

*MESSAGE FROM THE COMMANDING OFFICER ARMY TRAINING CENTRE
PIRBRIGHT*

Congratulations on being selected for a place at the Army Training Centre Pirbright to conduct your initial training. You are to report to the camp between 0800 hrs and 1100 hrs on the Monday that the course starts...

Maisie could read no further because her sight was blurred by tears. She had been accepted to the 14-week Phase 1 training. She was in and now she would not disappoint them.

"British Army, brace yourself because here comes Private Richards!" she shouted happily even if no one else was there to hear.

She would start mid-January. That would give her little but enough time to sort things out at the school and in between she intended to enjoy herself fully on Bella's wedding which she was invited to on Christmas Eve along with some other colleagues and of course Ginny, Bella's sister-in-law-to-be. It would be the perfect way to celebrate her departure to a new life. However, this meant that it was probably not the best timing to attempt to call Rab, not when she would be off for Army training without the possibility to meet him anyway. She would think about it over Christmas but for now she put it off, although she was careful to transfer the number on the paper note to her mobile phone. One never knew.

A/N: Next they finally start arriving to the hotel for the wedding and now we know Maisie is on the guest list too. Oh la la!

Chapter 27: Saturday, Dec 23 - Molly

Wedding gift - check

Toilet bag – check

Curling iron – check

Nylons plus extra pairs – check

My best bras and knickers – check

Dress for tonight – check

Dress #1 for wedding – check

Dress #2 f...

"Molly, are you coming or what? We need to get going now. Get your arse into the car!" Bella's annoyed stressed voice could cut through glass.

"I'm coming! Must make sure I don't forget anything. It's not like I can go back and get it."

I was quite confident I had everything as I already had gone through my check list about five times or so, but I really did not want to screw these days up by leaving anything vital behind. If there was one time in life when I wanted to look my best from inside and out, this was it. Who knew what might happen. I put my copy of the lyrics for *Don't go breaking my heart* in my handbag, despite that I knew it by heart now, then I was ready to go.

Matt and Bella were picking me up for the two-hour drive to the exclusive countryside hotel where the wedding party was to take place. The wedding ceremony itself would be held in a small medieval church nearby, while dinner tonight, the wedding party and Christmas Day brunch would take place at the hotel where all guests also would stay. The majority would arrive tomorrow, but family and the closest friends would go there already today and meet up for dinner tonight. Not a full-blown rehearsal dinner, something more informal, Bella had informed me, so she and Matt would be able to enjoy themselves in a smaller company before the big days and hopefully get rid of some wedding nerves. Bella had terrorised everyone for weeks, but besides that she urged me to get my arse into the car *pronto* I had the feeling that she was starting to relax a bit already strange enough. Maybe because everything was decided and delivered now, from ring and dresses, to cake and decorations. Now all she had to do was to make herself beautiful tomorrow and have fun. Well, manage to say 'yes' at the right timepoint too, but I had no hesitation she would manage that brilliantly.

If Bella was beginning to relax, it was an understatement to say that I was expectant and nervous. There were so many reasons to be. There was my role as bridesmaid which meant I would walk up the aisle – not with everyone's eyes on me because they would obviously be on Bella, but I did not want to trip over or anything else stupid like getting stuck with the dress hem in my knickers before I walked in, draw attention to me and destroy everything. I had to hold a speech for the two, which I wanted to be funny and moving, not a sleeping-pill; and worst of all I had to sing the bloody duet. Then there was Charles. The fact that he would be there, living under the same roof as me for two nights and almost three days. Endless

opportunities to meet him under the best circumstances possible. Maybe I would dance with him, maybe I would even dare to be a little flirtatious after a shot or two, maybe he would think I looked at least a bit cute when I was dolled up in the beautiful dresses Bella had gotten me for the wedding day. He had already seen the first one, the day I was posed on that stupid podium, but without makeup and a nice hairdo to go with it. The second one, for the evening, he had not seen at all and in my opinion, it was even better than the first

I had been to the hotel once before, in spring, when I had joined Bella and Matt to inspect it before they made a final decision to have the wedding here. It was beautiful then but coming here when the surrounding countryside was covered in deep layers of glistening snow was something different entirely, even more stunning. The buildings were decorated with thousands of small lights and the big fir growing naturally in the middle of the yard in front of the hotel was dressed in even more lights. Indoors, the decoration level escalated even further, with fairy lights, garlands of holly, bows of deep red or plaid ribbons, mistletoes, bells and Christmas trees with loads of baubles and tinsel. It was all very excessive, but completely adorable and tasteful. Right in the lobby there was a big fireplace where a fire was making welcoming crackling sounds and hot chocolate and biscuits were served to welcome the arriving guests. I instantly knew this wedding would be nothing but magical and Bella beamed too when she took it all in.

"This is just perfect. I knew it", and she squeezed Matt's arm affectionately. With the same affection, he kissed her on the head and smiled.

"Strangely enough, you're always right, darling." He was not the least ironic and seemed very pleased too, that their choice of venue had ended up with this.

As we were serving ourselves the hot drink, mum, dad, Nan and our younger brothers and sisters all tumbled in through the doors like a minor snowstorm entering the premises, but they soon settled with drinks and biscuits too. Next Matt's parents and Ginny came, and Georgie and Elvis looking as much in love as when I saw them last. Then came Charles and I stopped looking to the door after that. He wore the same dark coat as when I saw him the first time at the station and carried an exclusive-looking leather weekend bag. So typical of him to have such a tasteful bag, not like my raspberry pink plastic suitcase on wheels with stickers on to separate it from others at the airport belt. When he came inside he had snowflakes in his dark locks and on his face, which immediately melted and left little droplets of water on the skin instead and he shuddered a bit before the warmth from the fire reached through to him as he walked over to us. He hugged Matt and Bella, Matt's parents, Ginny, Elvis and Georgie and shook hands with the ones he had not met before, like my family. I knew that Elvis was watching me where I sat crouched in a big armchair, so observed all this out of the corner of my eye and I tried to look occupied with my hot chocolate and put on almost surprised look when he stopped before me.

"Hi Molly, is this where you're hiding?"

With me sitting and him standing, his legs never seemed to end as my gaze climbed up them, (skipped the crotch to avoid embarrassment) and continued all the way to his delightful face, where I found his brown eyes to be boring into me.

"I'm not hiding, just enjoying my delicious hot chocolate. You know I'm partial to that and here they have marshmallows too."

"Oh dear, then I better have some quick before you have it all", he grinned.

"Probably for the best."

He wriggled off his coat and flashed me another smile when the knitted jumper with Christmas motive became visible. My cheeks were already heated from the fire, now my insides heated up as well. I knew he was wearing it for me.

"Charlie, what the fuck are you wearing?"

I giggled when I heard Elvis shout out at him and he grinned back at me before turning around to Elvis and moving over to where the drinks and biscuits were served.

"Don't you like it Elvis? I got it for a very special occasion and thought it would be fitting to wear today too."

Matt joined them.

"I was there when he got it, he bought it from a dude in a bar. First, I thought he had lost it completely, but then I thought it was something the old Charles would have done before you became major and all serious."

"Hey, may I remind you you're speaking to your CO."

"Not this weekend I'm not. This weekend I'm the groom and you're my bestman. That must mean that for once I'm the boss."

"Fair enough, you're the boss between us, but I think you will find that between you and your lovely lady, she's always the boss, including this weekend."

"I get to be the boss in bed sometime", Matt grinned, causing the others to chuckle and as that was a little bit more information than I needed I tried to focus my attention in some other direction.

Georgie appeared by my side.

"So, I finally got to meet the famous Charles. Funny, now that I know it's him, I realise that Elvis has talked about him over the years. I just didn't connect the dots before."

"What did he say?"

"Not sure. I didn't pay that much attention as it was about someone I never had met. He has been away on tour a lot, many rounds to Afghanistan. I *do* know Elvis considers him one of his best mates and really appreciates him, so I think he's a good guy. And you must admit he's dreamy?"

"Hush, not so loud Georgie!"

"You didn't say anything, I did."

"Yeah, but anyway."

"I think you're very much in danger..." This time she whispered.

"What?"

"...of falling in love. Or, by the look of your pink cheeks you have already. I knew it."

"I like him, all right, but please let's not talk about it here and try not to make a fool of me this weekend. Just enjoy your Elvis and leave me to myself."

"All right, if that's what you want."

Charles just smiled at me across the room again, and I knew that what I really wanted for Christmas was him.

We were only around thirty people for the informal but very nice dinner that evening. I put on a little black dress (different than the one I had for the hen) and added a bit of a smokey eye. That look would obviously have been inappropriate for the wedding but tonight I thought I could try to look a bit seductive. Not that I know if I managed, but at least it made my green eyes look larger and greener.

We were seated around a couple of round tables and Bella's thought had been that one should sit with different people tonight than one would tomorrow. As Charles and I would sit at the table of honour during the wedding dinner, we were unfortunately not at the same table this evening. The dinner was wonderful anyway. Food and drink was great, a promising start for the weekend making Bella

relax even more. Everyone was so happy to be there and just enjoyed themselves and had fun. Dad, who was not comfortable about giving a speech in front of a big audience gave it in front of this smaller group instead and caused both me and Bella to cry because it was filled with lots of love and not so little regret over the drunk tosser he had been when we grew up, even if he ended with the conclusion that it was better to change late than never. I looked up then and met Charles searching gaze and somehow felt that he realised another thing or two about where Bella and I came from. Despite that we were not sitting next to each other, our eyes met often during dinner, except when I tried to avoid it because I saw that Elvis, sitting at a third table, was making faces at me. Sometimes I hate his guts.

After the delicious desert, I saw Charles get up from the table and leave the room for a while. I was curious about what he was up to but maybe he just headed to the men's room. Shortly after, Bella and Matt got to their feet too.

"Now we'll it a night, Bella and I. Big day tomorrow", Matt smiled. "But please, we encourage you to stay here and have a good time. Only remember the real party is tomorrow so don't overdo it tonight. We'll see you at breakfast, or in case you have a sleep-in, we'll see you in church."

I went over to hug them before they left. I would see Bella before church, as we would make ourselves ready together. Yet, I was a bit tearful. This was the last time she would go to bed as Bella Dawes, tomorrow night this time she would be Bella Geddings.

"I haven't asked, but are you doing it the traditional way, sleeping in separate rooms tonight?"

"Don't be silly, I wouldn't be able to sleep without Matt beside me tonight and then I'd look a wreck tomorrow. I don't see the point anyway when we've been sleeping together for years."

She had a point there and I smilingly watched them say good night to the others.

Swiftly Charles appeared by my side. He held a bottle of champagne and two glasses and leaned over to whisper in my ear, while smiling mischievously.

"Come Dawesy, it's time for us to sneak away and rehearse. Let's escape while they're all occupied."

That foxy smile, directed to me, together with the thought of sneaking away *anywhere* with him alone, made my legs feel a bit wobbly. Or maybe it was the wine I had consumed during dinner. I had intended to keep the alcohol intake moderate tonight, so I would be fresh tomorrow, but the waitress seemed to have topped my glass when I was not watching because I was doubtless tipsy now.

"I probably shouldn't have more to drink though", I nodded towards the bottle in his hand.

"It's only meant to facilitate the rehearsing", he smirked. "I know what you're like when you're hungover, and I agree, we can't have that tomorrow."

I wished he had not reminded me of that episode, which was something I was far from proud of, but of course I came with him.

"I have found the perfect spot", he said, striding along the passageway and soon stopped outside two big glass doors leading to a room which was rather an orangery, made mostly of glass and accommodating various plants of Mediterranean origin, like olive, fig and citrus trees. It was dimly lit by the many fairy lights hanging from the glass ceiling and with the snow falling outside, almost feeling like it fell inside due to all the glass, it was a magically beautiful place.

"Are we allowed to go in here?" I whispered almost reverentially.

"The doors are open, I already checked, so I don't see why we wouldn't be allowed. We're guests after all."

I tiptoed inside, I was not sure why, but it was so still and quiet, so it felt like the right thing to do. Charles just laughed at me.

"Why do you tiptoe when we plan to play music and sing?"

"I don't know. It feels like someone will come and tell us we shouldn't be here."

"If they do, I'll tell them to sod off."

Oh, this confident, bossy version of him was really truly sexy. It was probably lucky that I never opted for a career in the army, because with a commanding officer like him I would have been drooling all day. He seemed contented and at ease, like nothing could disturb his equilibrium, just picked up his mobile to turn on the song while giving me another wicked smile sending my insides fluttering. He popped the champagne bottle, poured two glasses and handed me one.

"Cheers to us singing."

"Cheers."

The glasses clinked together as we peeked at each other over the brim. He took a sip, I took three large gulps to steady my nerves. He put the glass and his phone down on a bench and turned to me while waiting for the song to start.

"Are you ready?"

"As ready as can be."

Except that my heart was beating erratic and my mouth was very dry, so I was not completely sure I would be able to articulate as required.

Don't go breaking my heart.

I couldn't if I tried.

Honey if I get restless.

Baby, you're not that kind.

Just like he had done the time in my flat, he swayed his hips (and his dishy arse) to the rhythm of the music, smiling wide as he sang. I had a feeling he was a bit plastered too, but only to the extent that it made his moves even smoother. My own tipsiness made it less embarrassing to follow his lead when he took my hand and we danced together while taking turns singing our lines. I remembered each and every one of mine and he nodded appreciatively. This could be good. If we did this

well tomorrow during the wedding dinner, I might not make a spectacle of myself after all. My only problem would be not to show everyone in the room that I was undeniably in love with him. I prayed it was not obvious now, trying not to look up in his face with the look of a lovesick puppy even if I felt like one and the lyrics only enhanced the feeling. Especially as he delivered his lines so convincingly.

Don't go breaking my heart.

I won't go breaking your heart.

The song ended, and the room was completely silent. He still held my hand and his face was very close to mine now, but his eyes not looking into mine. They were fixed on my mouth.

"I think our mission here is done, we nailed it."

"Oh, I thought something was the matter with my singing, the way you're looking at my mouth."

He smiled knowingly.

"No, it was perfect and now Molly Dawes, I'm going to kiss you."

Did he really say that, or was I imagining? It was like he was stating his intent, asking for permission and giving me the chance to stop him, all at once. My heart was out of my chest. Like I ever would want to stop him. He did not give me much time to think about it anyway because next thing I knew, I felt his warm lips. First, he just grazed my lips with his, as if trying the waters, but when I instinctively

coiled my arms around his neck and responded, he immediately pressed his lips harder to mine, in a full-blown kiss. It was like pressing a switch, or maybe triggering a small explosion, the initial hesitance between us evaporating into thin air. Our teeth were clashing, tongues flickering, probing, swirling, tasting each other, teeth nibbling each other's lips, meanwhile his hands moved down to my hips to pull me tight to him. Before I knew it, he moved me with effortless confidence and I felt my back suddenly up against the wall. After only the briefest pause to meet my eyes and check if I was in on it (oh, sweet Jesus, yes), he pressed himself to me. The hard planes of his body pressed against my softer curves and seemed to be a perfectly compatible match, begging for our figures to melt together. His hands moved up to cradle my face, holding me steadily and gently at the same time, so my head rested in his palms rather than against the hard wall, not pausing the kissing for one second.

I kept pulling him to me, holding the soft curls at the back of his neck, those I had longed to touch so many times. I wanted him closer to me. Christ, with the heat and sensation I now felt between my thighs, this was not close enough. I could hear his breath pulled in heavily through his nose, matching my own and I sensed some definitive hardness which was not there moments ago, being pressed against me and I could barely stop myself from pushing myself towards it but did not want to seem too needy. I would have liked to just rip his shirt off then and there like some wild sex goddess, but I was not *that* drunk. My inhibitions were still there and rescued me from acting like a mad woman who has lived in near celibacy for three years. All of a sudden, I became conscious that all the other guests were just down

the corridor and if someone walked by, we would be completely exposed in this glass room. He seemed to think along the same lines.

"We need to go somewhere. My room." His voice hoarse and breathless.

The tone was again bossy, stating the fact and presenting a strategy rather than asking, but I think my body had already given him the answer he needed. I followed when he pulled me with him, his eyes dark and intense in a way I had never seen them before, beckoning me to come. In that moment I had the feeling that wherever he led me, I would follow. The passageway was empty when we came through the glass doors, to my relief because I knew I would have looked completely guilty and caught in the act if we met anyone. The elevator was right next to the orangery and he pulled me inside it.

"We could have taken the stairs, it's only one floor", I giggled as it moved.

"Then I would not be able to do this", he said and pushed the stop button and caught me between himself and the mirror wall, grabbed hold of me and lifted me so I was partly supported by a small railing running below the mirror, partly by him. I spontaneously wrapped my legs around his hips, pulling him closer to me, but somewhere inside me an annoying bell started ringing, asking me if this was how I wanted to do it with *him*.

"What, you think we should do this in the elevator?" I asked anxiously.

He grinned cheekily.

"Are you prude, Molly Dawes?"

Before I could deny it, he continued.

"No, I wasn't thinking that, I just wanted to take a break here before going to my room because I can't keep my hands off you all the way. I think an elevator is kind of hot, I've dreamed of pressing the stop button like this one day."

It *was* hot, and it made me even more turned on than before, but it also disturbed me somehow. Disturbed me because Charles usually seemed so correct and in control and it did not seem plausible that this change would come only from him being overwhelmed by passion for *me*. It started to spin in my mind that he was not sober. That he never had even attempted to kiss me until tonight when he was drunk, not even when we were in the same bed. What if this was all it was to him, a drunken fumble? Pleasant enough but without deeper meaning. It would be amazing to continue this now - I was not even sure I would know how *not* to continue – but if it only was a drunken shag, it would not be as awesome tomorrow morning.

He had started dotting kisses along my neck and collarbone where my dress left it bare, in the most enticing way and I was so nearly lost in it again, but the sensible voice in my head was yelling at me now, refusing to keep quiet. Telling me that sleeping with him now tonight, if he only wanted me when he was drunk, would only leave me sad and mentally bruised. I had had enough of that in the past and I was too much in love with him to walk away from that unscarred. Having sex with Charles would undoubtedly had been the peak of my so far not too exciting sex life, but it would cost me too much. I did not want to be a one-nighter, or even two- or three-nighter, not with him.

I had a flash inside my mind of how it would be to stand as bridesmaid and bestman behind Bella and Matt by the altar tomorrow and not quite be able to face each other, shameful after sex that would be a diversion to him, everything to me. I did not think I could go through with that and it was not what I wanted for my sister's wedding. I had to abstain from a what would likely be a heavenly shag to be able to look myself in the mirror tomorrow, because a shag is just a shag no matter how heavenly it is – and I wanted more. I wanted him to be in love with me and want me, need me, when his mind was clear. And of course, he would not want me then, it was impossible to imagine.

Using every little ounce of willpower, I had, I broke off the kiss and reached out my hand and pressed the start button.

"Are you in a hurry to get to the room?" he said nibbling my earlobe and achieving goose bumps all over my skin.

As we only had been travelling one floor, the elevator stopped again almost immediately, and the doors opened. Luckily no one was outside, but he moved away from me and softly put me down, still smiling. This was so, so difficult. I was not sure my self-discipline would be enough. It had to be. I quickly moved out from the elevator.

"Charles, I can't. I can't do this. I don't want to, not like this."

His face shifted when the words sank in and he stared at me in in stunned disbelief and disappointment.

"You don't want this", he echoed my words.

How could I explain that I wanted it with everything that was me, but not without love?

"I *can't*, and I can't explain. Not now, when I'm drunk and you're drunk. Let's talk tomorrow when we're sober."

His eyes were dark again, but this time with frustration. He moved his hand up to cup my face and let his thumb stroke softly over my lips. I could barely resist letting out a moan of longing.

"I really wanted to be with you now." He sounded so sincere I almost yielded, but the keyword was *now* and that was the issue. He wanted it now, not tomorrow, not any other day.

"I'm sorry. I'm going to my room, please don't come after me."

Because if he did I did not know if my self-control would be enough to resist giving in to what my treacherous body wanted.

"Molly..."

"Please, let' talk tomorrow", I pleaded. "Not now when we might say something we regret. I want to be friends still when we stand by the altar with Matt and Bella. Don't you?"

"Friends? Yes, sure, if that's what you want", his voice sounded beaten and a bit desperate and I assumed it was the awoken but unfulfilled physical need that shone through.

"I didn't mean to..."

"You're right, let's talk tomorrow. Right now, I don't want to *talk*."

He almost spat the last word, like it gave him a bad taste in his mouth.

"Sleep well."

When I turned, I heard him mutter;

"No fucking chance of that."

Then he added, louder but softer, without any trace of sarcasm and directed to me.

"Sweet dreams Molly, you're a lovely girl."

I so nearly turned to rush into his arms and resume where we had ended but managed to keep walking to my room and once I was on the other side of the door, threw myself on the bed, utterly sad and confused. I knew I had done the right thing. How come then, that I felt like crap? Maybe because if I had played my cards differently and not thought so much about tomorrow, I would have been lying in Charles' arms right now. I could not help feeling I had totally fucked up. Maybe it would have been totally worth the subsequent heartbreak.

A/N: Everything was starting to come together so nicely and then they go and make mess of it all. Sorry for that, but no HEA without a bit of drama first.

A/N: A few of the reviews to the previous chapter said they would have had less willpower than Molly. I thought the same for myself, until I remembered that was exactly how I met husband; snogging the handsome guy in a bar and he tried his best to get me to go home with him, which I very much wanted to but decided not to – and here we are ten years later with two kids, living life with all its ups and downs. Still laughing and still, not sure I would have been able to resist in Molly's place.

Anyway, here we are – Christmas Eve and everyone is finally coming together. It will have to be more than one chapter it seems. Hope you enjoy!

As always, thanks for the lovely reviews. I read each and every one of them and appreciate them super-much!

Chapter 28: Sunday, Dec 24 – All

Charles

Immediately when he woke up, it hit him with full force what a total clusterfuck he had made of last night, but he could not fully grasp where it all had gone awry. He replayed the evening in his mind to try to find out. Not when he asked her to come with him and rehearse. It had felt like a secret conspiracy between them to sneak away and she had definitely been up for it. Not when they found that beautiful orangery, where it felt like they were in a magical world of their own and they had

sung and danced together, her eyes had twinkled, and her smile been wide and genuine. Not when he kissed her, he was certain of that too, because she had returned it immediately, pulled him to her and moved in perfect synchronicity, been as out of breath as he was. Her body pressed to his, her mouth glued to his, her tongue meeting his, the thought of it caused a tightening sensation in his groin again. Then they had moved into the elevator and now he knew he was getting closer to the point where something had derailed. Somewhere between the floors she had realised she did not want this, him. Had it been a mistake from start for her and it was only then she had come to her senses? Had his joke that she was a prude not gone down well? Was he a bad kisser or had she been offended when she felt his hard-on pressed against her?

Somewhere he had misread the situation and he cursed himself for it, because she mattered to him so incredibly much. She mattered more than anything except Sam had mattered to him for ages. When she said she did not want it, that she could not do this, his desire had been so intense that he felt like falling into a black hole of disappointment. Yet, that was nothing compared to the realisation that she did not have the same feeling as him, just when he had started to believe that she did.

He was not even sure how to approach her today. She had been the one to pull the emergency break, so he somehow felt that he must let her set the pace of the next step even if all he wanted was to rush to her room and tell her he was sober now and could they please have the talk. Then he changed his mind, this was too important to let it slip away. He swiftly swung his muscular legs over the edge of the bed, rose and got dressed. He walked over to her room with a spring of eagerness in his step and shot the offending elevator an evil eye when he passed it.

Elevator stop buttons would not be associated with good things from now on. He knocked on the door to her room and waited for quite some time. He looked at his watch and realised she might already be in the restaurant for breakfast. It was not the way he would have preferred to meet her, but he did not have much of a choice. Maybe they could chat over a coffee, or a tea for her.

As he walked down the wide stairs, he had a full view of the lobby and what he saw made his blood freeze.

Molly

I managed to eat some scrambled eggs, two slices of bacon and half a toast but did not have much appetite. All I wanted was to talk to Charles, make things good between us before the wedding so it would not be totally awkward, but he was nowhere to be seen. I considered if I should go knocking at his door but would not be comfortable surprising him dressed only in trunks or less, given where we had ended off. Instead, I brought a cup of tea from the breakfast room to the big fireplace in the lobby, where I sat down in the same armchair as yesterday. I thought I would have a good vantage point and see when Charles passed by for breakfast as he must come down either the stairs or the elevator. The memory of us in the elevator flashed by in my mind, him perfectly positioned between my legs. My thighs spontaneously squeezed together in response to the mental picture and a specific area between them asked me what the hell I had been thinking when I interrupted that moment. I tried to shake it off. Nervously, I kept my eyes fixed on the stairs, both hoping for and dreading him coming.

I was so focused, that I did not pay attention to the seat beside me and was startled when someone spoke next to my ear.

"What's your name?"

The cutest boy had taken seat next to me. He must be around seven or eight years old, had large brown eyes with eyelashes any girl would envy him, a lovely but somewhat cautious smile and a mop of light brown unruly, curly hair. His thin boy body almost disappeared in the large armchair, but I had no doubt that in a few years he would be tall and breaking girls' hearts.

"Hi, there. I'm Molly."

"So, you're not the lady who's getting married then?"

"No, that would be my sister Bella. What's your name?"

"I'm Sam, or Samuel."

"Ah, Sam. Did you know that name means 'he who deserves to get many Christmas presents'?"

He gave me a sceptic look.

"Really?"

I nodded seriously.

"Your parents really must have liked you, giving you that name."

"I think they do", he smiled again, this time looking less cautious. Maybe I was winning him over.

He looked around.

"It's nice here. I was afraid I wouldn't like not celebrating Christmas at home, but now I think this will be okay."

"I think so too. And I'm sure Santa will find his way here too, with all your gifts I mean."

Now, he looked at me like I'm an imbecile.

"I'm too old to believe in Santa. I know it's mum and dad who buy me things."

"Oh, of course you are. Sorry."

"It's all right, you seem okay anyway."

"You're not here alone, I reckon?"

"No, mum and I just arrived, she went to get the luggage. There she is."

He jerked his head in direction of the entrance where a model beautiful blonde woman with legs up to her chin just entered, dressed in an exclusive coat and carrying a suitcase with the distinctive Louis Vuitton logo on. I would not have guessed she was his mother because their colours were so different, but I guessed he had gotten his darker looks from his father. Also, the kid looked far nicer than her, he was cute while she looked posh and cold.

"Dad's already here, he came yesterday", he continued. Then his eyes fixed on a point somewhere above and behind my shoulder and his expression became one of total happiness. "There he is!"

Like an eager puppy he left the chair to rush towards the stairs. I had lost focus on the stairs for a short while when I spoke to Sam and just as I shifted my gaze back in that direction Charles came strolling down the steps. It seemed like this would not be the ideal moment to talk to him though, because the little adorable boy rushed towards him and was scooped up in a hug by strong arms. By his dad, obviously. Blonde mum and dark-haired dad equals a boy with light brown hair and brown eyes identical to his father's. The math was not complicated, why had I not put two and two together immediately. Those eyes, that smile, I should have known. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Charles had a family in Bath, that was what he always returned to. No wonder he had been eager to get it on yesterday because that was his chance before the trophy wife arrived. What a massive asshole. I so nearly had made a giant mistake. Well, technically kissing him was a mistake but I had at least diverted the disaster of sleeping with him.

Charles put Sam down and looked up, I assumed to look for *her*. Before I managed to tear away from the site of him and his son, Charles eyes met mine and widened, realising I had seen and understood. He opened his mouth half-way as if to say something, but what was there to say? 'Sorry, it would have been nice if we had taken the opportunity to shag yesterday, but now my family has arrived so if you would be so kind to double away fastest possible.' That was possibly what he would say if the words made it over his lips.

"Charles, there you are", the blonde woman called out in a posh, annoying voice, matching her looks.

He seemed unwilling to break eye contact with me but did not have much choice because I got to my feet, gave him a look filled with despise and walked away to leave him with his family. Right now, I felt he that he deserved the wife who looked like someone had put a stick up her arse, but question was if she deserved an unfaithful bastard.

Georgie

Georgie had finished breakfast and had the same idea as Molly, to have a cup of tea in front of the fireplace before she went to make herself ready for the day. She had seen Molly go in that direction earlier but now she was gone, and the lobby was quite empty. Elvis had been tired after last night – from one to many whiskies followed by passionate lovemaking until late. Georgie had skipped the whisky and felt so intensely happy, that she was full of energy this morning and had jumped out of bed despite falling asleep late.

She had barely sat down in one of the armchairs when her attention was drawn to a guest arriving through the entrance, putting his bag down on the floor to have a look around in the lobby. Fuck. This could not be happening. She briefly considered hiding behind the armchair, but it would have been ridiculous. If he was here for the weekend and the wedding she would not be able to avoid him anyway. Any

second now his gaze would fall on her. Now it did. Surprise and disbelief passed over his face, then Bones approached her.

"Georgie?"

"Yes", she said sheepishly, wishing she could sink through the floor.

"What are you doing here?"

"Drinking tea."

"I can bloody well see that, but you know that's not what I meant."

"I'm here for a wedding."

"Your own?", his voice now filled with sarcasm and she followed his gaze to her engagement ring, the diamond sparkling on her finger disclosing its presence and she had to suppress a reflex to cover it.

"No, of course not", she whispered, sad that she had hurt him.

"Then I guess it's the same wedding I'm attending. I used to work with Matt Geddings when I was in the Army."

"That's the one. I'm friends with them both."

To her surprise, he sat down in another armchair, kept looking at her intensively and made her feel uncomfortable.

"As we're going to be guests at the same wedding, maybe it's a good idea we had a talk."

It was not a question, he demanded to have a talk. Georgie was not sure she wanted to but here was clearly no escape to be found.

"I think it would be fair if you explained to me how we could be dating and kissing just a week ago, and it sure as hell felt like you enjoyed it, and now you're *engaged*? Unless I'm mistaken, and you just went and got yourself a really nice diamond ring as an early Christmas gift?"

"You're right. I owe you more of an explanation than you got over the phone. First, let me say you're right – I enjoyed being with you. I never wanted to hurt you."

"But you sure as fuck ended up doing it anyway, not as much when you said you didn't want to see me again, as when you turned up here, engaged."

"I didn't know you'd be here, did I?" she said softly. "Listen, I had been going out with this guy for two years. I loved him, but he had commitment issues, so I felt I had to move on and broke up with him even if I never really wanted to. We were on a break when I met you and I tried to get over him. I liked you – yes, it's true I did – and when you asked I wanted to go on a date with you. I had a great time both our dates, but I couldn't stop thinking about him. Then a few days after our last date, he appeared on my doorstep, telling me he had been a fool and proposed. I knew in my heart I had to say yes. I've loved him for two years and I still do."

"So, I was the collateral damage in the great love story of you two, a side track", he established flatly.

"I'm so sorry."

Her eyes filled with tears of remorse, but suddenly he laughed loud and heartily, almost made her jump in the chair.

"Come on, Georgie. It wasn't that bad. I liked you. I liked you a lot – I won't deny that, but we only dated twice and snogged a bit. I'm a grown man and I can handle rejection, even if I prefer when women fall at my feet. Sure, I may come out of this slightly bruised but nothing that won't heal after a whisky or another woman."

His blue eyes were amused. She realised there was no hostility or bitterness buried there and let out a sigh of relief.

"I want this wedding weekend to be great, so don't worry about me turning up with a sulking face later today. It's not my style."

"I want it to be great too, and I'm so relieved you don't take it that hard."

He shook his head.

"Even if I did, I understand you didn't want to hurt me. I've seen enough of you to know you would not do that deliberately, but that's how things turn out sometimes. You can't please everyone. Christ, half of the time I'm lucky if I please *anyone*, but you learn to brush it off."

His face turned serious.

"I hope your bloke knows he's a very lucky guy."

"I don't think he did, but that he does now."

"Then I'm happy for you."

He smiled, and she thought that he was an undeniably attractive man but that he never would be able to cause her to feel butterflies in her stomach the way Elvis and his cheeky grin did. She suddenly had an idea, something that just might work out very well.

"Thank you, Alex. It was nice speaking to you and I'll see you later today, but I have to go up to the room and make myself ready now."

"Glad we cleared the air."

He got to his feet and pecked her on the cheek before she headed off and he went to check in. Bones watched her go and thought to himself that even if he without a doubt would survive, it was an amazing girl that had slipped through his fingers and he wished he would find someone like her.

Passing the elevators, Georgie nearly stumbled on a dark beautiful girl coming out of it, occupied as she was thinking of the idea she just had. When the girls bumped into each other, both giggled.

"Sorry!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"I didn't see you."

"And I wasn't looking where I was going."

"Are you also here for the wedding?"

"Yeah, it seems like everyone is."

"Great, then we'll meet again later. I'm Georgie."

"I'm Maisie." The girl had a very beautiful smile and Georgie noticed that she had the kind of appearance that would have made Elvis look linger a bit too long in earlier days, making her jealous, but where they were now, she felt such trust in his feelings that nothing and no one would be able to make her turn into the green-eyed monster. With a sense of contentment, she returned to the sleeping Elvis and woke him up with a kiss.

Molly

Furiously I strode off to my room, slammed the door shut behind me, breathed heavily and clenched my fists. Then I was overwhelmed with sadness. It was like all the anger vaporised and was replaced with sorrow and emptiness. I was in love with a man who was a complete scoundrel. How could I be? How could he be?

I know I have trust issues. If I had not had the insight myself already, Bella and Georgie had made sure to tell me every time I ended things with a guy despite that he was quite promising after a first few dates, because I would rather be safe than sorry. Once bitten, twice shy, and all that. My trust issues started with dad and

continued with Artan and I have never let anyone in enough after him to give them a chance to repair my faith in men. I was starting to think I would be prepared to let Charles in, if he wanted to. Instead he had ruined everything by proving that even seemingly perfect guys were absolute fuckwits when it came to relationships.

This was not the time to feel sorry for myself though. This was Bella's amazing day and I wanted to be one hundred per cent by her side. I would have to pull myself together, put on a happy-face, put up with being close to Charles and see him together with his stroppy wife, dance, not drink too much and become obnoxious and appear to have fun. Damn! I just remembered I would have to sing a love song with Charles. I had no idea how to cope with that in the current situation, but I had to get through it. Look at his earlobe instead of his eyes and think of Ryan Gosling maybe, I have always fancied him. Then I could maybe avoid showing that I loathed him. Funny, yesterday I had been preoccupied people would see I was in love, now I was worrying the would see I hated him.

It picked my things together to go over to Bella's suite. A girl would come there and help us with hair and makeup. If anything, I intended to look my most dazzling self today, so maybe a small part of Charles would regret he had fucked everything up. I suddenly wondered why Bella had not warned me he was married. I had the feeling she had been trying to set us up, had she not known he was married? I would have to dig into that later, but today I would not disturb her or upset her with my petty love problems, just make sure that she had the loveliest day.

Brains

Brains was sitting in the church, taking in the interiors and the ambience. It was a medieval church, or rather chapel. The stone walls almost seemed to radiate with a golden glow in the light from the many candles in candle holders along the aisle and chandeliers hanging from the roof. There were beautiful decorations made of white flowers and green leaves all over the place, probably wasted on many of the male attendants but Brains always paid attention to such details – one of the things about him that sometimes made Fingers jokingly ask him if he was sure he was not a Doris. It was a big wedding but most of the guests were gathered now and settled in in the pews, everyone filled with anticipation for the ceremony to start. Then he saw *her*.

She had apparently been sitting in the front but seemed like she needed to go get something in the back of the church and came walking past him. She did not see him. Of course, she did not, because she had never *seen* him. He had been wearing a fake beard and Santa hat when they met. The lovely Ginny. She was here, how amazing was that. He watched her pass on her way back, appreciating that she was at least as lovely from behind, and take her seat again, together with the family of the groom he noted. Then the coin dropped, why she had seemed so familiar. She had reminded him of someone and now he knew who; his commanding officer, Captain Matt Geddings. Brains knew he had a little sister named Ginny. For fucks sake! Here she was within his reach, at a wedding, the most romantic place imaginable to meet her again, but fate was truly shitting on him from a great height because he would never have the guts to make a pass at his CO's little sister. Matt would probably kill him, or at least put him up for charges for the foreseeable future. He buried his face in his palms and groaned in desperation.

Rab

Rab sat next to Brains and followed his gaze as he was watching at a pretty, dark-haired girl pass by, then hid his face and let out a sound of desperation. Rab laughed to himself at the lovesick behaviour and jokingly elbowed him in his side.

"Love at first sight?"

Brains raised his head and shook it.

"No at second, I've met her before when I was Santa in the galleria - but nothing's going to happen."

"Why?"

"Just realised it's the CO's sister."

"Bloody hell."

"Hush, we're in church – but exactly!"

Rab whistled silently. He fully understood the predicament, he would not hit at their CO's sister either, not even now when he was free to flirt with girls as he liked. He was *free*, and he felt light at heart, like a stone had been lifted from him. He could not quite believe how everything had played out over the last few weeks.

On his dad's birthday, he had felt so desolate and sad, wondered how he would be able to live the life he wanted without being a grand disappointment to his parents.

He had known for sure he did not want to marry Aisha but had no idea how to get out of it without causing shame and sadness to his parents for breaking the engagement.

A few days later, Aisha surprisingly had asked to meet him. So far, they had seldom met without the company of others, so the tête à tête at a café the next day was something unusual and Rab was quite curious when he arrived. Aisha had seemed nervous when they sat down at a table, breaking her choc chip cookie into small crumbs without eating any of it, while he waited for her to speak. When she finally did, she surprised him yet again.

"Rab, I don't want to marry you."

No beating about the bush there, he who always had taken her for shy.

"What?"

"I'm so sorry. I don't want to hurt you, but I don't love you and I'm in love with someone else."

He absorbed her words.

"You've met someone else?"

"It's a guy I work with. He's not Muslim, so this is not going to be pretty. I'm not sure mum and dad will talk to me after I tell them, but I wanted to let you know first as you are my fiancé."

"In name."

"Sorry?"

"In name, Aisha. I don't want this either, this arrangement between our parents. I've never wanted it. We're good friends but I don't love you either and what you're saying is making me unbelievably happy. I just haven't been as brave as you, have not known how to take the step to end it. I had to fight to join the army and I wasn't sure I could take another fight with them, and I didn't want to hurt you or bring shame on you."

"It's our lives Rab, we must do what's right for us even if it would mean a break with our parents. I can't live a lie."

That was he increasingly had felt too, and his relief was palpable, now that she had taken the step. He took her hand and squeezed it.

"Thank you! You don't know how happy you're making me. Let's tell our parents together and let them know it was *our* decision. I won't let you take the blame alone."

Two days later he told the elderly Khalils and Jamalis. There was complaining, tears, anger, but Rab and Aisha stood firm in their decision and the arrangement was dissolved. Rab had arrived at this wedding weekend a free man and he was looking forward to some fun with his friends. As an adult he never had been a free man, it was an intoxicating feeling. When he got back to the city for a few days' leave, he might try to find Maisie. Just thinking about the possibility made him giddy. He knew she lived opposite to his uncle's restaurant. He could even leave a note with his number on her bike. Maybe she would want to see him. Now that he

was no longer engaged, possibilities seemed endless. Right now, he would just enjoy the wedding and a great party.

Molly

Bella and I were to meet Matt and Charles at the church. She had not been traditional about not sleeping together the night before the wedding, but she was adamant that he should not see her in the wedding dress before church. The arrangement suited me perfectly, the longer I could post-pone seeing Charles and the shorter time I had to be in the same room as him, the better. However, we would meet them in the back-room of the church because they had decided to walk up the aisle together. Even if Bella had forgiven our dad for the shortcomings during our childhood, she did not feel that she was his to give away.

Once the makeup-girl was ready with us, I looked like a photoshopped version of myself, especially when I got the silver grey tight dress on to complete the look, and Bella looked an absolute dream. The dress, the veil, her hair, her face glowing with happiness – everything was perfect. When we stepped inside the small room where the men were waiting for us, Matt had eyes only for her and gave her a look of adoration and as if he was prepared to fall to his knees and die for her if she asked him to. Fortunately, that was not what we were here for this day. He did not look to shabby either in his no. 1 dress uniform, and neither did Charles where he stood tall and solemn.

I did my best to maintain a blank face, but he was so strikingly handsome that unwelcome desire nearly choked me. Appearing in uniform was an unfair trick. I knew he looked at me, trying to establish eye contact, but I avoided by keeping my gaze fixed on the line of medals on his chest. He had many. I guessed that meant he was a good officer. Too bad he was a shitty anything else, like prospective boyfriend or faithful husband. Unfortunately, the priest came to have some final words with Matt and Bella before the ceremony started, leaving us to ourselves and I squirmed uncomfortably wishing I was somewhere else.

"Molly..." He touched my arm, but I flinched and moved away from him.

"I have no idea what the fuck happened last night, why it all went to shit, but..." he started.

"Let me stop you right there. Last night never should have happened. I talked to your *son* this morning, very interesting. After that I don't think there's anything to say between you and me", I spat.

I looked up at him and his look was one of utter disappointment. I did not get it, how could he think there could be anything between us when he had a family, a wife.

"I had hoped it wouldn't matter to you, if you knew me."

I snorted in disbelief, had he really taken me for such a marriage-wrecker? Or a girl who would be happy being the little something on the side? Maybe that was it. He had so not seemed the type, but this was even worse than Artan and the disappointment was crippling my insides.

"You obviously don't know me if you think that."

We kept each other's stare, neither looking away. His face had become stern and unreadable and I hoped I had my coldest, hardest look on despite that I mostly felt like crying.

"We are both grown-ups and I wouldn't do anything that could ruin even a second of my sister's wedding, so I'll be civil, I'll be kind and polite and talk to you when others are there. I'll keep it to an absolute minimum though, and don't you dare touch me and after tomorrow I never want to see you again. Thank fuck I didn't sleep with you!"

He looked horrified, answered with a short nod and then Bella and Matt returned to us, happy as larks and we both put on plastered wide smiles on our faces.

Bella

Bella got the feeling something was wrong between Molly and Charles. Everything had been going so well up to now, her plan to pair them in a silly song and make them realise how perfect they would be for each other. Over the last weeks they had seemed to get closer and closer. She had seen them exchanging flirtatious glances across the tables yesterday and when she and Matt said good night, she had noticed out of the corner of her eye how Charles approached Molly, champagne bottle in hand and pulled her away.

She had cheered silently, hoping it meant the wedding romance she had hoped for all along, but Molly had shared nothing this morning and seemed unusually serious, especially given the happy occasion. She had been smiling, but the smile had not reached her eyes. When Bella had asked if everything was all right, she had finally bestowed her a true smile and said that it would be, Bella should not worry about her, because this day was all about *her*. Then Bella had known she was right, something *was* the matter. Now when she saw them standing awkwardly next to each other with horrible fake smiles, it was confirmed.

Stubborn as she was, she would not let Molly get away without explaining what was going on, but it would have to wait until she had become Mrs. Geddings, a happening which was now imminent. Suddenly she was overwhelmed with nervousness and her heart pounded with joy and excitement. She loved Matt more than anything, he was her best friend, her lover and her soulmate and sometimes she could not believe her luck for having found him. She knew she drove him crazy at times and respected him for putting his foot down when she drove it things too far. In the end they were partners and equals even if may seem to outsiders like she was the captain of the ship. She knew that nothing in the world could make her happier than him saying yes to her today, except maybe carrying his baby but that was getting ahead of things.

Matt took her hand and smiled at her.

"Bella, just in case I get so nervous in there that I don't manage to get a 'yes' over my lips, I want you to know that I love you and adore you and there's nothing that I want more than being your husband."

She felt her nerves calm down, leaving her feeling only joy and excitement.

"Same here. I love you more than anything."

They kissed.

"Hey, I think you're a bit previous, you haven't been declared husband and wife yet", Molly smirked.

The music began playing, and it was time to enter.

A/N: Already a long chapter, so I cut off there but will try not to leave you in suspense for long. I think you saw it coming, Rebecca and Sam, making things worse before it hopefully gets better.

x

A/N: This was intended to be another chapter with 'everyone', but it turned out that Molly and Charles had so much to figure out that this will be only about them and there will be another (at least) Christmas Eve chapter.

I have turned and replaced the words in this chapter so many times because I wanted it to be perfect. I could keep doing that forever but at some point, I simply have to leave it be and press the publish button. Well, hopefully you will enjoy the read.

Chapter is written with 'Halsey – Without me' on repeat in case you should wish for mood music.

x

Chapter 29: Sunday, Dec 24, part II – Charles & Molly

When the girls had joined him and Matt in the back room of the church, he had only had eyes for Molly despite that Bella was the star of the day. For him there was only her, looking ethereal in her silver shimmering dress, fair skin and dark loose waves. He had wanted to walk over and peck her on the cheek and whisper in her ear that she was stunning, but it was evident she would have none of that. First, she had refused to even look at him. Then, when he had approached her as Matt and Bella were occupied with the vicar, the look of contempt she bestowed him had stifled him. He had attempted talking to her, not wanted to walk into the ceremony in hostility but she brusquely cut him off and told him she would only keep

appearances up this day for the sake of her sister, and then she never wanted to see him again. Her words stung like a knife, going sharp and deep into his heart.

The wedding was utterly beautiful. All weddings are magical in their own way, except maybe his own because already then, he had had an uneasy feeling that the aisle was the wrong path to go even with Rebecca's still invisible baby bump, but this wedding was something extraordinary. The old church which had been transformed in manner of winter saga with all the candles and white flowers, Bella's divine dress and veil making her look like an angel stepping down to earth rather than a lovely but bossy chick born in Newham, and a uniformed officer walking proudly by her side down the aisle. Never had Matt looked more handsome, or happier. Both the bride and groom were smiling wide rather than looking solemn as they came pacing, totally confident this was what they wanted most in life, meeting the gazes of all their friends and family. Eyes were getting tearful here and there already before the vicar uttered his first words.

Charles was immensely grateful that everyone's attention was on the couple, not on him walking a few steps behind, side by side with Molly because he was not sure he was able to hide his emotions despite that he struggled to do so. He must be the most miserable man in this church, all at his own doing. He was thankful he was wearing uniform, reminding him he was an army man who should know how to keep his emotions in check. It was unlike him to ever fail in that aspect. It was just that with her, it was impossible to not *feel*. It was like a dam of emotions inside him threatened to break any second and all would come flooding out. *She hated him*. He had not been honest with her and now she hated him. The sadness and desperation over that was mixed with resentment that his own actions had brought

him to this, combined with disappointment that she had reacted like she had over Sam. Exactly the way had hoped she would not, but had feared that she might, which was one of the reasons he had postponed telling her. He had a child, one he loved and was infinitely proud of. Sam would always come as part of the package that was him, but she did not want that. She did not want any of it. She had indicated last evening that she was not in the same emotional place as him and after meeting Sam she had made it crystal clear that she wanted nothing. She would not even let him explain. Maybe, she was just not interested in hearing any declarations of feelings from his end because she anyway did not feel the same.

He glanced at her sideways. They had reached the altar now and the two of them stood to the side so everyone would have a good view of the wedding couple. Their sides nearly touching but she made sure there was a gap of empty air between them. Her face was closed, eyes fixed straight ahead on Matt and Bella. He wanted to reach out his hand and take hers, but he knew she would only shake it off. She had been so furious and despite his disappointment in her, all he wanted was to take her in his arms and say they could be great together if she only would let them, if she would forgive him.

The vicar spoke beautiful words of love, of being each other's support and comfort, but it only pained him because it made the shortcomings of his past marriage very clear and pointed out what so elusively seemed to be out of reach for him now, when he as late as yesterday had thought he and Molly maybe were getting there.

Now the vicar recited the wonderful words from the Corinthians.

Three things will last forever: faith, hope and love – and the greatest of these is love.

He kept looking at Molly and suddenly she turned and their eyes locked. Her green eyes were glazed with tears and he was not sure if it was with emotions over the wedding or if she was sad over them, or both, but he suddenly knew with certainty that he saw love in the depth of them, behind the anger. By that, he also knew he could not give up. He loved her, he needed to hope and have faith that he could make this right. At least he could not give up until he had tried everything. He smiled at her, but she returned her gaze to the vicar. It did not matter, he would not give her up without a fight. It would not be the first time he went into battle and despite that this was completely different because he would be fighting to win her not against an enemy, he felt like his life was at stake as much as it had been those other times. This time his happiness too.

Molly

The wedding was everything Bella and Matt could have hoped for, so amazingly beautiful. The only thing that ruined it for me was the rage and sadness over Charles. I tried to shut it off, but it was impossible with him next to me. Nearly touching me and trying to make me meet his eyes. When I finally did, it was like he was looking into me, telling me this was far from over. But how could it be anything but over? Even if there was love (from my end) that did not help much when the other part had already put his love, faith and hope in someone else. I wished he would just leave me be and let my try to survive this day with a fake smile plastered

on my face. When they said yes, exchanged rings and kissed, salty drops rolled down my cheeks, as much in happiness for them as in sadness for myself.

From the church everyone walked the short distance back to the hotel. It was so close that it was possible even on the snowy roads, even if it was freezing cold dressed in party attire and thin coat. The hotel was warm and welcoming after that walk, but it was like my insides refused to defrost completely.

The plan was that everyone would gather for a champagne mingle and welcome toast, then the guest would continue to mingle meanwhile Bella and Matt had their wedding photos taken, with a change to Bella's second dress in between marking the shift between the winter theme in church to the more Christmas themed dinner. I would go change then too, to my second marvellous dress. I had been so happy about it and fantasised that Charles would look at me in awe. Now I just felt empty, it did not really matter anymore. So stupid. At the time Bella and I had chosen those dresses, I had not even known him. It was unreasonable that he meant so much to me now.

I saw him across the room, holding a glass of champagne like everyone else but not touching it with his lips. When Matt wished us all welcome and everyone raised their glasses in a toast, he raised his too but then met my eyes and still did not drink.

Then it hit me that he was staying sober. He did not want to drink until he had spoken to me. My own words from last night replayed in my head, that I wanted us to have the talk when we were sober. Too much had happened since then, the game plan totally different. He would have to abstain from drinking all evening if he was

waiting for that talk because I had no intention talking to him full stop. Demonstratively I took a big gulp from my glass before I broke eye contact. I noticed that his wife was not by his side but in a different part of the room, but it was not my concern.

Bella and Matt disappeared away. Everyone else happily kept mingling and drinking, nibbled on delicious canapes arriving on silver trays but I could not make myself touch them. I was careful with the drinks though, after that big gulp just sipping carefully because I suspected that the combination of too much alcohol and my state of mind would be far from ideal. I stood with my family, listened to their banter, not in the mood to make new acquaintances and not wanting to bump into Charles and his wife. It was time for me to go get changed too, so I put my glass down and left the room, already welcoming a break from it all.

Suddenly I found myself standing face to face with Charles, staring at me stern-faced, devoid of the faintest hint of a smile. It was just the two of us in the passageway and I tried to walk past him, but he grabbed my arm. Not so hard it hurt, but he took a firm hold around my wrist and even now when I was royally pissed at him, a ripple of need moved through my body and I wondered if he was able to feel my pulse racing.

"Please, Molly, we need to talk." Almost a whisper, yet clearly audible.

"There's nothing to talk about as far as I'm concerned." I impressed myself answering in such a steady voice, when my insides were trembling.

"Believe me, there is. I should only have talked to you before, *that* was my mistake."

"Why didn't you then?" I lashed out, raising my voice.

"I thought we would have more time together yesterday!" His dark eyes flashed, not in anger but frustration, his jaw clenched, for a moment almost looking dangerous. Then, just as quickly, that faded away, leaving his face in naked despair and something else I could not quite decipher. When he spoke again, his voice was low and soft.

"I know that's not an excuse, because I should have talked to you long before that and I'm so sorry I didn't. I've fucked up in more ways than I even understand, because I still don't have a clue why you ran away yesterday, but can I please at least try starting to rectify the mistakes I know of?"

His eyes met mine, sincere and pleading.

"Please?"

Even if I was furious, I was also very much in love despite what he had done and dying to know what he had to say, so after a few seconds' internal deliberation I nodded.

"Okay, five minutes, then I need to go get changed so I'm back when Bella and Matt returns."

I lied because I did not want to seem soft, giving in to him. I knew that Bella would both change dress and adjust her hairdo slightly and after that they would have the second session with the photographer, so the mingle would continue without them at least half an hour before dinner, probably longer.

He looked around, seemingly searching for someplace more private to talk and his gaze fell on a door with the sign "Baggage room". I figured it was one of those rooms where guests can leave their baggage for a while after checking out. He jerked his head that direction, tried the door and found it unlocked and I followed. It was a room with empty metal racks and nothing else, at this hour no one stored their baggage here. Sparse and completely unromantic, which suited me just fine now. He could forget he would sweep me off my feet, if that was what he intended to try.

He closed the door behind us and turned to face me. I placed myself at a safe distance, leaning against one wall. He leaned his tall frame against another, arms crossed over his chest, hands tucked in his armpits. Then, like he realised the pose looked defensive, he let go and the arms fell limply along his sides.

"I'm sorry", he said again, his eyes boring into me.

"For what exactly?" It seemed to me he had so many things to be sorry about.

"For not telling you about Sam, for you finding out like you did. I should have told you that I have a son and he's part of my life."

"Why didn't you?"

"I wanted to tell you, but the appropriate moment never came up. I never knew how to work it into the conversation. Maybe you would wonder what I was telling you for, when I wasn't sure what we were, if I meant anything to you. And then there were moments when I was close to telling you, but everything was so perfect that I couldn't bear ruining it, all I wanted was to enjoy being with you. So, I kept postponing it until it suddenly was too late. I planned to tell you last night, I knew

it was the last chance as Sam would come today but then I got carried away... and I thought we would have all night together. I... I was so fucking stupid, I did everything in the wrong order."

The words flowed out of him almost without a pause even to breathe, like he was afraid I would stop him if given half the chance – but I wanted to hear this.

"And I've been afraid, afraid how you'd react. I knew there was a chance you'd run the other direction if I told you I had a kid and thought it was better you got to know me more before I mentioned it. Honestly, I had hoped you wouldn't react so negatively to me having a son, if you just knew me first."

I guessed from the disillusioned look he now gave me, that he thought I had freaked out over his son today, thinking I had proven his fears right. Judging by what I had seen, Sam was a lovely boy. He would never have prevented me from falling for Charles. How could he even think *that* was what was making me livid?

"Well you've been very fucking economical with the truth. A *son* is hardly the big issue here, is it?" I did my best to sound hard, even if his words and sincere tone of voice had a way of seeping under my skin, moving me and making me want to hug him. But he still had not given any explanation to the biggest elephant in the room, the one in shape of skinny supermodel look-alike.

He looked dumbfounded. Did I really have to explain the obvious to him?

"Sam is not a problem even if I wish you had told me. Your *wife* is. You're married, and you didn't think to say?"

Now his expression changed again, to an incredulous one. His eyebrows raised, mouth opened half-way in mute astonishment before he managed to speak.

"My wife?"

"Sam's mother, which he so kindly pointed out to me down in the lobby. The blonde who arrived this morning. Or did she conveniently slip your mind?"

He took a deep breath and raked his fingers through his hair. His eyes briefly went towards the ceiling like he was asking for help from forces above, then returned to meet mine again without blinking. Like he had nothing to hide.

"Christ, this is so much worse than I realised. I didn't think you had seen Rebecca. I...For fucks sake... I thought... Molly, didn't Bella or Matt tell you *anything* about me? I thought she would have gossiped *something*... I'm divorced, separated since even longer. It's not the first thing I mention to people, because I'm not proud of how it ended but... I don't have a wife..."

His voice trailed off, pausing to let the words sink in and they slowly did. He had not been leading me on when I thought he was single.

"Rebecca is Sam's mum, but she's my *ex* and she is here with her new guy. We're so over anyone can possibly be. We shouldn't have been together in the first place and we stayed together far too long because of Sam. She's childhood friends with Matt and Ginny so she's invited to the wedding separate from me. I'm so, so sorry, I thought you were upset over Sam. I mean, that was hard enough to get thrown in your face without warning. This..."

For the first time since we entered this room, he now stepped closer. Before, he had allowed me to have my space to myself, now entered it hesitantly and I let him without backing away.

"Fuck, you must think I'm a complete shithead for kissing you."

I felt tears begin to prick at the back of my eyes.

"Yeah, that pretty much covers it." I raised my hand to wipe away a tear escaping over the edge and making its way down my cheek, before it would ruin my makeup. His hand went up to cover mine, cupping my face, held it still there. I did not flinch, now it felt right that he touched me.

"You really hurt me."

"It was the last thing I wanted. All I ever want is to make you happy."

"Well you fucked up big time."

"I know, and I'm sorry."

We stayed quiet for a moment, he kept looking at me steadily.

"Will you please let me know what I did wrong yesterday? Why you ran away? You didn't know about Rebecca and Sam then, but something went wrong, and I've been trying to figure out what half the night and all morning."

I stared at my feet, afraid to speak, then said weakly.

"I didn't want to end up in bed when we were drunk."

I sniffled, and he stroked my cheek with the pad of his thumb, moved closer. I wanted him to.

"We've never done anything sober. You've never tried to kiss me once, not even when we were in the same bed. I thought maybe the only reason you wanted it yesterday was because you were drunk. I didn't want to be your drunken shag."

He looked shell shocked.

"Is that what you thought? That I only wanted it because I was drunk?"

"Yes?"

He inched even closer, removed his hand from my face, instead wrapped both his arms around me and pulled me to his chest.

"For the record, *I* wasn't that drunk. I was one hundred percent aware of every little thing I did. *We* did. I was only affected enough to dare to do what I've wanted to do for a long time. I've probably wanted to kiss you since the first time I saw you."

I did not say anything, just took in his words and the sensation of his strong arms around me, the smell of clean cotton and aftershave, the raspy fabric of his uniform against my cheek, the sound of his heart beating under my ear, faster than could be expected. With one hand, he began stroking my hair like he had done when I was hungover and continued talking.

"Something happened inside me the first time I saw you at the station. You looked at me and I knew I wanted to take you in my arms and hold you and never let you

go. After you had disappeared, all I could think of was that I shouldn't have let you go and how could I meet you again if you didn't call me – and then you were there, in the restaurant. I almost couldn't believe it. I think I've been in love with you since that day, I just didn't dare to hope you would want me too."

I snorted, completely gobsmacked. It was hard to believe that this gorgeous, funny and kind catch of a man, who any single woman with an intact sex-drive would like to jump when he was dressed in this uniform, could be so full of self-doubt. His only true fault being poor communication skills when it came to timing of sharing information. He had just confessed he was in love with me and doubted that I could fancy him.

"Whats' funny?"

"Why wouldn't I fancy you?"

"I'm a divorced dad with dating skills that are completely rusty and a job that regularly takes me halfway round the earth. You're this heavenly, brilliant girl, a young and single doctor. You can have anyone, and it seemed unlikely you'd be interested in someone with a baggage like I have."

"Well, I didn't know about that, did I. So, you didn't really give me a fair chance to decide."

"No, but *I* knew, and it made me doubt myself. I'm sorry I didn't let you in on it."

"I know now", I tilted my head up to finally look at him again. "I wish you had had greater faith in me. I like you just as you are, beside the part where you don't tell me things."

"And I wish you had had greater faith in *me*, or that you had said what you thought yesterday. Wish you had said you wanted to slow things down but stayed. You could *never* be just a shag. I've never been much of a one-nighter, I'm more the dating kind of guy but yesterday I lost myself in you. I think I've never wanted anyone like that, but it doesn't mean that I can't wait – for as long as you need. I'm in love with you. I need to be with you, it doesn't really matter how."

He was cupping my face again and his thumb touching softly over my lips.

"I need to be with *you*", I smiled.

He gave me the loveliest smile in return, chewing his lower lip.

"We're two sorry fuckups, aren't we?" He leaned his forehead to mine.

"Uhum. That makes us a good match."

"A perfect match. Did I say I'm sorry for messing it up?"

"You did."

All I knew was that I had to kiss him now. I twined the curls at the back of his neck between my fingers and pulled him even a little closer and we kissed. First soft, then deeper but slow, not frantic like the evening before. Neither of us wanted to make the mistake to rush things again and we had a wedding party to return to

soon, so we just kissed for very long at a slow pace. I would gladly have stayed in this unromantic room doing exactly that all day, if we had not been missed and Bella likely killed me once we got out again, so I finally interrupted.

"We need to get back."

"I know." He kissed me again.

"I have to change dress, that was what I went to do."

"The one you have is lovely, you completely floored me the first time I saw you in it in the shop and it is even better today."

His words made me extremely happy, or maybe it was the kissing that had achieved that, or both.

"You haven't seen the other one, it's even better."

"How is that even possible? I'll be a lost man."

"Only fair, when you are wearing *this*. It makes me want to jump you."

I fiddled with the pips on his terribly sexy uniform.

"I thought we were taking it slower", he smirked.

I was not so sure I needed that, now that I knew how he felt about me.

"Just saying", I smirked too and was silenced with another kiss.

"Can I just ask one thing before we leave?" He furrowed his brows, suddenly serious.

"Yes."

"This, us, can we wait out a bit to show it?"

I was filled with disappointment. I was so happy, and I did not want to hold it back.

"Only until later tonight, when Sam has gone to bed. I don't mind Rebecca because she has Henry and could not care less, but it's not the way I want to tell Sam."

My spirits raised again, of course that would not have been the right way for Sam to find out his dad was seeing someone new.

"Of course. It will be difficult to hide though, when I'm so happy. I swear Bella will know the minute she sees me."

He laughed.

"Thanks. I promise, the moment he's off to bed, I'll slow dance with you and kiss you, so they tell us to go get a room."

"No need to exaggerate things", I giggled but really felt tingling sensations at the thought of him snogging me like that in public, or even better, him snogging me like that if we actually went to a room. That it was what he was longing for already, just like me.

"Shall we?"

"I suppose we must."

"One more kiss."

We sure made that last minute count.

A/N: This chapter is dedicated to my grandma, who never got to read anything I have written but I'm quite sure she would have liked it, judging by the romantic novels I used to sneak read at their house when I was a kid. It was time for her to fall asleep yesterday and she will be missed.

A/N: Thank you for all the kind words regarding my grandma and as always thanks for the much-appreciated reviews.

This is the chapter that never wants to end, I have been writing and writing and just had to cut it off once more, but next part should not take too long to finalise.

x

Chapter 30: Sunday, Dec 24, part III - All

Elvis

The mingle was under way and Elvis enjoyed himself; wedding party with free food and drink, a guest list which included many of his best friends and then Georgie. *His* Georgie. To him the most beautiful woman in the room in her cerise dress, and she was back with him. She had not only forgiven him but also accepted his proposal and now they were engaged. He wondered what he had been afraid of all these years, because all he felt now was a warm, comforting feeling of love and security. His mum had been so right this was the way to go. The need to let his gaze stray to other women completely gone. Well, he had to *look* at them, hadn't he? Anything else would have been strange, but he did not let his gaze linger longer than needed, that was in the past. Instead of admiring other women's curves, he replayed the past night with Georgie. Things had always been passionate between them, but now there was a new tenderness to it all. They had chosen each other, that was the way it was supposed to be. It was all he wanted.

Suddenly he froze, in the same instant as his eyes fell on a laughing, dark girl with frizzy hair. She looked up and noticed him too and after the expression of surprise had passed over her face, she came his direction. Fuck. He looked around to see where Georgie was, but she was occupied talking to a friend further away and then they seemed to be heading towards the ladies' room. He had some time to save the day.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed when she stopped in front of him.

"Nice to meet you too again, Elvis. I'm a guest at the wedding, as I assume you are?"

"Sorry, I just... I didn't expect to meet you here."

"Then I take it your girlfriend is here? How awkward", she giggled amused.

Elvis felt himself blushing, something that rarely happened as he never had been one to feel ashamed over many things.

"She is... and she's my fiancée now actually."

Maisie cocked an eyebrow.

"It was not the direction I would have guessed things were going in your relationship, judging by your tongue down my throat the evening we met."

"Maisie, please." Elvis chewed his bottom lip nervously. "That night I realised that I was on the wrong track. Sorry to say it, but I felt that kissing you was all wrong. It was about then I realised that she's the one I need to be with. She broke up with

me then, that night, but then we got back together and now she has accepted my proposal. Can I ask you..."

His words trailed off, bashful over what he had to ask of her.

"...not to spoil things by telling her you snogged me?"

"If my memory doesn't fail me, it was *you* pursued me and snogged me for Queen and country."

"Please, I'm sorry if I made you disappointed when I finished it, but..."

She hid her face in her palms and first he thought that she was about to burst into tears and he cursed himself because that would certainly cause a scene drawing attention to them, then he realised that she was shaking in fits of laughter.

"Get over yourself Elvis, I dare say I could handle the disappointment. I'm a big girl and you're not the only bloke in the world. Not the most fantastic one either, at least not to me."

"You're not pissed with me?"

"Nope."

"So, will you?"

"Keep your little dirty secret? Don't worry. I'm not the kind who likes to ruin other's relationships, especially girls who haven't deserved it. I just hope you've learned your lesson. A snog is not worth ruining something more meaningful. If you've

been given a second chance, don't waste it. You can see that advice as my Christmas gift to you", she smirked.

"Thanks, Maisie. It's a much-appreciated gift."

She just chuckled and mingled on, amused that he had been so uncomfortable about the whole situation, which he certainly deserved, and she hoped he would stay faithful to his girl.

Elvis gaze followed Maisie disappear in the crowd, relieved the awkward moment was over without developing into a disaster and he nearly jumped out of his skin when a deep male voice spoke right next to him.

"Hi Elvis."

What was it about people surprising him today? Then he recognised his old friend and colleague from Special Forces, they had been to Sandhurst together and crossed paths many times after that, but now it had been years since the last time, as Bones had left the army behind.

"Bones! Good to see you, mate. Didn't know you were coming, what a great surprise. You weren't at the stag?"

"Couldn't make it, but I wouldn't miss Matt's wedding. It was beautiful, nearly shed a tear."

Elvis smirked.

"Somehow, I find that hard to believe." He had known Bones as trustworthy, extremely brave, funny and sarcastic but never one to show much emotion.

Bones shrugged his shoulders.

"Believe what you will. I've changed. Mum just passed away after a long period of illness, fucking cancer. Taking care of her, seeing her like that, just getting weaker and losing her life far too early well, it changed some things."

"I'm so sorry for your loss, I didn't know. And I *do* get it. My mum is still alive and well, but she also made me see things from another perspective recently. She, and my girl, have changed me. I'm settling down, can you believe that?"

"You lucky bastard", Bones poked him in the ribs. "I'm not so fortunate yet. The one I've liked most so far slipped between my fingers. She's lovely though, so I find it a bit hard to let go. Especially as she's here today too. I didn't know she would be."

"What happened?"

"We dated a few times, nothing serious but I wanted it to be. Then she got back with this guy she had been with before. Christ, it's just over a week since I saw her last and when I saw her today she had a shiny big rock on her finger, got engaged to the bloke. Took me by surprise I must say."

Elvis suddenly got an uneasy feeling but tried not to show it.

"So... where was this other guy while you were seeing her?"

"I didn't know of him when we dated obviously, but when I talked to her this morning she told me about him. Said they had been going out for years but had been on a break because he had commitment issues. Then, after our last date, he had realised he was about to fuck things up and came to see her and proposed to her like some fucking knight in shining armour. And she fell for it! Can you believe that? Who falls for these things nowadays? Such a fucking cliché."

"Maybe he really loves her. Maybe she really loves him."

"Yeah, that's exactly what she says but I have the feeling she might be giving him a chance he doesn't deserve. I hope he takes care of her and loves her the way *she* deserves, because she's just great."

Elvis Italian temper had nearly reached cooking point due to jealousy. Even if part of him absolutely did not want to know, he had to find out how far things had gone between Georgie, who he assumed it must be, and Bones, who was well-known for being a good lover.

"How far did things go between the two of you? I mean since you obviously seem to care about her", he said casually. Or at least he hoped casually, not panicked.

"Because I cared about her it never went very far, I didn't want to push things from my end and she pulled the break from hers. In hindsight I guess it was because she wasn't over that guy. Some snogging, nothing more. Very nice snogging though."

Elvis sighed with relief. Even if they had been on a break, caused by his own actions, he was not sure how he would have been able to handle if another man had had Georgie. He realised how close it had been and how much just the possibility of it

happening hurt him. He knew he would not risk it ever happening again. He also knew he would not mention this to Georgie. He felt a bit like Scrooge, being visited by Christmas ghosts from past and present in the shape of Maisie and Bones, to make him fully appreciate the future lying ahead and not waste the chance given him. He realised he had to tell Bones though, because he would likely see him and Georgie together sometime during the evening.

"Listen, there's something I need to ask you. Was the girl called Georgie?"

Bones furrowed his brows.

"Yeah, how did you know?" Then his eyes widened as the coin dropped. "It's you! You're the other guy Elvis, aren't you?" He began laughing heartily.

"That would be me." Elvis was not as amused.

"Well, then I have to say congratulations to the engagement. You are one lucky guy."

"No hard feelings then?"

"No, and I can ask the same? I've been going out with your girl and just told you I kissed her."

"No need to repeat it, mate – but she wasn't mine then. I'm jealous like hell but we were on a break and that was my fault. I'm bloody happy you didn't sleep with her cos then I might have had to take a punch at you just for the sake of it, but now... I'm just sorry you liked her, and it didn't work out."

"It's a pity there isn't two of her."

Elvis suddenly smiled, coming to think of something.

"That would have been great, wouldn't it? Look, I'll go now before Georgie returns from the ladies'. I have a feeling she wouldn't be very comfortable seeing us together. I won't tell her I know. All right?"

"Me neither, I promise. Take care Elvis, both of yourself and her."

"I will."

When Elvis found Georgie a few minutes later, he took her in his arms and pulled her to his chest.

"I love you so much, don't ever forget that. I'm so, so happy you had it in your heart to forgive me and take me back and I'll always be there for you", he whispered.

"I love you too. All is forgiven." Georgie was a bit surprised at this public display of affection, but Elvis was clearly demonstrating new sides lately. They kissed deep and tenderly, Elvis with a slight addition of jealous passion that she had kissed Bones but knew he just had to swallow, forgive and forget because he was fortunate that she had chosen to take him back.

"By the way, didn't you say Sammie would be here?"

"She's coming. Landed at Brize this morning so she couldn't make it to the ceremony, but she should be here any minute now. There's actually someone here I'd like her to meet."

Elvis had the feelings their minds were thinking alike, but as he did not want to share his meeting just now with Georgie, he said nothing.

Monk

Monk was thinking that this was quite possibly one of the happiest days in his life. He was here with Rosie as his plus one. She was still his best friend, but also his absolutely gorgeous girlfriend who he adored more than anything. Her baby bump was still almost invisible, but *they* knew it was there, a little something growing, that was both him and her. This was the first time he introduced her to his squaddies in 2 section and he had been a bit nervous, knowing they would likely do their best to take the piss out of him. On the other hand, Rosie had known him much longer than them and was the one who truly knew him inside and out, so there was not much they would be able to say that could surprise her.

Of 2 section, Rab was the only one who had heard anything about Rosie before and even he did not know the latest development, so when Monk appeared with a blonde beauty by his side, protectively holding his hand on the small of her back, there had been many raised eyebrows, dropped jaws and whistles.

"Please behave guys", Monk grinned.

"Have you managed to get yourself a girlfriend Monk? Not a monk anymore, eh?"
Fingers joked.

Even if they had not met before, Rosie had heard many stories of them over the years and was amused to see that they lived up to the expectations.

"I'm not sure that I've ever been a monk but, yes, I have a girlfriend. And not an inflatable one like you Fingers."

"Oi! That's unfair. We can tell you a thing or two about your boyfriend", Fingers grinned at Rosie.

"Nothing that I don't already know", she smirked. "I probably know more about you guys than you do about me. I'm guessing you might be Fingers?"

"But you've just started dating right? Monk has never..." Fingers interrupted himself, even he realised he might be putting his foot in it.

"He has never mentioned me?" Rosie just smiled at Monk, took his hand. "Well, we've been kind of secretive because we've not really been an official couple."

"But now you're not anymore? A secret couple, I mean." Brains asked.

"It would be impractical and quite difficult", Monk said looking mischievous, "as we're about to have a baby."

Everyone's eyes were instantly drawn to Rosie's belly.

"What the f... Did you just say you're about to be a dad?"

"Yup", Monk proudly beamed and next second him and Rosie were pulled into a big group hug with the loudly cheering 2 section, receiving a mix of congratulations

and questions how Monk had pulled that off when he had the smallest dick in the section, which made Monk blush and Rosie laugh.

"Take it easy, you'll scare the little bugger, so it never wants to come out."

"It would never want to come out if it knew you're the dad anyway."

"Lucky Rosie is the mum then."

"You know this kid will have seven godfathers, right?"

"I think we'll have to make that eight if the CO wants to join in."

Despite the cheeky banter, Monk was nothing but happy. Finally, his two families had met and finally everyone knew that Rosie was his girl.

Rab

Rab was standing with the rest of 2 section. They had been quite stationary in a corner as they had noticed that the staff came topping their champagne glasses anyway, so they had not mingled much with any other guests yet, the only exception Monk's lovely girlfriend who they all had been introduced to. Rab was still digesting that Monk was becoming a father when he until recently never had hinted at being in a relationship, but sometimes things happen quickly when they are meant to be.

There were a few other Rab knew from the army here at the party, several officers, but otherwise he did not expect that he would know any of the guests. He thought that if the bride and groom waited much longer before they returned, they would find most of 2 section plastered, him excepted as he did not drink alcohol.

"Enjoying yourself Khalil?"

Matt appeared by his side, now in a smart black suit instead of the no. 1 dress uniform.

"Yes, Sir. Beautiful wedding, congratulations."

"Please, don't call me Sir today. I'd like to be just 'Matt' on my wedding day."

"Okay, Matt. Where's Mrs. Geddings?"

"I was just wondering where my lovely wife went."

"Already lost your wife, Sir? With all due respect I think that's a bit sloppy, I would have expected more from an officer in Her Majesty's Army", Fingers joked.

"I'm here and I don't intend for him to ever loose me."

Bella showed up behind Fingers and everyone gawped because she looked spectacular in the more Christmas themed, deep red dress she now had changed to. She beamed at their reactions, exactly what she had hoped to achieve.

"Love, there's someone here I'd like you to meet because she'll be joining you in Pirbright in January."

Bella stepped aside to let another girl through.

"Maisie has been working at my school, but she has always wanted to join the Army and now she's just been accepted to Phase I training. Not that I understand that any sensible girl ever would want to spend her days with a group of massive cockwombles like yourselves, but isn't it fantastic?"

The girl reached out her hand to Matt.

"I'm Maisie Richards. Congratulations on your wedding. I'm so happy to be celebrating this with you both. I've loved working with Bella."

"Thank you. I hope you'll enjoy your training in Pirbright too then. Welcome to the Army."

Rab just stared. The woman he had dreamed of for weeks. The girl he had thought he should try to find again now when he was single. She was standing here right in front of him and she was joining the Army. Not only that, she would be in the same place as him for at least 14 weeks. She was dressed in a gold shimmering bodycon dress, showing her amazing figure and leaving much of her beautifully bronzed skin bare. Rab had never brought a woman to bed, dutifully awaited his now cancelled marriage, but he wished desperately he could scoop Maisie up and do that right now. He would be one hundred percent satisfied with only a kiss too, though. Unfortunately, the mumble around him indicated that more or less the entire 2 section were thinking along the same lines. Matt silenced them with a stern stare.

"Behave lads, remember Maisie is to be a recruit in a few weeks and a future colleague of yours."

"Don't worry, I can handle myself". Maisie gave them a feisty grin and then her eyes fell on Rab.

He had not been sure if she would recognise him, but the way she smiled first faded, then returned even wider, showed that she did.

"Rab!"

"Hi, Maisie."

"You two know each other?" Bella asked curious, the bloodhound she was when it came to these things, immediately smelled potential romance in the air.

"We've just met briefly", Rab explained.

"Like fifteen minutes?", Bella cocked an eyebrow at Maisie.

"Something like that."

"Now I can see why those fifteen minutes were memorable, Maisie. I hope you enjoy your next fifteen minutes then. Sorry, I've got to go talking to the staff, so we can take our seats soon. If I'm not mistaken, you two have each other to the table. Matt have you seen Molly?"

"No, not since we went to change."

"Have you seen Charles then?"

"Erm, no?" Matt had no idea what his wife was after.

Bella walked away with a very satisfied smile, convinced that everything soon would be well in the world. She talked to the staff and also took the opportunity to swiftly switch two place cards passing by the tables, so private Khalil ended up in another place than first intended.

"So, are you really joining the Army?" Rab asked Maisie.

"What, you don't think I'd make it?"

"I didn't say that, no need to be defensive."

"Sorry, I'm just used to people questioning me. Not Bella, but so many others."

"I think it's great you're joining. For what it's worth my parents are questioning me being in the army constantly."

"I heard about your engagement, sorry."

He looked at her with astonishment.

"How did you even know I was engaged?"

"I went to see your uncle, in the restaurant. Then he told me you and your fiancée had broken off your arranged engagement and everyone was very upset."

"Why did you go to see my uncle?" He could not make the puzzle fit.

Maisie bit her lip and for the first time she looked a bit less cocky.

"Because I wanted to find you. I got your number, it's in my mobile. But don't make too much of it, I just liked you and thought it would be nice to see you again."

"But you didn't call?" He could hardly believe this, but a certainty spread inside him that she had not just thought he was 'nice' and he could not help smiling wide.

"Nah, I got it the same day as I got my acceptance letter and then I thought I would be gone for 14 weeks and it wasn't the best time..."

"But now we'll both be in Pirbright."

"Looks like it."

"And you fancy me?" he dared to tease her.

"I never said that!" she elbowed him in the side.

They beamed happily at each other and then it was time to raise another toast for the wedding couple and get seated for dinner. Even more than before, Rab felt convinced this would be an evening to remember.

Bella

Bella was happiness and contentment personified in this moment. Everything worked out just as she had hoped so far. Or at least she thought so, she could not be sure about Molly and Charles.

Something had been very wrong this morning, the dark cloud that seemed to hover over Molly's head, the distance between the two before the wedding ceremony, but now both had been missing for some time and she hoped that was a good sign. Now she just wanted them to return so they could get seated for the dinner. Oh, there Charles was, back by Matt's side but without any Molly in sight. Bella watched him searchingly from a distance. His face now looked relaxed, happy, *very* happy, eyes that even from a distance seemed to be dancing, his entire body language was different from this morning. And was not his hair a bit dishevelled? This was promising.

"You look amazing in that dress."

Molly had appeared by her side, also changed to her evening dress. Both girls' dresses were made of deep red silk, Bella's ankle length evening gown style, Molly's knee length more sixties style with narrow waist and wide skirt, both very feminine and flattering for the figure.

"So do you. It also becomes you to be freshly snogged", Bella said smugly.

"What?"

"Don't try to tell me that you and Major James have not been away somewhere making up after whatever fight you had had and then had a peace snog? You don't even have to answer. I know by the pink tinge on your cheeks and your unusually pouty lips that I'm right, and if that wasn't enough the major is standing over there looking giddy like a teenage boy who just got his first kiss ever."

Molly realised there was no point keeping appearances up for her sister, like she had suspected. She looked over at the happy Charles, who had not seen her yet, and felt very much in love.

"Okay, you're right", she beamed. "But don't tell anyone. He wants to keep a low profile when his son is here."

"Ah, didn't think about that, but I knew it! I've been waiting for this all of December – finally!"

"Bella, why didn't you tell me he was divorced? We had the worst misunderstanding this morning, it nearly ruined everything."

"Why I didn't tell you? Because your grown-ups Molly, you're expected to be talking to each other if things matter and when the timing is right for you, not for me to come running with gossip. If I had told you about divorce and child before you knew him, I know you would have taken it as your cue to make an exit, like you always do. I wanted you to get hooked on him, because I genuinely think he's a good guy and I think you would be perfect together. But I know it doesn't work to push you too much, I've failed before – and you know how I hate failing. This time I just set you up and hoped nature would work its magic and it seems maybe it did."

"Erm, maybe yes."

"Now, let's go over to them, it's time to make a toast and sit down for dinner."

"Bella", Molly put her hand softly on Bella's arm. "Thank you. Thank you for setting us up but not pushing me so I ran."

"Anything for you, Molls. It's always been you and me and I just wish you the same happiness that I have."

"Now you're making me all tearful again, but you know I'll never have quite what you have. I think no one could ever fall head over heels for me like Matt did for you."

"Don't say that." Bella nodded in direction of Charles who now had laid eyes on Molly, taking her in in her red dress matched with equally red lipstick, and it was clear from the admiring way he looked at her that he thought she was dazzling. Molly's heart jolted. It was only ten minutes since they had parted outside the baggage room, but she had already started wondering if she had imagined it all. His eyes and smile told her she had not. When Bella and Molly joined the group, he discretely moved to her side.

"You were right", he said with low voice and briefly let his palm rest on the small of her back.

"About what?"

"This dress is even better. I love you in red. I mean... I don't *love you* love you but I..." he stuttered embarrassed, thinking he had been a bit previous there.

"I get what you mean, thank you."

She wanted to melt into him and he wanted to kiss her and not being able to do that now, out in the open, was both frustrating and exciting. Then they split to take their places, next to the wedding couple at the table of honour, him on Bella's side

and Molly on Matt's, both thinking that was probably for the better because if they had been sitting next to one another, it would have been difficult to keep their hands off each other. Both were longing desperately for the moment they would be alone again.

Chapter 31: Sunday, Dec 24, part IV – Brains

Brains

Brains walked along the tables in search of his place card and when he found his seat sat down heavily. He felt a bit melancholic. He had stumbled over the lovely Ginny again, but she was out of reach, out of his league. His CO's little sister, he was really a miserable sod falling for her all of girls in the world. Matt was a great commander, skilled and fair and occasionally joining in in the banter with his men, in many ways similar to his equally appreciated predecessor major James. Yet Brains would never dare to ask his sister out, that would be overstepping so many marks. Not only because Matt was his superior but because sisters always are a sensitive matter when it comes to dating. He would have hesitated to date a sister to any of his fellow squaddies and this was worst of all. Impossible to imagine.

He was wistful that some of his friends suddenly seemed to move on romantically, while he found himself in a blind alley. Matt, of course, getting married to the love of his life today. Monk had conjured up an old but unknown love and was going to be a father. Rab obviously had something going on with that beautiful new recruit, Maisie. All in all, Brains suddenly felt lonely despite all the happy people around him, or maybe because of them. Wondering when it would be his turn to find someone special.

"Hi, it seems I will be your dinner partner for the evening."

He looked up and had to keep himself from gawping. It was she, Ginny.

"Do I have something on my face?", she asked a bit insecure and he realised he had failed not to stare.

"No, no. I was just a bit lost in my thoughts. I'm sorry. I hope you're not too disappointed I'm the one who will be your company for the evening?"

"No, why would I be?" she smiled genuinely, heating up his insides.

He got to his feet and pulled out her chair, ever the gentleman. He was not sure if this was a stroke of luck, or something very bad as he was at risk of falling even deeper for his CO's sister spending an entire evening in her company.

"I'm Ginny, Matt's sister."

"I'm Harry, one of his men... squaddies... he's my CO."

Oh, why was he rambling on. He did not disclose that they had met before, felt embarrassed to admit he had been dressed up as Santa.

"So, you're also in Pirbright then?"

"Yes, spending my days wearing camouflage."

Why did he say that? It was not like girls were known to go mad over those uniforms, in contrast to the no. 1 Matt and major James were sporting today. Brains has opted for a dark suit as the dress code of the wedding had allowed either. He had felt quite handsome earlier today, scrutinizing himself in the mirror. Now he just felt self-conscious, though a bit less so when she kept smiling warmly at him.

"And you, what do you?"

"No camouflage gear for me though I could certainly need it sometimes. I'm a teacher at the same school as Bella. We're friends from uni and that's how she met Matt, through me. One of my proudest achievements, bringing those two together. Not that they needed much help once they had met."

"They're quite different, aren't they? I mean, both their ways and where they come from."

"Opposites attract, I suppose. They're perfect for each other. And in our family, we never cared much where anyone comes from. It's more important who you are. Don't you think?"

He nodded, glad she thought so because he certainly came from more humble background than the Geddings siblings and even if nothing could happen between them anyway, it was just a nice thought that she might like him for who he was. Not fancy him but like him. One has to take joy in the little things.

Throughout the meal they continued talking about everything and nothing. He thought her mesmerizing and was amazed that she seemed to think his jokes funny. Hers definitely was, he did not know when he last laughed this much. Everything was so easy with her, just perfect, if she only had not been the CO's sister.

Speeches were delivered during the dinner, by parents, bestman, bridesmaid, friends - hilarious, touching and sometimes slightly embarrassing for the couple, like when 2 section made a joint effort and delivered a speech which should have been partially X-rated. Then it was Ginny's turn and she held a speech filled with

love for the couple, ending with that she hoped to one day find what they had. When she said that, her eyes met Brains and stayed there, locked in his for moments that felt like eternity to him, before she returned her gaze to Matt and Bella and rounded off. He felt flushed, but unsure why. Surely, the way she had looked at him had meant nothing to her, but he felt a grain of hope.

She returned to her seat beside him.

"Great speech", he complimented her.

"You think so? It took me ages to write and I'm supposed to be an English teacher."

"You were awesome."

"Thanks", she looked down, fidgeted with her napkin and he almost thought she blushed.

Suddenly he felt a pair of hands landing heavily on his shoulders.

"Taking good care of my sister I hope, Brains?"

He felt himself straighten almost to attention and move slightly away from Ginny at the sound of the familiar voice.

"Yes, Sir. Of course, Sir."

"Relax, Brains. I thought I had told you it's just Matt today. Save 'Sir' until after the holidays please."

"Okay, S... Matt." He still did not relax completely, maybe Matt thought he was being too friendly with Ginny.

Matt's focus now shifted to her.

"Just came over to say thanks for your lovely speech. So, are you enjoying yourself with your Santa?"

"Matt!"

She looked horrified, but Matt just grinned, the teasing big brother.

"What? You didn't tell him you know he's your secret Santa hero? Or that you asked to sit beside him when I said he'd be at the wedding? Oh, don't worry, then I won't tell him."

Matt chuckled, obviously thinking he was hilarity personified, ignoring the tomato red colour Ginny's cheeks turned to but was wise enough to leave before she exploded at him.

"Enjoy yourselves", he laughed and returned to Bella's side.

Brains looked at Ginny, smiling but questioning.

"You *knew* we had met? That I was the Santa in the galleria?"

"Yes", she admitted. "When I showed Matt the newspaper with the interview and photo of you and James, he was like 'Harry Wiggerty, that's one of my men!' And then he said you would be at the wedding and I was curious to meet you."

Ginny did not reveal that Matt also had said that Private Wiggerty was a great guy and as far as he knew single, further enhancing Ginny's curiosity of the guy behind the fake beard who had been so skilled at Heimlich's maneuver. Neither did she say that she thought she would have recognised him anyway because his blue, dancing eyes had stuck with her since their first meeting.

"So, do you think Matt would be okay with me asking you for a dance later?" Brains was not sure how he dared to ask, but he did.

"I definitely think he would, and if not, I don't care because I'd love to dance with you."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

She smiled her lovely smile at him again, and Brains was a lost man.

A/N: Maybe it's only me who think chapters can be too long because I tend to read during coffee breaks at work or when the kids are busy playing a few precious moments.

Before you start reading I must apologise for one of the plots in this chapter because it is worthy of a daytime soap like 'Days of our lives'. I'm sure you will understand what I'm eluding to once you read it, but I could not come up with a better solution for this person to get a HEA too. Anyway, I promised fluffiness and cheesy when I embarked on this story and that is what it is – lol. As always - hope you enjoy!

x

Chapter 32: Sunday, Dec 24, part V – All

Matt

Matt please registered that the dinner and speeches went just like Bella had planned and hoped. This wedding had in most ways been Bella's project with a capital P, but Matt had enjoyed almost every step of the way because he knew all of it made her happy. She had told him how she and Molly had used to lie in their shared bed as kids, fantasising of a different life than the one they had in the council estate in Newham, dreaming they were princesses who would be rescued by some prince. Today she got to be that princess, but the best thing was that Matt knew that she thought she was *every* day with him. This wedding was the icing on the

cake but not what really mattered, except for them saying yes to each other. The fact that he knew that when it came down to it, she would just as happily had said yes to him just the two of them in the city hall, made him want to give her everything – and he loved to share it with all their friends and family.

Many of the guys thought that Bella was bossing him around, but he knew that underneath the bossy surface she cared deeply about what he thought and wanted every decision they took to be one that would also make him happier. He had seen the surprised look on Charles' and Molly's faces moments ago, when the wedding cake was wheeled out on a trolley. Blueberry and white chocolate.

"But the passion fruit mousse was your favourite when we tried them out?" Molly said to Bella.

"Yes, but this was Matt's", Bella answered and kissed him.

They cut the cake, had a taste and she winked at him.

"Good choice, hubby."

"I know, I have impeccable taste in both cakes and wives."

"It seems that you do."

God, he loved when his wife smiled at him. Then the band started playing and he took her by the hand to initiate the dancing with the wedding waltz.

"I want to dance with you for the rest of my life", he whispered in her ear.

"And I with you", Bella whispered back, and he could not help but already long for when he in a couple of hours would be allowed to bring her up to the bridal suite to be alone with her and relieve her of that amazing red dress.

Bones

The cake had been cut, the band started playing and Matt and Bella were on the floor in their first dance. Bones was leaning to the wall, watching them with a smile. He would not mind dancing, but not just yet. Suddenly he noticed Georgie beside him, but she did not seem to take notice of him. She was wearing a different dress now than she had in the church and he took the chance to watch her appreciatively for a few moments before he spoke to her.

"So, you changed dress too?"

"Sorry?"

"The bride and bridesmaid changed, and you apparently. I like this even better than your first."

"I haven't changed dress, I arrived late so it wouldn't really be motivated. I'm sorry, do I know you?" Her brown beautiful eyes quizzically met his.

"Eh, if you haven't suffered memory loss since this morning?"

She gave him blank stare, then she burst into laughter.

"Oh, I can't believe I'm doing this again, that I always forget... You think I'm Georgie."

It was not a question, but he found it so curious that he answered anyway.

"Yes. You're telling me you're not? That's one crappy..."

"I'm not", she interrupted.

"You're not? For real? Then who the hell are you, her identical twin?" He said it sarcastically, thinking Georgie was really taking this joke a bit too far now.

"Good guess. Yeah, I'm Sammie, Georgie's twin sister."

He looked at her bewildered, but she did not seem to be joking and when he looked closer he noticed there were slight differences. For one, her skin tone was more tanned, like she recently had been to a warmer climate, she wore less makeup than Georgie usually did and close up their features were not exactly the same.

"I've just returned from Kenya this morning, so I came late, joined in time for the dinner. We haven't met before. You are?"

"Bones. Alexander."

"And you know Georgie?"

"Well, we're friends one could say", he smirked. "What have you done in Kenya?"

He recalled now that Georgie had spoken of a sister who was in Africa, but she had never mentioned it was a twin.

"I'm a medic in the Army and I've been away working on an outreach project for a couple of months. I've barely even had the chance to talk to Georgie since I got back today."

"So, you're not one of those twin couples who are as attached to one another like you were in fact Siamese twins?"

"No", she laughed softly. "We're quite independent. I guess we have the same background and values and all that, but we're very different in what we want out of life. Georgie is most pleased staying here at home, working at the hospital, starting a life with Elvis... I needed to get away, I guess I'm the more adventurous of the two of us and the Army suits me just perfect, even if we both in a way are in healthcare and like to help people."

"No fiancée?"

She laughed at his direct question and shook her head.

"Just asking so I don't piss anyone off if I ask you to dance with me now."

"No, you wouldn't be pissing anyone off."

"Then – do you want to?"

"I'd like that very much."

Together they joined the other couples on the dancefloor, his one hand around the waist of this girl who in so many ways was similar to Georgie, yet someone completely different and he knew that he would really like to get to know her.

Charles

Charles tapped the mike to check that it was on, having joined the band on the small stage.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm interrupt the dancing for a short while now because we have a special treat arranged for you today. I'm the bestman, as you know. Charles if you have forgotten my name since my very memorable speech earlier. By request from the wedding couple - yes indeed so don't blame me for this interruption - I'm going to perform a song for them and I can tell you I will be singing with such majesty that you will practically beg me not to stop", he grinned.

Everyone cheered, especially 2 section who knew from Charles' previous performance on tour that he was only partly joking, both about being a great singer and not wanting to stop once he got started. This major had many unexpected traits up his sleeve.

"I won't be doing this alone though. Please welcome to the stage... Miss Molly Dawes!"

Molly joined him, looking slightly terrified and embarrassed but also very pretty in her red dress and Charles flashed her an encouraging smile. He felt so ridiculously happy and in love that his only problem was how he should avoid exposing it to everyone, or especially Sam. He frankly did not give a damn about anybody else.

"I know Bella has decided most things for this wedding, but after manipulating us to sing a duet, she was kind enough to let us choose the love song ourselves. I think those of you who know me, might have an idea what song it is." He smiled, looking boyish and very little like the stern major. A section roared from a corner, certain what was coming already before the band played the intro.

Charles swung his microphone around before grabbing it and then started singing, winking to Molly.

Don't go breaking my heart.

I couldn't if I tried.

It had been magical when they sang in the orangery, but now it was even more so. Now when they had confessed what they meant to each other and cleared all misunderstandings the words meant something different. Charles would have liked to take her in his arms singing, but as he could not they let their eyes have a secret conversation in addition to the words they were singing. Never had they sung the duet this perfectly together before, even Molly admitted to herself that she was singing more than decent enough. Neither of them could stop smiling and they were almost unable to break eye contact, even if they felt that every now and then they had to glance at the couple they were performing the song for. Matt was smiling big and Bella jumping up and down with excitement, not so much over the song as over Charles and Molly, but no one else needed to know that. Everybody joined in the last chorus and when the song trailed off the applause and cheering was deafening. Charles hugged Molly and whispered in her ear;

"I'm desperate to kiss you right now."

"Ditto."

They still had to wait out and the suspense was almost unbearable.

A/N: Yeah, I KNOW! An identical twin – how lame is that? But what to do when there are so few girls and so many men in this series? It calls for some desperate measures. Come to think of it, if TG had introduced more female characters on screen, the existing ones would not need to sleep around. Not that I actually mind when female characters do in general, but I prefer when it is associated with a believable plot and some chemistry.

I read that Michelle Keegan announced she is returning for another season. Not sure how I feel about it but hope for the series to redeem itself and that I will go back to liking Georgie like I did in S2.

A/N: As promised, the last part for today and finally Christmas Eve comes to an end.

Chapter 33: Sunday, Dec 24, part VI - All

Sam

The day had started out quite dreary with the long drive here from Bath. Then it had been fun hanging with dad and uncle Matt for a while when they were getting ready. Sam thought them very handsome in their uniforms, thinking he wanted to join the Army too one day. Then he had to endure sitting still in church and Sam thought this could possibly turn into the most boring Christmas ever. He liked uncle Matt, not that he was his real uncle, he was in fact Sam's god father, but that did not mean he liked sitting on a hard wooden bench, hearing the vicar talk and talk and talk.

He had feared he would be the only child, so this grown-up party would be very long, but then he spotted Matt's nephews, James and Claire, and Bella's youngest siblings, Bill, Holly and Kevin, and his spirits raised. Already during the mingle they had found each other among all the dull adults and started feasting on soda and canapés. The fun had continued at the table dedicated especially for the kids. Bella had come and told them they did not have to remain seated for the entire dinner, they could have an early desert in the kitchen and then go and play as they liked.

As an only child, Sam was a bit shy and usually well-behaved, but his new friends sure knew how to amuse themselves without inhibitions. After loads of ice cream, they had made the big hotel their own; raced down empty corridors, had a pillow fight in the Dawses room, plundered the huge candy bowl in the lobby and laughed until their stomachs hurt. The only time Sam felt sad was when he thought he wished it always was like this, that he had siblings. Now the six of them had topped their heavy sugar intake with large portions of the delicious wedding cake and watched his dad sing with the nice lady from this morning, Molly. Sam was starting to feel very tired after this long day of fun.

He had told his mum he wanted to go to sleep and she had promised she would come and put him to bed after the tune the band was playing right now, because it was one of her favourites. Sam did not mind waiting but longed for some peace and quiet, so he left the ball room for the nearly empty lobby. There he saw Molly, sitting by herself in the same armchair she had been sitting in this morning and he sat down beside her again. He liked her. She had been kind and funny when they spoke this morning and he liked the way she looked at his dad, like she *really* liked him.

"Are you tired too?" he asked.

"Nah, just resting my feet for a bit. These high-heels are killing me. You should be grateful you're not a girl, men wear more sensible shoes."

Sam was grateful he was not a girl for many reasons, one of them was that he had a huge crush on Teresa in his class. High-heels just added to that list.

"Dad always complains he gets blisters when he has new boots, so men's shoes can hurt too."

"He's just whining, that's nothing compared to stilettos. He complains when he's skating too."

"Have you been skating with dad?"

Molly bit her lip, thinking she might have said something she should not have but she did not want to lie to Sam.

"Yes."

He did not seem to mind, though.

"Can I come next time? Please?"

"Of course, that would be great fun. Then I'd have two teachers, if you can skate already? I need that, I'm a terrible skater", she confessed.

"I can skate", Sam proudly said.

"Did you have fun today? Did you get any cake?"

"I've been with all the other kids, your brothers and sister and some others, so it's been fun, and cake was good, but I'm tired now. Mum will take me to bed soon. Are you having fun?"

"I'm having a blast, thanks for asking."

He was so polite, she thought. A bit precocious and a perfect little gentleman. His smile and twinkling eyes floored her just like his dad's.

"Are you and dad in love?" he asked out of the blue.

Molly was taken completely aback by the question. She hesitated before she answered because she was not sure what was the right thing to say to him.

"I like him", she answered cautiously, not wanting to put her foot in it when Charles had made it clear that he wanted to wait out and that seemed completely reasonable. They had become a couple this very day, or at least she thought they were a couple now. It was obviously too early to let his son know anyway.

"Good."

"Good?"

Sam shrugged his shoulders.

"I've been a bit worried about dad. He seems a bit lonely and not so happy. Mum has Harry now and I'm not sure she likes dad anymore. If he's with you I think he'll be happy again. He looks happy when he looks at you."

"Does he?" Molly smiled widely.

"And you look happy when you look at him. You look like I feel when I see Teresa in my class. That's why I thought maybe you were in love."

"Because you're in love with Teresa?"

"Uhum."

"You're a very clever boy Sam, and very nice. I'd be surprised if Teresa isn't in love with you too."

"I don't know about that. Promise you won't tell anyone. Mum and dad don't know, and not Teresa."

"I think you should tell her next time you see her. I've learned today that it's very stupid not to tell each other things, then one will just assume the worst."

Molly ruffled his hair. She found Sam absolutely adorable, even more so now that she knew he was Charles' boy and she knew she would never mind he was part of Charles' life. She hoped Sam would not mind if she was too, and this was a good start to a friendship.

Charles had been standing talking to Matt for a while. He had seen Molly sneak away and now went searching for her but stopped in his tracks when he from a distance saw her sitting talking to Sam. They were both absorbed in their conversation, their facial expressions shifting between serious and laughing. It looked like the two persons most important to him enjoyed each other's company and it warmed his heart. Finally, he walked over to them and both looked up with an expression of being busted. He was really curious of what they had been talking about.

"What are you two up to?"

"Nothing!" they said simultaneously, completely convincing him they were up to some mutual mischief.

He shook his head, tongue in cheek.

"You're doing a shitty job convincing me of that, but okay, if you want to be all secretive."

The two grinned at each other like they were a team and had 1-0 on him, and he quite liked it.

"Are you off to bed, scamp?"

"Yes, mum will take me soon."

"I'll do it, I haven't seen enough of you today and tomorrow you will go with mum."

Sam was to celebrate the remainder of Christmas Day with Rebecca's family and Charles resented the thought of not being with him when he for once was home and not on tour during Christmas. Rebecca had insisted and did not want to fight over Christmas, it would only make Sam sad.

"You can get an early Christmas gift from me, if you don't tell mum."

Sam beamed, happy to get a moment with dad. Charles turned to Molly.

"I'll be down again in half an hour or so, when Sam's sleeping. Will you be here still then?"

She nodded, and her eyes told him that she was longing for that as much as him.

"Of course, I'm not allowed to leave before the bridal couple does."

And she would never want to leave before he had returned and danced with her as he had promised earlier. Charles eyes told her that was exactly what he intended to do.

"Will you dance then?" Sam asked, as if he could read their thoughts.

"Maybe we will", Charles smiled elusively. "Come on now, we'll get you to bed."

He placed his hand on Sam's shoulder as they began walking up the stairs.

"Good night Molly", Sam called to her and she waved to him. Then the boy turned to his dad and said in low voice so only Charles heard;

"I think you should dance with Molly dad. She's really pretty and nice. And you should tell her you like her, because I can see that you do."

"Is that so?"

"I've learned today that it's very stupid not to tell each other things, then one will just assume the worst."

Charles was amazed at the perceptiveness and wisdom of his son, clearly exceeding his own by far and promised him he would do just that.

Artan

Artan had been out for a smoke and swore to himself because it was fucking cold, he nearly could not hold the cigarette between his fingers for as long as it took to smoke it. This Christmas was disaster. His landlord had threatened to lob him out of his flat if he did not come up with money for the late rent as soon as the holidays were over. He was unemployed, again, and not up for working either. Easy, somewhat dodgy transactions was more his style of making money than hard work, but right now there were no such opportunities and he could not allow himself to be kicked out of his flat, so he had to find another way to get some cash quick. His cousin had known they needed a dishwasher at this hotel over Christmas, because there was this big wedding and the guy who usually held the job had caught a serious flu. Working over Christmas was the last thing he wanted even if he usually spent his time getting wasted rather than celebrating it, but here he was, in the godforsaken countryside, working his ass off for some snobbish party and once he had a well-deserved break it was nearly impossible to even have a decent smoke. Fuck this miserable life.

When he, trembling from the cold, was about to return through the kitchen entrance, he realised that the door lock had jammed so he could not come in that way. Cursing, he found no other solution than to walk around the building and enter the hotel through the main entrance despite that it was absolutely forbidden for staff like him. Dishwashers were not supposed to fraternise with the guests.

He entered the lobby and stopped, gawping at the beauty of the decorations, the huge Christmas tree, the fire – and the dark-haired girl sitting in an armchair in a stunning red dress, looking like Snow White or some other fairy tale princess. She looked up at him and her eyes narrowed. First, he thought it was because he was a

lowly worker and she a guest but then he realised he knew her. It was just that she was about thousand times more beautiful than when he last saw her.

"Molly?"

Molly had not been certain it was really him, because he looked so ragged. Excessive alcohol, smoking and occasionally other drugs had made sure of that. His dull dark hair was badly cut and despite that he was well past adolescence his cheeks were covered in acne. Artan was far from a handsome or even healthy-looking man.

"Artan?" she said incredulous.

He thought she did not sound best pleased, but maybe he would be able to smooth things over. Tell her he had made a mistake when he let her friend blow him and make her forgive him. Artan had never lacked in self-confidence and who knew, maybe he would be able to end this Christmas Eve with a shagaton after all. She had never wanted it often enough when they were together which was why he had ended up with Proud Mary in that toilet cubicle, so it was all really Molly's fault, but she had always been a nice little...

Before he had the chance to say another word to her, a seriously tall, posh twat dressed to the nines in some kind of uniform came down the stairs, looked at him fleetingly and politely said;

"Good evening."

Then ignored him completely and turned to Molly and reached out his hand to her.

"Do you want that dance with me now Molly?"

"More than anything", she smiled.

Bloody hell, Molly had really climbed in the world, Artan thought grudgingly.

As Molly left in the company of the tall twat, she looked over her shoulder, gave him a lovely smile and could not resist throwing one of her favourite movie lines at him.

"Big mistake. Huge."

Then she turned away and was out of his life.

Charles

"Who was that?" Charles asked Molly. "Someone you know?"

"Someone I used to think I knew. I also used to think he was important, but now I know he's not. He's really no one to me, so let's just forget about him tonight. Maybe I'll tell you some other time."

"If that's what you want", Charles put his arm around her shoulders, pulled her closer to his side and pressed his lips to the top of her head.

"What did you and Sam talk about? He told me about as much as a clam."

"Secrets..."

"Come on, I'm bloody curious."

For a few seconds Molly just grinned, kept him guessing.

"All right. I think we got his blessing."

"What?"

"You have a smart kid. He figured out about us."

Charles laughed.

"He said you look happy when you look at me."

"I *feel* happy when I look at you"

"And he's been worried you'd be lonely now when Rebecca has a new guy. Seems he thinks I might be able to make you less so."

He stopped and turned to face her.

"I happen to think he's absolutely right."

Molly tilted her head up to him and he bent down to kiss her, for the first time in a place where they could be seen by others and unfortunately, they were interrupted almost immediately.

"Get a room!" someone shouted.

Charles broke off the kiss to see who it was and when he found that it unsurprisingly was Fingers, he gave him his sternest look, causing the private to quickly stutter an apology.

"I'm sorry Major James, didn't see it was you."

"Go find yourself a girl Fingers and stop harassing me, or I'll put you up for charges. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir. Will do, Sir."

"Piss off."

He grinned as he said the last, to show Fingers he was more amused than angry. Fingers anyway found it best to double away and Charles returned his focus to Molly.

"I bet he was shocked because he's never seen me kissing a girl before."

"Not your ex?"

"It's been really long since Rebecca and I were on such terms that we touched each other voluntarily, so no."

"I like it when you're this bossy, as long as you don't try it with me. It's hot."

"Oh, I might try it with you on some occasion. I think you might like that too", he said with a wicked smile and Molly felt a surge going through her body, feeling that she actually might.

The thought that she found him hot made his insides twist in need of being close to her. He pulled her with him towards the ballroom because he realised that if they stayed here alone another minute, he would want to bring her to a room to be alone instead – and he would not rush things again.

They entered the dancefloor and he held her to him, clasping one hand, holding the other at the small of her back. It was lovely to hold her like this. He just enjoyed that feeling and the music and let his gaze wander over other dancing couples. Matt and Bella of course, looking madly in love. Elvis and Georgie, he was glad they had found their way back to each other and even gotten engaged. Monk with his pregnant girlfriend, beaming with pride. Rab with a dark girl, looking more relaxed and happy than Charles had seen him in all these years. A girl who looked exactly like Georgie, it must be her twin sister, was dancing with his old colleague Bones and they seemed to enjoy each other's company. Brains and Ginny! That was unexpected, but they looked very cute together. Molly's parents, Dave and Belinda, seemed very pleased to have married off one daughter and looked like two lovebirds themselves despite all the challenges they had been through during their marriage. Rebecca with her Harry. Even if Charles did not have very warm feeling towards her he wished her happiness and knew it would also make his own life easier. Even Smurf was dancing with a quite pretty girl, so maybe he would for once not be whining about him always getting the shit end of the stick compared to Geraint. So much joy, so much love, all of it gave Charles this warm, fuzzy feeling – but best of all was of course the girl in his own arms.

This day had started in the worst possible way, then it turned to magic. He could not be happier than he was in this moment. Molly knew he was in love with her,

she knew about Sam and they seemed to get along - and incredibly enough she was in love with him too. He had been so close to destroying it all because he got carried away by desire and did not do things in the right order, allowing some things to happen too slow, others too fast. Lady Luck had been smiling at him, put everything right. He was longing for Matt and Bella to bid them farewell for the night, so he might get some time alone with Molly, but for now he was perfectly content dancing with her.

It was well past midnight when the wedding couple announced they were finally headed for their suite, but the party would go on for as long as anyone cared to dance and drink. When they had disappeared up the stairs, Charles turned to Molly.

"Do you want to stay longer, or would you want to go somewhere just you and me?"

"What do you think? Just the two of us", she smirked.

When they left the party behind and walked upstairs he held her small hand, her fingers laced with his. This was all he needed right now, to hold her and have alone time with her. No matter how hard it would be to restrain himself he would not repeat the mistake from yesterday, because he felt they had all the time in the world and could afford the luxury to take one step at a time. He wanted her madly but could and would wait out. They stopped outside her door and kissed, then he took a small step back, looking for confirmation if she wanted him to join her or not. To Molly the answer was so obvious that she did not even get his silent question and he has to ask straight out.

"Do you want to call it a night and meet up tomorrow morning?"

"No."

"No?" Charles casually cocked an eyebrow, but his stomach fluttered.

"No way. No way I'm letting you go, you're coming in here with me."

Her words made his pulse echo aloud in his ears, his mouth went dry.

"Are you sure?"

"I want you here. I don't want to end this lovely day without you."

Bashfully, she met his gaze.

"If you want to come in?"

"More than anything. On one condition though."

"What would that be?"

"Underwear stays on tonight." He smiled but was not joking.

"What? What kind of a rule is that?" she giggled.

"You were right yesterday, we shouldn't rush things and we should be sober.

I *want* to be sober the first time with you and I want you to be too."

"Is that your condition, underwear?"

"Yes."

"For the record I think it's a very silly condition, but as long as I still may kiss you and touch you ...deal. Will you now please come in?"

Holding Charles hand, Molly pulled him into the room and closed the door behind them. Now it was only him and her, alone at last.

A/N: A word of warning. This story is rated K because I intended for it to just be Christmassy and sweet and without smut. But I changed my mind. I decided they deserved a Christmas gift, so this chapter is (very) smutty. I will not change the rating of the entire story, instead don't read if you don't like a bit of smut. I would say the first section is T rated, second M (not leaving much to the imagination), and last section back to a safe K. If you read only K section, you will not miss any plot except some affection and hotness. Now I just press publish before I start to get embarrassed.

Hope you enjoy this bedtime chapter.

x

Chapter 34: Christmas Day - Molly

Waking up this morning, reminiscing last night, I had a feeling my best Christmas gift had appeared in a pair of briefs rather than in a stocking.

Oh. My. God. Last night I had sex with Charles.

Except I did not really.

Last night we had been standing, facing each other, for the first time with the conscious intent to sleep in the same bed. We had done it before but then by accident, so this was very different. We were alone, knowing we wanted to be alone.

The air was sizzling between us, but I think we were both also a little bit lost as how to continue.

The look in his eyes, firmly fixed on me, was a combination of amusement and want. He cleared his throat before he spoke.

"Do you want me to sleep with my clothes on?"

"Don't be ridiculous", I giggled. "You can hardly sleep in full uniform, plus I think I can handle if you sleep in briefs and it's *you* who insist to keep those on."

But as I said it, I realised I was not certain at all I could handle him in only briefs. Not that I would find it threatening in any way, but rather too arousing to be able to sleep. Too late to take my words back anyway, because he had not needed much encouragement it seemed. He already buckled up his belt and began undoing the buttons of his uniform jacket while looking at me steadily, with a faint smile, looking far more self-confident than I felt. Five golden buttons, not that I was counting or holding my breath. I admired how steady his fingers were. Mine would not have been if I had to do the same but luckily, I had no buttons which I could unbutton myself.

He pulled the navy coloured jacket off and discarded it on a chair and I wondered if there was no army regulation about not leaving your uniform in a wrinkly heap, but if there was he did not seem to care. He wore an undershirt, as sexy on him as the uniform had been, clinging to his lean body. Now he took hold of the hem to pull it over his head and allowed me to see his bare toned torso for the first time, which was a sight that made my breath hitch and I was obviously dying to touch his

well-defined abs. He had almost no hair on his chest but there was a streak of dark hair on his stomach, trailing its way down to disappear inside the lining of his briefs, almost pointing out the direction to go. I tried not to stare too stupidly. I knew I was chewing my lip now, mostly to prevent myself from accidentally letting out any embarrassing sound of need. I did not want to seem desperate.

Still holding my gaze, he unzipped the trousers, let them slide down his slender hips to his ankles where he stepped out of them with a small kick. Somehow, I found that very hot, but then again, everything about him was. I did not know before it was even possible have hot-looking calves, but his were so perfectly shaped and muscular. Now he was wearing only briefs and socks, a combination that could have been ridiculous on anyone else but not on him, not with those legs. He pulled off looking very masculine even in that otherwise ridiculous combo and soon he got rid of the socks anyway, pulled them off and crumpled them into a ball which he threw in a corner and stood there nearly naked and so very manly I hardly could breathe.

"Are you planning on sleeping in that dress? No matter how much I like it, it doesn't seem to be the ideal pyjamas", he said mockingly, cocking an eyebrow and disturbed my current state of awed paralysation.

"No, but I need help getting it off. There's something like hundred buttons in the back."

That was a slight exaggeration, but there was in fact twentyish tiny fabric coated buttons and I turned my back to him to show him. If he had not been here with me

I would have had to go ask mum for help, or sleep with the dress on like he had suggested. Him helping me out of it was much more pleasurable.

"Oh, dear", he said with amusement and came up behind me. He carefully moved my hair to the side then started undoing the buttons one by one, pausing when he was half-way to place an enticing kiss on my now bare neck making my skin prickle despite that it felt heated. When all buttons were undone, he carefully pushed the dress off my shoulders and it fell and turned into another heap of fabric on the floor, joining his abandoned trousers. He stepped closer, closed the gap between us so I felt his torso against my back, his lips to my hair. I leaned into him, his hands came down to my waist, holding me tight against him and I relished the feeling of his skin to mine for the first time. My body seemed tiny under the delicate pressure of his large, warm palms, simultaneously thrilling and comforting. Those hands now moved to graze softly down my shoulders, along my arms and my eyes fluttered shut just taking in the heavenly sensation. I was almost startled when he spoke, lips next to my ear causing a small vibration.

"I want you to know I'm so happy, I'm here with you. That I didn't fuck everything up... or I *did* fuck up, but we managed to clear it out. I've longed for this, dreamed of being alone with you, in every possible way."

"In every possible way?"

"I said that what I've *dreamed* of, but tonight not in every way. I would love to undress you more, remove your bra and knickers but then I don't trust myself to be able to keep to what we said, to wait."

His one hand had moved up to cup my breast, covered in the satin of the bra but he found his way to the nipple and teasingly caressed it. I felt it respond to the touch instantaneously, harden to a pointy tip standing out under the material, urging him to continue. With skilful determination, he slowly moved his other hand up from my hip, trailing over my belly, to cup the other breast, now grazing both nipples with the pads of his thumbs while nuzzling my neck right below my ear with his lips. I turned my head to meet his mouth with mine, moaning quietly.

I was thinking I had really lapsed in judgement when I agreed to only sleep together, not *sleep* together tonight because now I needed him, but when I turned around to look at him I could see in his determined face that he intended to keep to that. Unless maybe I could make him change his mind, it was worth a try. I let my hands run up his chest, around his neck, softly caressing him using my fingertips, then continued down again to circle lightly over the ridges of his abs, touching the downy hairs on his stomach not taking my eyes from his once.

"No, we don't, Dawesy."

"Don't what?" I asked in all innocence.

"I can see what you're thinking and no matter how much I like the idea, I don't think we should change what we agreed. I think we should wait out until we're one. Hundred. Percent. Sober."

The last words he said close to my ear and punctuated by nibbling my earlobe between each word, accompanied by a warm breath of air. Could there be a worse tease than him?

"We're keeping the underwear on tonight like we said, but it doesn't mean we can't enjoy being together. I find you absolutely divine in that bra and knickers, not to mention the stockings, but those you're allowed to take off anyway."

I had debated with myself if I should put on beautiful lace-trimmed stockings (sexy but a bit cold this time of year and I always worry they will slide down) or regular leggings (sit where they are supposed to but the way they inevitably dig into one's waist is not flattering in any shape or form and not recommendable if one is lucky enough to undress in company of a certain someone one wants to impress). In this moment I was extremely happy I had opted for black, lace-trimmed stockings.

He suddenly pulled me with him to the bed, forcefully so we both fell giggling on it, but silenced each other as our lips came crashing together. He was such a great kisser and we opened our mouths to each other, giving, kissing with a sensuality that took my breath away. We kissed harder, hungry to taste and explore each other slowly. We kissed with such perfection that it was like I was being kissed for the first time. Our hands now began roaming over of each other's bodies, eager to feel the bare skin, acquainting ourselves with angles, softness and hardness, gripping each other's hair to pull closer. Then he paused, retracted slightly and his fingers found the hem of my one stocking, carefully slid inside it and slowly, like a caress, pulled it all the way down until he could remove the thin material from the tip of my foot and discard it. He repeated it with the other leg, excruciatingly slow as I longed for him to return to kiss me. Stockings gone, he stroked his way up my calves, my thighs, (and may I say there was some considerable wetness between my thighs at this point), grazed over my groin, my belly, my breasts until he finally was level with me again and we kissed.

He had teased me, enticed me, now I wanted to do the same in return.

"Lie down on your stomach", I told him, smiling a husky order. He raised his eyebrows in pleased surprise but did as I said. I placed myself on top of him, one knee on each side of his delicious rump, straddling him and began planting damp kisses with soft half-open lips over the broad planes of his back, simultaneously caressing him with light fingers. I let my still bra-cupped breasts graze over him, knowing that the slick material would feel good against his skin, slowly moved further down and teasingly put a finger inside the lining of his briefs. His hand went up to catch mine, laughing.

"No no no."

I had known he would stop me and just giggled too and removed my hand. Instead I continued to kiss him at the small of his back meanwhile I caressed up the inside of his thighs, from the knees, higher and higher up, reaching very close to his crotch but not touching him quite there. Aiming to torture him slightly with elusive pleasure. If he now was so firm in his decision we would not get naked tonight, I would make him feel the same lovely agony as I did. I was not sure where my confidence came from except from him seeming to love it by the way he parted his legs to allow me better access and how he made some muffled sounds into the pillow.

I kissed my way up again, alternating between soft and hard lips, buried my nose in the soft curls at the nape of his neck. I deeply inhaled his heady scent, lying stretched out on top of him so the full length of our bodies touched, rocking slightly. I loved everything about him, how he felt, how he smelled, how he touched me now

when he suddenly turned to lie on his back, so he could hold me. With another swift move, he rolled us over, so he came on top and then just paused there, holding his weight on his arms so he remained a few inches above me and meting my eyes, tongue in cheek, said with hoarse voice;

"Do you know what you're doing to me? You're driving me crazy."

"That's what I was aiming for", I smirked, loving the feeling to have this power over him. He most certainly had it over me too.

He nuzzled my bottom lip softly and moved slightly so the prominent hardness that now was there between his thighs, put some wondrous pressure between my legs. God, I needed him there, wanted him there. He saw it in my eyes and teasingly began rubbing, slowly. Even if there was two layers of fabric between us the sensation was phenomenal. I did not want him to stop. I was too aroused to restrain myself or be embarrassed over being forward, just arched my back and grinded myself towards him, grasped with my hands around his back willing him towards me. He rubbed me on the perfect spot, it was like all my nerve endings were gathered there in one sublime point and it felt so, so good. Such perfect rhythm, such perfect heaviness from his body. The pleasure rapidly built up inside me until it became almost unbearable. I held on to his back, we kept kissing, rubbing so deliciously. Then I bloody came, just from being underwear to underwear with him. Unable to hold back I bucked from the bed, tensed, shuddered, came undone in a shattering orgasm. I did not scream, somehow almost wanted to hide my reaction because this could not really be happening, instead I bit my lip so hard I tasted

blood. When I came down, slowed my movement, he slowed with me, smiling amused and his eyes glazed with arousal too.

"It never happened to me before, not like this, from just...", I said when I could breathe again, a flicker of embarrassment running through me now when I returned from the heights he brought me to. "I think maybe I want you a little too much."

"There's no such thing as you wanting me too much. Christ Molly, I *loved* to see you like that, loved to do that to you, with you. I hope I'll get to make you come many, many times." He kissed me, breathing rapidly like me despite his supreme fitness. "You're so beautiful when you come. You're always beautiful."

I felt some last twitches before my insides stilled and wished he had been inside me, so I had come around him and he could have felt it. I could see he wished the same but that he stayed unbelievably resolute in his decision to wait.

"Next time it's your turn." I stroke his cheek.

"I'm feeling quite confident my time will come soon enough", he laughed. "This was, by far, the hottest moment I've had – and with underwear on. I'm not even sure how I'll handle without."

Neither was I, but I already longed for it despite my climax just now.

After a while of slower kissing, he rolled off me, to lie beside me, pulled me to him with his arm around me, my head on his chest, like we had been lying once before. I had never thought that I would be able to fall asleep beside him tonight, this first

night together, but suddenly I was exhausted. Sleeping bad last night, the emotional rollercoaster today, topped with sexual fulfilment and now being held in his arms feeling completely safe and loved, I was suddenly knackered.

"Charles, I think I'm going to fall asleep." I heard that I almost purred with contentment.

"And they say guys are the ones to climax and fall asleep at once", he said mockingly but then kissed me softly. "Just joking, I'd love if you fall asleep in my arms now."

Before I dozed off, but when he maybe thought I was already asleep, he pressed his lips to the top of my head and whispered;

"I love you."

I was suddenly wide awake but pretended to be asleep. Just took in the enormity of his words, yet feeling natural, and thought of how lucky I truly was until I finally fell asleep for real.

I woke up next morning with his arm comfortably heavy around me. He was still sleeping soundly, and our bodies were sprawled over the bed and around each other in an intricate knot. Last night came back to me in a flash, made my cheeks flush, made me hunger for more. He was adorable sleeping, his face relaxed, no furrow visible between his brows. So masculine, yet so boyish. He had a shadow from an overnight stubble on his chin. I knew it would be like sandpaper, rasping my chin, bruising my already snog-swollen lips, yet I was longing to snuggle up

right there, bury my face between his chin and neck, feel that stubble to my cheek. I moved closer and let my lips touch his. He was clearly asleep, his lips first immovable, but as I kissed him again I felt him starting to respond. A lovely good morning kiss getting deeper, harder.

"Hey, you", he just paused to say.

I opened my mouth and felt his tongue slip inside, moving over the inside of my lips, teasingly. He held my head gently now, cupped in his large hands and I moved my hands to his back, enjoying the feel of the soft skin as my fingers caressed the muscular planes. His mouth moved to my ear, his hot breath agonising with sensuality. I gasped from the flush of desire going through me. This man drew out some kind of inner sex goddess from deep within me.

"Please tell me we have waited out enough. It's bright daylight and I'm sober and I want you" I mumbled, wanting him too much to keep it from him.

"We have, no more waiting out", his hoarse whisper was barely audible, but he smiled and moved my hand to his briefs to let me know that a certain part of him definitely thought we had waited out more than enough and was in its most glorious morning mood. As we continued to kiss I began moving the hand that was cupped over his hardness, caressing it, feeling its length, the rounded tip through the cotton fabric.

"Good morning", I whispered next to his ear.

"A *very* good morning, I'd say."

I continued to touch him, caress him and he just closed his eyes for a while, sucked in his lower lip between his teeth and obviously enjoyed because I felt him grow even harder under the pressure of my fingers. Especially when I let them slide inside the lining of his briefs to finally feel him naked and this time he did not stop me. Warm, and hard, pulsating with blood that had been redirected there from whatever part of his body that was less in need of it right now. How I wanted him. I took hold around his considerable width and moved my hand more insistently along the length of him. He certainly did not disappoint.

My caresses made him groan into my mouth as he now kissed me compellingly.

"Slow down Molly or I won't last, this feels too good."

"You mean this?" My fingers circled around his tip.

"Yes, I mean exactly that. Please. Stop. That."

"Is that an order?"

"Yes."

"You forget I'm not one of your men", I smirked,

"Believe me, I'm very grateful you're not one of my men, but Molly...", he groaned.

Yet he was unable to move himself away from the touch immediately and I continued until I noticed he was dangerously close. I would have liked to take him between my lips, but I knew that would definitely have pushed him over the edge, so that had to wait until another time when our needs were less desperate. When I

finally retracted my hand, he looked at me with eyes dark of desire and for a short moment I thought that this was the moment when I would get to feel him inside me, but he had other ideas.

Without saying anything, he moved and sat up, guided me supply to part my legs so he could sit between them, then lifted one to rest on his shoulder, held it with one hand his eyes fixed on mine, began dotting little kisses on my calf. His other hand began stroking down the inside of that same leg, caressing the soft skin on the backside of the knee, then the inside of my thigh. Further and further up he moved, towards the destination where I needed him to be, finally placed his hand light as a feather between my thighs. I pressed myself towards him, needed more pressure. With a knowing smile, he gave me a little of what I needed, began stroking my folds through the thin satin of my knickers, very softly, then circling up around my clit but teasingly avoiding it, then moving down again, applying slightly more pressure. I felt the material go damp, there was no use acting coy here because my body was giving me away anyway and I could see that he loved it.

"You're so wet Molly", he said with fascinated awe. "I wanted to make sure you would be, but I feel that's not a problem."

"No, not a problem", I breathless admitted as he moved the knickers slightly to the side gaining access to my sodden folds. He let a finger briefly dip inside me, but only to pick up some of my flowing wetness and bring it up along me, glazing my clit and then rubbing it delicately.

"More. I want more", I heard someone pant and realised it was me. I have never been this forward in expressing my needs verbally, but I could not stop myself. What he did to me, I had to have more of it.

He did it again, this time inserting his finger for a little longer, a little deeper, stroking my g-spot when he took it out again, making me gasp, brought my juices up to my clit and rubbed perfectly again, with more insistence this time. I heard myself moan loudly now. He paused and put his fingers inside the lining of the knickers and I lifted my hips, allowing him to tug them off. Then his hand returned where I needed it and now inserted first one long finger, then two, instead of dipping teasingly he curled them up inside me as deep as he could, acquainting himself with my wet walls.

I moaned loudly pushing myself on them. Without removing his skilled fingers from inside me, he shifted position, so he could bend his head down between my things. His mouth was trailing a damp path on the inside of them. This was just too good to be true.

"I've been longing to taste you" It would have been a filthy comment if not said with so much love and need in his voice that it made me tremble, his expression boyish wickedness. He was making no secret of fantasies he had had about me anymore. He paused briefly.

"Please", I begged as I could not stand waiting another second to feel him there. Then let his tongue flick out and licked me, his fingers still inside me, tapping my g-spot. Yes, he knew exactly where to find it, I'm not sure I had been able to locate it that skilfully myself before. There had been times when I wondered if it even

existed or was only a myth. Now I knew for certain it was there. First, he just explored my slick folds gently with the tip of his tongue. I honestly thought I would either die of happiness or come right then. He looked up to give me cheeky smile, then dipped his mouth again and closed his lips around my clit and sucked, softly, then slowly increasing the intensity. I took hold of his curls, could hardly bear having him there but definitely could not bear it if he would move away. His fingers kept working their magic inside me, his mouth treating my clit so exquisitely.

I was so wet, had never been this wet because nothing had ever been this good and then I came, came like I never had. My walls contracting around his fingers, until he stopped moving them, my body arching stiff, hands clasping his hair for dear life, a wail escaping my lips. He continued to suck and nuzzle my clit softly until I had stilled completely, then let go at the same time as he removed his fingers and I immediately felt bereft of his presence. Fortunately, his plan was to replace the fingers with another part of him. He quickly ridded himself of his briefs, said;

"Take off your bra, I want to feel all of you naked.

Of course, I did as he said as I desperately wanted the same and then he came up with his face level to mine, supporting himself on his arms and like yesterday positioning himself between my widespread legs. Difference was now there was nothing separating us and as wet as I was, and hard as he was, the tip of him almost inserted itself inside me without him needing to thrust. Even though I just had come, I ached with need. Then he was there. He held briefly around his shaft, then thrust, once, then a second time and he was inside me to the hilt. Filled me, extended me, such glorious feeling. I wrapped my legs around him, allowing him

deep inside me, rocked to move him in place, dug my heels into his back to push him there. Then he pulled out, almost leaving me and then thrust back inside me again. Brief emptiness followed by the sensation of connection and fulfilment.

"More", I moaned, gripping the sheets.

He entered me again but paused for a moment, stroke my cheek with the backside of his fingers, kissed me, bent down his head and briefly closed his lips around a taut nipple. So lovely, but the anticipation was torture.

"Please, don't make me wait longer."

He moved. He fulfilled my wish by stroking in and out, long deliberate strokes at a steady pace, stroking my g-spot to perfection every time he moved out then thrusting in, pinning me hard to the mattress making me almost delirious with pleasure. His face was focused, almost pained in pleasure too, lips parted, eyes dark. He was so good, fantastic, amazing lover, knowing exactly what I needed. He kept the steady pace, made sure I was with him, brought my hands above my head clasping them, met my eyes steadily. Moved so marvellously. I felt the pressure build up inside me again and almost sobbed.

"I'm coming, I'm coming again. Oh, Charles..." Then words left me, muted, overcome by the imminent climax.

At those words he increased the pace, his hands grabbed my bum, now stroked frantically, harder, harder until we reached the pinnacle together, as I arched against him and he released inside me with a few last thrusts, groaning my name.

His skin was damp with a thin film of perspiration, his rib cage rising and falling. My skin was heated, like I had been sitting too close to a fire for long and I felt my pulse beating between my thighs, like my heart had transferred south. Panting, we slowly came down, together. He kissed me softly, still on top of me with languid heaviness, still inside me. Both of us shuddering in the last remnants of the sweet orgasm.

"That was..."

"Yeah..."

Neither of had words enough to even try to describe it, but there was no need really as we both had been as present as can be. Yesterday had already been pushed down to a modest second place on my list of most amazing sexual experiences.

"Merry Christmas", he laughed softly, breaking the gravity.

"Merry Christmas indeed."

As I said, my best Christmas gift had appeared in a pair of briefs rather than in a Christmas stocking – and then I mean the whole man, not just the certain part of him that had been tucked into the briefs, even if that was a very nice part of him.

I thought that Christmas hardly could get any merrier than this. At least until he a few minutes later, when he was lying beside me, said;

"You know, I'd love if you want to come with me to Bath."

"When?"

"Today."

"Today?! Don't you have plans for Christmas Day?"

"My plans for today are to attend the brunch here, then drive back to Bath and celebrate Christmas with my parents."

"Not Sam?"

"No, I wish, but Rebecca and I agreed long ago, when I thought I might be away on tour over Christmas that he would spend it with her and when it turned out I would be off duty, she refused to change the plan. She's not the most flexible person around. He'll come around tomorrow, but I wish he would be there today of course."

"And then you thought you would surprise your parents bringing a woman they never have heard of instead? You don't think it's a bit previous if I meet them? And today of all days?"

"They *have* heard of you before, actually. I told them the other night I've met someone I really like but that I didn't know if I had a chance. They are not difficult, and I know they would love to meet you, but maybe you have plans with your family?"

He looked bashful, a bit insecure and absolutely adorable as he said this.

"Well, Bella and Matt are staying here for another night to wind down after the wedding. The rest of us were supposed to head back to London for dinner at mum's and dad's, but since we're meeting here this morning and they have so many other kids, I dare say they could spare me for the rest of the day."

"Really?" His face happily surprised, like he had not expected I would accept his proposal.

I was flattered he had told his parents about me and was prepared to let me meet them. Spending Christmas Day like any other Christmas Day in the Dawes house, eating mum's always overcooked turkey, or spending it with new marvellous boyfriend with a chance of an encore of this morning's lovely activities? The choice was simple enough, even if the thought of meeting his parents was daunting.

"I would love to spend more time with you. Would love not to say goodbye, not even temporarily. All I want today is to be as close to you as I possibly can."

I stroke over his flat hard stomach and once again felt a surge go through me, this naked closeness was divine but dangerous. We could not stay in bed for more of this loveliness right now though, because we would be expected to join in for brunch soon and Charles also wanted to take the opportunity to be with Sam some more before he departed with Rebecca.

"I need to leave this bed now, or we'll be stuck here for another hour."

"And that would be bad."

"Very bad", he smirked, kissed me and swung his legs over the edge of the bed to put his words into action.

I watched him put on his trousers and undershirt and take the jacket casually over his arm. His hair was dishevelled, and he looked a bit naughty, in half-dressed uniform. I thought he could easily have qualified as December if someone had taken the initiative to make a calendar with The Hottest British Army Boys 2017.

"Meet me downstairs?" he said before leaving. We both knew it was a rhetorical question and I just beamed in response.

I was not the first arriving to the brunch but not the last either. It was an amazing wedding brunch buffet. So many things to choose from including mini burgers, eggs Benedict, Bloody Mary and champagne, but I opted for my traditional toast and tea, some scrambled eggs, bacon and fruit salad. When I was queuing for the toast, I felt a hand touch mine, Charles fingers secretly laced themselves with mine. I knew it was him already before I turned, because my hand belonged in that hand.

He had the knitted reindeer jumper on again. When he saw me registering that, he excused himself, saying he had not brought an extensive luggage and had to wear this.

"No need to make excuses. I've grown to appreciate it and I appreciate what's inside it even more. Besides, it's just perfect today. After all, it's Christmas"

I had come to love this jumper, the secret joke it was between us. Here in broad daylight surrounded by everyone else, it was difficult to believe that this gorgeous

man had made love to me less than an hour ago. This jumper, our laced fingers and the warm twinkle in his brown eyes that I knew was just for me, made it real.

"I'll go and sit with Sam now, spend time with him until they're off, but then it's you and me. Okay?"

"More than okay, just go."

We reluctantly let go of each other's hands and he walked over to a table where Sam already was seated, meanwhile I found my way to the table with my family, Bella, Matt and the Geddings family.

Bella looked at me searchingly as I sat down.

"I think someone had an interesting night", she hissed.

"Sorry, I don't need all the details of your wedding night, Bells."

"You know that's not what I'm talking about. I think you've had a close encounter with Major James!"

"Maybe I did."

"And?"

"None of your business, but... I'm going to Bath today!" I grinned.

She grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

"I'm so, so happy for you."

"And I'm so happy for you. Life is pretty good, isn't it?"

"It is!"

Both took a sip from our tea cups, thinking how our lives had become pretty much like the amazing lives we once had dreamed up in our council estate bunk bed.

"But don't for a second think that I'll let you off the hook telling me more about your night. We'll just save it for London."

Of course, I expected nothing less from my nosy sister and considering she had set us up, she kind of deserved it. Not every detail but a few.

When we had sat at the tables for long, enjoying the food, the company and summed up the previous day, Matt got to his feet and clinked his glass.

"On Bella's and my behalf, I want to thank all of you for joining us for our wedding and making these days very special for us. The brunch is nearly over, and I know many of you plan to leave soon, but it would make us very happy if you first would join us for one more activity... a snow fight!"

Everyone cheered, it seemed the perfect, fun way to end a winter wedding. We all got to our feet, fetched coats, hats and mittens and gathered outside where Matt divided us into two teams. This was clearly not a battle lead by the British Army though, because within shortly everyone was attacking everyone in a disorganised manner. Everybody was throwing snowballs around or pushing each other into the snow, accompanied by fits of laughter. Matt made a half-hearted attempt to set up some rules, then gave up and just took part in the fun.

Suddenly I found myself next to Charles.

"It hurts, eh? No one obeying commands?"

"Well, I must admit it disturbs the officer in me", he said, while forming a perfect snowball. "But as a regular guy attending a snow fight, I'm happy as long as I get a hit on *you*."

When I realised his intentions, I tried to escape but the snowball hit my neck right above the collar of my coat and ice-cold snow seeped inside the small gap.

"Oi!" I shouted indignantly, but next he pulled me around the corner of the building, out of sight from the others. He grinned, pushed me softly so my back was against the wall, kissed me and I forgave him, obviously. He cupped my face, stroke my cold cheeks with his gloved hands (some expensive leather kind of gloves, so a very soft touch still) and looked me in the eyes.

"I think this possibly is the best Christmas ever."

"I *know* it is. Unless your parents hate me, and I drink too much because they make me nervous and I make a tit of myself."

I had intended to keep those words in my head, but obviously they came out loud.

"That won't happen." He smiled and pulled me to him. "You'll see, everything will be just brilliant."

He kissed me hard, then he just dived back into the snow fight. I remained there against the wall for a minute, looking at all the white, listening to the cheerful

screams, felt the flutter in my stomach and the lingering touch of his lips, and I had the feeling this really would be brilliant.

Epilogue: December 26 - Molly

Yesterday had been the most perfect Christmas Day ever. Now we found ourselves in the car, on our way from Bath, Charles by the wheel driving us to some to me secret destination. I was very, very happy for three reasons. It was Christmas; Charles was home when I had thought he would not be, so we could celebrate together; and lastly, he had planned a surprise for me. Unlike my control-freak of a sister, I love surprises.

A year ago, we had travelled to Bath together for the first time. Charles happy, excited and relaxed. Me happy, excited and extremely nervous, wondering what I had gotten myself into. The closer we came to Bath, the stronger I felt that maybe not even the prospect of sleeping with Charles again was enough of a carrot to motivate me to meet the parents, but I could not back out (even if I briefly considered to abscond when we stopped to refuel and he went inside to pay, but it was not an option as I really, really wanted to be with him).

My nerves were not exactly calmed when he parked outside the James residence and I nearly had a Julius seizure, because it was this huge, elegant house, located in a long crescent shaped street of identical, equally posh houses.

"You're just stopping here to get something, right? They don't actually *live* in this mini-castle?"

"They do", he grinned. "And me too since the divorce, whenever I'm off duty. Don't worry, I have a floor to myself."

"You see, that's exactly what worries me! One floor alone must be at least double the size of my flat, and I'm sharing that space with Georgie. I've never known anyone with a house as big as this. It's amazing, but it's also freaking me out a little bit and I didn't even bring any gifts to you parents."

"How could you, when we decided this morning? They'll understand."

Well, I suddenly felt like this house was not designed for a surprise visit, rather arriving in style after receiving a gold print invitation, and a uniformed servant would announce one's arrival followed by a trumpet fanfare. I did not want to get out of the car, I would be perfectly fine spending the day here if he brought me some turkey. And perhaps a bottle of wine.

"Molly, I called mum and told her I'd bring you and she said you're very welcome. They'd be disappointed if you didn't come now. Not to mention how extremely disappointed I would be."

He leaned over, very close and I thought he would give me an encouraging kiss, but he just unbuckled my seat belt, smirked and said;

"Double away, Dawes. Get your arse out of the car and you'll see everything will be fine."

As it turned out, he was right. Without hesitating Charles opened the impressive, wrath decorated door and cheerfully shouted we were here now. Almost immediately both his parents popped their heads around a door, like they had been standing there eagerly waiting for us. They did not look too fearsome. In fact, they were all big smiles and seemed almost as excited as Charles about me being here,

quickly pulling us further into the house and offered us something to drink. I said no to something stronger (my nerves were still craving a glass of wine, but it did not seem advisable), but gratefully accepted a cup of tea and then we sat down in front of the fireplace and just had the best time.

Like Charles had said, they were not difficult people, it was like I had known them for ages. They were interested in me, asked questions not to put me on the spot but because they genuinely wanted to get to know me. They asked where I came from and were not the least bothered when it was Newham rather than some London address corresponding to their own in terms of poshness. They were equally impressed by how many siblings I had, as me being a doctor and most of all they wanted to know more about how Charles and I had met. His mum loved the story about the duet and how we had collided at the station and got a dreamy look in her eyes.

"It seems to me like you two were destined to meet." She gave me a hug and I felt I had to blink because I obviously had some smudge in my eyes.

"Mum, you're making Molly embarrassed", Charles complained but I think he was the more embarrassed one. Especially later, when his mum, Ruth, after a gin or two shared stories of him as a toddler and teenager. Very amusing stories, or at least three in the room thought so.

Their house was not far behind the wedding hotel when it came to Christmas decorations, luscious and truly magical, with two large Christmas trees and lighted fireplaces in almost every room. Ruth, had prepared a delicious meal together with their cook which more resembled those meals you see on the cover of a glossy

magazine than the dry turkey my mum used to conjure up. It made me miss mum a bit, but only for a split second, especially as she had been thrilled when I told her I would be going with Charles.

"Good for you my girl, finally letting go of Abominable Artan."

I really was.

Ruth willingly admitted the cook was the one who should take credit for the meal as she was lacking considerably in cooking skills herself and mainly had chopped vegetables. It made me feel relieved because it took the pressure off from any future meals I might prepare for them and I thoroughly enjoyed the dinner (now allowing myself one glass of wine because I got the feeling Ruth was starting to think I was pregnant when I so fervently avoided alcohol).

As the day went on in the pleasant company of Ruth and William, I wondered how they would be expecting me and Charles to sleep. It was the first time I was in their home and they knew Charles and I just had met, so it was not unlikely that they would expect us to have separate bedrooms. Very reasonable indeed, but I was hoping not. Luckily, Charles was thinking the same and made no fuss about it. It turned out that the floor he had to himself was more like having his own apartment in the house, so if he put me in a guest bed there or his own bed, no one needed to bother about. He put me in *his* bed, a marvellous king size one. We did not spend much time sleeping in it, but we used the mattress surface optimally, I must say.

When I left that house the following day, I was not only in love with Charles, but with his parents and their home too.

"We'll be going abroad again right after the holidays", Ruth said. "But I hope we'll meet soon again. It would be lovely if you two came and visited us in our house by Lake Garda in spring or summer but I'm sure we meet here at home sooner."

I took the train back to London, so Charles would have alone time with Sam, but two days later he came up to London and we celebrated New Year together, with Georgie and Elvis, Bella and Matt and some other friends. I would lie if I said we have been inseparable since, because both our jobs and him needing to be with Sam has kept us apart, but we have spent as much time together as we possibly could. Charles came to London often to hang out with friends and my family or just spend time alone (Georgie moved in with Elvis in February so then we had my flat to ourselves). I went to Bath to be with him and Sam, who quickly proved my first impression of him as a lovely boy right. In spring we moved from cuddling in the sofa to walks and picnics in the parks and occasionally he forced me to go running with him, acting my PT and driving me mad. In summer we attended the wedding of Georgie and Elvis (my heart sang when we got *one* invitation together) and met many of the guests from the Christmas wedding again during one amazing day. Then we headed to Italy for two weeks' vacation. One with his parents by the supremely beautiful Lake Garda, one alone in total decadence in terms of great Italian food and wine and making love all night long, and sometimes during a mid-day siesta. Charles claimed that siesta is a Spanish tradition rather than Italian, but I do not think one should be too picky. Both are Mediterranean countries and 'when in Rome...' and all that. It is such an excellent tradition even if I think the purpose might be to rest, which we did not really.

Autumn came with good news and not so good news. The good news was that Bella and Matt had a baby. As I had foreseen, it arrived almost exactly nine months after the wedding. I do not get how she manages to plan her life to such perfection, but she does without effort. Anyway, baby George was the cutest baby ever with an abundance of dark hair and Matt's brown eyes. Of course, he slept all the time and only breastfed for fifteen minutes each time before he fell asleep again, so Bella was the most relaxed and rested mum anyone had ever seen. Again, I was not surprised. I adored my little nephew and the Geddings gave me some solace when I received the less good news.

In September Charles told me he was to be deployed. It was a humanitarian mission, thank God, but he would be away in Nepal for three months without the possibility to call me often.

"Will you wait for me?" he asked with serious, dark eyes and I could see that he feared my answer.

"Of course, I will, if you promise you'll come back to me."

"Always."

It was tough to say good bye knowing I would barely even get to hear his voice often. There was e-mails though and he wrote me regularly and long, said he spent some time in his office every evening before going to bed. He even sent me a photo of that beige Army office, so I would be able to picture him sitting there writing, along with other photos of the camp and surroundings. Also, one of himself in

uniform. Even if he smiled to the camera, he looked his most impressive self, taller and straighter than ever in camouflage and navy beret and I found it difficult to take in that this major was *my* Charles, but he proved it to me all the time in his writing.

He wrote me about everything he was allowed to tell me about the daily life there, which was a whole lot as it was not classified the same way as in a war zone; wrote me about his feelings and thoughts in general and his love for me in particular. He verbalised things he never had said face to face and I did the same. Somehow, I fell in love with him a second time over those months and fell even deeper than before. I knew with certainty he was the love of my life and I missed him like hell.

The tour was intended to last over Christmas, but a week before he called me.

"Change of plans, I'm coming home Molly!"

"You're coming home?! When?"

"Tomorrow! I'll be home for bloody Christmas! Please, please, please tell me you can change your plans and come celebrate with me and Sam in Bath."

Wild horses could not have stopped me, and I was absolutely thrilled to see him again. That was the nature of Charles and my relationship; countless times over the last year I had thought to myself that I never had felt *this* happy before and now I could not possibly get any happier – but then I did, again and again.

Next day, I picked Sam up in Bath to drive to Brize Norton. Rebecca tolerated me as she seemed to think I had a positive effect on Sam and when Charles had been

away I had sometimes gone to Bath for the weekend anyway, to meet with Sam, stay in Charles apartment and feel a bit closer to him surrounded by his belongings. Rebecca had even asked me if I would babysit Sam for an entire weekend when she and Harry were going away. He really was my little friend and he filled the gap of the absent Charles even better than his belongings.

Now we had agreed to surprise Charles meeting him there when he thought I was on a shift and Sam in school. I was a bit nervous while we were waiting together with other families and girlfriends (and the occasional boyfriend) at Brize. What if we just felt strange seeing each other again, like giving each other a lame hug and not feeling right about kissing?

I had not needed to worry. We saw him first, as he was not expecting us, and my heart raced at a speed that cannot be entirely healthy. When his gaze fixed on us, he split up in an enormous grin, dropped his kit in a manner I think his superiors would object to, referring to being careless with the property of the Army, and was with us in three large steps. First, he hugged Sam until the boy complained he could not breathe, while looking at me over his shoulder with twinkling eyes. Then he let go of Sam and pulled me to him and kissed me like he did not care about anyone around and Sam said he needed to vomit and I needed to be in a bed, alone with Charles, ASAP. He was home, it was still right, and he was still mine - and I was most definitely his.

Just like last year, it had been planned for Sam to celebrate with Rebecca and she was reluctant to change when Charles returned home early, but this time both Charles and Sam put their feet down and insisted Sam should celebrate with his

dad and it ended with him doing so. Charles parents were equally excited when their holiday plan was changed from Christmas alone, to be joined by their son, grandson and me.

It turned out to my best Christmas Day ever, even better than last year. Waking up with Charles, knowing we were together, belonged together and had survived the distance-relationship a tour implied without creating a rift between us, on the contrary the time apart had made us grow closer. We were soon joined by a giddy Sam, excited to open his Christmas gifts and then spent the day together feeling that this was my family too now – and I knew for sure I had never been this happy.

On Boxing Day, Sam returned to Rebecca and that was when Charles announced that he had a surprise for me, we would go on a mini-break to an unknown destination – and that was how we had ended up here in the car, leaving Bath and after some time exited the motorway to drive out on the countryside.

Suddenly I recognized the surroundings and the coin dropped.

"We're going back to the hotel?"

"Finally, she gets it", he smirked.

He had made reservations at the wedding hotel, to celebrate our one-year anniversary (two days late but who cares) at the very place where we became a couple.

"Same room?" I cocked my eyebrow. I had *very* fond memories of that room.

"First, I thought so, but then I went bananas and booked their most luxurious suit. I'm so freaking happy to be home with you again and that we've been together a year, so I wanted to do something special."

"Being with *you* after nearly three months apart is special, but I appreciate you got the suite too", laughed and placed my hand on his thigh.

Later on, we were lying relaxing in the bed which was so big it made Charles bed in Bath look small like a tiny stamp in comparison, after having done things which would be new fond memories of *this* room. Life could not be any better than this, I thought to myself and sighed.

Charles moved to lie on his side, head propped up by his hand and looked at me intently.

"I have something I want to talk to you about."

I attempted to read his face. It was serious, and I realised it would be something that mattered to him and consequently mattered to me. I was suddenly filled with fear that he had news of another imminent tour, maybe lasting much longer than the previous one. Even if that had worked out fine, I would hate to have to let him go too soon again.

"You know I think it's been great to be posted in Pirbright this year, so I easily could come visit you in London."

I *did* know, because he certainly had done the trip very often and I had loved every time he came. What would he say next, that he was off to Catterick? Or Canada,

that BATUS-place he sometimes spoke of? In the seconds he paused, I had time to outline several possible scenarios, none of them good.

"I have hoped I one day would get the opportunity to be relocated to Bulford, so I would be closer to Sam. If I'm posted in Bulford, I could even get a house in Bath and commute daily and Sam could stay with me during the weeks, not only weekends."

I would always understand him for wanting to be closer to Sam, but he would be further away from me which I selfishly did not want. I wondered where this was going, but just nodded showing I was listening.

"The other day, I was offered a transfer to Bulford. If it hadn't been for you, I would have accepted it on the spot, but I wanted to talk to you first."

It made me happy that he wanted to include me in the decision, but I realised that for Sam's sake there was only one proper choice and I would not keep him away from that or make it difficult for him even if it was less ideal for myself, or us as a couple.

"Of course, you have to live closer to Sam if you have the opportunity. It would be amazing if he finally can stay with you."

"It would, but you're important to me too and I don't want to sacrifice spending time with you." He reached out the hand he was not supporting himself on and caressed the dip of my waist. "I have a suggestion. Just hear me out and you don't have to decide right away because it would be a big decision."

I nodded in tense anticipation, waiting to hear what he had to say.

"I was thinking, if maybe you would consider looking for a job in Bath and move there to live with me."

I had to let his word sink in before I could speak.

"You're asking me to come and live with you in Bath? Move there and live in the same house as you?"

I wanted to make sure I got him right before answering anything, so I did not make a fool of myself.

"I know it's a lot to ask as you would be uprooting your life, which is why I want you to think about it before you answer, but yes, I'd love if you did. I love being with you and want to be with you as much as I can. Between work and Sam there isn't as much time as I'd wish, and I'd like to use it to the fullest."

"So, you would not just want me to live *in* Bath, having my own place?"

"If you think it's too early moving in together, or if you don't feel prepared to share home with a child every second week, it's of course a middle way that you have your own place, but I was thinking..." His Adam's apple lurched. "I'd hoped maybe you'd want to share my home. To get a place that is *ours* and know we can wake up together and come home to each other at the end of the day."

So, he wanted me to give up a job and colleagues I really liked, move to another city than the one where I spent my entire life up to now, leave my family and friends

and share a house with a child that was not my own. Now the picture was clear to me.

"Yes."

"What do you mean 'yes'?"

"I don't need to think, I say yes right now."

"Are you sure?" His serious features began to crack into a smile.

"Never been surer about anything in my entire life. I want to be with you."

"And you don't mind Sam being part of that?"

I inched closer, so our bodies were pressed together and kissed him on the tip of his nose.

"When will you get it for real, Charles James, that Sam never is a problem for me? I love him. I think he's funny and sweet and I love the way he always takes my side if you and I disagree. I also know that him and you belong together, and I would never do anything to keep you apart more than you already have had to put up with. He needs his dad and you need him to be happy. I want both of you to be happy."

I think his eyes got a bit glossy, or maybe I was just imagining. His arm was now around me, holding me close to him.

"Thanks Molls. I know that not every girl your age would jump at the thought of having a step-son."

"I'm not every girl and both you and Sam are very special boys."

"And work? You don't mind giving it up?"

"You trying to talk me out of it? It won't work mate. I will miss some of the colleagues, naturally, but my foundation years are soon over so it would be good timing for a change hospital anyway. I think what I'll miss most is to be able to just drop by Bella and the baby anytime, but it's not reason enough not to move. Not when I want to be with you."

"So, we're moving in together? Our own place?"

"You sound so surprised, like you didn't think I'd say yes?"

"I didn't dare to let my hopes get too high. I knew I wanted to stay together with you either way, whatever you decided. I didn't want to get too fixed in my mind on a future where we would be living together, but now that you say yes... Molly, I'm just so unbelievably fucking happy."

So was I. It had happened again that he made me happier than I ever had been.

In the evening, we walked down the familiar stairs and I thought we were going to the restaurant, but Charles pulled me in another direction.

"Where are you going? I thought we were going to have dinner?"

"We are, but I've arranged a small surprise."

He was dressed in black suit and white shirt and looked simply gorgeous, especially now when he smiled, satisfied he had arranged something for me. He stopped outside the glass doors leading to the orangery, the place where we had our very first kiss - and some more, a year ago. It looked much the same with the beautiful Mediterranean plants, plentiful fairy lights hanging from the glass ceiling and a spectacular panorama view over the snowy landscape outside. The difference was a table for two, set with candles and all in the middle of the room.

"We're having our dinner here?"

"I thought so. Do you like it?"

A candle-lit dinner just the two of us in this magical place, what was there not to like?

"I love it! Thanks for doing this for me."

"For *us*", he grinned. "I planned I would eat here too, if that's okay with you."

I poked him affectionally in the side.

"You prannet, of course I got that. I can't believe and Army man like you is allowed to be this romantic. Isn't it against regulations?"

"If it is, I don't give a fuck", he grinned.

There was already a bottle of champagne in silver ice bucket and Charles poured us two glasses as soon as we had taken our seats.

"Cheers - to us and Christmas", he said.

"And to us moving in together."

"Indeed."

But as I said that, he got kind of a funny face, like something was the matter.

"What?"

"What do you mean?"

"You looked strange right now?"

"Did I?"

It seemed like it was nothing he wished to share and then we were interrupted by a waiter bringing a trolley with our dinner, so I dropped it, but I could see there was something and was starting to wonder if maybe he had changed his mind about moving in together. Maybe he had been so sure I would say no, that when I instead said yes, he realised he did not want it. Moving in together had not even been on my agenda this morning, now the thought of him maybe not wanting it after all made me sad.

My concerns increased during the meal. I noticed that Charles was shuffling around the delicious food on his plate, not eating much. He was not his usual relaxed, entertaining self and I felt I had to keep the conversation going. In between he even seemed absent minded, despite that he had arranged this very romantic

setting. Half-way through the meal I felt I could not take it anymore and put down my knife and fork, staring at Charles.

"If you changed your mind, just say."

"About what?" He looked taken aback by my abrupt question, his brown eyes confused.

"About me moving to Bath and us living together."

"Why would you think that?"

"Because you're acting all weird! Here we have this lovely dinner in this amazing room, which you have arranged, but you're not really here. Something's wrong, I can tell and the only thing I can think of that is different from this morning is that we decided to move in together. If you changed your mind we don't have to do it, but please stop this and come back to me."

"I didn't change my mind – and I'm always *with* you", he looked at me steadily and there was a smile at the corner of his mouth which seemed reassuring. Maybe I got this wrong.

"What then? You're acting so strange."

He cleared his throat.

"I'm nervous."

"About what? It's not like you've never had dinner with me before."

"No, but I've never proposed to you before."

I stared at him, shell shocked. Had he said what I thought I just heard? And did he mean propose in the way I thought it meant, or could that mean something else?

"*What* haven't you done?"

He swiftly got up from his chair and kneeled beside me. Not that classical, yet ridiculous, pose on one knee. He was standing on both and took my hands, his eyes all intense.

"I haven't asked you if you want to be my wife, but I'm doing that now. I had planned to wait until desert, but I was apparently so nervous I blew the whole thing. I hope the timing doesn't swing your answer either way. Molly Dawes, will you marry me?"

Still shocked I looked at him searchingly to make sure he was serious.

"And here I thought it was a big deal you asked me to move in with you."

"It was. It is, and if you had said no I'm not sure I would have dared to propose tonight. It felt like one stepping stone in the right direction. The direction where I'm one hundred percent sure I want to go with you, to always have you by my side and to always stand by yours. Maybe it's much in one day but I know it's what I want, and I can wait out if it's all too soon for you."

"Don't you know by now that I'm crap at waiting out when it comes to you?"

"I know that you can be a bit impatient at times, but I thought that was more related to physical aspects", he smirked.

"Oi, you cheeky bastard! I think you were the one who once was so impatient with your physical needs, in an elevator, that this relationship almost didn't happen."

"I'm so glad it did – happen. So, what do you reckon, do you want to be my wife?"

His wife, Mrs. James it was hard to imagine. No, wait. It was not hard to imagine at all.

"I do. I want to be your wife."

"You do?"

"I do. On one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you never let me become a bridezilla like Bella and terrorise everyone in my surroundings."

He laughed, now relieved and relaxed, the pressure and nervousness over an imminent proposal had flown out the window.

"I can promise you that, I'm not Matt so I'd never put up with that."

"Then I'm yours."

"Wait, I forgot – I have a ring! I really don't have a talent for proposing."

"How fortunate you'll never have to do it again then, but this was more than good enough for me."

He pulled out a small box from his pocket and opened to show a white gold ring with a beautiful diamond, not too large or extravagant, perfect for me. He took it out and put on my finger and then we kissed softly.

"I love you."

"I love *you*, Major James."

We finished our lovely meal, Charles now able to eat and enjoy himself and I could not stop thinking about how much I adored this man and he would be my husband.

When we returned to our suite and Charles had used the key card, he turned to me and lifted me in his arms, one arm under my knees like I had been a bride being carried into a bridal suite.

"You don't think you're a bit previous there?"

"There's nothing like too previous when the chemistry is as undeniable as it is between us, and I really, really felt like doing this. Now I'm bringing you to bed Molly Dawes."

He did, and once again I thought that *now* I could not possibly get any happier, because it was insane how happy I was.

THE END

A/N: This was the end as I'm sure you figured out. THANK YOU for following this story all the way and once again THANKS for all your lovely reviews which really mean a lot to me! I intended for this to be an easy little piece in busy December but instead it turned into my longest and most complex story (in terms of tying all pieces together) so far. That is what happens when you cheer me on :)

A/N: Sorry, I felt something was missing before this story was complete.

x

Chapter 36: P.S.

From: Charles.James@mod.uk

Sent: Oct 5, 2018

To: Molly.Dawes@xxx.uk

Subject: Miss you already!

Hello you,

Today we finally reached our destination here in Nepal after hours and hours in the Hercules, followed by a long bumpy truck-ride until we reached the base near some godforsaken mountain village. The Army facilities are much the same wherever we go in the world, but the surroundings here are amazing – green valleys and hills, snowy mountain tops at a distance and clear blue skies above. If villages had not been ruined by the earthquake, this would be a serene place. I wish you could see it all Molly, I'll send some photos. We have installed ourselves and will settle into routines over the next few weeks, starting to make ourselves useful as quickly as possible. I'll run a PT session with the lads early tomorrow morning. I expect it will be quite tough for them, up on this altitude, but the more

reason to do it so they acclimatize to the conditions. I know how much you would have liked to be part of that, you always love a PT session with me.

This time in the evening, the camp is silent, and I have a few moments to myself in the office. It's quite sparse but I have the feeling this will be my favourite place on this tour, because it's where I can write to you. You can picture me sitting by a desk on a really uncomfortable chair, writing, sometimes looking out the window where dusk is falling, leaving the sky pink over the mountain tops, and hear the crickets chirping. I'll write you as often as I can, I promise. I already feel that I'll need it for my own sake, to fill the Molly-sized hole in my heart at least partly. God, it's only been a few days and I miss you so much it hurts. When I write to you, I feel closer to you for a few precious moments.

I had time to think during the flight. The lads probably think I stayed quiet because I was very focussed on the mission ahead, and I should be – but all I could think of was you.

Molly, you have flipped my life upside down, changed everything in the best possible way. I used to think that all I wanted was to live out of a bergan, that a settled life wasn't for me. I was never happy with Becs, so I kept running, hid myself on tour but wasn't happy because it kept me from Sam too and a fulfilling life at home. Things were a bit different already when I met you, a new calmness in me after the divorce but I still thought that besides Sam, the Army was everything to me and I needed nothing else. The moment I met you, I knew it wasn't so.

You were so beautiful and angry and at the same time vulnerable that day at the station, and all I wanted was to make you smile. I just knew you would have a lovely smile. When you left, I felt empty – as I do now. Without you, something important is missing in my life. When I'm with you I feel complete, like a better version of myself, like the man I want to be. You have made me find my way back to myself, to the real Charles, not the one who's an emotionally unattached major in service of the British Army. I never want to go back to be only that again.

Meeting you, I felt like spring had come and I was thawing after a long winter – and I hadn't even realised I was frozen before.

When did I know I had fallen in love with you? I'm not sure. Something happened already at the station and I think that by the time we said bye at the restaurant, I had already fallen but I didn't understand it, or admit it until later. First, I had to wrap my head around that you were so very different from what I had imagined, you were such an unexpected, wonderful surprise. I thought you would be this obnoxious woman and then you were just lovely and intriguing, and I couldn't get you out of my head.

I don't know if I ever told you, but I sort of had promised myself not to get involved with any woman what so ever for the foreseeable future. I didn't want that kind of complications, just an easy life with Sam and the Army. Well, I changed my mind pretty fast. Maybe when I saw you in the bridal shop. Or maybe when you opened your door with flour all over and made me bake Christmas cookies with you. It was so easy to laugh with you from the start. I mean, I never would have gotten that ugly jumper for anyone else but for you it seemed like a natural thing

to do – and it was so worth it just to get to see you smile. Then the evening when we were invited to Matt's and Bella's, and you let me know you were not interested in a relationship and said I should behave like I went to the dinner as a single, I was so disappointed. I know I said I wasn't looking for anything either, and that had been true a few days earlier, but your words stung, and I didn't even know why.

I soon resented the thought of you spending time with me only because Bella had set us up, because I noticed you were on my mind all the time and it got worse for each time I met you. When you were talking dirty to me at the dinner table at Bella's and Matt's, just to play Bella, you have no idea what it did to my insides. I realised I wanted you there and then and after that there was no turning back. I wanted to get to know you more, wanted to make you laugh, wanted to be the one to take you to bed at night. I just didn't know what to do about it when you had made it so blatantly clear that you were not interested.

Still, there were little moments when you gave me hope. In Bella's kitchen that morning, when we went skating, when I gave you a tour the day you came to Pirbright for the cake tasting. There always seemed to be those intense moments between us then, but I didn't know if it was just in my imagination because I wanted it so damn much. Then, when I discovered you nearly naked in the bed beside me after the stag... Do you know the effect you had on me? I almost didn't dare to even move because I was afraid I'd do anything that would come out as pervy and scare you off. You next to me in only underwear was nearly too much to handle, but I loved to have you in my arms when you fell asleep. I didn't want to leave you that day, but I had promised to get back to Sam.

I was so sure you would reject me if I told you my feelings, Molly, for so many reasons. You had said you weren't looking for a relationship, you were so much younger and me, this amazing single-girl and I was a divorced father. You know how I didn't even dare to tell you about Sam and having been married, even if it seems so stupid now. But my feelings built up gradually and that evening before the wedding, I just couldn't hold back anymore. I was so in love with you and I wanted you madly, the ambience was so great, filled with love and happiness and the alcohol obviously clouded my judgement. I regretted it like hell that evening, after you broke it off, and even more the morning after. In hindsight, I'm not sure I ever would have dared to approach you if I hadn't then, so now when everything worked out to the best I'm actually happy I kissed you that evening. I should have skipped the elevator stunt though – maybe we can have another try some other time. (Partly joking, hope you know that. It might be interesting to explore but I'll leave it up to you if you want to press any stop button).

Making love to you for the first time was one of the most shattering experiences I've had in life. To turn you on, to see and feel you come. You were so amazingly beautiful, flushed and shuddering, moaning my name, it was the undoing of me. I knew I was completely lost in you then. I still love making love to you my darling, there's nothing like it. I'm longing for it now. Kissing you on your neck, down to your collarbone and that shallow dip right below your neck which I love, I could bury my face there forever with my lips to your skin. Then again, I'd always want to continue trailing down to your rosy nipples. I love the way they first are soft, then when I touch them, transform to perfect little stiff buds, like they ask for my lips to enclose them. And I love your breasts, the way they're

perfectly sized to fit in my cupped hands. I could linger there all day too, but then I'd miss your belly. I know you sometimes complain you don't have enough stomach muscles and I use to tease you that you only have to sign up for more PT sessions with me, but you should know that I wouldn't want you any different. I love your every curve, love the dip of your waist, the roundness of your buttocks, love that your shape softly fits with mine when we lie close together. I love how smooth your skin is on the inside of your thighs and the way you part your legs for me when I touch you there, showing me where you want me. The same place where I want to be. I've never wanted any woman like I want you. I don't even think I had made love for real until with you, because I was never present like I am with you, never connected like I am with you when I'm inside you and your eyes are locked in mine. It feels like we're inside each other. You're the one for me.

I was crazy about you from the start, yet it's nothing in comparison to how I feel about you now, when I know you for real. When I have seen you with Sam, with my parents, our friends, your family and know how loving and caring you are. When I know your story and how both your dad and Artan let you down, but you have been willing to let me into your life and trust me - that makes me want to take care of you, but also admire you because you're so strong. When we have spent days and nights together and I realise that things just get better and better, that I love you more for each day. I've just come here and yet I can't wait to get home, so I can continue life with you. This comes from the guy who used to be desperate to go on tour, who thought the Army was my life. Now, all I want is to settle with you and with Sam. I hope that doesn't scare you. Sometimes I'm afraid

that it will, that you won't feel as much as me, but then I look into your green eyes and know that you want to be with me too. Nothing makes me happier.

It's pitch black outside now and one can probably hear all the privates snoring loudly, so I should hit my bunk too. I'm already longing to share your bed again.

I'll write you again tomorrow.

I love you, body and mind.

Always yours,

Charles

P.S. Did I say that I miss you?

I clicked the 'send' button and turned off the computer, grateful for the technology allowing my message to travel across the Earth with the speed of lightning. It made me feel closer to her. I hoped this tour would not make us drift apart, hoped the three months would not feel too long for her at home. Time usually passed quicker for us soldiers, the ones being away, than for those waiting at home. This tour though, I had the feeling that time would pass agonizingly slow for me too. The difference from before was that I always had longed to leave my home behind, now I craved to return. Maybe I should try to apply for a desk job when we came back from this tour, so I could stay home with her and Sam. I was ready to commit to her fully, could picture a family life with her and Sam and someday, if we were

lucky, more children. Before I left for tour I had visited a jeweller's shop and ordered a ring. I hoped it would feel right still to ask her if she wanted it, wanted me, when I returned. I had done it partly because I needed that to look forward to, to bear leaving her.

Before leaving the office and head for my quarters for the night, I left my reverie behind and put on the mask of an Officer of the British Army. Detached, focussed and alert, appearing to have my mind only on the task at hand – but on the inside I would never be that person again. Molly had irrevocably changed me, and I was fucking happy about it.