

A photograph of two people holding hands. The person on the right is wearing a plaid shirt and a brown jacket. The person on the left is wearing a light-colored sleeve. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, possibly a beach or a field. The text is overlaid on the image.

# A SUITABLE COMPANION

An Our Girl FanFiction

Miss Piony

# **A Suitable Companion**

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*Captain Charles James is wheel-chair bound after an accident during a military training exercise and reluctantly seeks assistance. Molly Dawes is a bit lost in life and despite that she is not looking for a job she suddenly finds herself employed by the distant, yet attractive officer. Will the two let each other in enough to be able to help one another?*

*Should be easy to follow even if you never have seen “Our girl” (although I highly recommend the series for enjoying these fantastic characters on screen).*

*All characters except newly invented ones belong to Tony Grounds and BBC.*

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## Chapter 1: An accidental interview

“What previous experience do you have of taking care of a convalescent?”

Truth is - none, but when I open my mouth, I lie so fluently that I almost believe myself, to the blonde, cool woman who for some reason is interviewing me for a job I have no intention applying for.

“I was taking care of my sickly grandmother for many years, almost like a part-time job. I was there for every single day until her very last moment and then I sat by her side, holding her hand as she left this world. Everyone was so sad because she was the most beloved person, but their grief was at least relieved by knowing she had company until the end by someone who loved her.”

I believe myself so much that I can feel a tear finding its way out from the corner of my eye and run down my cheek. This is total bullocks. I’m not a naturally care-taking person, nurse is one of the professions I first ruled out back in the day when one discussed possible career options with the school counsellor. Furthermore, my Nan is alive and well, probably shouting out loud in the bingo-hall as we speak, but no need for the interviewer to know that. I don’t know why I bother. I shouldn’t even be here for this interview, it’s a mistake, but her haughty way of looking at me like I’m unlikely to qualify strikes a competitive nerve in me and now I suddenly want this job more than anything. Even though I don’t know for sure what it actually is.

-O-

This morning started like any other morning in the Dawes household. Except I got up a bit late because I had put the phone alarm on snooze too many times, hurried for the bathroom only to find it occupied by Bella. It is hopeless in our house if you for some reason miss your “slot” in the bathroom. We are so many sharing this bathroom that we have spontaneously fallen into a pattern where everyone follows a schedule for using it in the morning. Usually Nan is first, she is one of them elderly people who for unknown reason wakes up fully alert at 5.30 am even though she does not have to get up for work, which leaves her plenty of time in the bathroom before it is my turn. Then she gets busy; me, followed by my sister Bella, then Mum together with Bonnie, Charlie, Liam and Ella to get the little bleeders ready for school. Last comes dad. He does not really have anything special to get ready for, so like Nan there is plenty of time for him and I think he likes to just sit there for an hour. But me, now, I’m colliding with Bella. Luckily, she is in a good mood and lets me brush my teeth and put on makeup while she is in the shower, saving me from arriving to work more than ten minutes late, breathless after biking faster than usual.

The café owner, Louie, is waiting impatiently for me, demonstratively looking at his watch as I enter the door and hurriedly put on my apron and dive into my place behind the counter. This job is in one way my dream job, yet miles away from it. My dream is to have a café of my own. A really cozy, homely one, with small intimate tables, armchairs, cushions, shelves with magazines, books and games that the guests can borrow, maybe even a fireplace which one can drink hot Cocoa in front of in the winter. Everything will be homemade and made with love, the bread for the tasty sandwiches, the delicious the cookies, cakes and pies. It will smell great, obviously, from the newly baked pastries, the freshly grounded coffee

and the tea. I will be circling around, chatting to the many regulars and convince them to try the new cake recipe I have invented. Of course, this is nothing but a dream so far and the only resemblance with my current job is that the place I work is called a café.

Firstly, I do not own it, Louie does. He is a short, chubby Italian who thinks he has irresistible Italian charm but actually is quite creepy and has a foul temper. Secondly, the café is far from cozy. So much could be done with this room, the lighting, the furniture, right now it is sparse and cold with a mixture of ugly plastic chairs and metallic tables, with unmatched cloths and vases with hideous fake flowers, a ghastly greenish shade on the walls. Thirdly, what we serve is not homemade. Some of it Louie orders ready from a supplier, some is so-called 'bake-off' which means it comes here half ready, we bake it some more in our oven and present it as our own. It does not taste bad, but I'm not very proud of it either. Obviously, the customers know the difference too. By-passers come in and we have enough guests to make ends meet, but it is not like it is a popular and crowded place, or people make an extra detour to get here because of positive reviews on TripAdvisor.

I love to bake. It is my favourite hobby (my second best is reading) and I can spend hours and hours in our kitchen at home trying new recipes, from cookbooks or my own inventions. I would love if I could serve that to the guests, but Louie says that preparing everything from scratch with quality ingredients would be too expensive. All I do here in the café is to put the bake-off in the oven, prepare sandwiches and make coffee.

Today, eleven-ish, the phone rang and as I was busy serving a family of four, Louie answered. When he had hung up, he turned to me;

“We have a home delivery.”

Now, that was a first. As far as I know no one has requested it before and we have not offered it.

“Some posh lady over at Royal Crescent was desperate for an apple pie for her book club gathering this afternoon. She was willing to pay a fair amount for a home delivery.”

Of course, pay enough and greedy Louie would agree to anything. Problem is, we do not have a delivery boy, or a car or even moped for the purpose. Even before he says it, I know that I will have to put my arse on my bike and pedal myself and the pie over there. At least I will get out of here and away from Louie for a while.

Biking to work is okay, because the distance between home and the café happens to be relatively flat. Biking anywhere else in Bath can be a hell because of the steep streets. Even though the distance between the café and Royal Crescent is not that far, it happens to be very steep and when I arrive I’m all flushed and sweaty. Fortunately, the box with the pie is still attached to the carrier. If I had dropped on the way it I’m not sure I would have managed to return for a new one and go back again. For the thousand time I think I should start jogging or some other exercise.

The houses in this street and the entire street itself, are intimidating. The old houses are so amazingly beautiful and just ooze wealth, very far from the house the Dawes family lives in, although I must admit ours looks cozier. I wonder how come

someone living here came up with the idea ordering an apple pie from our café. I get the answer shortly after calling on the door.

The house does not have a regular door bell, instead a brass knocker. (I assume brass, it could be solid gold for what I know but then I guess they would need a permanent guard watching it or someone would steel it, so probably brass after all.) When I knock, it is opened by someone who seems to be a house keeper, and she seems very bothered when she understands I'm there to deliver the pie.

"We usually receive deliveries through the kitchen entrance" she says in complaining voice, pursing her mouth.

How the heck was I to know? But I play along.

"Do you want me to go around to the other entrance?" I ask in my most congenial voice.

"No, no, too late", she replies impatiently. "Just come with me quickly."

I guess it might offend the fine people living in this building if they would happen to see a simple person delivering something. I laugh inside at the thought, there really is a difference between people and *people*, at least some people like to think there is. Holding on to the box with the pie which is my ticket into this fantastic house, I follow the housekeeper towards the kitchen area in the back of the house. The moment I enter the kitchen I fall in love. The rest of the house may be posh, but this is rustic and homily. It is large, with a big wooden kitchen island with an antique finish to it, a huge stove of the kind I only dream of – retro looking but in fact top modern, copper skillets and pans hanging from the roof. I would die to be allowed to bake in this kitchen, but I'm only here to deliver a pie that I have not



baked myself and which I'm not particularly proud of even if I know it is one of the better ready-made pastries we have on the menu. As the housekeeper conjures forth some bills to pay me, she explains how come I'm here.

"Normally, Mrs. James always orders apple pie for the book club afternoon tea from the Courtyard café and today would have been no different, but they called an hour ago and it turned out their pastry chef had vomited – vomited! – in the kitchen, so of course we had to cancel the order and look for something else. Your café was the first one within reasonable distance who was able to deliver."

Ah, that explains it. We were not the first choice and I can hear that she is pissed off that the pastry chef had the audacity to be sick while preparing something for this household. Suspiciously, she opens the box, looks at the pie and sniffs it.

"It is homemade, I presume?"

"Of course." I'm not even ashamed lying to her. It amuses me that the ladies of the book club will eat this pie. I wonder if they will be appalled or if they will not know the difference. She believes me or she is just desperate, but either way she closes the lid of the box, counts the brazen sum that Louie has demanded to deliver this pie and hands it to me.

"That would be all. I'm very busy, can you please see yourself out." It is not a question, rather a request.

"Okay, enjoy the pie. I hope you will find it delicious." I say very politely and she gives me another suspicious glance before she turns her back on me.

It is only when I have already left the kitchen that I realize I did not ask where the other entrance is, the one where she would have preferred that delivery boys, or

girls, entered. Instead of returning and ask, which would most likely annoy her, I decide to leave the same way I came. Just as I stand in the main entrance, for a moment admiring the giant staircase which is winding its way high up above my head, I hear someone say;

“This way please, miss.”

Another woman is standing a few meters away, signaling for me to come with her. Before I have the chance to ask anything, she spins around and disappears through a door. This is very odd, but it would be impolite not to follow, wouldn't it? Or maybe I'm just too curious not to.

She leads me into a small but very elegant office, seats herself behind a desk and sign for me to sit down on the chair in front of her.

“So, what is your name?”

“Molly Dawes.”

She glances down at the papers in front of her.

“Strange... Your name is not here in the list of candidates I got from the agency... Well, maybe they just added one last minute and frankly we can need some more candidates to choose from.”

I have absolutely no idea what she is talking about. Candidates for what?

“As you know, we are looking for a companion for Mr. James, someone to keep him company meanwhile the elderly Mr. James and his wife are away travelling. Someone to ensure he is not alone, help prepare his meals and drive him back and forth to rehab.”

It sounds like an easy job, lucky the person that gets it – but she continues.

“The job will be... a bit of a challenge. Mr. James is not very happy with his current situation and he can be... let’s say moody. His companion needs to be able to handle that.”

I can hardly help letting out a giggle. “Companion”, it sounds like something out of a Jane Austen novel, which is quite fitting as we after all are in Bath. She is one of my favourite authors by the way. Now that the interviewer woman has warned me about that the job may be challenging, she seems to find it necessary to ask of my qualifications as well.

“What previous experience do you have of taking care of a convalescent?”

Aha, so Mr. James has suffered from some kind of disease or injury, therefore he finds himself confined to this house and in need of a companion (giggle inside again). This is the moment where I find myself lying about taking care of Nan without better reason than that the interviewer woman by her sneering looks has provoked my competitive spirit. Also, I’m curious like hell.

She gives my speech some thought, then with a sigh says;

“There are several candidates who have more experience than you, but maybe it will work out. I will let you through to the next step. Mr. James has the final say and will meet all candidates to decide which one he wants. So far no one has passed that step.”

This is just too exciting to tell her a mistake has been made, I’m not looking for a job and head for the door. Instead I let her show me to another room where three others, two women one man, are seated on chairs along the wall, apparently

waiting for their turn. Suddenly a door opens, and a middle-aged, upset-looking woman hurries out and leaves without looking at any of us. My guess is she did not get the job. The next woman, in her fifties and with hair so frizzy it looks like she put it in a waffle iron this morning, disappears through the door. I hear the other two chatting while waiting. It seems they have experience from working with elderly and sick people that far exceeds my made-up one, but as I only want to take a glance at Mr. James, I do not really care. The frizzy haired woman soon appears in the door and with flushed cheeks make her way off as speedily as the previous one, further increasing my curiosity about the challenging Mr. James on the other side of that door. In the next twenty minutes, the same happens with the other woman and the man – it seems they did not get far impressing Mr. James with all their previous experience.

As the door opens for what I assume must be my turn, I hear a harsh voice shout from inside;

“How difficult can it be for you massive cockwombles to find a candidate who doesn’t make me want to kill myself!!!? Is there even one I don’t feel like lobbing out of here at the bare sight of them?”

Just as I giggle about this, the interviewer woman looks out though the door and says;

“Ms. Dawes, Mr. James is ready for you.”

The question is – am I ready for Mr. James?

A suitable companion

***Thanks for cheering me on after publishing the first chapter, I can't tell you how much I appreciate that.***

***Someone pointed out there is another fanfic story based on the same book (Jojo Moyes "Me before you"). Honestly, I didn't know but anyway fanfic is about merging others' stories with your own ideas. Once I've finalized this story I will search for that other one and read it, but not until then because I don't want to feel limited by it. I hope my story will turn out to be different from that. And remember, this is Molly and CJ in the situation of the book played out in Bath, not the book characters living in Bath. I wouldn't want it any other way.***

***Anyway, I have taken the opportunity to write a second chapter while the weekend is still here, before returning to all the seriousness of the weekly life. Hope you enjoy! /X***

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## Chapter 2: An offer too good to be refused

I'm still giggling to myself about "cockwombles" as I enter the room, I just cannot help myself, but he effectively wipes the grin of my face first thing he does.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" he lashes out.

Kind of a rude way to greet someone you have never met before, but he says it with such authority that even though it annoys me like hell, I find myself answering, truthfully;

"Cockwombles, Sir."

'Sir'? Where did that come from? I do not remember ever calling anyone 'Sir' but his voice reminds me of one of those army movies where officers keep screaming at some poor privates crawling around in the mud. I'm so close to laughing again but it does not seem recommendable, so I try to hold back. Apparently, a smirk still makes it to my lips unintentionally.

"What's so fucking hilarious?"

I wonder if all posh twats swear this much, it does not suit his appearance well, but I do not ask. Instead I tell him, again, what I was thinking.

"Sorry, S..., Mr. James (so close I said 'Sir' again!) it's just that your voice reminds me of one of those films where a grim officer is shouting at some sad wankers."

He looks at me sharply, or rather drills his brown eyes into me like he thinks he can see my soul. I'm quite confident he cannot, but it still makes me a bit uncomfortable.

"Are you mocking me?" he snaps. "Do you know what I do for a living?"

"No." By the look of this house I would have thought he does not have to lift a finger to 'earn his living'.

Maybe because I have been frank before, he accepts my answer as the truth, sinks back in his wheelchair and relaxes slightly, then says to himself rather than me and with a gesture to his legs;

"What I did before this anyway..." He sighs but does not offer any further details, leaving me curious.

The blonde interview woman has already made an exit. I assume she expects that I too will be lobbed out of the room soon and she has probably retracted in search for more candidates. Hah! Good luck with that!

I sit down on a chair, seemingly an antique one which is too hard to be comfortable. I will probably not stay long anyway.

"I don't remember asking you to sit down" he says flatly.

"Neither do I, but as it is common courtesy I assumed it must just have slipped your mind. And I thought it would be nice to be on your level rather than looking down on you."

His eyes wander over my face, searchingly, as if to check whether I'm trying to be cheeky or not. He accurately decides I'm sincere and let it pass. He shifts his gaze to look out the window, for a moment it almost seems like he is forgetting I'm there.

Now, I take the opportunity to take a first real peek at him. His voice is impressive and so is he, even if he is a bit thin and bound to a wheelchair, which I immediately can tell that he hates. Now that we both are seated he is obviously taller than me but it is difficult to judge exactly how tall he would be standing up. He has a beautiful face despite that it seems to be frozen in a hard expression, blank of any other emotions than irritation, anger and arrogance. He has a crease between his brows and despite that he is young I get the feeling it is pretty permanent these days. His features are symmetric, sharp, chiseled one could say, which is even more



apparent because he is thin. He has amazing brown eyes and the head is topped with thick, curly dark hair which could do with a trim to look well-groomed. If he looked a bit friendlier, or even put on a smile, he would probably be extremely handsome. Suddenly I feel a need to be the one to provoke a laugh from him, to make him look less stern, but judging from the first impression that would be difficult, bordering to mission impossible.

"Is it permanent?"

I bite my lip, but too late. I had not intended to say that out loud, disturbing the temporary peace and definitely not increasing my chances of thawing this ice cube of a man. His gaze leaves the window, head turning to me. Even his movements are sharp, precise, like a razor blade cutting through the air.

"What?"

"The wheelchair."

"It better fucking not be."

He really has a foul language and efficiently manages to stifle any further attempts from my end to make conversation. But then he suddenly thinks a proper interview question is called for.

"So, miss...?"

"Dawes" I remind him, slightly offended he does not remember but then again, he probably thought he would only keep me here for a minute not making it worth to

memorize my name. Strangely enough I think I have been in here longer than any of the other candidates and he has made no sign of kicking me out yet.

"Miss Dawes, what made you apply for this highly attractive position?"

I can tell he is being sarcastic. Obviously, he has self-distance enough to realise that this may not be my, or anyone's, dream job. I like that. Once again, I decide to be honest, because I have nothing to lose. Louie is waiting for me back at the café and I have already over-stayed.

"I didn't."

"What are you saying?"

"I didn't apply for this job."

He stares at me like I'm mad.

"Then what exactly are you doing here?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I came to deliver an apple pie for Mrs. James book club."

He opens his mouth in disbelief but it seems like I temporarily have deprived him of words. Second best to make him laugh, could possibly be making him look like a fish gasping for air - and at least I have achieved that. But I cannot leave him suffocating, can I? So, I add a little more info.

"That blond woman thought I was a candidate and pulled me in for an interview. Then one thing just led to another."

It is probably pure frustration over the clearly crazy person in front of him, but I think I'm seeing a hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

"Was it any good?"

"What?"

"The apple pie?"

"I wouldn't recommend it."

Again, the hint of a smile.

"You're refreshingly honest."

Wow, that is close to a compliment, but I cannot linger further and I rise from the chair.

"Anyway, I better be going. My employer is probably going bananas I've not returned. Key person to the business and all that." Lame attempt of a joke from my end.

"I haven't said we're finished."

The harsh tone in his voice is back. Yes, it is very clear that he is used to people doing as he says, but I think some resistance may be good for him. And if it is not, well, I cannot resist giving some resistance anyway.

"No, I did. I've told you this is a mistake. I was just being curious and I shouldn't have taken up your time. My apologies."

I head for the door, but turn around there and cannot refrain from saying;

"And a *companion*? Seriously, who wants a job with that title? Only someone who had read too many Jane Austen novels."

He does not know I have read *all* Jane Austen novels, more than once, but I feel it is a good punch line. He raises one eyebrow, in surprise/annoyance/amusement - I don't know, but I'm satisfied to have provoked a reaction. I giggle on the inside like so many times before during this brief encounter. This has been fun! Challenging and unexpected but fun. I would not want to have him as my boss though, he would be far too bossy – even worse than Louie I reckon.

"Good bye, Mr. James."

"Good bye, Ms. Dawes."

When I close the door behind me, I feel my shoulders drop a decimeter or so. I was not aware of it in there, but now I realise they were up to my ears from the tension. Good luck to the poor bastard that accepts the job, he or she will have a tough time. Blonde woman was right about the challenge. I compose myself for a minute, then find my way through the corridor to the stairs and further down to the entrance. It strikes me that it must be difficult to get around here in a wheelchair - but that is not my problem.

I feel relief when the front door closes behind me as a signal this surreal experience is over, but it does not last long. I hear the door open again and the blonde interview woman comes scurrying after me, her high heels clattering on the paved walk in a stressed manner I would have expected to be unlike her.

"Ms. Dawes!", she pants. "I need your details! Address and phone number. I don't have that from the agency."

That is because I'm not looking for a job, you morons. No, I should be kind. After all, I have given her the impression I'm applying for the job even if both I and Mr. James know I don't want it.

"I'm sorry, I don't want the job."

Now she looks desperate and twists her hands.

"But he insists you're the only one he wants!"

What?! Did he not hear what I just said?

"I'm sorry. There has been a mistake and I'm in fact unavailable to be his companion at this point. I told him as much." Oh, I just cannot help smirking at *that* word again.

"He said you might say that and asked me to tell you the salary..." she holds out a piece of paper with a figure written on it. I take a glance just for the sake of it but it will not change anyth... Holy fuck! Are they kidding me? It takes me about six months to earn the same in the café, tip included. Clearly, they got it down wrong, but still, I would not want come working for him until hell freezes over. She seems to be able to read my face.

"He also said, if you were still hesitating I was at liberty to offer this..."

She scribbles a new figure, considerably higher than the first.

"Are you serious?"

"I can assure you we are, Miss."

Can I say no to this? I quickly deliberate the pros and cons. I'm not attached to the job at the café and I don't particularly like it even on a good day. This job will probably be hell, but I would be able to put away so much money that I would be one step closer to the dream of my own café. I will probably regret it within less than a week, but I hear myself saying;

"Okay then, if you want me so badly."

Eagerly she shakes my hand with perfectly manicured fingers. "I promise you won't regret this."

I have the uneasy feeling she is not in a position to promise me anything of the sort.

"Let's go arranging the paper work"

Now she has returned to be the cool and efficient woman I first met and within minutes of congratulating myself of escaping, I enter Royal Crescent no. 10 for the second time.

-O-

When I return to the café, Louie is pissed off both because I have been gone for much longer than could reasonably be expected and because he just got a call from the James household, saying they were not pleased at all with the apple pie and it

'did certainly not taste homemade'. The latter is hardly my fault but he seems to blame me anyway.

"You cannot even deliver a pie to the satisfaction of the customer!" he yells at me.

"If you mean that I can't make something taste like it's homemade just by taking it for a ride on my bike, then I think you're right."

"Don't be smart! You should be glad I don't fire you!"

It feels so amazingly great that I, instead of just swallowing his insults, am able to say;

"Save yourself the trouble. I quit!"

And I'm out the door, slamming it after me and leaving behind one surprised, chubby Italian. Oh, I have always dreamed of making such an exit. This has indeed been a very interesting day.

Yes, it feels great. It would feel even better if I was to start working for someone else than Mr. James on Monday. I'm quite sure I do not know what I have gotten myself into, this is very muddy waters. I have not even seen a proper job description, it all went so fast. I sincerely hope it does not include wiping his arse. If it does, I think I will find myself looking for a new employment very soon.

*I just can't seem to stay away from writing these days although my husband thinks I'm doing some boring work stuff right now. Only you know I'm not. This chapter was a bit difficult to write because I'm eager to move on to Molly's first day at work but I want to set the scene around her first; her family, friends and, tada! - boyfriend. I was also distracted by the fact that events belonging later in this story emerged very clearly in my head and I first had to write two chapters about that. Now time to return and tie the story together so I can get to those chapters sooner rather than later, because I personally really like them and hardly can wait to publish ;)*

*In case you wonder, Katie in this chapter is Katie from basic training in the prequel. I always thought it was so nice how they had each other's back despite, or maybe because of, them being so different and I thought it was a pity Molly did not get an opportunity to develop her female friendships further in series 1. She had such shitty friends before and it seemed she deserved good ones. After all, great friends are at least as important as a man in one's life.*

*Hope you enjoy and as always, thanks for R&R! /X*

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### Chapter 3: Near and dear ones

It is Friday, I have quit my job and the new one does not start until Monday, which means I have an extra-long weekend ahead of me and an excellent opportunity to



hang out with my boyfriend Smurf. Or, Smurf is what everyone calls him to tease him about his protruding ears but he insists on being called Dylan. I would be happy to oblige him if I did not forget it all the time. It is just that Smurf suits him so well. Smu...Dylan, is Welch, originally from Newport but he moved here a couple of years ago when he started uni. That is how we met, we moved in the same student circles before I dropped out of uni three years ago, but we have only been going out together for a little over one year since we accidentally bumped into each other again.

We are serious, I think. I know Smurf thinks we are serious, and I do too most of the time, it is just that sometimes I feel a hesitation inside. I *do* know why, but I'm also quite certain it will not get any better than this – relationships, I mean. I wish I could just stop thinking so much. Besides being quite cute (although a bit short), Smurf is clever, ambitious, kind (most of the time), sort of funny although a bit dry - and he has the advantage that he usually does not ask too much of me. I'm not talking about sex, even if our sex is not the most steaming one could imagine which does not always make me so keen on it, but emotionally. He seems quite content with me even though I'm not overwhelmingly infatuated with him. At least as long as I do not show potential feelings towards someone else. I have noticed on one or two occasions that he can get quite jealous, but it mostly amuses me. There is just something about a short, Welch guy with protruding ears that makes jealousy a bit hard to take seriously. I'm not trying to make him jealous on purpose though, I'm not the kind of girl that likes to play around with others' feelings, but there were a few occasions when he got the wrong end of the stick and got really mad without any real reason. Most of the time we just trot on though.

Here I was thinking that Smurf and I might spend the whole day together, doing something romantic or fun maybe, but it turns out he has lectures he does not want to miss and he proposes to meet in a pub in the evening instead. I'm not too disappointed. My second option, which actually might be even better, is to meet up with my friend Katie. It has been a while as I'm usually busy with work and Smurf and she is busy with her studies. I got to know her in uni too, we started together three years ago. Sometimes I think I may have been avoiding her because it hurts to see where she is now and know I could have been there too if I had continued, but things turned out as they did and there is no point to be bitter and it would be stupid to lose a good friend over it.

Unlike Smurf, Katie is thrilled to hear I have the day off and on the spot, decides to ditch all her classes. We meet up outside her student house and bike to a nearby café. Not Louie's café obviously, I would not want to show myself there until his Italian temper has cooled off. Probably not later either as there are many better places to go for coffee and cake.

One thing I like with Katie is that no matter if one week, one month or even a year pass between the occasions we see each other, she remains the same. She looks the same; sturdy figure, straight fair hair always cut to shoulder length, practical and correct clothing and shoes - and she is the same. I can always trust her. She does not have a false or malicious cell in her body and she would always have the back of her friends, of me, and she has a lovely quiet sense of humour. She is quite shy and modest though, so too few realise her fantastic qualities, especially among boys. She has not had a boyfriend for as long as I have known her and only once has she confided in me about being in love. Surprisingly enough the object of her

feelings was one of those athletic blokes who only seemed to have half a brain, unfortunately the kind who is very unlikely to fall for a girl like Katie.

It is this in-between-season when it is difficult to know what to wear, because one day your hands are freezing in the morning and you wish you had mittens, and the next day one has to remove the knitted sweater one put on because it is too hot. Today, the September sun is shining on us as we sit down with our coffees outside the café. It is so good to see her.

"I have missed you!"

"Me too, missed you so Molly. Why haven't we seen each other for so long?"

Right now, it seems like too many unimportant things came in between, we must clearly learn to prioritise better because it is so great when we finally meet. Fortunately, one of the best things with true friends, is that even when a long time has passed since you last met, you just pick up from where you left.

"Tell me everything! What has happened in your life?"

She tells me she has passed all courses with flying colours, no surprise there but I'm happy for her. She tells me gossip about people I know since we studied together, which both makes me laugh and feel sentimental. Once I was part of this, the student life but it feels so distant now. Like I was another Molly then.

Then she delivers some shocking news.

"I have a boyfriend." She blushes and it is so cute.

"Katie! We have been here for half an hour and only now you tell me you have a boyfriend! I'm very upset!" I'm not, I'm just thrilled for her and want to hear *everything*.

"Do I know him?"

"You know who it is. It's Sammy Worthington."

"*The* Sammy Worthington?!"

"Yes."

She looks incredibly pleased, happy and in love and no wonder because Sammy Worthington is the same half-brained athlete she has fancied forever but that none of us thought she would ever get together with. Apparently, he is equipped with a full brain after all and they were paired up during a course in business analytics and he ended up realizing the many qualities of Katie. Of course, she does not put it that way, but that is what I can make out of it. Right now, I could kiss Sammy Worthington, because I'm so happy he is making Katie happy.

"How long have you been going out?"

"Four months. We're actually talking about moving in together."

I still feel happy for her, but it also reminds me people are moving on with their lives – and I don't know if I'm ready to. As if she can read my mind, she asks;

"How about you and Smurf?"

"What about us?"

"You're still seeing each other, right?"

"Yeah."

"So, have you thought about moving in together?"

"He has mentioned it..."

"But?"

"I don't think I'm ready."

She looks at me with sad, sympathetic eyes, almost more than I can bear because she knows too well why I hesitate, so I change the subject.

"Anyway, I quit my job at the café yesterday. That's why I have the day off."

"You did!? Why? Or maybe I shouldn't be surprised, Louie was always an asshole and you were too good for that place."

Laughingly I tell her what happened the day before. To Katie, always in control and never making an unplanned move, this just seems crazy.

"Do I get it right; on Monday you start working for a moody man and you don't even know exactly what the job is?"

"Yupp, but don't forget that the salary is extraordinary. For the first time, I might have the chance to save a sum large enough to make a bank interested in making the rest of the investment that I need for my very own café."

## A suitable companion

"Still, it's crazy. How old is he?"

I'm not sure, I think that because he is thin so his bone structure is so visible and because he had that crease between his brows and looked super-serious, he seemed older than he really is.

"Around thirty maybe."

"Is he good-looking?"

"In aristocratic kind of stiff way. Come to think of it, he would make an excellent Mr. Darcy."

We both giggle. We have seen the scene when Colin Firth's Mr. Darcy emerges out of a pond with a wet white shirt glued to his body about a thousand times.

"Molly Dawes, it sounds like you need to be careful or you'll make Smurf jealous."

"No way, there is nothing, *nothing*, like that ever going to happen with that schmuck. I'm sure that feeling is very mutual. This will be a purely employish relationship."

"That's not even a word."

"Who cares, you get what I mean." And we laugh again.

A few hours later we part, filled up with the energy one can only get from a large portion of girl talk, but Katie will join me and Smurf in the pub later that evening and she has promised to bring Sammy.

I head home, biking through streets bordered by autumn coloured trees, sun in my face and I feel happier about my life than I have in a long time. I'm almost never home this time of the day on a weekday and it is unusually calm as the little kids are still in school and Bella is at work at the local nail bar. It gives me and mum a rare opportunity to sit down and chat alone. Despite that I just had a cappuccino, I'm very much in the mood for tea and biscuits with her.

When the little kids were small she used to be a stay-at-home-mum, but now she is working part time in their school. She is not a teacher but an "extra resource" and very well-liked by everyone. Having six kids of her own it is no wonder she has good hands with others. I think she would like to work full-time but it is just not possible until the little ones get older. God knows we could need the money. Dad is between works as so many times before, this time he was fired because of 'attitude problem'. He is the nicest, most loving man in the world, as long as you do not piss him off and as long as he is not pissed. Unfortunately, both happens more frequently than one would wish for. So far, I have given almost everything I earn to the household but when I start my new job, I will continue to give the same amount as before and save the rest. Already before I have started it, it makes me feel terrible but I must try to save for the café. I must save for something of my own. So, I tell mum everything about my new job, except that I accepted it for the salary and what it is.

My mum is a much more care-taking person than I am, so she just thinks it sounds great.

"That's so good of you Molly, taking care of a crippled man."

Funny, even though Mr. James is stuck in his wheelchair I find it difficult to identify him as a crippled man. I rather think of him as a very vital man, trapped in a wheelchair – but maybe that is just semantics. He cannot walk either way and he needs my assistance.

"Come on mum, it's a job like any other. It's not like I'm turning into Florence Nightingale, you know that's not me."

She just smiles and pinches my cheek like I still was a three-year-old.

"I think you are better taking care of people than you give yourself credit for Molly Dawes."

I suppose mothers always think the best of their children.

After a while, Bella comes home from work. She complains about Mr. Wong, the owner of the nail bar. I know exactly what he is like because I used to work there too when I was younger. Luckily my good results in school rendered me a grant for uni so I got away from him. Without the grant I would never have been able to afford to study. Bella is smart too, but more the street-smart kind that does not necessarily give good grades. I have tried to encourage her to do something else, but she is happy for now – unless Mr. Wong has a bad day. After all, she is only twenty so she has plenty of time to decide on her life. I'm only relieved she has managed to turn twenty without getting pregnant with some wanker. Since she was thirteen I have worried every time I have seen her snog one of her many boyfriends, but now I finally feel she is old enough for me to relax. I still wish her something more than being stuck with a wanker plus baby, or being a single mum, but at least



she is a grown-up now. Or nearly, she will still always be my little sister. She never thanked me for nagging her about protection, but that is what elder sisters do for their younger ones anyway.

Unlike mum, she teases me about my new job instead of congratulating me to it, just as I would expect of Bella.

"Molly, you know you will panic, you're so not a nurse. You will probably push the wheelchair down the stairs and kill the poor sod"

"If I do that, it will only be because he deserved it. And I will not do it until I have made him change his will so I inherit all his money."

We giggle and mum pretends to be appalled.

"You girls are just terrible!" Then she puts her arms around us both. "But I love you so much anyway."

I feel the same. The Dawes family may be messed up, and there is definitely too many of us, but I love every single one of them and I know they love me.

***If not already apparent, I don't plan to be very faithful to the book, I was just inspired by the situation. So, if you loved the book you should probably read that again, but I hope you enjoy this too as much as I love writing it :)***

***And I'm sorry, Molly will not start work in this chapter either, but we'll get there. I promise.***

***As always, thanks for your comments on the previous chapter, it's really spurring me on.***

***X***

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## Chapter 4: An evening to forget

In the evening I bike over to the pub where I'm to meet Smurf, Katie, Sammy and maybe some other friends. Smurf and I have decided to meet a bit earlier than the rest to grab something to eat and hang out just the two of us for a while.

As Smurf is not originally from Bath, he rents a room in a house which he shares with other students. They are five guys living in that house, sharing the bathroom and kitchen and I avoid going there if I can because it is not very clean. I mean, the Dawes house is messy, but five grown up men living together can apparently be completely incompetent when it comes to cleaning away dust bunnies from the floor, removing cooking spill and dirty dishes in the kitchen leaving it overall sticky, or rinsing the bathroom basin clean from stubble and spitted tooth paste - so I prefer not to touch any surfaces in their common areas. Smurf's room is quite okay

though and I sleep there a few times a week but sneak home for breakfast and shower. I would rather die of starvation than eat anything cooked in that kitchen. He for his part thinks my home is already too crowded by my family and he has a point there. This means that whenever we want to do something more social, like hanging out with friends or have a meal, we do it in our friends' homes or out, in pubs and cafés. This is the main reason we have our meal in the pub tonight, not that he wants to invite me to dinner. As Smurf is on a student budget I know he expects me to pay for myself. Maybe I would have either way because I have never really understood why the guy should pay, but I must admit that it would be nice if he offered to sometimes, just as a romantic gesture so I could choose to say no or yes. But I guess we are just one of those modern equal couples. Do not get me wrong, I very much like to know I can take care of myself, but every now and then it would be nice to feel that he *wants* to take care of me. Maybe that is just a stupid outdated girlish thought that belongs in the sixties.

I'm in a good mood after the day with Katie, mum and Bella, and Smurf seems to be too as he greets me with a brief kiss. We find ourselves a booth to sit in and order some burgers, crisps and beer. I would love to tell him about everything that has happened since yesterday, but he immediately gets started talking about his day. He is really excited about the accounting lecture he had today, apparently by a famous guest lecturer and I nod along as he tells me every detail even though accounting is hardly a passion of mine. Sometimes I find it hard to be excited about the same things as him. He is a person who likes to dig into the details of matters, especially debit, credit, revenue and other (boring) accounting stuff. And well, that is not me. I probably ruled out accountant as a possibly future job at the same time as I did nurse.

After half an hour of reiterating the lecture as detailed as one possibly could without completely duplicating it, and me patiently practicing the art of being an active listener, he finds it fitting to ask how my day was. In all his excitement he has already downed two pints meanwhile I only have sipped half of my first and I hope it will not be one of *those* evenings, but so far so good.

I finally tell him about that I quit the café and was offered a new job. For some reason I change the story slightly when I tell it to him, I'm not sure why. I do not tell him how challenging Mr. James seems to be and I do not tell him that he could be really handsome if he was not such a prick and maybe gained a little weight. In fact, I think I manage to give Smurf the impression that Mr. James is elderly and I do nothing to correct it.

"That's great baby. I never liked the way the Louie-guy looked at you."

We have left the table to stand by the bar as he wants another beer, and when he says it he grabs my arse a bit too hard. I do not appreciate it much, both because it feels rough rather than loving and because we are in public, so I shake his hand off.

"Don't be such a bore Molly."

"I just don't like it when you touch me like that in front of others."

"You're my girlfriend, no one will mind."

"I mind. And anyway, Louie was not the reason I quit. The other job just seems better."

"Taking care of a crippled guy?" he looks amused and can see he is about to make another comment about it, when we are interrupted by Katie and her boyfriend joining us.

Sammy is the pleasant surprise of the evening. One after one he deflates all the prejudices I had about him, like pricking holes in a bunch of balloons. He is athlete and extremely good-looking in the somewhat bulgy-muscled way that is not really my type, but obviously Katie's. He is also smart and funny like usually only guys who have not been able to depend on their looks are, making him an exception from the rule. The best of his traits, though, is that he seemingly adores Katie. I could have forgiven him many faults just for being in love with her, but I genuinely like him. And they match each other better than anyone would have thought. Compared to his tall, athletic frame she suddenly looks almost petite and being in love has turned her very pretty. I'm so happy for them, but also envious, which may seem ridiculous because I'm here with Smurf – but I know we don't quite have what they do and for a moment I long for another place in time. As usual, I do not allow myself to linger there because it is useless and painful.

As I feared earlier, this turns out to be one of those evenings when I get a bit embarrassed over Smurf. When Smurf is sober, his personality is quite dry. I would not go as far as calling it humourless but he is not the one to make me laugh out loud. After a few pints he is very different. His humour does not improve, but he *thinks* he is hilarious. Talking he does quite much sober too, but when he is drunk he gets very loud and rude. Also, he gets jealous easily and on occasions even mean. I know he does not mean to be so I forgive him, but as long as I'm soberer than him, which I usually am, it makes me embarrassed.

By the time Katie and Sammy arrive I can see by the glossiness of his eyes that he has already had a pint or two too many. He seems to like Sammy, impressed by his looks and his athletic track record – he is on a few different of the university's sports teams. Smurf attempts male bonding with stale jokes that I do not find very entertaining and by the look on their faces, neither do Katie and Sammy.

Like any newfound lovers, Katie and Sammy have a hard time being separated from one another even by a small space and constantly find ways to touch each other little and when Sammy cannot refrain from giving Katie a long passionate kiss that makes me look in the other direction because I'm a bit embarrassed at witnessing such public affection up close, Smurf loudly says to me so everyone else can hear;

"Look there, Molly, there's a girl who doesn't mind her guy fondling her even with people around. It's only you who are so stiff you won't even let me touch your arse."

"Smurf, please..."

"You're so prudish Molly Dawes." He turns to the bar for another beer, I'm not sure how many he has had by now but he certainly does not need a refill.

"Should you really..."

"DON'T even think about saying it! I'm fully capable of deciding what I should drink myself!"

I do not finish the sentence, I realise he is already past the point of this evening when there is any point trying to interfere. Now it is just a question of how bad it will be. With the new beer in hand, he turns to Katie and Sammy, who look a bit

uncomfortable about the verbal exchange we have had but Smurf seems completely oblivious to it.

"Have you heard that Molly got herself a new job? A real top job! She will take care of a crippled old man!" His voice is filled with mockery now.

I look at Katie and invisibly shake my head. She gets it immediately and does nothing to correct Smurf's idea that it is an old person I will take care of. Smurf rants on.

"Oh Molly, you just keep exceeding yourself. You dropped uni to work in a café, and now you leave the café to take care of a cripple. Will you have to wipe his arse?"

I have wondered that too, but the way he says it, it sounds so mean, like he despises me and what I do. He bursts into laughter, thinking himself hilarious and never minding the rest of us finds his comment offensive. Now he turns to Katie.

"But Katie, you're such a goodie good girl, stays on track with uni and now you got yourself a man. He's clearly out of your league but he seems happy, so you must do something right. Maybe you let him shag you more often than Molly lets me."

I see their faces crinkle in disgust and Sammy clenches his fists. He would have taken a swing at Smurf if Katie had not taken hold of his elbow to stop him. I just want to sink through the surface of the earth.

"I'm so sorry, he's had too much to drink."

"Don't talk like I'm not here! And I've only gotten started!" Smurf slurs.

"We should go home, Smurf."

I'm not too far away from crying, why does he have to do this? Why can we not have a normal evening and just enjoy ourselves?

"It's Dylan to you! ... I'm not going home. I'm going to stay and have some fun, maybe find some girls who like when I touch them."

Now he sounds like a sulking child, although a mean one, and I know I will not manage to get him to come with me, unless I ask Sammy to throw him over his shoulder and carry him and I would not do that. Honestly, I think I need to get away from him for a while. Get some air and clear my head.

"I'm leaving now, I've had enough of this."

I turn to leave, Katie and Sammy joining me. I hear Smurf shout behind me.

"Just go Molly Daaaawes, get your stiff little arse out of here! I'm anyway only second best to you!"

The worst thing is, he is right.

I said one of Smurf qualities is that he usually does not have higher expectations on my feelings for him than I can deliver, but tonight is clearly an exception to that and even if he has been an idiot, I'm the one leaving with a bad conscience and a feeling I need to make it up to him tomorrow when he is sober and nice again. He would probably not be drinking too much or be mean if I just could give him what he needs.



A suitable companion

As we leave, I feel Katie's arm around my shoulder, pulling me to her.

"Oh, Molly you shouldn't have to put up with this."

But I don't expect that I can get any better, not when I'm not willing to invest my soul in it.

***Apologies to any fans of Smurf for making him an asshole, but having seen Iwan Rheon in the role of Ramsay Bolton in Game of thrones, it's not that difficult to picture him as a bad guy I think.***

***Oh, just love this – husband away on business trip, kids tucked in bed - which means I can write undisturbed. Let's see where that will lead us.***

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## Chapter 5: Beginnings

I'm relieved to leave the weekend behind me and focus on something else. Smurf called me, hungover, on the Sunday and apologised for being too drunk. I noticed he did not apologise for what he *said* but I choose to ignore it. Maybe he does not remember. Also the feeling remains that it is partly my fault, so I should not be too hard on him. Anyway, we spend the afternoon in his bed, watching film and having some make-up sex although not of the passionate kind. I should be happy we are on good terms again, but I just feel empty.

When I arrive to Royal Crescent no. 10, Monday morning, I briefly consider if I ought to find the kitchen entrance or if I will be allowed to enter through the main door as an employee of the household. I decide for the main door. After all it is 2018, not 1918 and people should not need different entrances. Just as I knock on the impressive door, I realise that I will likely meet the housekeeper again and before I have thought of a plan how to get out of that, she stands in front of me. She immediately recognises me and looks like she has eaten a lemon.

"If you have come to take back that horrible pie, you are too late. We have already thrown it in the garbage."

"I'm sorry. I did not bake it, only deliver it and I can try to make it up to you at some point, but that's not why I'm here."

"Then why on earth are you here?"

"I will start working for Mr. James today."

"Mr. James or young master James?"

She is funny, 'young master James'. I wonder if they have a master Skywalker, or even master Yoda too. That could make things really interesting. I refrain from asking though, as I suspect I'm already not a favourite of the housekeeper's and she is highly unlikely to get the Starwars reference.

"Young master James." I reply with my best poker face on.

She lets me in but tells me to wait in the entrance.

"I need to confirm this" she says.

I wonder if they usually have a lot of intruders saying they are here for work, as she feels that is needed. She soon returns and gives me a nod to come with her.

"I don't know how you pulled this off, going from delivering pie to work here" she mutters and again has the lemon-look.

"My name is Molly Dawes."

I know that hardly explains things, but I'm trying to be friendly. She barely gives me a glance and answers;

"I'm Mrs. Hutchins. I have been working here for 22 years. I don't expect that *you* will be around that long."

"Neither do I, so at least we agree on something."

Probably shouldn't have said that, because I think it may be an insult to her that I don't plan to stay here that long even if *she* does not want me here. She just snorts and walk on, bringing me to the small office where I first met blonde interview woman and now she is there again. Her name is Amelia Saunders and I learn that she helps attending to the elderly Mr. James business when needed but is not a permanent feature of the house like Mrs. Hutchins. Today her task is to welcome me and let me know what I'm expected to do in this house.

"Welcome, Ms. Dawes. Good to see you again. You have already meet Mr. James and you will again, and then I will introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. James today. They are leaving for a longer period of travel tomorrow, not to return until Christmas and they want to meet you before they depart."

That explains why they were so desperate to hire someone quickly. The old folks want to go travelling but not leave the son alone. Come to think of it, isn't it a bit odd that he is living in his parents' house? I mean, I live in my parents' house, but I'm only 23 and I don't have any money. He is around thirty and money does not seem to be an issue, plus I get the feeling that this wheelchair thing is quite recent. I thought only weird people stayed with their parents that age, but then again, he has done nothing to prove he isn't weird, has he. Well, I will probably learn more today. Ms. Saunders continues.

"I will let Mr. James tell you about himself first and if you feel you have further questions after that you may turn to me. Your fixed tasks during the day, will be to drive him back and forth to rehab or if he wants to go anywhere else, and to keep him company whenever he wishes you to. The rest of the time you may spend as you like. There is a TV room you can use and you may borrow what you want in the library. We expect you to work five days a week, during the weekends he can manage with Mrs. Hutchins."

I'm wondering if I might sometime be allowed to borrow that wonderful kitchen and bake. I doubt that Mrs. Hutchins would want me there, but maybe if I bribe her by making a pie of my own. But I decide it is too early to ask, will do that once I have settled a bit.

"Mr. James rooms are on the second floor."

Rooms, not room – nice.

"How does he manage to get up and down the stairs with the wheelchair?"

"After it happened, they installed an elevator for the purpose at the back-end of the house, so that's no problem. Your biggest challenge will be to get him and the wheelchair in and out of the car but the house is adapted, including his bathroom."

Now I must ask the question I'm dreading.

"And how about that, eh... can he manage by himself... in the bathroom?"

She smirks. "Yes, fortunately, otherwise I wouldn't have hired a young girl to tend to him. There are some limits you know. He manages very well to shower, go to the

toilet and get dressed. He does not always get out of bed but that is due to other reasons than physical limitations."

I feel myself blushing, but I'm terribly relieved about that. It means I might not have to look for a new employment in a week or two at least.

Now it is time to meet Mr. James. Even if this is the entire purpose of my job, I'm dreading it slightly. I know I was quite cheeky last time and I enjoyed it. The difference is that then it did not matter to me. *Now* he is my employer, my boss and I preferably do not want him to fire me right away. Anyway, he decided to hire me despite that I was cheeky so maybe I don't have to hold back the rebelliousness he provokes in me entirely.

Ms. Saunders brings me up the stairs to meet him anyway. She stops outside a door.

"Here we are. Take some time to get acquainted and I'll come back for you in an hour to take you to see Mr. and Mrs. James."

She knocks on the door, then turns and leaves and I'm on my own.

"Come in."

That impressive voice again. I take a deep breath and decide I'm as prepared as I can be.

It is a really nice room that I enter. Large and filled with light from the tall windows. The furniture and details are different from what I have seen so far in this house, more masculine and sparse, less antique-looking. The shade of colours are more to

the grey and brown end of the palette than the pastel one. Still, it is not sterile but quite cozy somehow. It is clearly his room, or one of them.

He sits in the wheelchair with a book in his lap, near one of the windows and the sunlight falls on him. It lights up his chiseled features and highlights his dark locks so they look golden around the edges. He could very well replace the guy in the painting *The dying dandy* or be the hero of some epic novel, but he is not. He is a grumpy guy, bound to a wheelchair and now I'm embarking on the daunting task to cheer him up. Ms. Saunders did not mention that as a part of the job, but surely that must be one of the purposes of keeping him company.

"Welcome, Ms. Dawes. Glad you decided for a career-change."

At least I get a nicer welcome than last time.

"Well, you kind of forced me, Mr. James."

"Forced you?"

"By offering a salary I couldn't refuse."

"Right, you're here for the money" he says flatly.

Why else would I be here? Because of his charming company? Allow me to laugh. Anyway, it is good that we have established that even if I'm here to socialize with him, it is as his employee, not his friend or whatever. I take a seat in an armchair. It is almost too soft and I feel like I'm disappearing in it. I try to find a good position but it feels a bit like sitting in one of those colourful bean bags one had as a kid - it is comfortable but impossible to sit gracefully. Almost impossible to get out of too,

and I feel myself wriggle a great deal before I manage. I change to a chair. He has watched my efforts with a raised eyebrow.

"Are you comfortable now, Ms. Dawes?" he smirks.

Great, it seems like I have already managed to amuse him, although unintentionally.

"I am, thank you very much. But seriously, how does one sit in that armchair? I felt like it was going to swallow me."

"So did I when I sat in it once, which is why I never sit in it again. Mum bought it because she thought it looked good but obviously she never tried sitting in it."

"You could have warned me."

"I could, but that wouldn't have been as much fun."

Asshole.

We are quiet for a short while. I'm not sure if I'm expected to continue speaking or if he will, but it feels like this is get-to-know-each-other-time, to at least on a first superficial level navigate who we are. He does not make a move, just stares me out, so finally I feel compelled to say something.

"What do you do?"

"What do you mean? I'm sitting here with you, obviously."

"Your job, I mean. You mentioned last time that you had one."



"I did?"

First, he does not continue, but when he does it becomes obvious he just wanted to keep up the suspense before playing a trump card.

"I'm a captain. In the army."

Now, there might be a twinkle in his eyes as he awaits my reaction but I cannot keep my jaw from dropping. Probably I'm the one looking like a fish gasping for air right now, remembering my comment about cruel officers too well. Ah, shit, there I put my foot in it. Seriously, what are the odds?

"For real?"

"No, a fake one" he says dryly but I can see he is laughing on the inside.

"That explains things."

"Explains what?"

"Your voice. That I get the impression you are used to people doing what you tell them to."

When I say it, I wonder if I might cross the line for what he thinks is okay already, but he seems to simply accept my answer.

"Well, good to know I still have it in me" he says. "It has been some time since I yelled at privates."

I hope he has not planned to transfer that yelling to me instead.

"What happened to you? If you don't mind me asking."

"You don't beat about the bush, do you?"

"Would you prefer that?"

"Actually, no. I prefer your bluntness and it's no secret, although I prefer not to think of it."

He takes a deep breath as if to prepare himself.

"Me and my section were on a training exercise in the Belizean jungle. It was supposed to be challenging and fun, to practice our skills, but not dangerous. It all changed when I happened to step on an animal trap hidden in the vegetation, and got my legs pierced by sharp wooden spears. One leg got a deep flesh wound, but the other one was worse because it was penetrated right through, even through the bone. I found myself in the middle of the jungle seriously injured and unable to walk."

When he tells his story, I feel my body going tense from just imagining the pain of getting one's legs penetrated by wooden spears. I once stepped on a rusty nail, that was bad enough.

"Our medic managed to stop the bleeding, but there was not much more to be done then and there. We didn't even dare to remove the spear because I would likely have bled out. We decided that the others would return to base to get help, as they wouldn't be able to carry me walking through the jungle. Only our medic stayed behind with me. We were trapped there for several days, while the others tried to

get help and then find their way back to us. I won't tell you all the details but there were complications and they could not return for us as quickly as we had hoped. We ran out of painkillers, we ran out of food and clean water. I have been through a lot but I have never been so sure I was going to die. The pain was extreme and there was nothing to relieve it. I could feel it taking over my body, my mind. Our medic tried to keep the wounds clean but in that damp heat they soon got badly infected. By the time I finally was medi vac'ed to hospital I was delirious and got there so that they just barely managed to save my legs from needing amputation. So, things could be worse now than they are, but I hate this. Hate being tied to this wheelchair and not know for sure if I will be able to walk again. Or go back to being a soldier again."

The story was so painful, so rough, yet he delivers it like he was talking about someone else and ends it abruptly almost without showing any emotion, even if he says he *feels* hate.

"I don't know what to say. It must have been hell."

"It was. But this is worse."

I believe that it is, for someone like him. He must feel caged.

"How long ago?"

"Six months now, and this is how far I have come. Progress feels so damn slow that some days I just want to give up trying. The injuries are healed on the surface, with scars of course, but the muscle tissue, nerves and even the bone were damaged and

it takes longer to heal, even longer to be strong again and I cannot be sure I will fully recover."

"But you go to rehab, I understand?"

"Yeah, I have a whole team looking after me at Headley Court. Physiotherapist, doctor, even a psychologist even if I'm not sure what that's good for. Sometimes I just feel like a guinea pig in a lab under their watchful eyes."

Psychologist. Makes me wonder if there is more to it than he has told me, more than just physical damage, but I decide it is too early days to ask.

"I understand I will be your driver."

He nods "Yes, that's expected"

"And keep you company."

"Well, let's see about that. It's mum who is convinced I need some company while they're gone, but I'm not so sure about that. I would have been satisfied if they had hired a driver – but she insisted. So now I must put up with you. Luckily, it's a big house so you won't be in my way too much."

It seems like he is not even aware he is insulting me.

"Luckily." I repeat flatly, then something strikes me, something I would like to know.

"Why did you hire me?"

"I just said, didn't I. Mum had me do it."

"Yes, but why did you hire *me*? I was clearly not the best qualified of the candidates."

He looks me right in the eyes and it takes a few, long seconds before he answers.

"Because you were the only one who came in here with a smile on your face. And you didn't look at me or treat me like you pitied me. Please never do, Ms. Dawes."

The way he says it, it is more like a warning than a request. I do not think he has to worry about that, however. Despite his state, he manages to radiate a combination of arrogance and dangerous strength from underneath the polished surface, which makes it difficult for me to feel much pity. I'm more concerned with how we are to get along. On the other hand, if he does not want me to keep him company we might mostly see each other when I drive him. That could work out well...

"I go to Headley Court rehab center three days a week. It's a two and a half hour's drive so we will inevitably spend time together."

... or not. Five hours (!) alone with him in a car with nowhere to escape, three times a week. *That* will be a challenge.

I get the feeling we are done with each other for today, or rather that he considers himself done with me. I'm saved by Ms. Saunders, who as promised comes to pick me up. I'm relieved to get a break. Just as last time I feel myself relax when I'm out of his presence. I'm not sure what he is doing to me, if it is the captain in him that makes me straighten my back an extra inch.

Ms. Saunders leads me to a parlour, yet another lovely room in this house and we are soon joined by Mrs. James and her husband. She is a beautiful woman, with soft blonde hair, petite and almost birdlike. Her most striking feature is the dark brown eyes which she apparently has passed on to her son. She gives me a very nice smile at the same time as I feel that she is measuring me on a scale. After all, I'm the person in who's hands she will leave her boy. I don't have own experience obviously, but I have heard that mothers never cease to think of their children as children. Mr. James senior is very tall and seems to be the one who has provided the genes for the dark hair, although his is somewhat greyed by now. He has a friendly smile too, seems less concerned with my qualities and quickly demonstrates a jovial nature. It seems like the harsh, not so amiable features of young master James (oh, why did Mrs. Hutchins place that phrase in my head?) must have emerged from an unfortunate combination of them both or be acquired rather than inherited. I like them.

Mrs. Hutchins brings us tea and biscuits on a silver tray and takes the opportunity to give me the evil eye before leaving the room again. I will clearly have to work hard to get her approval. Mrs. James pours tea in three cups and hands me one.

"So, Ms. Dawes, Ms. Saunders has told us you have extensive experience of taking care of a sick relative..."

I had forgotten that lie, now I will have to live with it.

"... and I have understood you have met our son and get along well."

Now, *that* is an exaggeration. He did not throw me out, that is not the same as get along well if you ask me but I nod.

"Has he told you about his background?"

"He told me he's a captain in the army and was injured during a training exercise in Belize, nearly lost his legs and has a long way back. I understand he's not certain if he will walk again."

"Yes" she confirms. "Yes, that is part of it. That is how he got his physical injuries, but he has scars that go deeper than that and which he got already before Belize."

"His head is messed up?"

"You could say that, although I think that depression or PTSD, although maybe not the worst form of it, would be more correct terms. I will let him tell you more himself, if and when he feels comfortable to do so. He doesn't like to talk about it. Not with us, not with the psychologist or anyone else, but I'm hoping if he spends time with someone regularly that is not family or a psychologist, he might feel inclined to talk about it. If he starts to trust you. I'm not expecting you to "fix" him, that would be naïve and too much to ask – but if he starts talking to someone, it might make it easier to talk to the professionals too. As far as I know he has refused saying much during his sessions up to now, he thinks they are useless. He is on medication, but that will just help alleviate the symptoms, not treat the cause. I know it's a long-shot but it's worth a try. We have nothing to lose. He needs healing but to heal he must first accept he's not well, besides his legs being injured."

After a pause, she adds;

## A suitable companion

"I know he can be very difficult. What I ask of you, as his mother, please don't give up on him and quit when he has a bad day. Please take a deep breath and stay and you might help him to become the wonderful person he actually is again."

I think that Mrs. James might be exaggerating the positive features of her son, but I'm still touched by her plead.

"I will try, I promise."

We talk for a while longer before we say our goodbyes and they head to finish packing for their trip.

"I hope we will see you again when we return by Christmas" says Mr. James.

I feel that Christmas is very far away and I wonder how I will last until then, despite that I have promised to try. But who knows - one day at a time, as they use to say.



***It's established, I have an addiction – writing. And I indulge it as my husband is still away on business trip, hence a new chapter. Hope you like it and super-thanks for all kind reviews of the previous one. /X***

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## Chapter 6: Dreary days and an unexpected alliance

I consider the first day quite successful, so when I arrive the next I do it in good spirits, thinking this might not be too bad after all. I know that the elderly Jameses were to catch an early flight to Italy where they will start their travel tour by visiting Lake Garda, so now it is only me, Mr. James and Mrs. Hutchins. But as it turns out, the second day is not much to cheer about. He wants to keep to himself and I do not get to see him at all. He is up and about but he does not want my company and has told Mrs. Hutchins that he only wants her to bring his meals to his room. I spend the day exploring the fantastic library, find myself a classic to re-read and end up in an armchair doing so. It may sound like the best job ever, but I'm surprisingly restless and feel like I want to be of some use. I'm intended to do a job but I'm busy doing nothing much and find it unsatisfying. The day after is the same and the two next. This is really, really boring and time passes infinitely slow.

Next week I know there must be a change because then I'm supposed to start driving him to Headley Court and he has to come out of the room. I have made a promise to Mrs. James and I intend to keep it. I will not let him ditch his rehab sessions.

Monday morning, back at Royal Crescent and it starts to feel familiar. Almost, but just almost, like I belong in this street. However, I do not feel like I belong enough yet not to knock on the front door and wait for Hutchins to let me in, so I do. When she opens she looks a bit tired and shake her head.

"Today is not a good day, Ms. Dawes."

"What do you mean?"

To me it seems like last week was a row of not so good days, so how can this day be worse.

"When I wanted to bring him breakfast he told me to leave. He won't even come out of bed. It's just one of those days, there's nothing to do about it."

"Should I have a try?"

She looks very hesitant.

"You can, but I would not recommend it and you do it at your own risk."

Slightly trembling but trying to boost myself, I walk the stairs up to his rooms. Mr. James bedroom has an entrance from his dayroom. The door is closed and I knock. No answer, but that could be expected so I open the door ajar and peek inside. Coming from the bright light, it seems completely black in there and I do not see a thing.

"Hutchins, I thought I made it clear I don't want any breakfast."

He does not sound happy. I would like to flee, but not without a try at least.

"It's not Hutchins, it's me Molly Dawes."

He is silent for a few seconds.

"I won't go up today. I don't need you here."

"But would it not be nice just to..."

"Did you not hear what I just said?"

"But..."

"What do I have to say to make myself clear?! Get your fucking arse out of here Dawes and let me be alone!"

I realise that for today I have lost the battle and close the door. I spend the day in the library again and see nothing of him, obviously he is keeping to his intention to stay in bed. I wonder if it is like this often. But I have made a promise to Mrs. James not to let him miss rehab. On Wednesday it is time for his next session and then I am determined not to fail, I must get him out of bed. I simply have to brace myself and come up with a battle plan, hoping that little me will stand a chance against the captain with my amazing wits, charm and stubbornness as my only weapons.

-O-

Next day, I arrive earlier and ask Mrs. Hutchins to let me bring the breakfast tray.

"Are you sure girl? You might as well get it thrown after you."

## A suitable companion

I don't tell her that if he throws the tray after me I intend to throw it right back, knock him out and drag him to the car. But I hope it will not have to come to that. Even if he is skinny he seems heavy enough.

When I open the door to the dark room I cheerfully declare;

"Breakfast for young master James"

I hear him stir in the bed.

"What are you fucking calling me?"

Yes, I have spurred a reaction. One point to Ms. Dawes, if anyone is keeping score.

"Didn't you know that's what Hutchins is calling you?"

"Yeah, but she has known me since I was eight and she's from another century. I'm no 'young master' to you."

I quickly do the math, they met when he was eight and Hutchins has been here 22 years which would make him 30. There I got that answered without needing to ask.

"I just like it, makes me think of Luke and Yoda."

"What?"

"Haven't you seen Starwars? '*May the force be with you, master Skywalker. Breakfast eat shall you*'"

I try to mimic Yoda's manner of speaking. My eyes have adapted to the darkness and now I see Mr. James sit up in the bed, looking at me like I'm clearly insane. I note with relief that he does not sleep naked, but is wearing a t-shirt and I do my best to disregard the fact that it feels quite private to be in someone else's bedroom. Somehow, when you sleep with closed door it is like the air gets saturated with the body heat and the scent of the one sleeping there. I must admit that it smells good in here. He looks more boyish than he uses to, in that t-shirt and messy dark hair, although the morning stubble gives away that he is a grown man. Finally, he gives me a sign to come over with the breakfast tray. Progress! Another point to team Dawes.

"I'm obviously not going to be able to sleep more anyway" he says it grumpily but I get the feeling he is not too upset.

"Mrs. James had me promise I will not under any circumstances let you skip your sessions at Headley Court. So my mission here is to get you out of bed and in and out of the car. I will drag you there if I have to."

"Good luck with that." He pauses, then unexpectedly admits "Some days it's just difficult to get up, you know."

I know. I've been there, in a very dark place, but I don't feel like sharing right now.

"Just eat your breakfast."

"I will, if you leave me alone instead of standing there staring at me like I was a monkey at the zoo."

I feel my cheeks blush and retract from the room thankful for the dim light. Somehow, I hope I will not have to go get him in his bedroom too often, I like to keep some distance to my employer.

Half an hour later he comes down in the elevator and we are off to Headley Court for the first time. A first milestone reached.

-O-

During the upcoming weeks we establish some kind of routine. Three days a week I drive Mr. James to Headley Court. That takes up most of the day, total five hours of driving, him having a PT session with the physiotherapist and sometimes also see the doctor and once a week a psychologist. After that we have lunch and drive back and he disappears to his room. The other two days, he has a training schedule that he follows at home. The Jameses have transformed one of their many rooms to a home gym, so it works out very smoothly. Those days he still prefers to keep to himself and I spend my time in the library or watching TV, just in case he would change his mind and wish for company, or ask me to drive him somewhere. That has never happened so far. I wonder if he has any friends around here, or if they are all in the army. At the end of the day I go home feeling I could do more.

Then, I make a new unexpected friend myself.

One afternoon when Mr. James as usual has asked to be alone, I'm *so* in the mood for a cup of tea. Up to now I have avoided the kitchen as much as possible as the dragon Hutchins resides there, but I really have a need for tea now. I find her sitting by the large wooden kitchen island, sipping a cup of tea herself. As I enter, I'm once

again awed about the beauty of this kitchen and without intending it my thoughts are coming out loud:

"I love this kitchen so much. It's the most beautiful I've ever seen."

She looks at me, first surprised, then proud.

"Yes, it *is* beautiful, isn't it? When they refurbished it Mrs. James allowed me to wish how I wanted it" her fingers touch over the smooth wooden surface and I understand the gigantic kitchen island was one of her wishes.

"It's so amazing. All those copper pans and skillets, and that fantastic oven. I would love to bake her."

"Bake? I wouldn't let you cook anything here based on the pie you delivered."

Meanwhile she says it she brings out another cup from a cupboard and pours a cup witch she puts on the kitchen island and give me a gracious nod as a sign to sit down.

"You remember I didn't bake that, right?"

"Certainly, it wasn't homemade."

"I *can* bake, and I love it. It was my boss in the café, he thought it was too expensive to make our own. I wasn't proud of what we were serving. I don't miss that place."

"You like it better here then?"

"It may seem odd, but I do. Not that it's easy with Mr. James and I know you don't like me..."

"Who said that?"

"You don't have to say, it's quite obvious."

She purses her mouth, putting on her signature-look.

"Well, I didn't like you at first, thought you were just a sloppy girl, but your growing on me I must admit. I think you are good for Mr. James and I like that. And you don't give up easily."

Wow, coming from her this feels like a huge compliment because I have the feeling she does not give praise too often.

"I wish he would let me do more. I feel so useless when I spend so much time just reading and watching TV."

I can see she is contemplating something now.

"You know, I would allow you to bake here sometime if you really like to. I don't like baking myself and you could make up for the other pie by proving you can make a decent one."

Mrs. Hutchins cooks all the food in this house, seemingly having a combined position of housekeeper/cook, but I have noticed that she never bakes. If she doesn't like it, it also explains why they usually order from a bakery when needed.

"I'd love that. Tomorrow I'm driving Mr. James, but on Thursday?"



"That would be fine. Let me know if there are any ingredients you need and I'll make sure we have them at home."

Two days later I make the most fantastic apple pie with homemade custard and invite Mrs. Hutchins for afternoon tea. Already before she says anything, I know she approves of it, even likes it because her lemon-face is gone. When she takes her second piece, she says;

"This you can do again."

And just like that we have started a tradition of afternoon tea her and I. Sometimes we just take a plain cup in each other's company, sometimes I bake and then I always try to surprise her with a new kind of pastry. She has started to include a plate with decent portion of anything I have baked with Mr. James afternoon tea too, with the comment that 'he needs to put on some weight and the boy did not use to be this thin before'. I think she is right about that and have only asked that she does not tell him that I'm the one baking. I'm not sure why but maybe I think he would not eat it if he knew, or maybe I just want to surprise him telling that someday. It pleases me to see that the plates always came back scraped clean and I think to myself that this is another point to team Dawes – and seemingly the team has a new member now. It feels like Mrs. Hutchins and I have become allies in our attempts to help Mr. James one little step at a time and it feels great.

"You surely have a talent for this Molly" Mrs. Hutchins says preparing to put another spoonful of Sacher cake in her mouth. Of pure restlessness I have outdone myself today with this complicated delicious cake.

## A suitable companion

"I hope to have a café of my own one day."

"Then I hope you get it, but not too soon because then assume you would leave us."

Now I know for sure that I have not only won Hutchins over to reluctantly accept me. I have made a friend.

*After having had a birthday party for my son and gone voting (general elections in Sweden, which seem more important than ever as we may be facing a turbulent result), I finally found some much longed for time to write. Glad that many seemed to like Molly and Hutchins teaming up. There has been wishes for more interaction between CJ and Molly. We're getting there, I promise and I'm looking forward to it too. I just thought it wouldn't be very realistic if he let her in immediately – and then the story would be very short. Hope you enjoy this chapter and again, thanks for cheering me on in my writing! /X*

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## Chapter 7: Driving Master James

It is about two and a half hours drive from Bath to the army rehab center Headley Court, one direction. This means we spend about fifteen hours alone together in the small space that is the car every week. At first it seems daunting but it turns out not to be too bad. For one thing I'm pleased that there is at least this occasion when he cannot avoid me, so I can feel like I'm being of some use. To begin with, we are silent much of the time as he does not really encourage talking. It seems like he thinks that the brief introduction he gave about himself the first day is more than sufficient. Eventually, the silence gets on my nerves and without him asking for it I start to tell him things about my family. Like little stories, current and past ones. Come to think of it there are many crazy stories to tell about the Dawes family and quite a few cast members to choose from so it is a good way to spend time during the long drives.

Things I tell Mr. James; how happy we are because dad recently got a new job as janitor at the local cinema. Besides being a paid steady job, there is the perk that the whole family can go there for free on Sunday afternoons. Often, we go all of us, watch some movie which is suitable for the youngest and eat popcorn. It is turning into a nice tradition and I hope he will be able to keep the job this time.

How we had to cut off all of Ella's beautiful hair last weekend, because Liam made an experiment to see if slime would stick in hair. (It does!) And the week before that, Nan had another hair incident, planning to dye her hair with her regular chestnut just to cover her grey ones, but got the wrong bottle and ended up with a lovely purple. She looked like a Muppet.

I tell him how proud mum was when the headmaster at the school said he thinks she has potential to become a teacher, so now she is considering if she could start taking evening courses to maybe get there in a few years. I always knew she is not unintelligent, she has just never been given a chance before.

Then there is Bella, who finally freaked out at Mr. Wong and quit the nail bar, but not before she had scribbled all the mirrors with nail varnish saying, "Mr. Wong has a tiny dick". I know for a fact that she definitely does not have firsthand information on that (uh! As if) but I still bet she is right.

I tell about how I have started worrying about Bonnie like I did for Bella before, now that she is fourteen and has her first real boyfriend, taking on the role to nag her about protection without getting any thanks.

And the wild child Charlie who came home, smeared black around the mouth because someone had dared him to eat a Spanish slug and he did not back out because the girl he likes was watching. As if she ever would want to kiss him after that.

The first week or so he just listens, but he does not ask me to shut up either. Sometimes he makes a snorting sound, like he might be holding back a laugh. Over time he starts asking a few questions here and there and even ask follow-up questions to stories I have told the previous drive, seemingly interested to know how a situation has developed. I realise after a while that I do not know when I had conversations like this with someone before. Certainly not with Smurf. He is more interested in the details of accounting than the details of my family's life and listening is not his forte.

"It's strange..." I say to Mr. James.

"What?"

"This, driving around with you in a car."

"Why? Makes you think of a movie again?"

"What? Movie? Why would I think of a movie?"

"You seem to do that a lot. Army movies with yelling officers, Starwars... I thought maybe it was something you do, identify your life with movies"

"That's twice, it hardly indicates a habit."

There was a third time, when Katie and I thought of how it would be to replace Colin Firth in wet shirt with him, and I concluded it would work out more than fine if he was less skinny, but *that* he does not need to know.

"You know once is once, twice is a habit... I thought you were thinking of *Driving Miss Daisy* or something."

"The one with a Jewish old lady and a black chauffeur driving around?"

"Yeah."

"So, you're Miss Daisy, then? Now I'm picturing you in a lady's apparel with a little hat with gauze."

I giggle. This is an odd but funny conversation, we haven't spoken this much in weeks if you don't count the one-sided talks I'm delivering.

"That would make you Morgan Freeman" he chuckles.

"This conversation is totally derailed... What I really wanted to say is that I just realized I have not spent this much time alone with any one person since... since I don't know when. All these hours in the car with you."

"Interesting. And you wish it was with someone else instead?"

"I didn't say that. I like driving with you, but I wouldn't mind if you talked a bit more. Now it's mostly me having a monologue."

"I like hearing about your family. They're so different from mine, and so much happens. It's better than watching a soap."

"You're comparing my family to a soap?"

"Yeah, or like *Seventh heaven* but with a misbehaved family and so much more entertaining."

He has a wide grin on his face now and I realise he is only teasing me. I like it - a slight defrost of Mr. James achieved. Then he becomes serious.

"To be honest, there is something comforting to hear about them. I don't know what for sure. Maybe it's that you seem to have your issues but also lots of love and support in each other. It's very different from growing up as an only child with my parents."

He almost sounds longing and it is nice when he puts it that way. It is true. We are dysfunctional but loving.

"I have only thought about one thing..."

"Yeah?"

"The one you tell me least about is yourself."

"That's because you get the live version of me, that's even better" but as I say it, I feel myself tense a little. I'm not very fond of questions about myself, but it seems he suddenly thinks it is about time to get to know me a little better.

"What do you like to do, Dawes? I mean, when you don't work for me, in your spare time?"

"Eh... hang with my friends... read, but that I do when I work for you as well, when you don't want company... and I love to bake."

"You do? I had not pictured you as the domestic kind."

I do not tell him that there was a time when I discovered it was a way of keeping me sane, the preciseness and careful hand needed when baking pastries for the recipe to be successful. Measuring the exact amounts of sugar and flour, temper chocolate over to exactly 56°C, decorate meticulously. It kept my mind off other things.

"You should try it at home sometime. I'm sure Hutchins would let you use the kitchen" he continues unaware of my thoughts.

I'm about to say I already did, but he is moving on to the next question on his mind.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Yes. Smurf... I mean Dylan. We've been going out for a little over a year. He's studying at the university."

"Smurf? Really?"

I explain the nickname, again placing a smile on his lips.

"Why did you drop out of university?"

The big question, now it begins to feel a little bit like an interrogation.



"I had a scholarship. I lost it and then I could not afford to continue. Simple as that."

I purposely sound short and hope he will stop asking, but no.

"You had a scholarship? Then you must have been brilliant in school Dawes? I know one does not get scholarships like that easily."

I do not say anything, but he is right. I was brilliant once, always best in class and it was not even difficult. It was very surprising to everyone but myself as I had absolutely no help with my homework from mum and dad. Not that they would not have wanted to, but they could not as soon as we were past the lower classes. But for me it was always like everything fell into place, numbers, words, without much effort. Now, I just shrug my shoulders at his question wanting to leave the topic.

"It's a shame you didn't finish your exam. What happened so you lost your scholarship?"

"I don't want to talk about it." I hear it coming out a bit harsh, but I really do not.

"But..."

"I. Don't. Want. To. Talk. About. It."

Maybe I'm being rude to my employer but I want to make myself very clear. This is mined ground. I'm not ready to go there with him now and I probably never will. Fortunately, he senses that and drops it.

"Okay"

He looks out the window, but then he turns back to me with a smirk on his face and I'm relieved to see he was not offended.

"You probably regret asking me to talk more now, don't you?"

I smile too. "No, you could just stay off some topics."

"So, there is a list of topics I should stay away from?"

"Nah, it's that one topic."

"Are you sure, can I ask about *anything* else?"

The very teasing way he says it and with a twinkle in his eyes, I realise it might be wise to add a few other topics to the list.

"No wait, I'm glad if you don't ask about... my sex life."

It is the first thing I come to think of that I really would not like him to ask about, but it is also a joke and he gets it.

"... and if I don't give any details of mine, right?" he fills in.

"Exactly! That would just be a bit more information than I need."

We continue our easy banter, adding topics to the list that would make us uncomfortable to talk about, like our toilet habits or if we had odd dreams where the other one appeared, or where Hutchins – god forbid – appeared. However, the first comment planted a curious seed in me. Does he have a sex life? I assume he could because he is not paralysed so even if he cannot walk he could certainly

perform, for example if he was lying down on his back and someone was on top of him... I snap out of it, god I cannot be thinking such things. That was the purpose of putting sex on the forbidden topics list to start with.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I ask instead. I'm kind of expecting a no as I have not seen one up to now so I'm a bit surprised by his answer.

"Yes. Rebecca, she's called."

For some reason I feel a bit deflated, which is really stupid for so many reasons. It is actually unthinkable that a guy like him would not have a girlfriend no matter if he a twat half of the time and cannot walk.

"I haven't seen her around?"

"She comes by sometimes in the evening. She's quite busy." After a pause he adds "And I don't think she handles this very well."

"What do you mean?"

"Me being in a wheelchair, not being my usual self. I'm not really the same person she started going out with once. I could walk then, and I wasn't always this moody you know."

"You're moody? I hadn't noticed."

He throws his head back and laugh.

"You're a very poor liar, Dawes, but you really cheer me up, you know. You are probably the one who gets to see me most in a good mood these days."

"Then I don't dare to imagine the version everyone else gets."

I'm only half joking when I say that. Right now, he is in good spirits but mostly it has been nothingness as he does not even want company. I can only hope this conversation is the beginning of something different.

When we drive up in front of the rehab center we both have grins on our faces. This was a good drive, it feels like we are getting somewhere even though I'm unsure what the intended destination is. For him to get better I suppose.

"Here we are Mr. James."

"You can call me Charles, you know."

"Charles! Charles? Really?" I cannot help myself smirking at this.

"What's so fucking hilarious about Charles?"

"Nothing I suppose" but I keep smirking. Of course, he is called Charles, that suits a posh twat like him just fine. "Now that you say it I feel I should have guessed."

"And I have the feeling I should be offended by your reaction. You're not endearing yourself to me Dawes" but he has a big smile on, too, contradicting his words.

"If I'm to call you Charles then you should call me Molly."

"I like to call you Dawes, but I'll stretch as far as Dawesy."

"Dawesy – I like that. I'm clearly winning you over with my incredible charm and magnetism."

"I wouldn't go that far Dawesy. A name is just a name."

Not that I feel he is actually falling for my fantastic personality, but I feel this is somehow a step forward. It seems I got myself a nickname – and I quite like it.

-O-

As I hoped, that drive turns out to be something of a turning point. Not that he suddenly has switched into an easy personality, he can still be very grumpy and unpredictable but at least he starts to welcome my company. He talks more during our drives. The days we stay home at Royal Crescent he often asks me to join him in the afternoon, just hanging out. We chat, lie on a couch each reading, play cards or backgammon. He tried to teach me chess but I'm too impatient and he gets impatient too when I don't get the rules, or simply ignore them.

"You can't move the bleeding Queen like that, Dawes!"

"She's the Queen, can't she move like she wants to?"

He sighs in frustration and gives up and I'm pleased about my victory getting him to ditch the chess.

Sometimes I get him to join me and Mrs. Hutchins for the kitchen afternoon tea and it almost feels like we are an odd family when we gather around the kitchen island with tea and cake. And it does him good with the extra calories, he has started to fill out. Not in a fluffy kind of way, I do not think he has those genes and he is also exercising so much that that the extra energy rather turns to muscle, but

## A suitable companion

he is no longer skinny which makes him look less sharp and torn. I'm not sure who is most pleased with the improvement, me or Mrs. Hutchins.

For a few weeks I feel like I'm the world's best companion, helping him to make progress slowly. His mum will be so pleased when they return by Christmas. Of course, I should have known that things are not that straight forward. Life is not a romance novel where a bit of chatting and some cake will solve everything when you have a complicated past like Charles.

*It seems I won't get peace until this story has found its way out of my head. I have a very clear idea where it's going but nothing is final until the words hit the "paper" (and after editing a couple of times). Anyway, it seems like you don't mind that the chapters come frequently. Thanks for all the lovely comments on the last chapter, glad you liked the two of them together. Thanks for taking the time to read and review my writing, it makes me really happy. /X*

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## Chapter 8: Backlash

Charles mentioning of Rebecca has made me curious of her. There are no photos around in the house that I have seen and so far, she has not made a visit when I'm there. I cannot resist asking Hutchins when we one day have afternoon tea in the kitchen, this time without Charles.

"Charles mentioned he has a girlfriend."

"Rebecca, yes..."

The tone of her voice indicates she may not be a fan of Rebecca, which encourages me to dig deeper.

"What is she like? I mean, I just find it a bit odd that I haven't seen her around in the weeks I've worked here."

"Ah, she comes here sometimes in the evenings, but if you ask me it would be just as good if she didn't bother. Or better."

"Why?"

"She's not there for him, not in any sense that matters. In her world, all was good as long as he was this handsome successful officer, headed for a splendid military career, progressing to major and so on - with her by his side, naturally. His injuries, and maybe even worse from her perspective, him not being able to be social like he used to, it's difficult for her to handle. I think she thinks that it's not what she signed up for. She comes here more and more seldom, and from what I can tell it hardly raises his spirits."

My hand is resting on the table surface and surprisingly, she puts her hand over it, saying:

"I'm glad he has you Molly."

"I'm just employed to be here, remember" I say a bit embarrassed.

"I know, but you are still doing so much more for him than she is. He needs you."

My cheeks are blushing but I cannot pretend that her words do not make me proud and happy.

-O-

I do not notice at first. Maybe because the worsening comes gradually, maybe because I was a little too caught up in the bubble of happiness of him getting better, seemingly both physically and mentally, so I did not want to see the signs. In retrospect I curse myself for not paying better attention. Not that I know for sure



if it would have made any difference but maybe we could have pulled the break and reversed it before it got so bad.

Over a few weeks, he gradually becomes more silent again and more often prefers to be alone. There are days when I suspect he has skipped exercising when we are at home. The Headley Court sessions would be more difficult to escape because I would notice at once, but he seems more reluctant to go there. He begins to look more tired, with dark circles under his eyes and when I ask he just mumbles he had a bad night. And there is something in his gaze sometimes, like a transient flicker of panic but it is nothing concrete, nothing I can ask him about and if I had, I probably would not have gotten an answer. Slowly I realise something is not quite right. I worry increasingly, but I do not know what to do. He is not shutting me out completely, like in the beginning, but he is not inviting me in either.

-O-

Then comes an afternoon when I meet Rebecca for the first time. Charles is upstairs and I'm loitering in the library when there is a call on the front door. I know Hutchins is busy preparing dinner, so I make myself useful opening the door in her place. There stands this perfect woman, as if she just had stepped out of a magazine. Not *Hello*, but rather one of those with a cover featuring upper class people, cheerfully seated on a horseback in spotless outfit while simultaneously drinking a cup of tea with an autumn leafy estate in the background, or pictured inside their perfect home, surrounded by their perfect family, all with plastic white smiles pasted on their aristocratic faces. She is tall and thin like a model. She has long, straight and shiny blonde hair, the kind you expect to hear a swoosh sound

effect from when she moves. Her face is a very beautiful but cold. She can compete with Charles when it comes to having high cheekbones and her whole face is quite sharp with pale smooth skin, but she has a pair of pouty pink lips that softens the overall impression. And her eyes. They are large, framed by long eyelashes, which I do not doubt she uses frequently to dupe men, and the colour of the large iris is icy blue. From the moment I see her, she is the Ice Queen to me and I'm seriously wondering if I would turn to ice if I reached out a finger to touch her.

"You must be Rebecca" I state.

"Ms. Hawthorne" she corrects me, seemingly offended I went straight to her first name. "I don't think we have been introduced. Who are *you*?"

I would have thought Charles might have mentioned something to her about me. Something like that he has this great girl keeping him company during the days and cheering him up, but no, it seems like I have not been worth mentioning to this ice goddess.

"My name is Molly Dawes. I work here, helping Mr. James."

For some reason it seems fitting not to call him Charles in front of her. I just get the feeling she would not appreciate it much that we are on a first name basis (or that I am with him and he calls me Dawesy). I wonder if it does not hurt to lie down beside her, her hipbones look so protruding in her skinny fit jeans one could almost cut oneself on them. Why has Charles chosen this woman to be his girlfriend? I'm a bit disappointed in his judgement. I would have thought he liked a warmer personality than hers appears to be. But of course, she *is* extremely beautiful.

"Are you going to let me in?" impatiently she steps forward and although I'm reluctant to, I have no valid reason to not let her in.

While she takes off her expensive-looking coat, she decides to make conversation.

"What do you help Charles with anyway?"

"I drive him back and forth to rehab and I keep him company when he likes to."

"That can't be often" she snorts. "He has turned into quite an eremite since Belize."

She does not say it fondly, or even with pity, rather with contempt. I like her less and less and as I started off at zero we are now on the minus scale. When she disappears up the stairs I do not miss her.

I do not think the house is badly insulated, but it is very quiet, and therefore it is difficult not to hear that they start arguing when she has only been with him for a short while. I cannot hear what they say, which I'm both grateful for and annoyed about, but I can hear their raised voices, his dark and hers more high-pitched like a disturbing, loud mumble. It goes on for quite a while, then she storms down the stairs and out the front door and slams it after her. I do not see him before I head home that evening, he just lets Hutchins know that he does not want any dinner.

I do not know if that argument was the last push in the wrong direction, or if the argument started because he already was in a bad place, but next day is certainly not a good day.

It was intended to be a Headley Court day and I'm surprised that he is not ready and waiting for me in the hallway like is our routine. Instead, Hutchins appears, looking sad.

"It seems we are back on square one" she says.

"What do you mean?"

"He won't come out of bed, he won't have breakfast and he won't even let me open up the blinds."

I feel so disappointed. I was not mentally prepared for a backlash, which was naïve of me, I realise that instantly. In the light of this, the last weeks play up in my head and now I see the signs of worsening painfully clear.

"I'll go to him" I say.

"I'm not sure he'll want your company, Molly."

"Neither am I, but I have to try. We can't just leave him like that" and heart pounding I head up the stairs, to once again enter his dark bedroom.

He lies on the bed, curled up in a fetal position. When he senses my presence, he raises his head to look at me. It is horrible. The eyes that look into mine are dead and yet panicked at the same time, how that is even possible. When he sees that it is me, he just lies down again and say weakly:

"Please leave, Dawes."

No 'piss off Dawesy', no 'get the fuck out' in the request, which makes me even more worried. I linger, hesitating because I really do not want to leave him like this but I'm not sure what to do. I decide I will not leave. Instead I do what I don't really dare. I walk around to the other side of the gigantic bed, carefully climb up on it, and without showing the hesitation I still feel, move as close to him as I can.

"What are you doing Dawes?"

"Just shut up. I'm not leaving you."

Strange enough, he does not protest and that is the last thing any of us say for many hours as I now lie down behind him, curl my body to follow his and wrap my arms around him. It is a strange thing to do but it is the only thing I can think of. To try to give him some sort of comfort for whatever it is that he needs to be comforted for. I wish I could keep him safe from the past ghosts in his mind. Our breathing falls into the same pace, slower and slower and eventually we both fall asleep. When I wake up, I stay where I am, just shift position slightly. It seems he is already awake and feels it.

"What are you doing here, Dawes?" his voice is low, tired, not angry.

"I don't want to leave you alone when you're like this. I just won't, so there is no point you tell me to go. You don't have to talk to me but I'll stay here."

I hope he will not get the idea to push me out of the bed, because I know he easily could. He does nothing of the sort, just stays silent for a while.

"I want to talk to you."

He surprises me.

"I would love to listen."

It takes a while still before he says anything, but I'm not in a hurry for anything.

"I just can't get out of this bed... It's like I'm in this giant black hole, trying to climb out of it and sometimes I think I'm on my way but then something pulls me back down."

"Was it Rebecca's visit?"

"No. No, she does not make any difference. She is... just nothing to me. When I think of her I feel numb, empty. Like with so many other things. I look around me and I feel nothing. Not anger, not sadness, I don't feel at all. It's like the past hurts so bad I can't feel anything for the present."

He takes a deep breath.

"Even the most ordinary things feel difficult, not because I can't walk, but inside of me. Getting out of this bed. Bringing myself to the bathroom to have a shower. Turn on the water, pump soap out of the bottle... To everything, there is this sequence of steps that seems so unbelievably difficult to do, that I don't know how to get started with the first one."

I just listen without interrupting, without letting go of my arms around him.

"And when people, not only Rebecca, come around or call me or text me, instead of thinking how great that they think of me, I think 'can't they just go', and 'how

will I ever be able to call them back'. It's only you and Hutchins I can stand at all... And then there's the anxiety. I feel terrified, but I'm not sure what I'm terrified of. There's such a weight on me that is so unbearable that I don't know how I will get through the next minute, and the minute after that, so I can get through the day. I makes me paralysed, I just can't get out of this bed. Something is wrong with me, Dawesy. Very wrong."

It breaks my heart that he is so messed up, I almost do not know what to say.

"When did it start? Not this time, but first."

"After I was in Afghanistan the last time, nearly two years ago. It started after that and has gradually become worse, especially after I got the injuries in Belize as I'm stuck here with my thoughts."

"Do you want to tell me? About what happened in Afghanistan?"

There is a silence so long that I first do not think he will tell me anything, but finally he starts to speak again.

"It was my fifth tour to Afghanistan. I probably shouldn't have gone that time. I wasn't fully focused, not like I had been before. I think I maybe had started to feel a bit disillusioned about Afghan. The British Army was packing up, preparing to leave them to their own fate and I couldn't see we had done that much real difference, you know. For the first time I was doubting my role there."

He pauses and we just lie there again, breathing slowly. I do not want to say anything and risk disturbing this fragile moment of trust.

"Yet, I was happy to be there because I was able to reconnect with some Afghan soldiers I had served alongside before and considered to be my friends. Captain Azizi, one of them was called. Also, one of my best mates happened to be deployed there, Elvis."

He is silent again but I refrain from commenting the unusual name. This is clearly not the moment for that.

"We knew each other from Sandhurst. He was a cheeky, too good-looking Italian, very different from me, but we just got along from the very first day and became best friends. He was a bit like the brother I never had..."

His voice breaks and he pauses before he can continue.

"He was a special forces soldier but our paths crossed every now and then on tour, and when we were home at the same time we always hung out. He was also dating a female private in my section, a bit of a complicated story but they loved each other. Both she and I were really happy he was there with us, in Afghan... Then shit was going down. Azizi seemed to have despaired even more than I about his country and he... betrayed us. There was an unexpected ambush where I realised he was on the enemy side now. Then there was this bomb... Elvis discovered it but before he could do anything..."

He gasps for air but continues.

"...before he could do anything, it blew up in his face and he was thrown from the roof of a building. I think he was dead before he hit the ground."



I press my face into his back, hold my arms tighter around him, feel myself crying for this person I never knew because I understand how it must hurt inside him.

"His girlfriend... she was our medic. She tried CPR but there was no use, there was nothing anyone could do. God, I have never heard anyone cry like that, it was almost not human. I don't think you can understand it if you were not there."

I think I can, I know I can. Poor girl. And him, his best friend. He is crying now, I hear him sob.

"It was my fault. I was in charge, I should have seen it coming. Should have sensed there was something the matter with Azizi, but I wasn't alert as I should have been. I will never forgive myself. I see him again and again, cannot get him to disappear. I mean, I don't want him to disappear, I always want to remember my best mate... but I want to forget that, the burnt and bruised version of him, with eyes open, staring into the sky without seeing anything. It's like it's burned into my retina. It comes back in my nightmares, it comes back in flashes when I'm awake nearly every day, but some worse than other. And her...It's my fault she lost her love. We have met many times since and I know she doesn't blame me, but I do. I feel the weight of it, I just can't escape it. Sometimes, like today, it's like this pressure over my chest. I can't get air. I'm just paralysed. It was my fault, Molly and I don't know what to do. I don't know how to live without my friend, or how to live with the guilt. So many times, I have thought it would be better to just end this misery. I'm no good to anyone and I can't live with myself."

"Don't even think that Charles. I can't begin to tell you how sad this all makes me and I understand this is so hard to live with, but don't even think about doing anything to yourself."

I know there are no magic words I can say like a quick-fix to make him feel better. I know he is not in control of his mind and will need help far beyond what I can give him. The only thing I can do is support him to get that help.

"You need help."

"I know... but I don't know how anyone can ever help me."

"We need to get you to Headley Court, to get help from the professionals there. You need to see the doctor and the psychologist, and you need to start talking to the psychologist about all this. Otherwise they cannot help you. You need to trust them like you have trusted me now. They are there to help. And I know it may seem impossible to get there, to even get out of this bed, but I'm here for you and I will come with you, hold your hand if you need me to. But I won't let you give up, I won't let you just sink into this. I can't let you die because Elvis did, I just won't let it happen."

He does not agree, but he does not say he will not let me take him there either.

I stay with him and eventually I can feel him falling asleep again, into a much-needed rest. Later, I get up from the bed and go get something for myself to eat. Then I sit in an armchair by his side, reading and just watching him sleep, his long eyelashes against his cheeks he looks peaceful for a while. Tomorrow I will take him to Headley Court and I do not intend to let him out of my sight before that,

just in case he would get the idea to escape from it all in the worst possible way. Eventually I fall asleep in that chair and when I wake up, finding myself tucked under a blanket, by Hutchins I assume, the new day has arrived.

-O-

At Headley Court they instantly identify the situation as grave. Charles has asked that I join him when he meets with the doctor and psychologist. I do and he takes me up on the offer to hold his hand. There is no doubt that he is suffering from depression in combination with PTSD. They agree they will increase his dose of SSRI medication, he needs that right now. There is quite a risk that his condition will initially get worse as a side effect of the increased dose, before he gets any better. Because of that and because they think he needs to see the psychologist daily for some time (and, even if they do not say it out loud, because there is also the risk he might harm himself), it is agreed that he will be submitted to the clinic for a few weeks. I can come visit, but he must stay. I hate to leave him here, but I'm also relieved. I think it is what he needs right now.

Before I head home, I tell him I will be back in a few days, to bring him some of his things. He may not need anything right now, but it feels good to have that excuse to come.

"Come back to me" he says.

"I promise, I will. And you have to promise me to talk to the psychologist, like *really* talk. Please, for me if not for yourself."

I do not know why I get the idea to say that. I do not know why he would want to do anything for my sake.

-O-

When I drive back to Bath, alone, I think about my own past. At some point I will share it with him, so he realises that I know for real what he is going through. Today was not the right time to share my story though. He has more than enough with his own demons and I would not want to diminish his feelings by telling him about my experience, saying "Hey, me too". But later on, I may be able to connect to him better if he realises that I understand from my own experience that depression is not loss of only happiness, it is loss of vitality. Loss of any feelings, of energy, of strength, of the ability to care about anything around you. That it is the need to sleep endlessly. But even if I understand, I will not let him sleep endlessly although it may seem to him like the only way out. No. Fucking. Way. I will make him understand that what I see in him does not scare me. It only makes me feel empathy, it makes me want to help him and I will not leave him even if he tells me to.

***I'm moved by the reactions to the previous chapter. I was a slightly nervous putting that one up as it was a bit personal, as is this one. Thanks and again, hope you enjoy!***

**X**

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## Chapter 9: Both sides, now

The next weeks are so strange, I feel like I'm in limbo. I have become so used to the routines we have together, me and Charles, so life feels empty with him gone. It is like I'm suddenly having a vacation I neither asked, nor made plans for. Of course, I can see Smurf more than usual but for some reason I'm not racing to the opportunity. When I'm with him, it happens quite often that I zoom out, feel like I'm looking at the two of us from the outside and ask myself what I'm doing. But still, it is familiar, it is safe and I'm not up for more changes for the moment. We go to Newport for an extended weekend trip, to visit his mum Jackie and his twin brother Geraint.

Jackie is sweet and Geraint is very likeable, in many ways easier than Smurf. He was born minutes before Smurf and I have the feeling that Smurf always had some kind of inferiority complex towards his brother for that reason. In reality, I don't think the difference between them has anything to do with timing, it is just that they are different personalities despite that they are identical twins and share the same set of genes. But Smurf seems convinced that him coming second has given him a disadvantage in life somehow, one of the many things he seems to be slightly bitter about.

The stay in Newport is nice but Smurf keeps nagging me constantly, complaining about every little thing I do. There is something wrong with the way I dress, the meal I helped cooking does not taste well, I'm not listening attentively enough to what he says, I don't leave him alone when he needs to prepare for an exam next week, I'm not as social as he would like to in between, and when I beat him playing cards it makes him unreasonably angry. I just do not know how to please him.

In the evening, Geraint and I sit in the kitchen talking over a glass of wine. Smurf has gone up to study some accounting stuff and we have a very relaxed chat. Sometimes I have wondered briefly what it would have been like if it was Geraint I had met first instead, but that is just a passing thought.

"Molly, I have to ask, what are you doing with Smurf?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's my brother and I love him, but he's not easy. At least not to you. Are you happy with him?"

The same question I have asked myself. I just do not know what to do about it as I'm not prepared to break up and it bothers me that someone else notices I may not be happy and asks. So, I react as one so often does when someone else points out something one already knows is wrong, I become defensive even if I know he means well.

"We're perfectly happy, thank you" I snap.

"I'm sorry Molly if I stepped into something I shouldn't have. It's just that I think you are great, and I love my brother. I want both of you to be happy."

I'm unable to continue the conversation as I now have a lump in my throat.

"I'm sorry Geraint, I will call it a night and hit the bed now."

And I do. Smurf stays up studying late and I lie alone in the bed in his old boys bedroom, staring at the ceiling in the darkness and I do not know why tears are running down my face.

-O-

After a few days I go visit Charles. I'm only allowed to stay for a short while. The positive effects of his increased dose of medication has not yet had a breakthrough and it may take a couple of weeks. Only when they have alleviated the worst symptoms with medication, they can for real start working on the root cause. Now he is still in a too bad shape and mostly he is sleeping. I just sit by his bedside for a while and keep him company. He looks like a child, although a very tall one, dressed in the white hospital clothes and tucked between equally white sheets. We do not say much, but it is great just to see him again and I think he likes me being there.

-O-

Some days I go visit Mrs. Hutchins, only to share our usual afternoon tea. It seems like she is missing both me and Charles and she tells me she wants us to come

home. I smile at this, it is really like she sees the house at Royal Crescent as the home for all three of us, although I'm well aware that is not the case.

One afternoon I get an unexpected call from her. She asks if I can come by the house because someone would like to see me. Curious I hurry there, wondering if it might be that Charles' parents have interrupted their trip to come home even if I know Mrs. Hutchins have let them know Charles is in good hands. But surprisingly it is Rebecca.

She is waiting for me in the parlour where I had my first encounter with Mr. and Mrs. James. She looks perfect today too, but slightly tired.

"Molly" she says when she sees me and I'm equally surprised that she remembers my first name and that she chooses to use it.

"Rebecca" I say.

We sit down and she clears her throat.

"I understand that you took Charles to Headley Court and he was submitted there at the clinic, and that you have visited him since?"

There is no accusation in her voice, she simply seeks confirmation and I give it to her.

"How is he?"



"It's bad, he is really under the surface, suffering from depression and PTSD, but he is getting help now. They have a whole team set up over there and they have adjusted his medication."

I almost think I see tears in those ice blue eyes, but she turns away to gaze out of the window and stays like that when she speaks, like she is unable to face me.

"I know, I saw it coming again. That look in his eyes... it's like when he looks at me it's completely empty. And I can't stand it. Not again, not anymore. I can't even stand to ask him how he feels because I know I don't want to hear the answer."

Her confession is shocking to me.

"But he's your boyfriend!"

"Don't you think I know that? That's why I've tried for so long. But he is not the same man I fell in love with, he is an empty weak shell of that man. Nothing of his strength or his humour remains, nothing of his feelings for me either I would say. It started so long before Belize, after his last tour to Afghanistan. His best friend died there, of course I got to know that much, but he would never talk to me about it, never let me in. Instead we just drifted apart."

I assume that she finds me so insignificant that it does not matter that she confesses this to me. Her gaze shifts briefly back to me from the window before returning there again, as if it makes it easier to speak.

"I'm not a bad person, I really don't think I am, but when you have tried to be there for someone so for long... and it feels like it does not make any difference at all..."

like the history just repeats itself no matter what you say or do... like there is no way of breaking through the illusions he has in his mind... and it feels like he doesn't even want you there... then finally you despair."

I just nod, not knowing what to say to this woman I do not know.

"I thought he was improving before Belize, he was in a better shape than he had been ever since Afghanistan, seemed quite happy with life. He really wanted to go to Belize on this training exercise with his section, was looking forward to it and thought it would be fun, so for once I was glad to let him go. No dangers foreseen. I thought that maybe... when he got home we would finally get married and have a family of our own. When he instead came back injured, torn into pieces physically and mentally, I was not mentally prepared to deal with it. I was not prepared enough, strong enough for a backlash. All I could feel when I first saw him in the hospital was, well relief he was alive first, but then I panicked. I just wanted to run. Or hide under blanket and not come out until everything was fixed. I just felt I couldn't go through with it again."

I'm not sure I should pity her, but at some level I do. I may not like her but I do understand it must have been very difficult to live with this for many years. She continues speaking. It is like a plug has been removed and now she cannot stop herself, it is all just flushing out of her.

"Sometimes when he just sits there numb, or lie in his bed shaking, or look at me with desperation in his eyes... I feel for him, but it is so hard keep loving him, keep wanting him. I fell in love with an equal and now he is just so weak. I have felt more

like his mum than his partner. I don't even know how to be attracted to him sexually anymore."

Wow, that is some serious shit she is saying. And way more information than I need.

"I'm so tired of everything in our lives evolving around him. How *he* feels. What *he* wants to do, or rather what he doesn't want to do. One can put one's life on hold for some time, but not forever, that is just too much to ask. I need something for *me*, someone who cares about *me*. I'm so fucking tired of that everyone we know always ask how Charles is. No one ever asks how I am, as if I'm not allowed to have any feelings. Or they say, 'you're so good to stand by him'. Like my only function in life is to support him. But what if I don't want to? What if I want to run the other direction and live my life? Does it make me a bad person? I don't know, but I don't care anymore. I have nothing more to give. I'm depleted. I don't want to just endure my life, I want to live it."

Finally, she looks at me again and I can see that tears are running down her cheeks.

"And now this... I just don't see how anything will change for real, ever. I don't see a future for us without depressive episodes and panic attacks. I don't see a future where he looks at me like I matter, or when there is a look in his eyes like *anything* matters. I love him, but I just can't take more of this. It's time for me to make an exit."

Rebecca's voice breaks when she says it. I realise that the Ice Queen is not as icy as I first thought when I saw her. There are so many conflicting emotions under the

perfect surface and she is a woman who has reached her breaking point. If life was a football game, she would be in need of a substitute for sure. I guess she is looking to me to be that, but I cannot help saying;

"What?! Now? When he needs all the support he can get?"

"He does not need me. He clearly does not want my help and he stopped needing me a long time ago and I have only been bound to him by my guilty feelings. But now that you are here, I know he is in good hands."

"You don't know me."

"No, but I talked to him last time and in contrast to being with me he likes being with you. And I spoke to Hutchins and I get the picture. Even if she does not say it straight out, I can read between the lines that she thinks you are doing more for him than I ever have."

I feel a strange mix of empathy and despise for her. I understand that it must be hard to live with someone who is sick over a long time, your wishes and needs always coming second, especially if you do not feel wanted or feel like you are getting anything back. It is still hard to understand that she can live with herself leaving now, but maybe she can no longer cope living if she does *not* leave. Either way, her mind is made up.

She collects herself, smooths out invisible wrinkles on her skirt.

"Anyway, I wanted to tell you to let you know I will not be around – but I hope that you will be. All I want is for Charles to get well but I can't wait out anymore."

She gets up to leave. When she is in the doorway I say as a goodbye;

"I hope you find happiness Rebecca" and I do.

"I hope the two of you do too" she says with a weak smile, making it sound almost like Charles and I was a couple rather than employer and employee. This was truly an unexpected and odd conversation and I remain in the chair for quite long, just digesting it, before I head home.

-O-

Some days later I go visit Charles again. This time I get a happy surprise. The effect of the increased dose of medication has kicked in and the strange thing with SRRI is that there can be a shift from one day to another once it starts to work its magic. He is up, he is eating, we talk for quite a while and he even delivers a few jokes. We both know it is only chemical and the hard work to treat the underlying causes for his depression and panic remains, but it is a relief to see him feel better and now he can continue working with the psychologist and the physiotherapist.

"Dawesy... thank you for taking me here. I don't know what would have happened otherwise."

"I was worried you know."

"I know. I'm sorry for doing that to you, but I just can't help myself."

"I know."

"I'm doing as you told me."

"What?"

"I'm talking to the psychologist. *Really* talking" he smiles. "It's difficult, but we do a little at a time."

"Nothing could make me happier. I'm looking forward to you coming back though. It's really boring without you around. I don't know how to fill my days when I don't have you to annoy."

"I'll be here a few weeks longer, to really get things going, but then I'll be back."

The doctor tells me they are very positive about the progress he now is making. Besides accepting the sessions with the psychologist, he also seems to have gained energy to put in an extra gear with his physio. Now we can only hope he will continue that track.

Another thing that certainly seems healthy is Charles hair. He needed a haircut already before he went here and now, a few weeks later, his mop of hair looks absolutely wild.

"Have you looked yourself in the mirror lately?" I ask him.

"I have tried to avoid that, I'm sure it would not be a happy surprise" he grins.

It would probably in a way, because he looks healthier, less tired, less panicked, but the hair...

"You're in serious need of a haircut."

He pulls his hand through his hair, as if to feel its length.

"I am? Well, they don't seem to provide a hairdresser here, only doctors, psychologists and physiotherapists. Maybe I could ask one of the attractive nurses" he smirks.

A sting of something in my heart, but I ignore it.

"I can do it."

"You would just be messing with me, Dawesy."

"I promise I won't. I have been cutting my sibling's hair for years. That was the only hairdresser we could afford, so I have practiced a lot – and they're definitely more challenging targets than you are as they won't sit still."

"Okay, let's do it."

Ooops, that persuasion went easier than expected. Now I have to live up to my boasting.

I find a pair of scissors, shampoo (the non-perfumed hospital kind but we cannot be fussy) and a towel. We bring his wheelchair into the handicap toilet and pull it up so he has his back against the basin. If he sinks down a bit where he sits, it works quite fine to wash his hair like this when he leans his head back against the basin edge, as there is also a shower nozzle connected to it. I flush the water until it is lukewarm, then carefully wet his long locks, pulling my fingers through them. I had not thought about that it would feel so intimate to do this. I love touching his hair. It is so soft and thick and it becomes heavier as it goes wet. I take a fair amount of shampoo and work up a lather, while massaging his scalp and down towards the

nape of his neck softly but firmly in the way my hairdresser does on the occasions when I have treated myself to that luxury. I do it for longer than reasonably is needed to make his hair clean, but he seems to enjoy it. He closes his eyes and relaxes, one of these moments when he looks boyish and at peace. I get the urge to touch his face, but I do not. I intend to stop and instead start rinsing, but when he feels me removing my hands he opens his eyes and looks at me;

"Don't stop yet Dawes, it feels so good. I never knew washing my hair could feel so good."

So, I do as my boss tells me and continue for a while. Nothing strange at all, hairdressers do this every day, strictly professional.

Finally, I rinse off the lather and carefully dry his hair with the towel so it becomes damp instead of dripping, before I comb it and then get started cutting. Cutting curly hair is obviously different from cutting straight but I have had the opportunity to practice on Liam. I cut carefully, not rushing anything, starting on the sides, then moving on to the neck, then going back to even out a bit on the sides. Especially I like cutting so the nape of the neck becomes fully visible again, there is something vulnerable about this place and I touch him there softly when I pull out his locks to cut off. Finally, I kneel to be in level with him, face to face, to be able to judge my work and I'm pleased to see it looks good. He looks good. I'm just a bit sad that the moment is over.

"Now you look proper again."



"Can I trust that?" his brown eyes, now in the same level, stares into mine with one eyebrow raised and I feel the need to break the connection. I stand up and spin the wheelchair around so he can look himself in the mirror.

"Not so shabby, or what do you say?"

"I'm impressed Dawes. You're a woman of many talents."

I would like to know what he thinks my other talents are. Not chess, obviously. I cannot help smirking at that thought.

"What?"

"Nothing, I'm just pleased with the haircut."

After spinning him around, I have my hands on his shoulders and now he puts one of his over mine, meeting my eyes in the mirror.

"Thanks. Thanks for everything."

And I know it is not the haircut he is talking about.

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***A/N: There is a secret to this chapter and I'll let you know it. Rebecca may seem the bitch and Molly the good one, but both represents different sides of me. In the case of Rebecca, not things I have done but things I have thought. I'm living with a man who for longer periods over many years has suffered from burnout, depression and on***

*occasions panic attacks. It is very difficult when it lasts long and returns repeatedly. One has promised to be there for one another for better and for worse, but it is pretty hopeless when you only see 'worse' ahead and you feel like you're the one who is 'always there'. Like you're never allowed to be weak yourself because there is no room for that. Part of me has felt like Molly, like I want to be there, comfort him, do everything for him, be understanding, supporting, loving. Another part of me, which I have not been proud of, has wanted to escape. Especially on one occasion when he fell back into depression and panic attacks shortly after recovering from a previous extended episode. Then my main feeling was panic too, and that I did not want to be part of this anymore. I had not recharged my own energy after the previous period and did not know how to cope. Like Rebecca I had hoped we were headed for a better, easier period and the backlash took me by surprise and for a while I nearly thought I would break too. But I stayed, and I didn't break. And different from Charles in the story, my husband always wanted me to stay.*

*It took years before I could express these feelings to anyone, it was a bit shameful. I just endured, but I was not happy. Eventually, I spoke with friends and found that when I was honest about it, people were more understanding than I had thought and had many times wondered how I coped. But you cope with a great deal when you are a family and there are kids in the middle. Earlier this year we also started couple therapy. He has seen a therapist alone for a long time, but this was for us and it was such a relief to air our feelings in the*

*presence of someone facilitating it. We have both realised that I need to do more things that are just for me, not for him or the kids, to get new energy to put into our relationship. Maybe this is also why I like the writing so much, because it is my own space.*

*We are in a quite good place now. He is well for now and we're happy. I try not to think about how it will be if he has another episode, but at least now I have had time to recharge, and having people around to talk openly to, both friends and professionals, would help I hope.*

*If you comment on this, please don't eat me alive because I'm not a selfless angel like the Molly personality but I felt I wanted to highlight how complex living with depression is, not only for the depressed one but for the ones who live close, which is often forgotten.*

*To end on a less serious note, who else would like to give CJ a haircut?*

*;)*

*X*

*Once again, thanks ever so much for all wonderful feedback in comments and PMs to the last chapter. Like someone said, more talking about mental illness is needed to decrease the stigma that still seems to be there. If me writing about it helps even one person I'm glad but it was also a great feeling to just get it out of myself and share it.*

*Just so you know, now is enough of the self-experienced stuff and going forward I'm just making things up. I also realised that the months are passing by a bit quicker than I had planned in this story with everything I want to fit in during a certain period. Instead of going back and changing the start of the story to earlier, you just have to excuse me for stretching this autumn out - creative freedom or whatever you want to call it.*

*Most chapters live their life in my head for a while before I write them down, but this one was not even there as an idea until in the car this morning. I felt I wanted an angst-free chapter after the two previous rather heavy ones, to describe the slow but steady progress of both CJ's health and their friendship. Enjoy and thanks again for R&R, especially the kind comments to the more personal parts.*

X

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## Chapter 10: A modest birthday celebration

Charles has been home for two weeks now. He made great progress in the weeks before he was discharged from Headley Court and it has continued. I understand he is slowly opening up to the psychologist, one step at a time. He says it helped to talk to me first. He is also really fighting with his physio, both when he is there and at home, now often having a training session on his own both in the morning and in the afternoon. His mind has been set on ditching the wheelchair for crutches and a few days ago he managed. Not for long walks yet, but for shorter distances. It was a real victory and he was so amazingly happy, as was I. Not to mention Hutchins. I swear I saw tears in her eyes even if she mumbled something about dust as she tried to discretely wipe something away. It turned out to be the best present to himself for his thirtieth birthday.

I thought Charles was thirty already, based on the advanced mathematical equation that he was eight when Hutchins started here and she has been working for the James family for 22 years, but it turned out that his birthday is quite late in the year. Of course, Hutchins was on top of this information and told me some days in advance. We both knew that the last thing he would want was a party of any kind, but we still thought we might make the day special for him in the little things. On one occasion Charles complained about that he has been growing up on healthy breakfasts like oatmeal because his parents and Hutchins thought this was the best for him (which, considering how his physique turned out, might have been a correct assumption). But this day I spoil him with a breakfast in manner of the less health-focused Dawes home; cocoa puffs, toast with Nutella and raspberry jam and of course, his favourite Nespresso coffee, Rosabaya. Hutchins and I bring it to his

room, singing *Happy birthday* and I think how great it is to for once come here without a knot in my gut at the prospect of an angst-filled encounter. He seems utterly surprised that we have thought of his birthday at all. Apparently, he had done his best to forget it but now that we are here he seems happy. After the song, Hutchins excuse herself that she has something to attend to in the kitchen but I sit down in the same armchair where I have slept before.

"Cocoa puffs!" he says with almost childish joy and anticipation. Sometimes he is very different from the stern man I met the first day in this house. "It can't be Hutchins that decided the content of this breakfast."

"Nope, that would be me. I thought that once a man has turned thirty it's not more than fair that he gets to taste cocoa puffs."

He dips a spoon in the bowl and takes a mouthful.

"This beats any gourmet meal I've had" he grins.

"You know you're probably old enough to decide yourself what you should eat for breakfast? I think that right comes at the same age as voting, if not before. Even females have the right to decide for themselves what they eat for breakfast these days."

He throws a pillow at me.

"Shut up, Dawsey."

"But seriously, can I ask something I wondered about?"

"Yeah?"

"I get that you live here now, after your injuries, but how come you did not move out before? To have your own place?"

He points at me with his spoon. "You didn't either, if I'm not mistaken."

"No, but I don't have the money to do it. On the contrary, my family has often needed what I earn to make it, so I had my reasons. But for you, money does not seem to be an issue?"

He puts down the spoon and take a sip of his coffee instead, seemingly thinking.

"You're right. I could have moved anytime. I did live away from home when I was at uni and before that I was at boarding school, so in a way I left home early. After uni came Sandhurst and then, with my job, it didn't seem worth it to bother getting my own place as I would be away so much anyway, either at the regiment or deployed somewhere."

Makes sense, which might mean that he is not a freak even though he has stayed home at mum's until thirty, because he has not really. I think of all the places he must have gone to on tour, his world so much larger than mine as I have never left UK so far and spent most of my days in Bath.

"What's your favourite place of all the places you have gone to on tour?"

The question comes out before I really had time to think about it and I hope it will not remind him of things he does not want to be reminded of. But he does not seem to mind. He has to think about it a while though.

"I think I would have to go with Nepal."

"Why?"

"First of all, it's amazingly beautiful. The mountains... that there are both very green areas and snowy landscape, beautiful lakes, clear skies and wonderful little villages. Then the people are so friendly. It was such a contrast going there after Afghan, where one had to be alert every second because anyone could be an enemy. When we went to Nepal, it was a humanitarian mission and our help was welcomed and the people were just fantastic. They were poor but still willing to share anything they had with us. And even when they had gone through disaster like earthquake, there is such a serenity to that country. Not only its beauty but the way their religion is entwined in everything they do. To them religion is not just a separate building you go visit on Sundays, but a part of everyday life and the mentality. There's such a calmness to it. You know, I even got to see a living goddess there."

"Was she hot?"

"Dawes! She was a child."

"How was I to know? I have only seen goddesses in the *Percy Jackson* movies. There they're pretty hot - and the gods too. I wouldn't mind a date with Poseidon."

"It's clearly impossible to have a mature conversation with you." He rolls his eyes at me.

"That's because you're old and boring now - and I'm not." I tease him. "But seriously, Nepal sounds nice."



"We should go there hiking someday... I mean, when I can walk again."

I know it is not really a serious suggestion, but still it evokes so many thoughts inside of me. Like that I really hope he will heal so well that he can go hiking. But if he does he will not need me working for him anymore. And then, besides that I need to find another income, would we be friends still so we actually might consider going hiking in Nepal? Oh shit, if we do I have to get a passport and I need to start exercising so I have a chance keeping up with those Sherpas, because now I'm not fit enough for sure. The capacity of my brain is amazing sometimes, I swear that loop of thoughts only took one second.

"This toast is great. Why haven't I combined Nutella and jam before? Anyway, will you leave me alone for the rest of the day now or will you keep annoying me?"

"I had planned to keep annoying you. Nothing big, but I thought we might just get out of this house, for a walk in the park to try your newfound abilities. We can bring the wheelchair so you don't walk too far, but a little walk. It's such a beautiful sunny autumn day out there."

I'm prepared for resistance because so far, we have never left this house together to go anywhere but to Headley Court, but he just smiles and says okay. What I love most about that smile is that it reaches all the way up to his brown eyes and I think it is enough to keep me warm through an entire day.

There is a park quite near the house, a beautiful one. Even if it is a regular weekday when one could imagine that people should be busy working, there is a lot of people strolling around. Alone, together, with dogs and with kids. I hope he likes this

because I feel so very happy being here with him. It somehow seems like a giant leap in the right direction that we are here, out of the house, feeling the sun on our autumn pale noses for a while, breathing the fresh air. For most part of it he sits in the wheelchair, but he also tries his "wings" with a walk on the crutches. It is a little more of a challenge than the plain surfaces indoors but it works brilliantly. Proud of him I clap my hands.

"Now you have deserved a hotdog for lunch."

"You really know how to spoil me, Dawesy."

"I do, don't I? You can have any topping you like."

He goes for modest ketchup and mustard, despite all the other sauces, onions and pickles the hotdog stand can offer. We sit down with view of a pond where some kids cheerfully are throwing breadcrumbs to some ducks and breaks into fits of laughter when the eager ducks come too close, seemingly want to nibble their shoes.

"Do you want to have kids?" he suddenly asks.

"I haven't really thought about it yet. So far, I have had enough with my brothers and sisters you know. But I have never thought I don't want it, so yes, I do. Not as many as mum and dad, though. And you?"

"Yeah, I want kids. And I wouldn't mind as many as your mum and dad has. Growing up alone has made me want a big family. Our house was always so empty and silent. Except at Christmas when all my cousins came and it was filled with

children and laughter. The house was magic then and I always used to wish it would be like that all the time, not only at Christmas."

"It depends on the kids... If you come to my house for one afternoon I think you will change your mind."

"I doubt that."

"Anyway, you'll have a challenge to find yourself a woman who is up for it. Not everyone is like my mum who produces babies on a conveyor belt."

"You really know how to put things in a romantic way, Dawes."

"I'm just saying, many of us are closing the shop after two or three."

Now it is him who bursts into laughter. Then his gaze falls at the kids and the ducks again.

"Next time we should bring some bread too. I like feeding ducks."

I'm not sure which I should choose to react on, the fact that he likes to feed ducks (seriously?) or that he thinks about coming here again. I decide for the latter.

"Next time? You mean you consider coming here again?"

"Honestly, Dawes, this was the best thing in a very long time."

"What, the hotdog?"

"No, all of it. Coming out, seeing people, feel the sun and get some air. Thanks for pushing me."

"I didn't have to push that much, you didn't even protest."

"Only because I didn't want to disappoint you."

Sometimes when he meets my eyes as seriously as he does now, I do not know what to do. I must look away because it is too much. I know that he hardly is doing things for my sake, but his joke plays on strings inside me which I'm not comfortable with. It stirs something, I do not know what, but I certainly do not want him to know.

"You're full of shit Charles James" I just say to break the spell.

For the afternoon tea I have baked a fantastic cake, with thirty candles of course. Hutchins places it on the kitchen island saying;

"Molly baked this for you."

He looks very surprised.

"Wow, amazing Dawes. Thank you! This is even nicer than the cakes that you use to buy Hutchins."

"I don't buy any cakes, it's always Molly who makes them."

"Sometimes you're really daft for someone so smart. Anyway, I'm glad you like it" I giggle.

"Why didn't you say?"

"Because I wanted you to eat the cakes, you seemed to need it, and I wasn't sure you would if I said I had made them. You know, before, when you didn't really want me in this house."

As I think he does now?

"I have always wanted you in this house. Why would I otherwise have hired you?"

"You know what I mean. You said you only did because your mum had you do it, remember? And you only wanted me to drive you and keep out of your way for the rest of the time."

"Okay, I remember saying that. The good thing about getting older is that you realise it's okay to change your mind" he grins.

My mind is a little bit conflicted about what he says. *Did* he change his mind, or did he only *say* that time that he did not want me here, despite that he wanted me here already then? I don't know why I bother with such thoughts, it does not really matter. I'm here, we are friends, sort of - and on a day like this life seems just perfect.

Before I go home for the day I accompany him up to his room, not that I need to as he is fully capable of taking the elevator himself, but it just feels nice to make sure that the birthday child gets there okay. When I'm already halfway out the door again, Charles says:

"Dawesy, I meant what I said before."

He sees that I'm not sure what he is eluding to.

A suitable companion

"I like having you here... I like me better when I'm with you."

At that I can only smile and make an exit, because I do not know what to say.

***Thanks again for all encouraging reviews! It's just lovely to get that kind of support. Here comes a weekend read in return :)***

***X***

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## Chapter 11: The worst day of the year

I wish I was better at following my own advice, I really do. The advice to talk, that is. When Charles returned home from the hospitalisation at Headley Court I was set on telling him about myself when I found a good opportunity to do it, but so far, I have cowardly bailed out. I know it would probably be good for me, for him, for our friendship but the words just will not come out of my mouth. It seems like there is a disconnection somewhere between the speech centre of my brain, where words are phrased, and my lips when it comes to this particular topic. And I'm obviously not ready today either even though I have struggled for weeks.

Tomorrow is *The Day*. The worst day of the year. I would like to take the day off and do what I always do, but I have put off asking Charles for a leave. I'm not sure why, but maybe because I'm afraid he will ask me what I plan to do with my free time. I do not feel prepared to share the truth with him and I'm not sure I'm capable of pulling a lie either, so I have postponed asking. But now I must.

He is reading a book when I find him.

"Charles, there's something I need to ask you."

He looks up.

"Okay?"

"Can I take the day off tomorrow?"

"How come?"

There it is, the dreaded question.

"I have some personal business to attend to."

He considers it briefly, then says;

"I'm sorry I can't agree to that. If you had asked earlier, I would have arranged for someone else to take me to Headley Court but now you give me too short notice. I have a special evaluation session to assess my current condition with both the physiotherapist and the doctor tomorrow, so I have to be there. You can have another day off if you like, just let me know when."

With that, he considers the conversation to be over and returns to his book, leaving me feeling devastated. He is right, I should have asked earlier, and he has no way of knowing that this day is special to me, in the worst way, and cannot be exchanged for any other random day. I do not want to tell him though, or maybe I want to but do not feel I'm capable, so I just leave with tears burning behind my eyelids.

Next morning, I wake up, even though I do not want to. I drag myself out of bed wishing I did not have to face reality, but I have learned that there is no escape. My family give me extra hugs before I'm off to work but they know since long that I prefer not talking about it. Only mum says;



"Couldn't he have given you the day off? Even Louie used to agree to that."

"I asked too late mum, I have to suit myself. Maybe it's good to break traditions."

She looks at me with sad eyes, although I guess my own would look even more sad if I bothered to take a look in the mirror.

-O-

When I help Charles to enter the car I talk as little as possible. The entire drive I talk as little as possible, although Charles tries to pick up a conversation several times. Normally these days, our drives are a mix of banter and comfortable silence. Today it is only silence and I'm not sure Charles finds it comfortable, but it is what I can offer. Meanwhile he meets with his treatment team for the special assessment, and then go through his usual exercise schedule, I wait in the cafeteria. Time is passing by so slowly, I can hear the tick tock from the oversized clock on the wall meanwhile I sip bitter tasting coffee from a plastic cup, and I'm feeling worse and worse about being here and not doing what I should be doing today.

Once Charles is ready and we are back in the car, again driving in silence, I feel desperation building up inside of me. It feels like a growing tsunami wave that is going to devour me. If I'm not there, he will think I have forgotten about him, he will think I have moved on, he will...

"Dawes!"

I jump in the seat, judging by the volume of his voice Charles has tried to contact me for some time now but I was in my own universe.

"Sorry?"

"Are you pissed at me?"

"Pissed at you?"

"For not letting you have the day off? I really would have wanted to, but this was important to me. Going through this assessment today. They think I've made great progress..."

"I'm not pissed."

I know I'm interrupting him, but I cannot help myself.

"I need to be somewhere. Can we go? It's a little detour and you would have to wait for me a little while, but... it's important to me."

The words are coming out of me so fast my tongue almost stumbles on them. I feel like my life depends on him saying yes, but I do not say that. I keep my eyes on the road, but I can see in the corner of my eye that he is looking at me searchingly, wondering what I'm up to. Then just says;

"Okay. You keep waiting for me all the time, so it's only fair."

After all, he is paying me to wait for him not the other way around, so maybe it is not really fair, but I do not care, he has agreed. I can go, I'm endlessly relieved. I will not fail *him*.

"Thanks, boss."

I notice that he squirms a bit in the seat, I know he is not completely comfortable with me reminding him he is my employer like that.

Approaching Bath, I adjust our usual itinerary, so we end up where I wanted to go, and I park the car.

"I'll be back soon", I promise and leave him in the car. I can see he is surprised about where we have stopped but I'm not able to provide him with an explanation. Not right now, there is something else I need to do. I hurry down the gravel paths to the place I know so well and sit down on the damp ground. Finally, I can exhale.

"I'm here. I'll always be here. I will not forget you."

I do forget about Charles waiting for me though, lost in my memories. *Our* memories.

-O-

"Molly?"

I do not know how much time that has passed. Charles has found me sitting on the ground, curled up with my arms locked around my knees, rocking from side to side. I know my tears are flowing freely down my cheeks and I'm probably an ugly crier, but I do not care. I'm surprised that Charles is here, I had entirely forgotten about him, but he has made his way here on the crutches. Through the haze I think that it must have taken him some considerable effort on the gravel walk. His gaze falls at the gravestone in front of me.

*Jonah Bridgeman*

A suitable companion

*1994-2014*

*Beloved son, brother, friend and boyfriend*

*We will miss you for always*

He does not ask anything, merely says;

"I got worried, so I came looking for you. I don't want to disturb, but can't you come up at least? It must be freezing sitting on the ground."

I had not felt it before, but I realise now that I'm very cold, almost shaking. I do as he asks and get up, even though my limbs are heavy. Then he takes a step closer and put his arms around me, pulling me to his chest. We just stand like that for an eternity and I keep crying. I feel the rough coat fabric against my cheek and I can hear his heart beat steadily because my ear is pressed to it. Strangely, two thoughts penetrate through my grievous memories. One is that his arms are so much stronger than I had expected, he is obviously doing well with his exercising and no longer the weak skinny man he was when I met him. Secondly, he smells amazing. I have felt his scent before, but never like this, up close. It is a faint, pleasant, not overwhelming scent of aftershave, mixed with the clean smell of soap and underneath that something that must just be himself. It should feel wrong thinking about that here, but for some reason it only feels safe.

Finally, he says;

"I can stand here for as long as you want, but please give me some notice before you move because I'm actually holding on to you."

I realise then, that he has thrown his crutches to the ground to be able to hold me and I'm supporting him as much as he is supporting me.

My tears have slowly ceased, and I dry away the last ones with the back of my hand.

"I think I'm ready now. I have done what I came for. Thanks for joining me."

We pick up the crutches and move towards the car without saying anything further. I'm grateful he is here, it made the experience different this time. A little easier. Maybe because I know he understands loss. I'm still not ready to talk right now. He is sensitive to that and we drive to the house in silence.

"Come with me" he says as we enter, and we head for the kitchen.

I'm glad he suggested that. It is the coziest room in the house, my favourite and I can think of no place where I would rather be right now. Hutchins is away for her weekly bridge session this evening and I'm relieved I will not have to explain to her. I know she would worry about me.

"Would you mind making the tea?" he asks. "I kind of exhausted the strength in my legs before."

I notice he does not say it to give me a bad conscience, he is just tired now and I'm happy to make the tea. When we are seated on two stools by the kitchen island, he says;

"If I had known what you wanted to do, that it was so important to you, I would have given you the day off. You know that don't you?"

I swallow, it will not take much for me to start crying again.

"I do. I just couldn't tell you. I mean, I didn't mean to keep it a secret really, but I just couldn't make myself tell you even if I wanted to. Intended to even. It is difficult. I'm not as good at talking about myself as I tell others to be, as I tell you to be. But now you know."

We both sip our hot tea silently for a while.

"Who was he?"

"He was my best friend, ever since we were kids. Then he became my boyfriend and later fiancée. He was my everything – but he died second year of uni."

I see his eyes widen at the realisation that he is not the only one of us who has lost someone close. I look down in my tea cup, with my willpower trying to press back the re-emerging tears into the lacrimal ducts again but feel that I fail.

"I'm so sorry, Molly. I had no idea."

No, how could he when I never talk about it anymore.

"What happened? Tell me as much as you want, not only about how he died but about him."

And it feels right, right to tell Charles about Jonah today, on the anti-anniversary of his sudden death, to keep him alive by sharing the memory of him.

"We knew each other since we were babies. Our mums were best friends and they had us only weeks apart, so growing up we always hung around in each other's

homes. We played together, did sports together, started school together - even though the teacher never would let us sit together because we disturbed too much with our mischiefs."

I smile at the memory and feel the taste of my warm, salty tears as they reach my lips.

"We stayed friends even when we became teenagers, even at the age when the whole boy/girl thing is sensitive we would just never let anyone bother us about it. We had other friends too, but everyone just had to accept we were best friends. Then, when we were sixteen we realised that we fancied each other in other ways too. I kissed Chris Baker on a party and Jonah got jealous and angry, and I got sad because he was angry and wanted nothing more than to make it right again. Did not care about Chris Baker at all. That was when we realized we were in love, too. In secondary school when everyone else changed boyfriends and girlfriends, we stayed together. We knew we had found "the one" and we were just so happy together. We did things of our own, never holding each other back, but both always wanted to return. And we made plans for the future. Both started uni here in Bath, he studied medicine and I studied entrepreneurship and management. I thought that would be a solid ground for starting my own business one day. At Christmas that year, he proposed. He had this thin silver ring because he could not afford more as a student and said he would change it for another one day, but I did not care, it was all I ever wanted. I was just so, so happy and I felt life could not be better."

I pause, because now comes the hard part. Charles sees it and takes my hand, entwines it with his larger, solid one and makes me feel like a small part of me is somehow protected.

"Today, three years ago, I got a call. It was Jonah's mum calling from the hospital. She was hysteric, saying they had taken him there and I had to come. I thought that even if she was upset, it could not be that serious, because I was so sure that if it was I would have felt it somehow. So sure, that we were connected so I would have known if something bad had happened to him. But I had felt nothing, just carried on as usual until that call. Yet, it turned out he was already dead when the ambulance reached the hospital."

I can see that Charles' eyes are filled to the brim with tears too. He did not know Jonah, but it seems like he feels for me.

"What had happened?"

"He had an aneurysm. I don't know if you know what it is? It's when the wall of an artery weakens and causes an abnormally large bulb, which can rupture and cause internal bleeding. You can get it from disease, trauma – or some are born with it and carry it throughout their life like a hidden bomb waiting to explode."

I have memorised the explanation the doctor once gave me, word by word, although I don't think he said bomb or explode, that is just how I have pictured it.

"That was likely how it was with Jonah, that he was born with it. He had just been out jogging and it burst. He died immediately. We didn't even get to say goodbye. I saw him at the morgue, but that does not really count, does it? He was so pale and



cold, and one could see it was not really him lying there, just the empty shell. I'm not religious but it was so clear that whatever it was that was the essence of him had already gone somewhere else, I don't know where, and left was only an empty vessel."

I take a deep breath before I continue.

"I was paralysed with grief for so long. I could not get out of bed and I could not sleep either. I could not eat unless someone forced me. I didn't want to see anyone, hardly even my family. I dropped out of uni, I couldn't achieve anything anyway, didn't even write the exams. I lost the scholarship of course but it didn't matter anyway because I thought I would never do the things we had dreamed of. Mum and dad didn't know what to do but eventually it was Jonah's mum who got me out of bed and forced me to get help. Things turned slowly, and I managed to stay on my feet and finally get a work and start living some kind of life again. For so long I felt guilty if I was smiling sometimes, like I had forgotten him for a second. Until Nan pointed out that he would not have wanted me to never smile again. Life is okay now, but not as before. And I will always miss him."

He looks into my eyes, and he is still holding my hand. We stay silent for a minute and I take comfort in his presence.

"It seems we share more of a common history than I realised, losing people that mattered to us. And I'm so sad for you. So truly sad. I know there's nothing I can say to make this better."

"I'm sorry I didn't let you in on it before."

I am, but I'm also a little bit afraid that I have over-stepped telling my boss all this.

He remains quiet.

"You're not going to say you know how I feel?"

So many people have said that, and I have believed very few of them, but as Charles has lost Elvis I think he might understand.

"I lost one of my best friends and in the worst way, but he was not my childhood BFF, teenage sweetheart or my fiancée. He was certainly not my *everything*. It has been hard enough as you know, but I would not presume to know how you are feeling Molly."

I like that about him, that he does not make assumptions about me.

"No... but it feels just a little bit better to tell you about him. I think you might have liked him, even if you're very different."

They are - different. Where Jonah was soft, Charles is sharp, where Jonah was easy going, Charles is complex. Yet there is something about them, about the core of their personality that is similar. Something dependable, something safe. And I'm beginning to think Charles has a real sense of humour, like Jonah did. I think they would have gotten along.

"Tell me more about him. Tell me everything that you want to remember today."

I nod. On Charles suggestion, we first move to the living room couch because our bums have started hurting from sitting on the wooden chairs in the kitchen for so long. There I tell him about Jonah. Tell about when I beat him to losing the first

tooth at age five and he had our older neighbor punch him on the mouth with the hope he would lose one too, but just ended up with a nose bleed instead. I tell about the time we had chicken pox simultaneously and our mums allowed me to move in with him for a week, so we could be ill, and less bored, together. I tell about the time when some older boys bullied him and took his kick-bike, and I furiously went after them, yelling at them and beating them with my little fists, taking them with such surprise that they returned the kick-bike without further ado and never bothered him again. I tell about the time when the three blonde girls in our block said I could not play with them because I had dark hair, and he poked his tongue at them saying they were ugly albinos and I had better friends than them, referring to himself and of course were right. I tell about the first time we kissed, which was also the first time since we were in diapers when felt shy in each other's company but also ecstatic because it felt so right and we realised we were in love with our BFF. I tell him about how Jonah proposed, in his student room on a rainy Sunday afternoon, noting fancy but still the most romantic proposal I could ever think of.

I feel like it is small treasures I'm sharing with Charles, and he receives them without interrupting me, only nodding, humming, smiling. He is a great listener. I already knew that from our drives, but I appreciate it more than ever today. When I finally run out of words, he says;

"It was a beautiful love you had", gently squeezing my hand.

It is getting late now and I'm exhausted. I feel like I have been talking, Charles listening, for hours and hours and my eyes are filled with sand from having cried so much and I'm extremely sleepy.

## A suitable companion

"I think you need to lay down for a while" he says, softly commanding. Right now, all I want is to obey. I sink into the couch and when I'm already drifting off, I think I feel Charles putting a blanket over me and tuck me in.

"Thank you, Charles James, you're a very nice guy. Much nicer than I thought when I first saw you", I manage to mumble.

The last thing I hear before falling asleep is Charles low soft laughter. I like it very much.

*This is my own absolute favourite chapter so far. I wrote it roughly ready already before chapter 4, even if have edited since to fit with things I had come up with in between and added new ideas. I'm so happy it's finally time to share it (hurray!) and I hope you will like it as much as I do (sorry for not being more modest but I'm just in love with Molly and CJ in this situation). Much appreciated if you let me know what you think :)*

X

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## Chapter 12: A nicer kind of lunch

When I wake up the following morning, I feel rested but first I'm confused about where I am. Then I register the by now familiar, expensive furniture and drapers framing the tall windows letting the morning light in. I have slept on Charles' couch. I feel a bit embarrassed. Clearly, we crossed a line between employer and employee yesterday when I told him everything about my past. One which normally is not crossed, but it was a very special day. I'm just not sure how to deal with it today. He is nowhere to be seen yet, so I just remain where I am for a while and let my mind drift.

I really liked talking to him yesterday. He felt like a friend, one I could trust and one that could understand. It suddenly strikes me we did not talk about Smurf, were he fits into all this. Truth is, he does not really. Smurf was a peripheral friend of Jonah's who I had met on some occasions during the university years. About one and a half year after Jonah's death, we met in a bar when Bella had forced me to

come out with her one evening instead of just shutting myself up in my room. I did not know him well but generally liked him and he seemed to like talking to me. I had not even thought about dating up till then. My feelings for Jonah were still so strong and the baggage I carried seemed too heavy to tell any twenty-ish prospective boyfriend about. For all I cared I could stay a "widow" for the rest of my life. But he was nice, he was kind, he already knew about Jonah, so nothing had to be explained. He did not seem to demand anything from me, just showed me that he liked to hang out. So, we did, more and more frequently. After one evening out with friends when I maybe had a drink or two too much, we ended up in the backyard of the Indian take away, first snogging, moving on to a shag. I'm not sure I really wanted it, but I did not say no. I did not feel any butterflies in my stomach, no tension or expectation. I just felt numb as always, but it was still quite nice in a way to be wanted and everyone around me said I had to move on at some point. So, I tried. Since then it has just slowly and steadily rolled on and now a year has passed since that drunken Friday night.

I know he wants us to move together, have a place of our own but I have said that then I'm not able to put anything away for the café so we have to wait. For now, he has grumpily accepted it, but I know that is not the true reason why I do not want to. The true reason is that I like him, but I do not love him. Or, at least I used to like him, I'm not always as sure now – but I do not know if it would be any different with someone else. I just do not think I have it in me anymore, I think that part of me was lost with Jonah, the part that would feel deep love and actual excitement about a man. I suddenly have a flash from yesterday in the graveyard, the masculine scent of Charles and his strong arms around me and it sends a surge through my abdomen. The body is a silly vessel, sometimes reacting to things in a

way it should not – and I repress it and am determined to forget. Charles is my employer, nothing more, nothing less. It is probably for the better if I try to keep my distance. I also need to make up my mind about Smurf and me, but not today, not right now.

After a while, I hear Charles crutches coming down the stairs, and him too, naturally. I sit up on the couch and he takes a seat in one of the armchairs. Good, I like that we have some distance between us.

"Hi, there" he smiles. "Did you sleep well?"

Surprisingly, I did.

"Hi... I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For this, me sleeping on your couch. For spilling my life history to you yesterday and crying a river of tears."

"I don't mind. Are you feeling better today?"

"I do. The worst day of the year is over, now I'll be quite fine until next year. No more outbursts to be expected." I give up a small laughter, but it feels hollow.

"It's okay, you don't have to be cheerful. That was some heavy stuff – but you can talk to me about it anytime, you know."

He is the best. I did not know, but now I do. I nod, then something strikes me.

"Yesterday, in the car, before we went to the graveyard I interrupted you. You were about to tell me what the doctors said. Did you have good news?"

He burst into a pleased grin. I'm not sure if it is because of what he has to share, or if it is because I remembered, or both.

"Yes, the doctor, physiotherapist and psychologist all agree I'm making very good progress. If it continues like this, I will be able to walk without crutches in a month or two and probably return to service in six. Apparently, they also think I'm making progress with regards to my nut so I'm coming closer to being mentally fit as well, even if I must continue with both therapy and medication for the foreseeable future. I will most likely not have to request medical discharge."

"This is amazing news, we should celebrate! I'm so proud of you!"

He looks at me serious.

"You know that I wouldn't be here without you?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

I do not know why my heart beats so erratic when he says such things to me.

"I'm not. You have helped me get my head straight, I was in a really bad place the day you first walked in here. And the physical part, I know the physiotherapist has done a great job, but you spurred me on there, too. I'm sure it would have taken longer without you."



I can feel myself blushing. I know he is at least partly right, but I'm still not comfortable taking credit for his well-being. I have not done that much really, besides being here and annoying him. Then it dawns on me. When he is well he will not need me. In a couple of months, when he can walk and drive himself, he will not need me. I would not have thought it from the start, but now I know I will miss this job immensely – and not because of the salary. I keep the happy-face on but suddenly I feel drained and sad inside, but for different reasons than yesterday. Reasons that I cannot completely put my finger on. Instead of digging further into the feeling, I say;

"So, how do we celebrate?"

"Let's go out for lunch, to someplace nice. I'll make a reservation. My treat."

I nod. Then I realise my mum must be worried sick that I did not come home last night, of all nights. She might just as well think I have committed suicide.

"I must call mum!"

"Relax. I called her yesterday when you had fallen asleep. As your employer I have the number to your next of kin in case of emergency."

As my employer, right. That is what he is, full stop. But now we plan to go for lunch, I just have to make myself look decent again after a night on the couch.

"Thanks, that was really sweet of you."

Like everything he did yesterday.

"I might need to go home quickly, to change and have shower. I can hardly go to lunch someplace nice like this."

"We have bathrooms here, you know. And I'm sure my mum has some clothes you can borrow. You're about the same size."

I would like to say no, but then I would have to explain that I feel we are crossing yet another line here that we should not, and I have not told him that I think we have crossed a first. That would only make things even more complicated. Instead I agree to do as he suggests.

At least he does not show me to *his* bathroom. It would have felt far too intimate to be in the shower where he usually is naked, washing my hair with his products, leaving his scent on me. I push away the thought of him being naked at all. What is *wrong* with me today? I must be emotionally sensitised after yesterday. Luckily, he takes me to a guest bathroom and tells me he will leave a change for me outside the door. I take my time in the shower because I want to make sure that I do not have to hang around naked if it takes him time to find something I can put on. It will probably be some ghastly lady outfit, chosen so he can have a laugh at my expense for the rest of the day. If so, it's on me – I'm willing to take that after all he did for me yesterday. But I'm happily surprised. He has chosen a very elegant cream white silk blouse and a black pencil skirt. He has even managed to conjure up a pair of nice high heeled black shoes my size. Obviously, Mrs. James has great taste, or Charles has great taste selecting from her wardrobe. It is a mix of strict and feminine which I think is a pretty sexy, and the size is perfect. When I put it on I think I look a bit like Meghan Markle in *Suits*, especially as I have my long hair

out in loose waves instead of my usual ponytail or knot. It is very different to the jeans and t-shirts he sees me in most of the time and I look quite beautiful, although not as striking as the Duchess of Sussex. The cream white fabric goes very well with my fair complexion and dark hair and even without makeup my green eyes seem to radiate. 'Too beautiful for a lunch with my employer', I hear the voice in my head saying to me. Oh, why can I just not stop thinking these things today and just go and have lunch like a normal person.

He waits for me seated on a chair in the entrance, right below the stairs. He looks up when he hears me giggle, coming down the stairs and for a second, I think his pupils widen, but it is hard to tell with the distance and the chocolate brown colour of his surrounding iris.

"What's funny?" he asks.

"With the risk of annoying you with my usual movie comparison, I feel like I'm in one of those American high school films where a couple are going to their prom and she comes down the stairs."

"And he just can't believe his eyes because she's so beautiful?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, but that's usually how it is, isn't it?" he smiles cocking his eyebrow.

I feel my cheeks flush. I'm not sure if he is just playing along or if he is giving me an indirect compliment.

He does not say anything more, he just has the widest grin on his face, seemingly very amused that he has managed to embarrass me a little.

"You don't look to shabby yourself." I manage to say anyway.

That is an understatement. He has added a navy-blue jacket to his regular tailor-made shirt and jeans outfit and dapper is the word that comes to my mind. Or simply marvelous.

I'm prepared to drive as usual, but when we open the front door, a cab is waiting for us. He sees the question in my eyes.

"Today we're not driving. Today we will have drinks for lunch".

He looks very pleased with himself announcing the surprise.

It is a fifteen minutes' drive. I try to relax in the backseat when I for once do not have to act chauffeur. It is just that he is sitting here in the back too and even though he is on the other end of the seat, with space between us, I somehow find it distracting. His legs are so very tall, taking up much of the space. His thighs look muscular in those tight jeans and I can really see that he has put on some healthy weight, there is definitely more substance to the thin man I first met. Like me, he is fresh out of the shower and here in the car I can feel his scent clearly, the same amazing scent I felt when I was close to him yesterday. Again, I ask myself; what's *wrong* with me today? I look out the window and force my mind to focus on Smurf. I wonder what he is doing right now. He is probably in a lecture, maybe he will go for a jog during lunch. I should go see him tonight, have a cozy evening just the two... Damn he smells so good! Not Smurf. My thoughts, or rather my senses

have strayed again, towards Charles. Luckily, the cab stops in front of the restaurant now.

It is a very nice restaurant, the kind Smurf and I would never go to because it looks like one meal would cost what we spend on food for a week and that is confirmed when I look at the menu. Yet, it is cozy, not stiff at all and the head waiter greets us with a big smile and shows us to the table. Our waitress turns up almost immediately and asks if we want to start with something to drink.

"Definitely!" says Charles. "Can you please bring us a bottle of *Pol Roger Brut Réserve*?"

I have no idea what he just ordered but I'm sure it will be something nice.

We have a table by the window and we have view over a hotel across the street, which I know well.

"I used to work in that hotel. It was my first job ever."

I nod in the direction of the Holiday Inn hotel.

"Really?" he looks interested. "What did you do?"

"Nothing fancy, I was in housekeeping, cleaning rooms. Hard work for quite little money, but I was still in school so working there on weekends made a big difference to my wallet. Or, to the family's wallet I should say.

"I wish I had done something like that."

"What exactly? Clean sixteen rooms in eight hours and trying to fit in a lunch somewhere? You don't go around lazily with a feather duster, it's very heavy job making beds with those thick mattresses, making sure everything is spotless after all sorts of weird people having spent the night and a manager coming by when you're done to check you have not failed somehow. And then the piccolo who has carried a tiny suitcase gets all the tips only because the guests see him. The housekeeping staff was not allowed to fraternise with the guests, not that any guest would have wanted to with the ugly uniforms we had to wear."

"*Fraternise* with the guests?" he bursts into laughter.

"That's not my words, it's verbatim from the handbook." I laugh too, because it was indeed a very silly handbook, and very ugly uniforms. "My favourite guests were business men who hardly unpacked, the worst were weekend families and couples who ordered lots of room service that needed to be cleaned away. They were a nightmare."

"I get that it wasn't glamorous, but I would have liked to try a normal job with... average people, and I mean that in a good way. I never worked before joining the army. Growing up, I only met people like my parents and their kids, then I went to boarding school and later Cambridge and it was much of the same. And throughout, I was never expected to lift a finger except for managing my studies. At Sandhurst, it was a bit different but still quite homogenous. Then, when I started working, first at the regiment, later when I was deployed, there was this great mix of people and I think have never felt as at ease as when I was hanging with the privates even if there was always a certain distance because of the ranking, but it's

also a special environment. Mostly males, a jargon of its own, a bit rough and not exactly a regular eight-to-five-job. Sometimes I think it would have been good to experience more of...normality."

"Yet, you have been dreading not being able to return to the army since you were injured..."

He smiles "Yes, that's contradictory, isn't it? But I guess that if I one day leave the army I would like it to be by my own choice. I'm not ready yet. I miss my section, miss the lads, I would still like to aim to be a major one day. Like I said, it's the place when I have felt most like myself... there and with y..."

"Then I..."

We spoke simultaneously during the last part of his sentence, so I cut him off and I did not get what he said.

"Sorry, go on."

"No, you say, it was nothing important."

I still wait for him a few seconds, but now he seems unwilling to repeat what he had intended to say, so I finish my sentence.

"Then I hope you will be able to return, I really do. That was all I wanted to say."

He smiles and fidgets with the napkin. The silence is not uncomfortable in anyway but, yet I feel a need to fill it.

"When I worked in the hotel, there was one guest, a woman, who stayed there several times. When she unpacked her toilet bag in the bathroom, she always had the full product line from Clinique. I don't expect you would know but it's like a whole kit of products; cleanser, facial water, moisturizer, lotion... all in different but matching colours. They were always standing there in a row on the bathroom shelf like a pastel coloured rainbow. I thought it was so beautiful. It was my dream then, that I one day would be able to afford the whole Clinique product assortment. Dreams were simple then."

"Is that still your dream?"

"No, my dreams have changed since I was sixteen" I smile.

"What do you dream of now then?"

"Of having my own café – owning it and have it the way I want it, bake everything in it. And I guess I dream of finding love, like I had with Jonah. Or not exactly the same, but a kind that feels as good."

"You don't have that with Smurf?"

I had not intended to reveal that, but too late.

"No, it's not like that with him... It has always been second best, and maybe not even that – and he knows it, I think."

Our eyes are locked and somehow it is a loaded moment but to my relief we are interrupted by the return of the waitress bringing a bottle of champagne tucked in



a wine cooler with ice. Apparently, this is what *Pol Roger Brut Réserve* is. Charles gives me a wicked smile.

"Now we are going to get you drunk, Ms. Dawes!"

"What? Why? I'm at work, remember?"

"And that is why you will do as your boss tells you. I have the feeling you need to get drunk, it will do you good. Relax, have some fun – I will too, if it makes you feel better about it."

He looks boyish as he hands me my first glass, and happy. The crease between his eyes is gone. I know it will be there again if he focuses on something, or if he is angry, but it is not the permanent feature it was when I first met him. I like this version of Charles James.

"A penny for your thoughts" he says.

"I just thought you look different from when I first met you. Healthier, happier, more at ease... less like a stuck-up twat."

"Oi! That was uncalled for! You're still the same though. Just as cheeky", he grins.

"Thank god for that, my life was so boring before I hired you."

In one and the same sentence he gave me a compliment and reminded me he is my employer. Good. Good that we both remember that.

I love this lunch, I do not want it to end. The food is divine. The champagne and later the wine, are delicious. The company is great. I laugh so much that one

occasion I have to dive for the ladies' room not to pee my pants. I knew he was funny, like a controlled sense of humour, but today he is hilarious – and it is not because I have had too much to drink. Maybe that is a contributing factor, but he is really funny too. And he is laughing so much, his once stern face completely transformed, his lovely chocolate eyes twinkling. The only time I feel serious, is when I'm on the loo and the thought passes through my head that I again wonder if we will stay friends when he does not need me anymore. When I'm not his companion.

When I get out to the table again, he has order two gigantic strawberry daiquiris, topped with grated white chocolate and with straws.

"Instead of desert" he explains with a satisfied grin, and I feel myself smiling again so my cheeks hurt.

We certainly stay there much longer than a regular lunch and we certainly have more to drink, but finally we jump into a cab again and head for home. Our separate homes that is (just to make it clear). He tells the taxi driver to stop by my house first.

"Are you sure? Will you make it into the house alone on the crutches? You're drunk after all."

"I'm not as drunk as you think I am. You just think so because you are drunk" he seems to think that he is hilarious, but I also have the uneasy feeling he is right. We have been drinking approximately the same amounts, but he can probably stand his drink much better than I can. When the cab stops I say:

"Here we are, the Dawes residence. I would invite you in to say hi to my family if we weren't drunk, but you're welcome some other time."

"I'm looking forward to that."

I almost believe him.

"Anyway, thanks for letting me take you to lunch today, Dawesy. I had a great time."

"So did I. Thanks for inviting me. You were right, I needed to get drunk, it was too long ago."

Because I always stay nearly sober to ensure Smurf stays on track.

Unexpectedly, he leans over and gives me a kiss on the cheek, just a light touch of his lips. The sudden closeness, his breath against my cheek and the heat from his body surprise me. The kiss on the cheek is intimate, dangerously close to my mouth and I get goosebumps. He does not miss the intended target though, saving us both from embarrassment. Yet, I feel like another invisible line has been crossed even if it is only in my mind.

I have changed my plans. Tomorrow, I will go and hang out with Smurf. This evening, I will just enjoy being tipsy after an extremely nice lunch, probably the nicest I ever had, and go to bed early. Maybe I will dream about Smurf. Maybe I'll dream about my café. Maybe I will dream about owning the full Clinique product assortment. I will definitely not dream about Charles James. Full stop.

A suitable companion

***This chapter I wanted to have to let their worlds mix a little bit and for Molly to see new sides of CJ. As usual, hope you enjoy and happy reading and glad if you let me know what you think.***

**X**

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## Chapter 13: A little welcome commotion

"We will have company tomorrow" Charles announces one afternoon.

I feel myself turning on a very surprised face. Besides Rebecca, no one has come to visit Royal Crescent in the months I have known him. Surely, him accepting visits must be another sign his health is going in the right direction.

"Really? Who?"

"It's not *one* person, it's my section. Or, I still see them as my section even though they have another CO now when I'm on sick leave."

"CO?"

"Commanding officer."

"Aha... I guess that must have been hard."

"What?"

"Going from having a bunch of people you could command what to do, to just one"

I'm smirking.

"Yeah, especially as that one doesn't always do as I tell her to."

We grin at each other. I don't really know how come, but since the fantastic lunch it feels like Charles and I are so synced, having a mutual understanding, laughing about almost anything together. Like every day holds a hidden joke. I feel like I'm smiling most of the time in his company.

"Does she *ever* do as you tell her?"

He pretends to think.

"I think there was this one time..." and then he unexpectedly reaches out a long arm and tickles me. "...but only after I had used my most stern voice."

I'm trying to get away from his tickle, taking advantage of that he still cannot move like I can and breathless exclaim;

"Oi! What was that about? I didn't deserve that."

"Oh, I think you did, Dawesy."

"Stop it! What does your most stern voice sound like?" I try to distract him with a question.

"FOR FUCKS SAKE DAWES, THAT'S AN ORDER!"

His voice cuts through my laughter like a knife. I find myself almost standing to attention and suddenly have no problem visualising him in the role of the officer, who's orders anyone would follow. He is a bit terrifying - and also, seriously hot.

Nooo... No! No, I did *not* just think that. Absolutely not.

I wriggle to get away from him still tickling me and sit straight on the sofa, at a safe distance from him, putting on a mock serious face.

"Now you scared the shit out of me! Sometimes I don't know who you are" I pant.

He frowns.

"How do you mean?"

"Tickle me... and then talking like that. It's like two different personalities."

"I'm both" he grins.

And I suppose he is. I'm trying my best to repress it, but this combination of stern man and playful boy causes a very inappropriate surge going through my body. Now it is me telling myself silently, 'For fucks sake Molly, pull yourself together!' I must remind myself that Charles is my employer, Smurf my boyfriend. Things are becoming very confusing. Confusing, but not unpleasant in any way.

"Schizophrenic you mean? Anyway, okay, then I know. I'll stay out of your way tomorrow."

"No, why?"

"I thought you might want some quality time with your lads."

"I do, but I would also like you to meet them."

I feel disproportionately happy about that he wants to include me, but simultaneously I wonder what his "entourage" will think of me.

"So, exactly how many guests are we expecting?"

"I'm not sure if all of them will come, but if they do they'll be eleven."

"All male?"

"No, two of them are women. Our medic and our driver. You think you are capable handling nine male soldiers?"

"I guess we'll see, but I have very sharp elbows, and tongue, when I need them. One gets that as a perk where I grew up, even though I would not call it free."

He shakes his head. "Oh, Dawes, suddenly I'm really looking forward to seeing you with the lads."

So am I, looking forward to seeing him with those guys, to see him in another context, surrounded with other people, to get to know him better. After all, he has spent a lot of time and challenging situations with them and it will be interesting to see him in their company. I'm just a teeny tiny bit nervous about what they will think of me as the odd bird of the company.

The following afternoon, a military truck stops outside the house, looking misplaced in this tidy street, and a stream of uniformed guys, and one girl, enter the house. They are noisy, laughing and taking up much more space than their actual body volumes, and I like them from the first minute. First of all, they seem so genuinely happy to see Charles, and even more so to see that he is in a quite good



condition. There is such a great dynamic within the group and towards him. There is this friendly banter, cheeky, but never stepping over the line to be mean. In a way, they remind me of my family and I suddenly realise that one of the reason that Charles misses this is because they are in a sense family to him, like the siblings he never had.

They fill up Charles room, long legs spreading over the elegant couches, their military green outfits looking as misplaced in here among the expensive furniture as the truck did in the street. The guy named Mansfield Mike makes the mistake of drowning in the same bottomless armchair I did the first day, which makes Charles and me extend a cheerful glance.

"It's strange to see you in civvies, boss" says the one called Nude-Nut. "I've never seen you in anything but uniform before."

Now that is a disturbing thought. I have never seen him *in* uniform, but now after seeing 2 section, all dressed in their kit, I can picture it in my mind. Not that I'm thinking along those lines at all. Honest.

It seems like most of them have funny nicknames; Brains, Fingers, Dangleberries, Baz Vegas, Monk and so on. In addition to the privates there is one Sergeant called Kingy. Missing is apparently their medic, Lane. I'm quite fine not knowing the story behind the nicknames as I have the feeling it will be salacious in most cases, but I'm curious about one thing.

"What's Charles' nickname?"

"Well, he's definitely not 'Charles' to us", Fingers grins. "I didn't even know you were called Charles, boss?"

There is a general, teasing laughter among them.

"I don't get what's so fucking hilarious about my name? It's a name as good as any other."

"Yeah, right."

"But I'm very curious to know what you fuck muppets call me behind my back."

Fingers looks innocent. "Only the same thing we call you to your face; Captain James, boss, bossman."

I can see that Charles does not completely buy the answer, but it does not seem like anyone will reveal anything further, so he has to give up the battle as lost.

He shakes his head, smiling "The same bunch of cockwombles as ever."

I'm curious to know more about them and after a few minutes I realise that they are all very curious about me.

"So, are you Charles girlfriend?" the only girl in the company asks. I have learned that this is private Richards, or Maisie.

"No, I'm working here. I'm his companion."

"What sort of strange job is that?"

"I know, the world's most stupid role description." I explain how I got the job and we laugh together, me and Maisie, and I instantly feel that I like her. I get to know that she is a very skilled and venturous driver who has saved her team from dangerous situations several times. I get a vibe that there is something between her and a bloke named Rab. They are careful to always have a distance between them, but I see the invisible strings pulling them towards one another, an unlikely but very cute couple that the others seem completely unaware off.

Fingers has missed the conversation between me and Maisie and loudly says to Charles;

"Is this your girlfriend, Boss? Then I understand why you want to stay at home."

I want to be cool with these guys, but I feel myself blushing,

"Dawes is not my girlfriend" Charles explains calmly. "She is working for me. Believe it or not, there were some things I could not manage on my own after being penetrated by those fucking spears."

"I wouldn't mind getting some assistance from a girl like you" Monk says cheekily, poking my side.

"You'd better shut up dickhead, or I'll kick your balls." I tell him, feeling I need to end this conversation before it strays too far.

"Oh, feisty!" Dangleberries grins, and I feel like I have passed a test. We keep on sparring verbally and I enjoy myself. At one point my eyes suddenly meet Charles' eyes and they lock into each other. I get the feeling he is very amused at the sight

of me amid this testosterone-filled bunch, having no problem keeping up with their banter and fighting them off if I need to. What did he expect? I'm the eldest sister to several brothers and equally feisty sisters. I grew up in a neighbourhood filled with rough boys that I needed to befriend. And I think my brain might be working twice as fast as that of some of these guys. If he thought they would get the better of me, he has underestimated me. The fact that I did not want to let him see me being trumped by them might have spurred me on too.

"I quite like you, Dawesy. I wouldn't mind if you came with us on tour like our..."  
says Fingers

"Your what?"

"Mascot."

I laugh. "I thought you were going to say something much naughtier."

"Oh, I wouldn't mind that either if your offering."

"Fingers, manners!" Charles interrupts him with his harsh captain voice. "Besides that Dawes is my employee, she has a boyfriend."

"You do?" Maisie surprised turn to me. "Even if you work for him I just got the impression the two of you..."

"What?" Charles interrupts her sharply.

"Got along really well together."

"We do, but it's strictly professional. Dawes is nothing but professional, so get your heads out of your arses and leave her be."

He sounds so stern, yet a smile is playing around his mouth, so everyone knows he is not angry for real. Again, I think the strictly professional thought that this combination of authority and playfulness is very appealing. 'Professional Dawes', that is who I am to him, though. As I should be. It is only that, that as I get to see more and more new sides to Charles I feel myself being in deep waters - but I'm not sure what is hidden under the surface.

"Are you sure you don't want to change that boyfriend of yours for a squaddie?"  
Fingers persist.

"I will give it some serious thought" I laughingly lie to him.

"And Dawsey, stop flirting with Fingers. I can't have you compromising my men, they're not allowed to bring personal to the battlefield."

"I'm not flirting, I'm just naturally charismatic."

He grins back at me and I feel confident he knows I'm not really flirting with one of his men. That would have been weird in so many ways.

"You're just jealous at me, boss" Fingers continues the joke.

I am a bit surprised about the irreverent tone they use towards Charles, as I would not have expected that was okay towards an officer. I comment it when I have a moment speaking only to Sergeant Kingy.

"I would have thought soldiers showed more respect towards their commanders?"

"Ah, don't be mistaken. Captain James is very liked by his men, loved even, and they go way back. We all know we can joke around with him, but when it comes to a serious situation, we would all listen to him 100%. These guys have the utmost respect for him, they would follow his every command and meet their death for him if they had to. We know how to enjoy the less serious moments together to be tied together when it really matters."

I like that description of it and I feel admiration for Charles for having the trust of his men. After all it may be their lives they put in his hands, so it is serious business.

Meanwhile I'm talking to Kingy, it seems Fingers has delivered another dirty joke at the other end of the room, leading Charles to say;

"I wish you would sometimes engage your brain before your mouth."

"But you loooooove us anyway and you want to come back to us" Dangleberries half-sings.

"I must be crazy, but I do" Charles smiles.

"So, when will you get back to work, Boss?" Brains asks.

"I'd say somewhere between in three and six months, but I think sooner rather than later."

His answer hurts inside of me. I really like them all and the banter among them and Charles, which I'm for a moment part of. They have been nothing but inclusive

to me this afternoon, but they have a connection which I'm not part of and as soon as he is well enough he will leave me for them, for something that I will not be asked to join in. And that is how it should be. I would never want him to stay cooped up in this house with me. I just wish the alternative was not to lose him altogether.

The afternoon is full of laughter and the house seems very empty and silent once they leave, but Charles seems quite content that we are on our own again.

"I can see why they are important to you" I tell him.

"Yeah, we go a long way back and even if they can be annoying like hell they mean a lot to me. You fit in well with them, although it's probably for the better that you're not part of this section."

I find that a little offensive.

"Why?"

"Because I think half the section would fall in love with you and then they would be fighting one another over you, and I couldn't have it like that as their commander."

Sometimes he gives compliments in the most unexpected ways, which makes my insides heat up. I change subject.

"How long have Maisie and Rab been a couple?"

"What? No, they are not a couple, it would be against army regulations when they are serving together."

"I've said it before, but sometimes you're really daft for someone so smart. They are clearly in love, regulations or not. Haven't you noticed? Wouldn't you break those stupid regulations if you fell in love?"

"No, I wouldn't. I would never jeopardise anything by showing feelings for anyone as long as we worked together, especially not someone under my command."

"What would you do then?"

"I would wait out."

Our eyes are locked. Now there is no joke in his voice and I suddenly hear my own heart beats sounding very loud in my ears. I'm not sure if we still are talking about Maisie and Rab. If not, I'm not sure what we are talking about instead. Anyway, he has made his point crystal clear and for some reason it feels like someone has thrown a bucket of ice cold water over me.



***Thanks again for all reviews, love the feedback! I also appreciate that you guess where the plot will be going but will not comment, not to spoil anything :) Thanks to you who said you had been skeptical about reading the story but then read all in one fell swoop, I take it as a huge compliment that my writing managed to capture you in that way.***

***A little warning, things will get a bit rough in this chapter.***

***X***

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## Chapter 14: Life is not a walk in the park

We, Charles and I, have included in our regular routines to visit the park a few times a week. Usually he insists on bringing some old bread and we spend part of the time there feeding the ducks, although he claims I'm impatient and feed them too large pieces which they might choke on. But no ducks have complained so far - or died for that matter.

We still bring the wheelchair, but leave it parked for longer and longer as he manages increasingly well with crutches only. Most days it feels like a small progress is done. Sometimes he can still experience pain in his legs and sometimes he still has nightmares, but overall there are more steps forwards than backwards. One of these days in the park, we walk down one of the small winding paths and we are both in the midst of a laughter after me telling about that Nan got caught in the local store trying to nick candy, but claimed she just wanted to taste before buying and got away with it. Unexpectedly we are interrupted.

"Molly?"

Startled, I feel like I must have jumped half a meter up in the air at the sound of the familiar voice which I did not expect here, but strangely enough my feet are rooted to the ground.

"Smurf?! What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same. I'm out for a jog, decided for another tour than usual for change of scenery."

His gaze at Charles is suspicious and far from friendly, and it is not that strange considering he thinks I work for an old crippled man. Even if he had been the least interested in my job, I would not have told him about Charles progress as it would have been difficult to explain without setting him straight about the age-misunderstanding.

"Mr. James, this is my boyfriend Sm... Dylan. Dylan, this is Mr. James, who I work for as you know."

"It's *Captain* James, actually" says Charles.

Why did he have to say that? He will just make things worse. I let go of his elbow which I was holding, take a step away from him to put some distance between us, but glance at him sideways. His jaw is clenched, he looks a bit tense. For some reason he does not seem to like Smurf. And Smurf certainly does not like him, which is understandable. Here he has been thinking I'm spending my days with an old sickly man and here is Charles. Even when he leans on the crutches he is

towering over Smurf, so much taller and more well-built than he is, his perfectly chiseled features a mocking contrast to Smurf's pretty common ones.

"*Captain James!*" Smurf spits the words out with disdain. "So, this is who you are working for?"

"I have told you that."

"You have told me you work for a crippled man in wheelchair."

"Crippled was your word."

I shouldn't have said that, I know it will only provoke him further.

"You know what I mean! You have been fucking economical with the truth, haven't you?!"

I'm not sure what to say to that, because the truth *is* that I have not been exactly truthful. He continues;

"He's not old! And I don't see any wheelchair?!"

"It's over there." I nod in the direction where it stands, deserted.

"He can fucking walk Molly! It seems like he doesn't need a wheelchair. So why does he need you?"

He says it with an alarmingly calm, icy voice but I can see that he is furious. His face is tense and white, his ears red and that is never a good sign.

"You don't have to talk like I'm not here."

If possible, Charles deep voice is even calmer and icier than Smurf's. "And, actually, I *do* need her. I can only walk short distances still and I can't drive. She drives me back and f..."

"I don't want to hear!" he shouts to cut Charles off and I flinch from the sudden outburst. Then he continues with lower but equally nasty tone of voice "It's not difficult to guess what the two of you have been up to."

"Enough!" says Charles but I just wish he would be quiet.

"Smurf, no, it's not like that."

"You can say what you want Molly Dawes, but I don't believe you" and by that, he just spins around and runs away.

Charles turns to me.

"What was that about?"

I sigh, feeling embarrassed both about Smurf's behaviour and about my part in it, but I cannot escape explaining.

"I might have led him to believe you are older than you are. Much older. Or, he assumed, and I did not correct him."

"Why?"

I look away.

"Because he can be quite jealous sometimes. I have learned that sometimes it makes life easier if I don't tell him everything, because he might misinterpret. And maybe he does that because..."

"What Dawes?"

"Because he knows I don't really love him."

I can barely breathe saying it, I do not know why. I see by the look in his face that he wonders what kind of relationship I'm really in and I do not want to enter a discussion about that with him, so I escape by saying I will go get the wheelchair for him.

"Are you all right Dawesy?" he asks, concerned, when I return.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

I do not mean to be rude, but I'm rattled by my two worlds colliding so abruptly and I'm not looking forward to the talk to try to make up with Smurf. Or, is it make up that I want to do? I do not know any more. Life has been confusing lately. Feelings have been confusing. Not when I'm with Charles, then everything seems easy, but as soon as I leave him for my own life, my real life outside Royal Crescent and our walks in the park. And today even the park is complicated, like one sanctuary destroyed.

"I'm sorry if I in any way has caused trouble."

For some reason he does not sound very apologetic, and I'm annoyed that he had to point out to Smurf that he is a captain, but anyway I say;

"Don't be. This is my own doing and I have to fix it."

So, when I leave Royal Crescent that evening, I go over to Smurf's place without knowing for sure what outcome I'm expecting or hoping for, and I'm not sure if I'm relieved or not that he lets me in when I call on the door.

He is silent first, turning his back to me and I can see him clenching his fists, drilling his nails into his palms. I hope I have not hurt him, because that is not what I want.

"Smurf, please talk to me. I know maybe he was not what you expected, but nothing has happened between us. Nothing is 'going on', you got that wrong."

He turns around and despite what I just said, I see rage in his eyes in combination with a profound contempt. Maybe the expression in his eyes should have warned me, but I have never been able to take it very seriously when Smurf is jealous. When it happens I'm completely unprepared.

Bam!

His fist hits me, right in the face. Somehow, he manages to hit both my mouth and my nose and I'm paralysed in shock and pain. Before I'm able to recover from it even a little, the next strike hits me. He may not be a skilled fighter, but it seems any angry man knows how to punch so it hurts infinitely. I'm gasping for air, raising my hands to try to protect me, desperately hoping he is done but far from it. Instead he takes a hit in my solar plexus, pain again radiating, and I lose my breath entirely this time. While the rippling shock weakens my body, he takes the opportunity to brutally push my back up against the door and with his hands grips around my

throat. He holds me there and looks me straight in the eyes, his own furious and completely cold.

"You little cunt!" he hisses. "You have been going behind my back for months."

"I have not gone behind your back. I work for him, nothing else."

"SHUT UP, LIAR!" he screams right in my face and I'm so afraid now. There is nothing ridiculous about Smurf in this moment, he is dangerous. Very dangerous.

"You made me think he was an old crippled man! But NO! No, he is a young fucking captain in the army and he looks fucking good!"

I feel his grip around my throat tighten. It hurts and it is hard to breath. I feel myself panicking because I'm not sure if he will stop.

"Have you fucked him? Is that why you're not so keen on me? I thought you were just being frigid but now I understand..."

"No" I manage to croak. "No, never. I have not cheated Smurf."

"But you wanted to, I know you did. You have been thinking about him. Thinking about being naked in his bed, letting him fuck you!"

When he shouts this at me, he uses his hands, still around my throat to pound my head against the door. One time, two, three...will he stop? He is tightening his grip further and I'm beginning to see dark spots dancing around before my eyes. Through the blur I can see in his eyes that he is out of control, not knowing how to stop. He is going to kill me.

"Smurf, please." I can only whisper now.

"I'll give you what you deserve."

Still strangling me with one hand, he presses his lips hard to mine without any form of affection, forcing my mouth open and push his tongue in deeply. It repulses me, and I cannot help thinking that he cannot be serious trying to kiss me now. Then it dawns on me that he is very serious, and it is not the only thing he intends to do, as he let one hand go from my throat and hurtfully hard kneads my breast.

"Oh Molly, you will so get what you deserve" he pants close to my face.

I'm terrified now, not believing the reality I'm facing. The hand on my breast relentlessly continues downward and to start tugging my skirt, pulling it up. I thought him killing me was as bad as it could get, but I realise he has worse plans for me. I try to fight against him, I try to keep my legs together, I try to wriggle but he is too strong, and he forces my legs apart with his knee. He pins me to the door, keeps strangling me with one hand, leaving me with little air and no words to protest. He has ripped my stockings and for a moment brusquely put his hand between my legs before he rips my knickers while he is laughing the most horrible laugh. The last layer protecting me is gone.

"I will give you what you deserve bitch and then you'll never look at someone else."

With the hand that just was under my skirt he has started unbuttoning his jeans. There is no way out of this, he will take me and he will kill me. This is the end of me. My entire body is crying no but there is no escape.



Then a knock on the door.

"Smurf are you there?"

It is Matt, one of the other guys living in the house. "I had half a bag of crisps in the kitchen. Did you take that?"

The knock and the normality of the questions briefly makes him loose focus, enough to release his grip so I finally get a chance to move and with unexpected strength manage to knee him in his balls – hard! - and wriggle out of his grip, push him away. I manage to tear the door open and find myself face to face with Matt who looks utterly surprised by my appearance. It must be fairly obvious something is not right, my face wild, my clothes torn.

"Are you okay Molly?" he asks.

"Just keep him away from me." I wheeze and run, behind me I hear Matt saying;

"What the hell is going on here Smurf?" but I'm out of the house before I hear him answer.

I run home. I do not want to sit on a bus with people staring at me in my current state. I do not want to see anyone, not even my family. Also, my body is so pumped full of adrenaline that I'm shaking uncontrollably and probably would not be able to sit still. I just run and run, away from Smurf, away from this relationship that has turned into something sick. I run even when I'm out of breath, when my side hurts, when I'm ready to collapse because I don't feel safe to stop until I'm home. When I finally get home, I just shout 'hi' and then sneak to my room, locking the

door behind me. I do not want them to see, I do not want to explain. To painful, to shameful. It hurts like hell, my face, my throat, my body and I feel dirty, soiled. Even if it never became a complete rape, I feel abused. Thank god Matt came. For an hour I just lie on the bed, then manage to sneak into the shower without meeting any of the others. I let the hot water run for long, sit down on the floor, while tears are streaming down my face. I scrub myself hard with a sponge and soap, feeling a desperate need to remove every trace of Smurf. Never will I let him touch me again, or even see me. I should have ended this long ago but this is without a doubt the end.

When I lie in my bed again, thoughts are spinning. I'm wondering if I saw it coming. Not really, because then I would have left long ago, but there were a few times when maybe it crossed the back of my mind, the question if he would be able to hit. If he one day would cross that line. There was sometimes the expression in his eyes, his jealousy. But I pushed the thought away and today I have paid for it.

I examine my face in front of the mirror. My lip is cracked and swollen, and I can see the bruises beginning to appear both on my face and around my neck. I will look like shit tomorrow. It hits me that I will have to go to work, that I will have to meet Charles and it fills me with dread. I do not want him to see me like this, I do not want him to ask questions, or look at me with despise because I chose my boyfriend so unwisely. I sit on the bed, head in my hands, crying again. I must go to work though, because he has an important day at Headley Court with the full team there and I do not want to let him down. I have to pull myself together and try to disguise the worst with makeup.

Later mum knocks on the door to ask how I am and if I want dinner. I tell her I have a headache and just want to sleep.

"All right, love, just tell me if you need anything."

Yes, I need her to hug me for hours and tell me everything will be okay, but I'm not able to say, not able to let her in – not into the room or into my shame, not even mum. I just lie there numb, tears streaming until I finally fall into restless sleep.

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***A/N: I promise not to leave you long with this horrible chapter. Also, I want to point out that even if some things in previous chapters were based on self-experienced stuff, none in this chapter is, so no need to worry.***

***I promised I wouldn't leave you hanging long with the bad ending of the previous chapter and a business trip with waiting time at the airport was very good for the writing, so here it comes.***

***X***

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## Chapter 15: Aftermath

I do not sleep well this night. I toss and turn, feeling trapped by the sheets, again and again reliving Smurf's hard grip and the living nightmare that he for real tried to rape me. My boyfriend. I used to trust him - my judgement of character must be very poor indeed. When daylight finally comes I'm as exhausted as when I went to bed.

As I feared, my face looks even worse in the morning. The bruises have turned into a deep purple shade and I'm more swollen. I put on a polo jumper to conceal my neck and do what I can with thick makeup, but I would have needed a magic wand to make it go away completely. I practice the lie of Nan clumsily opening a door right in my face a few times in front of the mirror, but I'm not sure I will be able to tell it with Charles penetrating gaze on me. Anyway, here we go. I leave the house without showing myself to my family, postponing it for as long as I can because I do not know how I shall be able to face them. Explain to them.

When I arrive to Royal Crescent, Charles is waiting for me in the entrance prepared to go, as I knew he would.

"There you are" he cheerfully shouts when he sees me by the gate. "Did you take a sleep-in, you slacker?"

Then he sees my face and his expression changes, like a dark cloud passing over it. I do not want to meet his eyes.

"Molly? Molly, what the fuck happened?"

"Nan opened a door on me."

I hear how lame it sounds.

"Don't give me that crap!" he snaps. "No door did this to you. Look at me."

I just cannot. I cannot stand to look in his eyes if he is angry with me. But I feel him raise his hand and softly place it under my chin and turn me up towards him. There is no anger to be seen, only concern.

"God Molly, did Smurf do this to you?"

"Yes" I whisper.

"Why?"

"He was jealous of you, of us, after seeing you yesterday. He thought..."

"What?"

"That something was going on between us. And he didn't believe me when I said there is nothing."

Now his expression turns into one which is difficult to interpret, his face hard as stone and through gritted teeth he lowly says;

"I could kill that coward, dysfunctional little schmuck for doing this to you."

It is kind of terrifying to think that unlike most people just saying such a thing in frustration, Charles actually could. Probably with his bare hands. Smurf would not stand a chance even if Charles has his crutches. Maybe he could even use them to crush his skull. Of course, I would not want that mainly because it would put Charles in jail, but it somehow gives a little comfort just picturing it for a second.

"What happened?"

I take a step back from him. It is so difficult to talk about this when both my body and my insides hurt, and I do not want to start crying.

"Can we just get into the car? You will be late for your appointment."

He looks disappointed that I do not want to tell him, his concerned eyes not leaving my face.

"Molly..." he says softly, and I know that any anger in his face was directed only to Smurf, not me.

"Charles, I can't. Not now, please just let's go."

"Are you sure you're okay to drive?"

"It's just bruises Charles, I'm able to drive."

He capitulates, realising he will not get anything out of me here and accepts going into the car. We drive off, but here he is not willing to drop the subject and after a few minutes demands again;

"Please, tell me what happened, Molly."

I know he will not let me escape this, I must give him something.

"I went to his place. He hit me, then I ran away. We're over now, I will not see him again."

I keep it brief not to let my emotions lose.

"Why was he so furious, I still don't get it."

"He knew I was working for a guy in wheelchair, in need of help, but I may have given the impression you were... "

Not as young and attractive as you are.

"...older and weaker. He did not like what he saw. It's my fault."

"It's NOT your fault, Molly!" he lashes out, raising his voice so I jump a little in my seat. I scare more easily today.

"I'm sorry, it's not you I'm angry with. But you mustn't think it's your fault. NO man has the right to hit a woman for any reason. You know that, don't you?"

Even if it is not me he is angry with I just want to retract into my shell like a little turtle and never come out. I feel too weak today to cope with any criticism, too weak

to cope with anything at all. My last strength was consumed kneeling Smurf, breaking free and running home.

"I suppose I do, but..."

"No 'but', there is no excuse for it. Ever! Have you reported it to the police?"

I'm silent.

"You *will* report it to the police, Molly?"

"I don't think I can. It's just... It's over now, I just want the bruises to go away and then I don't want to think of it."

"But Molly..."

"No, Charles. This is *my* decision, *my* life. I have to decide. You're my employer but you can't tell me what to do in this case. Just let it go."

And then he does. It is a long drive but for the rest of it we are silent. Not our usual comfortable silence. I can feel that Charles is angry and frustrated beside me, I hear it from his breathing, it oozes out of his pores. I'm feeling sad and inadequate.

When we arrive to Headley Court, Charles ask me to sit down in the waiting room a while instead of heading to the cafeteria directly like I use to when waiting for him. I do not have the energy to argue.

When he returns he sits down on the seat beside me. He surprises me by taking my hand, wrapping it between his. I first flinch, as my body's most recent memory of



touch was so horrible, but he does not let me go. I give in to him, let him hold my hand and let it relax. Then he speaks to me softly.

"Molly, I'm so sorry for losing my temper a bit just now in the car. I realise it's the last thing you need today and the only thing I really want is to be there for you. I'm so sorry for this happening and that it was because he saw us. I know you want me to stay out of this, but I can't. I care too much about you. What Smurf did to you was wrong and you need to report him. For your sake mostly, but not only. Now that he has hit you, he has crossed a line. Once a man has done that, there is a big risk he will do it again. If not to you, to some other woman in the future. He needs to get this in his records, he needs to get his punishment and he needs to know he cannot just get away with this. Otherwise it may end even worse next time. Do you see?"

I think about how I was sure I was going to die. After being raped. I would not want anyone else to go through that. But I do not know how to go through with this either.

"I have talked to my doctor here. She is willing to examine you, so you get your injuries documented. That way you have it for a police report. I understand this is extremely difficult for you, but I'm here for you. I'll come with you to the doctor. I'll come with you to the police. I'll do anything you need - if you just let me."

I bite my lower lip, but it hurts so I stop. His hands holding mine are so warm, it feels like his strength is transferred through them to me. I just want to run and hide from this situation, but those hands hold me here, keep me grounded and make me believe that maybe I can do this.

"Okay" I say. "I'll see the doctor at least."

I look up in his face and see relief over this partial progress. I realise he does not lie when he says it matters to him.

"Do you want me to be in there with you? Or do you want to be alone with the doctor?"

I'm not sure I want him to be there, but I don't think I can go through it without him.

"I want you to come."

He shows me down the corridor, to an examination room where a female doctor is already waiting. She looks welcoming and kind and reaches out her hand to greet me.

"I'm Dr. Johnson. Charles has told me you could need an examination..."

Her gaze runs over my face and I see sympathy.

"... and I think so too. Come in and please sit down here."

She shows me to an examining table and I sit on the rough paper covering.

She looks at my face and gently touches the bruises, making notes in between. With a cotton pad she removes some of my makeup, the cover I so carefully applied, so the bruises are fully visible in all their ghastliness.

"Molly, I must ask you – is there anything else?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have any injuries that I can't see when you are dressed?"

I hesitate, but I know I have to do this.

"Yes" I whisper and first pull the jumper up to show my belly where there is another big ugly bruise. Then I pull down the polo neck.

I know it looks really bad, the finger shaped bruises clearly showing the suffocating grip Smurf had on me like a foul purple pearl necklace. I hear Charles gasp for air. I have avoided eye contact with him in here but now I cannot help myself. His facial expression is appalled fury... and something else which I cannot place. His jaw tense and his fists clenched. Of course, he is shocked, because I did not mention this too him. I made him think I took one hit and ran.

"He tried to strangle you?" Dr. Johnson says and with soft fingers examine me, I just flinch once when she presses a little too hard.

"Yes" I look down and sob.

Now Charles raises from his chair and come to sit beside me, put his arm around me and leans his head to mine. His mere presence so close to me is a comfort.

"I understand this is difficult, Molly" says the doctor. "But it is a very good thing that you did this, document your injuries. You need to report this man. He is clearly dangerous. It seems your injuries are mostly superficial even if it hurts, so they will heal in a week or two, but had it continued... If he had put more pressure on your larynx he could have caused permanent damage, and even worse he could..."

She does not finish the sentence but we all know what could have happened. She is finished now, and I pull up my polo neck again, covering the purple marks. I get a signed copy of the notes she has made, to bring to the police.

Charles accompanies me to the cafeteria.

"Are you sure that you will be okay to wait for me alone?"

"I'm sure. You go and do your things and then I'll see you afterwards."

I can see that he is rattled and unwilling to leave me.

"I don't want anyone to hurt you like this, ever again, Molly."

"I know, neither do I" I say weakly.

He steps in closer and wraps his arms around me, like once before letting the crutches fall to the ground without caring about the noise echoing throughout the cafeteria. For a while I just stand there, wrapped in the warmth of his body, leaning my head to his chest, not wanting to let him go even if I said I would be fine.

"It's me who are supposed to take care of you, not the other way around. I'm obviously doing a shit job here" I attempt to joke to break the spell.

Then he holds me at armlengths distance, seriously saying:

"Don't even think it Molly, not today."

I nod, once again biting my bottom lip, forgetting it hurts and flinch. He touches it softly with a stroke of his thumb.

"Stop doing that to yourself" he says tenderly. Then, collecting himself, remembers he really must go.

"I'll be back in an hour or so. Have a cup of tea and something to eat, take care of yourself in the meantime. Call me if there's anything. Okay?"

With his arms removed from around me, I feel cold and my sore lip would certainly have liked more of his caressing touch, but I just nod that I will be all right and he walks off.

Once Charles is ready, we have lunch although my appetite is nil and then we drive back to Bath. But we do not go to Royal Crescent, we go to the police station. With Charles help I will try to cope with this. In the reception, we let them know that I wish to report an assault. We have to sit down in a waiting hall for quite a while. I cannot stop my leg from moving nervously, until Charles places his hand on my thigh, making me stop. I know he only intends it to have a calming effect and it does, but at the same time also the opposite which feels completely wrong given the situation we find ourselves in. Here we are, my boss and I, about to report my now ex-boyfriend assaulting me and all I can think of is the warmth from his hand through the fabric of my jeans. This tingling sensation starting from where he is touching me and radiating - everywhere. He holds his hand there until my name is called out and at least it kept me from being nervous while we waited.

It is a female police officer that sits on the opposite site of the desk. When she sees my face, she first casts a stern glance at Charles but when she understands that he is here to support me, not the cause of it, she softens.

"Are you comfortable having him in the room?" she asks me.

I nod. I'm not comfortable in fact. I dread telling the details with him here, but just like with the doctor, I do not think I can manage without him beside me either.

"Very well then" she says. "Let's get started. I will complete the report here on my computer as we speak, that's why I'll be writing."

Again, I nod. She asks questions and step by step we fill in the report. I tell her that my boyfriend up to yesterday, Dylan Smith, in his student room, unprovoked hit me with his fist right in my face repeatedly, and in my stomach. Then he held me to a door and strangled me.

When I come to this part, Charles reaches for my hand. God, it feels good to hold it, his strong fingers laced with mine.

"Then he pounded my head against the door. Repeatedly. Hard. He continued to hold around my neck until I almost passed out."

Now it is getting really difficult. I have not told Charles this bit. He still thinks Smurf just beat me and strangled me, and that is bad enough. In the corner of my eye I see that his body is very stiff at the same time as his ribcage rising and falling like he is breathing upset.

"Please go on Molly, don't leave out any details" says the woman.

I take a deep breath and continue.

"Then he tried to rape me."

My own body clenches at the memory, my lower abdomen locking itself in self-defense even now.

I feel Charles suddenly squeeze my hand so hard it hurts. I squeeze back to remind him it is me he is holding and glance at him. Again, the look of dismay and rage combined, but he softens his grip when he remembers he only wants to comfort me even if he would like to crush Smurf.

"He ripped my stockings... then my knickers... All the time pushing himself against me and strangling me. I knew he was going to rape me... and I thought he would kill me."

I must pause, tears are running. Oh, where do tears come from in such an infinite stream?

"But he didn't?" she asks in kind sympathetic voice, leading me to continue.

"One of the other guys in the house had come home and came knocking on the door. He lost focus for a second, so I could knee him and get loose, open the door and run."

"This other guy saw you?"

"Yes."

"Did he understand what was happening?"

"I don't know, maybe. I think he understood something was very wrong but didn't really get what was happening."

"Still he is a witness. Can you give me his name and address?"

I give her Matt's name and details. When she is finished writing the report, she prints it for me to read and sign. She explains that they will initiate a preliminary investigation. Smurf will be called to give his version, and they will hear Matt, then it will likely be a trial where I will have to witness. Dr. Johnson's evaluation of my injuries is attached to the report and the police woman also takes some photos. Then we are done for now.

"Molly, it was a very good thing that you came here today and reported this. A guy like him is likely to repeat this. I know this is very difficult, and it may feel difficult having to witness during the trial, but you are doing the right thing. It is great to see that you have support, but if you feel you need to see a psychologist that can be arranged too."

When we walk out of the police station, I'm so relieved to have it done but I'm also frightened to look at Charles. I'm afraid he will scold me for not telling everything from the start. He stops me at the pavement outside.

"Molly, please look at me. I need you to look at me."

I do as he says. He stands so close.

"I'm so terribly sorry for what happened to you, and so furious with Smurf for doing it. I wish I could have protected you from this. You have been incredibly brave."

No anger (except at Smurf), no blame, only concern and kindness, and again something more, undefined.



"I was ashamed. I didn't know how to tell anyone. Charles, he was my boyfriend... I don't know how I could be so mistaken, how I could be with someone who could..."

My voice breaks.

"Molly, we all make mistakes and there is nothing to be ashamed of. Not on your part anyway. Smurf on the other hand..." his eyes go black and I can clearly see that I wouldn't want to be on the enemy side opposite to him on a battlefield. But then his look softens again, and he leans his forehead to mine, lifting his one hand cupping the left side of my face.

"But now you have done this, so brave. Please know you can talk to me about this anytime. And I'll come with you to court, whatever is needed to get you through this and for Smurf to get his punishment. Okay?"

"Okay."

I could stay like this forever, and we do for a while, but we are blocking the way for other pedestrians and have to move eventually. I drive him home and am prepared to leave for mine, although all I want is to stay here with him because I feel safe here. I'm dreading that I will meet Smurf out in the streets, lurking in some corner. It is like Charles can feel that and he gently pulls me with him into the house and have me sit down at the chair inside the entrance. He kneels to be at level with me and takes both my hands. I could really get used to holding hands with him, but I had better not.

"I'll call a cab for you, so you don't have to go home alone."

I nod.

"But I'll only let you go if you promise me that you will tell your family tonight. Everything. I don't want you to lock this up inside you Molly and try to carry it on your own. You're not to blame, not in any way, and there is no shame in this. I understand it is hard to talk about, but it will be even harder going forward if you don't. You need your family to know and to take care of you."

I wish that *he* would take care of me. Oh, god it is such a silly thought, that is not what we are here for, but I feel it so strongly. He reaches out and tuck a strand of my hair that has escaped the ponytail, behind my ear, and before retracting the hand again lingers and touches my cheek. I'm not sure if he is completely aware of what he is doing but at least he seems to have the ability to read my thoughts.

"I will take care of you too, but it is only better if there are more of us doing it. I don't want you to be alone in this."

I almost get the stupid idea that he is about to kiss me, but he just clears his throat and say;

"And if Smurf ever bothers you again, please let me know. I would..."

He gives me a weak smile.

"... I'm not sure what I would do, but I would make sure he doesn't do anything more to you. It will be okay Molly, everything will be fine."

And when he says it, I believe that it will. This day would have been very different without him and I'm so grateful he has been here. He makes me feel I can survive this, too.

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***I promise it will get happier soon again, but I want them to bond in the difficult as well as the happy moments, and Charles to be there as much for Molly as she has been for him. And we had to get rid of Smurf somehow.***

***Thanks again for all kind reviews, it's just amazing to get that feedback when posting.***

***X***

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## Chapter 16: So many questions

Telling my family was easier than expected. Of course, I gave them different amounts of information, like one version rated for adults and one for kids. The younger ones, Bonnie, Charlie, Liam and Ella, only got to know that Smurf had behaved badly and hit me (because that was difficult to hide anyway) and that we are no longer together, meanwhile Bella, mum, dad and Nan got to know all. Every horrible detail, like Charles had encouraged me to share with them. And he was right, telling them made it weigh less heavy inside me – especially since their reactions were only care and concern when it came to me, range when it came to Smurf. Dad was half-way out the door on a mission to wallop him, when I stopped him since a charge for assault might just end up with him losing his job – and Smurf is not worth that. We love our family cinema Sundays too much, and we need the money.

About a week after Smurf's assault, I unexpectedly get a text message from Matt. He asks if we can meet up at a café and have a chat. First, I get really stressed out. Even if Matt is a good guy, he is so very linked to Smurf and the last situation when I met him that the mere thought of meeting him is enough for me to feel panic-stricken. And what if it is just a way to lure me to meet Smurf, I just could not stand facing him.

I'm with Charles when I get the message, having lunch together in the kitchen after he has done his morning physio at home. He has just had a shower and sits in front of me, hair more curly than usual because it is still damp and dressed in a grey hoodie instead of shirt, which makes him look relaxed and at ease. He obviously pays attention to my face expression as I get the text.

"What is it Dawesy, you look like you've seen a ghost?"

"It's a message from Matt, you know they guy in Smurf's house that interrupted..."

I cannot make myself finish the sentence. He nods.

"So, he asks to meet with me in a café, but I'm not sure if I should go, if I can manage seeing him. He just makes me think of Smurf. And what if Smurf would turn up?"

"Do you like this Matt? I mean, do you think he is the type who would set you up to see Smurf after what he saw?"

"No, not really, but I was so mistaken about Smurf that I'm not sure I trust my judgement anymore."

"I think your judgement is just fine, it's just that Smurf freaked out in an unpredictable way. But would you like to hear what Matt has to say?"

"I think so, it just stresses me out too."

"Then, I'll come with you. Not into the café, but I can stay nearby and if there's anything that worries you, you can just call me or text me and I'll be there in a minute. Would that be okay for you?"

"That would be amazing of you, then I would feel safe to go."

"No problem, of course I'll do that."

So, two days later, Charles positions himself at a bench as back-up forces to be called in if needed, meanwhile I enter the café where I have agreed with Matt to meet. He is already there and to my relief he is alone, no Smurf to be seen. He greets me with a warm and genuine hug.

"Hi Molly, so glad we could meet."

He asks what I want and gets himself a cappuccino and a tea for me and we sit down at a table, and I wait for him to start talking.

"How are you, Molly?"

"Quite fine", I answer hesitantly as I still do not know what he wants with this encounter.

"I'm so glad to see you and that you look okay. I walked around with a knot in my stomach after that day, when you just rushed out. It was so obvious that something that was not right had been going on, but I could not get anything out of Smurf. He was just weird and shut himself up in his room. Then the police contacted me for a hearing, and I realised just how wrong."

The tears that seems to have become my new accessory are again threatening to emerge in my eyes at the memory of all this, and I nod.

"You saved me that day Matt, I'm not sure how things would have ended if you had not come, but not in a good way."

"Have you met Smurf since?"

"No! No, and I don't want to. I guess I'll have to in court, but I hope that will be the only time I ever have to see him again."

"It might be, he has left Bath. Did you know?"

"What? What about uni then?"

"He is transferring to another one, I'm not sure which but he has already left. It was all arranged very quickly. It might have had something to do with that guy coming around to see him."

"What guy?"

"Really tall, dark hair, good-looking – and angry as hell at Smurf from what I could tell. He had crutches but that did not seem to hamper him from picking a fight with Smurf. They had a vivid discussion, or what one should call it, in Smurf's room, then he stormed off. The day after Smurf had a huge black eye and announced that he would be leaving Bath immediately, to start studying at another university next semester. Frankly, the rest of us were quite relieved because it was going weird in the house after the afternoon with you. No one really wanted him there anymore."

Charles. Of course, it was Charles who was there, even though he has not mentioned anything. He went to see Smurf. For me. To make sure I don't have to run into him here in Bath again. The black eye is just a bonus, but I'm so relieved

Smurf is out of the picture – and ever grateful for Charles for doing this for me, without even taking credit for it. Oh god, I just want to rush to him and hug him and thank him, but I stay a while longer chatting with Matt, finishing our hot drinks and talking about what will happen next. It will likely take some time, but there will be a trial where we both of us will testify. As it was not a completed rape, it is likely that Smurf will only get a suspended sentence and a fine, but if he is convicted it will be in his records at least. He will not get away like it never happened. It will be hard, but it will be worth it – and somehow it seems easier now that I know he will not live nearby anymore, and also because I now know that Matt no doubt will support my story.

"See you at the trial then, Molly", Matt says as we hug each other good bye. "Take care of yourself now, and Smurf will get what he deserves. I'm on your side."

"Thanks Matt. Thanks for saving me that day, and thanks for sticking up for me. You're a top bloke."

And I leave, to go see the other top bloke that is waiting for me.

He is sitting at the bench where I left him, looking a bit deserted and restless. I sit down next to him.

"Hi there, lonesome."

He lightens up in a warm smile.

"Hi there. Was it okay?"

"Yeah. He just wanted to make sure I'm okay and let me know he's on my side."



I pause and look at him sideways to see his reaction when I tell him;

"Smurf has left Bath, he's transferring to another uni."

He puts on a surprised face, but I can see that a smile is playing around his mouth, giving him away.

"Really? That is great news, isn't it? That you won't have to run into him?"

"Yes, it's very fortunate. I wonder what convinced him it was a good idea to leave."

We look at each other, serious, until he realises I have called his bluff and he cannot hold back a small laugh.

"So, you know? I hope you're not angry that I meddled? I just couldn't... I just couldn't do nothing, I had to go see that little twat and let him know that if he ever touched you again, or even came near you, I would have to inflict him some serious injury."

"That's the wording you used? Inflict serious injury?"

"No, I think I was much less polished at the time", he smirks.

"And you hit him?"

"I had not planned to, because now he could accuse me of assault if he wanted to, but seeing him, knowing what he had done to you, I just couldn't help myself. I'm only glad I could stop myself after one punch, otherwise I would not have been better than him."

Oh, yes, so much better than him.

"Thanks Charles. It means the world to me to have you on my side."

Quickly and a bit shyly, I give him a kiss on the cheek but I'm careful not to linger and risk causing embarrassment. But it must surely be an acceptable way of thanking a man who has picked a fight on your behalf? He is my hero today. Yet, my cheeks feel hot when I pull back, and I rise from the bench to hide it.

"Should we go home, then?"

-O-

It is Thursday afternoon and we are hanging out in Charles' room, me on the sofa and Charles lying flat on the carpet because he got the idea that it would be a good way to stretch his back, which apparently needs stretching. I cannot resist teasing him;

"This is really a sign you are getting old, when you start having problems with your back."

"Or maybe it's a sign I have been exercising a lot and need a good stretch. Or, it could be one of my injuries as a war hero."

"War hero, really? If I'm not mistaken your injuries came from stepping on an animal trap far away from any war zone."

He laughs, but there is also a challenging glimmer in his eyes.

"Yeah, but you have no idea what I was up to during my army days before that, do you?"

He is right, besides what he told me about the situation where Elvis was killed and meeting 2 section, I know nothing about his army career, what he has done and achieved, and it strikes me that for all I know he could very well be a war hero. He seems to have been on an awful lot of tours anyway. The way he says it, in combination with him lying there making moves to stretch his lean muscular body, it does things to me. Sometimes he is, there is no other words for it, so amazingly hot. Somehow it feels even more inappropriate catching myself with such thoughts now when I no longer have a chaperone in the form of a boyfriend. I am saved from my thoughts by my mobile ringing and when I answer, Charles nods that he does not mind if I take it here.

It is Katie. We have met more often during this autumn, after that awful evening when Smurf got too drunk. She and Sammy are as happy as ever and have moved in together and I like to pop over for a tea, meal and talk every other week. But now I have not seen her since the situation with Smurf, so she is blissfully unaware of what I have been going through. I have planned to tell her next time we meet. Telling Charles, telling my family and reporting it to the police has done that it no longer feels like an insurmountable obstacle to talk about it. But I will not tell her now, over the phone.

"I have an idea" she now says. There is a quiz night at our local pub tonight, which could be nice. We need to be a team of four. Why don't you and Smurf come by and we can team up?"

No, I will not team up with Smurf for anything again, but it was a long time since I went to quiz night and it would be so much fun... My gaze falls at the tall man still stretching on the floor, his t-shirt sliding up a bit, so I see a glimpse of his flat muscular stomach. (Come on! Seriously, that is not fair. Focus, Molly, focus.) It would be good for him to come out and enjoy himself. Is it possible that he would be up for it?

"Smurf cannot make it, Katie, but hang on a minute."

I see that he reacts when he hears me mentioning Smurf and I smile at him to show nothing is the matter.

"I have a request for you..."

"And what would that be Ms. Dawes?"

"Would you come with me and my friends to quiz night at the pub? We need a fourth member of the team and for obvious reasons we will be missing one."

He looks hesitant.

"I promise it will be fun... and I will adore you for always."

He cocks an eyebrow.

"For always?"

Please don't let me blush. Not sure who I'm directing that prayer to as I'm not religious, but anyway -please.

"Something like it."

"You make it very hard for me to refuse... Okay, I'll come."

"Hurray!" I return to the mobile. "I'll bring someone else, so we are a team of four."

"Great, I'll sign us up then. Quiz starts at 7, so let's meet there at half past six."

What did I just do? Invite Charles to spend an evening with my friends. I have absolutely no idea how it will be. I really like being with him, but that is inside this little bubble where most of the time it is just us and Hutchins. On the other hand, it went well with me and 2 section. It will be interesting anyway – and good for him.

We take a cab there, so I can have a beer without thinking about driving. Katie and Sammy are already there, true to her habit to always be on time or ahead of schedule. They look quite surprised when I introduce the tall, handsome stranger.

"Charles, these are my friends Katie and Sammy. And this is my boss, Charles."

"Can you please not call me boss on an evening like this, Dawesy?"

He looks a little embarrassed.

"If you stop calling me Dawesy for an evening and say Molly instead."

"I thought I had done enough by coming here as a favour to you", the words may sound like he is reluctant, but he seems happy to be here and I know he is only joking. Anyway, he finds it fitting to clarify that to my friends too, so they will not be offended, which I find very sweet.

"Just kidding, I'm actually thrilled to join you for quiz night. It's ages since I went to a pub."

"Charles, just so I get it, are you Molly's boss? I thought you worked for someone in wheelchair, a Mr. James, Molly?"

"That would be me, I'm just rid of the wheelchair these days, and we ditched the titles."

We order beer and food from the pub menu, the talk is very easy going and Charles blends in in this quartet seamlessly, better than Smurf ever did. He asks interested questions to my friends and listens carefully to what they say. He jokes with them, he makes jokes at his own expense, he teases me. The age difference and the fact that he carries experiences very different from any situation we have been in, are not to be noticed. I watch him laughing, eating fries and ketchup and I find myself wishing that he was my boyfriend. That like Katie and Sammie we belonged together and would go home to the same home tonight. To the same bed... Oi! Hold your horses Molly! I just cannot allow myself to think such things about Charles. I need to just shut that off and enjoy the evening and try to contribute to some quiz points. I meet Katie's searching gaze, hoping no one has been able to read my mind – but my friend knows me too well. When they guys both have gone to the loo, she hisses;

"What is this about? What has happened to Smurf? And this extremely nice boss of yours, is there something going on between you?"

"Smurf is a long story, and not a nice one, so I'll tell you some other day – but he is gone. It's as over as it possibly can be. But Charles and I, there's nothing there, we're just friends."

"Are you sure about that Molly?"

Aaargh, I have a hard time enough fighting off my own thoughts without her coming here planting any seeds that absolutely should not grow here. Planting thoughts about Charles in my head is as forbidden as it would be to plant cannabis among the roses in Mrs. James garden.

"As sure as I can be."

An answer that means absolutely nothing, since I'm not sure at all, but it sounds pretty convincing. I have the feeling she remains suspicious anyway.

We are a good team, the four of us. Our mixed backgrounds and interest making us a success, taking one point after another in the game. Sammy covers sports with some help from Charles, news questions we manage together, geography Charles has covered from his tours (or maybe he was just very good at geography in school in contrast to me), I cover some curiosa and literature and Katie is generally good at anything else.

*How long is an Olympic swimming pool? Fifty metres – check, Sammy.*

*Which double Nobel Prize winner's scientific discoveries launched effective cures for cancer? Marie Curie – check, Katie.*

*What did the Beckham's wedding cake cost? 35 000 – check, me, tanks to my baking magazines.*

*Who was the first Western explorer to reach China? Marco Polo - check, Charles.*

*Who wrote the poem 'Under milk wood'? Dylan Thomas – check both Charles and I, our afternoon readings paying off.*

*Which word can be placed before bottle, bell and bird? Blue – check, all putting our heads together.*

We are so good that we are the winners of the evening and the quiz master declares that we get a free pint each from the bar as prize, and we are just having the best time together.

Later, Charles and I say good bye to Katie and Sammy and stand waiting for the cab we have called to take us home.

"Thanks for bringing me. I had a great time. I like Katie and Sammy."

"So, did I, thanks for joining the team. And glad you liked my friends. They are such an unlikely couple yet perfectly matched once you know them."

"I guess different is good, the classic opposites-attract-thing."

I just hum in agreement, or something. No doubt, I'm attracted to opposites of a certain kind.

There is a brief silence. When he speaks again, he almost seems a bit shy, or nervous.



"I have a request in return. Say no if you don't want to because it's clearly outside your regular job tasks."

"Okay?"

"Will you be my plus one at the regimental Christmas party next week?"

I must look surprised, because he feels the need to fill in with more information.

"I've had the invitation for long, but I didn't know if I wanted to go. I didn't know how I would feel, how I would have recovered by now. But now I would actually like to go there, meet some people I know, hang out, have some drinks. I know I won't be able to dance but I'm not too sad about that. I'd really appreciate if you would come with me, though. Then I know there is at least one person who wants to hang with the guy with crutches."

"I'm quite sure there are more people who wants to, considering how 2 section greeted you last time, but I'd love to come anyway. That's the least I can do after what you have done for me."

And it is, but that is not the only reason I want to go with Charles to this party. I will get to see more of his world, I will get an opportunity to dress up and have fun – all in the company of him. Wild horses could not keep me from accepting this request. I'm already counting down the days until next Saturday.

***Thanks once again for all reviews, I love to hear what you think. A usual – hope you enjoy this one.***

***X***

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## Chapter 17: Festivities derailed

This party invitation raises so many important questions. Like, what am I going to wear? I try to get some help from Charles, asking what the dress code is. He looks absentmindedly surprised, like clothing is of no importance and just say;

"Oh, any cocktail dress would do."

Yeah, like I have a stash of twenty cocktail dresses to choose from. Obviously, I will have to go shopping. I want to bring someone with me to get a second opinion. I know that if I ask Bella, she would choose something which is too slutty for my taste. If I ask Katie, the outfit will be too sensible. So, I bring them both and hope the result will be something in between, but it turns out to be an ordeal to find something which we all can agree on. Too sexy, too boring, wrong colour with my complexion, unflattering model, too short, fabric looks cheap, too sparkling, too Santa-like... I do not know all the various reasons we find to reject dresses. When I'm already exhausted and prepared to give up, Bella sees one more little shop which we have not been to and encourages me to have one last try.

"Because you want to look nice for this date, don't you?"

"It's not a date."

The two of them look at each other and giggle.

"If it's not a date Molly, then why are you going to all this trouble? Then you could just have taken any old dress in your closet."

I blush. It is true that I want to look my very best on Saturday, if only to get the pleasure to surprise him, but must they point it out so bluntly.

"It's not a date, all right? But I'll have a try here too."

And there it is, the perfect dress. We see it at once and I think we are all holding our breaths expectantly as I put it on, waiting to see if it lives up to our hopes or if this will fail like all the others did. But it does not. It is red, so very fitting for a Christmas party. A deep kind of red which is both sober and tantalizing at the same time. It hugs my body perfectly, showing my waist, my hips, ending right above the knees and has a slit going perfectly high up on my thigh. It has quite a cleavage which would be vulgar on someone with a huge rack, but with my rather small breasts it just looks elegant and sexy combined. Together with my fair skin and dark hair, it is sensational. Just a bit of red lipstick to go with it and I might have heads turning after me. I look at myself in the mirror and wonder if this is really me – but amazingly enough it is. I pull away the draper of the fitting room and step out to show the others. Bella, Katie and the saleswoman – the jaws drop on all of them, telling me it was not only I who liked it.

"That's the one", says Katie.

"That's definitely the one", Bella whistles.

Saturday evening, he comes around in a cab to pick me up at home, which is a first and it feels very nice. Almost like a proper date.

Nan is quick as a flash to open the door, to get the opportunity to see this man that I'm working for and who now will take me for a party. From upstairs, I hear her babbling on and hope she will not tell him a bunch of embarrassing childhood anecdotes about me before I get there, so I hurry down the stairs.

Oh, holy shit!

I had not realised he would be in dress uniform. I feel my stomach making a summersault. I do not know what to say, if I open my mouth there is a slight possibility I would be drooling. He is just so incredibly handsome. Why does he have to do this to me? I'm too occupied taking him in, to bother with my own entrance and I'm probably stumbling down the stairs rather than gliding gracefully in a manner that would accentuate the dress in the best way.

I'm not sure what reaction I expected from him, but he looks almost shocked. His eyes fixed on me, he parts his lips slightly, but no sound is coming out. When I reach the bottom of the stairs and stand in front of him, we just stare at each other for a moment, until Nan (who we had forgotten) elbows him in the side;

"Aren't you going to say something?"

Then he seems to snap out of whatever thought he was caught in and clears his throat.

"You look really beautiful tonight, Molly Dawes."

It is the first time he has given me a straight compliment, one that is not entwined verbally in something else so I'm not sure if it is a compliment or not. But with this one, there is no room for misunderstanding and embarrassment, the only thing I manage to answer is a bleeding;

"Ditto."

I hope he does not think I overdid it with this dress.

"Is it all right for the occasion, the dress I mean? Otherwise I could go change..."

I do not know why I say that because I would have no idea what to change to.

"No! I mean, no - don't change. This is perfect."

He gives me the biggest smile and I'm in so much trouble. I glance at Nan and I know that she sees it, so I hurry to put on my coat and escape out the door before she says anything cripplingly embarrassing like I know she could very well do if we stay another second.

In the taxi, I feel there are two ways of handling this, the feelings I have inside. I could acknowledge them but that would just lead me to become shy and mute – and we cannot have that. The other option is to put the lid on (like a very heavy lid, with some weights on top and probably a chain with a padlock around it all) and just try to be my normal cheeky me. It takes some considerable effort, but I really want this to be a great evening, not spoiled by me thinking inappropriate things about my boss. So, I make a joke about that I had to be really quick down the stairs because otherwise Nan would have taken my place when a uniformed man appears

at the door like that. The thought of bringing her instead of me makes him laugh, and I feel relieved because now we are on familiar ground again.

It is a quite a long drive, but time flies as usual when we are together, and I'm almost surprised we are already there when the cab driver stops. Other cars are also arriving, people streaming inside, many in uniform but also many in civilian festive clothes, so I will not feel completely out of place in my red dress. Someone has gone to lengths to decorate the place and the room is beautiful and Christmas-like. I have not had time to get much of a Christmas spirit before, but now I do. I feel giddy and happy about being here with him. It suddenly strikes me that anyone seeing us could think this was a real date, that I'm *with* him.

We make a stop in the bar to get something to drink. He turns to me and put his hand on the small of my back to get my attention, asking what I want to drink. I'm barely able to get the words out, all my focus directed to the part of my body where I feel his warm palm through the thin fabric of the dress. I read once, in the highly reliable source of knowledge *Marie Claire* magazine, that if a man touches you, even in what may seem as a friendly manner, it means that he fancies you at some level. I do not know why that irrelevant fact comes to my mind right now.

"A glass of white wine, please", I manage to answer. We get our drinks and head for a table, me helping him to carry his drinks as he has to manage the crutches.

"I wish I didn't have them tonight", he confesses.

"You will be rid of them soon."

"I know, but for the first time in one of these parties, I wish I had been able to dance."

His eyes meet mine and I wonder if he means because he would have wanted to dance with me.

It would have been nice, but I do not mind that he will not be able to dance with me tonight. Even if he can walk quite a distance on the crutches, dancing would likely be a bit too much strain and I'm perfectly happy sitting here beside him, watching people and let him tell me things about them, laugh about the gossip he tells me - which is a whole lot. The army is a much more intriguing institution than I would have imagined. Sometimes he touches my arm when he wants to point someone out to me. Also, a whole lot of people come up to us to talk to him. Congratulate him to his improvement and say they hope he will be back to work soon. Charles is careful to introduce me to everyone, so I do not feel excluded. He is really a very gentlemanly date.

So, I'm terribly happy, enjoying myself enormously, until the most beautiful woman sweeps up by our side and he greets her with genuine delight;

"Georgie!"

If I was a more spiteful person I would rejoice in that she has an ugly name.

"Charlie!"

She is calling him Charlie. He never said I could. God, she is beautiful, it should be criminal to look like her. I felt beautiful tonight but I'm clearly no competition to

her. She has a perfect face, features that manage to be cute and beautiful at the same time. Pouty lips, brown eyes, a skin tone that seems to be naturally bronzed even in December, which she has matched with a gold shimmering dress and she has dared a very generous cleavage even though her tits' cup size is two or even three sizes larger than mine. She is that kind of enviable woman who has been gifted with generous breasts despite that she has a wasp waste. The only area where I feel I trump here is the dark hair; where mine is glossy and thick, hers looks like she has had to work with it a great deal to achieve volume and the colour is a bit dull like she has dyed it too much. Also, her eyebrows look a bit odd. One has to take joy in the little things.

"It's so good to see you." I hear him say.

I just wish we did not have to see so much of her, half of that cleavage would have been enough if you ask me.

"It's good to see you looking so well. Last time I checked I thought you were dying" she smiles with perfect pearl white teeth.

The happy bubble I was in moment ago has popped and I feel excluded, but now Charles remembers me.

"Molly, I want you to meet Georgie! Georgie, Molly is my..." suddenly he hesitates. I guess he is not sure if he is to call me a friend or an employee.

"...his companion" I fill in with a smirk.

He smirks too, and for a second the connection is there again.



"Georgie is the medic that was with me in Belize, in the jungle. She saved my life, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her."

Oh, I never knew it was a woman he was alone with there in the jungle, in the sweaty dark nights. Of course, this gorgeous woman is also competent and brave and has saved his life. I should be grateful too her but for some reason I feel a strong dislike and grit my teeth in secret while doing my best to be polite.

"How nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

Despite her petite size she has a hoarse, sexy voice, sounding like she is on her way to bed for some adult activities any second. I get the feeling I could not be of less interest to her, all her focus is on Charles. She sits down on his other side, which naturally makes him turn away from me when he talks to her. They have plenty to catch up on, and they enthusiastically do meanwhile I'm starting to feel like the fifth wheel.

"I was so worried when the medivac took you away. I wish they would have let me come."

She puts her hand on his knee in an intimate gesture. He does not remove it, although I get the feeling he checks if I notice. I look away, I do not want to disturb their tête-à-tête. I have been looking forward to this evening and I had the feeling he did too. Now I understand why. He hoped he would run in to her, meet this amazing life-saving goddess again. I feel petty, but I hate her a little bit. Now he is polite enough to try to include me in the conversation.

"Georgie stopped the bleeding and managed to keep my wounds as clean as was possible. I would have died before help reached us if she had not been there."

Yada yada, tell me more.

"I'm sure you would have endured somehow, you are so strong."

Oh, come on! She really knows how to work a male ego. Now she even turns to me.

"Charlie is the best CO one could have, such a great leader."

I can imagine where she wants him to lead her. She looks at him with adoring eyes. I do not know how much longer I can stand this club of mutual worship without puking, even if he just shrugs his shoulders and modestly say;

"Now you're exaggerating Georgie, if I was such a great leader I would not have gotten into all this shit."

But now she continues to talk to me, surprisingly enough. I get the feeling she is claiming her territory.

"When we were alone there in the jungle, facing death, we both realised we were bonded in a special way, connected by the death of Elvis. Didn't we Charles?"

Aha, so *she* was the girlfriend of Elvis. I almost feel sorry for her. He looks a bit awkward. I guess he did not want me to know about their *special bond*.

"Eh, I'm not sure I remember everything. I think I was delirious from the infection and fever there at the end."

"But I remember, let me tell you..."

Could someone bring me a pair of ear plugs? I do not know how to stand her. She is probably the most annoying woman I have ever met.

"Would you like to dance?" a voice asks from above.

I look up and there stands a guy that Charles pointed out to me earlier. He is called Bones, or Captain McClyde, and according to Charles they are some kind of rivals ever since their Sandhurst days. However, he is very good-looking and smilingly he offers me a way out of this awkward and boring fifth-wheel-situation. It would also feel great to dance with another handsome man when Charles is fully occupied with big-tits.

"I would love to."

I turn to Charles.

"You don't mind, do you? As Georgie keeps you company."

Charles and Georgie have interrupted their conversation and he is looking at me, his eyes unusually dark, but he gives us a polite stiff smile and say;

"Of course. You don't need my permission to dance."

I can feel he is not happy. He must really dislike Bones, but right now I do not care. If he wants to flirt with Georgie, he cannot expect me to sit beside him and just hum and nod and agree they look fabulous together.

Bones takes my hand and lead me to the dance floor. He is a great dancer (which leads me to think about what they say about great dancers also being great in bed) and he is a lot of fun. He is a really cheeky and sarcastic guy and I laugh at the comments he makes about people around us. I love the comments he makes about Georgie.

"That woman is not satisfied until she has the whole regiment drooling over her, but if you ask me you are the most beautiful one in here tonight."

I really do not get why Charles does not like Bones, I think he is brilliant.

We dance a couple of dances, the last one a slow dance and he holds me strongly, yet delicately and whispers jokes in my ear, making me laugh again. The evening is not so bad after all. I glance towards Charles. Georgie is still by his side, even closer if possible, talking into *his* ear but his eyes meet mine and he does not look happy. Can he really be so petty that he objects to me having some fun when he is occupied elsewhere?

Then Fingers and Dangleberries show up and pull me to dance with them and I'm just laughing until my stomach hurts over these crazy guys, until I get a break when Bones appears again and takes me with him to the bar and gets me a mojito. I love mojito, but I know I cannot stand strong drinks very well. I will get drunk, but I do not care. I do not think anyone else will either. So, I just enjoy my delicious mojito, and then a second. Maybe a third, but who is counting? Maybe Charles. I have been busy talking to Bones but suddenly Charles is standing beside me. Georgie is nowhere to be seen. Oops, seems like things did not work out with her as he had hoped because his face looks almost as stern as it did the first time I saw him.

"Hello Sternface" I say and run my fingers over his beautiful face. He flinches - because I'm not Georgie, obviously. Giggling. I turn to Bones.

"Doesn't he have the sternest face you could find?"

He laughs and nods, now it is us sharing a joke at Charles' expense and he does not seem to appreciate it.

"It's time to go home, Dawes."

"So, I'm not Dawsey tonight?"

"What?" he snaps.

"I'm not..."

"I heard you. No, not tonight you're not and now we're going home."

"Someone is in a bad mood because he did not get what he wanted tonight", I wink at Bones, who laughs back.

Charles looks furious and grabs me by my wrist.

"Hey, you're not going to turn into another Smurf, are you?"

He looks like I have hit him and let go of me like I'm burning hot and I know I have crossed a line. I didn't mean to and I wish I could take back those words. Charles is wonderful and I'm drunk and I just wish Georgie was not part of the picture. I know he would never hurt me like Smurf.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I'll come, let's go."

We leave, but not really together because he walks one meter ahead of me all the way to the cab, with impressive speed considering the crutches. Then he sits down in the seat beside the driver, leaving me alone in the backseat. The whole long drive back to Bath is filled with angry silence. I'm sobering up and I feel terrible. I'm not sure where exactly things went wrong but they are terribly wrong. He must be so angry with me because I compared him with Smurf. And he is nothing like Smurf. Nothing like him.

We finally stop outside Royal Crescent no. 10. The path to the front door is icy so even if he normally would not need my support for the walk by now, I go with him to ensure he does not slip on his crutches and just ask the driver to wait for me. He accepts that I walk by his side, but he shakes me off when I offer support to prevent him from slipping. I feel miserable. It started like such a great evening and now it is like he is wrapped in a dark cloud. It feels like he hates me.

"Good night then, see you on Monday" I say, then turn around to leave with tears dangerously close to emerging.

"Dawes, wait."

The harsh tone after the long silence almost makes me jump. When I turn, with one arm he abruptly pulls me close to him and kisses me hard on the mouth. He presses his cold lips to mine, parting his lips slightly. It is not a gentle kiss, I rather get the feeling he wants to punish me for something, but I do not know what. Was it for what I said? It sends a rippling shock wave through my body, but before I

have a chance to decide if I should respond to it or not, he lets go of me just as fast as he grabbed me, saying coarsely;

"I forgot to kiss you under the fucking mistletoe. Good night Dawes."

Then he disappears through the door, slamming it closed behind him and leave me out in the cold with an emotional chaos inside.

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***I think we all know what is wrong with Charles and I think he needed that to figure out a thing or two – lol.***

***I'm glad you seemed to like the disastrous Christmas party. Just to let you know, I don't dislike Georgie in the series, but she does so not belong with CJ and here she made the perfect rival.***

***If you like to have a soundtrack with your reading, for the latter part of this chapter, search for 'Julia Michaels – Jump' on Spotify, because that is what it what I have listened to writing it and I think it is just perfect. But optional of course :) Happy reading, really hope you enjoy.***

X

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## Chapter 18: Christmas sucks, maybe

Next morning, I wake up, terribly hungover and with an uneasy feeling in my gut. I mean, uneasy in addition to feeling slightly nauseous. Then it all comes back to me. The perfect start of the evening, which slid into something not so perfect and ending in catastrophe. His eyes black with anger, his body language as distant as it possibly could be, except for that extremely weird kiss. What was that? I'm totally confused. Why would he do that? It was a horrible kiss, because it felt like he did not want it, so devoid of affection. Nothing like I had imagined it would be if we kissed, not saying that I actually have imagined it. At least not *that* many times.

I stay where I am for long, just staring at the ceiling, my mind drifting and not in the mood to move. Finally, I go to the bathroom to freshen up. I meet my own eyes in the mirror. I look tired, torn, nothing like the sparkling girl that left the house in Charles company yesterday. Puffy under the eyes not only from the alcohol but also



because I cried myself to sleep. I splash my face with cold water, to try to wake up for real, to face reality. I fear meeting him again, but I know I will not get any peace until I do. Until we can talk this through. I just have to live through this day, so I can meet him tomorrow. That is all I want.

Nan is the first to notice I'm not exactly cheerful, as one could expect after a Christmas party. Her sight is disturbingly sharp for someone her age, or maybe it is her sixth sense. But then again, it does not take a genius to understand that something happened between last night and now, just by the looks of me.

"Molly dear, how are you today?" she sits down next to me in the couch. The others are busy elsewhere in the house or away, so it is just the two of us. Yet I hesitate, because I'm not sure what to say about it really.

"I'm all right, I suppose."

"Are you? You don't look it."

"So, I look like shit? Thanks for that."

"I didn't say that. But you looked way happier when you left last night with that wonderful young man."

Yes, that *is* the problem, isn't it? That he is an absolutely wonderful man, but he is not mine.

"Oh, Nan, I don't know what went wrong. It started so great, we had the best time. And then this gorgeous woman appears, who he knows since way back and seems to like very much – and she was all over him. So, I went dancing and having fun

with others, and then he just got so mad. And I said stupid things to him, because I was drunk."

I bury my face in my hands. I do not tell her about the kiss, I cannot bring myself to do it. It is just a too embarrassing moment to put into words.

"Are you sure he really fancied that woman?"

"It was quite obvious."

"Because the way he looked at you when you came down those stairs, I would not have imagined that he would even look at another woman."

It hurts, because for a magic moment there I thought the same, maybe. But I was wrong.

"She was so beautiful, and she saved his life when he was injured in the jungle."

"Molly, from what you have told me it seems like you have too. Saved his life, although not in the jungle. And why was he mad?"

"I had fun with a guy he really doesn't like, and I said things to him that were not very kind."

"To me it seems like you both made a mess of a nice evening and need to talk to each other to sort things out."

I think so too, and even if I fear it, the sooner the better. But he has other plans. In the afternoon I get a text from him:

*Mum and dad showed up. No need for you to come tomorrow or the days before Christmas. See you after the holiday. P.S. You will get your salary anyway, don't worry.*

That is all. I cannot believe it, after yesterday. And that he assumes that what worries me is if I get paid or not. Damn him! That is the last thing I'm concerned about. It is over a week until Christmas Day, and then there is Boxing Day too... eleven days until I get to see him. How am I going to stand the suspense? How am I going to enjoy Christmas with this hanging over me? But I don't have much of a choice when he does not want to see me.

I just tell the family I got some extra time off because Mr. and Mrs. James are home, and that is at least part of the truth. To fight off my thoughts and bad mood, I throw myself into Christmas preparations. Making decorations for the house and Christmas tree, exceed myself in baking, shopping Christmas gifts. I have been very disciplined about putting away money for my future café investment during the months I have worked for Charles, but now I allow myself to nibble a bit of it just because it is so nice to finally be able to get something extra for all my loved ones. I love all this, normally it would make me giddy, but the whole thing with Charles is like a wet cold blanket covering it all. Not a single word from him. Apparently, he is doing great without me. Who knows, maybe he has called in Georgie and she is comforting him by her bosom. I try not to even think about that possibility because it hurts too much. How I long for Christmas to come, but only because I want it to be over, so I get to see him again. I doubt that I will have any pleasure in the celebration itself when all I can think of is him.

Late on Christmas Eve, someone calls on our door. Dad opens but shouts over his shoulder;

"Molly, it's for you."

It is a delivery boy and after signing off, he hands me a parcel. I bring it inside and go sit with the others by the Christmas tree which we finished decorating earlier. We are gathered there for some boardgames, drinks and snacks and I have been struggling to enjoy myself.

The outer layer of the parcel is a plain brown carton box which gives no clue of the sender. When I open it, inside I find the most beautifully Christmas wrapped box. It is quite large and heavy. Excited I open the little card which is attached.

It is a handwritten message, in beautiful sweeping letters;

*Never stop dreaming*

*/Charles*

He sent me a Christmas gift. I get a lump in my throat and my heart beats erratic. I would have liked to go to my room and open it alone, but I know I would not get away with it. The rest of the family are just too curious. Expectantly I open and gasp in disbelief at the sight of all the beautiful pastel coloured bottles and jars, it must be at least twenty of them. Charles remembered what I wished for once. He has sent me the full Clinique product assortment.

Charles wonderful gift is enough to raise my spirits a bit during the Christmas days. Such a considerate gift, must be some sort of peace offering, mustn't it? Or maybe

he bought it already before all this and just thought it unnecessary to let it go to waste. What do I know? Anyway, I'm still as eager to meet him again and I do not dare send a text message because I'm afraid he would tell me not to come in the next days either. I do not sleep well the night between Boxing Day and the Thursday which is the first regular day after the holiday. I get up very early because I cannot sleep anyway and have breakfast with Nan, who always is up at this ungodly hour. She pats my hand because she understands this is what I have been waiting for all Christmas.

"It will be fine, love. Just go talk to him."

I'm so nervous. I'm so bloody nervous.

When I get to Royal Crescent, it feels like a life-time has passed since I was here last. I give the steps outside the front door the evil eye, like it was the fault of that specific spot that Charles kissed me there. I remember that Hutchins already several weeks ago asked for a few days extra leave around Christmas, so she is not around, and I let myself in. I'm not sure about the whereabouts Mr. and Mrs. James but no one answers when I shout 'hello' so I just head upstairs to Charles rooms, almost trembling with nervousness but I cannot leave when this is all I have been waiting for.

His room is empty too, so I'm beginning to wonder if anyone is home, but as the front door was not locked they should be.

And there he is, the sight of him causing my heart to race more than it already did.

He stands leaning in the doorway to his bedroom, arms folded across his body. Apparently, he got rid of the crutches during these weeks. It hurts me I was not here to celebrate it with him, that he did it without me. Now that he does not lean on the crutches he is taller than ever, intimidating – especially because I do not know where I have him anymore. He has a bit of a stubble and the wavy, dark hair is disheveled. He wears a white shirt, but it is not tucked into his trousers like it usually is and an extra button is unbuttoned which makes him look relaxed, a bit rough and gorgeous. He is gazing at me seriously and he is just so amazingly hot that I find it hard to breathe, and he seems so nonchalant that I would almost like to hit him to get him out of balance.

"Hi Dawes, good to see you" he says casually.

It is obvious he does not plan to offer any explanation for his erratic behavior last time we met, not even pretend it happened. All throughout the holiday and when I went here today, I have thought that I would apologise to him, for whatever unknown reason that had made him mad at me that evening. Just so we can be friends again, because I need him to be my friend. I have missed him so my body aches. I have missed him like I have not missed anyone since Jonah. But now that he stands there, loitering in the doorway completely unaffected, like nothing strange has been going on between us I suddenly feel furious.

"What's the matter, Dawes? Didn't you like your Christmas gift."

"I did. I loved it. Thanks. But..."

"But what, Dawes?"

"Why the fuck did you do that?!" I blurt out.

He looks a bit taken aback as it is normally him using foul language, not me.

"What do you mean? Buy you a gift?"

If he has not spent his entire Christmas thinking about that strange kiss, like I have, it may not be obvious what I'm eluding to, but his neutral tone just makes me angrier.

"Kissed me like that!"

"Oh, that. I told you, I missed to do it under the mistletoe."

"The way you did it we both know it was not about that."

"Do we?"

I'm not getting anywhere with him like this. His expression is completely blank of emotion, maybe that is something they practice in the army because he is so damn good at it. I realise that if I am to have any chance what so ever to get anything out of him, I need to let him know how I feel. I need to be honest even if it means exposing myself.

"You hurt me."

"How?"

"That kiss. It was so careless, hard and cold and then you just disappeared and did not want to see me. It was like I was nothing to you, not a friend, not even an employee because an employee you wouldn't kiss like that."

He does not say anything, but I think I see a flicker of some kind of emotion in his eyes.

"I thought we were friends Charles. I thought I meant something to you."

"I haven't said that you don't."

"You have a very strange way of showing it. What did I do to you that evening? You were enjoying yourself with that Georgie. Was it so bad that I went dancing instead, or what? That I didn't sit glued by your side as a fifth wheel when you two were flirting with each other..."

"We did not flirt" his tone is flat and determined.

"*She* did, that was obvious from miles away and you did not seem to mind."

"Why are we talking about if I was flirting or not?"

"Because you seem to mind that I danced."

"I would not have minded if you just danced and have fun. But *you* flirted, and with Bones of all people!"

"Wow, a reaction! What does it mean to you if I flirt anyway, you're just my boss, right? And a boss is not supposed to care if I flirt, and not supposed to give me strange kisses."



He swallows. I'm in a flow now, an angry upset flow, and continue.

"Am I right? And by the looks of it you soon won't need me. I mean you seem to be able to walk now so you can manage just fine on your own."

He is quiet a few seconds, remaining where he is with his arms crossed, clearly showing his distance.

"I need you Molly. I still won't be able to drive to Headley Court for a while."

"Yes. Yes, *that* is the only reason you need me. I thought after what we have been through maybe we were something more to each other. I thought I was your friend, I thought you were mine. Clearly I was mistaken."

I feel tears threatening to burst behind my eyelids.

"I can't do this anymore." And it is true, I feel too much to be playing this game.

I spin around to leave. He moves faster than I ever have seen him do and suddenly he is by my side, taking hold of my arm.

"Let me go Charles."

"I don't want to be your friend" his voice is low, dark, serious but somehow warm.

No, that seems painfully obvious now.

"At least I don't think I can *only* be your friend. And I certainly don't want to be your boss."

I'm just angry, sad and confused.

"Then what do you want Charles?"

"Don't you know that Molly?"

"No, Charles, I just feel tired of guessing what you want" I say dejectedly.

He lets go of my arm, but only to take my face gently between his palms, stroking my cheeks with his thumbs. No one could be more surprised than me, shocked even. When he speaks his voice is coarse.

"Molly, I want you. I only want *you*."

I'm not sure I understand the words that are coming out of his mouth, like my ears are not fully connected to my brain anymore. I just stare at him. He was close before, but now he moves even closer, his eyes searching my face for a reaction. I do not know how to react, but my heart is beating so fast it would make me worried if I was able to think about anything but his presence. He is so close I can feel the heat from his body, feels his sensual masculine scent, the one I love so much. I can see his rib cage rise and fall with his every breath, and time seems to stand still in the silence. He caresses my cheek, then softly strokes his thumb over my lips. I feel myself parting my lips ever so slightly, amazed wondering what is happening. He bends his head looking down on me, I feel him move one hand to the nape of my neck and then simultaneously pulls me to him and moves himself towards me. He kisses me. He kisses me! Oh my god...

This kiss is completely different from the one after the unfortunate Christmas party. It is warm, soft, a bit hesitant awaiting my reaction, but still firm. And there is a reaction, in my entire body, like someone had pushed a button and turned on a thousand light bulbs. It feels like my body must be glowing. It takes a few seconds before I realise I should answer the kiss and do. I put my arms around his neck, pulling him towards me too, burying my hands in his thick dark locks, finally allowed to touch them. When he feels my response he deepens the kiss, parting his lips so I feel his tongue. This kiss. It is like the world is evolving around us, spinning faster and faster with us standing still in the center of it. It is so different from anything I have experienced. Let us face it, Smurf never hit the mark. It was like kissing a frog for years without it ever turning to a prince. Instead he turned into a toad, or something worse. And Jonah, he was my love, but the first time we kissed we were kids. It was a beautiful teenage kiss and then we grew up together, sweet and innocent. But this. This is a man whose body is an unexplored and up to now forbidden mystery and he is kissing me senseless. A man who knows exactly what he wants and no longer makes a secret of it. I feel his warm hands on the small of my back, pressing me towards him. I have never wanted so much.

I have no idea how long we stay like that, exploring each other's lips, mouths, with our bodies pressed against each other. Then I silently take his hand and lead him through the door into his bedroom, causing him to look ridiculously happy. There is nothing distant about him now.

We do not lie down on the bed. Standing beside it his hands finds their way under my jumper, so I feel them on my bare skin and slowly, in an almost caressing

movement he pulls it over my head, so I stand in front of him in bra and jeans. He takes a step back to look at me, his eyes dark and wide.

"You are so beautiful" he whispers.

I want to even out our degree of being undressed and step into him and start unbuttoning his shirt slowly. Then I cannot help myself and giggle.

"What's funny?"

"I'm not sure this is appropriate employer-employee behavior."

"Oh, shut up Dawesy! If you're not comfortable with it I'll fire you, so you feel better, but please stop talking now. All we ever do it talking – and now I want something else."

I do too. So very, very much.

I'm finally done with the buttons and tug the shirt over his shoulders, let it fall to the floor. God, he is so beautiful. No longer skinny, but only lean muscles, the most perfect torso I have ever seen, and I'm allowed to touch it. (Still cannot believe it but have no possibility to pinch myself and even if I did I would not because I want to live this illusion.) I let my hands wander over the warm surface of his skin, exploring him. He turns me around to undo my bra and let it fall to the floor. Standing behind me, he cups my breasts, gently touches them, sending beams of exhilaration through me, at the same time as he gently tilts my head over to kiss my neck. I could faint from pure bliss in this moment. I love that we take it so slow, there is no rush. Now that the secret is out, we have all the time in the world.

Eventually, he moves his caressing hands down to the lining of my jeans and start unbuttoning them. Start pulling them down where he stands and when he does not reach further, bends down and kneeling help me pull them off and on his way up plants soft kisses on the back of my thighs and then further up on the small of my back, along the spine, up on my shoulders and pull my hair away to kiss my neck again. I turn too, and as slowly, undo his trousers, pull them down slowly but when he has them around his ankles he gets impatient for a brief moment and smilingly kicks them off himself. Nearly naked we kiss again, for the first time feeling the bare skin rub against the other ones and I feel the very evident and exhilarating hardness under his briefs. I can hardly describe the feeling, his soft skin against mine, both craving as much body contact as possible. When his hands with tantalising movements find the lining of my panties I gasp, but then teasingly step away.

"No, now it's your turn to go first."

"Really?" he smirks. "We're taking turns here?"

But I just find the lining of his briefs and slowly pull them down, the minute after he does the same to me. We stand in front of each other, now without a thread on our bodies and just take each other in. Without comparison, this is the most sensual moment in my life so far. He looks like... in seventh grade we made a school trip to London and went to British museum. As we had not seen much nakedness yet in that age, us girls where drawn to the section with those ancient Roman marble statues of naked muscular men. He looks like that, he could have been the model. Muscular, perfect, smooth, almost like carved in marble, except for the

scars on his legs. And except for that those statues for some silly reason had penises either covered by fig leaves or of the same size as their tiny ears. Charles has neither, let me say as much.

I step closer and let my fingers softly wander over the scars. I do not find them repellent. Somehow, they make him more human in all his perfection and I love every inch of his body.

"They're healed" he says. "And not only those scars."

I know that he means the invisible scars, the ones he got already in Afghanistan.

"They will always be there like a part of me, but they don't hurt like they did before."

"Like Jonah does not hurt like he did before either. Not since I told you about him."

We do not need to say anything else, our eyes and our bodies communicate more than enough. Now he just takes my hand and pull me with him to the bed. He lies down first and pulls me so I'm over him and we keep snogging, delighting in now feeling the full length of our warm bodies touching each other, his hands grazing over my back, my buttocks. Then he rolls us both around, so he is on top instead, over me. Looking down at me smilingly and with eyes filled with desire, mirroring mine. I have never been so aroused.

When he enters me, it is like we both freeze for a moment, the only movement being our eyes, locked into each other, widening. Because it is so surreal, so amazing, that we hardly can breathe, let alone move. First we must take this moment in, absorb it. Then he bends to kiss me deeply and we slowly begin to move again, together.

## A suitable companion

This is like nothing else. This is all. I'm consumed by it, by him, us. It the most perfect feeling ever and I do not want it to end. But we cannot stop ourselves from building up the rhythm that inevitably will end this in a climax, and when it does for both of us, it is so strong that we tense, shudder and then sink into each other, moaning each other's names out loud. Blissfully happy we relax in each other's arms, until we both feel we need to do this again.

*Once again thanks for all your reviews! It is both thrilling and a bit nerve-wrecking to know that when I push the publish button you read what I write. Even if I just write what comes to my mind that I want to write, I'm always hoping you will like it. Like what I do to the characters and what happens to them, so it is a fantastic affirmation to get response in the form of your thoughts about it, how you may interpret a situation or what you hope will come. By now you may have figured out that I'm a HEA person, so apologies to anyone who thought this would be a tragedy since the beginning was inspired by "Me before you". I hope you are not too disappointed about the turn of events :) Thank you to CJM Follower for your thoughtful comment, because I did not want aggression, only a mix of bit of jealousy, passion and love, so I'm glad if I managed that.*

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## Chapter 19: Magnets

This is not the morning after. It is the morning after the morning after the morning after... I'm almost losing count because the truth is that with his parents and Hutchins away from the house, we have left the bed as little as possible, completely indulging this new element of our relationship. *Our relationship*, Charles and mine. Just the thought of it sends jolts of happiness through my body. In the last days he has shown me in so many ways that what he said is true. He wants me, only me. I have only let my family know I'm staying here for a while, to be explained later, and we have remained where we are. Obviously, we have had to eat, but we



have simply ordered pizza or gone to the kitchen to make something easy like omelette, before we returned to bed again. It is like we cannot bear being far apart, and we prefer not to even have clothes separating us even when we are not actually making love because we cannot get enough of the feeling of skin to skin.

This early morning it is still dark outside as it is the last days of December and I'm just lying here, burying my face against his warm muscular back while he still is asleep, and I think that this is how we should be. All these months, we have been like two magnets, one north pole and one south pole, who in the proximity of one another only wanted to snap together like magnets do, but we have fought against the attraction. Staying apart has required effort as it is against the laws of nature for magnetic fields. Now, when we are as close as we possibly can be, it is natural, and we can finally relax in each other's arms because this is where we belong. Everything is in balance.

I can lie here all day, just hold him. Feel his warmth, feel and hear his breath, feeling safe and happy. *In love*. So long since I felt like this. Or, I have never felt *exactly* like this, this is new. I'm a grown up now with grown up feelings and at the same time as this feeling is as beautiful as the one I had for Jonah, it is also more mature and stronger. It may seem strange only a couple of days into the relationship, but it has been growing for months to finally bloom now, in the middle of the winter. So, I'm content with life just lying here. Except now I hear my stomach rumble reminding me I will need breakfast at some point, so maybe I will not be able to stay here *all* day. I could go down to the kitchen and make a breakfast tray for both of us and bring up here.

Then it hits me that he said Hutchins will be back today and she is always here early, so no doubt she is here already. Crap, what are we going to tell her? She will understand I have spent the night as soon as she sees me, I have obviously not come through the front door this morning. And it is a Sunday, so I should not be here at all. What will she think of this? For all I know, maybe she has not accepted that her young master James has an active sex-life yet (even though I have been very pleased to discover he is far from a novice in the area). After all, he is only thirty and still staying at home. Even if he had a girlfriend for long, she never liked Rebecca. What if she will not like me now that I have started sleeping with him - and have no intention to stop in the foreseeable future. Aaargh, just looking at him lying there sleeping, tucked under the duvet but deliciously naked underneath makes me want to wake him up with kisses and do all sorts of things to him. But I decide to grab the bull by the horns and go talking to Hutchins. I consider her my friend and I want to be honest with her.

I put my clothes on and have a look in the mirror. To me it is so obvious what I, we, have been up to. My hair is messy, but that can be fixed by pulling into a knot. However, my lips look poutier than usual and pink because they are swollen and sore from all the lovely snogging and his stubble. I bite my lip and feel a surge in my lower abdomen, longing to kiss him again. And my eyes, awake although I ought to look sleep-deprived, twinkling with happiness and fulfilment. Sexual fulfilment, that is. I'm so busted. But also, so overjoyed that this seems like a minor problem. Just as good to get it over and done with and hope it goes well.

The day I came back after the holiday, my mind was so occupied with thoughts about meeting Charles, that I did not really pay attention to the Christmas

decorations. But in my absence, Mrs. James and Hutchins had transformed the place and Charles was right, it is magical at Christmas. I admire it all once again, now when I move towards the kitchen. Last evening when we had called for pizza, we wrapped ourselves in the duvet and sat down by the living room fireplace, having red wine and eating pizza slices directly from the box next to the gigantic and amazingly decorated Christmas tree. It was ridiculously romantic and once we had gotten some new energy from the pizza we just had to make love then and there. My cheeks flush at the memory as I pass the Christmas tree.

Hutchins is in the kitchen, making her morning tea. She has her back to me and turns around when I say 'Hi'. I stay in the doorway, a bit hesitant, not sure where to start.

"Hi Molly, you're here early and..." Now she realises it. "... it's Sunday?"

And I see her face going from surprised, to realisation, to... happy?

She comes over and gives me a big hug.

"Finally!"

"What?" I want to make sure if she is thinking what I think she is thinking.

"Don't make me disappointed by telling me you have not spent the night in Charles bed?"

"I have", I confess. "I wanted to tell you. I wasn't sure you would approve."

"Silly girl. I have been hoping for so long the two of you would figure out what you feel for each other. It has been obvious to me for months, but you have been a bit slow. And when you weren't here this Christmas... he was so morose I was afraid he was having another backlash until I realised he was just pining after you."

He did not tell me that, but it makes me heat up with happiness. He missed me like I missed him. I must tease him about that later.

"Do you want a cup of tea, or do you just want to go back to bed?" she now smirks.

I do want to go back to bed, but I also want to talk to her and I'm quite convinced he will not disappear anywhere.

"I'll have a cup. How was your Christmas?"

After a while Charles comes down to the kitchen, fortunately decently dressed so he must also have remembered that Hutchins was to return. I'm almost startled by his appearance because now that he does not have the crutches he suddenly moves smoothly and without a sound and seeing him again even after only a moment apart, I feel like throwing myself around his neck. How I love those chocolate brown eyes, his curly hair, how tall he is – can I really call this man my boyfriend? We have not said yet but I think that would actually be okay with him. In one glance he takes in the scene in front of him and understands that Hutchins already knows, so he comes up to stand behind me, puts his arms around me and leans his chin to my head. I love that I'm allowed to be in his personal space like I have only been on rare occasions before. I do not think I will ever get enough of it.

"Good to see you again Hutchins. I hope you had a good time with your family."

"I did. And I'm apparently not the only one who had a good time" she laughs.

I look up at him and then he even dares to give me a light kiss on the lips in front of her.

"No, we had a good time over here too" he smirks. "Are you okay with that?"

"Charles, it is not for me to say anything about really – but if you must know, I'm thrilled. I have been waiting for months for you two to get anywhere, but you have been slow like snails."

"How did you know?" he asks with surprise.

"I have known you since you were eight. You may have all that fancy army training to keep your emotions in check but to me it was obvious from miles away, even if it was just as obvious that you did not understand yourselves that feelings were mutual. Sometimes I have been thinking about just ask you to sit down here in this kitchen and tell you, and have you do something about it. It is quite a relief that you finally have figured out. I don't think I could have taken much more of your behaviour from this Christmas."

She looks at Charles with a mock stern face, and we just laugh and kiss again although I can see that he is a bit embarrassed getting outed like that. I love that he has not been cool about not seeing me. (And I love that Georgie and her bosom apparently never have set foot in this house.) It feels great to have Hutchins blessing, I was more worried about that than about his absent parents.

With Hutchins home, we feel that we probably should get our arses out of bed and even out of the house to get some fresh air and devote ourselves to some less decadent activities, and we decide for a walk to the park. It is the first time he makes the walk without either wheelchair or crutches. It is the first time that we hold hands. Both feel momentous. It is cold, and the air turns to white smoke as we breathe and speak. There is a thin layer of snow on the ground, making crispy sounds as we step on it and the trees are coated in the most beautiful snow crystals, sparkling as the sun hits them. The pond is covered with thick ice and today the kids, and some adults too, are skating. Our cheeks become rosy from the biting cold, but it is just lovely to be here, and I look at our laced, gloved fingers thinking this is our first appearance in public as a couple. He seems to think about the same and stops to have a snog.

Charles was right the day I came here, that there is a time for talking and a time for... other things. Right then it was the other things we needed, but now we also need to talk, and this walk is a perfect opportunity as we cannot get distracted as easily by each other as at home. For one thing we need to figure out how to do with my employment. We have a bit of a catch 22 here. He does not want to exchange me for someone else and we both want to be with each other as much as we possibly can, up to the day he returns to work. I feel a bit odd about taking his money now, but if I do not, I must find another job *pronto*.

"I can't stand the thought of changing you for someone else. You're the only one I want with me during the car rides to Headley Court. I would just miss you like hell and be super-annoyed with anyone else driving me."

I would not want to be in that other person's clothes, I know what he is like when he is in a bad mood and then it is a *very* long drive.

"But I can't have you pay me when we sleep together."

"Look, I know it's not an ideal situation we have gotten ourselves into here and I understand if it may feel even weirder for you than for me..."

"So, you don't feel weird about being my sugar daddy?" I half-joke.

"Molly! I'm trying to be serious..."

Oh, there is the familiar frown, I just want to kiss it away.

"... what I wanted to say, this is weird for both of us and if I must choose between seeing you every day like we have done up to now and *not* sleep with you for the time that remains until I start working, and being able to sleep with you but not see you all day and have to put up with some other moron, then I chose the first."

He astounds me, he would give up the lovely sex over a few months to be able to just be with me. It is very flattering and sweet. However, he will not have to choose because I'm not as strong as him. I want to have the cake and eat it, see him all the time *and* sleep with him. I would rather disregard the weirdness for the time being.

"I'll stay... but only if you never suggest we stop sleeping together again."

"Oh, god, so glad you said that. I was prepared for some really tough months now that I know what I would be missing."

And he pulls me to him for another long kiss and we laugh together.

"And technically I'm not actually paying you. My parents are, the contract is written with them."

I'm not sure that is much better, but I do not have a better solution, so we decide to just leave it like this. It would probably have felt weirder if Charles was a different person and if I had not been so sure of our mutual feelings as I now am. After all, it seems like it may only take another couple of months before he can return to work, so after New Year I will start looking for another job to be prepared when that day comes. The great thing is that now it does not mean we will say good bye to each other, far from it.

"What would you like to do? When you don't work for me anymore?"

"First, I just must find myself some new source of income, but then, in the long-term I would like to work on my plan to have a café. Try to finish my missing courses from second year of uni because I think that is a solid foundation, make a real business plan, try to get a loan, find the suitable place.... Even if I have kept talking about it over the years even after Jonah, it is only now that I feel I really dare and have the energy to dream again and turn the dream to reality."

I stop and make him look at me.

"That's thanks to you."

I mean it. I was in a numb vacuum when I met him, not really hoping for or expecting anything out of life - and he changed that. He blushes. He is the cutest when he does that.



"I would love to help you. I think it is a brilliant idea, the way you bake, your café can only be a success and I think you have the mind to drive a business. You would also be seriously hot as independent business woman I think, so I really encourage this."

His eyes twinkle at this thought and I'm only too willing to follow when he pulls me with him towards home, because we both feel we have been away from the bed long enough now.

Later we lie between the sheets, again talking. There are so many things we want to find out now when we no longer have to keep up an indifferent pretence. Painting invisible patterns on my skin with his fingertips, he asks;

"When did you know you had feelings for me?"

"I'm not sure... it came gradually. First it was just these moments when things felt different, loaded... like when I washed your hair that time, or when you held me in the graveyard. But I was not sure what it was, just that it was strange. Disturbing somehow, yet nice... but I was with Smurf and I just thought I was confused and should not feel like that with my boss. So, it took long before I really understood, or admitted it to myself."

He smiles and looks very pleased with himself, I assume because he managed to evoke those feelings in me already months ago.

"And when did you know? Know that you wanted this?"

"From the first time I saw you, I think."

"You mean you hired me to be able to shag me?"

"No! No... I'm not that naughty" he gives me a wicked smile that does not make his words very convincing.

"I'm not sure when I knew I consciously wanted exactly *this*, but I think I fell for you the first time you came into this room. It was more like... When you came in here with that infectious smile of yours and your beautiful green eyes and was... just cheeky, not like the other meek wankers that applied for the job, I just knew I wanted to be with you. That I didn't want to let you go. Over time that feeling sort of expanded until I finally understood what it really was. I think Hutchins is right, we have been quite slow both of us."

"I have already told you, sometimes you're really daft for someone so smart."

"Then I would say the same applies to you, Ms. Dawes."

And he tickles me until I surrender, which honestly does not take very long because he is far too skilled in the art of tickling, but then I pull him to me and we kiss for the hundredth time today.

"Enough with the talking for today, Dawesy?"

"Definitely enough with the talking."

And there is a long, lovely silence between us.

*I'll do something I never usually do and that is publish a chapter before I have read the full text a couple of times to make sure I think it is ready. But my husband is away on another business trip and I really got into this writing mode and have been writing hours and hours and now I just feel like publishing it. Maybe it is a bit unpolished, so if you like you could wait and read a day or two and I'll probably make some adjustments for the better, but now I just feel getting it out there.*

*I think some have hoped for this and it has been in the plans for long but I did not want to spoil anything by including it too early. It was only meant to be one, but it became so lengthy that I divide it in two but publish both at the same time. Hope you enjoy and as usual, love to hear what you think!*

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## Chapter 20: Charles, part I

*She is lying beside me, asleep. I have caught her watching me when I'm sleeping, but now it is my turn and I relish the moment. Her long dark hair is tousled, and I get the impulse to untangle it for her, but I'm afraid I would wake her up, so I do not. Her long eyelashes flicker slightly against her cheeks when she is dreaming, and there is a faint smile on her lips, so I think she might be dreaming something good. Maybe about us, this new, magical entity. I have never loved being with someone this much. She asked me earlier when I knew that I wanted*

*this, and I told her the truth; that even if it was not a conscious thought, I knew I did not want to let her go from the first time I saw her. But in my wildest dreams I could not have imagined that it would end up in something as wonderful as this.*

"The next applicant is a Ms. Molly Dawes." Saunders announces.

I'm wondering if this parade of wankers will end anytime soon because it is insufferable. I cannot stand them, one probably more competent than the other but I hate when they look at me with understanding, pitying eyes. Like they could ever understand what it is like to be me. I'm not meant to be here, locked up like some freak, unable to walk. I'm rather meant to be walking, running, on strong legs through the terrain in some godforsaken shithole, commanding my men. This is undignified, frustrating, depressing and there is nothing I can do about it, except attending my physio and hope for a tiny sign of improvement. My patience is as stretched as it can be.

"How difficult can it be for you massive cockwombles to find a candidate who does not want to make me want to kill myself!? Is there even one I don't feel like lobbing out of here at the bare sight of them?"

I do not care if the applicants outside can hear me. So, what? It's mum's stupid idea I need a *companion* while they go travelling. She did not want to leave but I told them to go, I will be relieved not having to see their worrying faces. It depletes me of the little energy I have.

I get a surprise when Ms. Dawes enters the room. First, she is not an old spinster like I had pictured in my mind, secondly, she enters the room giggling. Now, that

is a first, but I cannot snap out of my bad mood and ask what the hell she is laughing about.

"Cockwombles, Sir."

As the conversation continues, she keeps giggling or smirking at some secret joke throughout. She is cheeky for sure and I think she is even mocking me, which both annoys me and intrigues me. But when she asks straight out if the wheelchair will be permanent there is no mockery in her voice, just a sincere question and without pity. Then, she tells me she did not mean to apply for this job, she just ended up here by accident. I feel like laughing, I feel like spending more time with her will drive me insane because she is clearly a lunatic. Yet, I also feel that spending more time with her is exactly what I want.

When she disappeared out of the door, after making sure she got the last word saying how ridiculous the job title *companion* was, I felt my cheeks flush with annoyance, but she was the first one in a long time to evoke something else than anger and bitterness in me. It was a such a feeling of relief to finally feel something else. And that smile, and those green eyes, that just had lit up the room. I wanted to be in her company again, *had* to, rather felt it than thought it. Without really making a conscious choice, I wheeled myself out in the corridor and shouted for Saunders who came hasting and told her that *she* was the one we should hire, her or no one else.

"But there were others who were more qualified" she said.

"Qualified for what? Bore me to death? It's her or no one, you can tell mum that if you like to, or you can run after her and give her an offer. And make it so good she cannot refuse."

As she hurried away I asked myself what I was doing, but when Saunders returned and said it was a done deal, I felt a fragment of happiness. A feeling which had been missing in my register of emotions for long, now combined with the equally absent feeling of expectation thinking about her starting.

Over that weekend, I counted down the days until she would start. Until I would get a disruption in this tedious life. Then came the first day, and it fulfilled my expectations already when she sat in that silly armchair. I do not know how I managed to keep a serious face on, because on the inside I was dying with laughter when she wriggled and turned her petite body to try to escape that gigantic swamp of a chair. And truth was I had spent half the weekend thinking about how I could drop the fact that I'm a captain to her, to achieve maximum impact after her joke about dreadful officers. The quickly passing expression of disbelief and uncertainty before she resumed her cheeky smile was totally worth waiting for.

I liked how she from the start did not fuss with me like everyone else. She asked straight out what happened with my legs and acknowledged that it was shit, but she also made it clear that she would not take any shit from me because she felt sorry for me. Actually, I think I managed to annoy her so much she did not feel sorry for me at all. If anything, she thought me an asshole and I found that very amusing.

## A suitable companion

The first time I thought something inappropriate about Molly, she had only worked for me a week or so. She made a joke if she, in her role as companion, would not get such a hot little uniform that nurses use to have in naughty movies. Then she just burst into fits of laughter at the thought of it, so she got tears in her eyes, without realising what she did to my insides. All I could do was stare at her with a frown, so I must have seemed totally humourless, meanwhile I

1) could not escape the picture of her in such a nurse uniform - and I liked it way too much and

2) wondered what kind of naughty movie it was she has seen

3) cursed myself for being an unprofessional pervert.

She had absolutely no idea what she did to me, completely unaware of her own natural charm. I realised then, that if I did not keep my distance I would be in trouble. Of course, I fucked that up completely, keeping the distance I mean.

I was still together with Rebecca then, officially, but the relationship had been dead for long. We were only ever perfect for each other on the surface, which I think was enough for her. The beautiful façade everyone saw when they saw us together. But there was never any depth to the relationship and when Elvis happened I found it impossible to share that with her even if she tried to make me. She made some small efforts, but I felt it was pointless even trying to share it with her. She would never understand. So, I shut her off. When I got to know I was leaving for Belize, I felt happier than in a long time. Finally, I would get some space, escape from her and during the quiet evening at the base before the training exercise was initiated,

I came to the conclusion that I ought to end it when I came home. Then the accident happened, and I was transported home a wreck. Somehow the physical injuries, the forced confinement, made the memory of my past experiences worse. Too much time to think, feel. I did not even have the energy to break up with her, or maybe I wanted her to be as miserable as I was, so I kept her on a string just to be mean. I'm not proud to think of that but my actions were not logical. When she finally took the step to end it, after I had been admitted to Headley Court I did not miss her. I only felt relief, and by then Molly was already on my mind.

Sometimes there is this phenomenon when you fire a gun to a wall or a door, and the sun falls in from the outside through the bullet holes, that you can see like almost tangible beams of light if the air is dusty on the other side. Something ugly turning into something beautiful. I think that Molly was like that. She made holes in my hard shell and what came through were pure rays of light, slowly lighting up my dark inside. It was hard to resist. Her bullets were the stories she told me when we drove, her teasing me and treating me disrespectfully, driving me nuts when I tried to teach her chess, making me laugh despite my resistance.

Those stories. First, I just listened with half an ear but then I started to realise that her family was really interesting, they do all sorts of crazy things all the time, so far from my neat and tidy one. I began to long for those stories, to hear the continuation of those that were left unfinished the last drive and soon I could not stop myself from asking questions. Soon I felt like I knew them, although I had never met them. After a while, I realised that she did not tell any stories about herself. I found that equally intriguing. One could mistake her for open, but in fact she is a very private person. I managed to extract some little information from her,



only when asking direct questions – and I found myself feeling illogically disappointed when I understood she had a boyfriend. Smurf, what a loser-name. I was more positively surprised and impressed when she told me she had had a scholarship for uni, that said a lot about her intelligence and I was extremely curious when she refused to tell me why she quit. There was clearly a story there and I was determined that one day I would find out.

At some point I identified I had feelings for her of some sort and thought that it was fucking inconvenient. I was so not ready for love, as broken as I was. And definitely not with someone who works for me – never.

Then came the backlash. I could not do anything. It was like all energy was leaking out of my body and with it any feelings. Not only those inconvenient feelings for Molly, but every feeling. I just felt empty, like a vacuum, except when panic got hold of me. The nightmares kept me captive during the nights and during the days the angst kept me in a tighter and tighter grip until I hardly could breathe, let alone leave the bed. That was how she found me, like a fragment of the man I really am. Then she just held me, gave me her energy, let me feel I could trust her, until I felt I wanted to tell her *all*, like I had not told anyone before. And then she made me admit myself to Headley Court. I'm convinced she saved my life. If I had been able to summon enough energy, I would have gone to the bathroom and taken all painkillers I had in one swoop to end my misery, but she made sure I never came to that. Others may have saved my life from physical trauma, but no one has saved me from myself like her. She did not give up on me, she refused any other option than saving me. She is amazing.

I barely remember when she first visited me at Headley Court because I was still so under the surface, but the second time when the medication had kicked in, I was so ridiculously happy to see her. I had not spent one second thinking about Rebecca, but I had spent hours longing for her. When she offered to cut my hair that day, I think it was just a spur of the moment idea and neither of us had thought about how intimate it might feel. When she washed my hair, my god. And then when I felt her fingers softly pull out my locks to cut them, brushing off hair from the nape of my neck, my entire body was awake, tense and all I wanted to do was to pull her down to me, kiss her – but I could not. She was working for me and I was still a wreck, not a man to fall in love with. I just resisted the impulse and revisited that moment so many times in my day dreams, but it gave me a new motivation to get well. Get well so I would be a man who she could possibly love, get well so she would not have to work for me anymore and I would be allowed to tell her how I felt.

When I got back home, I quickly improved. When she for my birthday suggested I would leave the house for a walk, I was terrified. I had kept myself in familiar territory for so long; the house, the car, Headley Court, only in the company of her, Hutchins and medical professionals. A walk to the park would be far out of my comfort zone, but when I saw her happy, expectant face I could not say no. It turned out to be such a great day, the best I had since I do not know when. To get out and to be in her cheerful company, laughing. I feel like I'm a different person when I'm with her. A bit like someone I was a long time ago, but even better. Before she left that evening, I could not hold back saying;

"I like having you here... I like me better when I'm with you."

She just smiled and dived out the door, and I cursed myself because I felt I had been too personal, nearly exposed what I felt. I decided not to make that mistake again, not while she is working for me.

This is so against my work ethics, the regulations and moral code that the army has drilled me in over the years - and it has never even been difficult to adhere to. Not once. Even if I have worked with a few female soldiers over the years, even when I was single before Rebecca, I never found myself in a compromising situation. I made no difference between the females and the males, if I wanted company of women there were plenty outside the army. I know this is not the army, but it would still feel wrong to tell her how I feel. I could put her in a really awkward situation, and she could choose to quit. I don't want that. I need her in so many ways. Once I'm healed so I do not need her working for me, then I may take the risk but for now I'm happy if I can just be near her even if it is just like friends - because nothing makes me happier than Molly.

Then, it turns out she needs me to be there for her. She has been something of an enigma, the way she refuses to talk about her past and the way I feel that she understands my dark moments like no one else and finally came a day of revelation. For Molly, the worst day of the year. She behaved so erratic that day. First, I thought she was just pissed because I did not give her the day off, but then I realised there was something more to it and when she asked if we could go somewhere where she needed to be, I did not only agree as a favour to her, I was also incredibly curious. I was so perplexed when we parked by the graveyard, it was not what I had imagined, although I'm not sure what I had imagined. She just left me in the car and I stayed there obediently until I got worried about her and went looking for

her. That graveyard is big and as she was sitting down, hidden among the gravestones, I did not see her at first. When I did, it broke my heart. She was so in a world of her own, so absorbed in pain and grief that I was not sure I would even reach her and when I read the inscription on the stone she was sitting in front of, I understood. I did not know who the dead young man had been, more than it must have been someone profoundly important to her. And all I knew, was that I wanted to be there for her, like she had been for me. When she allowed me to hold her, I felt so many things. Sadness for her, but also tingling happiness of holding her in my arms. She had held me before, but never I her. She was so small, so easy to wrap in my arms and I got the feeling I could easily break her, but instead I held her together. I just wanted to protect her from whatever is haunting her and at the same time the lovely blossom smell from her hair made me dizzy.

Later, she told me everything about Jonah and about the darkness she fell into after his death. Suddenly everything is clear, the missing piece of the puzzle handed to me, completing the picture. I got to know why she understands me like no one else, got to know why she has not wanted to let anyone in on some parts of herself, because she has closed them off – to survive. From that moment I hoped I would be the one to open her up again, that I would find the key. When she fell asleep on my couch that night, I was thinking that if I had not been bound by my crutches, I would have wanted to carry her up to my bed to lie down beside her through the night, but even if I had been able to it would have been inappropriate.

Yet, the following day, I got myself into further trouble. Like I could not stop digging a big hole for myself to fall into. It started innocently enough with the suggestion that we should go out for lunch to celebrate my progress. Then I

suggested she could have a shower here and borrow some clothes from mum. The minute I left her in that bathroom, I regretted it because I realised I had just made things so much more difficult for myself. In my mind I saw her undressing in that bathroom, turn on the shower, let herself get soaked by the water, sensually wash her hair... I had to stop myself there, using all my willpower and focus on finding her some clothes, and I had to fight off the same thoughts when I left the clothes outside the bathroom door. Fight of a fantasy where my legs are fully functional, and I knock the door and asks if she want company, she answers with dusky voice that she would be glad to and then we have steamy sex in the shower. I went to take a very cold shower myself to end that.

When she came down the stairs, I regretted I had not chosen something less flattering from mum's wardrobe. Mum has good taste in general, but if I had looked careful enough I might have found something less flattering. Because this was amazing. Molly was amazing. I like her in t-shirt and jeans but like this she was not only cute, she was also so incredibly sexy. I wanted to peel off that thin blouse, see her step out of that skirt, maybe keep the high heels on, run my hands through her wavy hair and pull her to me... I forced myself not to react. Telling myself 'I'm cool. I'm her boss, taking her to lunch the day after she shared her past traumatic experience. Nothing more, nothing less.' But I was so fucked. When we sat in the cab, I tried to look out the window, but all the time my eyes found their way back to her beautiful legs in nylons. It was a relief when we arrived at the restaurant.

We had so much fun that lunch. The tipsy version of Molly is adorable, and she is incredibly funny. I think she did not mean to tell me that what she has with Smurf is not the love she hopes for, but it slipped out. The waitress interrupted us, which

was probably for the best because I'm not sure what would have been said otherwise, but the words stay with me. I have not spent much time thinking about Smurf, he is not part of *our* world, but of course it has disturbed me a bit that she has a boyfriend. This confession, it gave me hope which probably would have been better off without, but it left me so happy. When I took her home in another cab, I could not resist ending the amazing day by giving her a kiss on the cheek. It took my last straw of willpower not to kiss her on the mouth instead but when I drove off I was grateful I had manged, as that would have jeopardised everything and been so completely inappropriate. But wonderful. I knew then that I was in love, completely, madly and utterly in love with Molly Dawes.

*This chapter has been slightly updated since I posted it yesterday, to make it flow better. Don't you lovely people sleep? I posted the two chapters right before going to bed (far too late because I could not stop writing until I was finished) and in the morning it had already been read almost hundred times, and most of you seems to be nearly in the same time zone as I. I hope I don't keep you up :)*

X

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## Chapter 21: Charles, part II

My feelings were confirmed every day I met her after that and strengthened when I saw her in the company of 2 section. She handled them so well and they all loved her. We ended up on mined ground though, when we talked about Rab and Maisie possibly having a relationship. When she asked me if I would not reconsider my principles if I fell in love with someone I worked with. I had to restrain myself then, to not just throw all reservations over board and tell her what I felt, convince myself that the only right thing in such a situation is to wait out. So, I told her just that, firm, controlled, uncompromising without showing any emotion and she looked at me with disappointment for being such an unromantic man of principles. If she only had known what I felt under the surface.

Then I got to meet Smurf that day in the park. God, how I disliked him. I could not understand how Molly could be with him because she was far too good for him in every visible aspect, both looks and personality. He was just to unlikeable. I could not help telling him I'm a captain, I had a feeling it would disturb him, and I wanted

that. If I only had known the price Molly would pay. Even if all the blame was his, I hated myself afterwards for adding to his anger, his jealousy. When I saw her face next morning, I was ready to kill him for real even though I have always been able to keep my impulses under control. But it was more important to be there for her, to get her through this and I was glad that she let me even if she tried to resist it at first. That day held so many shocks for me. When I saw the additional bruises around her neck and realised he nearly killed her, when I understood at the police station that it was mere luck that she escaped a complete rape. I felt such frustration and anger and it was only the fact that she needed care and closeness that prevented me from exploding in fury.

But I kept thinking of that little shit and what he had done to her and a few days later I had to go see him. When he faced me, I saw the fear in his eyes. The fear of a true coward who would only ever dare to attack someone less strong than him. I went there to talk to him, threaten him, but my emotions took over and I hit him. Punched him so hard in the face that he did not get up while I remained there.

"If you ever hurt her again, no if you even come close to her, I will make sure that you die. You will never feel safe again, not anywhere. I know a number of special forces soldiers who would be willing to do me a favour and they can get in anywhere and kill an enemy – and you are my enemy, make no mistake about that."

No need to mention that no SF soldiers I know would kill a guy like him and he seemed to believe it.



"You will pack your bags. You will transfer to another university and you will leave Bath immediately. I don't care how you arrange everything but if you don't leave town by tomorrow, I'll send someone after you. Is that understood?"

He was just wining after the punch.

"THAT'S A FUCKING ORDER! IS THAT UNDERSTOOD!?"

"Yes" he managed to whisper, and I left him like that. I was incredibly pleased to hear via Matt and Molly that he had actually left town. He was a coward indeed.

The next weeks in her company were lovely but increasingly confusing. Now that there was no boyfriend between us and with all the events that have been pulling us closer, I felt myself falling deeper and deeper in love her. Sometimes I was so close to just draw her to me and kiss her, my body was aching to do it. I kept repeating my mantra that I must wait out until she no longer worked for me. Then we had this great evening with her friends, and I could even more clearly picture what it would be like to be her boyfriend, be part of her world outside the little universe where she and I exist, which made me long for it even more. Maybe that was why I could not resist asking her if she wanted to come to the regimental Christmas party, although I had considered it before and come to conclusion I had better not, that it was inappropriate. When she accepted, I was both overjoyed and a bit worried what it might lead to. A party, alcohol, no boyfriend, you never know.

When I saw her in that red dress, I knew it would be the ruin of me. I no longer wanted to take her to the Christmas party. I wanted to put her in the waiting cab,

ask the driver to take us back home to Royal Crescent, bring her up to my bedroom, let that lovely red dress slide off from her body and...

Her Nan elbowed me, brought me back to reality and told me to say something and I realised that the proper thing to do was to give her a compliment. It is just that I could not think of any words that would be enough to cover how amazing she looked, or any words that would be appropriate to say in front of her Nan, or herself, when it came to the things I would like to do with her in this moment. I'm not sure I had ever wanted a woman this much. But it would be so inappropriate when she still works for me. Once again, I told myself I just have to wait out, even though it felt like the hardest thing I have ever done. Harder than surviving in the jungle of Belize.

The party began so great. I was just so proud to be there with her, even if she was not my girlfriend. She was clearly the most beautiful woman in the room. I've never danced in these parties, I've always been hanging in the bar, talking with friends, but that night it disturbed me I was not able to dance. I would have loved to slow dance with her. To have a reason to hold her, to bury my face in her hair, hold my cheek next to hers – but she seemed to be happy to just sit beside me. She charmed everyone I introduced her to and I was having such a blast talking about everyone here with her. Okay, so I would not be able to bring her to my bed that night or any night soon, but just being near her was fantastic.

Then everything went wrong. I did not even realise at first. Georgie showed up and I was glad to see her, like any of the 2 section guys. She did not come along when the others visited so I had not met her since Belize, and I was simply happy to meet

her again. Maybe I was naïve to think that would not seem different to Molly than meeting the others. She got along so well with Maisie and I did not think Georgie would be different, because she is no different to me. Objectively I know that Georgie is smashing. It is just that to me she will always be Elvis' girl, and secondly, she is not my type at all. I only ever think of her as one of the lads and assume everyone will understand that is all there is to it. I was a bit bothered when she touched me and seemed to want to exclude Molly on purpose... and when she was eluding to that we had discovered in the jungle there was some silly kind of bond between us. I almost felt like laughing when she said it, but it did not feel appropriate as it concerned Elvis. Also, I felt a bit uncomfortable about her sticking all that cleavage up my face. I have always preferred small breasts, like Molly's perfect ones which I would like to... (I just had to stop myself there otherwise I will have a hard on and it would be so inconvenient there at the party.) I tried to include Molly in the conversation, but she seemed a bit reluctant and suddenly Bones, Captain fucking McClyde, appeared out of nowhere and asked her to dance. She seemed so happy to accept. Of course, that was what she has longed for the entire evening, and I could not. I was so mad at my fucking legs when he brought her to the dancefloor. I followed every move they made, and when they slow danced it was killing me. I wanted it to be me, but worse than that; I realised I had no right whatsoever to claim her. She was not mine in any shape or form. I had just lived in the illusion that we had something special. I was convinced I could not do anything about it as long as she worked for me, and I needed her to do that until I can walk and drive by myself. I had told myself I was fine waiting out if I could only be near her, but it was only that evening I realised that might not be enough for her. She might not even have the desire to be with me in any other way, and she might have

the desire to be with someone else and I had nothing to say about it. I was only vaguely aware of what Georgie was telling me, meanwhile I had full attention on Bones' hand on Molly's back and how she laughed at the things he whispered in her ear.

"Come with me tonight", Georgie was breathing in my ear, and startled me.

"What?"

"I know you want it Charles. We have both wanted it for so long, it's inevitable."

She looked at me with glossy eyes.

"I'm sorry Georgie, I don't get what you mean?"

"Don't act shy Charlie, I know you want me and now you're not my CO now so finally we can..."

"Georgie, no. No, there will never be anything like that between us. You got it wrong, I'm not interested in you like that. I care for you as a friend, and as the friend of your former fiancée, but I'm your CO, and even if I was not your CO I don't have feelings for you in that way. And I never will."

She looked offended and pissed off like hell and she was up on her feet in no time.

"You have been leading me on" she spat.

"Not once. I have not treated you different from the other guys."

And I saw a realisation in her eyes when she thought back and understood that is actually true, but she was still as pissed at me and spun around and left. To be honest, I was only relieved. If I become the commander over 2 section again, I will clearly have to make sure that we change medic because her and I should not work together again.

Now that I was rid of her distracting me, I looked for Molly again. She was in the bar, drink in hand. It seemed like Bones kept them coming and I thought it might be time to stop that, so she did not get too drunk. I loved that she was enjoying herself, but I wished she was less intimate with Bones. I know he is quite the womanizer. Right before I reached them at the bar, I saw him brush his lips against her cheek whispering something to her. The things it did to my insides, I would have liked to take a punch at him. When she saw my face, she just laughed at me, called me Sternface and laughed together with him without realising how it hurt me. God, Molly you did not know what you were doing to me. I just wanted to get us out of there, so it would only be the two of us and we could make things right again. When she would not come with me I lost my temper and without thinking grabbed her by the wrist.

"Hey, you're not going to turn into another Smurf, are you?"

I immediately let go of her, I do not think I have ever felt so ashamed. How could I do that? After what she had been through, and when I had no right, none what so ever. She was not my girlfriend, no emotional strings attached, she was just working for me and had no idea what I feel about her, and even if she was my girlfriend I would have no right to grab her like that. I was so mad at myself, and

unfairly mad at her for making me act like an asshole. She seemed to regret what she said but it was too late. Something between us had been destroyed by the actions of us both. I strode off with her after me, relieved that she at least came. I could not stand sitting beside her in the taxi, not after that. I was too ashamed and too afraid that I would not be able to keep my emotions in check and tell her what I felt. That horrible drive never seemed to end, but finally it did and all I wanted was to escape inside the house. But no, even though I had been an asshole she insisted on accompanying me to the door. So concerned for me, so lovely. When she blurted out a good night, sounding sad and confused, I could not help myself. I just grabbed her and kissed her but was so furious with myself and so immensely frustrated and all that came out in that kiss and it was just completely wrong. A hard, angry kiss, seemingly devoid of affection. Wrong because I had never wanted to kiss her in that way. I realised what I was doing was wrong and just let her go, came up with the lamest excuse:

"I forgot to kiss you under the fucking mistletoe."

Then I escaped into the house, wondered how I would be able to face her again, or able to face myself. I felt like such a total loser. I cursed myself, as I stood inside the door with my back leaning against it, heart pounding. This was so not what I wanted. I wanted to run after her, apologise to her, but I just could not bring myself to do it, I was too proud. How did things get so fucked up? God knows I had been fantasising about the evening, even before I asked her to come. So many stupid dreams, but I just could not stop myself. My favourite was that we sit in the backseat of the cab on the way home and she suddenly moves in to kiss me without warning and it gets steamy there in the backseat. Somehow, the driver disappears

in that fantasy and it is just us there, me pulling up her dress, she straddling me and... and instead I was sitting in the front beside the driver, angry, silent, jealous. Now I was not even sure it was justified. But Bones has always been able to drive me mad. Why did I kiss her like that? The simple answer is that I really, really wanted to kiss her, but not like *that*. I just did not dare to kiss her the way I wanted to, so I did it in anger instead and maybe I ruined everything. I did not know how to face her on the Monday. I was not sure I could.

My logic had been so crystal clear to me: we would wait to show any feelings until I no longer need her working for me, because I could not replace her with someone else and in the meantime, we just enjoy our company on the platonic level. That evening I realised two things. That, after seeing her in that red dress, I was not sure how to keep my hands off from her some months longer, or even days. And worse, that she had in no way signed up this plan of mine. I just assumed, with the way I was feeling, she felt the same, but it dawned on me that I have no right to expect anything from her above exactly what I'm paying her for. I felt like such a fool. A presumptuous fool. If there is anything I should have known by now, it was that she has a will of her own. I did not know how face her again, because I was so totally embarrassed over both my behaviour and my thoughts.

So, when mum and dad came home earlier than expected for the holiday, I thought I took the easy way out when I told her to stay away. It was just that already after a day, I missed her so my body ached. I was desperate to see her again, to make everything good. If I had heard anything from her I would have begged her to come. But nothing, not even after I sent the present that I had felt so happy about when I bought it. I realised then that she must be so mad with me that she might never

forgive me and the whole Christmas was just miserable. When I managed to ditch the crutches I did not even feel happy for real. It was not the same when she was not here to celebrate with me.

Then she came back.

The feeling when I see her standing here in my room again. So incredibly glad to see her, so incredibly nervous about what will happen now. I keep my arms crossed to make sure it is not visible if my hands are trembling, the might be from all the adrenaline pumping through my body. It does not begin well. She is angry with me for the kiss, with every right – and I try to pretend I'm cool, like it was nothing to me. Then she tells me I hurt her and my heart flutters. I hate it, hate that she stands there sad, because I hurt her when it is the last thing I want to do. I hate to feel this frustrated because all I want to do is kiss her.

And she tells me she cannot do this anymore and she spins around to leave. I cannot let her leave, not like this.

All I feel is 'Fuck it!' Fuck if she cannot work for me anymore. I do not care, I just cannot hold it back any longer, I just have to take the risk that she will turn and run when I tell her if there is just the slightest possibility that she will not.

"I don't want to be your friend."

She looks devastated.

"At least I don't think I can *only* be your friend. And I certainly don't want to be your boss."



Her face so angry and confused.

"Then what do you want Charles?"

"Don't you know that Molly?"

"No, Charles, I just feel tired of guessing what you want."

Then I just do it. I take her face gently between my palms, stroke her cheeks with my thumbs. She looks completely surprised, but the anger vanishes, and she does not back away. I can barely speak.

"Molly, I want you. I only want *you*."

And I bend down and kiss her, so nervous she will push me away, that she will not want the same. But after the first surprise, she puts her arms around my neck, and she returns the kiss. Nothing like that horrible, hard one-sided kiss I gave her out of jealousy and anger, this is something different entirely. I'm not sure how my legs manage to carry me and that has nothing to do with my injuries. I'm feeling fantastic, yet strangely weak in my legs. She presses her small body to mine and all I feel is that I cannot have her close enough. God, I have been longing for this, for her to be mine. Or maybe for me to be hers.

I reach out to the back of her head, to softly pull away the elastic tie that holds her ponytail in place and let her hair fall around her shoulders. I have longed to do that since I first saw it lose when we had lunch in the restaurant, so see the shiny strands move, to bury my hands in them as I pull her close and kiss her again, and

everything that happens thereafter is a thousand times better than any fantasy I have had.

*For long, I thought that falling for her was against my better judgement. But this Christmas has been hell without her. I think I have longed for her, pined for her every waking moment and suddenly I realised that loving her is the only sound thing I have done for so many years. The only thing that makes perfect sense. I felt that nothing else mattered, if she only would come back to me and I got to tell her how I feel. Tell her that she is my best friend, and that I want her so much it hurts. And that I love her. I should probably not tell her all that in one fell swoop, with the risk of overwhelming her with confessions, but it is without a doubt true.*

*I cannot believe my luck that she is lying here beside me, right now sleeping. To be honest, we could both need that after the hours of making love and talking and making love again, but I just cannot get enough of looking at her, touching her bare skin – now that I'm allowed to. God, she is so beautiful. Her fair skin is so amazingly soft, the curve of her lower back so perfect, her breasts and nipples – I do not even know what to say. I wonder if I will be able to look at her and not want to undress her ever again.*

*There are only two things that have ever made me feel like I'm truly home and strange enough none of them is a place. One is an institution - the Army. The other is a person. Her. Molly. She is my home. Wherever she is, I want to be. Where ever she will be, I will want to return if I must leave her. I know that for sure. She is my love, overtrumping the army by far, and nothing can ever change that.*

## A suitable companion

*Enough of nightly mind-wandering. I move closer to her to spoon against her back and feel her soft skin against mine. When I put my arm around her I cannot resist cupping one of her wonderful little breasts in my hand, it fits so perfectly there. She gives up sigh of contentment in her sleep, like she can feel it even in her reverie, making me smile. Then I fall asleep too.*

***No, it is not over yet, if anyone thought so.***

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## Chapter 22: Everything must come to an end

I have let my family, via text message to Bella, know I'm staying at Charles place, *with* Charles. They have not disturbed by calling but I have received several text messages in return:

*Bella: About f-ing time! I knew the red dress would do the trick.*

*Mum: Don't get it, are you working nights now? Miss you. X*

*Nan: Heard the great news. Don't worry about your mum, I'll explain. Stay as long as you need (long I hope). Say hi to your lovely young man from me*

*Bella: Come home soon, want to hear EVERYTHING!*

*Mum: Nan told me, so happy for you! XXX*

*Bella: Are you coming to the New Year's party tomorrow? Everyone will be there and I would miss you. Pleeeeease! You can bring lover boy.*

-O-

We wake up to the last day of the year. Even if New Year logically is no different than other days, the concluding day of the year always feels a bit special. Sometimes good, sometimes bad depending on how the past year has played out. Sometimes I have felt disappointment and a sense of loss over the 365 days that have gone by, if I feel I have not done as much with them as I could have. *Should* have. It has been

like that for a few years now. But today, when I wake up next to Charles and think of what has happened this year, and especially the last days, I feel that a year could not be more complete.

We have not made plans for the evening, not together. I had plans before, but I want to be with him tonight of all nights. It is not that we have avoided planning, we have just been too busy with the present.

I hear my mobile make a sound, alerting me to another text message from Bella. She seems to be getting desperate because I have not answered her latest ones.

*Bella: Coming tonight or what? Bring your Captain! Want to meet him ASAP!  
And you too. XXX*

Bella and I were to go to a big party tonight which a common friend, Alex, throws. He is a party planner by profession, famous for his great parties, so it will be good for sure. Katie and Sammy are also invited, like many other of our common friends. During the depressing Christmas I did not feel up for it at all, but now things are different. In case he would like to come with me.

"Are you staring at me while I'm sleeping again?" he says with eyelids still closed and then open them to look right into mine.

I'm obviously caught in the act and blush.

"Again? I have never watched you when you're sleeping. Why would I? I have better things to do."

"Yeah? Like what?"

I cannot think of a good answer, so I just kiss him, and I feel his lips smiling as they touch mine.

"I was thinking about something..."

"That sounds dangerous."

"Maybe. How would you feel about coming with me to a New Year's party tonight? I know our previous attempt of going to a party together was not very successful, but..."

He finishes the sentence for me;

"But things are completely different now, aren't they?"

"Yes."

Our eyes are locked, both smiling at how very different things are now compared to then.

"I would love to go to another party with you now that I know that I'm *with* you, when you are my girlfriend."

*That* word, he said it, my heart making somersaults, but I cannot resist;

"Girlfriend? I don't remember that we have discussed..."

"You're such a tease Molly Dawes. *I* want to be your boyfriend. *You* want to be my girlfriend. Don't try to deny that after these days."

And it is actually pointless when there is nothing I want more.

"I want to be you girlfriend, Charles."

He knew it, yet he looks ridiculously happy when I confirm it. We have to celebrate this now being official, if only to ourselves, by a long snog followed by some more loveliness.

A while later, I pick up my mobile.

"Then I let Bella know we will come along."

He nods, and it is decided, we will go to our first party as a couple.

I have not been home to change clothes these days. It has not been necessary as I have either been naked or borrowed a t-shirt or shirt from Charles. The size of his clothes is too big for me of course but I like being dressed in them, and he likes me in them. Especially his tailor-made shirts which I wear like short dresses, he has told me he thinks I look hot in them. However, now I cannot postpone going home. I need to scavenge my wardrobe for something dressy for the evening and I definitely need to fix my hair and put on some makeup.

"Why?", he teases. "I think you look perfect like this."

"Thanks for the compliment but when I go to a party I prefer if it's not obvious to everyone what we have been up to the last days."

"They would only be jealous."

He might be right, but I still prefer to dress up. We agree that I will go home, and he will come too in the afternoon, once he has prepared himself. For the party that is, although I guess he might be preparing himself mentally for meeting my family as well. Even if he has heard a lot about them, Nan is the only one he has met. I hope they will not eat him alive, but I'm quite confident he will manage.

It is so ridiculous when we say good bye. We both know it will only be for a couple of hours, yet we find it extremely challenging to let go. We snog in the doorway and I'm about to finally tear away and then he pulls me back again, to keep snogging. He tells me now I should really get going and I'm about to but have to return and wrap my arms around his neck, let our lips meet again. We behave more like smitten teenagers than the adults we are. I love it.

Finally, I head home. As soon as I get through the door, half the family attacks me. In other words, Bella, mum and Nan.

"Molly! Finally you're home."

They pull me into the kitchen and have me sit down for an inquisition poorly covered as an ordinary chat with tea and biscuits. Not that I mind really, I'm ready to bubble about Charles and let them know about my happiness. Of course, there is a whole lot of details I omit although I know Bella will try to squeeze it out of me later, but I tell them the essentials. How we have realised that we have fallen in love over the last months and now are together.

"This is so romantic", says Nan. "You should have seen him the evening he picked her up, wearing dress uniform. He was gorgeous."



"I can't believe I missed that", Bella sulks.

"You will see him later. He comes over to join us to the party, and to meet all of you."

"Really?" mum gets a bit nervous, but luckily the house is already clean and less messy than usual due to the planned New Year's celebration, so she does not have to take action to get it in shape for an unexpected guest that she wants to impress. I know she will make sure that dad puts on something proper though. He might have anyway, but now he will not escape getting rid of his regular joggers for sure.

Now to getting myself ready for the evening. I have a two-piece set which I think might do. It is a silk strap top in dusky pink and a sequin pencil skirt in a darker shade of the same dusky pink - some glitter feels appropriate for New Year. Especially this New Year. With some matching jewellery and high heels as complement, the outfit looks perfect. Once I'm ready with hair blow dried into movie star-like waves and have makeup on, I feel even more beautiful than I did for the Christmas party. I know it does not only come down to the outfit, but also to being in love and knowing that the man I love will come with me to this party.

I'm a little bit nervous about him coming here. He has been in the entrance before but now he will stay an hour or two. What will he think of my home, so very different from his? I look around with a critical eye but come to the conclusion I should not worry. It is definitely not as spacious as Royal Crescent no. 10, or as posh. It is small and cluttered with things, but it is cosy, homily. One can see that a family of eight plus Nan lives here and somehow you can feel there is a lot of love within these walls. I'm glad I have grown up here and I would not have changed it

for Charles' home if it meant I would not have had all my siblings, mum and dad, and Nan with me. It hits me that I'm proud of who I am and where I come from, which might be one of the reasons we are a match despite our very different backgrounds.

Yet, when he later stands there in the door he looks a bit misplaced. He looks more like he ought to be in a fancy bar or casino, ordering a 'dry vodka martini, shaken, not stirred', because he would make a perfect James Bond. He wears a black suit with perfect fit, a crisp white shirt and black bow tie. His hair looks darker than usual because he has some kind of hair product in it to tame the curls a bit. He is incredibly handsome and if he was not my boyfriend already he would not have had any problem to convince me to agree to a one-night stand in manner of James Bond. But he does not have to, because I get to sleep with him this night, and next night, and the night after that...

"You look awesome", I manage to say. Thinking 'fucking awesome'.

"No, Molly, *you* look awesome", he says, then murmurs in my ear; "You shouldn't dress like that, I only want to take you home."

"Ditto."

But no chance of that, because now my family gathers and want to meet him. Even if Nan has informed them he is gorgeous, I think he makes quite an impression on everyone.

Bella whispers to me;

"Shit Molly, I don't get how it could take you so long to get it on with this man. I would have thrown myself over him at first sight."

"Oi! It's my boyfriend you're talking about."

"Yes, but only because you saw him first."

I doubt that is the only reason, but I like that she likes him. I already knew that Nan likes him, had she been forty years younger she would easily have tried to steal him from me. Dad seems a bit intimidated but makes a true effort at a friendly chat and offers him a cold beer, which Charles gladly accepts and we all move into the living room, which gets quite crowded when the whole family is there at once. The four youngest accept him immediately, with mild curiosity. They have more important things on their mind than their eldest sister's love life. Surprisingly, the only one who is a bit wary is mum. Reflecting about it, I only think she is afraid that I will get my heart broken again after the trauma with Jonah and the violent ending with Smurf, but I see her slowly relax when she sees mine and Charles' body language together. We sit next to each other in the sofa and we must brush against each other every other minute, seemingly accidental but really out of necessity.

He also shows himself very interested in and attentive to my family. He knows a lot about them from our drives and now when he talks to them, I realise just how much he has made the effort to remember. He asks dad about his job at the cinema, mum about how it is in school, Nan if she has won anything lately down in the bingo hall, Bella if she has found a job she likes after walking out on Mr. Wong (and his tiny dick). He openly tells about himself, how he ended up in the situation that he needed me, as employee that is. It is all so easy. Who could have thought when we

met, that the posh twat Captain James would sit here in the Dawes living room charming the pants off my family because he genuinely cares about what they think about him, because he likes them and is in love with me. Sometimes the turn of events is surprising and amazing.

Mum, dad and Nan will celebrate home with some neighbours tonight, so they are in no hurry anywhere and this turns out to be quite the little pre-party before Bella, Charles and I leave for our festivities. It is just so amazingly nice being here with them all *and* him, that I almost do not want to leave.

"I want this one day, Molly", Charles whispers in my ear during a moment when no one is listening.

"What? A crazy family?"

"A large noisy family, toys and drawings everywhere, something that really feels like home."

I realise that he probably means that he wants that with me, and both that and the fact that he likes my family home makes me warm and fussy inside. I move closer to him on the sofa and give him a kiss, which immediately renders cheering from my family. They obviously do not know how to behave. But he loves that. He wants that.

Finally, we leave for the party. Bella does not have a date for the evening, but I suspect that she has a thing for our host, Alex. I do not think anything has ever happened between them, but the way she talks about him, I think he is more than just our common friend to her. I do not think he has a girlfriend, maybe something

will happen between them tonight. Anyway, he is a great party fixer. He has been able to borrow this amazing house for the event. A large one of several floors, terrace and a big balcony where we will be able to watch the fireworks later. There is even a big pool in the garden even though that obviously will not be used this cold night. His people have arranged temporary bars, mingle tables, decorations, awesome music, delicious finger food, drinks, champagne, champagne and more champagne. The house is full of happy people who want to celebrate the last hours of the year with a big bang and you know from start that this is going to be a great evening.

"This is great, Molly", says Charles as we stand sipping champagne watching people.

"But?"

"I didn't say 'but'."

"No, but I felt that there was one between the lines."

"I just have never pictured you in parties like this. Not sure why, just from the way you have talked about your life."

"I used to like things like this, then it changed, after Jonah, and I found it hard to stand it. So, you're right, it has not been much party in my life the last years but maybe there will be more now."

"I hope so, I wish for you to have fun. For us to have fun."

"I have fun with you almost all the time", I smile. That is not flattering, these days it is true.

"And I with you."

And we go dancing, because he can. We hang with Katie and Sammy and I introduce him to other friends. Some I have hardly met in a long time but tonight is a great reunion of sorts. We catch Bella snogging Alex in a corner long before midnight, so it seems she will have a happy closure of this year too.

"I thought you said there was nothing going on between you", says Katie with a smirk.

"I did not think so at the time."

"If it was so obvious to everyone else that we had feelings for each other, could you not have done us the favour to tell us and spared us a Christmas in misery, pining for each other?" Charles complains.

"Don't blame me! I tried to tell Molly the quiz night, but she denied it."

How much easier life would be sometimes if we were not blind to things right in front of us. Then again...

"It would not have mattered if I believed it, because you were set on following your silly principles."

He murmurs very close to my ear, giving me goosebumps;

"They were very silly principles indeed, best thing I've ever done to throw them over board."

When the clock is close to midnight we go out on the balcony, champagne glasses in hand.

This year, 2018, was an amazing mind-blowing year. So much has happened and it all started with that accidental interview and me getting the job as Charles companion. The struggle to get to know him, to get him to open up, get him to fight his demons and survive. The struggle to live with my own past – and how we were there for each other through all that. Then the disaster with Smurf, where the positive outcome was that Charles and I got even closer and it ended with Smurf, as it should have long ago. And the disastrous Christmas party, not long ago at all but everything was so different that evening, that it feels like ages ago. Our mutual hidden feelings, our mutual not so hidden jealousy that made us both so miserable until we finally both lost it in frustration and told each other how we felt and became lovers. It has been hard and beautiful at the same time and I'm not sure if I'm ready to let it go, to let this year turn into the past, but there is no choice really – New Year is here, and everything must come to an end sooner or later. Except this. Charles standing behind me, his arms wrapped around me keeping me warm here on the terrace as we watch the fireworks that have started a bit prematurely, his lips in my hair. We both know this will not end, not now, not later, not ever, because it is so completely right. As people around, us start counting down to midnight, I turn to him and he smilingly looks down into my eyes.

"I love you, Molly Dawes."

It is the first time any of us say it, which is not strange since we have only been a couple a few days and despite my own thoughts just now, the big words make me a little bit nervous, both to receive and say out loud myself. Does he really mean it?

"You don't think you're a bit previous there?"

"No. I have known for months that I want to spend the rest of our lives together, so on the contrary I'm a bit late at telling you."

OMG, he is fantastic, and he loves me.

"It almost sounds like you're proposing Charles James, careful so I don't take you seriously."

"I'm not. Yet. But I might next year." He gives me a cheeky grin, so I do not know if he means that. Probably not, but anyway it makes my heart race.

"For now, I just wanted to say I love you Molly."

And when he bends down to put his smiling lips to mine in a New Year's kiss, but not before I get to say;

"I love you too."

And as we kiss, a deep lovely kiss, and there are champagne corks popping, fireworks going off, other people kissing and hugging to celebrate the new year, I know this is just the beginning for us, not the end.

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*A/N: I find myself almost a bit reluctant to write the chapters now, because I have only planned two more after this. I really love to write about this version of Molly and CJ but I don't want the story to get thin so better end it as planned. You know what they say about killing your darlings... not that I plan to literally, so don't worry. But everything must come to an end, just not yet - two more chapters to come.*

*X*

*I always find that something is missing when a book or a series end when the couple first get together, leaving me wanting to know more about what happens to them. Of course, I have now realised that is where one can fill in the gaps with fanfiction, but for this story I want to give some more so there will be two chapters that will do that in different ways. This first one will be available in two versions, this and one rated M for smut - simply because I was curious to write that and thought my characters deserved it - lol. No S&M or similar stuff because that is not my thing, just full on, hot and romantic sex – lots of it. If you chose to read this version you will not miss any plot, so if you do not like smut or just don't want it for this couple, stay here. However, if you like me are curious where it may take them, read the full chapter in the M-section. Either way - hope you enjoy and glad if you let me know what you think of this little experiment.*

X

*Update: some have asked how to find the other version. Either change your filter settings. They will automatically be K-T rating, you need to change to M. Or I think you can use this link: [s/13079136/1/A-Suitable-Companion-Chapter-23-Permission-M-rated-version](https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13079136/1/A-Suitable-Companion-Chapter-23-Permission-M-rated-version)*

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## Chapter 23: Permission

The summer evening is warm, the kind where the heat of the day lingers and there is a lazy calmness about everything, but it may still be difficult to sleep because one

will likely toss and turn overheated between the sheets. I have spent this Friday evening, after I quit work, in the garden with a book and a glass of cool white wine with the smell of roses and honeysuckle surrounding me. It may seem like I have been relaxing, but on the inside, I have been far too impatient and expectant to find true calm. I'm waiting and yearning for Charles to come home.

During the first months after we became a couple (and I still must pinch myself sometimes to convince myself this lovely life is true) it was like we kept the routines we had since before, but we added all sorts of lovely new things to them. When we hung out in his room in the afternoons, we did not sit in separate armchairs anymore. Instead we cuddled up in the sofa together and every now and then interrupt our reading or playing cards by snogging, and sometimes had to interrupt longer for a tour to the bedroom. When we went to the park we always held hands (still do). When I drove him to Headley Court he often put his hand on my thigh, sometimes just hold it still there and sometimes let it wander further up until I had to tell him to stop if he did not want us to end up in the ditch. And in the evening, I did not say bye and go home around five like I had done before. We had dinner together, watched TV or a movie (rarely all of it because we could not keep our hands off from each other) and when it was time to go to bed, we went together, still smiling mischievously at the novelty of it. It kept feeling a bit forbidden for several months, but it is not, it is just lovely, lovely, lovely.

It was agreed that he would start working again in April but already in March he was in such good physical condition that he was beginning to get restless and decided, without me having much of a say, to add something to our routines.

"I think we should start jogging together" he says one morning.

I cough, nearly choking on my tea. I'm so not a jogger, or athlete of any kind. I have always considered biking around Bath the perfect amount of exercise and as I never had a problem with overweight that has not been an incentive either.

"It will be fun" he declares and cocks an eyebrow. I so doubt it will, but he is insistent, so two days later after a shopping tour to buy me new trainers we go.

He is such a pain in the arse! I understand he uses to run PT sessions with his soldiers and now he seems to think it is an excellent idea to apply that on me. That will have the benefit of getting us both in shape plus he seems to think he will get warmed up in this role before going back to work. I can tell he has been missing this part. Problem is I do not like him bossing me around. Some days I hate him.

"Come on Dawesy, you can make it! Faster!"

He shouts at me from the top of a long and steep stairs going up a hill, or rather a mini-mountain. It feels like he made it to the top minutes before me and now enjoys tormenting me fighting to get there. When I finally reach top he says, panting;

"You can do better."

"I hate you" I manage to get out between my forced breaths while gritting my teeth.

"No, you don't."

"I do hate you! This is good only because I will be thrilled when you start working so I don't have to put up with this shit anymore."

He comes to stand very close to me, so I feel his radiating body heat and far from unpleasant smell of fresh sweat. That is one of the amazing things about him, he always smells good.

"No, you don't" he smirks confidently and bends down to kiss me, grabbing my arse and pulling me to him.

He is right, I definitely do not hate him. Even when he is extremely annoying I love him to bits and want him. This tall, sweaty man sends a surge through my body.

I can feel that his mind wanders in the same direction.

"Should we head home?"

"Yeah, but just so you know you have squeezed every ounce of energy out of me, so there is nothing left for other activities."

"Then I guess I will have to do the work", he grins cheekily and pull me with him to force me jog the last bit. A real pain in the arse.

Still, I miss even that once he starts working and to my surprise I continue jogging every other morning as a way to fill the void he has left. I will get very fit it seems.

He started working back in April and since then he has made the long drive home from Bulford barracks most evenings, only to drive back in the morning, because we want to be together. For now, he will not be deployed. It must be ensured that

he gets fully fit for service again before he goes on tour. Eventually he will and I'm dreading that day, but nothing makes me happier than seeing his physical condition essentially returned to what seems to be his normal (very fit that is). He has also cut down on his medication, his team of doctor and psychologist thought it was time to try that and so far, it has worked out well. He can still have the occasional nightmare, but overall, he is well – and I know for a fact he is very happy. In addition to our relationship, which grows stronger by the minute, it was good for him to get back to work. Even if I was reluctant to let him go, and he equally reluctant to leave for his first day, that is his right element, not staying home with me. He needs to have a purpose, he needs to be active and at length it is healthy for him to see other people than me.

I have started working in a café. Not returned to Louie's horrible place, this is a really cosy one where everything is homemade, and the owner, Doreen, and the colleagues are very nice. I enjoy working there and already have a deal with Doreen that I can continue working hours in the autumn when I have planned to resume my studies as a first step to start my own place.

This summer evening, Charles has been away for two weeks and I have missed him like crazy. We live together in the house in Royal Crescent. I moved in more or less from that day when we first admitted our feelings for each other. He already needed me there in the days, and now that we wanted to spend every night together it seemed kind of unnecessary and impractical for me to go home to the Dawes house in between. Charles simply declared that there was a set of drawers and a wardrobe that I was more than welcome to use in case I wanted to bring over some of my stuff. After that we were inseparable, and it felt completely natural. Mr. and Mrs.

James anyway went traveling to warmer degrees again after the holiday, so the house is not exactly crowded.

By the way, they were thrilled when they after New Year returned from visiting their relatives and found out we were together. Like Hutchins, they confirmed that Charles had been in a horrible mood during the entire Christmas, so they had almost taken him for depressed again. Upon their return a completely different Charles met them, radiantly happy and in love, and their reaction was relief, joy and gratefulness for the way things have turned out. Not once did I feel that they questioned our relationship because of our different backgrounds or how it had started. They were simply not that kind of people and they just thought it was the best thing that could have happened to their son. They seem to think I have saved him. I'm just grateful that they accept us without any questioning, although I find it slightly odd, or maybe coward, that they stayed away the whole autumn when Charles clearly was not well. I know he told them to go, yet they must have turned a blind eye on, not to see that he needed help from people who cares about him. But maybe it hurt too much to see or they did not know what to do. It is not my place to judge them and everything turned out for the best, and I like them after all.

The reason Charles has stayed away for two whole weeks this time, was a field training exercise followed by some ceremonial gatherings at the regiment, even one this evening so he is coming home late and I'm waiting impatiently. Once it gets a bit chilly in the garden I go inside and change to a new slip I have bought to surprise him. It is so beautiful, cream white luxurious silk with lace trim and thin straps and it hugs my body in a very flattering way. I must admit that I feel sexy in it as I look

myself in the mirror and hope he will think the same. I try a graceful position in the sofa, but just end up laughing at myself. The slip has to be enough, sexy poses are not really my thing. I just make myself comfortable with my book again. But can he please come now?

Finally, when I have almost dozed off, I hear the car drive up in front of the house and there he is soon after, leaning in the doorway looking at me with a smile. OMG, I had not realised it was such a formal gathering tonight, but he is wearing his no. 1 dress uniform. The occasions when he does are so rare, and I have a soft spot for it, or rather for *him* in it. The no. 2 looks good on him too, but the no. 1... I almost let out a laugh because he is so ridiculously sexy, but I'm embarrassed to admit that the uniform turns me on in addition to the effect he always has on me, so I pretend like nothing although I want him here and now. With that uniform, I almost do not need any other foreplay, but I would not tell him, because foreplay is after all extremely nice.

"Hi beautiful, missed me?"

"You should only know how much" I smile, and he comes over to kiss me.

It is a deep kiss from the beginning, he seems to have been missing me too, but after a while he pulls away and say;

"God I'm knackered, and I need a shower."

My body feels deprived of his touch and disappointed, especially since he has not even noticed my slip yet where I sit curled up, until he adds with a wicked smile;



"Care to join me?"

Oh, yes.

Without answering I just get up to stand in front of him and then his eyes widen at the sight of me and he smiles.

"New?"

"Yes, it is a gift for you."

"I like that kind of gifts. Especially when they wrap you."

I start undressing him, first the jacket buttons one by one. I stay very focused on my task, because I would feel a bit silly showing him my fingers are trembling slightly with excitement, and I can feel his warm breath on me as he is looking down on me at work.

"So many buttons..." I just say.

"Far too many."

With all buttons unbuttoned, he pulls me to him in a kiss meanwhile I tug the uniform jacket off. Under it he wears a white cotton tank top which clings to his firm torso, showing it off in the most flattering way. Whoever designed the pieces of the uniform including the undershirt was truly a benefactor to all women (and gay I suppose). But no matter how good it looks on, it has to come off because I want to feel his bare skin. I pull it up from the slacks and put my palms to his flat stomach under the lining of it, then let them slide up to his chest so the tank top

comes along, and I pull it over his head. I step closer, wrapping my arms around his lower back and kiss him on the chest, nibbling kisses, letting my tongue move over his skin and I hear him breathe heavier. He puts his hand under my chin to turn me up to him and we kiss again, even deeper this time, our tongues exploring, gently biting and sucking in each other's lips.

"I thought we were getting me undressed for a shower" he says.

"Oh, we are. Too." I muse. "Just let me have some fun on the way."

"My pleasure."

Not only, I can assure you that.

...

*This part of content in M-rated version*

...

Then we leave the shower and he wraps me in a gigantic towel. I love the towels in this house, so gigantic, thick and luxurious. He puts one around his own hips, like sarong, and once again looks amazingly hot with his damp torso and wet locks. My man.

We lay down on the bed, but none of us feel ready to sleep yet. For a while we just look at each other. Relish that we are together again. I love this. Love that I'm *with* Charles. And Charles is *with* me. He looks completely peaceful. He has a slight shadow on his chin, a bit of emerging stubble at the end of the day and I know

it will grow to be even more visible overnight. I kiss him along the jawline to feel the roughness of the stubble. Softly and slowly I make my way to his smiling mouth, placing my lips there. We stay like this, faces close, alternating between just looking into each other's eyes, letting our lips graze over the face of one another and let our mouths touch. This is speaking without words, right now no words needed in our little universe. I could possibly stay like this forever.

...

*This part of content in M-rated version*

...

We just lie here for a while in the tousled sheets, coming down to earth again from the heights we have been to together. First, we stay glued to each other, then both need some space, lying on our backs a little bit apart because we must cool down. The hot summer air is not very helpful, but as soon as we have cooled slightly we move closer again and cuddle up. I have missed this as much as what we just did.

"God Molly, I have missed you in so many ways, I just love to be with you."

As usual we are in sync, minds and bodies.

"Tell me what you have been up to while I've been away."

Not that we have not spoken on the phone, but it is always different, better, when we get to share our lives like this.

I tell him about funny guests at the café, how I went to a pub with Doreen and the others who work there one evening after we had closed, that Hutchins has knitted him a ghastly pullover (in the midst of summer, yes, but probably only because she missed her boy too), that mum has asked us over for lunch on Sunday. He tells about me about the field training exercise which was like a mini-battle with realistic scenarios the soldiers might face. He is proud and happy because 2 section did really well.

"Are you missing the real thing?"

"I am, a bit, but I'm not ready for it quite yet. I also know that whenever I go I will miss you like hell. I'm not looking forward to *that*. For now, I'm just happy with things as they are, that I have both work and you."

"I must admit I'm selfishly happy as long as you are not deployed."

We kiss and cling to each other until he realises something.

"I'm hungry Molly. The food at the dinner tonight was crap."

"Let's go scavenging in the kitchen then."

He put on his tank top and briefs, I put on one of his shirts which I often do instead of a morning gown. We tiptoe down to the kitchen. Even if Hutchins is not in the house it feels like we are up to mischief and might get caught any moment.

"What do we have...?" Now he has his head half-way in the fridge. "Some pie, some cold meat, maybe a sandwich..."

"You really weren't kidding when you said you're hungry."

"Starving! Minimal food and then a demanding sex goddess on top of that."

"So, you're blaming me now, that's not fair." But really, I find it flattering to be called sex goddess.

We sit down by the kitchen island for his meal and have a glass of wine each from the bottle I opened earlier. When I cannot resist taking a bite from his sandwich he complains;

"How come women so often say they're not hungry or up for desert and then end up eating yours."

"Are you talking about women in general or about me eating your food?"

"Both, but especially you" he grins.

"Maybe because I love sharing your meal, take it as a sign of love" I smirk.

And we kiss again. It was meant to be a brief kiss, I did not mean to interrupt his meal, but he seems more unwilling to interrupt the kiss than the meal - and I have nothing to object. Without letting go of my lips, he puts his fork down and pull me up from my stool to stand between his legs. He deepens the kiss, let his tongue swirl around in my mouth in the most sensual way.

"For a man who claims both to be knackered and hungry, you seem to have a lot of energy."

"Mmmm, saving it for the important things."

...

*This part of content in M-rated version*

...

I sink back on the kitchen island and he sinks down on me, also half lying on the bench top over me, panting, exhausted, overwhelmed.

"God, I didn't plan for that when we went here for something to eat."

"Me neither, but I don't complain."

"Believe me, neither do I. It must be the summer evening, it does strange things to people."

"Lovely things, I would argue. You know, we should probably scrub the top of this before Hutchins cooks the next time."

"Yeah, that would probably be for the better."

We grin, and our lips find their way to each other again, softly now in the wake of the waves of passion. Then he takes my hand and leads me up the stairs to our bedroom, where we finally fall asleep in each other's arms.

I'm just the luckiest girl that my love also happens to be the most amazing of lovers.

*For the previous chapter I only got comments for the "hot" version but I hope the other was okay too :) Anyway, this is the last chapter and their life has moved on in a new direction. I have been unusually slow completing it and almost do not want to press the publish button because then I'm done with this story which I have loved writing. I will write again for sure, because I enjoy it too much not to, but I do not know what just yet. If you have an idea for a story/situation you would like written but do not feel like writing yourself, you could send me a PM and maybe that inspires me to something new. The interaction with you has certainly inspired me to write both longer and faster than I had planned when I started this story. This last one is an unusually long chapter from me, hope you enjoy and like the ending! Thanks for the help!*

X

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## Chapter 24: A new life

I could kill him. I seriously feel that I could in this moment.

I regret my decision not to abstain from a big Christmas baking this year. I'm generally tired and irritable these days which was not a good start. Lilly and Nathan wanted to help. Too much unfortunately, and now the entire kitchen is a mess covered in flour, sugar, eggs and dough, meanwhile a dirty version of them lost the patience and giggling disappeared to some other part of the house and I'm left here alone. Just as good that they made an exit before I lost my temper and took it out

on them. The kitchen is freaking hot because the oven has been on for so long and I'm also more sensitive to it, flushing. I'm also a bit absent minded lately and just now I forgot a tray of cookies in the oven, so they were all black and burned when I finally took them out, and smoke poured out setting the fire alarm off.

I have surrendered and just sit down on one of the stools, alarm ringing in my ears, looking at the mess and crying. With my gaze fixed on the chaotic kitchen island, I think of the time we made love there. Or rather had hot, steamy sex. *That* kind of hotness I did not mind. No chance of that happening now - and I cry even more at the thought.

Now Hutchins comes hasting, I had just sent her checking on Lily and Nathan when I opened the oven, and everything turned into chaos. In one glance she gets the situation and opens the window to ventilate the smoke away (why did I not think of that?), throws the burned cookies in the garbage and then comes over to hold me. After a while the alarm stops, and it is possible to think a straight thought again.

"Molly, Molly, Molly..." she says. "It would probably do you good to take it a bit slower. You know, you don't have to do all this, this year."

"But I want Christmas to be magic, like it always is in this house", I sob.

"It will be anyway dear, it doesn't come down to if you do everything like you use to, like bake hundreds of cookies and cakes. I think you know that. And you have other things to take care of, including yourself."



I sob and sigh. I know she is right, I do. It is just that I feel so frustrated. There are so many things I *want* to do, at least as many as before, but I'm limited by my decreasing energy and agility. I hate that and there is absolutely nothing I can do about it, except count down.

I look down at my belly. My *gigantic* belly! With Lily and Nathan, it was only this big at the very end, when I was heavily pregnant. Now I'm only six months gone, three remaining. Three fucking months! I could kill him for making me end up like this.

It is not strange that I'm big, because this time there are two babies in there. Twins. I remember the day we went for the first ultrasound, Charles and me. I had still not quite grasped we were pregnant for a third time. He had wanted it for so long, had not let go of the dream to have big family. I was more hesitant. Things were really running well with my café right now and I was looking into expanding, and I was not sure I was up for trusting someone else with the responsibility of my business while taking care of a new baby. I was not sure if I was ready to let my body transform into Barbapapa again (huge and shapeless I mean, would have loved his ability to transform into anything I wanted) and I thought that two kids, a family of total four was perfect. Also, I was a bit afraid of what another baby might do to us, him and me. But he was pleading, and one afternoon when I held Katie's second new-born daughter, I threw in the towel. Seriously, it should be forbidden to present such lovely little creatures to someone who tries resisting getting another one, they look innocent but are a true honey trap.

When I told him yes that evening, he was overjoyed. I soon had my IUS removed and we started trying, but I had expected, maybe hoped, it would take some time. However, my period did not come next time - I was already pregnant. Yet, I think I was in denial until we went for that ultrasound. Charles was sitting by the bedside, expectantly holding my hand as the nurse squeezed some cold gel on my still flat stomach and began moving the probe over it. I always find it hard to interpret those ultrasound images until they point things out to you, for all I know it could just be my intestines showing. The nurse happily said;

"Congratulations, I can see two strong little hearts beating here", she pointed at something moving.

My first thought was that I was carrying some kind of freak baby, who would be the first human with two hearts.

"Two?", Charles asked.

"Yes, twins", she beamed.

Then the penny dropped, and I felt myself going pale, or possibly green. If I had not already been lying down I think I would have fainted. I saw Charles face, pure happiness. Thinking back, for him it was probably a combination of the feeling of hitting jackpot when he knew it was the last time he would convince me to pregnancy, and pride of having managed to get me pregnant with twins. Like it was a confirmation of his damn masculinity. But he was not the one who would have to carry them, I was. Anyway, he was so enormously happy, and I felt such love looking at him, that I never got to put words to my fears and I still have not. He will

get his big family, or we will, but I'm afraid what it will do to me, to us. Well, part of it is fairly obvious by now when I look, and feel, like a huge container ship sailing around but the rest of the uncertain future is yet to come.

-O-

The year after I met Charles and we became friends and at last lovers, I got accepted to uni a second time. Now that I mentally was back on track I managed my exams with flying marks, Charles always cheering for me, telling me how brilliant I am, and I could easily keep working at Doreen's café on the side. My dad had managed to keep the work at the cinema, and with mum working part time I no longer needed to help providing for my family, but I needed the money to get by myself with the expenses for uni, even if I was lucky enough not to have pay any rent. And Doreen was such a great mentor, giving my advice for my own start up so I loved keep working for her.

I also worked on my business plan for the bank, to present to them and ask for a loan. I did not take it lightly, I spent hours and hours preparing for what felt like the most important meeting of my life. Or, second most important. *The most* important was meeting Charles, but of course I did not know back then, so that time I did not prepare at all. I did not dare take the risk that this would go as well without preparation, and once I finally went to that appointment I felt so ready and was dressed to the teeth in very business woman-like manner. And I had the biggest backlash. Somehow, I had been so sure that my café would be a success that I was not set on them doubting it, but they thought that café was a quite risky business and wanted me to put up a larger share of the investment myself than I had

managed so save up to date. I felt devastated over this bump in the road, as I realised it would take me many years to save that much and I wanted to get started *now*. When Charles came home that evening he found me lying on the carpet staring empty up in the ceiling.

"Didn't you once say stretching is just for oldies?"

"I'm not stretching", I answer morosely.

"What are you doing then?"

"You know I had my appointment with the bank today... such a grey little man, in a grey little suit whose hobby is to crush people's dreams."

"I know, I have been curious all day! What did he say?"

I turn on the side and prop my head up, leaning on my elbow, a bit cheered up by the reminder that I at least have the most gorgeous boyfriend in the world.

"That cafés are a risky business. Many of them don't make it for long before they go bankrupt, so they would want me to put more money into it myself than I had counted on. It will take me years and years before I can save that kind of money, I don't even know if it is realistic. Maybe I'll just never have my own place."

I lie down, my gaze fixating the ceiling again. He comes over to lie beside me and takes my hand. We lie there quiet for a while.

"If you want me to I could be your guarantor" he says out of the blue. We have never discussed it and I would never have suggested it. I know his family, including him,

are loaded but I would never dream to take money from them (except when I worked for him but that was a whole other thing).

"I couldn't Charles."

"But I believe in you. I know you, what you can do. The bank doesn't know that. I have complete faith in that your café will be a success and I would see it as an investment. I really want for you to do this and *now* is the right time because..."

He stops himself.

"Because what?"

Glancing at him from the side I can see that he looks a little bit embarrassed, his cheeks turning pink and he swallows.

"Err, well I thought it might be more difficult to find the time to get a business started once we have kids, it may be easier if it is already rolling then. Maybe, I'm skipping ahead of events..."

I'm not sure what I'm most thrilled about – that he believes in me so much that he wants to invest in me, or that he says straight out that he wants us to have kids together. I roll over to lie on top of him, looking into his brown eyes and I can see that he is awaiting my response to what he just threw out, to confirm if this is something I'm up for one day. I love the fact that he is a tiny bit nervous.

"Do you know that you are the most amazing man?"

"No, but I like you saying it."

"And I love that you want to have kids with me."

"You do?"

Yes, absolutely, f-ing yes! He wants to be the father of my children, my ovaries are probably dancing inside me.

"Yes. I want that too, without a doubt."

He looks so happy and I kiss him.

"And with that great argumentation I *will* let you be my guarantor, but only if we write very formal papers on everything."

Now it almost sounds like I'm doing him a favour, but he is the one being fantastic here.

"Okay, I think I can agree to that", he grins.

With Charles as my guarantor, the little grey man has run out of excuses to deny me a loan and I can get started. It is not done in a day, not in a week or two either. Charles was right in that it was probably a good idea to initiate this before any toddlers take up my time and thoughts, because there are so many things that must fall into place. For starters, I needed to find the perfect venue, one with potential to transform in the café I have always dreamt of. I never imagined it could be so hard. During weeks I spend my spare time walking and biking through the streets with the purpose of finding the right place, and in the week ends I make Charles come with me. Finally, one Saturday when we have paused the search because I need to buy a new dress, we walk into a beautiful shop not far from our favourite

park. It turns out that everything is on sale and the shop owner tells me she is retiring, and the shop will close. Charles reacts first.

"So, this place, has it already been rented by someone else?"

"No, I know the owner is looking for someone new", she says.

Our eyes meet, it would be perfect. The size is perfect and there are big, beautifully small paned windows letting in the day light and there are backrooms that could be made into the kitchen/baking area. I can easily see how this can be transformed. There is even a broader than usual pavement outside, where it may be possible to place some tables and chairs during the warmer season. After that everything fell into place step by step and six month later I opened. I hired a girl, Aishling, from Ireland and with the same passion for baking as I and I identified her as a kindred spirit from the moment we met. The start was a bit slow, it always takes time for people to discover new places and I have a few angst-ridden nights during those first months, but slowly it fills up more and more as the word is spread and it does not take long before we have more guests wanting to eat here than we have tables for. It is hard work, but it is also so much fun and I just love it and feel so proud of myself, that I finally made it.

Time moved fast. On a winters day Charles proposed and we got married the following summer. After that we both felt that it was time for the children we had talked about already long ago. Once we started, my longing somehow increased exponentially and when my period still came for the third month in a row I got a bit desperate. In retrospect it seems a bit silly, because I have been told it is quite normal and you do not usually seek help until you have tried for at least a year

without success, but it felt like we were trying for ages and I was so hugely disappointed every time there was a red stain again indicating we would have to wait at least another month. Charles was calmness himself, but I think it may be hard for a man to understand what it is like when you listen to and interpret every little sign from your body in anticipation; are you maybe a bit hungrier than usual (eating for two)? Do the breasts feel a bit swollen? And then nothing. Until there finally was. I do not think I have ever been so happy as when I had peed on that pregnancy test stick and it turned out positive and I ran to him and told him. He was as happy as me, but it was hard to grasp that there would be three of us.

I was fortunate enough to have an easy pregnancy, my only craving being for all sorts of different tastes of fruit flavoured yoghurt so we at one point had ten different in the fridge and Hutchins complained there was not room for anything else. During that first pregnancy, I was never worried about giving birth. Not until one week before the expected delivery date. Charles and I where shopping groceries when my gaze fell on a honey melon and I suddenly froze in panic.

"What is it?", Charles wonder worriedly.

"That! Something the size of that is about to come out between my legs! I've never had anything bigger than you there! Even if you're impressive I'm glad you don't come anywhere near..."

"I get the picture."

He is flushed, he probably dislikes picturing a honey melon coming out between my legs as much as I do.



"I don't want to be part of this no more. I change my mind! I don't want it to come out."

He really tries to take my sudden fear seriously, but I see a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

"It's a little bit late for that, changing your mind."

"I do anyway!"

He moves me away from the unfortunate melon, by gently pushing the small of my back and manages to find a chair where he has me sit down.

"You know it has been done before? I have heard you're not the first woman to have a baby? In fact, millions of women have managed to get millions of babies out over the centuries."

I cannot help smiling.

"Are you sure? I thought I was the first one."

"Also, I'm quite sure the baby's head will not be the size of a melon."

He manages to calm me down enough to think I will be able to do it if I only get the epidural anaesthetic, but on the actual day somehow it all goes faster than expected and when we arrive to the hospital I have already missed the "window". Lamest excuse for not just giving it to me, but I have to make do with laughing gas to ease the labour pain. But it goes surprisingly well. I like the gas, it makes me feel like I can handle squeezing out a melon. It makes me want to tell jokes, I feel I'm just

hilarious as I lay babbling on the bunk. Oh! Shit, shit, shit - now it hurts after all, I just hope I'm not going to crack all the way. Probably need a little more gas to make sure I do not feel if I do.

"You should probably take it a bit easy with the gas now", the nurse says to me.

I'm thinking that as they robbed me of the epidural, I will not let them take away the gas too. No way. If there is one thing I'm completely set on *not* having, it is a natural birth with all the naked pain included to make sure I'm aware of every beautiful second, yada, yada. Whatever help there is to alleviate the pain, I want it.

"Could you take away the mask from her?" she asks of Charles.

Oh, that bitch! I take one last deep breath before he removes it from me, and I feel fine, I do. And he holds my hand. I hope that I will not crush his hand, but it looks like he can handle it. Time to press hard again, and, oops that did the trick, the baby is out.

Our little Lily, it was such a fantastic life-changing moment even if Charles teased me afterwards that I was high from the gas. Maybe I was, but it was a great experience anyway and afterwards the pain was somehow forgotten, and I only really remembered the beauty of it.

-O-

I had always wondered what I would be like as a mother. I was not sure that I would be patient enough or caring enough to be really fit for it. Not like my own lovely mum who had a natural gift for both conceiving and taking care of children. But

surprisingly, *that* was not the hard part, it just came naturally for me too. All I wanted was to be there for her. I could watch her for hours, hush her and sing lullabies when she cried, breast feed her half the days and half the nights without complaining. She refused to take a dummy, so she wanted to be at my breast for so long and so very often. It was very cosy, but it also made me feel a little like a milk cow. That was part of the problem that emerged, which I had not been prepared for. The difficult thing in of all this was for me and Charles to find our new roles in relation to one another now that we had this third family member, taking up much more space than her tiny body. She demanded so much of me, and I wanted to give it, but once she finally was asleep I was so relieved to get some space, to finally have my body to myself, that I did not seek the closeness of Charles like I always had. And when I did, it was to cuddle up and sleep, not so much for making love. He tried to take part in taking care of Lily, but she almost always preferred me, the milk machine, the more familiar smell, and often began to complain loudly when Charles took her in his arms. She was unfairly partial to me, because he loved her from the first moment. Often, she was a happy baby during the day but as soon as Charles set foot inside the door in the evening, she started crying, which was wearing us both out. To let him sleep well during the night, I started sleeping in another room, so I would not disturb him when she woke and wanted to be fed several times. Slowly, and without any of us wanting it or first realising it, we drifted apart. I felt that I missed him, but I did not know what to do. I was lost and insecure in this new parenthood landscape. In a way I was immensely happy, but simultaneously unhappy, if that is possible – and I felt ashamed that I was not only happy through and through. I had this lovely baby and lovely man, yet I felt alone and misunderstood. At some level I also missed the café which Aishling was

running with minimal input from me and another hired help and was ashamed that motherhood alone was not enough for me, that I wanted *all*. The only place I allowed myself to let my feelings take over and cry was in the shower, where no one saw, and the water rapidly flushed away the evidence. I had many, long showers when Lily had her mid-day nap.

Then there was this Sunday afternoon. All three of us had fallen asleep for a while in our big bed. Lily for once satisfied in Charles arms and now she slept on his chest. I woke up and looked at him, so beautiful. The sun was falling in through the windows, making his dark curls gleam. He looked peaceful and happy. I felt how amazingly much I loved him and how I never wanted to lose him. I also felt, strongly, that I wanted him, and I had not felt it like that in a long time. Not since she arrived. I moved over and kissed him on the lips. That woke him up and I felt him answering the kiss and then I deepened it, opened my mouth, let my tongue slide into his provocatively. I could see his eyes gleam with happy surprise. I sat up and took away Lily from him, so carefully, so very carefully not to wake her, put her down in her crib, and thank god she continued to sleep for another hour. In complete silence we undressed and made love in the most wonderful way. After months when the desire was not quite there, at least not for me, we rediscovered each other. It was not better than the first time, but at least as good and different because our relationship was on another level now when we had created a life together that would bond us forever. We talked about it too then, how we both had missed this and needed to make room for *us* too. Just the two of us. Charles told me about how alone he had felt sometimes because he had felt like Lily and I had something he could not quite be a part of, although he had not wanted to behave like a sulking boy and therefore had not wanted to tell me, and I told him I had felt

alone too. It was such a relief that afternoon, we came closer than ever and after that I was only happy most of the time.

When Lily got older, her attachment to me got less and she was at least as happy with Charles, making our trio more balanced. When she was around one she started in day care and I returned to the café. I am happiest like that, when I had both my worlds. When Nathan came, three years later, we were wiser and did not make the same mistake. He was also the easiest baby, who slept twenty-three hours a day and preferred be fed as quickly as possible, with bottle instead of breast feeding, so it made it easier for Charles to take care of him too from start. It has been wonderful years and next year Lily is already turning six and Nathan three.

Somehow, we have managed to turn Royal Crescent no. 10 into a lively family home, like the one I grew up in and Charles always wished for. Mr. and Mrs. James, or George and Alice as I call them nowadays, surprisingly gave it to us as wedding gift. Crazy, I know. They simply told us they had already signed it over on us as they anyway spent most of their days abroad and intended to buy a smaller house in the south of France, and they just hoped there would be room for them if they came visiting any future grandchildren. After that, we dared to change it more into our own. Some of the elegant rooms were kept as they were, as was the already lovely kitchen, but the rest was step by step transformed from a movie décor fitting for the Bennets, to a more real-life home. Especially after the kids arrived and their stuff seemed to be everywhere. First crib, diapers, bottles, then toys, toys, toys, drawings and perler bead pegboards. Mr. and Mrs. James always look confused the first half hour when they get here because they manage to forget the change between the visits, but they always seem to conclude that they like it. And they

adore their grandchildren. How could they not, in much they are little copies of Charles although Nathan has more of my smile and Lily my green eyes. It is a very fortunate genetic mix.

So, we are a happy little family and the only hard part after the first period with Lily, has been when he has been on tour. There has been quite a few them over the years, only outreach projects and longer training exercises, but it is still hard to be without him for several months as it has been sometimes. This time he has been away for three months. Not exactly splendid timing but it was decided before I got pregnant and could not be changed.

-O-

Now, it is four days before Christmas and if everything goes according to plan he will come home tomorrow. But nothing has gone according to *my* plan. I wanted everything to be ready and marvellous, welcoming him home for Christmas. I wanted it to be decorated - the rooms, the Christmas tree, gifts wrapped and ready, hidden in wardrobes, cakes baked, food bought so only final preparation remained, but here I sit crying and have only achieved half of all that, the tree is not even brought home. I'm so sad, so angry and frustrated. I'm equally disappointed that the house will not be the Christmas house of his dreams when he gets here and mad because he made me pregnant. Perfect pregnancy hormone induced logic. I just lean into Hutchins comforting shoulder and let my tears flow.

"I think I can take it from here, Hutchins."

We both jump in surprise at the deep, kind voice suddenly filling the room. Captain James, or *Major* James, as it now happens, has arrived home early.

Oh, great now he sees my crying ugly, flour in my hair in a burn-smelly kitchen, as far from a perfect beautiful wife as one could be. Could he not have kept to the plan and come tomorrow?

But now that he *is* here can he please hurry and come and take me in his arms?

"So glad to see you Charles. I'll leave you two alone, see you later."

And Hutchins disappears swiftly and silently like an Indian in moccasins, do not know how she has learned that trick.

For a moment we just look at each other. I think he is trying to read how to best tackle this, if I'm up for humour or not. He decides for 'not' which was the correct choice. He moves into me, raises his hand to my cheek and wipe away some tears.

"What has happened, that made you cry this way?"

"Can you please just kiss me first and I'll tell you?"

And he holds me and kisses me, and I feel the enormous issues I have shrink considerably, just feeling his warmth, hearing his heart beat when I lean into him. It is so good to finally have him home again.

"I have missed you so much and I didn't picture finding you like this."

"Like an ugly crying walrus?"

He snorts trying to withhold his laugh.

"Beautiful, but unhappy!"

He put his hand on my belly and one of the twins takes the opportunity to acknowledge him by kicking, making him smile. It was not possible to feel from the outside when he left. So much has happened in the time that he has been away, besides me going from a flat tummy to *this*. I have needed him here.

"I have missed you so much. I'm so big and tired and I'm just not enough this time", I sob.

"I'm sure you have been more than enough."

"Look at this place! It is a mess, and not half of the preparations are ready. We have not even bought the tree because it felt overwhelming trying to do it with the kids and this belly."

"Great! I hoped you hadn't so I can come along. We can go tomorrow."

He looks happy like a kid now, I had forgotten that he loves to select the perfect tree.

"And the house, it's not ready. I want it to be magical like it always is at Christmas.

"It will be! We can call in a cleaner, so we don't have to do anything ourselves, just do the fun parts. And with us here, you, me, the kids, it will be magical no matter what. That is what I have been longing for. It doesn't matter if everything isn't perfect, Molly"



He has a way of peeling off the layers of a problem so in the end there is nothing left. Almost nothing.

"And I don't know if I can do this."

"Do what?"

"Be a mother of four, I don't know how to manage. Lily and Nathan still need me so much, and now there will be two new ones who also will need me. I will just sit there, stuck breast feeding all the time. How is that supposed to work out? And Lily and Nathan have started teasing each other all the time and doing mischiefs, and when I'm tired I lose my patience and get angry and yell at them, and they get angry, and then sad, and I feel like the worst mum. And then there is the café to think of even if I'm not there, so many decisions to make and I'm not even sure my brain is fully functional any longer. And you go on tour and the kids miss you and I get to take all the battles and you just come home and you're the best dad in the world just by showing up for a while. I need you to be *here*, to be part of this, to also take the conflicts, to support me. But maybe you want to stay away because I'm just a huge hormonal monster who can't have hot sex with you anymore, now because I'm big and when the babies come because I'm so tired, I'm so afraid we will drift apart again like we did after Lily because there's so much with the babies, and then you get fed up with it all and leave me, and then I will be so heartbroken that I can't even run the café and it will go bankrupt and I have nothing..."

Every little fear I have considered even once just flushes out of me and he just holds me, my face buried to his chest. When I finally run out of words, he continues to hold me silently for a while. He has always been the best listener.

"I want to be part of this every day, to support you and to handle the conflicts as much as you. I don't want to be an absent dad, that is not what I wanted the kids for. And I don't want to be an absent husband. In a way it hurts me that you would even have to worry about it, but it's true that I have been away much. I know that would be even harder with two more kids, so I *will* change that. I meant to tell you as a Christmas surprise that I will not go on any more tours. I have applied for desk service in combination with training soldiers. I will still have to go back and forth to Bulford, but I will come home to you every day and I will be here all weekends. I want to be one hundred percent by your side, and I want to be involved in everything. Does that sound good?"

I nod. It does, almost too good to be true. He will stay here, home with us. It is the best gift he could ever get me for Christmas.

"And about sex... I will be the happiest man when we find our way back to hot sex, and I'm sure we will, like we have after the others - although I'm not as convinced as you seem to be that we have actually lost it now. If we have and it takes time to get back to it, then there is anyway no one else in the world that I would want it with. You are the only one for me Molly and you will always be. I love you so much that it hurts physically to be away from you, and when I see that you have grown this beautiful belly when I was away, it saddens me that I was not there every day to share it with you. I want to be part of everything, even the days that are difficult. And if it all gets too much, we will get some more help here in the house and we can get you some more help in the café. We will find ways together. I'm here for you, I always will be."

He holds my face between his palms and leans his forehead to mine.

"I'm yours and I always will be. I promised you when we got married and it's still true."

I let his words sink in. He has efficiently deflated my last fears.

"You're just too wonderful to be true", I mumble.

"No, I'm just very much in love with my wife and egoistically want to spend my days with her."

"No more tours?"

"No more tours."

"Thank you. Best Christmas gift ever. That and that you came home early."

"I'm glad you told me everything Molly. The last thing I want is for you to carry around all these thoughts yourself and just worry."

We just hold each other for a while. It feels so safe and my tears dry away. Then I hear little feet come running. It is Lily and Nathan, who have spotted his Bergen in the hallway and are overjoyed that daddy is home, and suddenly we are all a pile of hugs and laughter. Then they want to invite him to try the cookies they have made, so we have cookies and milk there by the kitchen island and life feels so much better than it did an hour ago. Fantastic in fact. That evening he shows me that even if we have to be slower and a bit careful with my wobbling belly, it is still very much possible to make love passionately and marvellously.

The rest of the Christmas is wonderful. He does as he said and call in a cleaning firm who fixes the place meanwhile the four of us plus Hutchins go for Christmas tree hunt, buy the last gifts and have lunch at my café. It is so crowded that we have to wait a while for a table. I hear one of the guests say;

"I really love this place, it's just a pity it's always so difficult to get a table."

"I heard they will be opening another one like it at the other end of town. Close to the campus area."

"Oh perfect, so close, then we can go there all the time."

Even if I already know it is popular and that is why I'm going to expand, it warms my heart and I tell the waitress Emma to send over a free cappuccino each to them.

The rest of Christmas disappears in a happy blur with grandparents James coming home, my family invading the house to celebrate and in between lovely moments just the four of us, or two of us.

-O-

In March, Rose and John, arrive through a caesarean. I was a bit scared about that, but all goes well. As it was a planned surgery, I'm awake throughout with only local anaesthesia and a screen shielding off so we do not see the surgery itself. It all goes so fast. I think they are still preparing for the cut, when I hear a splash followed by tiny baby screams as they extract them. We get to hold them as soon as they have been checked to be okay, one for us each. We are moved from the operation theatre to a regular room with two beds. Charles will get to stay with me as we had twins

and as I will not be able to get up from the bed in another 24 hours or so, so he will have to take care of any diaper changes etcetera. I still cannot feel my legs because of the anaesthetic and it feels extremely weird, like there is no bottom half of me, but there are other more important things to focus on. John is lying on my chest, for a while opening his eyes and peeking at me. All babies are born with bluish eyes, but his are of the darker kind indicating they will turn into Charles' beautiful brown colour in the next months. His wrinkly little hand grabs hard around my finger, as if to make sure I do not disappear anywhere. Charles sits beside the bed. He wears a hoodie with a zipper and he has opened it and put Rosie inside and zipped it close again, so she is lying on his bare chest protected and with only her little head visible, almost like she was back inside my belly again. She is so pleased with this that she has fallen asleep. We just look at and feel the two miracles, the two little new lives, both with a fair amount of dark hair on their tiny heads. Charles holds my hand.

He clears his throat and his eyes are a bit damp. It seems like he feels as emotional as I, and he looks me in the eyes.

"Do you know something Molly?"

"No, what love?"

"Now I feel complete."

It is the most beautiful thing he has ever said. I too feel so utterly complete as a person can possibly feel. I do not know for sure what the future holds for our little family. I have learned, that even if you get the man of your dreams you still must

fight for your happiness, to keep it. Both of you have to stay committed to staying happy. At the same time as you feel security in one another, you need to truly keep seeing each other and not take one another for granted. We made the mistake once to lose sight of that and will not do it again. I feel confident that we will make it together because there is endlessly much love between us. And I tell him;

"So do I."

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*I love and I'm grateful for that you have followed this story to the end despite that it turned into the length of a book. If you have had a favourite chapter, I would love to hear which one and why. For now, good bye to Molly and CJ, but as I wrote at the beginning of this chapter, let me know if you have an idea for a story/situation you would like to see written.*

*Lastly, some have wished me well in my personal life because of the things I wrote earlier. Thank you! I'm fine and right now happier than I was for many years.*

X