



An Our Girl FanFiction

**PROTECTING
MISS DAWES**

A job like any other

Miss Piony

Protecting Miss Dawes

– a job like any other

November 2, 2018

Charles James has left the army behind and is working in the Royalty and Specialist Protection Branch of London's Metropolitan Police Service, now faced with a new challenging assignment to protect the Home Secretary, Molly Dawes. His new client intrigues him like no one has before and suddenly he finds it hard to remain within professional boundaries and refrain from becoming personally involved.

Cross-over with BBC's Bodyguard. You will not have any problem following the story even if you have not seen any of the two series.

Credits to the creators of both series and thanks for lending characters and part of dialogue to me.

X

PROLOGUE..... 4

CHAPTER 1: CHARLES..... 5

CHAPTER 2: CHARLES..... 13

CHAPTER 3: MOLLY..... 22

CHAPTER 4: CHARLES..... 28

CHAPTER 5: MOLLY..... 36

CHAPTER 6: CHARLES..... 47

CHAPTER 7: MOLLY..... 57

CHAPTER 8: CHARLES..... 68

CHAPTER 9: CHARLES..... 77

CHAPTER 10: CHARLES..... 85

CHAPTER 11: MOLLY..... 95

CHAPTER 12: MOLLY..... 103

CHAPTER 13: CHARLES..... 112

CHAPTER 14: MOLLY..... 128

CHAPTER 15: MOLLY..... 146

CHAPTER 16: MOLLY..... 159

CHAPTER 17: MOLLY..... 170

CHAPTER 18: CHARLES..... 193

CHAPTER 19: CHARLES..... 205

CHAPTER 20: CHARLES..... 217

EPILOGUE..... 228

Prologue

I put on the bullet proof vest, followed by a crisp, perfectly ironed white shirt, a tie with an immaculate knot around my neck, then strapped the holster in place, finally the suit jacket on top. I raked my fingers through my dark curls attempting to make them look orderly, as I met my own gaze in the mirror and put the mask on, the imaginary one that hid the real me from the world. I wondered to myself what this new job would be like, the one as a bodyguard to the Home Secretary.

I put my expensive lingerie on, thin nylon stockings to wrap my legs, buttoned up the white silk blouse and tucked it into a black pencil skirt before putting on a pair of Manolo Blahnik high heels to add four inches to my short frame. I gazed into the mirror and smoothed a strand of hair in place and ensured my strict bun looked flawless, knowing that as a female politician I would, in difference to male colleagues, not only be measured by my skills but also by my looks. I could not fail, then the vultures would be there immediately. Then I put the imaginary mask on, the one that hid the real me from the world, and braced myself for another day at work, as Home Secretary of United Kingdom.

Chapter 1: Charles

Monday morning, and I, Special Protection Officer Charles James, was called to a meeting with my superior officer, Chief Superintendent Lorraine Craddock, but I knew that I had nothing to worry about. If anything, I expected praise for my actions during the weekend. There had been times when I had strayed from given orders and gotten bollocks for it, but I felt confident this would not be one of those times.

Sunday afternoon I had found myself on the train from Bath, where me and my son Sam had been visiting my parents over the weekend. Now we were headed back to London and Sam was asleep in his seat. I had been reading a book, but habit made me vigilant as always and I had spotted a man behaving strangely on the platform before entering the train. The man talked in a mobile phone, but when the conversation ended, he smashed the phone into pieces and then threw it into the trash bin. I watched as the man entered the train and then lost sight of him, but an uneasy feeling had planted itself in my gut. Something was not right.

A while later, the conductor walked through the aisle checking tickets. When she walked past a toilet ahead, I saw her knocking the door, but no one answered. She continued her round, but on the way back knocked the toilet door again - still no response. I felt a chill along my spine, a certain sign that something was wrong. I glanced at Sam, but he was fast asleep so after a brief hesitation I got up and followed the conductor. When I caught up with her in her booth, she had just gotten off the phone and seemed shaken. I identified myself as a police officer from the Metropolitan Police, and asked what was going on and then she confided that she had just been informed that there might be a suicide bomber on the train and they

would stop at Barnet Shed, a derelict depot, where SCO19 would board the train. However, it was seven minutes to go until then - plenty of time for a potential suicide bomber to act. Plenty of time for us all to blow up. I thought for a while, then told the conductor to stay connected to me on her mobile phone, and at my signal unlock the train doors – I would try to throw the bomber off the train the minute he came out of the toilet. I was counting on him to come out before detonating, to achieve the maximum number of casualties, and that would be the one opportunity to stop him - at high risk but better than not acting at all.

I left the conductor and with heart thumping fast from adrenaline stood waiting outside the toilet door, my eyes fixed on the lock. When it turned from red to green, I told the conductor to unlock the doors and prepared myself to attack the man... but the man came out, looking completely normal, no explosive vest to be seen and he just gave me, a hovering stranger, a surprised glance before he went away along the aisle. I stood there confused for a few seconds, I had been so certain, all my instincts had told me... and then I thought I ought to clear the toilet so the man had not left a bomb in there. The man's behaviour had been so odd earlier, I had felt so convinced it must be him and... I opened the door and stared into the frightened eyes of a shaking woman, dressed in an explosive vest, in her hand holding a trigger. The man was not planning on doing this on his own, he had left the unpleasant deed to his wife.

Half an hour later it was all over. The train had made the stop as planned, passengers, including Sam, had been evacuated and the police had boarded it. I had stayed with the woman, Nadia. Talking calmly to her, I had managed convinced her not to pull the trigger, instead handing it to the police and give

herself in. I had also convinced the police not to shoot her, although words had not been enough. I had had to shield her with my own body because some police had seemed a bit too trigger happy – and I shielded her because looking into her eyes I was convinced she would not push the button, she wanted to yield, and I wanted to save her. Avoid any unnecessary deaths. And so, instead of shooting her, they carefully stripped her off the vest and the whole thing ended without any casualties, the suicide bomber and her husband taken into custody and I was the reluctant hero of the day although my name would be kept out of the media spotlight to ensure I would not become a target myself in case there had been any accomplices.

This Monday morning, however, it made me the target for the praise of my boss.

"It's a miracle you're in one piece", she started. We had a strict working relationship, but I respected and liked my boss.

"It was luck that the bomber changed her mind."

"I don't think it was luck, I think it was you talking her into it. Am I right?"

I just nodded. I guess I'm a man who cannot resist taking action when needed, but I'm not that comfortable taking credit for it.

"Great job Charles, credit to the branch", chief superintendent Craddock said.

"Thanks ma'am."

"So far you have been acting as PPO to visiting foreign dignities", she continued.

That was stating the obvious and I wondered where she was going. Personal Protection Officer, a role in the Royalty and Specialist Protection Branch of London's Metropolitan Police Service, that was my job a since a few years back. When I decided to leave the army and looked for alternative careers, that had popped up as an attractive option. It was a job which always required me to stay focused and alert during working hours, should there be any threat to the person I was protecting at the moment, but which in reality had been quite uneventful up to now compared to patrolling in Afghan. The other real advantage was that after working hours I was truly free, and it allowed me to stay close to home. Allowed me to see much more of Sam than army life had, to be an active part of his life. No more tours.

"Yes ma'am, that's right."

"Following the events yesterday, the Commissioner's ordered me to review specialist protection to senior politicians. I'm assigning you to a cabinet minister, the Home Secretary."

The background to this was that the suicide vest on the woman on the train was far more advanced than what had been used by terrorists previously, and the country's threat level had been increased from moderate to substantial as accomplices might still be at large.

"Very good ma'am", I simply said. I did not mind much who I was protecting as long as I had a job that kept me near Sam.

"It's a move up", she clarified, and I guessed that I had not seemed appreciative enough, so I tried to sound more enthusiastic when I answered this time even if I did not really give a fuck.

"Yes, thank you ma'am.

"You'll start tomorrow."

And with that I was dismissed.

That night I googled her; Home Secretary Molly Dawes.

Of course, I had seen her flashing by in the news before, but I had not paid much attention. She was surprisingly young, an ambitious rising star in politics and the youngest Home Secretary ever appointed. She seemed to have come from a simple background and fought her way up to the top, now one of the most powerful women in the country. I noted two things especially; Her voting in parliament was official and scrolling it through I saw that she had consistently voted against armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. She clearly seemed to be against everything I had been proud of taking part of in the past. And secondly, she often smiled in pictures, but the smile never seemed to reach her large green eyes.

Next morning, I dressed the task. If I was to be a tail to the Home Secretary I had to look proper, and anyway shirts and tailored suits was what I was most used to wearing since I put the army uniform on the shelf. Passing the police office, I picked up my Glock and two magazines – this kind of job required being armed.

I had been told to meet up with my colleague, PS Kim Knowles, outside the Home Secretary's office building. Kim had been on the Home Secretary's team for long, knew the ropes and briefed me. As with most of these assignments, there was one day team and one night-team covering the Home Secretary. In the current situation, I would be an addition to the day team. She had a driver and behind the car she was travelling in together with her PPO, a backup always drove. They sure went to lengths to keep her safe.

When Kim opened the Home Secretary's car door and greeted her, she also introduced me.

"Ma'am, this is PS James, the new PPO."

When Ms. Dawes agilely got out of the car, I was surprised at how tiny she was. She looked much taller on the telly than she was in real life.

I reached out my hand;

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

I received a firm handshake in return despite that her small hand disappeared wrapped in mine and as her sharp eyes caught mine, it was as if she could read my mind in an uncanny way when she said;

"They always film from an angle, so I look taller than I really am, and sometimes I stand on a box when I give speeches... In case you wondered."

I found himself stammering, I do not know when that happened to me last. Anyway, a rare experience for me, as a former captain when shouting out orders rather had been my element.

"I didn't think along those lines, ma'am."

"Sure about that?"

Kim interfered, and saved me from saying something embarrassing.

"You should continue inside now, ma'am."

Then I grabbed the opportunity and added;

"Ma'am, I wondered if we could discuss you using the underground entrance from now on? It would be much safer."

Crossing the yard like she did now, she was far too exposed in my opinion.

She sighed and nearly rolled her eyes, like I understood very little of this world.

"I'm late for a meeting", she just said and strode off with an impressive speed considering her short legs and very high heels. She sure knew how to work them.

Her personal assistant, who tried to keep up with her speed, stopped and half-whispered;

"Molly likes to be seen."

That stopped Ms. Dawes in her tracks and she turned, looking at the two of us with hawk eyes.

"I don't *like* to be seen. Believe me there are many days when I would like to take an underground route, or even better, stay covered under my duvet for the entire day, but I just don't have that luxury. I *have* to be seen, otherwise I'm dead as a politician – and then I can't make a difference."

I just nodded, obviously she was was a person who not let herself be played with. The more sophisticated part of my brain reflected that she was indeed not a very sympathetic personality, meanwhile the more primitive part surprisingly and inappropriately presented me a picture of her under her duvet and made me feel I would not mind joining her there, before I cut off both those strings of thought/feeling and focused on my task to protect her.

Chapter 2: Charles

The day was uneventful. She spent it in her office. Much of the office was open landscape and even if she a few others had rooms of their own, there were huge glass windows, so even from the outside it was easy to view what was going on everywhere, even if I could not hear everything that was said. I have found however, that sometimes when you do not hear what people say, it is easier to read their body language because you are not distracted by what comes out of the mouth. The mouth is a better liar than the body. By the end of the day, I had a fairly good idea of which of her visitors she liked, and which ones she did not like. However, I had not picked up that she felt threatened by anyone that she met. I did pick up that her personal assistant, Chantal, deeply disliked the Home Secretary for some reason and it was beyond me how you can work as assistant to someone you do not like, when you have to work so close together. My own job was different, it was all about keeping some distance – I did not have to like her, only protect her.

In the evening, when her day at the office was over but her working day far from, I sat in the passenger seat beside the chauffeur, Terry, as he drove her back to her flat. Ms. Dawes was on the phone and I acquainted myself with Terry and talked about their driving routines. It disturbed me when I found out that he practically always drove the same way back and forth between her home and the office. The predictability would make her an easier target and was something I wanted to change, immediately.

"Cross the river and take the South Circ", I instructed Terry.

Ms. Dawes had just gotten off the phone and exhaled an annoyed sigh.

"Terry has been driving me for three years, I think he can be trusted to determine the fastest route."

"I've made a dynamic risk assessment and given the current threat level I'm recommending a diversion, even though it may not be the fastest route."

"And how much longer will that take?"

"Can't say for certain Ma'am."

"In that case we'll just take the usual route, please Terry."

"Take the South Circ, if you don't mind", I insisted firmly. This I directed to Terry who wriggled a bit in his seat, seemingly uncomfortable being in the midst of a verbal cockfight between us. Then I half turned to Ms. Dawes in the backseat;

"My job is to keep you safe Ma'am. I won't tell you how to do yours."

"No, but you're happy making it harder", she retorted dryly, before she bent over the papers in her lap again and I realised that keeping this strong-willed woman safe would be a challenge. Obviously, she had not ended up where she was by meekly following what others told her to do. She was not my first difficult client, but I was starting to get a feeling that she might be *very* difficult.

As we finally reached the building where Ms. Dawes' flat was located, the back-up team parked their car across the street and I followed her inside, briefly greeting the police officer that was stationed by the front door as a permanent feature.

When we entered the flat, I asked her to hold on by the door meanwhile I secured the flat. Even in the darkness, before I turned on the light, I could feel irritation oozing out of her. If this was not routine to her, I wondered what kind of job my predecessor had done because she ought to be familiar with this, but maybe the threat level to her had been judged as lower before and this had not been done. Still, she was the Home Secretary and the lack of security awareness amazed me.

I walked from room to room in the spacious and elegant flat, carefully checking all possible hiding places; behind doors, in closets, behind curtains. As it was my first time here and I needed to familiarise myself with the surroundings, a thorough check required some time. She quickly lost her patience and disobeyed my request, walked into the living room and unloaded her briefcase on the table with another heavy sigh.

"May I ask what you're doing?"

"My job, Ma'am?"

I thought that was pretty obvious.

"What's behind this door?"

"My study. Don't..."

I opened the door and was taken by surprise. Pleasant surprise. The rest of the flat was beautiful but impersonal. It could almost have been a hotel suite instead of someone's home, with the very few personal items that were to be seen. This room, which she called her studio, was very different. It was cluttered with diverse things

and framed photographs, not orderly and sterile like the rest. I got the feeling that by opening that door, I had entered not only the room but a part of her where she normally did not let anyone in randomly. That this was the only room in the flat that truly reflected her. The feeling was reinforced by her reaction to me entering.

"Seriously, I'm expecting a colleague and I need you to fuck off. No offense."

I raised my eyebrows, questioning why she so obviously did not want me in there, but answered with my politest voice;

"None taken."

She did not piss me off. Instead she had made me curious of what it was about herself that she was so eager to keep hidden, and why.

"You *do* realise a possible intruder could hide here just as well as anywhere else?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Nothing has happened up to now, has it?"

Now, *that* annoyed me, that she did not seem to take the increased threat level seriously at all. It made my job difficult. Maybe it was because she pressed that button and triggered something in me, rather than the need to thoroughly scan the room which in all honesty seemed empty, that I turned my back on her and walked into the room instead of closing the door.

"I have to check here too, or I can't be responsible for your safety."

I heard a frustrated sigh behind me and wondered how many times a day she let those out, it seemed like she had much to ventilate - or was it only I who triggered that from her?

I liked the room, liked it a lot. Compared to the rest of the flat, it felt like a home. The colour palette was different to the other rooms, warmer, less sober. The furniture was more personal; not all perfect designer pieces, some time-worn like they were long time favourites, like the armchair in a corner where I thought she probably had been sitting reading many times judging by the state of the upholstery and a cosy blanket was crumpled up on it. The decorations were also different, some seemed to be made by children and I wondered who they were to her, and there were plenty of photos of what I presumed to be her family. They seemed to be a large family and they did not look one bit posh, rather the contrary. I remembered what my google search had said, that she had worked herself up from the bottom. I wondered what and where that bottom had been. Lastly, I noticed a West Ham t-shirt thrown over the back of a chair. Another unexpected finding and I could not resist commenting.

"Fotball fan, are you?"

She followed my gaze.

"Oh, that. It's just something I put on when I slee..."

She interrupted herself, shook her head, seemingly thinking that she was giving out unnecessary information and she closed her mouth and backed out of the room, leaving me to myself to finish. I did quite soon, there was no other reason to linger

than that I liked to be in there - and that was of course not a valid reason at all. Before I left I thought that it even smelled nicer in her, a trace of perfume I had not noticed anywhere else in the flat. If she wore it on her skin, I had not been close enough to smell it.

I moved on to the last remaining room, her home office it seemed. Here there were no family photos, but one with her, the PM and another minister. I picked it up and had a closer look. They were shaking hands, looking happy - but once again I noted that her smile did not reach all the way to her eyes on that photo. I wondered if it ever did.

Suddenly she was behind me;

"That was us plotting to build the Death Star."

There was not a flicker of a smile but apparently, she had a sense of humour – anyone making references to Star Wars must have - and I had to pretend to clear my throat, not to snort out a laughter.

"Seriously, how long is this going to take?" she asked.

"I'm done soon, Ma'am", I reassured her.

"Just get on with it", her voice now tired.

She sat down by her desk and started reading some papers, but after a minute leaned back in the chair, fixed her eyes on me and to my surprise resumed conversation.

"I've just been reading an incident report."

"Ma'am?"

"PC Knowles said your name is James, right?"

"Yes?"

"The police officer that prevented the 1st October rail attack, was that you? It says in here it was a Charles James."

"That would be me."

There was a brief silence before she spoke again.

"It's been a long and trying day. I'm sorry we got off on the wrong foot."

My impression up to then had been that she was the type that never apologised for anything. It seemed like I had been wrong. It is always nice when you are wrong in a positive way.

"Thank you, Ma'am."

I heard that my own tone of voice did not sound very forgiving. I do not know why because I did not want it to come across that way. She got up on her feet and reached out her hand to me. She had kicked off her high heels, and without those extra inches she was really a tiny person standing next to me.

"All is forgiven?"

For the first time a slight insecurity in her voice.

"If you wish."

"No really, I've been a total cow."

I had to bite my tongue not to say 'Yes, you have' and I think it was understanding that, that put a wide grin on her face. I found myself responding with one too.

"All is forgiven."

My job was done, yet I found myself strangely unwilling to leave her, but the doorbell rang, and I went to open. The, compared to me, short and dark-haired man on the other side seemed slightly surprised seeing me. He was apparently the colleague she had been expecting and he introduced himself as Rob McDonald. I instantly got the feeling that he wished to be more than a mere colleague to the Home Secretary and that he also wished for me to be gone. He happily dangled a bag containing a wine bottle in front of her nose, saying;

"I brought this for later."

"Oh, okay", she said but sighed in the way I already found characteristic to her, and this time I liked it. She did not seem very enthusiastic at the thought of sharing a bottle of wine with him.

However, there was no reason for me not to fulfill McDonald's wish to be alone with her, so I nodded good night.

"Are you really sure I will be safe, PS James?" she asked with a mocking smile at the corner of her mouth. I do not know why the question felt like an intimate joke between us, one which excluded him.

"Quite sure Ma'am. I think you will be able to sleep safe, even alone."

Maybe there was a pink tone to her cheeks when she answered; "I will", and I for some reason I felt certain that she answered both to that she would sleep safe – and alone. It made me feel an unmotivated satisfaction as I closed the door behind me and left them to it - whatever that was.

I waved to the night team, as I passed by their car and jumped into that of the day time back-up team and we drove off, and I went home to my own empty flat where the silence seemed to echo between the walls. I found it hard to fall asleep, tossed and turned for long and just as I finally was about to doze off, in my head I heard replayed her surprisingly witty words when I had stared at her photo, '*It was us plotting to build the Death Star*' and I fell asleep snorting out a laugh.

Chapter 3: Molly

He intrigued me, I could not deny that. He also annoyed me, and I was not sure if I liked or did not like having him by my side, or rather a few steps behind.

It was long since I got used to having bodyguards in general. When I first was told that my position now was such that I had been assigned one, it felt like a joke. Me, Molly Dawes from East Ham, was considered important enough to have a bodyguard! I nearly laughed out loud, but the serious face of the head of security, made me mask it as a cough attack. I was not sure if he bought it, because he looked quite suspicious.

"You *do* realise you may be a target from now on, Ma'am?"

I said I did, but it was not until later I realised how much my life now was changed. That when the door to the highest power in the country had opened for me, other doors had been closed simultaneously. Even though I now had the possibility to make decisions which few citizens could make, my own freedom was seriously limited. I could no longer go for a stroll in the park, or even sneak down to my local kiosk to buy a Cadbury chocolate and a high-quality magazine like 'Hello' without a shadow at my heels. Going visiting my family in East Ham was completely out of the question, judged to be too dangerous. It did not matter that I had ran those streets up and down or fetched my drunken dad from the pub when I was far too young to do so, now that I was a grown woman and the Home Secretary, it was not safe for me to set foot there. I understood the logic of it, but I found it hard to accept - and it made me feel caged. I missed being able to pop over to mum and Nan for tea and biscuits. I missed not being able to visit my sister and nephews. I missed

hanging with my brothers and sisters watching TV on a Sunday evening, fighting over a bag of crisps. If I wanted to see them, it had to be carefully set up. Preferably they should visit me. They did, but not as often as I would have wished. They were never comfortable in my flat, never relaxed, my class journey and the current difference between our lives and homes too apparent. It was just that, that *I* was the same on the inside, only lonelier now. I still needed them but could not be close to them. It made me unhappy, but I realised it was the prize I had to pay. Most days it was bearable, some days it was not.

My journey from East Ham to be Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department, or in short the Home Secretary, had started with Ms. Jenkins. She was my teacher in secondary school and had somehow identified something in me that she did not see in her other students. She encouraged me, helped me with the homework as I had no help from home, made me believe that I could manage anything, that I was capable and smart. She also helped me to apply for a grant to a private school and when I got it, visited my parents and managed to convince them to let me accept it. She convinced me I could alone handle taking the bus which on school days would bring me to a very different part of the city, and she convinced me that it would get better, that I had to do it again when I came running to her, crying, after my first day among those children that on the surface were so different from me. She told me I was tougher than them, not born with a silver spoon up my arse, and more intelligent than the majority. She told me I had potential, I had been given a chance and if I just showed some grit, I would be able to fly anywhere I wanted. So, I endured, never fitted in exactly, but in time was accepted, excelled and went on to university where I was something of a star - and she was right, I flew.

I did not plan to get into politics it just happened as a sort of extension of engagements I had during my university years and the right people picking up that I had an interesting profile and helped me to move forward, driven by their own motives just as much as for the benefit of me. A young female who had risen from poor circumstances in her own capacity, that was the kind of poster girl that was in high demand. That was how I cynically thought of it later, but I did not realise that from the start.

I had been flattered. First by that people treated me like an equal, found me intelligent, listened to what I had to say. Later I was flattered by the realisation they wanted me on their team. So, I played along, followed the unspoken rules and sometimes the spoken too. Like when my mentor early in the political career told me I should see a speech therapist to get rid of my cockney accent. My simple background was an asset, but we did not want to exaggerate it, did we? And people had to be able to understand what I said, otherwise my message would not get through. It seemed reasonable, so I agreed, and a half-year of speech lessons amazingly enough did the trick. It was only when I got agitated I sometimes forgot myself and slipped into my old accent, and when I was with my family. Sometimes I thought I had erased part of myself when I changed the way I spoke, but most of the time I just considered it a trade-off. My motive for being in politics was not power itself, which I had noted to otherwise be a common driving force among politicians. Mine was to make a real difference, to allow more kids from East Ham and similar places to change their lives. To make less children, later grown-ups feel like they were not included in the society they lived in, but unwanted by-standers. If I could make that difference for ten children, or even one, then I would have achieved something in life.

Yet, some days it all felt like I was trapped in a wheel, madly spinning on, and I longed for a simpler life where I did not have to watch my every step – where I would not need to be watched over every step. Part of this journey, had been to get used to always having a shadow in the shape of a few bodyguards. It was just that this new one did not feel like a shadow. Charles James. He felt very much like a man of flesh and blood in my personal space. I had not let any man in there since my failed marriage. Truth be told, one of the reasons my marriage failed was probably because I did not even let Roger in there either, even if the main reason had been the discovery that he saw me more as a stepping-stone in his political career than a woman he truly loved. That was the big difference between us, that unlike him I wanted to love and be loved by someone just because we could not help ourselves, not for any other reason. My attempt at marriage had left me cynical, though, and now I doubted if I would ever be loved for the real me. Especially as I so seldom showed *myself*, for fear of making myself vulnerable.

But Charles James intrigued me from the moment I saw him. Of course, there was the obvious fact that he was bloody gorgeous, he would never melt into the shadows anywhere. I met men in tailored suits all days, but few wore them like him, like a second skin on a body so fit that any woman with an ounce of libido would at least briefly consider what it would be like to tear the suit off. There was also something else, something undefined. He seemed posh somehow, the way he talked, the way he moved, his self-confidence. Still, there was an easiness to him, but combined with quiet strength and an ability to be deadly serious. He was an employee to me, even if I was not the one to pay his salary, but already the first day he had showed that he was not afraid to talk back to me, if he thought it necessary, if he thought me wrong. I have never liked people who lick upwards, so I found it refreshing –

even if it was annoying too. I had no doubt that he found *me* annoying in return after that first day, which was only fair because I had not been nice – but I could not help myself.

When we came inside my door and he told me to wait there while he secured the flat, he briefly put his hand on the small of my back and I was not sure if I should be annoyed because he was bossing me around, or if I should lean into him so that the warm pressure from his hand did not disappear. As the second option seemed inappropriate, I went with the first.

And when he went into my studio, he caught me off guard. No one ever went in there, because I did not allow it, and it made me feel exposed to have him in that room. I did not want him to scrutinise my family, judge my favourite books, see my secret stash of crisps, comment that the drawings made by nephews were not that skilled, or ask me how come I was cheering for West Ham. Of course, he did none of those things except asking about the football t-shirt, he just checked the room. Yet, it felt like he suddenly knew me better than most people I surrounded myself with all days. I was not comfortable with that and behaved badly.

It was like someone above gave me a reprimand for that, when I sat down to read the incident report from the 1st October attack and his name was there, as the one who had averted the whole thing. Prevented I do not know how many deaths. I looked between him and the words in the report. Here he was walking around like nothing, like he was not a damn hero of some sort and he did not tell me to sod off when I treated him like shit. It made me embarrassed, it made me feel like a very small person and I had to apologise. I saw that he had not expected it, that it was a

positive surprise, and that made me glad. Like genuinely glad in the way I seldom felt these days.

Then Rob McDonald came dangling his wine bottle and it made me feel embarrassed, but in a different way. I do not know why I would care if PS James thought McDonald and I had a relationship and he might spend the night, but I did. I'm not sure what he thought when he left. Maybe nothing, maybe he did not care because after all I'm just another client to him. I should never forget that. To him, protecting me is a job like any other – and to me, he should be a bodyguard like any other.

But I felt I wanted to get to know him better. I knew nothing about him and it flew through my mind if I should order a briefing package on his past, but I felt that I wanted to get to know him in the regular way – asking questions and hope he would answer them. After I had sent McDonald home and the wine bottle stood unopened on my kitchen island, the thought of getting to know Charles James better made me go to sleep with a feeling of anticipation of the next day.

Chapter 4: Charles

The reason why I usually returned from work to an empty home, was my own doing, even if at least to some part involuntary. Or home - it was a flat, the place where I cooked for myself, watched some telly, slept, but I think it takes something more to define a place like a home.

Me, Rebecca and Sam once had a home, until my PTSD screwed things up. I somehow had the naïve thought that I was immune to that shit, that I was able to distance myself from the things I experienced on tour so that they would not affect me deeply, but they did. Gradually, more and more. The emotional distance itself turned out to be part of the problem. Shutting off my emotions when I was in service might initially have been a good idea, but eventually it made me shut them off all the time. Or bury them. It made me numb, careless, unloving. When I finally could not help feelings bubbling up from where they had been repressed deep inside me, they came out as anger, wrath, desperation – even violence. Not ever hurting any person physically, but I had tantrums and on more than one occasion threw things around me, like a bottle of beer that I crashed into pieces against a wall and the beer poured down the wall like a sad brown waterfall, making Rebecca look at me like I was insane. So first, I made sure Rebecca had no reason to love me anymore, then I scared her off with my foul temperament and one day I woke up to a wife filing for divorce and asking for full custody of our son, and my career dangling on a thin thread because I risked being declared unfit for service. That was when I finally realised it was time to get counselling and to leave the army. Scrape up the remainders of my life and try to make something good of it again.

It was strange, we had many fights before, especially where I yelled at her, but when she left it was without a bang. She just told me she had had enough, that she did not love me anymore and did not feel safe for her or Sam in my presence, and I sadly realised she was right and let her go without protest. I did not fight for her. I did not miss her, but I missed *him* immensely and that was when it hit me I had royally fucked up and had to get a grip of my life. It took time though, hours and hours of seeing a therapist, even more time doing my own soul searching and connect to my true feelings again and deal with them, admit that I was damaged goods who needed healing. Rebecka never cut me off from Sam entirely, but during the first year after the divorce I only met him together with her, in public places. When my condition improved, she finally let him come and stay with me for weekends or go with me and visit my parents. That was how still things were. It was a step in the right direction and being with him made me immensely happy. It was the only thing that really meant something. Rebecka and I had a polite truce where we both wanted what was best for Sam, but I did not want her back and she definitely did not want me, so we mutually agreed on never trying that path without even having to talk about it. One day I might look for someone else, but I had not been ready to yet even though I was feeling fine now. My goal was to have a good relationship with Sam, be a good father that he would have contact with and maybe even look up to. That was all that mattered to me.

Beside the therapy, leaving the army had been a step on my journey to get well. I was done with it, I wanted to be close to Sam, so despite that I was proud of the work I had done there I was not sad to leave. Through an ex-colleague, I was tipped off about the possibility to change career and join a special branch of the police which focused on protection of VIPs, like politicians and the royal family. I thought

it seemed like a job that would be as good as any other and so I ended up as a Special Protection Officer. I quite liked the job. Liked the colleagues, found the clients interesting. The things I got to hear because everyone thinks of the bodyguard as part of the furniture. Some of those guys in power are seriously fucked up with huge egos and a desire for power rather than a wish to do what is good for the people. There was the other kind too, the ones who never put themselves first and those I admired greatly. I still had to find out which type the Home Secretary was. A few weeks in on the job I had not figured out her character yet, but I found her intriguing.

Since I started working for Ms. Dawes, I paid more attention to what was said about her in the news. I had of course heard things about her before, or her political work, but then she was not a real person to me – now it was different. She was mentioned frequently, as the hot topic of national security was within the remit of the Home Office. People were scared. The common man on the street was scared, which meant that politicians were scared too because if they failed to make people feel safe they might find themselves kicked from their position by the next election or even sooner. It seemed like after the latest attack, the PM, probably in an attempt to seem resolute, was considering enhancing surveillance power through a Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, the so-called RIPA-18, but according to the news the Home Secretary wanted a more moderate solution. It was rumoured that this debate on national security has the potential to split the government in those that thought it would be justified to increase surveillance of all citizens to increase the safety for all, and those who thought it would impinge on normal people's privacy.

What they did not say on the news, but I heard Ms. Dawes say herself, was that she thought the RIPA-18 would be dangerous and interfering with the privacy of the citizens. We were in the car with Rob McDonald on the way to a TV studio, when I overheard them talking about it. I had learned by now that McDonald's role was as a Special Advisor to Ms. Dawes. I also knew that he disliked me, and that he very much would like to not only give special advice to the Home Secretary, but also special treatment in bed. I could not blame him, up close she was both beautiful in her own special way, and charismatic. Of course, he had said none of those things, but it was quite easy to read him. I doubted that he had had any real success getting anywhere near her bed, which for some reason amused me and I got the feeling that even though he was always very amiable around her, he otherwise had a somewhat short fuse because of sexual frustration. I had a feeling I would be hard for me to resist from comments that might trigger him . He was just that type of small man thinking a bit too highly of himself, compensating for lack of height by trying to seem powerful in other ways, which I enjoy teasing the most. Best thing is that guys like him are provoked just by the height of me, which means I can keep annoying him all the time without having to do anything.

This day, Ms. Dawes was going to be interviewed about the current threat level and the plans to implement the RIPA-18. In the rear mirror I saw her lean her head back to the seat and take a deep breath, like she was preparing herself for something she was not looking forward to.

"I don't know how I'm going to be able to defend this regulation, Rob."

"You have to, otherwise it will be seen as undermining, or even backstabbing, the PM. You need to support him fully."

"I know... It is just that I think it is dangerous. I think it gives us powers that we should not have, to interfere with lives of regular citizens. Like this Big Brother surveillance in manner of 'Nineteen Eighty-Four.'"

"1984?"

She rolled her eyes and I could not help but filling in.

"Futuristic dystopian novel by George Orwell, considered to be one of the best English-language novels of modern times."

"Thank you Mister-know-it-all. Why don't you mind your own business in the front seat and we'll mind ours back here", McDonald said sourly.

But I saw in the mirror that as she turned towards the window, she was smiling.

Once we arrived at the BBC studios, we had to wait for a while before the news program would start and Chantal went to fetch some coffee. A studio man looked in.

"Home Secretary, in two minutes I'll take you to the studio", he informed.

"Thank you."

McDonald said;

"I bet the PM pulled out of this interview because he knew you would do a much better job.

"Sounds like a reason not to pull out to me. He wants this regulation, but he knows it will be controversial, so he lets me do the dirty-work of defending it."

I thought to myself that it must be demanding to live a life as a cynic, always thinking that people around you may have ulterior motives, and even worse that you were probably right.

Chantal came hasting back into the room, carrying paper mugs of coffee for Ms. Dawes and McDonald. Somehow, she got stuck with one of her high heels on the edge of the carpet and almost tripped, in the fall splashed coffee all over Ms. Dawes. She immediately got to her feet, trying to wipe the brown fluid away with her bare hands but without being very successful.

"Fuck, fuckity, fuck!", she exclaimed, which was understandable as she was going on national television in a minute. A coffee stained blouse was not really what you wished for when you want to make a calm and composed impression.

Chantal's reaction did not help, she burst into fits of laughter which made me roll my eyes. That girl was not acting very professional for being the PA to the Home Secretary. Ms. Dawes words made me want to laugh too because they seemed so misplaced coming from a polished politician, but I had learned long ago to put a lid on unwanted emotions and this was a good time to use that skill.

"Shut up!", McDonald hissed to Chantal, palpably distressed and not helping the situation either.

Chantal then said she was sorry, but I do not think her apology convinced anyone in the room.

"Give her your blouse", McDonald told her.

She giggled again;

"It will never fit."

And she was right. She was even thinner than Ms. Dawes, her look fashionable but bordering to anorectic and her blouse would be too tight. My own shirt would suit better. As soon as the thought formed inside my head, I started loosening my tie while they continued bickering over what to do. As I stepped forward and Ms. Dawes saw what I was doing, her eyes widened.

"What are you doing?"

"Fresh from the dry cleaner this morning. Best option you have Ma'am."

"It will look too large on me", she said helplessly.

"I think it will be okay under you jacket. And isn't 'boyfriend fit' trendy? Not that I'm... I mean the larger size... You know what I mean."

What was I babbling about? I shut my mouth and wriggled off the white shirt and handed to her. For a second, she just looked at me where I was standing only in a white tank top with the ballistic vest over, feeling quite naked under her gaze, then she took the shirt.

"Thank you" and looking at the two others added; "I'm glad someone is using their brain and taking action. Don't stand around gawping. Chantal, fuck off and organise Sergeant James a new shirt."

"And you", now turned to McDonald who had made no move to turn away when she had to change clothes. "Please give me some privacy."

"Oh, of course" he said embarrassed that he had not thought about that himself and quickly left the room too, but not before he gave me a jealous look for being allowed to stay.

I turned my back to her and occupied myself putting on my jacket again but was very aware of the froufrou sound of her taking off her jacket followed by her blouse. Naturally, I did not sneak-peak but part of me wanted to. Felt curious what she looked like in only her bra. I shook my head to myself, feeling pervy. She certainly was not for me to look at, or even think of without clothes, but there was something oddly sensual about us both standing there, back to back, removing and putting on clothes, my shirt now on her, even if I was sure that feeling was one-sided on my end.

Chapter 5: Molly

'Oh, bloody hell!' I shouted inside my head.

When he stepped towards me, simultaneously loosening his tie and started unbuttoning his shirt, a surge went through my body and tingling sensations seemed to converge in a specific spot somewhere near my pelvis. It was not motivated solely by the fact that I had taken on an involuntary celibacy since the end of my marriage and was starved of physical contact in general, but more by the undeniable fact that he was so f-in hot in that moment that my emotions scared me. When he moments later stood there in only tank top and a ballistic vest, both enhancing the shape of his extremely fit body, and with the arms bare so I could see every muscle and tendon, he was more than easy on the eye. I hope he thought I stared only because I wondered what he was up to, but truth was that I stared because I wanted to take in the sight of him before he put on more clothes again. I also found it kind of sexy that he did not lose his calm in the situation, instead took charge and came up with a solution, unlike McDonald who first was nonplussed, then half-drooling at the prospect of watching me change before I sent him away. Sometimes I do not know how to put up with him, but he is a good and loyal advisor. One of those that I can count on to have my back when I need it, so I must put up with a bit more than I would like to. However, I drew the line at letting him watch me only wearing bra on my upper body.

Without me needing to ask for it, PS James turned his back to me and (to my regret) started putting on his jacket again. I felt abashed as I removed my own jacket, followed by my blouse. I was sure he paid no attention, but to me it was both unnerving and kind of sensual getting undressed with him behind me. I watched

him out of the corner of my eye to check that he did not look at me, but he respectfully kept his back turned to me. Suddenly I had this flash vision of him coming over, standing behind me when I was dressed only in my bra and skirt, how he would pull me close to him so I would lean my back to his torso, put his arms around me and first place his lips to my neck, then as I turned to him, move them to my lips... It was a very inappropriate but very pleasant vision. I tried to shake it off by putting his shirt on, but it was still warm from his body and smelled of an after-shave I found very appealing. It almost made me feel like he was hugging me for real, so it did nothing to relieve me of the fantasy. Luckily, the studio man returned for me, told me it was time and helped me snap out of it.

Time to be professional, time to officially defend that regulation which I behind doors was so against. I was thinking that the PM was a dangerous man, with ambitions which I did not like. Controlling private information is controlling people in a way that no one should be able to, because it is too tempting to use power for the wrong purposes. I knew that I had to tread carefully during this interview though. If I did not come across as supporting him, I could be considered as a threat to him and then the wolves would come running after me. My interviewer was Norman Hawkes, a very respectable newsman, but also a sharp one. I knew I could expect difficult questions and I had to be fully focused, which suited me perfectly when I wanted to forget what I just had been feeling.

Norman started with questions about the current threat level in the country, what actions had been taken since the 1st October attack and if people could feel safe. Then moved on to more mined territory.

"I understand that one action which is under consideration is to implement the so called RIPA-18, which would allow the Security Service to eaves-drop any phone conversation or read any e-mail of persons that could be connected to any future planned attacks. Would that not be a serious breach to the privacy of common people? Could it not be an excuse to find out information about anyone?"

Personally, I agreed with him, but that I could not say.

"It would not be used that way. It would only be used to find out more about persons that had somehow caught the attention of the Secret Service."

"But what would that take? Would it for example be enough to google manure? Then any farmer might be incriminated."

He was referring to the fact that in the past some home-made bombs had been done using manure. I tried to laugh it away, even if I was not sure what the criteria would be.

"No, of course not. It would take more than that. Like a combination of search words, on repeated occasions."

He changed direction slightly, but not into more comfortable ground.

"It is rumoured that you don't agree with the PM that this regulation should be implemented?"

"A rumour is exactly that Norman. I'm here am I not? Defending this very regulation. That means I'm behind the PM in this."

"So, can you reassure the viewers that you believe that this is the best for the country? Best for them?"

I could not make myself lie and answer that with a straight 'yes'.

"I'm sure that the PM only has the country's and the people's best in sight."

"But it would not be the first time your opinions differ, if I'm correctly informed."

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it true that you consistently have voted against sending troops to Afghanistan? Something that the PM strongly advocated."

He had me cornered. That was official information which anyone could find out online, and also something I did not wish to deny. I had voted as my conscience told me at the time.

"It's true that we have sometimes respectfully disagreed, but that doesn't mean that I don't stand behind him and the general party view overall."

The bollocking the PM had given me after that voting. It had nearly thrown me out in the cold, but others had convinced him it was still wiser to keep me on his team. It had nearly been the end of my political career though and was one of the reasons I had to watch my steps.

"Do you still maintain the view that it was wrong to send troops there?"

I had to speak from my heart.

"Honestly, I don't know. I wish we had not had to. I wish the presence of British soldiers was not needed in war zones where we are not actually part of the conflict. Still, I think we achieved good things in stabilising the country, helping local people, helping the Afghan National Army to improve their skills so they could continue the work – but I think it came at a great cost for many individuals. Many British soldiers who were injured, killed or returned home with PTSD and lost limbs and maybe have a ruined or at least very changed life. I find it hard to judge if it was worth that sacrifice. I find it hard to say if I would vote the same way today or not."

"That sounds like an unusually honest answer from a politician, Home Secretary."

It probably was, and I wondered what trouble it might get me in this time. The interview was finally over, and I could exhale. I felt that my shoulders were tense and knew I would not relax completely until I was back home in my studio with a cup of tea and could call mum and ask what she thought of the interview. As she had no interest what so ever in politics, I knew she would only say that I had looked nice and point out how different I talked, and I would laugh, and everything would not feel so deadly serious for a moment. I saw PS James standing in the shadows, outside the bright lights, with his eyes fixed on me and suddenly I wondered what he had thought of the whole spectacle. I would like to know his opinion.

It was just us, and Terry, in the car home. I had sent Chantal and Rob off home in other cars, did not want any company this evening, just felt exhausted. He followed me up, naturally, and checked the flat. I saw him move nimbly from room to room, he knew his way here now and I had even gotten used to him being in my studio.

"All clear Ma'am."

I did not want him to leave immediately.

"Do you want a cuppa?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I'm having a cup of tea. Do you want one too? I know you're not drinking alcohol on duty, but I assume tea would be okay?"

He looked a bit hesitant, but then nodded.

I put the kettle on and took out a few different jars of tea leaves from a cupboard.

"Chose which one you want."

He smiled.

"I'm normally a coffee kind of guy, so any tea bag will be fine for me."

"Come on, smell them and say which one you like."

Obediently he opened the different lids and smelled, finally went with the Russian Earl Grey. I prepared two cups and sat down by the kitchen island on a stool opposite to him and asked what I had been wanting to ask him.

"So, what did you think?"

"Of what?"

"The interview."

"It's not for me to have an opinion on my client's work, Ma'am."

"First, can you stop calling me Ma'am? That and that code name 'Lavender' makes me feel like a granny."

That made him laugh. 'Lavender' was the code name that security always used for me, communicating to each other; 'Lavender is on the move', 'Lavender is approaching', maybe even 'Lavender is on the loo taking a shit' – what did I know. In the beginning it took me a while to understand it was me they were talking about and the name just made me think of those little bags with lavender that Nan always insisted to have in her drawer where she stored knickers, so they would smell good. Not that I know if anyone ever smelled her knickers, but I was always thinking that it would scare anyone off if they ever came close to her knickers because I did not like the smell very much.

"As you wish Ma'am", he said with a twinkle in his eyes. "What should I call you then? Dawes?"

"You can call me Molly, Chantal does."

"I think that would be considered a bit too informal for your bodyguard. I'll stick with Dawes if you don't mind. Unless you prefer that I call you 'Lavender'?"

"Dawes it is then", I smirked. "Secondly, maybe it's not for you to have opinions about my work, but now I asked you because I want to know what you thought about the interview."

"Okay", he was silent for a while and I liked the way he was not rushing his answer, thinking it through.

"I think you did quite well. I heard you in the car on the way there, so I know you're not behind this RIPA-18, but I think you got away without seeming like you are completely opposed to the PMs view. And I think you managed to reassure the viewers that the PM thinks this is in their best interest, without actually saying that you think so."

"How very observant of you", I said dryly.

"You asked..."

"Yes, sorry, please continue."

"Your answer about Afghan surprised me."

"Really, how come?"

"I knew that you voted against sending troops there..."

He must have seen my surprised look, so he explained.

"I googled you the day before I started working for you. I always do with new clients to have some idea of what they are like and stand for. Of course, google tells a very limited story and I always find out much more interesting things about a person once I start working for them."

In that moment I wanted to know both what he had found about me on google, and what else he had found out about me since he started working for me – and what he possibly found interesting.

"Anyway, then I had you down for this undifferentiated anti-war politician, who would be against everything I had done and been proud of being part of in my past, maybe even despise it... but what you expressed today was much more nuanced. With an understanding of both the gains and the losses. I liked that."

I digested what he just had told me.

"You were a soldier before this?"

"Yes, for many years. I was an officer, captain, went for four tours to Afghan before I understood it was time to leave the army."

That explained his ability to take charge in a stressful situation like the one today, piece of cake compared to the situations he must have found himself in in the past.

"And what did you think of it?"

"I always loved being in the army, or at least until in the very end. I felt like I belonged there in a way I didn't ever in the boarding school my parents sent me to, or in the company of their friends and the children of their friends. There was an easiness to that life, a camaraderie which I had not known before, and the sense that I could make a difference. But the more time I spent amid the conflict, the less sure I felt I was making any real difference, and people around me were injured and even died. It took a toll on me, and on my family."

"You have family? Then I should not be keeping you from getting home."

I felt unmotivated disappointment.

"I'm divorced, but I have a son who is part of my life. He comes to live with me every other weekend. I suffered from PTSD and that became the nail in the coffin for my marriage. It was probably never meant to last anyway."

"I'm sorry to hear it. And your PTSD?"

"What about it?"

"Did you get help?"

"I did, finally, but it took a divorce and nearly losing Sam before I could make myself see a therapist. I'm very glad about it now. I'm through on the other side and able to look forward, able to be there for Sam."

It was a lot of information to take in, but he continued.

"So, I'm one of those persons you spoke about today. One of those who have paid a price, suffering from PTSD, losing my family... I can't tell you if it was worth the price for everyone. I really can't, but if *I* was given the choice I would have gone again on that first tour and the ones after too. I would not have wanted it undone. So even if the price was high I would have done it, but now I need move on, find a life after all that."

I just nodded and suddenly felt very aware of that I was sitting here alone with this very attractive man in my kitchen, having the longest non-work-related and quite

personal conversation I had had with anyone but my family in a long time. It made me feel a need to withdraw, not to expose myself – even if there were so many other things I was curious to find out about him.

"Thanks for sharing your story. I will not keep you longer. Go home now and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay, thanks for the tea, even if I still think a nice Nespresso is the winner. Good night, Dawes", he smiled the most charming smile and then he was out the door before I knew it.

I was knackered and headed for the bed, but before I fell asleep I opened my laptop and googled. Not him, because I still preferred to find out about him from himself, but myself. I wanted to know what he had been able to read about me. Beside my political views, the official ones, my votes in parliament, one could read how I had risen from a simple background to become the Home Secretary, almost presented like a fairy tale. This was something that the party liked to broadcast so of course it was one of the first hits of the search. One could also read that I had been married to the Rt. Hon. Roger Penhaligon, the Government Chief Whip. One could not read that he had been an asshole who thought I would be a good wife for his political career, or that it had hurt me to discover that.

Okay, so he knew I had a past. I wondered if he cared at all.

Tired as I was, I went to sleep in his shirt. Too knackered to bother taking it off - that was the only reason.

Chapter 6: Charles

I was not sure what to make of that tea session with the Home Secretary... Dawes... Molly. I would have liked to call her Molly, but it felt too personal. She was my client and I had to keep some distance, although having a night time tea together was hardly achieving that, or the fact that she seemed so normal, so nice – that also made distance more difficult. The more I saw of her, the more I liked her. She kept surprising me in positive ways, often in situations when I first thought she had shown a less flattering side but she then turned it around.

A few days after the tea chat, Ms. Dawes was in her office and I had had a short lunch break which was considered safe when she was in her office. I had just returned and came walking on the ground floor of the office building when they shouted to me from the reception desk;

"Security! Security, they need you upstairs, quick!"

Adrenaline immediately shot through my body and my pulse was beating fast during the seconds it took me to ascend in the elevator. It went painfully slowly, but when the doors finally opened, and I rushed out, I heard Chantal shouting upset. Her target was Rob McDonald.

"How can you treat me like that?! You hated me from day one!"

"PS James, there you are", McDonald for once seemed relieved to see me. "Would you kindly escort Ms. Dyson from the building?"

"Good luck recruiting! You don't even know what I do on a daily basis, because you are that fucking arrogant! You never cared to find out what I do!"

She kept screaming obscenities at McDonald, a very feisty lady for her petite size, until I took her by the elbow and asked her to please come with me.

"No", she said but suddenly seemed completely deflated and sad.

"Come on, let's talk about it downstairs, all right?"

She then nodded and came with me without further struggle. In the elevator down, she seemed close to crying.

"What happened, Chantal?"

"They started interviewing candidates for my job. Didn't even tell me they were giving me the push."

"They didn't say why?"

"She's a sociopath, he's a narcissist, that's reasons enough. Good help anyone who sees through them."

I had Rob down for a prick, but I had started to think better of her, so I felt a bit disappointed. Chantal had done a shitty job as a PA, that had been apparent on several occasions. Still, this was not a fair way to treat someone who had worked for you. Would Ms. Dawes really do something like that?

"I'm sorry Chantal. Good luck."

I waved to a cab to stop for her.

"Good luck to you who has to keep working for them", she bitterly said and jumped into the cab.

My gaze followed it as it drove off and wondered if I would find out what the true story was. I did later that evening. We sat in the car on the way the flat when Ms. Dawes spoke, seemingly disturbed over the development with Chantal.

"I'm sorry you got pulled into the mess with Chantal. Rob thought that you would be able to handle her, he apparently didn't on his own... you know, with your negotiation skills... You managed to talk a suicide bomber out of setting off a bomb, so you clearly have some skills in the area."

"I guess I know how to calm down people, even if I haven't practised on furious PAs before", I smirked. "Did you really start interviewing people for her job?"

"It was so awful", she sighed. "I had planned to talk to Chantal today, tell her I have to replace her because she does not live up to the standard I need, as you might have seen on an occasion or two. I have given her so many chances because I want to help a young woman who wants to make a career, but she's just so sloppy and careless. It affects my job, how I come across, and I can't have that. But I didn't want it to end this way."

"What happened?"

"The HR department and Rob had screwed up and scheduled Rob to start interviewing candidates too early. To tell the truth, I'm not sure if Rob cared if there

was an overlap. He's not always that considerate. Chantal found out and hell broke loose. I don't blame her for that part, I think it's completely understandable. If she had wanted to listen I would have tried to explain but she thinks I'm a bitch anyway, so I don't think it matters what I say."

"You may be right there."

I felt glad to learn how things really were, that she was not as cold-hearted as to let a girl know she had been sacked by finding out about interviews for a replacement. She sighed.

"It's really exhausting to feel that people hate you. She's not the only one you know."

I suddenly got the feeling she was quite lonely, and maybe not as strong as she always appeared in public. I got the stupid idea that she probably could have needed a hug. Then we pulled up in front of the house and the conversation was over.

-OG-

A few days later, Ms. Dawes and Rob McDonald were headed for the Chambers with the bodyguard team in tow as usual. As she got out of the car, a man approached her, and I did not stop him because I recognised him from photos. He was her ex-husband, Roger Penhaligon, also known as the Chief Whip. A title I never quite got my head around, as it makes me picture someone standing with an actual whip, whipping other politicians – and when I saw Penhaligon I thought to myself that he probably would have enjoyed that. It was difficult to picture this man

as her ex-husband, the one she came home to after work and shared a meal and bed with, maybe planned for children with even though it obviously never had happened.

"Do you mind if I steal your Boss for a minute Rob?", he said but it was clear that it was a rhetorical question and he did not expect McDonald to object, which he indeed did not. The more I saw of him, the more spineless he seemed to me.

"Sure, see you inside", he just said and strode off.

Penhaligon was substantially older than both me and Ms. Dawes, yet good-looking. Tall, with a sharp face, dark hair with some silver by the temples and with a somewhat haughty expression in his face. He did not beat about the bush but went straight to the subject without any greetings. If I had not known it, it would have been impossible to guess they had once been husband and wife.

"Interesting TV interview. You must be very proud."

"I'd really like to get to the Chambers, if that's all right with you, Roger", she sighed and seemed less than thrilled having to talk to him.

"Planning on high-jacking the counter terror debate for shameless self-promotion?"

"I did not ask to do that interview! The PM made me, and I did the best I could. You know Norman Hawkes isn't easy. And this damn regulation... Is there a point to this conversation?"

"You're not returning my calls."

I could see that she seemed very uncomfortable, so I decided to intervene.

"Pardon me, Ma'am. For security reasons I'd prefer if we moved indoors."

"You work for us Plod, so wind your neck in", he snapped. Apparently one of these mighty men who think they are well above the common man. Her ex really was not a pleasant personality. He turned to her again, lowering his voice so it sounded threatening.

"I'm the fucking Chief Whip. When I call, you answer. We're claiming center ground but you're heading off-piste."

"The PM can count on my full support."

"Bullshit, he's weakened if everyone does not back him up on this - and anyone who can read a face can see you're not behind this regulation even if your beautiful little mouth says different. You're taking this opportunity to strengthen your own position. You're making a move for the leadership."

"Sir, Ma'am, I really need you both to move inside for security reasons."

"Can't you call your monkey off? Throw him some nuts."

Even if I could not care less about what a shit like him said about me, it bothered me that she would let him talk like that to someone who was working for her. But she wouldn't as it turned out;

"He's mixed-race, Roger. Take care so you don't come across as racist. It would be bad for your image, wouldn't it?"

That shut him up and smirking she swept past him and left him standing fuming on the pavement, while she shot me a glance filled with amusement. When we came inside and walked the hallway down, I saw her chest rise and fall from upset breathing. Apparently, the chat to her ex was upsetting in some way. She stopped and looked at me.

"I'm not."

"Not what, Ma'... Dawes?"

"I'm not making a move for the leadership. I don't want it. But as long as the PM and Roger think that I do, they will consider me a threat. I can never... just lean back and relax, then someone is coming for me."

I'm not sure why she told me, she probably just wanted to get it off her chest, but it told me quite a bit about the world she was struggling in. I wished I could relieve her from this pressure.

"Mixed-race? You really think I look like it?"

"No, but maybe you look a little bit like a monkey. All that hair and the brown eyes...", she snorted like she was trying to hold back laughing for real and it seemed like the thought of me having similarities to a monkey was hilarious to her.

"A monkey? I have a feeling I should be offended."

"I like monkeys. I like them much more than I ever liked Roger Penhaligon."

Her eyes twinkled and then she continued walking towards her meeting and I had the feeling I had been given an odd compliment after all. Once again, she had surprised me, and I considered myself a man who was not easily surprised.

That evening, when I had accompanied her to the flat and cleared it and was about to leave, she asked me to hold on a moment and went into the other room. When she got back she had my shirt with her, in a plastic bag indicating it had been to the dry cleaner.

"Your shirt. Thank you."

She gave me a smile that seemed almost shy, a really beautiful smile. I think it could have melted a stone. Again, it surprised me that she had bothered.

"No problem, Ma... Dawes."

"You're nearly getting there, remembering not to call me Ma'am."

"It just feels more natural."

"Does it? I beg to differ, it doesn't feel natural to me."

In the silence that followed, a question which I had been wondering about, popped into my head.

"Did you always want to be a politician? I'm sorry, I hope you didn't mind me asking you that."

"I don't mind. No, I had intended to be a criminal barrister...it was more a coincidence that I got into politics, engagements during my university years. And

when the opportunity came, I thought I could make real difference, you know. Like you thought about Afghanistan. I'm not as sure anymore, not sure about what I manage to achieve... I'm about doing the right thing, making the hard choices – but that's not always appreciated from above. We want to keep the voters pleased, even if that might not always mean the best for all. And if I keep voters too pleased, it may be threatening to those I thought were supposed to be on the same team. That sometimes mean you're not allowed to be yourself, express the views that are really mine or do what I personally think is best. I try to, but it's hard."

"I think you are winning me over."

She cocked an eyebrow, questioning, smirking.

"Don't tell me - with my incredible charm and magnetism?"

"With your honesty. With your wish to make a difference rather than aiming for power. I think I would put my vote on you."

She looked me straight into my eyes and I noticed that hers were green, a special light green colour.

"I don't need you to vote for me, only to protect me."

It could have been an insult said in a different tone of voice, but she said it softly and with a smile and I knew I would do anything in my power to protect her.

"Rest assured Ma'am, I'll do what's required."

"I won't keep you longer. Good night PS James."

"Good night, Dawes."

The thing was, I did not mind that she was keeping me. I had nothing waiting for me and when I left I missed her company.

Chapter 7: Molly

Tuesday morning and my new PA, Trinny, briefed me about my schedule for the day. This time it seemed like Rob had managed to find me someone competent and already a few days in on the job she seemed to be on top of everything, making my life easier.

"First, you have a one-to-one with Stephen Hunter-Dunne."

Stephen Hunter-Dunne was the Director General of the Security Service, MI-5. As such, he was reporting to me and I was his superior, but he was a slippery sucker and I was not sure I trusted him not to go his own ways. Compared to the police, the Security Service was far less transparent. Lately, I had made sure to set up regular meetings with him to at least try to get a grip of what he was up to.

"Right after that you have a meeting with him again, plus Anne Sampson, Mike Travis and..."

Commander Anne Sampson was the Head of the Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism Command, also reporting to me and today I expected we all would get a debrief about what news there was about the 1st October attack, as that investigation was on her table. In contrast to Hunter-Dunne, Anne Sampson was someone I trusted. We did not always see eye to eye, but my instincts told me the middle-aged red-head was immune to political intrigues and completely uncorrupted. I was not sure however that she had the same faith in me, just a feeling. I knew she was against the RIPA-18 and I think she thought I was behind it. Mike Travis was the Minister of State for Counter-Terrorism, trustworthy but somewhat old-fashioned if you asked me, he did not fancy the RIPA-18 either.

Hunter-Dunne was the only one of them who was in favour of it, naturally as I would feed him more information but that was what worried me.

Trinny continued.

"... and this afternoon I have scheduled two hours for shopping."

"What?!"

This was highly irregular, I would never spend part of my working day shopping.

"I have seen that you're invited to the PMs birthday party next week. I assumed you would need something new to wear, something nice. Media will be there, so you will want to look your best."

It was official, this PA was a gem. My closet was filled to the brim with suits, blouses and pencil skirts but very few cocktail dresses or evening gowns. I was clearly high priority to spend two hours on this.

"...and I have booked a stylist to come fix you for that evening. She will come to your flat 5 pm next Friday."

She was a keeper. She now turned to Sergeant James.

"And I will need your measures."

"My measures for what?"

"I will get you a dinner jacket for that evening. Even if you're not a guest you will need to blend in."

She really thought about everything. He looked surprised, but then found himself.

"No need. I have one, I have been to Black Tie events before", he smirked.

Indeed. I suppose I should not have been surprised. After all he had told me came from the type of family that sent their children to boarding school. I could not help thinking that I was looking forward to seeing him dressed like that, but then I turned my focus to the meeting with Stephen who just arrived and the two of us moved into my office and closed the door.

Stephen had some worrying news.

"We have acquired intelligence about a possible terrorist attack on a London school"

"Oh, my God. Then you have to feed the report through to the police when Anne Sampson arrives."

"Ordinarily I would, but one of the schools which seem to be possible targets threw up a link to a serving police officer. His kid attends the school. It is a Charles James."

My heart sank. This would have been horrible news anyway, but now it might affect someone working close to me, someone I quite liked.

"It may be a coincidence?"

"Yes, it may. Or a terrorist cell obtained confidential information on the officer who foiled the 1st October attack, and this is their plan for revenge. In my experience,

information leakage occurs for one of two reasons. Either police officers fail to communicate securely or an officer susceptible to bribery or blackmail is responsible for the disclosure."

"You mean to say that if there is a police leak, we should keep this to ourselves?"

"That would be my recommendation."

"Then we will."

"Thank you. And I want to point out that taking specific steps to protect the school in question may redirect the terrorists towards a different course of action, action we are unprepared for."

"We'll tighten security around the schools and hold back the reason why."

He nodded in agreement. With that, he thought the discussion ended, and it was but my mind was spinning. How could I *not* warn James that there might be an attack to his son's school? On the other hand, if I did it might put the whole counter terrorism operation in jeopardy, if the terrorists understood we were on to them and they modified their plan. I was out of balance when the next meeting started.

We all sat down around the table and Anne informed us on the latest development after the 1st October attack.

"The bomber herself claims to have been coerced by her husband and she remains too intimidated to reveal much."

"And who are their accomplices? Where did they get the bomb? What are their targets?"

I heard that my tone was harsh, and I knew it was not only the lack of information from Anne but the thought of Sam's school that disturbed me.

"Inquiries are ongoing."

"Clock's ticking, maybe my officers would have more success", Stephen chimed in.

"Come off it Stephen", Anne protested. "We're happy to receive intelligence but it's our investigation."

There was a clear power struggle between the two of them, but Mike calmed it down by pointing out that police jurisdiction was clear. I thought this was difficult. Anne was right, but on the other hand maybe Stephen's people would achieve results sooner.

Once the meeting was over, I had a gap before my next meeting and I just sat by my desk trying to digest what I had been told this morning. There might be an attack to a school. It might be Sam's school. He might even be the target because James had stopped the previous attack. I looked up and met his eyes through the large glass window separating my office from the open space outside. He was standing posted in his usual place, calm, composed, making sure I was safe. How could I ask of him to keep *me* safe, if I did not help him to keep his own son safe? A decision formed in my head and I got up.

"I need to go to the ladies." I told him as I walked past him, and he followed.

He followed the normal routine and checked all the cubicles as we came in. When we he had seen that they all were empty, I did not enter one but turned to him instead.

"I need to tell you something."

He immediately looked vigilant, understanding something was going on. I hesitated, knowing I was breaking rules, but then spoke.

"I was informed by Stephen Hunter-Dunne that there might be a terrorist attack to a London school. The school your son goes to seems to be a possible target. It may be revenge for..."

"...for my intervention during the 1st October attack?"

"Yes. Your identity may have been leaked, and for that reason he does not want to share this information with the police. Security will be raised around all the schools that may be targets, but discreetly, we don't want to alert the terrorists, so they change plans. Then they may do something we cannot predict instead. I'm not allowed to tell you this, I would be in deep shit if anyone knew I do, but I can't keep this from you."

"Thank you."

His eyes were dark with concern. His whole body looking tense and alert, like he wanted to run off and do something about this, which was the natural reaction.

"You can't act in any way that would indicate that you got this information."

"I need to get Sam out of that school."

"I understand that, but you can't be seen there. Can you maybe call your ex-wife, tell her to get him? Say that he has called her because he felt unwell and she wants to take him home, then pretend he is sick for a while and keep him away from school until this blows over? Do you think she can do that without asking a lot of questions and without telling anyone?"

He thought for a moment.

"That might work."

"It has to, if the terrorists find out we know...Or if someone finds out about me telling you..."

"I get it. I'll see to that she does that and nothing else."

"You go find somewhere private and make that call."

He nodded, and we were about leave the toilet, when he touched my arm.

"Molly..."

I met his eyes, warm brown wells one could drown in.

"Thank you."

I gulped, suddenly feeling nervous not about what I just had done but about his presence.

"I'm just doing what my conscience tells me to do."

"Thank you anyway, you did not have to do this."

He let go of my arm but the feeling of his long fingers there remained.

An hour later he passed me a small note, which when I read it said:

Sam safe at home. Apparently, he has a killer head ache, seems like he has caught the flue and will be in bed for at least a week.

I exhaled in relief, now we only had to make sure that all other kids were also safe.

In the afternoon, I went for the shopping tour Trinny had arranged. I felt odd given the circumstances, but I had to carry on according to schedule. I asked that PS James had the watch outside the shops and his colleague Kim Knowles accompanied me inside instead. Somehow, I knew I would not be 100% comfortable having him so close when I got undressed, even if there was the curtain of the fitting room separating us. There was something increasingly unsettling about his presence. Not in an unpleasant way - yet unsettling. The shopping was a success though and I completed it within an hour, coming out of it as the owner of a new evening dress and high heels which I was very much looking forward to wearing. The happiness I felt about it was however interrupted shortly after we had returned to office when I was informed there had indeed been an attack on a school. To the Heath Bank Primary School, the very one that I knew that Sam was attending.

The police had identified and tracked a suspicious van, or large goods vehicle, heading towards the school. They had overtaken it and shot the driver before it reached the school. When teachers saw the vehicle approaching in full speed and police shooting at it, they had brought the kids that were out in the yard inside the school but unfortunately that seemed to have been part of the terrorist's plan. Not only the van exploded, but also an IED already placed inside the school. Two police officers were killed and more injured, but like a miracle there were no casualties among the pupils or teachers even if some had gotten milder injuries. So far, no organisation had claimed responsibility.

As I waited for the elevator, headed downstairs and on to a meeting to update the PM, I whispered to James who stood by my side.

"Have you heard?"

"Only over the radio. But as you know, I have nothing personal to worry about. I will never be able to thank you enough."

"I have to ask you to stay on for the rest of the day to avoid suspicion, sorry for that, but I hope you will give him a big hug tonight."

"I will, be sure of that."

This had been a long and exhausting day and I would have loved to go home directly from the meeting with the PM, but I had a dinner meeting scheduled with Rob, Indira and Sanjeev – two others from my closest team. Well, I had to eat anyway, and I knew that the restaurant Rob had chosen was great so there was at least an upside to it. When I arrived Rob was already there, waiting by the table. James and

Kim Knowles sat down at a table of their own at some distance, that was the way it usually worked out when I went to a restaurant. The bodyguards would just sit there and keep an eye on the room and people, drinking water and not let food distract them. I hoped they had had a snack before, so they would not be too hungry before the end of it.

"This was a great choice", I told Rob. "I haven't been here in ages, but they have great food."

"I'm glad you like it. You have been under so much stress lately, you deserve a nice dinner", he smiled and poured me a glass of wine. I could not help feeling that it did not feel quite appropriate after the day's events, and also that he was a bit creepy.

"Should we wait for the others until we order? Not like them to be late. Should we give them a call, so they did not go to the wrong place?"

He cleared his throat and looked a bit embarrassed.

"I was afraid you would cancel..."

"What?"

"They're not coming. It's only you and me."

"The others are not coming?"

"Errrr.... No. I thought this could be nice, just you and me having dinner."

A date with Rob McDonald was not what I wanted *any* day, but today I was less in the mood for it than ever. Still, I thought for a moment I might just put up with it, have some nice food then call it a night, but then I looked past Rob and met Sergeant James' gaze and knew I could not do it. Sitting here on a date I did not want to be on, with him looking at me – it was just too awkward. I could not go through with it.

"I'm sorry Rob, this feels weird. We should re-schedule."

"Please stay. Have a couple of drinks, some good food"

"I really can't. I'm going home now. I'll see you at the office tomorrow, sleep well."

He looked utterly disappointed but made no further attempts to try to stop me from leaving.

I got to my feet, nodded to James and Knowles who swiftly adapted to the change of plans and took me home. As I went to bed, I was wondering to myself what exactly it was that had made me feel so uncomfortable about having James watch me while I had a dinner date. Kim Knowles would not have bothered me at all, but even if his eyes were kind I would not want to have them on me while I was on a date with another man.

Chapter 8: Charles

When I finally was released from duty that terrible day, I immediately went to see Sam and Rebecka. My boss, CSI Lorraine Craddock, had called me up and informed me about the attack to Sam's school and I think I managed to seem taken aback, like I had not known before, just heard over the radio that it was *one* school but not exactly that one. And even though I had known I was shaken, so it was not that difficult to react as she would expect me to.

"There were no casualties among the pupils, but some were injured. However, I have learned that your son called in sick earlier in the day and was fetched by your ex-wife. It seems like he had a guardian angel."

I could not make out from the tone of her voice if she was questioning how come Sam had been home, but if there was a question I ignored it. He had indeed had a guardian angel in the shape of Ms. Dawes, but I had to protect that secret. I was blown away by what she had risked by telling me. I was immensely grateful because I knew that if it came out, it would likely be the end of her political career and yet she had done it. If I had hesitated regarding the nature of her character before, she for sure had proven herself now. Lorraine continued;

"We have moved them to a safe house, as we don't know if it has anything to do with you that Sam's school was attacked or if it was coincidence."

"Thanks, Ma'am. I'm very grateful."

"Please come to the office tomorrow morning and we'll talk more, now go see your family."

I drove to the safe house where I had been informed Sam and Rebecka had been taken. He was fine and happy to see me, but not as happy as I was to have him unharmed in my arms and I hugged him long and hard. I almost did not dare to think of what could have happened to him or his friends.

"I can't breathe, dad!" he finally complained, and I had to let him go.

"Okay scamp, I'm just freakin' happy to see you. You go watch some telly and I'll have a chat with your mum."

Rebecka was distressed, naturally. The thought of that it had been so close that Sam was there during the attack, the school blown up, many of his friends and teachers injured, two dead police officers and leaving their home to stay here, that was a lot in one day.

"Did you know?" she asked as soon as we were alone.

"I can't tell you anything. Please, don't ask any questions Rebecka. Let's just be grateful he was not there, okay? And please keep him in bed over the next days as there are police officers around here. I need the story about him having the flu to hold up. Okay? You think you can do that? Otherwise I will be in trouble, and others too who don't deserve it."

Rebecka is bright and she understood there was a good reason she should not ask more questions, so she just nodded.

"I see. I'm grateful either way, but I need to know - are we in danger, Charles? Did this have anything to do with your involvement in the 1st October attack?"

"It may be a coincidence, but it could also be that they were targeting me, or someone next to me as a revenge. We don't know that and that is why you must stay here until we know more. I'll stay here too, I'll take the couch. I should not be staying in my flat either and they can't afford two separate safe houses for us. You think you can live with that?"

"It's fine, I think Sam will just be glad to have you here, and honestly I'm too in this situation."

For the first time in many years, we spent the night under one roof united by the possible danger we might find ourselves in.

-OG-

Next morning, I went to the office like Lorraine had asked me to.

"I hope everything is well with Rebecka and Sam, given the circumstances?", she began.

"As well as could be expected, it's distressful having to leave your home and live under protection like that, but I'm glad they had the possibility. Sam has the flu, but otherwise he's fine."

She looked at me sharply.

"Yes, he was very fortunate to have the flu on a day like that."

I was grateful for my ability to put on a poker face in that moment.

"Indeed, he was, Ma'am."

She dropped the subject and went on.

"You do understand the question it raises?"

"I don't understand how they could possibly know which officer was responsible for the 1st of October, unless there has been some kind of leak."

"We don't know, we're investigating of course... Meanwhile, we have to take the view, if there's any risk, any risk at all of you being a target it puts not only you and your family in jeopardy, but also your colleagues, maybe even the principal and her staff."

Now I realised where this was leaning, I should have seen it coming.

"I'm sorry Charles, but you're restricted to desk duty, pending reassignment."

It was the logical decision, I knew that, but it made me upset. Not only did I not fancy desk service much, but I did not want to leave Ms. Dawes on her own. Of course, she would get a replacement, but I felt I needed to be there for her. Especially after what she had done for me.

"Oh, come on! I'm not the one who's fucked up. The leak, the other ones, they should get punished."

"This isn't a punishment, Charles. I think you know that."

I did, really, I just found it hard to accept anyway but I could do nothing but head for my desk and a long boring day by the computer, drinking foul tasting coffee from plastic mugs and wondering what Ms. Dawes was doing now and hoping she

was safe at all times. I was grumpy, reluctantly taking on the tasks given to me, pointless ones like organizing duty rotas, and I lashed out at a colleague who came over with a pile of handwritten reports that needed to be transferred to electronic ones. I felt I could have been of more use elsewhere and my wish to be out there and do something that mattered was eating on me.

In the afternoon, Lorraine surprisingly called me into her office again. She did not seem pleased.

"Your line manager doesn't appreciate your attitude to administrative duties."

I shrugged my shoulders apologetically but did not feel very apologetic.

"They are not my strong suit."

"Just as well you're being restored to active duty at the Home Office, then."

Yes, yes, yes! I would be back.

"Thank you, Ma'am."

"Not me. Seems like you have made friends in high places."

Had *she* wanted me back? Had she requested it? For some reason that thought made me very happy, happier than it ought to. After all she was just a client like any other.

It seemed to annoy Lorraine that she had been overrun, but she only said;

"That's it. Piss off."

So, I did, and next day I returned to my place by Ms. Dawes side. She was already in her first meeting for the day when I arrived. She looked out through the office window and noticed my presence. She gave me a quick smile, then returned her focus to her meeting. I kept looking at her. Even when her words were not to be heard, she was so charismatic. Through the muting glass, I could see her expressive face change in silence, arguing, listening, frowning, focusing, smiling. She was not girlishly pretty, but so much more interesting than that, beautiful in her own special way with almost disproportionately large eyes and that mouth which seemed to be made for smiling but too seldom did.

She did not acknowledge that she had pulled any strings to have me back. When she was on the move to the car later in the day, she simply said;

"Good to have you back, PS James."

"I'm glad to be back."

And I really was.

-OG-

That weekend I was off work. I knew that Rebecka was not comfortable seeing too much of me, so I tried to stay out of the safe house in between. An old friend was in town, so we decided to meet up for drinks. Elvis was a soldier, that was how we knew each other, but meanwhile I had moved on he was still in the special forces and it was a rare treat to be able to see him. We had known each other for long, long before my marriage and we had shared so much – he was probably the person who knew me best in this world. He knew more about me than Rebecka ever had.

I think some people mistook him for carefree and shallow, but that was a jargon he used and there was quite some depth to him if you knew him well. With that said, he could also be a jack-ass, he was a good friend but probably the worst boyfriend in the world and sometimes the stories he told me about his many relationships made me cringe.

We met up for a few beers and spoke of how life had been since we last met. My substantially improved health condition and relationship with Sam and Rebecka, his life on tour – the little he could tell as most of it was classified information, his love-life – which was always a source of conversation as it was so fluctuating, my non-existent love-life which he thought was both tragical and comical.

"Charlie, Charlie, Charlie...", he said shaking his head. "You're a damn good-looking man and I'm sure women would fall at your feet if you let them."

I looked down spinning a coaster on the table, shrugged my shoulders.

"It's just not my priority right now. Sam is. Work is. Nothing else. I'm just glad to have a fully functioning life again."

"I don't know how you can consider your life fully functional if you don't get it off sometimes", he grinned.

"Elvis!"

"Okay, okay...let's drop the subject. So, Sam is fine. How about work then? Any interesting clients now?"

"Yes, I'm bodyguard for the Home Secretary since a few weeks."

He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head, looked like he was thinking of something pleasant.

"Aha, the Home Secretary, Molly Dawes. Not bad!"

"What do you mean?"

But the tone of his voice, and just knowing Elvis, I already could guess where this was going.

"She's one of my free passes."

"*One* of your free passes?"

"You know, kind of a celebrity you would be allowed to shag if you come across them, even if you're in a relationship."

"Yeah, I know what a free pass is, but first – aren't you supposed to have *one*, not several? And secondly, the Home Secretary of all people?!"

"Come on! Even a monk like you must have noticed she's beautiful... and then there's something about a woman in power... the thought of getting on top of her and feel that you are in charge."

I shuddered. I did not like what Elvis just said for so many reasons, it was just wrong on every level. I told him to zip it and we talked about other things, but on the way home I analysed what it was that had bothered me.

I did not want to picture him with her, because *I* wanted her. The realisation hit me with full force. The epiphany that I wanted to be with her in the most intimate way.

And I did not want to do things *to* her, I wanted to do things *with* her. Unlike Elvis had fantasised, I did not need a power trip of feeling superior shagging her like I owned her or push her down in any way, but I would want to be her equal. One man and one woman making love. The sudden need almost left me breathless.

I did not feel grateful to Elvis for alerting me to this. It was so totally inconvenient and inappropriate. I had to be 100% alert and focused on keeping her safe, not let my attention slip because I was distracted by the client herself. It was also unthinkable for other reasons. Even if she would have been attracted to me, which I was sure she was not, an affair with her bodyguard would be ridiculed and could be the end of her political career. This was simply something that never could happen for so many reasons. Still, when I went to bed on my couch in the safe house, slightly drunk as I was, I dreamt something unsettling, something forbidden and exciting, that made me wake up in the middle of the night with my entire body reacting in a way it had not done since long before Rebecka and I went separate ways. I was clearly in trouble.

Chapter 9: Charles

During my therapy sessions to treat the PTSD I had gradually learned not to shut off my feelings, quit placing them in boxes in some hidden place at the back of my brain and instead be open with them. It was achieving this which finally had enabled me to get through on the other side, be a fully functional man again. However, now I saw it necessary to dust off that skill, and resolutely put my newly discovered feelings for Ms. Dawes in such a mental box, carefully taped it closed and placed it in a god-forsaken corner with the intention never to open it again. At least that was what I told myself and it worked quite fine over the week that followed after my pub evening with Elvis. I focused on the job, stayed alert on the surroundings, never let my eyes linger on her longer than was motivated, held my conversations with her as brief as possible. I was quite satisfied with myself for being so professional. Then came the Friday and the PM's birthday party.

I had turned down Trinny's kind offer to arrange a dinner jacket for me, as I owned one which had been tailor-made for me during my university years and still fit me in the same way it had then. I brought it with me to the Home Office that morning, as I hardly could walk around in dinner jacket all day but wanted to be prepared to go directly to the party without having to stop by my flat. When Ms. Dawes saw the bag, she commented;

"Excellent. I'll be going home to change and have stylist help me get prepared so I look a bit more exciting than the regular boring me. You can just bring your clothes and get changed over there too."

I agreed, not to that she usually looked boring in any way, but to that it would be efficient to get changed at her place.

When we got to the flat, she referred me to her studio, said I could change there, meanwhile she was off to her bedroom and the ensuite bathroom with the stylist in tow. I briefly reflected upon that these days she did not hesitate at all to let me in there, in contrast to the first evening when my presence in her studio had seemed to upset her.

Changing clothes was a quick affair, so I was ready long before her and sat down in the armchair in her studio, let my gaze wander over the photos and little trinkets and drawings, taking the opportunity to try and decipher more about who she really was. There was only one photo of her, together with what I assumed to be her family. She seemed to be in her late teens, and already somehow stood out from the rest of the group in the photo even if I could not put my finger on exactly what made her do that. She was just different from the rest. She seemed to be the eldest of her siblings and I could count to five brothers and sisters. The parents were young for having teenage kids but looking like life had not been easy on them, and in the case of the father maybe not the booze either. There was one elderly woman in the photo, maybe a grandmother. The photographer had not managed to coordinate a photo where all nine looked into the camera and smiled simultaneously. Several of the smaller kids seemed to be half-fighting with each other, the mother appeared to try to keep them in check, the younger teen sister looked embarrassed to be there and the father gazed somewhere to the left, possibly drunk. Only the elderly woman and Molly looked straight into the camera, the woman smiling, Molly serious and like she wanted to be somewhere else. I

suddenly realised that when I looked at this picture I could only think of her as Molly, not Ms. Dawes or the Home Secretary. Maybe because that was who she had been then, unaware of who she would become in the distant future. I wondered how she had had the possibility to become who she was now, but I was not sure how she would take it if I asked her.

There were other photos of the family members growing older, and of the sister with a baby, then with a toddler and another baby – I assumed Ms. Dawes' nephews, her sister a young mother like their parents had been. The photos indicated that Ms. Dawes was the only one who had risen above her background and made a class-journey. I wondered how she felt about that, how they felt about that. Were they proud, or did they feel that they had lost her? Or maybe both?

I had returned to the first photo, that of the entire family when she spoke behind me and startled me.

"One of the few photos of the entire Dawes clan, and not even that one time we managed to pull ourselves together and make it a proper one. It says a bit about the ever-present chaos when there was no camera around."

It sounded to me like her voice was filled with both fondness and sadness. I turned around and took a deep breath at the sight of her.

Normally, she was wearing modest makeup and had her hair in a neat bun and always wore a blouse and a well-fitting jacket, paired either with slacks or pencil skirt. This evening, the stylist had transformed her, so she looked like a combination of Snow White and old-fashioned Hollywood glamour. Her fair

complexion was radiant, her black eyelashes long and made her green eyes look even larger than they normally were, her lips painted in a luscious tempting red. Her dark hair was styled in big waves and swept so it fell over one shoulder, held in place by a sparkling clasp on the other side. And the dress... She did not have a huge cleavage or a slit that went half-way up the thigh, but she did not need it. The ankle length dress was made of cream white silk and the thin fabric fell along her body, clung to her every curve, leaving very little to the imagination. I could see her hipbones, the soft curve of her nearly flat stomach, her small but perfectly shaped breasts. I wondered if there was even space enough between the dress and her body to fit in any underwear. She was absolutely amazing, and I just stared like a fool. Maybe that was why she felt compelled to ask, almost nervously;

"Do I look okay?"

I had to clear my throat before speaking.

"I don't know what to say that quite covers it... You look stunning."

For a moment we looked at each other, both serious, then her face split in a wide grin. How I loved it when she looked happy all the way to her eyes.

"So, I should give the stylist a big tip then?"

"You definitely should", I smiled back, relieved that the tension was gone.

Before she left the room, she glanced over her shoulder and said;

"You don't look too shabby yourself."

I felt my cheeks turning hot and was glad she had left so she did not see, and I realised that the box with feelings which I so carefully had taped up and put away, had been brought out into the light and was wide open.

-OG-

The PM was throwing quite the party; everyone dressed to their teeth, champagne in abundance, waiters swarming, three-course dinner at the most exquisitely set tables, a band playing, everything played out in beautifully decorated surroundings. Security was high due to the prominent guest list, so I could allow myself to relax a bit as my eyes were not the only ones watching over the guests. My focus should be on the surroundings, the room, the people moving around, but again and again I was drawn to her, could not keep my eyes away from her. Even though there were many beauties in the room, she stood out, almost floating around in that amazing dress. She looked surprisingly comfortable in it, considering how far it was from her everyday attire, considering how far it was from the teenage girl in the photos. She mingled, she made conversation, she smiled and laughed. I could see that I was not the only one drawn to her – many men sought her attention, and I felt a pang of jealousy. I was not entitled to it but could not help it. Every once in a while, her eyes met mine from a distance and she gave me a smile, almost like we shared a secret, but I was not aware of what that may be. When the dancing started, she was asked to dance time and time again and I wished that I had been allowed to hold her only one dance.

Suddenly, she came towards me with surprising speed considering her high heels, but I had seen her practice that before.

"You have to rescue me", she hissed.

"From what?", I glanced around us, suddenly alarmed.

"From Rob McDonald. I have already put up with one dance with him but now he seems set on another. I can't stand it, his hands on me. Eeeek! Please, please, please, dance with me Sergeant James."

"It's not appropriate Ms. Dawes."

"It will be less of a scandal than if I have to slap Rob in the face for touching my arse", she smiled, and I could not argue with that.

So, I took her hand and led her to the dance floor, with one hand I held hers and placed the other one at the small of her back. I'm not sure which feeling I enjoyed most; holding her small hand wrapped in my larger one, or my other palm feeling the warmth of her skin through the thin silk as I held it to her back. Or maybe it was that her whole body was just inches from mine, in between touching as we moved and the narrow space of air separating us seemed electrically charged.

"You can dance for real!", she exclaimed, almost like an accusation. "I mean, I can't dance really but when you lead me it feels like I can."

"Two years in Miss Huffington's dance school", I smirked. "Very reluctant attendance on my part but my mum thought that was skills every young man ought to acquire."

She laughed and said, mockingly;

"You certainly are a most accomplished young man. It serves you well now, doesn't it?"

"I'll thank mum next time I see her and tell her I got a compliment from the Home Secretary thanks to those dance lessons."

"Don't remind me."

"Don't remind you of what?"

"That I'm the Home Secretary. Not right now. I just want to enjoy this dance, it's the best dance of this evening. The best moment of this evening."

"Seriously?" I laughed as I thought she was only jesting, but she looked me in the eyes and said, now without any smile.

"Seriously."

She was so close to me and a whiff of the same lovely perfume which had been lingering in the air of her studio the first time I was in there, reached my nostrils. I felt I did not want to stop breathing this air that was her, that had been in touch with her skin and acquired her scent. I wanted to stay like this, holding her, unless I could hold her even closer. Then the song ended, and I had to let go, but she did not step away.

"Can you please take me home?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, it's late, I'm knackered, and I don't think it will get any better than this"

"Okay... as you wish Ma'am", the last I said because I felt a need to create some distance between us, to be able to remain professional. An expression passed over her face. I could not interpret it for sure, but I got the feeling maybe she appreciated the formal 'ma'am' less than ever in this specific moment.

Chapter 10: Charles

Ms. Dawes said her good byes and we got into the car with Terry. I asked him to drive to the flat, but she leaned forward, asking;

"Could we pass a drive-in and get some fast-food to bring with us?"

"You're hungry?" I was surprised as she just had been through a dinner.

"Yes, starving", she smiled.

"Burger King? There's one nearby."

"That will do."

When we stopped, she placed her order in the microphone, then turned to me and asked if I wanted anything. I was actually starving too, since I had not eaten since before we went to her flat to get prepared, so after a second's hesitation I made an order. I was not sure if she would want me to keep her company eating, or if she expected me to eat it on my way home but I thought that I would know soon enough, and I needed to eat something either way.

When we got up to the flat, she put her paper bags down on the coffee table by the sofa and nodded to me to do the same, so then I reckoned she expected me to stay.

"I hadn't figured you as someone who eats junk-food, so far I have thought of you as the healthy-salad-kind-of-person."

"This is going back to my roots. I was raised on junk-food but less exclusive than Burger King", she smirked.

"Really? Anyway, I'm impressed by your appetite, especially as you're quite small" I glanced at her bags, she had ordered at least as much as I. "After all, you have eaten a three-course meal tonight."

"That's where you're mistaken. I ate almost nothing during dinner", she laughed. "I had this idea that it would make me look pregnant in this dress. I mean, I love it, but it shows *everything*. There's no way to hide a swollen stomach here."

She looked down on her own body and so did I, and could only silently agree to that, yes, the dress really showed every curve of her slender body.

"I need to get changed before I eat", she concluded. I thought that would be a relief, so she would wear something less tantalising – but then she turned her back to me, enhancing my predicament instead of putting an end to it.

"Will you help me with the zipper? Sorry to ask, but I'm not sure I can manage on my own without destroying the dress."

She did not say it in a seductive, husky voice, just her normal one, so I felt completely certain that all there was to it was that she needed help. Still, I had to focus on my fingers to make sure they did not tremble slightly as I unzipped her. I did it slowly, partly because I did not want to risk getting stuck in the delicate fabric and destroy the dress, but I must admit that I also did it slowly because I could not help enjoying the moment. I made sure not to touch her skin, I did not want to be creepy and scare her off – she had enough of that with Rob and I would never want to be *that* guy. I just pulled the zipper down slowly, touching the fabric softly and saw her bare back appear, probably skipped a breath when I noticed that my guess

earlier had been correct and she was indeed not wearing any bra. I would have loved in that moment to let my fingers caress her soft skin, to push the dress off from her shoulders and let it fall to the floor, but instead I took a step back and said with surprisingly steady voice;

"There you go."

"Thanks, I'll be right back."

When she returned a few minutes later, she had wiped off the red lipstick and taken away the clasp in her hair, so it now fell loose over both her shoulders. She was wearing a pair of joggers and the West Ham t-shirt I had seen hanging over a chair before. She was about four inches shorter as she now was barefoot. She still looked amazing but in a more approachable way.

"Princess time is over", she joked.

I was not so sure about that.

"Now you'll have to tell me the story about that t-shirt."

She looked down, like she had not thought about what she put on.

"The Dawes family are all West Ham supporters. Well, my dad is, and he wouldn't let anyone under his roof cheer for any other team."

"What are they like, your family?" I had been curious for long and hoped I was not over-stepping by asking, but she did not seem to mind. She had opened her bags

and started dipping chips in ketchup, simultaneously unboxing some chili cheese and now talked between chews.

"Poor. When I grew up we were really poor, and too many. Too many to make ends meet, too many for our small house. Mum, dad, Nan and the youngest ones still live in the same house but it's far better now because some of us have moved out so it's not so crowded and because I give them money, so they can have a decent life."

"You didn't when you grew up then? Have a decent life?"

"Barely. But you know, we were in good company, so I didn't think much of it until I changed school sometime during secondary school. Most of my friends had dads who were unemployed, drank too much, or both – if there was a dad present at all. Most of them had mums who had their first kid when they were almost kids still themselves. It was the Newham normal. It was rough, but we knew how to get by, if only just."

"What happened then, how did you end up here? It's quite a journey... and I'm not thinking geographically."

She had now attacked her burger and I had to laugh at her.

"You really weren't kidding when you said you were hungry, or that you like junk-food."

"Oi, you cheeky bastard! It's been ages since I had a proper burger and I so deserve it after starving through an entire party and having Rob drooling over me on top of that."

She laughed too and for a second I could picture her in a Newham street, talking back to someone there instead of me.

"Sorry for interrupting you, you were about to tell me how you ended up here."

"Well, I was good in school and I had a teacher who encouraged me, helped me to get a scholarship and to get my parents to accept it. Christ, they didn't get the point of studying at all, so that was a big leap for them, to let me go off to a private school in another part of the city. I think they felt that they lost me."

"And did they?"

"Partly, I think they did. It opened my eyes to another world, made me realise that I didn't have to settle for that life, that I could achieve more with mine – and in the end, that I might make a difference for others. That maybe I could make life better for other Newham kids and their likes."

"And now? Do you see your family?"

"I do, but not as often as I'd like to. My relationship with dad has always been complicated because he was an alcoholic, but it's better now. But mum, my sister and I have always been close. They come visit me, but they're never comfortable here. I'm not allowed to go there for security reasons."

She looked down when she said this and when she looked up again her eyes were damp.

"You miss them."

"I do! Sometimes I don't know if it's the right choice to be here, to have this job, to live in this flat, not be able to go home to mum when I want to. I have had to change so much – part of it I wanted, but part of it just came with the career... I'm talking too much, I shouldn't bother you with my personal issues", she interrupted herself.

"I don't mind, it's interesting."

"I doubt that. Tell me about you instead. How did you grow up?"

I told her about my childhood in Bath. How I had grown up as an only child to wealthy parents, always wishing I had a large family like hers, which made her roll her eyes like I did not know what I had been wishing for. Told her about how I had been sent off to boarding school, missed home, had friends and done well but never felt completely at ease, and it was the same during my university years. Inspired by an uncle who was a major, I had decided to apply to Sandhurst and there I finally felt like I was on the right path. When I eventually became a captain in charge of a platoon and was deployed, I was sure I was in my right element.

"I liked it almost to the end, but by the end of my final tour I was suffering from PTSD. I had been through too much, lost people who were important to me without dealing with it. It became worse, or at least more apparent when I got back home. In hindsight, it seems strange that I didn't realise it and accepted help much sooner, but I guess that's part of the illness. You don't think straight, don't make

the best decisions or even feel like you normally would in a situation. I was a completely different personality for a while. It had been bad between me and my wife for quite some time, but during a period she was frightened of me – rightfully so, I can admit now. So, she filed for divorce and I lost custody of Sam."

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. It made me wake up, finally seek help. Now that I'm fine I see him quite often. He stays with me every other weekend and we meet in between too, even if he's staying with Rebecka most of the time. It works better that way with my working hours."

"But you miss him when you're not with him?"

"Yeah, miss him like hell. Like you with your family I suppose, but I'm just glad that I can be a good dad to him at all, that I managed to turn things around."

"How is he after the school attack?"

"Fine, as he was not there thanks to you. Annoyed because he can't go to school and has to live in a safe house, away from his stuff. Rebecka and I were more shaken because we realise we could have lost him."

"I wish I had kids too", she surprised me by confessing.

"You were married too... What happened?"

"Oh, Roger... That was a mistake from beginning to end. Not that I didn't have feelings for him in the beginning. He wooed me, with roses, romantic gestures,

dates of a kind I had never been to and I was so overwhelmed that a man like him showed interest in me. I had not gotten used to my own role as a "shooting star in politics" and I was star struck by him. His looks, his confidence, his power – and that he seemed to have feelings for me, it was all so exciting."

She looked sad at the memory.

"I fell in love with him, but I didn't really know him and after a while as married, I realised that he didn't truly love *me*. He loved the idea of us as a power-couple. To him it was more like marriages in old days, you know when it was business transactions which both parties benefited from, but there was little or no love. He did not want me for me, he wanted me by his side because he thought we could both make splendid careers. That was the only thing he was interested in, not me, us... and children were definitely not on the agenda. They would have gotten in the way of our careers, he made that clear. It was a hard lesson to learn, a painful one. I was in a relationship which was not what I wanted so I had to end it. I wanted... love plain and simple, without any ulterior motives. Is that pathetic? I filed for divorce, which of course didn't look good so now he hates my guts, as you could see when we met."

I was touched by her story. I did not think her wish pathetic, I thought she deserved so much more. If things had been different I would have loved to be that man for her, the one who loved her for her but I knew the circumstances under which we had met prevented that.

"I wondered how you ever could have fallen for him. He seemed like such an asshole, and you seem so nice. I hope you don't mind me saying that?"

She laughed.

"No, no I don't mind."

She had finished her meal and leaned back in the sofa, suddenly looked a bit tired but still happy.

"It's strange... You're actually a posh twat with a background similar to his, but in difference to how it was with him, I feel like I can be myself with you."

"I take that as a compliment even if you're calling me a twat. I suppose that's one notch up from monkey, thanks."

"You should, take it as a compliment I mean. I almost never feel like myself. God, I don't even talk like myself anymore, for better and for worse."

"You would speak cockney, I assume? How did you learn not to?"

"Speech therapist did the trick. At the end of our marriage I used to talk cockney at home, especially when we argued, just to annoy Roger because he hated it. It made him feel like he had married a white trash girl he told me. Now I only use it if I see my family, or if I'm really, really mad so I forget myself."

"I would love to see that."

"Me being that mad? You should hope you never piss me off that way."

"Nah, just the cockney part."

"I'll think about it", she smiled.

Time had passed quickly, I'm not sure how long we had been sitting talking in the sofa. Now we were interrupted by the night team calling on me, asking if I had fallen asleep on the couch, and I told them no and that we could make the exchange.

We gathered the paper bags, empty boxes and mugs and put them in the bin. A strange normal thing to do together with the Home Secretary.

"Thank you", she said.

"For what?"

"For a really nice time. For letting me be myself for a while without having the feeling that someone will stab me as soon as I turn my back to them."

"The pleasure was mine."

It was. I had enjoyed this evening far too much and was in more trouble than ever. And if things were not complicated already, it got worse three days later when my boss, together with Anne Sampson asked me, no, ordered me, to spy on Ms. Dawes.

Chapter 11: Molly

As soon as the door closed behind him, I ran towards my bedroom and jumped into bed, literally, so I bounced on it like a child. Very not in manner worthy of Home Secretary. I felt all giddy, and I knew that the champagne and wine I had been drinking earlier had little to do with it. *He* had everything to do with it. I replayed all the best moments from the evening in my head – and he was part of them all.

When he turned to me as I walked into the studio once the stylist was done with me, so incredibly handsome in dinner jacket and white shirt that my heart almost stopped, I had realised that his opinion of how I looked was the only opinion I cared about this evening. I had wanted him to think me beautiful and his eyes seemed to tell me that he did, and then his words too even if I had to pull them out of him. That dress was not like me, but in retrospect I knew I had been thinking of him when I bought it. Had wanted him to see me in it, had wanted him to think I was something special. Had wanted him to want me.

During the party, I loved all those brief moments when our eyes met across the room. Each time I wished I could be close to him instead of parted by a crowd, but I also liked the feeling that we shared a common secret, even if I had no idea what that was. It helped me endure talking to and dancing with Rob McDonald. He did not seem discouraged at all by the awkward near-date I had interrupted, instead he seemed more eager than ever to be close to me. His sweaty palm too far down on my back, his stale breath on my face when we danced. I knew I could not stand it a second time, so when I saw him striding towards me over the floor again, it gave me the excuse I had wanted all evening to dance with Sergeant James. Charles.

I had never called him that to his face, but I had thought the name many times. Dreamed of moaning it close to his ear.

He had never touched me before and now he was holding me steadily as we danced. Despite my high heels, he was so tall compared to me and being in his arms made me feel both small and safe at the same time. Despite his length and a body that ought to be heavy from muscles, he moved so lightly over the dance floor and when he nimbly lead me it felt easier to dance, and dance well, than I ever had experienced before. Unlike Rob, his breath smelled fresh, minty and he was wearing an after-shave I really, really liked. So much that I now considered if I should go to a perfume shop this weekend and try to find it, just to have it and sniff at when I felt like it, but it would be very awkward if he spotted the bottle when he was doing his regular check of the apartment. 'How come I have a man's after-shave? Well... errrr... And it's the same that you have? You don't say!?' That was a conversation I would not like to have. It would be very weird and difficult to explain, so I simply had to hope I would get to smell him wearing it again.

And his hands on me, that was nothing like Rob's. Large, comforting, yet exhilarating hands that did not move anywhere they should not – even if I would have liked them too. And later, when he unzipped my dress... I felt his breath on my neck, like a breeze moving the little hairs there, giving me goosebumps as he carefully, excruciatingly slowly pulled the zipper down, and I was dying for him to touch me. Hoped he would do it, if only by mistake, heard my blood whiz in my ears and the faint sound from the zipper, in the otherwise compact silence. He remained completely professional, just stepped away as soon as he was done – and I liked him even more for it.

Then we just had the greatest time, relaxing in the sofa. Had the meal, mixed seriousness with banter and I felt I got to know him a little better. I could have stayed up talking to him all night, but then he had to go. Naturally, because this was not a date, he was not to sleep over or even give me a kiss on the cheek as he left. This was his workday, I was his job and it was time for him to quit and go home and leave foolish little me here. Foolish because I was beginning to fall in love with my bodyguard. I snorted at the thought, if people knew! Celebrities like singers, seemed to fall for their bodyguards every now and then. Like Britney Spears, or Whitney Houston – but that was a film come to think of it. Anyway, for them a bit of gossip involving a hot bodyguard might only be a boost to their careers, making them more interesting. For me it would likely achieve killing my career. Yet, thinking of those brown eyes, his smile, sometimes reserved, sometimes warm, his way of biting his lower lip when he was thinking about something, the dark, thick curls that I would like to run my fingers through, grab and pull him towards me – all that made my knees feel weak and he was what I saw when I closed my eyes and tried to fall asleep.

Even if I knew there could be nothing between us, the thought of seeing him again Monday morning made me feel happy anticipation all through the weekend. He started later than usual due to a meeting with his boss, and when he finally came he quickly dampened the happy feeling I had had. Suffocated it completely even. I had a meeting in my office and through the large glass window saw him arrive, replace Kim Knowles, and I smiled at him. He just looked back at me with his face completely devoid of emotions, eyes dark without any twinkle. There was no connection between us, nothing, no acknowledgement that we had had a great time together a few days ago, no sign that he ever had smiled at me or intended to do it

again, that he knew me at all. I was taken completely by surprise and I felt deeply disappointed. So disappointed that it ached inside. Had he only kept me company to be kind and now he thought enough was enough and wanted to draw a line and stay completely professional? I did not know or understand, but stupidly enough it hurt. It hurt in a different way than it had when I realised Roger did not love me for me, but it hurt and it made me feel silly.

A bit later I had another one-to-one with Stephen Hunter-Dunne, one of those regular meetings I had set up to try to get a grip of him and what was going on within the Security Service. I feared what purposes he and the PM would use the RIPA-18 regulation for, the possibilities seemed endless and not in a positive way. Many in the public were against it, but I had the uneasy feeling that forces to drive it through were strong despite its unpopularity. I got no new information out of Stephen this day though, he just tried to get my permission to interfere with Anne Sampson's investigation of the 1st October attack and when I said I could not allow it because it would set a dangerous precedent, he could hardly hide his annoyance.

"Her people are getting nowhere, Home Secretary!"

"Police jurisdiction is clear Stephen."

"But..."

"That's enough. We will not discuss it any further."

He was fuming when he left me, and I had the feeling that I had an enemy rather than an ally in him, but as they say – keep your friends close and enemies even closer. That was what I was trying to do.

Sometime during that meeting, I looked out again and this time Sergeant James really had a stern-face on and was looking at me searchingly, his brows furrowed – like I was doing something bad. Again, I wondered what was the matter with him, without getting any answer of course. When it was lunch time and I finally got out from my office, it was no different. He just greeted me courtly, then kept his distance, said very few words, more like a stranger than he had been even on his first day working for me – and I understood nothing. This behaviour continued over the next days and eventually I gave up any tries of chatting and reluctantly accepted that this was the new normal.

The following Monday, I was invited to a meeting at No. 10 Downing Street. As I walked the short distance between the car and the entrance, there was a flock of journalists gathered, shouting questions and I heard;

"Moving in Home Secretary?"

"Is this your new home, Home Secretary?"

Apparently, the PM and Roger were not the only ones who speculated that I aimed for this address and it made me uneasy. I glanced at James, but he had on the stone-face that now seemed to be a permanent feature, no indication he even had heard.

My favourite ex-husband was there of course, greeting me as jovially as ever;

"The PM's pissed off. Thinks you're hogging the limelight. Naturally I disabused him of the idea that you would attempt a leadership challenge." His voice filled with sarcasm.

"What have I done now? I haven't even given any interviews since the one with Hawkes."

"No official ones maybe, but apparently you danced with one journalist at the PM's birthday party and he was completely mesmerised by your wits and charm, which he described in detail in his weekend column, so everyone's Saturday breakfast read was how amazing you are. Quite the little campaign for yourself."

"I'm sorry Roger, it seems like I'm just not able to please the two of you. Whatever I do, it's wrong. I think I even told that journalist that I'm pro RIPA-18, so I thought I was doing you good – but this time I was too *charming*. I can't believe it."

I walked past him and asked myself how I ever could have been married to this intolerable man.

The meeting was a discussion about RIPA-18, and behind locked doors I once again aired my fears for implementing it, tried to make them all listen until the PM and Roger essentially told me to shut up. By the end of it I felt people were swaying in their direction, the regulation one step closer to being approved. Once the meeting was over, the PM asked me to stay behind and I braced myself for another bollocking. Now the topic turned out to be another another than my party conversation with a journalist or the abominable regulation.

"What is the latest progress of the 1st October attack investigations?", he demanded to know.

I repeated the latest updates from Anne Sampson, which was that the investigations were not as fruitful as one could have hoped.

"I'm starting to lose confidence in the police's ability to make progress", said the PM. "So, I'd like to take up Stephen Hunter-Dunne's proposal for the Security Service to assume a role in interviewing the 1/10 bombers."

I wondered how he knew of that proposal. I certainly had not told him. Had he talked to Stephen himself about this? It made me very concerned, but I tried to remain calm.

"Sir, that would be setting a dangerous precedent. This can only be a police matter. I've already told Stephen no."

"And now I'm telling you yes. Make it happen, Molly. I want those bombers and all their accomplices behind bars. It does not look good that time goes by without result."

"I must object..."

"No, you mustn't. We are done here."

And I realised that I could say nothing to make him change his mind, he wanted the Security Service in on this.

"Sir."

I could not believe I had been overrun in that way. He was forcing me to force Anne Simpson to accept Stephen's interference, against my will. I knew what she would think of me when I told her. She would think that I was the one not trusting her and had MI-5 run my errands, when I was in fact trying to prevent Stephen from going off-piste. I was furious when I got into the car, sat down in my usual place

behind James with Terry beside him in the driver's seat. My thoughts were floating as we drove through the streets. What was the PM and Stephen up to? I did not have a good gut feeling about this whole situation, and the direction the RIPA-18 was leaning made me feel desperate. This was all so wrong.

My thoughts were abruptly disrupted, and my focus returned to the immediate surroundings as someone fired a shot at the window on Terry's side of the car.

Chapter 12: Molly

Someone was shooting at the car. The sound was muffled, I guess a silencer was used, but I immediately understood what it was anyway. One shot hit the window...two... the third went through and made half of Terry's head explode like a watermelon does if you drop it to the ground. He must have died immediately. Blood splashed all over me and I heard someone scream at the top of their lungs and realised it was me, although it felt like all of this must be happening to someone else, it was completely surreal. God, Terry! Naturally, being dead he lost control of the car, but Sergeant James managed to simultaneously slide down in his seat, grab the wheel and steer the car to the side, stop it with breaks squealing, and shout to me;

"Down! Down, stay away from the windows! The bullets can pierce the windows but not the armoured metal!"

I had slid down by reflex, curled up on the floor, breathing heavily, screaming, sobbing in fear as more and more bullets hit the car, the shooter did not cease. I jolted from fear every time a new bullet hit the vehicle. This was someone who seriously wanted me dead. I heard James call for assistance through his radio.

"We have lost Terry. We will wait here for back-up."

His voice so calm, I could not believe it, but this was what he was here for. I had never thought for real that anything like it would happen, but now it was. Another bullet ricocheted against the metal and I squealed.

"Look at me, look at me, Molly." His eyes met mine through the space between the seats. "Take my hand."

I gave him my hand, hesitated to take his as mine was all bloody, but he had no such qualms, just took it and laced his fingers with mine, preventing me from freaking out in panic.

"It's okay, Molly. Remember, the bullets can't get through the armour plating. We should just wait here for assistance. It will take a couple of minutes. You're doing really well."

I sure as hell did not feel like I was doing well at all, and as seconds, minutes went by without help arriving I wondered what took them so long. There were new shots, and despite that he held my hand I could not stop myself from screaming.

"Why isn't help coming? We're going to die here."

"No, we're not, not on my watch.

There was communication through his radio that they would not send in unarmed officers because risk was too high, and we had to wait further for back-up. Suddenly he climbed back to me, taking a risk as he briefly exposed himself through the windows. He crouched beside me, took my face between his palms.

"You will be all right. We will be all right. You have to be brave, I will leave you and try to get to the shooter."

"No, stay with me!"

"I have promised to protect you, and I will. I don't know why the assistance is delayed, I have to try to take him out. I need to get out there."

His face so close, his eyes looking into mine, like a safe point to fix on to stay sane, not panic completely – how would I manage without them? He squeezed my hands one last time, then opened the door ajar, quickly slid out of the car and was gone. I stayed on the floor, panting, squealing, more terrified than I ever had been as more bullets kept bouncing against the metal.

Finally, the shooting stopped and after what seemed like an eternity, police came and opened the door, helped me out and to an ambulance. I had to take one last look at Terry, to say good bye to the man that had been driving me for three years but wished I had not had to see half his face gone, replaced by a bloody mess. I was taken to the hospital to get examined and cleaned up. I stood for long in a warm shower, scrubbing myself and saw the water turn red, then pink, finally clear but still felt like I had Terry's blood on me.

I was informed that Sergeant James had spotted the assassin at the top of a building, managed to get there and take him out, shot him as he would not surrender, just kept shooting. He had not been identified yet. It would take some time before James returned because he had to leave a statement, after action report, about what had happened. It was not known if this was a lone madman, or someone who had accomplices and therefore the threat to me was considered to remain even if this shooter himself was now dead.

So, after such a dreadful experience I was not even allowed to return to my own home, cuddle up in my bed or hide myself in my armchair under my favourite

blanket. I was taken to an anonymous hotel room, heavily guarded. I was informed that the country's threat level had been increased to critical. So far there was nothing indicating that this was connected to the 1st October attack, but it could not be ruled out either.

Someone was kind enough to bring me some clothes from the flat, so I could change from the hospital gown I had been offered in place of my blood-stained clothes. Even though I now was in a safe place, clean and changed I was shaken to the core. I was scared and the only thing I wanted was for Sergeant James to return. I knew there was a whole lot of competent people watching over me, but *he* was the one who made me feel safe. After this attack I was no longer sure who I could trust, but I felt sure I could trust him even if he had been acting strange the last week. The concern in his eyes in the car while the bullets had been raining on us, his calming words, the way he had risked being shot at when he left the car to try to get to the assassin – I trusted him more than anyone.

Kim Knowles informed me that in addition to guards outside my door and further down the corridor, one of them would always be staying in the room next door and I just needed to call on any of them if there was anything. I was grateful for all the safety measures but only wished he would return sometime soon. When he finally knocked the door, came in and closed it behind him I was just trying to prepare myself a cup of tea, but I found that my trembling hands made it difficult. He stood leaning against the doorway, arms crossed, and I could not let him know exactly how glad I actually was to have him back.

"No complaints about the surroundings, but it's unsettling not to be allowed back into your own home." I heard how tired I sounded.

"How are you? Are you okay?"

"How can I be? But I'll survive I suppose..."

"It was surely a nut-job by one man acting alone, so you don't have to fear anymore", he attempted to reassure me.

"Does SO15 know anything about him yet?"

"They would probably tell you before they tell me."

"I've been thinking all afternoon - why didn't help come? Why were the police held back from entering the square?"

"They didn't want to send in unarmed officers, it was not safe, they would have risked their lives."

"I didn't mean them, I meant the armed response vehicles, the ARVs. Surely they must have been able to get there sooner – unless someone ordered them to stay back?"

A flicker in his eyes. Had thought the same? If so he did not care to share his thoughts.

"I don't know Dawes. There's no reason why anyone would hold them back."

"We were under attack! Caught in the line of fire! Who would have the power to do so, to give such an order to hold resources back?"

He did not seem comfortable to be speculating about this.

"That would be an executive officer at SO15, like Anne Sampson... or someone higher up in command, but don't draw any hasty conclusions now. It could be down to unfortunate circumstances."

"I'm scared! A man tried to kill me, and it seems like someone maybe wanted to let him do it."

"I can't imagine ARVs were held back without a good reason. First priority is always preservation of life."

"I was being shot at!"

My hands were now shaking uncontrollably, and I tipped the teacup on its tray and started crying. Suddenly he was by my side, took my hands and held them still.

"Calm down, it will be okay. No one is going to harm you, I'll make sure of that."

He was holding my hands but seemed hesitant to step closer, and now I very much needed him to do that, to hold me.

"I'm not the Queen, you are allowed to touch me. Please, can you hold me", I begged him.

He still looked hesitant about if it was appropriate, but there was no one there to see us so in the end he stepped into me and wrapped his arms around me. I'm not

sure how long I stood there, leaning my head against his chest, heard his steady heart beats, felt the calming effect of his body heat through the clothes and for a moment I felt completely safe. All I wanted was to stay like this, have him near me. It felt like he had his lips to my hair and when I finally looked up on him, he had his head turned down to me and our lips were so close. I did not think, just felt and acted on instinct and suddenly my lips grazed over his. First once almost by mistake, then once more because I could not resist. I wanted him to respond, wanted him to kiss me back, and for a second I thought he would, but instead he took a deep breath and stepped away from me.

"This is not right, you're upset, and I can't let you do this."

I was upset and maybe that was what made me act, but I had wanted this for so long. It had nothing to do with my exposed situation except that it had made me unable to hold back. I immediately felt ashamed though, knowing I had put him in an awkward position he probably did not wish for at all. I was the higher ranking of the two of us and it was so completely inappropriate of me to make a pass at him. I turned my back to him in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have... I'm not myself."

"I know... and no worries, I don't hold it against you in any way. I'm not offended. It's just that I have to focus on my job which is protecting you, and you don't need to do something you immediately would regret."

I would not regret it, I knew that for sure, not if he had wanted it too – but he did not.

"Can you please leave me alone?"

I hated that my voice was breaking, but I did not take his rejection well after everything else this day. He watched me silently for a few seconds and I felt so small under his gaze, his arms again crossed over his chest, distantly, defensively, no longer a place where I could seek refuge and comfort.

"I'll go but I'll be outside or in the room next door if you need me."

I *did* need him, but in ways which he could not be there for me, so it was better that he left. I just nodded. Before opening the door, he paused.

"Molly, I..."

I met his eyes, had no idea what he wanted to say.

"...no, sorry, nothing." And he opened the door and left.

I sunk down on the bed, feeling lonelier than ever. I had longed for him to come and then I had made fool of myself. Overstepped in the relationship employer vs. employee. Oh, my god if a tabloid had been able to expose such juicy details – I would have been completely fucked. At least that was something I felt sure about, that he would never tell anyone what just had happened, but it was a small consolation in this situation. He had rejected me. He did not want me like I wanted him, that was painfully obvious. It was not late, but I was exhausted and I was sad, so I went to bed, pulled the duvet over my head and cried silently, feeling not only threatened but also like a pathetic failure for having tried to kiss my bodyguard.

Protecting Miss Dawes – a job like any other

Chapter 13: Charles

I was devastated to see her so distressed, and no wonder that she was after seeing her driver being shot dead, his blood smearing all over her and then fearing for her own life. I did not dare to take the initiative to hold her, but when she asked me it was all I wanted. Hold her and keep her safe. She felt so small and fragile in my arms, and she smelled so amazing. It felt so good I never wanted to let her go. When she let her lips touch mine it was a total shock, like someone had used a stun gun and electrified me. It took every ounce of self-discipline I had, not to let my lips crash down on hers and kiss her with the intensity of all the emotions I had inside me, but I could not do it for so many reasons. I could not allow myself to blur the lines more than I already had, if I got involved with her I would not be able to keep my head clear and protect her as she had to be protected. I could not imagine stepping down either, now that she needed me most. Secondly, I did not think she really wanted it. She was apparently in an emotional turmoil after the day and in need of closeness and physical contact to comfort her, but that was not the same thing as really wanting me. I could not take advantage of something she would for sure regret when she came to her senses. I did not want to be her mistake, the mere thought of it made me feel sick. Lastly, I was not sure where I had her. I had been told by people I normally trusted that she was dangerous, and I had been asked to spy on her. That made me wonder if my judgement had been clouded when it came to her because my attraction to her was so strong. I needed to keep my head cool and find out. But it was hard. It felt all wrong to let her go, to see the expression of disappointment and embarrassment over the rejection on her face. To walk out of that room and leave her alone was one of the hardest things I have ever done.

A week earlier, I had been called to a meeting with CSI Lorraine Craddock. When I arrived there Monday morning, I was still in a great mood after the previous Friday evening with Molly. It was increasingly difficult to think of her as anything else than Molly, the girl in West Ham t-shirt who I wanted to smile at me again. When I dreamt of her she was not the unapproachable Home Secretary, and I dreamt of her both when I was sleeping and when I was awake. The meeting with Lorraine abruptly woke me up from that reverie and made me realise how far I had strayed from being professional. When I arrived at Lorraine's office she was not alone, but unexpectedly had the company of Anne Sampson. As far as I knew she had never set foot here in this office before so something extraordinary must be going on. Yet, I was surprised over the direction the conversation took when Lorraine started talking.

"Stephen Hunter-Dunne, the Director General of the Security Service... How many times would you say the Home Secretary has met with him in the last weeks?"

"Errrrm... I have not kept count, Ma'am."

Now Anne Sampson chimed in.

"They're having almost daily conferences without me, isn't it so? They're obviously keeping me out of the loop. Why?"

I was totally perplexed.

"I'm never in those meetings, it's just the two of them so I wouldn't know", I said honestly and wondered where this was going.

"I'm worried about what the two of them are plotting. I know Stephen is way too eager to take over the investigation of the 1st October attack and I'm not sure she will deny him that. And this RIPA-18 which they both are advocating..."

I knew *she* did not, but it would feel like a betrayal to say that as she had told me in confidence.

"... it will give Stephen and her access to an unlimited amount of information that could be used for unknown purposes.

"Ma'am?" Still I did not understand the purpose of this conversation.

"We think she is a dangerous politician, and the combination of the two of them even more worrisome. We need to keep a close eye on her and her activities. This is where you come in. You know everyone she meets, when, where, how long. We want you to keep us updated."

My eyes shifted to Lorraine, was she in on this plan?

"You want me to *spy* on her? Is that it?" I asked straight out, all this gave me a very uneasy feeling in the stomach. She was the last person I would like to spy on.

Lorraine had the decency to at least look a little bit embarrassed.

"Spy is a bit exaggerated maybe, but to be alert and let us know what you see."

"Isn't that just semantics? It sounds a whole lot like spying to me. I have got my duties as PPO, I would rather stick to those."

Anne Sampson stepped forward.

"Oh, I see. She's got you wrapped around her finger, hasn't she? Of course, she would want to keep you close to her, or at least make you feel that way, make you feel special, to ensure you are loyal to her – but remember that this is a *job*, and we are your employer first hand, not her. Remember where your loyalties should be."

Now I felt my own cheeks burning. She *had* made me feel like we had a special connection, but could Anne be right, and it was just part of a strategy to ensure my loyalty? To ensure that I would not spill information she did not want me to?

"We're expecting to get weekly updates, James", Lorraine stated.

That was the end of the discussion. If I had not had feelings for Molly, I think I would have pushed back further. Now I did not trust myself, that my judgement was not blurred and the last thing I wanted was that they got suspicious about any feelings from my end, so I reluctantly accepted.

It was with heavy steps I returned to the Home Office. I realised that to be able to follow this order, and find out if Molly was indeed who they feared, I would need to take a big step back in the relationship we had developed. If I had been a full-fledged spy I would of course cold-heartedly had used that closeness to gain information from her, but I was not. I was an army officer, turned police but not a spy. I did not have it in me to use the trust of someone I liked in that way, so if I was to succeed in following this order at all I would have to try to shut off the feelings I had and keep my distance to her. I hated it. When she looked at me and smiled and I did not return it, I saw surprise and possibly hurt pass over her face. I knew she did not let her guard down for many, and she had with me that evening in her sofa. She must wonder what was happening now even if she just needed

someone to confide in, relax with and did not feel the same as I. Or had it all just been part of a devious game from her end? Was she that deceptive? A sociopath, like Chantal had claimed. I hated my job that morning, and I hated it every day thereafter, because I had to be different to her than I wanted to. I had to distrust her and look for signs that she was up to something untoward. It felt like a betrayal to her, when she up to now never had done anything that in my eyes justified spying on her. Of course, now that Lorraine and Anne had pointed out to me that it was irregular that she had private meetings with Stephen Hunter-Dunne, I noticed how frequent they were and wondered what they were about. She did not disclose a word about it.

Now, this latest development, the attack... I could not make the pieces of the puzzle fit. Someone was after her. Was it because she was somehow a threat? Or because someone hated her for her political views? Or had it only been the action of a madman? A disturbingly well-equipped and skilled madman in that case, able to hit his target with precision from a long distance. I had seen his face after killing him. He looked like a Caucasian, like any English bloke. Of course, he could have been radicalised somehow, but I instinctively doubted that he had any relation to the 1st October bombers and their accomplices. Who else would want her dead? It had disturbed me too that it had taken assistance so long to reach us. Was she right that someone could have held resources back on purpose with the hope that the sniper would succeed? Whoever was after her, if there was someone beside this assassin out there, I intended to make sure they did not succeed. My superiors could force me to spy on her, but protect her I would anyway.

After the attack, I had expected that she might take a few days off, but she seemed determined to get back to work immediately. To Rob McDonald's concerned question if she really should, she just answered;

"No, I don't want to take a few days off. I have work to do and I need to keep myself occupied, keep my mind distracted from what happened, or I'll go mad."

For once, Rob and I seemed to agree that it would have been better for her to stay out of the lime-light for a while, to allow herself a break and recover, but she would not have it.

When we arrived to the Home Office, a group of journalist were waiting and she gave a brief interview – inside the doors, in the entrance, where she would be safe.

"Home Secretary, is there a concern you're still a target?"

"For security reasons I'm afraid I can't disclose any specifics."

She was good at avoiding giving out information when she did not want to. Maybe, she was hiding more from me than I had thought.

"Any comments on the assassination attempt?"

"Only that I'm extremely grateful for the swift and courageous actions of the police and security services and I'm deeply thankful there weren't more casualties than there was. One was one too many and my thoughts go to his family."

"How are you feeling, Home Secretary?"

"I'm feeling ready to resume my work."

But when she and I went up the elevator, in the silence with no one else around I heard her take deep breaths and glancing at her out of the corner of my eye, I saw that she closed her eyes and clenched her fists. In that moment, she did not seem ready to resume her work at all, but as soon as the doors opened, she straightened her back and pulled herself together, showing nothing as she exited. She had an impressive poker face, it could almost compete with mine.

She had a private meeting scheduled with Anne Sampson before lunch. Through the window glass, I could see on Anne's face that Molly was saying something which upset her enormously. In fact, she looked furious and when the meeting was over she stormed out without giving me any look of recognition. Later that afternoon I was called to Lorraine's office again.

Lorraine greeted me, and I noticed that Anne was again present, now a calmer version of her than earlier.

"Sergeant James, come in, sorry to keep you waiting. As you can imagine, it's pretty hectic around here following the attack on the Home Secretary."

"Any progress, Ma'am?"

"Not much yet. The shooter remains unidentified and we don't know if he was acting alone. However, we have called you here as a follow-up to our previous meeting. Do you have anything to report?"

"She did meet with Stephen-Hunter Dunne on one occasion, otherwise nothing that would raise any suspicion what so ever."

"You already know that I met with her today", Anne Sampson said. "She informed me she is now overruling me, or SO15. She's taking the 1st October attack off us and let Stephen and the Security Services take the lead in the investigations."

She shook her head and seemed so upset she found it difficult to speak.

"This is unjustified, unprecedented. She is a very dangerous politician. A politician that has to be stopped."

"Stopped in what way, Ma'am?" I asked, hearing the provoking tone in my own voice.

"I will ignore what I think you might be implying, Sergeant James. I mean stopped in the way that we need to collect more information about what she is up to and, if needed, stop her from doing it – not causing harm to her. Is that understood?"

"I wasn't implying anything, Ma'am." But I guess that I had been really, and I still was not sure if I could trust Anne Sampson. I was not sure if *anyone* could be trusted anymore, except myself.

"Look, Sergeant James. We find ourselves in a situation where the country's risk level is critical. Over that last months, there has been three attacks – to the train, to the school and to the Home Secretary, we don't know if they are related. In addition, we don't know if the Home Secretary and Stephen Hunter-Dunne can be trusted or if they are resorting to unacceptable methods because they think the situation motivates it. Or actually we do, overruling the police in the way they do now *is* unacceptable. We must gain intelligence to finds out what is going on and maybe prevent it, even if it means unusual methods."

I wanted to ask if we then were any better than the people she said she wanted to protect the country and the public from, but I kept my mouth shut and she continued.

"I understand that she thinks well of you and arranged for you to return when you were assigned to desk job after the school attack. After your excellent actions during this latest attack, I assume she will hold you in even higher regard. That allows you to be close to her...."

If she only knew how close, dangerously close. Closer than I could allow myself to be.

"As you know we have arranged to keep her at the Blackwood hotel with an adjoining room. We will be expecting that you stay there for much of the time. My surveillance team will provide you with the necessary equipment to monitor her meetings."

"I'm sorry, Ma'am, do you mean eaves-dropping to what's being discussed when I'm not allowed in the room?"

"You can call it that if you wish, or you can call it obtaining necessary information. If Stephen Hunter-Dunne or any of his lackeys come to see her, I want to know what is being said."

I wondered if this was lawful, but I let that part be her responsibility, however, my stomach cringed at the thought of doing this to Molly.

"If you hesitate to do this, we will have to replace you", Lorraine warned. "And I could also mention that we may need to review the need for your son and ex-wife to stay in the safe-house. As you know we have limited resources in that aspect and constantly need to review who is most in need..."

A very poorly disguised threat, or maybe extortion was a more fitting description.

"I'll do it", I interrupted her. Defeated. I did not want to leave Molly's side and I would not do anything that could jeopardise the safety of Sam and Rebecka. I had to do what they asked of me.

Already that evening, positioned in the hotel room next to Molly's, I unpacked the equipment and tried it out even if I knew she was not in a meeting, just to check if it worked. There was a door connecting the two rooms, which only could be opened if it was unlocked from both ends. It was the best surface to listen through as it was thinner than the walls, so I held the device too it. At first, I heard nothing, it was just quiet in the other room, no TV or music on. Then I heard her cry, sobbing loudly. I could not bear listening for long, because it made me want to knock on that door, so she would open and let me in so I could take her in my arms. Even if I did not know if she was to be trusted, I could not get rid of those feelings and it made me feel powerless and frustrated not to be able to be there for her.

Next day, however, Stephen Hunter-Dunne came by for a meeting in her room and reluctantly I assembled the equipment again and listened in. What I heard, confirmed the feeling I had had that Anne Sampson and Lorraine Cradock had been mistaken about Molly all along.

"I hope you are pleased Stephen, that you were allowed to take lead of the 1st October attack investigation as you wished." She sounded tired yet sharp.

"I am, Ma'am."

"Well, I'm not. I think this is wrong, completely wrong. I happen to agree with Anne Sampson that this is setting a dangerous precedent. I was forced by the PM to agree to this, but it's against my will. I want to make that perfectly clear to you. I expect you to be completely transparent in keeping both me and Anne Sampson updated on any progress, or the methods you use for that matter."

"It almost seems like you don't trust me, Home Secretary."

"I'm not sure if I do, Stephen. You clearly went behind my back and talked to the PM and agreed on this action plan, so no, I don't trust you. I hope you get to the bottom of the attack, but I want to be kept in the loop and I don't want any foul methods. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

I thought I heard a hint of disdain in his voice, even if the words were courteous enough. Then he left.

I sat down on the bed to think through what I just heard, and actually, recorded as per the orders I had gotten. This was proof that it had not been Molly's idea or even will to remove the 1st October attack investigation from SO15's table. Stephen's wish had been granted by the PM himself, not by her. She was against it but had been overrun. I also knew that Molly was against the regulation that would give the

Security Service access to more information about the public, meanwhile it was supported by the PM. What was this leading up to? I felt relief over her confirmed innocence and would report during the next meeting with my superiors. This was information I did not want to share over the phone.

Two days later, Molly was scheduled to hold a speech at St. Matthews College. I advised against it, given the current situation when the threat level to her was still high, and would remain so until we had ruled out that the assassin had not been acting alone. But she insisted;

"I can't lock myself up, then I'll be dead as a politician anyway. There is nothing to discuss."

All we could do, was sigh, accept and ensure that security was high.

Before she went in front of the audience, she and I had been referred to an office behind the auditorium. Even if she had insisted firmly on doing this, I could tell she was very nervous. Her appearance was composed as ever, dressed in suit and an immaculate blouse, the hair in the perfect bun that was her signature, but her legs were moving nervously, and her hands held a tight grip around the edges of the chair seat. I pulled over another chair to sit next to her, close to her and looked her in the eyes, her beautiful green eyes.

"Are you okay?"

"I don't know how to deliver this speech... I don't believe in what I'm intended to say. It's all supposed to be pro-RIPA-18, backing up the PM, leaving no one in doubt that I'm behind this regulation and him", she blurted out.

"But you aren't! Maybe it's time to say that? There are so many out there who are against it, maybe if a politician like yourself spoke up, others would follow. Maybe you can stop this."

"The PM would never forgive me... It would be the end of my career."

"Maybe not, if enough people agree with you it might be the end of his instead."

"I don't know if I have the courage."

"Molly..." She looked surprised that I spoke her first name, I never had before, but I just continued.

"... what I've seen of you... It seems important to you to be true to yourself, to act in line with your beliefs. I think it's time you do in this case and I don't think it will hurt you. On the contrary."

"I'm terrified!"

"*If* you go out there, I think you should say things you believe in even if it scares you. That said, you don't have to do this at all if you don't want to, you know. You could cancel.", I said softly.

When she answered, her voice sounded like she was close to tears.

"Oh, but I do. I have to be visible, and I can't show fear – then they have won."

I was not sure if 'they' meant the terrorists or the PM and Penhaligon, or all of them.

"Are you sure, maybe everyone would understand?"

"I don't think so, people don't tend to be forgiving towards female politicians."

She had a point there, I knew that.

"Okay, so you'll do it, but you don't have to worry. You'll be safe. I'm here and the whole place is swarmed by the Security Service."

As we spoke my body had acted without the approval of my brain and now I found myself holding her hand. She looked down on them, her small hand and my larger one touching but did not retract hers. Instead we laced our fingers together and I could not keep myself from letting my thumb stroke gently over her knuckles.

"I wish I had not met you like this", she said. Then looked up at me, her eyes damp.

"What?"

"I wish I had met you under other circumstances, when you weren't my bodyguard and I wasn't your job."

I wished that too, but before I could answer anything to that, someone was at the door handle and we let go of each other's hands like they were burning before the door opened. Rob looked in, briefly frowned at that we were sitting so close but just said;

"It's time to get on stage."

She gave me one last look, then went on stage and I took my place on the side of it. Kept my eyes on the room but listened to her. She started talking about how the

RIPA-18 would be a step in the right direction to fight terrorism, to prevent threats, but she did not sound as passionate as she usually did when delivering speeches. Her voice became weaker and weaker and then she stopped speaking altogether. The audience started to mumble and wriggle in their chairs, she just stared at them silently while seconds went by very slowly. Then she turned her head, looked straight at me. I gave her an encouraging smile and a nod, then she took a deep breath and turned her gaze back to the audience. When she spoke, her voice was stronger again, and grew stronger as she continued to speak. Now with conviction.

"You know what, I can't do this. I can't stand her saying things I don't believe in, lie to you. I became a politician because I wanted to make a difference, because I wanted to make this world better for common people, allow everyone to have a fair chance. I have always tried my best to act in line with my beliefs, but sometimes you have to make compromises as a politician. However, when it comes to the RIPA-18, I feel I have compromised too much, lost myself, fallen for the pressure instead of speaking my own mind – but I can't do that anymore."

There was more mumble in the audience, but of another kind than before, alert, curious what she had to say.

"I don't believe in the RIPA-18. I don't think it will be good for you, you, or you", she pointed at people in the audience. "Not for anyone! I think it is a dangerous regulation, interfering with common people's privacy and giving the security services access to information they should not have. With such a regulation in place, we can only pray that we have a leadership in this country that would not use the unlimited access to information to their own benefit, for other purposes than

preventing terror attacks. That is wrong! And it's why I will vote against this regulation and urge everyone else to do so too."

Her speech was delivered, and she went quiet. For a few seconds it was completely quiet in the room, the mumble had ceased. Then someone hesitantly started clapping their hands, followed by a few more and suddenly the room was filled with loud applause. I felt so proud of her. She looked at me and smiled as the room exploded in applause.

Then it exploded literally.

Chapter 14: Molly

I slowly regained consciousness. First, got a sense of my own body again, heard my heart beating erratic, then tried to open my eyes which were filled with dust. I coughed because my airways were filled with the same dust and I tasted blood in my mouth. Something warm was trailing down my face. More blood? Except for my heartbeats, everything was silent until a few moments later when my hearing gradually returned. I tried to get my bearings in the darkness, get a grip of the situation. I did not feel panic, was too numbed by the shock for that. There was chaos. So many people lying on the ground, hurt - or dead, and others further away, likely not as affected by the blast, now trying to escape from the room in a disorganised manner. There was screaming, there was crying but there was also terrifying silence and stillness. All those who did not move or make any sounds. How many casualties could there be? Impossible to tell through the dust cloud and darkness. I did not know if I dared to move, if I was intact or simply did not feel my injuries due to the shock, but I desperately wanted to know where Sergeant James, Charles, was. Needed to know he was alive.

Someone kneeled by my side, touched me softly. Thank god it was him, alive, and a sense of total relief came over me despite the surroundings. He leaned over me, his face and suit covered in grey dust from the explosion, half-coagulated blood drawing lines down his forehead and cheek. I suppose I looked the same.

"Molly", he whispered in my ear. "You're alive."

"Only just..."

"Can you feel if you're hurt?"

"No, I don't feel anything."

He let his hands graze over me to check if there were any visible injuries but did not seem to find any and his grim face relaxed a bit.

"I don't dare to move you, in case you have injuries not visible to the eye, but ambulance will come."

"Stay with me!"

"I'm not leaving you."

"I mean stay with me in the ambulance too, I want you near me."

He took my hand and repeated;

"I'm not leaving you, I promise." His dark, calm voice soothed me.

"What happened?"

"An IED... it must have been. I don't understand how, with all the safety precautions..."

"Are people dead?"

"Yes... I have no idea how many. When I look around there are so many lying down, motionless, and I don't know if they're alive or not..."

"Oh, my God!"

I felt a pang of grief and hopelessness. So many casualties and the target had probably been me.

"Can you hold me until the ambulance comes?"

He did not answer, just lay down close to me before I had time to regret the question, and put his arms around me until they came with a stretcher to take me away, and then he came with me. He was by my side as I was carried through the sea of people, flashing blue-lights and sound of sirens, into the relative calmness of the ambulance. He held my hand through the drive and when I asked for it, he stayed in my room at the hospital. I did not trust anyone else, I could not stand the thought of him leaving me, not even briefly. Someone wanted me dead and the only one I felt sure did not, was him.

I was examined and apart from the superficial wounds and the shock I seemed to be all right. I was cleaned up, my eyes flushed with saline, I got a dressing around my forehead and for the second time this week I was offered a hospital gown to replace my own damaged clothes. My life currently offered more action, or rather danger, than I ever had bargained for.

He too was examined and cleaned up but kept his suit on after dusting it off.

"Have you heard any news from St. Matthews?", I asked.

He nodded.

"They say it was a carnage... I don't know how many dead or injured yet. As I thought, someone seemed to have managed to place an IED inside before it all

started. I don't understand how... the place was being scanned thoroughly before you arrived... I feel like I have failed you Molly, failed to keep you safe."

He sat on a chair beside the bed I was now half lying on and leaned his head in his hands in desperation. I reached out my hand and touched his dark locks. I did not plan it, it just happened, and he did not flinch from the touch.

"No, you haven't, you're the only one I trust."

He looked up again, his eyes met mine and to my surprise seemed to be filled with agony.

"I have not deserved that."

"How do you mean?"

"I haven't been completely honest with you..."

"In what way?"

He took a deep breath and did not break eye contact.

"I probably shouldn't tell you now, you have enough on your mind... but I don't want to keep it from you anymore. Little over a week ago, I had a meeting with my boss. When I arrived, Anne Sampson was there too."

"Anne, why?"

"She had grown suspicious of the regular private meetings you had with Stephen Hunter-Dunne. Feared what it meant that you kept her out of the loop, feared what powers RIPA-18 would give the two of you."

"Okay...", I could see how it all would have seemed to her.

"She and my boss demanded that I kept them informed about you, who you saw, when, how long... Even that I bugged meetings I was not allowed to be in..."

"And you accepted!?"

It seemed so beneath him, to spy on me when I had opened up to him, let him into my life.

"Not at first, but they threatened me. Threatened to remove me from your team if I didn't cooperate, and I wanted to remain there to keep you safe. Threatened not to let my family stay in the safe-house where they've been staying since the school attack - and I could never risk their safety either... I was not proud of myself, Molly. I had to do it but I hated it!"

His disgusted expression showed me that was true.

"Was that why you went all weird the week after the PM's party?"

"Yeah."

Maybe I ought to be mad at him, maybe I ought to send him away, but all I felt was immense relief to know there was a reason why he suddenly had shut me off, that he had had no choice.

He continued;

"It was really difficult Molly... my boss, CSI Craddock... I really respect her, trust her and both she and Sampson were so convinced you were dangerous and had to be watched... stopped if proven necessary. It made me doubt my own judgement when it came to you."

"I understand... And what had your own judgement told you up to then?"

He gave me a weak smile.

"That you were a wonderful person. They made me think maybe you had just been playing me."

Butterflies woke up in my stomach when he said he thought I was wonderful.

"And now?"

"Now I know where you stand. I've known for some time you're not behind RIPA-18 but the other day I also overheard you talking to Stephen and I know it's not you who granted him to take over the 1st October investigation."

"No. Not me, I tried to stop that from happening. And all those meetings with him... I had them because I don't trust him, because I wanted to try to control him."

"Can you forgive me?"

I was quiet for a while. Not so much because I needed to think, as because I thought he deserved a small portion of torture as revenge for what he had done. But only a small one.

"Yes. Yes, I have to, because after all you remain the only one I trust right now. Apparently, I can't trust Anne or SO15, I certainly don't trust Stephen and it feels like the PM, Roger and I stopped being part of the same team way back... on top of that there may be a whole bunch of crazy assassins out there, for all I know. I need you by my side."

"I'm here. I want to be here more than anything."

"No more secrets?"

He seemed to hesitate briefly before saying;

"No."

It occurred to me that I kept one secret from him, that I was in love with him. Well, it would have to stay like that. Total honesty is not always a good thing. Suddenly I felt very tired and unsafe here, despite that he was with me.

"I have something to ask of you", I told him.

"Anything."

"I want you to take me away from here. I want you to take me home."

He frowned and shook his head, pulled his fingers through his hair as if to gain time.

"I hate to break this to you, but your flat still isn't safe. I understand you want to go home, but you can't."

"I didn't mean the flat. I meant home to Newham, to my parents' house. I want us to go, just the two of us. I don't want anyone else to know where we go."

"Molly..."

"Listen, I don't trust anyone right now. I want to disappear for a while,"

"Newham isn't safe for you."

"But *where* is it safe for me to be?! You tell me. At least people won't expect me to go there so I figure it would be quite safe after all, and I just want to go home to mum and dad. I need to see them, need to hug them after all this. Do you see?"

He seemed to be deliberating internally.

"You owe me that", I insisted.

Finally, he nodded.

"Okay, I'll help you, against my better judgement."

"You will?"

Despite that I thought my arguments were good, I was surprised.

"I'll probably regret it. It will likely cost me my job, but I'm not sure I want this job anyway after all this."

I smiled.

"I think the Home Secretary might be able to pull a string or two to let you keep your job if you want to keep it in the end."

"You think she would do that for me?", he smiled back.

"Yeah, she's quite nice once you get to know her, you know. Quite humane."

"Really? I heard she's a sociopath but that must have been false information then."

"I don't know who told you, but it surely wasn't a trustworthy source."

"Surely not."

Our eyes were locked a while longer. I did not want to end that moment, wanted to drown in his brown eyes, but he did at last.

"Okay, then we'll do like this... You need to leave your mobile phone behind or they'll be able to track you."

"It seems to be broken anyway after the explosion."

"Still, leave it here. I'll get out there for a while and see if I can find a way to get rid of the guard outside, then I'll come back and get you. You need to be prepared to move then."

I nodded in agreement.

"You're really sure you want to do this?"

"Completely."

He got up.

"You are one crazy lady, you know that?"

I grinned at him.

"Thanks, I suppose."

With that he left. He was gone for quite a while and I paced the room impatiently, suddenly did not want to stay confined here one minute longer. I nearly jumped in anticipation when the door finally opened again, and it was him.

"Coast is clear, let's go."

"How did you...?"

"No time to explain, let's move. Hurry! Put this on."

He gave me a long coat and a cap. I briefly wondered where he had found them but did not bother asking. Some poor sod would have to put up with the Home Secretary nicking his clothes. Once we were out in the corridor, he quickly pulled me through a nearby door, leading to staircase and we hurried down the steps. He seemed to know exactly where we were going. Reaching the ground floor, we were near one of the smaller hospital entrances.

"The entrance will be guarded, but they don't check people going out as much as they check those coming in. Lean on me and keep your head down, don't look anyone in the eyes."

I did exactly as he told me and suddenly we were out in the street, breathing the fresh evening air. We moved away from the entrance quickly and headed towards the cab parking that was not far away. As we jumped in, he gave the driver an address unknown to me."

"But...", I started.

"Hush", he whispered. "We'll get off there and change to another cab. Once they find out you're gone, they will start interviewing cab drivers. If one of them had a drive to your parents' address they would soon find out where you are."

"Aren't you clever..."

"I have my moments."

Despite the banter, I was tense. Even if I was not a criminal on the run, it almost felt like it and I desperately wanted to succeed getting away. We left the cab a few miles away from the hospital and he paid with cash, then he hailed another, and this time asked me to give the driver the correct address. We sat beside each other in the back seat, driving towards my home, towards my roots. It was an unlikely turn of events that I was going there with him. Suddenly I giggled.

"What?" he asked.

"You're the first bloke I'm bringing home to my parents in ages. I can't even remember the last time."

"Really? How about Roger?"

"Roger? He would not set foot there. Totally convinced he would be mugged, stabbed or whatever. He met them a few times, reluctantly, but never in their home."

"I'm honoured then."

Even without looking at him, I heard the warm smile in his voice and I suddenly wished that this had been that. Me bringing him home to my parents to introduce them to the guy I was *with*. Well, I was glad he was with me anyway, even if not in that sense. The streets we drove through now were familiar. We passed the nail bar where I had worked after school for a few years, to get some extra money to try to afford clothes that did not differ too much from those that my class mates wore. We passed the club me and my friends had used to go to as teenagers, and the corner where I had thrown up after drinking too much one night. Then the Indian take away behind which I once had had a one-night shag, a very forgettable one that yet stuck somehow in all its pointlessness, then the pub where dad was a regular and I knew we were almost home. Finally, the cab stopped, and he once again paid in cash.

"We won't be able to use credit cards", he explained as soon as we were out of the cab.

No, of course not, that would be easy to track.

As we called on the door and waited for them to open, I was nervous for some reason. Stupid, this was my parents' home and I had every right to be here. The only stupid and unnatural thing was that I had been denied this for so many years.

Mum opened, in pyjamas and a robe, looking like she was preparing to go to bed or maybe had already. When she saw me, the surprise was complete.

"Molly! What..."

"Hush! Just let us in and we'll talk."

Door closed, we stood in the cramped hallway and he looked so misplaced. Tall, handsome, posh. This house was not made for the likes of him, but he did not seem to notice at all. Instead he took mum's hand and shook it heartily.

"I'm Charles James, I'm bodyguard to the Home Secretary."

"Well, we call her Molly in this house. Welcome Charles, I'm Belinda."

She turned to me and gave me a big hug.

"We heard about the explosion and we've been worried sick. They said there were dead and injured, and that you had been giving a speech there, but they would not say how your condition was and when I called you, you didn't answer..."

"My mobile was destroyed in the explosion. I'm fine mum. Bruised and battered but nothing worse, it's a miracle."

She hugged me again and I had to tell her to go easy, because my body actually did hurt now that the shock did not have me in its numbing grip anymore. Then dad came down the stairs and I was grateful he was in t-shirt and joggers, not only briefs. My half-naked slightly overweight and very unfit dad was a sight I was happy

to spare Charles from. We went through the introductions again, then mum made some tea and we sat down in the TV-room. The little ones were sleeping.

Charles spoke first.

"I have to make it clear that you can tell *no one* that Molly is here. If you do, Security Services will come and take her somewhere they think is safer. She's not on the run really, but she wanted to come here and as you know, security don't allow it. So, you must keep your mouths shut, is that understood?"

A giggle nearly escaped me as he sternly drilled his eyes into mum and dad and they nodded seriously. Shit, he was so hot when he talked like that.

"I just had to come home mum. After everything that has happened... I could not take it anymore. I needed you... and I don't feel safe anywhere. Charles helped me to get away. The only ones I trust right now is him and you."

"Of course, you should come home then my girl, you belong here and you're welcome anytime you like."

She hugged me again, and I held on to her for long, felt tears running down my cheeks.

"I don't understand what's happening", I whispered. "I don't know why someone wants to kill me and want it so much they're willing to hurt others."

"My little girl."

When she said that and stroked my hair softly, I felt like her little girl again. Like the girl I had been before I changed school and chose the path that took me away from her, away from them. I did not regret it, and I would not want to have it all undone, live the life I would have had if I had stayed, but I wanted to have both. Was that even possible?

We sat there for a while longer, talked about everything that had happened lately, and then mum surprisingly asked Charles a whole bunch of questions. The kind I would have expected her to ask if I actually had brought a boyfriend home for the first time. He answered with an easiness to him, fitted in here unexpectedly well. When dad offered him a beer I knew he was accepted, even if he politely declined as he was on duty but said he would gladly take up the offer some other time. Him and dad drinking beer together, that would be a sight.

"Mum!", I finally interrupted. "Charles works for me, he doesn't deserve that you interrogate him like this."

"Are you sure about that?", she smirked. I felt myself blushing, and I think I saw him do too.

"Anyway, I'm knackered and would like to go to bed. Where can we sleep?"

"The little ones are asleep in their beds, but we can move them over to ours and you can have their room."

It was the best solution, definitely the least awkward one as I would not have wanted to share mum and dad's double-bed with Charles, but the suggestion still made me laugh. My youngest brother and sister, Jack and Sally, slept in a bunk

bed. The thought of Charles squeezing in his tall frame there was ridiculous, yet the best option and we said good night and closed the door to "our" room. A kid's room, filled with toys, drawings, multi-coloured lamps which gave off a dim light making the room quite cosy.

"I can take the top bed", he offered, and I laughed as he climbed up the small ladder which clearly was designed for someone half his size.

"Good night."

"Good night, hope you're able to get some sleep."

Then I lay there, wide awake. So aware of that he was lying above me. I heard his calm breaths, but I also heard that he kept stirring in his bed, so he obviously had not fallen asleep either.

"Are you awake?", I finally asked.

"Yeah..."

"I can't sleep either."

"No, I figured since you're talking. Unless you're a sleep talker?"

"I'm not", I giggled.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"I think I heard a hint of cockney when you spoke tonight."

"Sorry about that, that's what happens when I see mum and dad."

I do not know why I apologised for it, maybe because Roger always had been disdainful about it.

"No need to apologise, I find it quite... charming."

A warm, fussy feeling inside me.

We were quiet for a while and then I summoned all my courage and asked him.

"Would you hold me? I mean... I... I'm terrified really, and I just need to be held."

By him, not by any random person. OMG, OMG, what would he say? He did not say anything, instead he climbed down that ladder faster than I could blink. He had taken off his suit and he stood there only in shirt and briefs, smirking. He even had beautiful legs, damn it, strong-looking and masculine.

"I'm not sure exactly how we're both going to fit in in one bed, but I'm willing to try. He climbed in behind me, positioning himself so we spooned and put his arms around me.

"Is this okay?"

"Yes."

More than okay. Fabulous. Wonderful. Heavenly.

Nothing more happened, but I was as content as could be like this. Feeling the length of him against my body, his body heat radiating, not too warm, just perfect. The slight pressure of his arm around me. I fit myself into him, as close as I could, and he moved himself to match me.

"You think you can sleep like this?" he asked.

"Mmmm."

I thought that I did not want to sleep, because I did not want to miss a second of this, but the events of the day had taken their toll and made me exhausted, and now safe in his arms I felt myself doze off even if I did not want to.

"I bet you never thought you would end up in a bunk bed in Newham when you took this job", I mumbled.

"I never thought I would meet someone like you when I took this job", he whispered in my ear.

I did not know what to say to that, so I just stayed quiet and a few minutes later I fell asleep, oddly happy considering everything that had happened and that I was on the run.

Chapter 15: Molly

I woke up abruptly, stirred by a nightmare where I relived the explosion, but walked around the dark room afterwards and saw the dead lying there and then stumbled on Charles, covered in dust and debris and staring back at me with unseeing, dead eyes. The reality I woke up to was a lovely contrast, even if the bomb itself had been real. It took me a moment to realise I was in mum and dad's house with its familiar smell and noises, and then another to realise I was being held by Charles. Then I smiled to myself. In his sleep, the arm he had around me had moved so hand cupped my breast tenderly. I could also feel a soft pressure to my back from his morning hardness. I did not mind at all, but I knew he would be embarrassed when he woke up, so I pretended to still be asleep and enjoyed the closeness of him for some time, feeling only slightly ashamed that his unintentional touch excited me.

Finally, he stirred and woke up, and I heard him whisper to himself;

"Oh shit!", then quickly removed his hand from my breast and pulled back his hips from me so we no longer touched there, but then he put his arm back to just hold me, which pleased me immensely. If I was a cat I would have purred then, I enjoyed all this far too much.

I waited another fifteen minutes or so before I moved, so he would not think I had noticed. Then yawned and softly said good morning.

"Good morning", his voice sounded sleepy.

I liked it that way, it felt like an intimate version of it. I tried to make mine sound sleepy too, even though I was wide awake, my senses alert.

"Were you able to sleep at all?"

He gave out a little laugh.

"Fortunately, I'm used to sleeping conditions far more uncomfortable than this from the army. Here I was lucky both to have pillow, sheets and a woman beside me... errrm, not that I, we... sorry, you know what I mean."

I still had my back to him and smiled, loving that my presence could make him a little bit embarrassed.

"And you?"

"I slept well, except I had a nightmare. About the bombing and seeing a whole lot of dead people. Seeing you dead. It was awful."

He briefly pressed me a little harder to him.

"I'm here, I'm alive,"

"I'm so grateful for that, but others... I still can't grasp it really happened. I need to listen to the news, need to know how bad it was exactly."

"You want to get up and do it now? Listen to the news?"

"No... Can we just stay like this for a while? I'm not ready to face it yet."

"Me neither, to tell you the truth. I've seen much during my years in the army, but this... innocent people harmed and killed right here at home. I'm just so thankful we survived Molly. That Sam still has a dad."

I loved that he was using my name now, something had changed between us in the past twenty-four hours.

"What now?" I turned to him even if lying face to face was an even more challenging position than spooning, given the small space, and we ended up with our faces very close.

He had a morning stubble, a dark shade over his chin. I had never seen him with that, his shave was always immaculate, but it suited him. Made him look rougher, sexy. Made me want to dot little kisses along his jawline and feel that stubble bruise my lips.

"What now?" he repeated, smirking. "Are you asking *me*? You wanted me to take you here and I did, but I haven't made any further plans. I thought you had an idea? You're the boss after all."

"No. No, I don't have the faintest idea", I confessed. "I desperately wanted to get away, and I'd like to stay away for some time, but I realise we can't stay here. Sooner or later they will come searching here and as soon as dad goes to the pub, and I can tell you he's not able to stay away for long, the secret will be out despite your serious talk to them yesterday. I was impressed by the way, could imagine you like the officer keeping your men in line when I saw you like that."

I did not mention how hot I had found him in that moment.

He smiled.

"Old habits die hard, I guess I will always have an officer in me. Sometimes that's handy to bring out."

Then he turned serious.

"But you're right, we can't stay here. Either we call the security service and they take you back to the hotel safely, or we have to go somewhere else."

"I don't want to go back, not yet", I heard myself pleading.

He was quiet for a while, thinking.

"Okay, here's an idea. I have a lake cottage a bit up north. The location is secluded, and it actually belongs to an uncle, so it wouldn't be connected with me easily. Would you like to go there for a few days? Sooner or later you must go back, but it would allow you a little longer break from it all. If you want to?"

"Yes. Yes, I'd like that very much."

A cottage by a lake in the company of Charles James, I don't think that any girl could ask for more for a mini-break. Except maybe not simultaneously running away from crazy assassins, deceitful security services and back-stabbing fellow politicians, or that the company in question was just doing his job. But you cannot be too picky in such matters.

"Then we have a plan, even if it's a crazy one. I made a quite big cash withdrawal before we left the hospital, and I actually keep some more in the cottage for

unforeseeable situations, so we'll be fine in that aspect. I suggest that you borrow some clothes from your mum and bring with you. I would also advice not to tell your parents about our plan, just tell them we're leaving, then they can't disclose anything even unintentionally. Is there any way we can borrow a car around here?"

"My Nan has a crappy old one which she rarely uses, I'm sure we can take that."

"Great."

A plan had formed, and I was excited about it. The moment seemed right to leave the bed and get to action. I was just unwilling to tear away from him, maybe we would never be this close again. He did not move either, but finally it got too tense to just keep gazing in each other's eyes and I moved.

"Breakfast?"

"Yes please, I'm starving."

"Coco puffs?"

"Haven't had that since I was a kid, but I'd love that."

"How can you miss out on such a nutritious and healthy option for breakfast?"

"You always have that for breakfast?"

"Only on weekends normally, but I think we deserve it today and I'm sure mum has it at home, it's a staple commodity in the Dawes household."

"I agree, we do deserve that."

While we indulged in Coco puffs, we had the news on and the combination of comfort food and dreadful events was strange. There were eleven dead and over fifty more or less seriously injured.

"Information from the police is still scarce. It is believed that an IED was triggered but that has not yet been confirmed and no organisation or person has claimed responsibility for the attack. It is believed that the primary target of the attack was Home Secretary Molly Dawes. According to our sources she survived but there is no information about her current status, if she was seriously injured..."

They mentioned noting about me gone missing and we exchanged a glance of relief. That meant that getting away would be a bit easier than it would if the whole country was looking for me. Maybe they did not want to alarm the public more than necessary, maybe they did not want to reveal the breach in security which losing sight of the Home Secretary in a situation like this meant.

"Right before the explosion, the Home Secretary had delivered an unexpected speech, distancing herself from RIPA-18, saying she thought it was a dangerous regulation, planned to vote against it and urged everyone to do the same. This means she is taking a complete different view in the matter than the PM. It is difficult to judge what the effects of this revelation may be, but chances are it will sway the vote which as late as last week seemed to be in favour..."

I could only hope the news woman was right and my speech had made a difference. It would not make up for the lost lives, but it would be something.

After breakfast I had a chat with mum and dad, told them we would be leaving but not where, and reminded them they should tell no one we had been here at all.

"Please dad, I know it's difficult to keep your gob shut after a few beers down at the pub but this time my life may depend on it."

His eyes were damp when he promised not to say anything, even promised to stay sober for some time not to make any mistakes.

I packed a bag with some of mum's clothes. We were the same size but did not exactly have the same taste nowadays. I managed to locate some neutral pieces despite that she tried to convince me to choose a rainbow-coloured batik dress and similar gems from her closet.

Charles ditched his ruined suit and borrowed a change from dad. The t-shirt was all right as far as the size concerned as he filled it up with broad shoulders and muscles where there normally was room for dad's slight overweight, but it had a print saying; KEEP CALM SHIT HAPPENS, with a little turd above instead of the crown that usually topped such 'keep calm'-signs. The joggers were too short even if he wore them as far down his hip as he could while remaining decent. I could not resist laughing out loud.

"I love your t-shirt! And it looks like you're expecting a flood anytime soon."

"Shut up, Dawes", he grinned back. "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, as they say. In this case it's me wearing this outfit for your sake."

I put my hand to my mouth in feigned astonishment.

"For *me*? Oh, I can't believe you would do that for *me*?"

Truth was that even if this was the ugliest outfit he had ever worn, he still managed to pull off looking like a model out of a fashion magazine. You could probably hand this man a plastic bag to wear and he would still look amazing.

The little ones had been off to school before we got up and even if I would have loved to see them, it was for the better, so they would not tell their friends about my visit. We said our good byes inside the house to make our time out on the street as brief as possible, covered our heads in a hat and a cap respectively before we headed out, to make us less recognisable. In addition, Charles had advised me to wear my hair loose as I never usually did.

It was hard to say good bye to them and I hugged both long and hard. I was not sure when I would get to see them next. I sincerely hoped there would be a next time, that whoever was after me would not succeed. The thought made me nauseous and I had to push it away.

"Thanks for the hospitality", Charles said. "And for the clothes." He did not sound one bit sarcastic even though he was wearing a turd print.

Then we were out the door and inside the car which dad had picked up and parked right outside. Charles sat down by the wheel. I was a crappy driver. I drove little before I became the Home Secretary and since then I did not drive at all.

We took the M1, headed for the Peak District somewhere. I had never been there before so his attempt to describe the localisation of the cottage failed, but it did not matter to me. I was glad to get away anywhere, especially with him.

At some distance outside of London, we pulled into a petrol station to fill up. Mission accomplished, he opened my door and demanded;

"Come with me."

"Where to?"

"I'm going to make a call to my boss from the phone booth over there and I want you to listen, so you can rest assured that I'm not hiding anything from you."

"Why do you want to call her?"

"To tell her you're okay, this was your own choice and you want to stay away for some time. I also have some information which may be important for the investigation."

"But can't they track the call?"

"Not if I keep it short. They need at least two minutes to be able to triangulate the location even roughly."

So, I stood beside him when he spoke with CSI Craddock, with the task to keep track of time.

He knew the direct number by heart and she apparently answered.

"Lorraine, it's Charles James."

She seemed to start saying something, but he interrupted brusquely.

"Please listen! Listen carefully because I will hang up in two minutes. I'm with the Home Secretary, she is safe, and she has asked of me to take her off-grid. Ms. Dawes can you confirm that?"

He held the phone to me;

"Molly Dawes here, I'm fine and I want to disappear for a while that's true. PS James is only obliging my wishes."

He continued.

"In light of what has happened she fears for her life and doesn't trust anyone. Lorraine, I'm sure you've heard about her speech and that she's not behind RIPA-18. In the hotel room, there is a recording of her talking to Hunter-Dunne which proves that it was him and the PM that saw to that he took over the 1/10 investigation from SO15. Go get that, follow that track and I'm sure you'll find something interesting. But be careful! I think some powerful people are involved here... If you can trust Anne Sampson? I don't know for sure, but my gut feeling says you can. Hunter-Dunne, the PM and Ms. Dawes' ex on the other hand... tread carefully. "

I signed to him that the clock was ticking.

"Time's up but I'll call you in a week or so to hear what progress there is."

I heard her talking upset, but he just said;

"Got to go, bye!" and hung up.

All I could think of was that he had said he would call her in a week, did that mean I would spend a week alone with him in a cottage? Here I was on the run from true danger, yet the strongest feeling in me right now was joyful expectation over that. Silly girl... or woman was a more accurate description maybe.

He had told me it was roughly three and a half hours drive and that I could sleep if I wanted to, but I did not. Instead we mixed chatting with silence and for a while he tuned into a radio channel with eighties hits and started singing along and urged me to do the same. He sang surprisingly well, much better than me, but with him so enthusiastic it was impossible not to join in. It is strange, eighties music is not my favourite but it still strangely catchy. Like Jason Donovan, Bryan Adams and KC and the Sunshine band. We sang a few duets, but when he passionately embarked on 'Nothing's gonna change my love for you' I laughed so hard I cried and my stomach hurt.

"What? Don't you believe me?" he said with feigned hurt.

"No not really but keep singing, by all means. I'm really enjoying this."

And I was. This was so twisted, how was it possible to have such a great time given the current situation? The answer was simple: him. He was the reason.

We made one more stop, and he went into a grocery store and bought everything we could need for a week, or more. I raised my eyebrows to all the bags he came carrying.

"You really must think that I have a big appetite?"

"Judging from the evening of the PM's birthday party, I *know* you do", he smirked.

"Oi, I told you I did not eat anything during dinner."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever", he teased. Then added; "To tell the truth I got carried away. It's quite seldom I shop for anyone but myself these days, and it was a nice change."

"I hope you can cook it too, because I can't."

"So, you can't drive, and you can't cook. Is there *anything* you're good at?"

"Oh yes, there is..." When I said it, I was honestly just thinking in general, not about sex, but it unintentionally came out in such a tone of voice that it seemed like that was what I was implying. My cheeks burned, and it only got worse when I tried to explain it away.

"I didn't mean... you know...I'm not..."

"What?", he turned to me cocking an eyebrow. "What is it that you're not good at?"

"Sex!"

"You're saying you're not good at sex?"

"No! I'm not saying I'm not good at sex. I *am* good at sex... I hope, but I didn't mean to say that... Oh god, this is just getting worse by the minute, isn't it?"

"Keep digging, as they use to say", he grinned.

"No, I think I will just zip it instead, that's for the better."

"You're sure there isn't anything more you wish to clarify, regarding if you're good or not?"

"I'm fucking excellent! Now, let's drop it", I snapped totally embarrassed.

"As you wish Ma'am", he laughed and for once I did not tell him not to call me Ma'am.

We drove the last distance in silence but I had the feeling he kept chuckling silently. The last distance was a small winding road ending up by a small cottage beautifully situated by a lake and surrounded by forest. It looked like a little dream and suddenly I realised that I did not know when I had been looking forward to anything as much as I now was looking forward to spending time here with him.

Chapter 16: Molly

We got out of the car and he localised the key to the cottage, hidden in a pot beside the door and let us inside the small wooden house.

"If you don't mind I'll just go and get changed to something that fits me better, then I'll show you around."

"What do you mean? Are you complaining about my dad's impeccable taste? I thought a turd t-shirt was everyone's dream."

"Oh, I don't complain about the t-shirt, but I would very much like a pair of trousers that reach my ankles without me having to show off my naked arse", he smirked.

"I see."

I hoped that it was not possible to hear that my mouth suddenly got dry at the thought of his naked arse. Here I was trying to keep up the easy banter and he ruined it all by planting such images in my head. Totally unfair. It was not better when he returned really, because he looked completely gorgeous in well-fitting dark jeans and a grey pullover that seemed so soft it was probably cashmere. I had learned what cashmere was when I started in the private school. It was something very different from the acrylic knitted jumpers I had at the time. It had been a triumph when I much later purchased my own first cashmere jumper and I still had a soft spot for it, loved the feeling of high-quality wool. I had to hold myself back not to go over and pat the jumper like it was a cat or something because on him it was nearly irresistible, but it would have meant caressing him and that would have been an odd start to our stay here. He looked casual in this compared to the

suits he had always worn up to now, yet amazing – and more approachable. No idea to go down that road though. Even if he had not hesitated to hold me when I was scared and had nightmares, I knew he had only touched me by mistake in his sleep. When I tried to kiss him while awake, back in the hotel room, he had made it very clear that he was not up for it. I would not make the same mistake again. One failed attempt had been awkward enough, another try here in this place where it was just the two of us would have been so cripplingly embarrassing that I did not think I would have survived it, so there would definitely not be any touching from my end or any attempts to kiss for that matter.

Blissfully unaware of my thoughts and totally relaxed he asked;

"Do you want to have a look around then? Not that it's huge, you can almost see the whole place just by standing here."

I wanted to, and it was not – huge that is. The cottage consisted of a small but functional kitchen, a living room with a fireplace, sofa, coffee table and two crowded book shelves, one bedroom with a double-bed and an ensuite bathroom. I wondered how the sleeping arrangements would be, if we would have to share the double-bed – because that would obviously have been terrible for an entire week, but as if he could read my thoughts he said;

"Don't worry, there's a sofa bed in the living room. I'll take that, and you can have the bedroom to yourself."

Oh.

"Sounds good."

It was a very cosy cottage, with a beautiful view towards the lake through the living room windows.

"Come, let's check outside too."

He took my hand to pull me with him, but the second after let go as if he had realised a mistake and instead only gestured in the direction outdoors. He seemed happy to be here, happy to share this place with me.

"Do you come here often?"

"I did for a while, when I was not feeling so well. Especially after the divorce, when things caught up with me and I realised I needed to spend time alone and deal with my past. Then I often came here, to enjoy the nature and calmness, do some fishing and think. I find it very peaceful here, but I haven't been here for some time."

It did not sound like a place where he ever had brought any women before. I quite liked the thought of that.

"I'm glad to be here with you, but I wish it was under other circumstances", he added.

Such a simple sentence to say, but of course it set my mental cog wheels in motion, trying to figure out in which ways he would have wished it different. Only because I was on the run, or in some other way? I refrained from asking.

"I'm glad to be here. I needed to get away from everything and I really appreciate this. Thanks for taking me here."

"No problem."

We walked down to the lake. There was a jetty and a small rowboat was tied to it. The water surface was completely still, mirroring the surrounding trees and the sky. It was early autumn and all the leaves remained on the trees but had started shifting into a yellow, orange and rusty colour palette. It was a very beautiful scenery.

"The water will still be warm this early in the autumn because the lake is quite shallow", he said. "So, you can take a swim if you like."

"I didn't bring a swimsuit."

"You can go swimming in your underwear. I won't look, I promise", he smirked.

It seemed like this peaceful place was filled with mines, at least if one was equipped with my imagination. Now I pictured him going for a swim, coming out of the water, dripping and handsome, with one hand raking through his wet locks in slow motion. I cleared my throat.

"We'll see about that. I'm quite coward when it comes to bathing."

That was a big fat lie, I loved to swim and was happy to do so even when it was cold. I had not learned how to swim until some years ago when I took a course in crawling, but now I found it a relaxing way of exercising. I just was not sure I would be comfortable doing it in his company. Not only would it be hard to keep my hands off him, he would see me nearly naked too. I look okay I guess but not like I'm very comfortable showing off nearly undressed to handsome strangers, or handsome

guys I know and who happen to be my bodyguard who I have an inappropriate crush on.

"Really? Anyway, we can go fishing too."

"I have never."

"You've never gone fishing?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"City kid, you know."

He laughed.

"Okay, then we need to teach you a thing or two while you're here. Fishing and swimming is on top of the list of skills to improve, maybe I'll throw in a cooking class or two as well. I seem to remember that you said you were good at many things, but I don't know if I believe that. You haven't given me any proof really", he winked.

God, why did he have to go there again? I realised that now, when the reverence and respect that came from me being his superior had somehow worn off a bit due to the things we had been through together, in combination with this environment which was his ball court, he was a real tease. I both enjoyed it and disliked it. I would have enjoyed it much more if he had been teasing someone else than me. Now I felt a bit like an earthworm wriggling on a hook, which was suitable considering the fishing theme. How was I supposed to survive a week like this? I just snorted in response, turned my back to him and walked out on the jetty. I could

see small fish swimming underneath the surface of the clear water and thought I would at least prove to him that I was an excellent fisherman, or woman, so I could shut him up in some way.

"It's so serene here. Really beautiful view", I said.

"It is."

Something in his voice made me look up quickly and I caught him watching me with dark, warm eyes. A look that nearly made me stop breathing and turned my knees into jelly, but he just shifted his gaze out over the lake indicating that he too had been talking about the scenery, nothing else.

"Should we go and bring the stuff from the car inside?"

We fetched my small bag and all the groceries. I laughed again at the abundance of food, it barely fit into the fridge. It was already getting darker and he proposed that we should start cooking. I had hoped he would cut me some slack this first evening, but no, he had me chopping all sorts of vegetables.

"No, you can't chop the onion like *that*, it will be too big pieces. First in halves, then like this..."

He took his teaching mission seriously, it almost evoked his stern officer voice again. I mostly enjoyed having him close to me in the small space that was the kitchen and was willing to put up with him being a bit bossy.

"How come you can't cook? You didn't have someone preparing your meals for you before you became the Home Secretary, did you?" he wondered incredulous at my apparent lack of skill, pointing a wooden ladle at me, almost accusingly.

"No, of course not. I prepared most meals for me and my brothers and sisters when we grew up, it was just that it mainly consisted of marmite toast and canned beans. It's hard to become a gourmet chef with such limited options. Later, when I started earning money, I mostly ate out or ordered take away. When I lived with Roger, he had a house keeper slash cook of course. It would have been beneath him to cook."

He snorted.

"I still can't wrap my head around that you have been married to him."

"We all make mistakes, I suppose."

"It just seems to me you deserve so much better."

"Oh... Thanks." A lump emerged in my throat and I was grateful when he changed topic.

"Would you like a glass of wine?"

A whole bottle would be nice - and very much needed.

"Yes, please."

He uncorked a bottle of red and poured me a glass. I loved to watch him do things, uncork the wine, stir the casserole, just so normal yet amazingly sexy in everything he did.

"You won't have some wine?"

He had only poured a glass for me.

"No... even if this feels more like vacation, I consider myself on duty. I want to stay alert, so I don't drink."

I managed to forget again and again that I was his job, and every time he reminded me, I felt like a balloon which someone slowly emptied of air until it became completely deflated.

"Of course. Thank you, for looking out for me."

Still, while we ate, I managed to forget myself again. It was too easily done. He had lit some candles, the food was delicious and he was just the best company. I could not have asked for anything more from a date. When I had finished my plate, I put down my fork and wiped my mouth with a napkin, then sat circling the brim of my glass with my index finger and could not help commenting on it.

"You know, this is the dinner most resembling a date that I have been to in years."

"Really?"

I looked up at him. His chiselled features seemed softened in the candle light, and his brown eyes less piercing, almost gooey, even if it was just a trick of light. This was really ridiculously romantic - for being work, I mean.

"Otherwise I always have company of my bodyguards...you know like when you and Kim sat watching me and Rob. It's always like that, having eyes on me. It does not

really make for a natural date. This is the first time in forever I'm just having dinner with one other person... unless we count when we had burgers you and me. Even though it's not a date it's nice."

"So, you would have had a successful date with Rob if we had not been watching?"

"That's what you made out of what I just said? Noooo!", I giggled. "He totally ambushed me. I never wanted a date with him. It was so embarrassing when I realised that he had cancelled the evening for the others who should have been there. First, I thought I could just live through dinner with him anyway, but then I realised that I couldn't do it with yo..."

I interrupted myself. I had not been able to do it with his eyes on me, I had not wanted him to think I enjoyed a date with Rob."

"What?"

"...with you and Kim waiting for me when I didn't even want to be there."

"We wait for you all the time, it wouldn't have been the end of the world."

No, I guess it wouldn't have been to him.

"Well, I wasn't in the mood anyway, so it was a good excuse. Do you have another glass of wine?"

I desperately needed it.

Finally, we got up from the table and did the dishes. He lit a fire and we chose a book each from the living room shelves and just sat reading for a while, listening

to the relaxing crackle from the fire. I'm not sure if I actually registered what I was reading or only flipped pages at a reasonable pace, because the fact that we sat opposite one another in the sofa with our legs mingled was very distracting. There was no other way to sit really, as the sofa was not that big, so it was completely justified. In the end I was too exhausted to stay up longer even if I did not want to break this up.

"I think I'm going to bed now."

"Then so am I. Here in the sofa I mean", he felt it necessary to clarify.

"I can take the sofa, I'm much smaller than you and you probably sleep better in the bed."

"I wouldn't be much of a host or gentleman then, would I?"

"Okay, thanks then. And thanks for today... It's been really nice, which was unexpected given the circumstances."

"It has."

It almost felt like I ought to hug him good night or kiss him on the cheek, but I would not want him thinking that I was trying to repeat what I had done in the hotel room, so I just gave him a smile, went into the bedroom and closed the door, but I did not fall asleep for long. I lay wide awake staring at the ceiling through the darkness, thought of him, how he had been today, how much I liked him, that he was sleeping only a few feet away in that sofa and that I wished he was lying here instead and that it was odd, yet lovely to be here in this cottage alone with him.

Protecting Miss Dawes – a job like any other

This week would not do the trick for me falling out of love with him, that was for sure.

Chapter 17: Molly

Next day, Charles suggested that we would go out with the rowboat to try our luck fishing. I had slept badly and was feeling tired and a bit edgy, the recent events were obviously getting to me, so I told him to go fishing himself and stayed on the jetty. I was not in a mood for a fishing lesson.

"Suit yourself, you're missing out on something", he said but made no further attempts to convince me. Maybe he was looking forward to some alone-time in the boat, after all you can get tired of the company of only one person the whole time, even that was not the case for me with him.

I took off my shoes and socks and folded up my trousers to be able to dip my feet in the lukewarm water. I just sat there, enjoyed the stillness, the autumn sun on my face thinking I would probably get new freckles, tried to empty my mind of thoughts. I was beginning to regret not going with him and gazed at the small boat out on the water, where I could see him sitting focused, fishing rod in hand. Then the boat exploded, and I screamed and screamed and screamed.

I woke up from the nightmare screaming for real, did not know where I was in the darkness but felt completely panicked, was shaking and sweating, tears running down my face. Then he was there in a blink, took me in his arms.

"Hush, Molly, hush, it was a dream. Everything's okay."

I clung to him, first unable to speak, then sobbed;

"I dreamed you died. I dreamed the boat exploded with you in it and you were gone."

"But I'm not, I'm here. You're safe. No one knows we're here. No one is going to get you, or me."

I could not stop trembling or crying.

"Come, lay down and I'll hold you."

"It's so embarrassing..."

"No, it's not. Not the least. Do you know how long I had nightmares after Afghan and woke up exactly like this? For a very long time. I still do sometimes. I wish someone would hold me then."

He wrapped me in his arms, held me to him. His body was warm in the special way it is when you sleep. He was dressed only in trunks and held me to his bare chest. I nestled my head to the place between his neck and his collarbone and felt his skin to mine, inhaled his comforting masculine scent deeply and heard his calm heartbeats meanwhile he was stroking my back and my hair.

"It was just a dream", he repeated reassuringly and finally it sank in. Slowly my pulse went back to normal and I stopped trembling, stopped crying, just felt his calming presence and did not want him to disappear.

"I'll stay, just try to fall asleep again."

I could only think how right it felt to lie like this with him, that I always wanted him in my bed and finally I fell asleep again.

When I woke up, the sun was shining, and I was alone in the bed, but I heard him making noise out in the kitchen. The memory of the night came back to me and I could not help feeling embarrassed even if he had told me not to be, so I just stayed there for a while, hiding under the duvet.

"Good morning sleepy head. Breakfast is served."

He said cheerfully and sat down beside me on the bed and I had to look at him. He looked stunning in a grey hoodie and joggers and I could not quite grasp that this man had been holding me through the night, that I had been allowed to be so close to him. Now it was bright day and I was not.

"Good morning... Sorry about last night, I didn't mean to cling to you like a needy octopus."

He laughed at the image but shook his head.

"I told you, no need to be sorry. I know what it's like and it's completely understandable after everything you have been through. It would be strange if it didn't affect you. When you return to civilisation you should probably see someone to talk about it, to deal with it."

"I don't want to return..."

"No, but we both know you will have to eventually", he said tenderly.

He reached out and pushed away a strand of hair from my face, grazed my cheek briefly in the move. For a second, it looked like he considered to lean in and kiss me but of course he did not. Instead he got up, put his hands in the pockets of his joggers and tilted his head to nod in the direction of the door.

"Let's go have some breakfast. I even bought Coco puffs", he grinned mischievously.

"And you won't let me stay in bed anyway?"

"Correct."

"Okay, if you leave me alone I'll just put some clothes on."

"I almost thought we were past that. After all you have been lying next to me dressed in only that night gown all night, like a... was it needy octopus you said?"

If possible, he was looking even more mischievous now and I was embarrassingly aware of my mum's cotton night gown with a pattern of small rabbits and cloves on. Very far from the sexy silk slip which I would have preferred him to see me in if he was to see me in sleeping attire at all. I threw a pillow his direction, but he skilfully avoided it.

"Just go, will you?"

"As you wish."

When I came out to the kitchen he handed me a cup of coffee.

"Do you have some tea? I'm more of a tea person really?"

He rolled his eyes.

"You're really a high-maintenance girl. Do you know that?"

"Because I want tea instead of coffee?"

"Yeah."

I snorted but was in fact feeling very content despite his comment. I adored to have breakfast with him. Except for the breakfast at mum and dad's, I had not had company for breakfast since the divorce, and rarely before that either to be honest because we were always too busy working. I had not realised I missed it, but now I felt how nice it was. There is something intimate about breakfast compared to other meals, because you normally only share it with those you are close to, like your family or your lover. In this case with my bodyguard, but anyway it was nice.

"What do you want to do today? Are you up for trying fishing?"

I shook my head.

"Not that I don't want to, but my nightmare was just a bit too realistic. Can we wait a day, so it wears off a bit?"

"Of course, we can, and I can check the boat before if that makes you feel more comfortable, but I don't think there's anything to worry about. No one was on our heels when we left. If anything, Lorraine confirmed that when I spoke to her as she was so pissed at me because we had disappeared. It would be very difficult to connect this cottage to me, very few people know of it at all, there are no records that disclose it has anything to do with me. Even Rebecka has never heard of it and

I've never taken Sam here because I know he would freak out without TV and wi-fi. You can feel safe here Molly."

"Thanks, but I think I prefer postpone fishing to tomorrow anyway. Could we go for a walk maybe? And just hang out?"

"Of course."

So, after breakfast, we walked along the lake. There were winding narrow paths through the green. Sometimes the vegetation hid the water, but then the water surface broke through between the trees again, shimmering in the sunshine. The only sound to be heard was the birds chirping and our steps and breaking a twig here and there as we moved. It was completely empty of people and very beautiful. I was not a person who ever have gone hiking our spent much time out in the wilderness at all, but I had to admit that being close to nature had a calming effect and right now it suited me perfectly. Especially in the company of him.

For lunch we made sandwiches, then just sat reading outdoors in two loungers and this time I even managed to absorb the plot of the book, at least to some extent even if I glanced at him every now and then where he was lying lazily spread and gorgeous. In the evening we cooked again, and it was all very easy with a banter between us, interrupted by comfortable silence. It was a day of total relaxation and healing, just disconnecting from everything. There was a radio in the cottage, but we did not use it. He asked if I wanted to hear the news, but I said no, not yet. When bedtime approached, I got a little nervous though. More than anything I wanted him to lie down beside me instead of in the sofa bed, but I did not know if I dared to ask.

He seemed to feel a bit awkward to, but finally said;

"Molly... if you want me to, I can sleep beside you. In case you have night mares. Would you want that?"

I suppressed a sigh of relief.

"Yes. Yes, I'd like that very much."

And so, we went to bed in the same bed, me in my rabbit night gown, he in t-shirt and trunks. We did not snuggle up close to one another, we lay at some distance, but just the knowledge that he was close gave me calm in my gut and I soon slept like a baby and had a full night's sleep without nightmares. However, when we woke up, we were as close as can be. In our sleep, we had moved close together and spooned with him behind me and his arms around my body, fitting perfectly to one another. We said nothing about it, just moved apart when we woke and went up to have breakfast, pretending it had not happened. But it had.

We agreed that today we would have a try at fishing. To keep me calm, he checked the little rowing boat carefully before we entered it - and it was clean, no explosive devices attached to it. My panic from the dream had vanished completely. My senses told me he was right, there was only us here, no malicious person lurking around in the bushes planning an attack and I finally let go of the feeling from my nightmare.

If the day before had been all about relaxing, just being, this day was all about laughter. When I unsteadily entered the boat and almost plummeted into the water, especially since he was rocking it a bit on purpose just to tease me. Then

when he showed me how to put on one of the earthworms we had brought in a small glass jar on the hook and I almost freaked out. It seemed so mean to put a living animal on a hook, even if it only was a worm, to then be eaten by a fish.

"But you have to Molly, that's how fishing is done!"

"I refuse!"

"Then there will be no fish!"

In the end he had to put it on for me. He tried to be patient showing me how to throw the rod out, and I tried his patience again. Partly because it amused me, it did not actually seem that hard.

"No, Molly! Not like *that*! You will end up putting the hook in my eye if you're not careful. Do I need to show you again?"

"Yes, please."

He moved over, to sit behind me and using his own hands positioned mine in the correct grip and showed me the snappy move. I considered if I should pretend to still not get it, so he would have to show me once more but felt that it might be pushing him too far and also make me come out as a bit sillier than I wished to. After all, I am a smart, independent woman. When he moved away, I instead made a perfect throw and then we sat there fishing for a while, until something suddenly was pulling my float under the water surface and I got all excited.

"I have one, I have one!"

"Pull it in then for Christ's sake!"

I was immensely proud when a fish, or a herring as he told me, landed at my feet, but then totally panicked as it was twitching and gasping in the air and I had no idea what to do with it now.

"It's alive!"

"Of course, it's alive, you just pulled it out of the water. The lake isn't full of dead fish if that was what you thought."

He laughed at my distress.

"Of course, I didn't, but I didn't think it would move this much. What do I do?"

He sighed but smiled too.

"I'll help you."

And he removed it from the hook and broke its neck.

"That's brutal!"

"It's not. You must kill it if you want to eat it and this is the fastest, least painful method. Leaving it in the air until it suffocates would be crueller."

"I don't like it anyway", I sulked.

"Then you should get your fish in the grocery store, maybe in the form of fish fingers so you don't have to acknowledge that has been a living fish at all", he teased.

"So, no fish fingers swimming around in this lake either?" I said with feigned surprise. "What a pity, I think I prefer them to... was it herring you called it?"

"I think I might soon have to lob you out of this boat. You can't seriously prefer fish fingers to herring in any shape or form", he grinned.

"I told you I like junk food. Lots of fish fingers have been consumed in the Dawes household. That's why I'm so intelligent – you know they say eating fish makes you more intelligent?", I grinned back.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure it applies to fish fingers. Herring on the other hand..." He looked sadly at the herring and added; "I'm so sorry you will be wasted on someone who prefers fish fingers."

We continued fishing for a while, although I let him deal with all the ones we pulled up, but when we had enough for our dinner we finished, and he rowed us towards the jetty. I half-way lay down in the bow, clasped my head behind my neck and looked up in the blue sky, just listened to him dipping the oars in the water, then pulling them through it and I glanced at him, performing the move with strength so the boat glided with considerable speed over the surface. Between half-closed eyelids enjoyed seeing his arm muscles play, exposed as he was wearing only t-shirt.

Again, we prepared sandwiches for lunch and ate them outdoors, having a small picnic on a blanket by the lake. He tossed a crumpled napkin on me once he was finished.

"Now, Ms. Dawes, I think it's time for us to go swimming."

"How about you swim, and I watch?"

He cocked an eyebrow;

"You don't think that's a bit pervy? Watching your bodyguard swimming while not doing it yourself."

He got me. With that, it was difficult to abstain from getting into the water and I reluctantly went to get changed, which in this case meant undressing to only underwear and wrap a towel around me. I intended to show myself as little as possible. My bra was fine, it was my own and it was a black satin bra with a thin lace trim. The knickers was mum's, and shall we say covering everything they should in granny style, in other words as unsexy as they could possibly be but good in the way that they were hiding quite much. When I came outside, he had swimming trunks on, obviously he kept a stash here in the cabin. There was no news to it really, I had already seen him in his trunks, so the nearly naked sight of his toned body had no affect at all on me. At least that was what I was telling myself as we walked down to the lake.

"So, will you walk in cowardly from the shore, or will you dive in from the jetty?" he asked.

"Dive." The method which fastest would get me under water from the moment I took the towel off.

"Maybe she knows how to do it after all", he whistled.

"What?"

"Swim! You told me you were a coward but diving in is the bold choice."

Well, that depends on how you see it.

Out on the jetty, I let the towel fall and then rapidly dived into the water. Let myself glide under the surface, holding my breath for as long distance as I could manage, and then emerged again.

He dived in too and was suddenly beside me, his eyes twinkling, water drops in his eye lashes.

"I think you lied to me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're a good diver, so you obviously know how to do this."

"I took a crawling course, okay? When I said I didn't fancy going swimming I just didn't feel like flaunting myself in my underwear."

"But it's only me here, so no harm done."

Again, that depends on how you see it.

"Let's swim."

He knew how to crawl too, and we ploughed the water, silently swimming beside each other, almost competing for a while although I did not really have a fair chance against his stronger strokes. Then we swam back towards the shore and stood panting where the water was a bit shallower and he suddenly caught me off guard splashing water at me. Not a small amount either, more like half a bath tub.

"Oi, you nearly drowned me!"

"Don't be such a pussy."

"You..." I splashed back at him and then there was a full-fledged water fight, where both were trying to splash as much water as possible at the other one while trying to avoid it oneself. I laughed so my stomach hurt at the childish game, and so did he. Then suddenly he sneaked up behind me and wrapped his arms hard around me, locking mine so I could not move them and said with low, husky voice in my ear;

"Now you don't stand a chance."

One moment I felt his wet body pressed to mine and felt myself react to it with a sudden urge, next he had scooped up in his arms, lifted me up high and thrown me into the water, so I was completely under the surface for a few seconds. I took a large involuntary gulp of water and when I resurfaced spit it out and started coughing heavily. He was laughing, looking like a poster boy for swimwear and suddenly it all just became too much for me to take. The strange mix of having so much relaxed fun together, the sudden and strong desire when had held my half-

naked body to his in a firm grip, followed by the unexpected dip. I suddenly felt naked, not literally even if I almost was, but I felt like my true feelings were very close to being exposed. Felt that this combination of something that seemed like friendship and the urge to be close to him physically without being able to act on it, was too much to handle anymore. Too strong feelings to keep them repressed in his company.

He was still laughing at his coup.

"Got you, didn't I?"

"I don't want to do this anymore", I whispered between coughs. He had not picked up on my mood shift yet and kept on joking.

"Uhu, is the Home Secretary upset because she lost a water fight? You *do* know that losing is part of the game, don't you?", he laughed.

I just stared at him and repeated, now with louder voice and without coughing in between.

"I don't want to do this anymore. This game."

As I turned around and hurried out of the water, pulled myself up on the jetty and swept my towel around me, I saw his face now perplexed and serious.

"Molly, come on! It wasn't that bad, was it? You just got a bit wet and I thought we were having fun?"

But I just walked away without saying anything more, walked backed to the cottage and into the bedroom, slammed the door closed behind me. I realised he would think I was angry, even though I was not. I was just too much in an emotional turmoil to be able to stand being with him, having him watch me. That was why I was very alarmed when he opened the door, without knocking, without asking for permission. He stayed leaning in the doorway with the towel around his hips, looking at me questioning.

"Would you mind telling me what's going on, Molly? This must be something bigger than me dropping you in the water?"

"Leave me alone, please."

"No." Instead he came over to sit beside me, disturbingly close, his bare shoulder and arm touching mine. "No, I won't leave you until you tell me what's bothering you."

His voice was soft like velvet but very determined. Why could he not just sod off? There was no way I could explain this to him. Best thing to do now was to start packing and leave this place, so I would not be alone with him anymore, then change bodyguard when I got home. I could not pretend any longer. I turned away from him.

"Just go Charles, I'm not in the mood for sharing my feelings."

It seemed like he would not take no for an answer, though. He reached out his hands to cup my face and make me turn to him again, with his thumbs stroking away a few tears that trailed down my cheeks.

"Please, Molly. Don't shut me out, not after these days. You know you can talk me."

I felt my lower lip shivering stupidly but managed to say.

"No, I can't talk to you. You're the last person I can talk to about this."

He leaned his forehead to mine. Such torture to be this close to him and not be able to cross the line which I desperately wanted to cross, but I would never let myself do that again.

"Why am I the last person you can talk to?"

"For Christ's sake, leave me alone!"

I tried to pull away from him, but he took hold around my shoulders, not hard but firmly.

"I won't. Tell me, Molly. I need to know."

"No, you don't need to know! I'm quite sure you don't *want* to know, because it would be so fucking awkward to handle that I'm in love with you!"

Frustration made the words slip from my tongue.

"What?!" He looked shell-shocked.

"I'm in love with you", I repeated whispering. "I'm so in love with you that I don't know what to do with myself. So in love with you that it hurts not to be allowed to touch you... and I know you don't want that, so it makes it all wrong."

"You're in love with *me*?" he repeated with an expression which was difficult to interpret.

"Yes. Now would you leave me alone, so I can bury myself under the duvet and feel totally embarrassed?"

"No."

Instead he took my face between his palms again, and let his lips come crashing down on mine in an intense, breath-taking kiss, then pulled back and looked at me for my reaction. I gasped for air, now the one shell-shocked was me.

"But you don't want this!"

"How do you know what I want?"

"But you rejected me before, in the hotel room, when I tried to kiss you, remember?"

"I could never forget that, I think about it all the time... I didn't reject you because I didn't want it, all I wanted was to kiss you back... but I had to stay focused at protecting you... and I was sure you were just acting on impulse because you had been through something traumatic. I could never take advantage of that.... I was sure you would regret it if anything happened between us, and I could not stand if you would think it a mistake when I knew it would be something important to me. Something I would not want to forget. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I'm not sure I do..." The circuits of my brain seemed overheated. He was so close that our breaths mingled.

"I'm in love with you too, stupid girl. So in love with you", he whispered and then pressed his lips to mine again, this time softer, careful like he was trying the waters, yet assertive.

I could not believe this was happening, it was totally surreal and too wonderful to be true, but it *was* happening. Our half-parted lips grazing each other slowly, again and again. It was like caressing each other's mouths, just to try them out before kissing fully again. We did that for long, and meanwhile he nimbly pulled me up on his lap so I straddled him. My towel fell to the floor, but I did not care about my nakedness anymore, now it was what I wanted. To be close to him with as little as possible between us and he convincingly showed me he wanted the same. His hands roamed my back, pressing me to him, moved up to my neck and buried themselves in my damp hair, holding my head steady yet softly when he now kissed me harder, let his tongue into my mouth to explore it. God, he was a fantastic kisser. Then the hands moved down my back again, finding the clasp of my bra and unhooked it, slowly pushed the straps down from my shoulders and to let it come off.

"I think it's for the best that we get you out of these wet clothes, we don't want you to catch a cold", he murmured with his lips to my neck.

That was a very logical and valid reason, but there was no logic involved in the sensations I felt as his hands cupped my cold breasts as if to warm them and caressed the stiff nipples with his thumbs, then to my amazement bent down to catch one of them in his mouth. It felt so ridiculously good that I could not help letting a moan escape me and immediately felt a bit embarrassed at being so easy

to please, but he just looked up briefly and gave me a cheeky grin indicating that he appreciated the response, then bent down again and made sure both my breast received an equal amount of attention. Then I just let go and enjoyed it fully, holding his head there and let my hands run through his locks, pressed my crotch to his and revelled in feeling that his excitement was becoming impressively apparent down there.

"I think I've heard that especially wet bikini bottoms should come off as quickly as possible to avoid urinary infection..."

He slid a finger inside the lining of my ugly knickers, creating a ripple of lust between my legs.

"And that is your only motive for taking them off?" I whispered in his ear, the nibbled his earlobe which provoked a low groan from him.

"Absolutely, no other motives here. Only concern for our health."

"Then I'd better do as you say."

Still we kept on kissing for at least a minute, unwilling to break from each other even briefly, but finally I stood in front of him and while planting kisses on my belly he helped me tug off the little garment which showed annoying resistance, getting stuck on my hips because it was wet. When it was off, he stood as well, and we repeated the exercise with his bathing trunks who were equally uncollaborative. When they were finally off, I could conclude that every single part of him was as perfect as those I had already seen on a daily basis. How could any man be this perfect? His only flaws, if one could call them that, was one scar on his stomach,

another on his calf, since long healed and faded, but the skin having a different texture to it than the rest, smoother, hairless and I reached out my hand to run my fingers softly over the one on the stomach.

"What did you do?"

"I was hit by a bullet, in Afghan. It was a really serious injury, I had to be medevac'd, was resuscitated a couple of times and it took multiple surgeries before I was stabilised. I don't want to think about it *now*."

He looked down on my fingers tracing the borders of the scar, then I placed both my palms flat to his stomach and let them run upwards to feel the uneven surface resulting from his lean muscles and up to his chest, holding them still there on the taut surface and stepping in to kiss him. He let his hands slide down my back, reaching for my arse and decidedly pulled me to him. No space between us, skin to skin, the sensation of pulsating body heat. I do not think I had ever been so excited, this was so far from any pre-marital fumbles I had had and even further from the stiff intercourses that had been Roger's style of having sex. This was pure arousal.

"Shit, Molly", he suddenly sounded alarmed. "I don't have a single condom here, I never expected..."

"Don't worry..." I laughed between kisses. "I'm on the pill."

"Thank god, I don't know how I would have stopped now." He sat back on the bed again and pulled me with him, so I again straddled him.

"Me neither..."

Especially not now when his hand found his way between my legs, to the place where I most needed it to be and... oh, he was good at this, such amazingly skilful fingers. Not that I needed to be further excited really, my body was so ready for him, but it was marvellous. I touched his hardness, he seemed to be as ready as could be too, which he confirmed in his next breath;

"I want you Molly, I don't think I can wait any longer", nibbling my earlobe and then swiftly, with a firm hold around my hips moved me to lie down on the bed and came over me. He paused, his face a few inches above mine.

"You're so beautiful... so amazing... and I've wanted this for so long."

My happiness and desire knew no limits in that moment. With my hands I pulled his mouth to me in a kiss, with my legs wrapped around him pulled his hips to mine and we both wriggled a bit, so he ended up where we both wanted him to be, so, so much. A little resistance when he first thrust, but then he was inside me. We stopped there for a few seconds to just feel it, feel the coupling in all its gloriousness while smiling with lips touching each other. Then we began rocking our bodies slowly at first, building up to a pace where he was stroking inside me faster and harder until it was so good it was almost unbearable... and then there was a point when it was, unbearable, earth-shattering, and I heard myself screaming his name, and he groaned mine as he released inside me with one last hard thrust. So amazing, total fulfillment. He collapsed on top of me and we lay there breathing heavy and rapid, then slower, coming down to earth again and I stroked his smooth back softly with my fingers.

"What did you just do to me Molly? I think I nearly died there for a while, from pure bliss."

He had raised his head, so his warm brown eyes looked into mine.

"Well... ditto", I laughed almost feeling shy. I had never let myself go so completely before.

He raised his hand to pull away a strand of hair that again had stuck on my face as my skin was covered in a thin layer of perspiration from what we just had done.

"I love you", he said. "I love you, I love you, I love you." For each time he said it he dotted a kiss on my face.

"Can I say something?"

"Yes?"

"I love you too."

He grinned happily and then we embarked on another deep kiss, before he rolled off me, leaving me feeling a bit empty and thinking I would need him soon again. We lay there, turned towards one another, eyes locked and hands gently caressing, and smirking he said;

"Now you have proven you were right after all."

"About what?"

"You're fucking excellent."

Protecting Miss Dawes – a job like any other

He kissed me on the nose.

Chapter 18: Charles

Have you ever felt sorrow in the midst of a happy moment, because you suddenly have the idea that your time soon will be up, the moment gone, and you are already missing what you have even when you still have it? That happened to me during those days with Molly. Not at first, then I was only engulfed in the happy bubble, but as the days went by, sadness inhabited me because I doubted that she would remain mine when we left this place.

Everything was silent, peaceful. She was lying on the side with her back turned to me and I let my fingers slowly trace her softly curved contour from the shoulder, down her side to the dip of her waist, circle down under one of her buttocks and then up her spine, ending at her neck and finally placed a kiss there.

"Mmmm... Don't stop, I love that."

"Who has said anything about stopping? Not me."

I could not get enough of her body, enough of her. The more she gave me the more I craved, and it seemed to be the same way for her. I had lost track of time since we first went into the bedroom, when she was upset, and I was confused, it seemed like a life-time had passed since then. We had spent so much time in bed making love, talking and sleeping entwined that the only thing that separated day from night was the darkness and the light. When we got hungry we went up for a while, wrapped in the sheets and got ourselves something to eat, but then returned to the closeness in the bed as soon as we possibly could, to revel in what we had denied ourselves for so long. Not only had I waited out with her, it had been so long before I met her too. My marriage was dead long before the divorce and I could not even

remind myself of a time when Rebecka and I had been like this, spending time in playful, lazy lust. I had not known how much I wanted this until I had it with her. From what she told me, her story was much the same. The marriage with Roger had never contained any passion and she had been single since. Our mutual discovery of each other entailed so much joy, curiosity and desire which none of us had experienced before.

She now turned to lay on her back, her green eyes gazing up at me, the dark messy hair spread over the pillow and she bit her lower lip as if hesitating to say something that she wanted to say. She was adorable, and I had to kiss her before I let her talk. When I withdrew she almost followed me up, unwilling to let my lips go, but then she sunk back to the pillow, sighed with contentment and asked;

"When did you know? That you had feelings for me?"

"You're really asking me to reveal that?"

Maybe we ought to be past that, but her question made me feel like a shy school boy. She giggled.

"I guess I'm just really curious. You're so good at hiding your feelings when you want to, so I truly have no idea."

"Okay, I'll tell you if you tell me. Deal?"

"Deal", she smiled.

"Well, the coin dropped when I was out having a beer with a friend. That was the weekend before the PM's party. We talked about me working for you and he said that you were one of his free passes..."

"*One* of his free passes! That doesn't make a girl feel very special. How many does he have?"

I laughed.

"I also reacted at the number and that it was you, but with a slightly different perspective... anyway, I really didn't like the thought of him with you and afterwards I realised the reason was because *I* wanted to be with you... like this."

I caressed her cheek softly with the back of my fingers and she placed her hand on mine, turned her head to kiss my palm.

"And you?"

"It came gradually... I realised the evening of the party that you were the only one I wanted to be with, dance with, talk to... that I even had bought that dress because I wanted you to see me in it. And the hours we had in the sofa after the party was just the best I had in ages. I felt I could be myself with you and that is unusual for me these days. I didn't want to admit it, but I knew then I had a crush on you... and I was so looking forward to seeing you again after the weekend, but that was when all went to shit because you had been told to spy on me."

"Do you realise now how hard that was for me? I already had feelings for you too... and god, that dress... I wish you had told me you had bought it for me, then I would have taken it off quicker than you can count to three."

"So, you liked it?"

"You were amazing in it, but you were in the West Ham t-shirt too... and in that rabbit night gown."

"Now I'm beginning to doubt your sense of taste", she smirked.

"It's because you're amazing in anything."

"You flatterer... but so are you... Even if didn't acknowledge any feelings until the party evening, I think I was attracted to you from the first time I saw you on the street outside my office, and the evening when Rob tried to ambush me into a date I knew I could not go through with it with you looking at us. I could not stand the thought of you getting the impression that I enjoyed a date with him."

"I was so relieved when you ended it, not comfortable at all witnessing a tête-a-tête between the two of you."

"You were so stone-faced, I never could have imagined."

"It was my job Molly, to be near you and protect you, but hardly to be drooling over you. And I never imagined that you would look at me."

"Are you kidding me? Have you looked yourself in the mirror? And in addition to being a looker, you're such a top bloke. Very annoying sometimes but you make up for that by..."

She pressed her naked body to me and wrapped her right leg around me, at the same time as she kissed me with parted lips and let her tongue sensually probe my mouth, the complete experience made me groan.

"You'll be the ruin of me Molly Dawes. I'll never be able to leave this bed."

That was the end of conversation for a considerable time.

I knew we would not be able to shut out reality forever. I had promised to get in touch with Lorraine again in a week and we would have keep to that, otherwise a nation-wide search for Molly would probably be initiated, but we had a few precious days that were ours only and I tried to enjoy them to the fullest and not think too much. Still, as the days past, the inevitable coming closer, I sometimes during the night when she was sleeping peacefully next to me, could not help myself from going there, wondering what it would be like to return to normal life. Could we continue this? Would she really want to? And even if she wanted to, would it be possible under the critical eyes of other politicians, the public, the newspapers and tabloids? I was certain of what *I* wanted, but would she want the same once reality seeped into this lovely bubble?

I did not share my fears with her, she seemed so happy, so untroubled, like years younger when she did not have the weight of the Home Secretary role on her shoulders and I did not want to remind her of that reality. Did not want to deprive

her of this easiness sooner than I had to. We finally left the bed for a little longer periods, went for walks, went swimming - or actually skinny-dipping now that nakedness was preferred rather than embarrassing. To be close to her slick body in the dark water, it will always remain one of my most sensual memories.

This morning I woke up with a pang of angst. We had been here for a week, been lovers for five days but now it was time to find the nearest phone booth and give Lorraine a two-minute call. I knew those two minutes could change everything. Maybe we would be able to return here for a longer period after that, but more likely it would be the signal that it now was time to break up from this love nest.

"I don't want to go", Molly protested next to me.

"You know we have to. We can't hide here forever."

"I'm not letting you go."

She suddenly was on top of me where I was lying flat on my back, placing one hand on each side of my head, leaning over me with her face close to mine and her hair hanging like a curtain around us, protecting us from the world.

"You know I'm stronger than you, right? I can carry you to the car if I have to", I smiled.

"Not if I convince you to stay."

She moved her body, making it evident in what way she intended to convince me.

"It does not change anything, Molly..."

But the sensation when she lowered herself over me...

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yes..."

I tried to sound convincing but heard that my strained voice did not sound as firm as I had intended. She sighed.

"You really are a bore Charles James, spoiling my fun but in that case we at least have to make this a good one, like one for the road so we can stand being out of this marvellous bed."

The thought of not being this close to her was almost unbearable and I grabbed her hips to pull her closer to me and she leaned back, supporting herself with her arms, arching her back so I came deeper inside her and we moved with an intensity different from what we had before. Passionate but with a touch of desperation too, like we were already preparing to miss each other's body contact and now wanted to inhabit one another in every way possible before being parted. Suddenly she felt too distant in that position and I pulled her down to me, so our faces were close again and we could kiss. We moved slower now, kissing, caressing, not breaking eye contact for one second and I saw her coming closer, her eyes widened, her expression nearly frozen as her body shuddered and clenched around me and I let myself go to. Loosing ourselves in each other, or finding ourselves in one another - I was not sure which it was.

"Whatever happens after this, remember that I love you", she whispered.

"I will", I said but her words had a finality to them that rather increased my sadness and sense of loss than diminished them, but I attempted to strike a less serious note. "And remember that I love you, you're the hottest Home Secretary that ever existed."

The nearest phone booth was a few miles away and we drove there in silence, both having the sense this was a fateful moment and my whole body was screaming no as I dialled Lorraine's number and she picked up. I had hoped she would not.

"Lorraine, it's Charles James calling like I promised. We have two minutes so use them well, what news?"

"Thank god you're calling. Is the Home Secretary there? Can I talk directly to her?"

I could not deny her that and it was reasonable in so many ways, as Molly in the position as the Home Secretary was the one that both Anne Sampson's police force and Stephen Hunter-Dunne's Security Service were reporting to. I gave the phone to Molly and could follow the conversation only through her expressions and words. What she heard seemed to astound her. When time was up I signalled to her and she ended the call saying;

"We'll let you know when we're back in London."

And with a heavy heart I knew this was the end to our romantic get-away.

She hung up and stayed silent for a few seconds. I was impatient to know what has been said but let her take her time. Finally, she spoke.

"The investigation of the St. Matthew's bombing has taken unexpected turns... the recording they found in your hotel room made them scrutinize the activities of Stephen Hunter-Dunne... and as an extension of that the PM as well. Loraine did not have time to expand on the details now, but they are both in custody... and I'm needed back in London. Immediately."

"Then we have to go", I said sadly. She stepped closer to me and wrapped her arms around me and I mine around her, held her close to my chest and leaned my chin on the top of her head.

"We have to, yes, but it does not have to be the end of this. You and me. I don't want it to be."

"Me neither, Molly. I want us more than anything... I just realise it will be more... complicated out there."

I found my eyes dimmed by emerging tears because I feared that this was indeed the end of this, of us, because it was a fairy tale only meant for the lake cottage not for the political scene of our country.

We headed back and packed the few things we had, cleaned the cottage, locked it and placed the key back in its pot.

"Don't tell anyone where it is", I smiled to her.

"I only ever want to come here with you", she said, and I could see that now her eyes were damp too, mirroring my fears.

We did not speak much on our way back to London. We listened to the news for the first time, in an attempt to catch up on the officially known version until we got to London and Molly would receive more information directly from the source. The death tolls of the bomb had landed at twelve and many of the injured were still in hospital but seemed stable even if the condition still was serious for some. It was said that the Home Secretary was still in the hospital due to her injuries but would recover fully. We were both relieved that this escape had not been known to the public, that would make her return, our return, easier. Nothing was mentioned about Hunter-Dunne or the PM, but it was noted that it had been remarkably quiet from no. 10 in the last days.

"The PM... and Stephen... I wonder what exactly they have entangled themselves in."

"Me too, but I guess we'll know soon enough."

On the outskirts of London, we made another call to Lorraine to ask where we should go, where it would be safe for Molly to meet up with her and Anne Sampson, preferably without being attacked by journalists and we were directed to a hotel, not the same one where she had been staying before but one where they now kept a room for her, guarded by the police. Before we went into the car again, I pulled her to me.

"I know we will be separated when we get there. People need to talk to you, I'll be in for a bollocking by my boss... And I don't think it would be wise to let people know about us... so we should kiss good bye now."

"I'll kiss you, but not good bye. I intend to do this hundred, no thousand times again – just so you know."

"If you say so, Ma'am", I smiled to her lips, but I was not sure I had ever felt this desperately sad and hollow.

"And I'll make sure Lorraine understands that this was all my initiative, you just did your job coming with me."

"A bit outside the job description though..."

"I've always liked people who colour outside the lines."

We kissed one last, long and deep kiss but I could not enjoy it because it felt like my heart was being ripped out at the same time because it was so final.

Then we drove to the hotel, where Molly, as I had foreseen, immediately was escorted to a room to meet Anne Sampson meanwhile I had to face Lorraine who was waiting for me with an all but pleased expression on her face. Before Molly disappeared into the hotel, she stopped in front of Lorraine saying;

"Don't be too hard on PS James, he only did what I asked, taking me away from here. He's an excellent bodyguard and he has acted above and beyond duty keeping me safe. I don't want to hear about any repercussions. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Ma'am", Lorraine nodded reluctantly. Molly glanced at me and our eyes said all the words we could not say out loud in that moment, and then she walked through the hotel's revolving door and was gone.

Chapter 19: Charles

"What the hell were you thinking, James?!"

We were back in the office and Lorraine seated behind her desk. I had known this was coming even if Molly had told her to go easy on me. It was not the first time in my career I had been exposed to the fury of a superior officer though, and truth be told she was far from the most intimidating one, even if I respected her.

"I was doing my job, Ma'am. Keeping the Home Secretary safe."

"By going AWOL! You took her off-grid without authorisation!"

"With all due respect, it was authorised by *her* and when I looked last time she was the boss of not only me, but of you and Mrs. Sampson too. When she wanted to disappear, I could not deny her that. And I kept you informed."

She looked extremely frustrated, ready to burst with anger, but she knew I was right, we all answered to the Home Secretary in the end.

"How could she think she would be safer with only you than in one of our secure locations?"

"Do you even have to ask that? She was attacked twice in a week, the second time in a location where security was claimed to be maximised and yet a bomb somehow found its way in undetected. She felt she didn't know who she could trust anymore, if even you, Anne Sampson or Stephen Hunter-Dunne were to be trusted – and from what I hear that did not seem to be the case with him."

"So, she told you? That's strictly confidential information, it must not come out at this point. Is that clear?"

"I get that, Ma'am. She told me in strictest confidence and I intend to keep it to myself."

"She mentioned who else is in custody?"

"Yes."

She sighed and leaned back in her chair.

"She really holds you in high regard, doesn't she? Not many secrets between you, is there?"

I shrugged my shoulders and hoped I did not blush.

"I have saved her life, maybe that explains it."

"You spied on her..."

"Against my will, on your orders!" Now she was truly pissing me off and I jumped up from my chair and leaned myself towards her over her desk, placing my hands on it so I was towering over her. Sometimes it is very convenient to be taller than everyone else when you want to make an impact. This was also a good way to distract her and avoid answering the question. I knew she would wonder about the total openness between me and Molly if I told her yes.

"I was following orders because *you* threatened to move my family out of the safe house if I didn't. And don't bother denying, it was a poorly disguised threat and you

know it. Don't try to make it something else!" I spat, then added with calmer voice; "Although in the end I'm grateful for it because that's how you got on to Hunter-Dunne and could prove his dealings with the Prime Minister.

"Please sit down", her voice suddenly tired. "We're on the same team and I'm actually sorry I had to do that to you, force you to spy on her which is not part of the role as PPO, and I'm very grateful we got the recording. I'm not allowed to share all the specifics, but it seems Stephen had woven a complicated web to increase his and his organisations powers in a very irregular manner, dangerous even and somehow had gotten endorsement by the PM, even if I'm not sure he understood the extent of it. It also appears that Hunter-Dunne saw the Home Secretary as a threat to his plans, both because she was against the RIPA-18 bill and him taking over responsibilities from Anne's organisation, and because of her popularity. If she would become the next PM, Stephen's favourable position would be threatened."

"You mean...?"

"Our investigations indicate that Stephen and a small team around him were behind both the car attack and the St. Matthew's bombing. That's how the IED could get in there even though the place was swarmed by the Security Service, because someone from them placed it there. All this is strictly confidential, of course."

I shook my head, this was difficult to grasp – a man in his position willing to kill innocent fellow citizens in order to get to the Home Secretary. It seemed more like a plot fit for the screen than real life.

"Of course... And the PM, how much did he know about this?"

"Not clear yet, but first interrogations suggest that he did not know of the plan to kill the Home Secretary. His hunger for power may have corrupted him, but he's probably not prepared to go that far. Or, maybe he's happy someone else doing the dirty work if can only pretend not to know. It remains to be clarified. What's certain is that both Stephen's and the PM's positions will be vacant in a not too distant future."

I nodded and let my face remain blank, but my heart skipped a beat. I knew Molly would be considered if the Prime Minister had to be replaced and that would be an offer too good to be refused for anyone. It would be fantastic for her career, but not for us. In that position she would not be able to afford any skeletons, or bodyguard lovers, in the closet.

"What now?" I asked, trying to change subject to interrupt my depressing thoughts.

"Well, after your reckless actions I would have liked to assign you to desk service again, but as you overheard, the Home Secretary made it clear that she didn't want to hear of any repercussions for you coming with her..."

The choice of words made me smile inside. If Lorraine only knew in what ways I had been coming with Molly.

"...so that means you are to continue as her bodyguard. Go home now but come to work as usual tomorrow."

I nodded in agreement and left. I already longed for Molly but there was no way I could contact her tonight. Neither of us had a mobile phone, her broken in the explosion, mine smashed by me on purpose before we left for the cottage, so we would not be traced. We would both get new ones of course, but this evening we were cut off from each other. I missed her, her smile, her cheekiness, the warmth of her body and I could not even send her a text message. I decided to dampen the want by seeing the person who was the most important to me – Sam. Lorraine had confirmed Rebecka and him were still in the safe house. Even if the car attack and St. Matthews investigations were leading to Hunter-Dunne, the school bombing and train attack were separate from that and my family still considered to be under threat until that investigation was closed as well. It seemed like progress had been made though, and an operation to strike against a group of suspected accomplices, an identified terrorist cell, might soon be launched, but for now they were still in the safe house and that was where I went.

I had called them before I left London, so they knew I was fine after the bombing and would be gone for some time, so I had not left them worrying about me. Yet, Sam rushed to me and gave me a big hug as soon as I got inside the door.

"Dad, you're home!"

I refrained from pointing out that this house hardly was home, because *he* was home to me and holding his little boyish body next to mine, knowing he was safe in this crazy world and feeling how much I had missed him, in combination with missing Molly now, made my eyes flood with silent tears. Rebecka came too, saw my face and then wrapped her arms around me and we stood there for a while all

three of us in a family hug. We did not love each other like lovers any more, Rebecka and I, but Sam would always bond us because we wanted the best for him and we both wanted to be there for him, never wishing any harm to the other one. It warmed my insides that we had come this far.

"We're so glad you made it alive from that bomb, you know. It's so good to see you again." Her voice filled with warmth.

"I love you dad", Sam said, unusual words from the ten-year-old and it made me even more emotional.

"I love you too, scamp." I dried my eyes with the back of my hand.

"Are you crying dad?"

"Nah, just got something in my eye."

"Dad!"

"Okay, I'm crying but just because I'm so happy to be with you again."

"Will you stay here tonight?"

I looked at Rebecka and she nodded.

"Okay, if you want me to."

"I want to, dad! Can we make pancakes for him mum?"

She laughingly agreed and a while later we all sat down for a pancake dinner, the first time in many years that we had a meal together like this. The truce between Rebecka and me now complete, trust seemed to be restored and I was very happy about that since she was the mother of the love of my life. One of them... I was wondering if Molly was another, if we would have the possibility to develop our budding relationship to be that to each other.

After watching some telly, a relaxing movie, no news, I tucked Sam to bed and lay down beside him. Even if I had the same problem fitting into his bed as I had had in the bunk bed at Molly's parents place, this was lovely too. Lying beside my little boy, stroking his hair and feeling his body become heavy as he fell asleep. Whatever happened with other parts of my life, I would always have him and that gave me some consolation. Until quite recently I had thought I did not need any other kind of love in my life, now I knew I had been mistaken. Reconciling with Rebecka made life easier, but I knew for sure she would never fill that void, it was a green-eyed undercover cockney girl I wanted to do that.

Next morning, I got up early, to pass by my flat and change to shirt and suit. It felt strange somehow after a week in t-shirt and joggers, or nothing at all except Molly and the sheets wrapped around me. Another confirmation I was back to reality. Then the car picked me up to take me to the hotel and I was strangely nervous about meeting her again.

I knocked the door to her hotel room to pick her up, after chatting a bit to the police officer on guard outside it.

"Please come in, I'll be ready in a minute."

I went in and closed the door behind me and the moment I did, she came over and wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me to her in a kiss. For a few moments, I just held her, felt her, then I had to let go;

"Happy to see you too Molly, but we must get going or they'll wonder."

She looked disappointed.

"I know... I just, I missed you this night."

"And I missed you."

"What did you do?"

"I went to see Sam."

"Of course", she smiled, then became serious again. "I hated I could not call you, hated not knowing where you were or what you did."

"Me too, but we really have to get going now."

I did not want to seem cold but I had to cut this conversation off, or I knew I would be too emotional, alternatively would have to take off her tidy blouse and skirt and lay her down on the bed. Neither seemed like good options right now.

"All right then", she straightened her back and put on her Home Secretary face, shutting everyone including me out, hiding the real Molly. I wanted to tell her we could stay here all day instead, get undressed and order room service, but naturally I did not.

Her schedule was intense, getting updates, discussing action plans to deal with the current situation. In the afternoon, she had an appointment with her ex-husband, a.k.a. Chief Whip Roger Penhaligon. She had not asked that I left the room and I was positioned in a corner as he started speaking, ignoring me after having thrown me a glance filled with disdain.

"As you know, we find ourselves in quite a predicament..."

"You know, it would be nice if you at least pretended to care about me Roger. 'Glad you survived the bomb Molly', 'How are you Molly?' Thanks for your concern!" she said upset.

"I *do* care about you! I'm just... I'm just not good at expressing it, Molly."

He almost convinced even me, almost.

"There's nothing wrong with your eloquence in other areas", she snorted.

"Showing feelings is not my strong suit..."

I wondered what his strong suit was besides being an arrogant bastard, but kept my mouth shut.

"...but it does not mean I don't care about you. I never wanted it to end like this between us, Molly. I never wanted a divorce. I wanted us."

Oh, come on! He made me quite nauseous, especially as he moved to sit closer to her. I saw her stiffen and glance towards me, and I knew she was not comfortable

with me witnessing this either. The question was who she wished to be gone, him or me.

"What I wanted to say, is that we have a predicament. Tomorrow the news about Stephen Hunter-Dunne's likely involvement in the attacks will be released, because the public demands answers. The PM's involvement with Hunter-Dunne will also be exposed at least to some extent. Naturally, the Party will have to distance ourselves from the PM's actions..."

Naturally, throwing the man they had cheered on until now to the wolves to secure that the power remained in their hands. This was a dirty game.

"...and the best thing would be if we simultaneously could present the one we intend to put forward as his replacement. That would give a unified message, telling our voters that we can handle this and will get through it still strong. We need a candidate who is liked by the public, liked by media, preferably someone who has already taken a stand against the PM and RIPA-18..."

I knew where this was leading now. He was such an abominable snake.

"Everyone wants you Molly. Everyone wants you to step into the PM's shoes."

"Roger..."

"This is the opportunity you have been waiting for! That *we* have been waiting for! Come home and I'll help you be the most successful Prime Minister the country has seen!"

I forced my face to keep still in a stony expression, eyes looking straight in front of me instead of at them, I only felt my jaw twitch slightly and my heart thump. There was no way she could refuse this offer to serve her country in the ultimate way, to be able to make the difference she had always wanted to. I knew that, but suddenly felt I could not stay to hear her answer. I could not bear hearing her breaking up with me without even saying the words to *me*. If she accepted this proposal I would know that was it anyway, even if she did not even realise it herself.

"Excuse me, I have to visit the men's room."

"Who cares? Off you go", he gave me a dismissive wave with his hand and turned to her instead.

Her eyes sought mine, but I avoided eye contact and just went out. Headed for the toilets, where I stood staring at myself in the mirror, a desperate-looking tall dark-haired man breathing heavily to stay in control, and then splashed my face with plenty of ice cold water just to compose myself. Then I called for Kim and asked if she could take over my shift, said I had a terrible headache and had to go home. She met me outside.

"You do look a bit pale, mate, probably for the better if you go. Can't stay focused when you feel unwell anyway."

So, I left without saying good bye to Molly and with the certainty that the newspaper headlines tomorrow would say that she was the PM to be and, to be read between the lines, probably with a suitable partner like Roger Penhaligon by her side and no room for me in her life.

Protecting Miss Dawes – a job like any other

Chapter 20: Charles

Next day, I called in sick and at the same time asked the Chief Superintendent to be transferred to another assignment.

"This is very odd, Charles. Did something happen since we met last?"

"I just don't see eye to eye with the Home Secretary. After my return I've reflected on the situation when she demanded I'd take her away without telling anyone. Now that I've landed a bit, I realise I'm not comfortable working that way. If she's not willing to follow my safety instructions, and yours, I find it impossible to be responsible for her safety. I think it's better if someone else take over."

I hoped I sounded convincing and that she took the sadness in my voice for being tired due to illness.

"The strange thing is that I have a paper here on my desk, with a request from the Home Secretary's office regarding the same."

"What?"

I had not seen that coming.

"Yes, she's asked that you're replaced, so you seem to agree on that. Consider it done, you don't have to go back there on Monday. Come to the office instead and we'll see what your next assignment will be. And for your information, we'll strike against the terrorist cell today so hopefully your ex and Sam will be able to return home soon."

"Thanks Ma'am, that's great news."

I hung up with a heavy heart. What a way to break up... maybe not from a relationship because I guess it had been too short-lived to be defined as that, but at least an affair. A love affair. A lovely affair... To have your office contact the boss of your lover and say his services are no longer required. How clean and efficient, just like that I would be out of her sight with no way of getting near her without raising suspicion. It was not like her but maybe she felt she could not afford to be the source of any gossip given the current situation.

I left the flat, went out for a long and intensive run in an attempt to distract myself but my thoughts followed me like a constant dark cloud hovering above my head.

I felt so disappointed, betrayed and sad. I already missed her, but of course this was the choice she had to make. Who would turn down the possibility to become the Prime Minister for the possibility to fuck their bodyguard? Because that was what I always would be - the bodyguard. It didn't matter that I came from a good family, had gone to the most prestigious boarding school and university the country had to offer, had received the sword of honour for being the best cadet my year of passing out, had had a brilliant army career as officer – to any tabloid that found out that we had a relationship, I would still only ever be the faceless bodyguard the Home Secretary had been shagging and it would pull her down and cost her her career. I would never want that. I wanted her to be brilliant and I could not imagine anyone who would be a better leader for this country.

She had said she loved me... did she? Her words and my question went on repeat again and again in my head in pace with the sound of my feet hitting the pavement,

faster and faster until I felt the taste of iron in my mouth, my t-shirt was soaking and I barely could take another step. Then I sat down by the river bank for a while, just to catch my breath but my thoughts did not cut me any slack, a very annoying companion.

I leaned my head in my hands. I was in love with her, really in love with her so it hurt. Feelings so strong that I had not felt anything like it for many years. Maybe the last feeling I had that was this strong was when I saw the newborn Sam and was stricken by unconditional love. I wanted to fight for her but how could I when it risked hurting her?

The weekend that followed, was my weekend with Sam and we had planned to visit my parents. This time the train trip to Bath was uneventful and it was great to get away in the company of him. He was as sunny as ever and seemed to be so happy to be with his dad, with me, which warmed my heart more than anything.

I never told mum and dad I was working for the Home Secretary so there were no questions about her. They did discuss the latest news though, the scandal involving the head of MI5 and the PM and his resignation. They speculated in who would replace him but I added nothing to that topic.

They noticed of course, that I had something on my mind and mum asked about it. I wanted to talk to her but was limited in what I could say as I also wanted to keep Molly's and my secret safe. I did not want to do anything that would hurt her. I would never be the spurned lover that revenged being left, I only wished her well even if it felt like there now was insurmountable walls between us.

"What's on your mind Charles? You have seemed well for long but now I can see something weighs heavy on your shoulders."

I gave her a weak smile.

"Don't worry mum, it's not the same as before, it's not the PTSD. It's just that I..."

"That you...?"

"I'm unhappily in love I guess."

Surprisingly, my words put a big smile on her face.

"How is that something that makes you smile?"

"Because you're in love! Happily or not, I wasn't sure I would live to see this day. It just makes me very happy that you *feel* again."

"That's one way to see it, glad someone can be positive about it."

"I understand it may be difficult, but this is so much better than when you just were numb, bottling up all feelings inside of you. If you feel unhappy love, you're also capable of feeling happy love, my boy."

I had a lump in my throat now.

"It's just difficult mum... I want to be with her so much... and I think she wants that too, but the circumstances makes it very difficult."

"So she *does* love you too?"

"I think so, but I'm not sure... and things are so complicated, I don't think we can be together anyway."

"If it's meant to be, you will find a way to be together. You need to have faith in each other."

"I wish I had your trust in fate, but I know there isn't always romantic happy ever after in this world just because two persons love each other. There's so much else to it..."

"Is there really, Charles? Remember that of faith, hope and love - the greatest is love."

"You're citing the Bible to me now? Seriously, mum."

"Only because I think it's true. Sometimes we make life more complicated than it is and forget what's truly important."

She was annoying, yet she lighted a little spark of hope inside me.

Sunday afternoon I left Sam with Rebecca and returned to my own empty flat. It seemed emptier than ever. I could not make myself unpack the weekend luggage or do anything really. I just got stuck looking out the big windows where the rain now was pouring down. At least a fitting complement to my mood. I wondered what Molly was doing now. Could she spare any time thinking of me? Did she miss me? Did she feel alone? The thought of her being alone too, made me seriously consider grabbing an umbrella and take a cab to her hotel, but I knew they would not let me see her just like that, when I no longer was part of her security team.

Suddenly I was startled by the doorbell ringing. It was a relief to have my depressing trail of thoughts disturbed, so I opened. Outside a kid was standing, in baggy jeans and a hoodie, with the hood pulled over the head in a vain attempt to protect him from the rain because he was soaking wet anyway. He looked like a homeless kid and I briefly wondered if he was walking from door to door asking for money, or if he wanted to sell something. If he wanted to rob me he had chosen the wrong victim, I was quite sure I would manage someone the size of him even if he had a weapon. Then he looked up at me and the shock was complete.

"Molly?! What are you doing here?"

I quickly glanced around us, but no one seemed to be with her, no bodyguard in sight and I pulled her inside and closed the door behind her. For everlasting seconds we just stared at each other. I could not believe she was here, dripping water on my carpet, looking like a street kid. Her hair almost black when it was wet and it glued to her cheeks. Her face stripped of makeup, pale yet looking very young and vulnerable. Beautiful.

"Are you here alone? Where are your bodyguards?"

"Home. They think I went to bed early with headache."

"You can't walk the streets by yourself! It's dangerous!"

"I can assure you that I can. It's not the first time I sneak out like this. I'm a Newham kid, remember?"

She never ceased to amaze me and I wondered if she ever had done it on my watch.

"But you're no longer a Newham kid! You're the Home Secretary, soon to be PM if I'm not mistaken."

"You can take the kid out of Newham, but not Newham out of the kid. I had to see you somehow", she smirked.

She had taken this risk for me?

"And I'm not by the way."

"Not what?"

"The PM to be. Or the Home Secretary anymore for that matter."

"What?!"

"I'm stepping down. It's announced tomorrow."

"Why Molly? Did they push you out? I'm so sorry..."

She stepped closer to me.

"Don't be, you prannet. No one kicked me, I chose to resign."

"Why?"

She took one step closer, now in my space, our breaths mingling when she turned her face up to me.

"Because I'm choosing you. I'm choosing you Charles. If you want me?"

Did I want her?! More than anything, I just could not believe this was happening.

"But everything you fought for Molly? I don't want you to regret losing it and resent me for it."

"It's not *that* I'm losing. I lost myself, my family, a normal life on the way. I want all that, and I want love. Meeting you made me see that clearly. Not having those things is a too high a price to pay for something I don't even know if I believe in anymore. And anyway, there must be other ways I can make a difference. All I know is that I chose you now, you're all I want."

She paused, then asked shyly;

"Do you want me?"

First, I could not speak because I there were so many emotions going through me, when I finally did my voice was hoarse.

"I want you more than anything Molly. I just never expected you would make this choice, not given what you were offered. And you had requested that I'd be replaced..."

"Only because I want to be able to see you as my boyfriend, not my bodyguard. I thought it was better the sooner you stopped working for me. This resignation thing might take some time and I'm not sure how long I must continue to have a bodyguard and I wanted us to be together like a normal couple. Not you watching over me."

I took her face between my palms, leaned my forehead to hers.

"Are you sure about this?"

"I've never been so sure about anything."

Her words made me immensely happy. The fact that she was here made me immensely happy.

She shuddered in her dripping clothes which I nearly had forgotten.

"Let's get you out of these clothes."

"I'd love that", she said coyly, igniting every nerve ending in my body.

"I'm beginning to think it's a plan of yours to wear wet clothes so I'll offer to take them off."

"You may be on to something there", she laughed, then held her arms up straight above her head and I took that as a sign to peel off the wet hoodie.

Almost like undressing a child, except that it certainly was not a child standing in front of me but the most wonderful woman I knew. I continued to unbutton her jeans, a bit tricky since the fabric was stiff from being wet. Then I tugged them down over her slender hips and she stepped out of them. She was so amazingly beautiful, standing in front of me in only bra and knickers. Not model perfect but I loved every curve, her narrow waist, her small breasts. Everything about her made my body scream for her. She was still shuddering from being cold, so I closed the space between us and took her in my arms, but before I placed my lips to hers I spoke.

"The first time I realised I wanted you, when my friend had talked about you as his free pass, I thought that I wanted us to be together as equals. Just one man, one woman with each other, not you being my boss, not me trying to be that in bed to get even or something. Even if has been absolutely amazing when we have been together before, I have never felt that completely, that we are equal. Now I do."

She buried her face to my chest.

"I've never felt like your boss when we have been together like that. I've only been yours, from the first time. And you saying that is strange to me in a way because where I come from a posh twat like you would have been considered to be way out of *my* league. I never dreamed I would find someone like you."

"Surely, I must be one notch down from the Chief Whip", I smirked.

"Hell no! He can stick that whip up his arse. Come to think of it he might even enjoy it."

We both laughed and then felt we were done talking for now. As the rain kept pouring down outside, pattering a calming sound against the window, she undressed me too while we kissed. She tugged my pullover over my head and placed her small palms on my chest, dotted kisses there. Then I scooped her up in my arms and carried her to the bed. Our connection was so much more than body contact, but now it was what we both craved. She was here, in my bed, my world and I intended to make her feel so welcome she never would want to leave.

"Will you please tell me again what you said in the cottage?"

"About your abilities in the bed?"

"No, not that."

Then I knew what she meant and this time it felt like I was allowed to say it without any reservations.

"I love you." I kissed her cheek.

"I love you." I kissed her earlobe and neck.

"I love you." I finally placed my lips to hers in a long deep kiss, which she answered with passionate intensity.

"And I love you, Charles James. Never doubt that again."

Right now, our world was here under this duvet but tomorrow we would meet the world outside, not as the Home Secretary and her bodyguard but as two persons in love, hoping for and having faith in a future together. I loved Molly Dawes, and she loved me, I knew that now. My mum had been right after all, if there was love, that would prove to be greater than anything.

Epilogue

I put a crisp, perfectly ironed white shirt, followed by black suit and a tie with an immaculate knot around my neck. I raked my fingers through my dark curls attempting to make them look orderly and as I met my own gaze in the mirror, could not help smiling big and let out the almost ridiculous happiness I felt inside. Today I was the luckiest man in the world, no need to pretend being something I was not. I wondered to myself what this new life would be like, the one as husband to Molly Dawes. Then again, I already knew the answer - the best life I could possibly imagine.

"Ready?", Elvis asked as he completed the look by pinning a corsage to my lapel.

"As ready as can be."

I put my expensive lingerie on, thin nylon stockings to wrap my legs, then it was time for the exquisite white lace dress. Mum helped me with all the tiny buttons in the back and already shed the first tears of the day. A pair of Manolo Blahnik high heels to add four inches to my short frame. I gazed into the mirror and smoothed a strand of hair in place, ensured the seemingly effortless loose curled hair-do was held in place by the white flower tiara, knowing that today everyone's eyes would be on me. I did not mind, after all the bride is always the natural centre of attention of a wedding. No one would want me to fail, everyone would wish me well, wish us happiness. No pretence, no mask was needed, I would be fine just being me. From today and ever after I would be Mrs. James,

the luckiest woman in the world. Mum handed me the bouquet and smoothed out an invisible crease on the dress.

"You look just beautiful, and so happy. My little girl." She hugged me.

"Mum, don't make me cry too, not yet."

"Sorry, just had to. Ready?"

"As ready as can be."

The first sign that we finally were approaching our destination was the shimmering water surface between the trees.

"Look, now we're there!"

Charles was answering the question Sam had asked about hundred times during the ride, starting already at the outskirts of London and nearly driving his father mad towards the end.

As an ending to our honeymoon, we were to spend a weekend in the cottage that held a very special place in our hearts. It might seem odd that we were bringing Sam, but we had already had plenty of time just the two of us celebrating our marriage and now we were looking forward to some quality time with him.

Nearly a year had passed since we first came here, arriving as the Home Secretary and accompanying bodyguard, leaving as lovers. As we now found the key in the pot where we had left it and entered the cottage, I thought it felt more like a life-

time had passed since we left because everything was so different. I had been so filled with uncertainty that day and a sense of loss. I knew already then that I loved him, but I was not sure what the future held and how we would be able to be together. So much had happened, everything for the better.

After my resignation, I took a time-out for a few months, then resumed my career as criminal barrister. Charles continued as PPO for now but considered starting something of his own and I had realised that he actually worked only because he wanted to. His family's wealth was such that he did not really need it except that he would feel restless and useless otherwise. The announcement that I resigned for personal reasons had initially rendered a lot of media attention, but soon subsided when it became apparent that I had no intention to slander the PM or the Party and for real wanted to live the calm life I had claimed I wanted. Initially we kept a low profile but soon came out as an official couple. Very few made the connection that Charles had been my bodyguard or were interested in the love life of the former Home Secretary, only one tabloid wrote a short piece on that I had been seen together with a handsome man, former officer and only child of wealthy parents, seemingly a catch. I could only agree.

The first time I was to meet his parent I was nervous like hell, despite that he had said I had nothing to worry about. When we arrived at the impressive old house, he cheerfully opened the door, announcing;

"Mum, dad, we're here now!"

Here we go I thought, and seconds later his mum appeared. She had a warm smile on her face but when she saw me, her jaw dropped.

"You're really the spitting image of..."

"Mum, this is Molly." He interrupted her with a smile.

"Molly Dawes?"

"That's me."

I smiled too and wondered what was going through her mind, but she quickly found herself.

"Hello Molly, nice to meet you. You can call me Sally and welcome to our home."

Moments later she served tea and coffee in the kitchen and seemed pleased when I preferred tea.

"Never understood Charles and his coffee drinking", she confided in me.

"Me neither, I've always said that a tea bag does me."

"Now, will the two of you tell me how you met? When Charles was here last he said it was complicated and now I can see why."

We told her the story even if we omitted the details how we had ended up in each other's arms. She listened amazed and looked very pleased towards the end of it.

"Didn't I tell you Charles, that all would work out for the best?"

"You did - and I'm so glad you were right."

He took my hand across the table, entwined his fingers with mine and she smiled.

"So am I, my boy, so am I."

I knew then, that she had accepted me without further ado and when Charles' dad, Tom, came home an hour later he turned out to be as easy to get along with as Sally.

I was equally, or even more, nervous the first time I was to meet Sam. I knew he would always be an important part of Charles' life and I desperately wanted him to like me, but maybe he would think me the evil stepmother. They picked me up, Sam the cutest mini-version of his dad, and we went to have burgers and milkshakes in a new restaurant Sam had wished to go to, designed like one of those fifties style diners you see in American movies. When Charles left us alone for a while to go to the men's room I thought this was it. Now when we were alone Sam would surely say he hated me without even knowing me. I swallowed and wondered how a small boy could make a grown woman so anxious.

"Don't worry, I like you", he suddenly said slurping his milkshake and fixating his brown eyes on me.

"You do?"

"Dad likes you, and he's the best so that must mean you're nice."

"Thanks. He really is the best, isn't he?"

"Yeah, but don't tell him I said that."

I fought to stay serious.

"I promise."

"Do you love him?"

"Yes."

"I promise I won't tell him *that*."

I did not tell him that his dad already knew, only said thanks and asked if he wanted another milkshake and just like that we were friends.

I do not think Charles had worried about me meeting his parents or Sam, he was always convinced it would go well, but for me it was a relief when those check boxes were checked successfully, and I took joy in our budding relationship even more than before.

-OG-

There was only ever one thing I was scared to bring up with Charles and I finally summoned the courage one evening after a great afternoon with Sam, which somehow had increased my need to talk about this. We were reading, cuddled up in the sofa. More accurately, Charles was reading, and I pretended to meanwhile I was bracing myself for what I needed to say.

"I've been thinking..."

"Sounds dangerous."

"I need to ask you something."

"Mmmm..."

"I mean something important."

"Okay, I'm listening."

Now I had his attention but kept fidgeting with the pages of my book, nervous to ask, or rather nervous about the response I would get. Too nervous to beat about the bush once the words came out.

"Do you want kids?"

"Do I want kids?"

I had barely gotten started but already felt my cheeks burning.

"You have Sam and he's obviously not a baby anymore. I've been wondering if you want more... if you would consider... *I don't have any and I'd like that, very much. Do you think you'd ever want a baby with me?*"

There I had said it. My heart was beating erratic and the look he gave me seemed amused, which made me terribly frustrated. Did he not understand how important this was to me? I was not sure if it was a deal-breaker, it would not make me walk out the door straight away, but *if* he said no I would need time to re-evaluate everything. Would have to carefully think through if I was prepared to sacrifice having children of my own to be able to be with him. I did not want to even imagine a life without him, so whatever choice I made would be a very difficult and painful one, if I had to make it.

He put his book aside and held me closer to him before answering. I could hear his heart beating unfairly calm compared to mine.

"I thought for long I was happy with just having Sam, that I'd never wish for more children. It's so convenient now that he is old enough to manage many things on his own. The thought of starting over again with a new baby in my life and all the changes that would bring, is daunting."

My heart sank.

"That said, I've already thought it through and I realised I want that with you anyway, even if it's a big step. I love you and I want a baby which is you and me. Not only because I know you want it, I want it too. Not this instant, but somewhere along the line."

I felt so ridiculously relieved, I would not have to choose between the two things most important to me. I felt tears emerging, my attempts to hold them back futile.

"Are you crying?"

"Only because I'm happy."

"And you're okay waiting out? Not having a baby right now?"

"Yes, I just needed to know if someday..."

"I get it, and I definitely want that but", he kissed me, "how about we start moving in together for real?"

"That's a very good start."

"It is, isn't it? I've been wanting to ask you but then *I* was nervous it might be too soon. Now you made it very easy for me."

His warm brown eyes sought mine and then he bent down to seal this decision with yet another kiss and I was happier than ever.

-OG-

Neither of us liked our flats much, except for my studio, so we agreed to look for something else together. When we almost immediately stumbled over a lovely little house in Kensington we did not hesitate. 'Why waste any time?', was the question we asked ourselves and unanimously answered 'let's not', it only seemed stupid when we were crazy for each other.

In contrast to our separate flats, this house immediately felt like a home, our home, and I hoped we would live there together forever. It turned out Charles hoped for the same and one morning in early spring he proposed. We were in the kitchen, preparing breakfast, both in our morning gowns, when he came over to stand behind me, wrapped his arms around me and said in low voice with his lips close to my ear;

"Will you marry me?"

Surprised I turned around and then he went down in the classical knee pose, holding my one hand, looked me in the eyes and seemed adorably nervous.

"When you were standing there all lovely, I felt I just have to ask. I love you so much. Will you be my wife?"

No grand gestures, no elaborate empty words like Roger once had used when he proposed, just the true words that really mattered. To me it was perfect.

"Will you please come up here again before I answer?"

He quickly got to his feet.

"Of course, I will. I want to be your wife more than anything."

After all, we had already agreed to have children together one day and in comparison, marriage almost felt like a minor undertaking - although one I very much wanted.

We planned a small summer wedding, outdoors with our near and dear ones. Both had done the big church wedding before and felt no need to repeat it. Just like his proposal this was perfect for us, modest but beautiful and true. I thought I would burst with happiness when the priest declared us husband and wife and we for the first time kissed as Mr. and Mrs. James.

The morning after the wedding he told me the dower would be a two-part gift, the first one to come now, the second when we were on our honeymoon trip, and he looked incredibly pleased with himself.

"As my proposal was a bit spur of the moment, I have put some more effort into this to compensate."

"You didn't have to, your proposal was perfect to me."

"I know, and I love you for that, but I wanted to do this for you", he beamed. "The first part has to do with breakfast."

"Breakfast? Aren't we having breakfast here at the hotel."

"Nah, I have a more special breakfast in mind, just wait and see... tell me when you can guess."

He kept smirking as he started presenting various items to me.

"The breakfast itself..."

Two white paper bags apparently containing the meal left me clueless.

"...sunglasses..."

Big black sunglasses, still clueless.

"...black gloves..."

"Okay?"

He headed towards the closet and proudly pulled out a dress.

"...and a little black dress."

Then the coin dropped.

"We're having breakfast at Tiffany's?"

"We are!"

He had learned I had a thing for old Audrey Hepburn classics and 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' was an all-time favourite which I had made him watch more than one time.

"Get dressed and we'll take a cab there, just like Audrey, or Holly."

How I loved him. The film was clearly not his taste, yet he had gone to all this trouble to recreate it for me. I put on the dress, swirled my hair into a do that reminded of Audrey's more elaborate one and finished by putting on the sunglasses.

"You look very elegant, Mrs. James. Or should I call you Molly Golightly?"

I felt fabulous impersonating this favourite character of mine.

We jumped out of the cab outside Tiffany's and giggling ate the content of the paper bags - croissants, tea for me, coffee for him - while looking at the expensive window display. When we were done, he looked mischievously at me.

"We're not done. You're missing something."

"What?"

"You'll see."

He took my hand and pulled me inside the beautiful store.

"I think you have something for a Mrs. James", he said to the clerk.

While the clerk disappeared to fetch something, and I half died of excitement, he turned to me.

"I love to call you Mrs. James, Mrs. James."

"And I love when you do, Mr. James."

He pulled me to him in a kiss that still lasted when the clerk returned, clearing his throat.

"I must ask", he said curiously, "aren't you...?"

"No, I'm not, there's just a resemblance. I get to hear that quite often."

Whenever I could avoid it, I refrained from acknowledging I had been the Home Secretary. It was just easier like that.

"My name is Mrs. James", I could truthfully add this time.

"Oh, my mistake."

He put an exclusive flat box on the glass counter and Charles seemed all giddy.

"Open it. I had it made for you."

He had said something was missing, and here the pearl necklace was. Not as grand as the one worn by Audrey Hepburn when she had her Tiffany breakfast, but one more suitable for normal people, one perfect for me and incredibly beautiful.

"Do you like it?" he asked expectantly.

"No... I love it! I love all of this, thank you for doing this for me."

He put the necklace on and at the same time placed a kiss at the nape of my neck, giving me goosebumps.

"Do that again and we'll have to take a cab back to the hotel quickly."

Then he did, and then we did.

The second part of the gift was along the same theme and presented to me the morning after we had arrived in Rome. Our honeymoon trip was two weeks in Italy, starting in Rome followed by a road trip in Tuscany. This morning he left me alone in the hotel room when I still was sleepy after a night of very little sleep, and said he had a few things to arrange. When he returned and sat down on the bedside, he looked almost as pleased as when he took me to Tiffany's.

"I know your other Audrey favourite film is 'Roman holiday', so I thought we'd mimic that too."

This time he had prepared outfits for both of us. For me a white short-sleeved blouse, midi-skirt and scarf, for him a light-blue suit identical to the one Gregory Peck wears in the movie. He looked so gorgeous in it that I had to take it off once before we could leave the room. Then he led me to the cutest, Vespa in a colour matching his suit, also exactly like in the movie.

"This is your transportation for the stay in Rome and I'm your driver."

"Aaah, it's so cute! I just adore it! You won't let me drive?"

"No, for two reasons. You're a terrible driver, and the Italians are, let's call it capricious when driving. I don't think that makes for a good combination. If one wants to stay alive that is."

I had every reason to stay alive and frankly, I was very happy to let my handsome husband drive while I sat behind him, leaned my cheek to his back and watched the narrow winding streets of Rome pass by, until we stopped at our next site for sight-seeing. We saw all the mandatory things like St. Peter's Basilica, the Sistine Chapel and Colosseum but those grand places were not what I liked most. It was walking hand in hand through the sea of flowers in *Campo de' Fiori* knowing he was mine no matter how many beautiful Roman women were glancing at him. It was throwing coins in *Fontana di Trevi*, knowing that he too made a silent wish for a long, happy life together. Trying our way through as many different tastes of *gelato* as possible, ending up with *limone* being my favourite and *fresa* his, and looking at people passing by while having a cappuccino at any random *piazza* and gazing up at the sky through the two-thousand-year-old oculus of Pantheon, feeling small in awe of it, yet safe together. And the long nights and lazy mornings as newlyweds, of course.

From Rome we continued to Tuscany, regrettably had to leave the Vespa behind but anyway had a fantastic time on our road trip between the beautiful cities of Florence, Sienna, San Gimignano and Pisa. Enjoyed the amazing landscape, stayed in small hotels, had fantastic Italian food and more *gelato* and spent lazy days at the beach. It was truly the honeymoon trip made in heaven.

So, after all that I felt more than happy with the alone time we had had as newlyweds and did not mind at all that Sam would be with us these days in the cottage. He had been hesitant to join us to a place without Wi-Fi, but we finally convinced him he would survive for a few days, that it would be possible to go

swimming and fishing and most importantly that we really wished him to be part of our life.

That first afternoon after arriving was fantastic, such easy fun. Late in the evening, when Charles had tucked Sam to sleep in the sofa bed, he joined me in the bathroom when I just had finished brushing my teeth.

"This was a success. He admitted he's had fun without internet connection."

"That's huge."

"Sure, you don't regret we didn't come alone here on our honeymoon?"

"Absolutely no regrets, I love having him here."

"And do you want me sleeping on the sofa bed or in your bed this time?"

In the mirror I saw him cocking an eyebrow in his characteristic teasing way.

"There's absolutely no way I let you sleep anywhere else than in my bed."

I turned to him and wrapped my arms around his neck.

"Glad to hear it. Then Mrs. James, what do you say about ditching these?"

He kept the teasing tone, but his eyes were now serious, and he had reached out his hand and picked up my blister pack with pills from where it was lying on the edge of the basin.

I looked at him searchingly.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"I'm ready for the rest of my life with you to start. All I ever want is to make you happy."

"You're already making me very happy. Happier than I thought was possible."

"So, is that a yes?"

"Yes."

We both smiled as he threw the pills in the bin.

"Should we hit the bed then, Mrs. James? I've barely been able to keep my hands off you today."

"Ditto."

For the first time in this cottage, we went to bed as married, but it certainly was not the last. We came back to this place where we first had found our love many times over the years to come - alone, with Sam and later with our own children. It always remained our happy-place. One of them, because the truth was that we were happy wherever we were together.

A/N: I'm always a bit sad to end a story but thanks for reading and reviewing and hope you enjoyed reading as much as I enjoyed writing. Fortunately, there are always new stories.

X