

An Our Girl FanFiction

MISSED ME?

MISS PIONY

Missed Me?

Aug 26, 2018

Intended as a one-shot of the events and feelings going on in the time between when Molly leaves for her second tour to Afghan until she rings on CJ's doorbell in Bath, with just a brief re-cap of the past. But the re-cap swelled out more than planned. Maybe as a sort of therapy, cleansing away the ending of season 4, because I loved to relive earlier (in my opinion better) days. If you are not interested in reliving the past with little change other than my take on Molly's feelings and thoughts added, then you can skip directly to Chapter 4.

Credits to Tony Grounds and BBC for creating the lovely characters and show.

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Chapter 1

July 2014, Brize Norton airfield

It is the third time I depart from Brize Norton. On the two past occasions, I left UK with mixed feelings and this time is no different in that aspect, but the combination of feelings has been shifting every time I go.

The very first time I left from here to Afghanistan was on a grey October day, about nine months ago. Not that long ago really, but it seems like a lifetime has passed and I'm a whole different person. A different Molly Dawes. As I sit here, waiting to board, I replay in my mind what has happened between then and now.

October 2013, in the air towards Afghanistan

When the aircraft catches wind under its wings, I have just met 2 section and Captain James for the first time. I'm filled with anticipation and fear. Anticipation of the adventure ahead and of travelling further away from home than I ever have. Previously I have barely been out of London except during my military training, now I'm destined for another country and I reckon it will be very different. I'm also fearing that I will not cut it as the medic for 2 section, or 'Under fives' as they, *we*, are called. I just saw in the faces of my fellow squaddies, and even more so in the stern face of the captain, that they would show me no mercy if I do not measure up to their expected standards. Maybe, just maybe, if I'm lucky, Captain James will not execute his threat to lob me out of the plane if I'm not good enough at the job as he claimed he had no reservations of doing, but I know I will never be part of them unless I prove myself. They expect a medic which they feel confident to trust

their lives with and it is up to me to gain that trust. I'm scared shitless, but I also feel there is no turning back. No way will I return to my old life in Newham without a fight. I will fight to prove myself. I will fight to make these eleven male privates trust me and make the arrogant schmuck of a captain not look at me like something the cat has dragged in. Aaargh, that imperious look in his eyes alone is challenge enough for me, at the same time as it makes me feel very small and inadequate, seated here in an all-male aircraft without a single friend or ally near. Molly Dawes, what have you gotten yourself into?

July 2014, Brize Norton

The second time I departed from Brize Norton was only five months later but entirely different, with a whole other combination of emotions going on inside of me. Smurf, aka private Dylan Smith, now one of my best mates, and I had been home for fourteen days of leave and I was desperate to get back. So much had happened in Afghan the very last day before we went home to UK, leaving me shaken to the bone. I had not been prepared to leave, but unable to stay. I had tried to process everything that had happened and my bewildering feelings back home and found it impossible. Now I was eager to return, hoping that Afghan and the people there would give me the answers I craved.

October 2013 to March 2014, Afghanistan

In the morning of the day of Surf's and my planned departure from the FOB, we are alerted to that it is alarmingly silent from the mountain check point. After some deliberations we all head there, accompanied by some ANA soldiers lead by Captain Azizi and us under the command of Captain James as usual. In the past

months I have learned there is so much more to him than the arrogant officer I first took him for and I would trust him to lead me anywhere. Or almost, at least. And I know that by now he has approved of me - not that I did not have to fight for it. The way to gaining his acceptance was far from straight and I have surprised myself more than once. The first thing I did that changed his opinion of me in the right direction was to save Smurf's life.

-OG-

We were out patrolling on a day like any other, when Smurf was surprised by an insurgent who shot him in the groin and he was lying, bleeding and incapable of moving in the middle of an old mine field where each step was treacherous. I do not know if it was a previously inactive part of my subconscious mind, or my CMT training that kicked in, but I never hesitated to go after him. I knew I was risking my own life and I was frightened, but it did not matter. I was the medic and I could not let him die. I would not have been able to face myself, the rest of 2 section and least of all Captain James if I did. So, I crawled slowly through the mined ground, checking for mines every inch I moved. Naturally, I fucked up anyway and a mine exploded. A deafening sound and pressure wave followed, and I passed out for a while. Fortunately, I think it lasted only minutes, then I woke up with sun and dust in my eyes and to my surprise discovered that I was still in one piece. Of course, I had managed to scare the hell out of the others, but I had no time to bother with that. The explosion had brought me close to Smurf, but it was no longer possible to get contact with him and I called for an urgent medivac. Blood was streaming out of the wound and I tried to put pressure on, realizing that the only thing that did

the trick was if I put pressure there myself, with my own hands, as bandages or tourniquet alone would not make it. When the helicopter arrived, I never hesitated to go up with him on the winch or he would have bled out. I heard Captain James yelling the order in my ear, not to go. I would be a too easy target, exposing myself with the risk of getting shot if I went up that winch – but for once I had to disobey him, pretended I did not hear. No way would I leave Smurf to his death, I would rather be discharged if that was the consequence.

When I got back to the FOB from the hospital, after learning that Smurf indeed would survive because of my actions, Captain James was waiting for me. He looked fearsome, a stern giant with his arms crossed over his body and I braced myself for what was coming.

"What you did out there was stupid beyond belief, risking your life like that."

"Yes, Sir."

"Tell me, did you hear my order not to go?"

"No, Sir." We both knew that was a big fat lie, but amazingly, he pretended to believe me and gave me a smile – for the first time I think. Told me I had proven myself as an excellent medic. I felt like the sun was shining on me, and then I mean in addition to the ever-basking sun of Afghan. I had managed to get his recognition. It must have been one of the top five moments of my life so far, maybe top three even.

-OG-

The second time I think I managed to impress him, had to do with Bashira. She was an 11-year old Afghan girl I had befriended during our patrols and who had turned out to be an insurgent's daughter. She was not an enemy though, instead of spying for her father she had warned me about an imminent attack. We had entered her home that day, ready to remove her from her father as we thought that her interactions with me might have exposed her to danger. We found the house empty, but soon eyed Bashira out on the little village square. The surface was rapidly emptied when we realized she had been equipped with a suicide vest. If you can call it 'suicide' when someone forces you to put it on.

Once again, I did not think, just react by doing what I felt was right and I approached her, feeling I had to do whatever I could to keep her calm, so she would not move and accidentally set off the explosives. I could not think of anything but saving her. I know our guys were disturbing any signals to stop triggering of the bomb from a distance, but it was very risky nevertheless. I talked to her, where she was standing with tears streaming down her face, wishing I could hug her but that would not have been very clever with the vest on. I told her she was my soul-sister and that everything would be all right, that she was the bravest girl I know. I managed to keep her calm, keep her still until a man from the bomb unit came, dressed and moving like a man on the moon, padded and slow, reminded us how exposed Bashira and I were. He managed to carefully take the vest off her, scoop her up and run away – and so did I, hearing the bomb go off behind me. As I collected myself, I saw her be swept away on the back of a truck by the Afghan social services, hopefully to a safe place. Then I met the boss' eyes. The expression on his face was difficult to read but he looked a bit like someone inhaling deeply for air

Missed me

after a long dive under water. Unexpectedly, he did not say anything, did not scold me, he looked shaken and in the depth of his eyes I think I saw awe. Maybe. I do not know if it is possible to impress someone as experienced as him, but at least it seemed like he thought I had done something good that day.

I do not know if it is only because I have proven myself to him, but over time it is like Captain James has been thawing, from an ice cube to, not boiling, but lukewarm at least. He is still my CO, no doubt about that in my mind, but he also feels like a friend. Or maybe a friendly CO, not to push it too far. He even allows himself to laugh about what I'm saying quite often, and I have the feeling he quite likes my company, to the extent a posh twat like him can appreciate a Cockney girl like me.

-OG-

When we arrive to the checkpoint today, we sense from a distance that it is all too quiet and coming closer, we find them all dead. Our ANA allies, some of them so young they must have lied about their age to be allowed to enlist, are all dead. They are the first dead people I have ever seen, and it fills me with such complete sadness over the pointlessness of it. Afghans killing other Afghans. Only days ago, we worked and laughed alongside with them. Now the only thing we can do is to confirm they are dead and zip them up in body bags to shield them from the flies that already have gathered to nibble on them. It makes me want to cry and vomit at the same time. I do neither.

Back in the safe zone of the FOB, the sparse shower is far from enough to make me feel clean. The blood, the bullet holes in human flesh, the flies - the feeling is I have them under my skin. In my one-man female quarters tent, I'm drying my wet hair, lost in thoughts, my mind returning again and again to what I witnessed at the CP and wondering if it will be on my retina for the rest of my life. I hear someone clear his throat behind me, turn and find the Bossman standing there. He looks rattled somehow, a bewildered look in his eyes. I do not know what caused it, because it could hardly have been my superiorly hot appearance, dressed as I am in a simple cotton tank top and non-colour-matched shorts. I giggle inside at the impossible thought. I would love for him to see me in something nicer one day, not this or my combats, but I suppose that is unlikely to happen.

"Replacement medic is on her way, you leave in one hour" he informs me. It feels so wrong. I had managed to forget I'm leaving, my focus is so here and now, my London home so distant and surreal. He reads my face, he has become disturbingly good at it and more interested in my feelings than most of my family ever has been.

"What's the matter, Dawes?"

I tell him then, I was thinking of the young dead boys at the CP and worrying about Bashira. She is now under the protection of the social services - at the cost of being separated from her own family. Her father was worse than mine, considering he put a bomb vest on her which must count as far worse than being drunk most of the time, but if I had not become involved to begin with - would this have been triggered? I do not think so. It is my fault she is not with her family. Have I really helped her at all, and is she safe?

He frowns, pensively, then calm as always ensures me he is convinced I that I have given her an opportunity she never would have had otherwise. Tells me not to think too much, just do the job I'm bloody good at and we will be home soon. I want to believe him, I do, but it is partly his fault I'm thinking so much – he was the one who told me to engage my brain.

Then, his expression shifts, from the look of an officer concerned about one of his men, or women in this case, to a boyish almost embarrassed one and he tells me he has a request. He looks so much younger with that expression that I almost forget he is a hailed war hero and my captain, he could be someone I would hang out with in a bar instead. Only he is so much more handsome than the guys that use to hang in my local bar.

Some people are into fine dining. Captain James is apparently into fine coffee and he has had his Nespresso machine sent here. Ridiculous thing to do if you ask me. His request is if I would go to a coffee store in London and buy him coffee. First, I think he is joking, but he seriously tells me he is not fully functional without it, only with a hint of a twinkle in his eyes.

To show me he is indeed being serious he grabs my wrist and, kneels beside me where I'm sitting on the bunk and with a pen writes on my bare skin, beautiful writing, almost calligraphy letters. *Rosabaya*. Such an enchanting name for something as simple as coffee.

"Buy me some Rosabaya coffee capsules and I will adore you for always."

Had it come from someone else's lips, I would have laughed. But coming from him, it is like the words are playing on strings inside me that I didn't even know I had.

"For always, Sir?"

Did I say that out loud? He gives up a small laugh, unlike anything I've heard from him. It cannot possibly be a bit of insecurity in there, or can it? Then he looks down and we both realize that unconsciously our fingers have laced together. I would have expected him to let go instantly, but he surprises me beyond belief when he does not. Instead he strokes my fingers with his thumb, looking like he has never seen or touched a hand before. Like it is a bloody miracle.

"Come back to me" he says.

I manage to word "I will, don't worry."

But I am shaken, more shaken by this than by the events in the morning. My CO, Captain James, who always is professional to the core even when he is goofing around and laughing with us, and who is a man so out of my league I would never expect him to even glance my way except as a commander looking out for his men, is holding my hand, giving me the impression he never wants to let go of it. We sit like that in silence, probably seconds but feels like an eternity, until someone shouts for him outside. He jumps to his feet, looking like he has been abruptly aroused from a dream, makes another comment about the replacement medic, spins around and leaves the tent. Leaves me utterly confused about what just happen and wondering if it really *did* happen.

October 2014, Brize Norton

All those things happened the same day that the helicopter came to take me and Smurf to Bastion for further transport to UK. I did not want to leave. All I wanted was to be alone with him again, find out if it had only been a passing fancy, or if there was something more to it. Ask him what that hand-holding had meant to him, hoping he would show me rather than tell me by removing every bit of space between us, take me in his arms like in some silly romantic novel. I was already aware that I had a well-hidden crush on him since months, but that he would ever feel something had been unimaginable until that moment in my tent.

I thought of him almost constantly during the weeks home. What he was doing, what he was thinking, feeling. The remaining time I split between trying to fit in in the normal life of the Dawes family, thinking about Bashira and having flashbacks of the events at the CP. It haunted me in my dreams, it haunted me in daytime, leaving me feeling restless and estranged. I felt like I did not belong anymore. My only solace was when Smurf and I hung out for a few days in both Newport and London, as with him I could talk about everything I could not with my family. Everything except Captain James.

Chapter 2

July 2014, Brize Norton

Looking back to the day when I left from Brize Norton for the second time, the overall feeling I had was that I wanted to get back to Afghan to find answers. Answers to what was happening to Bashira, if we had made any positive difference at all or if it all was just pointless effort, and more than anything, answers to what I was to Captain James.

So much has happened between then and today when I depart for the third time, now it is all different again.

March 2014, Afghanistan

When Smurf and I return to the FOB from our UK visit, Captain James somehow get the wrong impression of Smurf's and my friendship and he closes himself like a mussel.

I have been thinking of him almost constantly for two weeks, like even in the back of every conversation I have had and now we stand facing each other, joking about how I could see in the medical charts that he has neglected to have his blisters attended to in my absence, instead of saying the things I really want to say. How will I ever dare if he does not bring it up? Then we hear Dangles throw a joke from the outside about that I had visited Smurf in Newport. I have nothing to hide but find myself saying a lame; "We only hung out."

I see the Bossman's smile fade away and suddenly it feels like he is towering over me rather than being a friendly presence. His eyebrows rise in disbelief, his

expression becomes hard and blank, and his jaw tenses before he just dodges away out of the tent without a word. He will not let me explain, not then, not later. I cannot help thinking he may be congratulating himself for having a good reason to shut it all down, knowing it should not have happened in the first place. All I want is to run after him, cup his face in my hands and kiss him. But it is unthinkable and would also be very difficult if he did not want it, considering he is so much taller and stronger than me. Would look very silly indeed, if I threw myself around his neck. I'm devastated, and mad with Smurf, which is completely unfair of course.

-OG-

Next thing I know, we are getting orders to get packed to leave the FOB for good and return to Camp Bastion. I feel melancholic. I have so many great memories from here, days with the lads, with Bashira, with *him*. But I have no say.

The caravan of trucks drives slowly on the dusty roads towards Bastion until we make an unexpected halt. The trucks have stopped because the road is blocked by something large, covered in white cloth. It seems to be moving but it is difficult to tell if it is only the wind or if there is something alive and moving under. Captain James steps up to be the one to go check and I, as the medic, am to follow. I'm meant to stay at a safe distance while he checks the road for mines, but an opportunity to be alone with him is too rare not to be taken, even if it means I risk being blown to pieces. Annoyed, he notices I'm not keeping the appropriate distance.

"Do you have a death wish, Dawes?" he snaps.

Missed me

"Maybe, or I just want to spend some quality alone time with you."

He does not say anything and even though I cannot see his face, I know he frowns. He is definitely not happy with me.

"Nothing happened between Smurf and I."

"What are you telling me for?" My heart races even faster than before, maybe I'm wrong, maybe he really does not care to know. But no, the face he made in the tent when Dangles made the comment, it must have been disappointment. And maybe jealousy even.

As we carefully tread the road, checking for mines, slowly move closer to the covered object, I have to tell him. For fucks sake, we can die when we get there, then I would rather want that he knows.

"I'm fond of you, Sir."

Never had I thought I would tell anyone I had feelings for them and end with a 'Sir'. But then again, I have never met someone like him, or felt for anyone like I do for him. I put my heart on my sleeve, but his face just remains blank, half shadowed by his helmet.

"Can we please have this conversation when we're back to Brize Norton again?" he asks.

I'm not ready to give up and in a last attempt to get some feeling out of him, humiliate myself and ask if love is not stronger than army regulations. Then he actually turns to me, sternly looks me in the face and says;

"*Nothing* is stronger than army regulations."

I should not be surprised. Actually, it is the answer one could expect from the Captain James I know. The anomaly was the brief moment in my tent. Luckily, the awkward situation is interrupted by a hand reaching out from under the cloth, grabbing Captain James leg. Lucky too, it did not grab me because I would have squealed and made an even bigger fool of myself. When we pull away the cloth, it turns out to be Sohail. Sohail is one of the ANA soldiers from the FOB, one we never quite knew if we could trust. He went AWOL the day Smurf and I went to UK and now he is lying here, severely injured. It turns out he has been beaten with rocks by the Taliban because he would not do what they told him. It seems like Sohail could be trusted after all.

He is urgently transported to the army hospital in Bastion and me and Captain James accompany him. The physician in charge tells us he is unlikely to survive due to internal injuries, but when we are allowed to see him he is still conscious. Struggling, he tells us the Taliban have done this to him because he would not kill someone. To be specific, he had been asked to kill *me* in retaliation of Bashira. It shocks me. Shocks me that someone finds little me so significant and feels such malice against me that they want me dead. Shocks me that Sohail, who I know never has thought highly of me, has chosen sacrificed his own life rather than meeting the request to take mine. Shocks me how close to death I have been if he

just had chosen differently. I see in the Bossman's eyes that despite that he is a hardened soldier, it shocks the hell out of him too. Then Sohail suddenly passes out and all alarms goes off beeping, staff come swarming like ants and wheel him away to surgery but with minuscule chances that he will survive. We are left in the empty room, no longer separated by Sohail's bed and still staring at each other in shock. I feel tears streaming down my cheeks but am too weary to wipe them away. He takes a step forward, reduces the space between us, and with his thumbs wipe my tears away for me. Then he leans his forehead against mine. It is comforting, and it is very intimate, but I cannot really appreciate it because I'm shocked numb.

Sohail died during the surgery and it is not a day for romance, but after the nurse who delivered the news has left, he takes my hand, squeezes it briefly and say, "We have to wait out." I'm not sure exactly what he means, except that nothing more will happen at least for as long as we remain in Afghan. And I know he is right. He is my superior ranking officer, above me in the same chain of command. If anything would happen between us, one or both could be discharged - and we do not want that to happen.

-OG-

Back in Bastion, he stays distant and I back off further, our easy friendship out of equilibrium. Then, a piece of unexpected information turns into a wedge that causes an even wider rift between us. One day I overhear a conversation between Smurf and Bossman. Strange enough I find myself hiding in a locker in Captain James private barrack. He put me there. I had been distressed and sad and in the midst of a conversation he had pulled me into his makeshift office/bedroom, so we

could talk in private. It felt like we connected again, had a closeness. He almost invited me to celebrate Christmas with him in Bath sometime. Then Smurf knocked the door and although we were not doing anything illicit, Captain James panicked and practically pushed me into the locker where I'm now standing.

Believe me, there is nothing in this conversation I want to hear. Wish I had earmuffs, so I could block out the sound. Ironically, Smurf is asking Captain James for love advice, and it is about *me*. I knew he had feelings but never *that* serious. Somehow, he says he feels that here in the shadow of death, life is too short to wait out and he has decided to propose to me. Already hearing this much of the conversation, I'm appalled. I do not want Smurf to propose, and I do not want Captain James to think I have ever encouraged him to. But it gets worse. Smurf asks;

"How did you propose to Mrs. James?"

I think I have a short circuit in my brain. 'Mrs. Fuckin' James!'

He has made me no promises, but I still had the feeling there could be something when we got home just now when we were talking. I wonder if he had planned to let me know when she welcomes him at the airport? It is not like there ever has happened anything for real between us, nothing that would have made anyone say that he has been cheating, but I'm still so deeply disappointed. Disappointed he has not been honest, feeling betrayed and in some sense, also feeling he has betrayed *her*. His wife. Does he not understand I have feelings? Feelings for him.

He seems very bothered by the conversation. He should be, as he knows I'm listening. He interrupts Smurf, tells him to absolutely *not* propose here in Afghan. Not endanger all of us, to stay professional and focused at the job. Yeah, I assume *that* is the only issue to him. God forbid that we break army regulations under his watch, that we do not stay focused and alert. If Smurf proposes once we get home and I accept could probably not bother him less, because *he is already fuckin' married*.

When Smurf finally leaves, I wait for a few seconds then dive out of the locker and the door. I don't want to speak to him. I don't ever want to see him again. I don't know if I have ever been this hurt. No by the way, I know for sure I have never been this hurt. But he does not leave me alone, he comes after me and grabs me by the elbow, forcing me to look at him. In this moment I resent him for being stronger than me and I feel like spitting him in his handsome face.

"This is exactly what I meant when I said we have to wait out!"

"Now you're annoyed with *me*?! How the hell does that work out?" He must be kidding me!

"We have come here to work..." That is just the lamest excuse and I do not let him finish the sentence. I'm too furious to be the little private speaking reverently to the CO, or to be the less beautiful and eloquent girl feeling inferior to this catch of a man, I'm just a woman in rage over a man who has fucked up and I cannot pretend otherwise.

"You're married, and you didn't think to say?"

Missed me

"We split up!" he snaps. "We're separated. I've come on tour, so she can sort everything out."

"You're married, did that just slip your mind?"

"Did you not hear what I just said?"

"You lied to me."

"Not once!"

"Well you were fucking economical with the truth! What are you going to tell me next? That you have kids?"

I see him freeze, now speechless, breaks eye contact and looks to the ground. It does not take a genius to understand that means he *does* have a kid, or two, or three. How have we spent all this time together and he has not once mentioned he has family? I feel I don't know him at all. Maybe I never did, only what he decided to show me and that seems to be a very small piece.

I think I hate Captain James a little bit in this moment. For stealing my heart and then stepping on it until it crashes into thousand little pieces, probably without understanding it. Probably without caring. I'm hopelessly in love with my CO, no matter how inappropriate and now everything is ruined.

-OG-

Since the first day, Captain James has told us to stay focused, stay alert and not bring personal into the battlefield. Yet, Smurf, I and himself have failed epically.

Everything reaches a breaking point during a joint op with the Americans to try to catch Bashira's father, the insurgent Badrai. We, 2 section, have been dropped off in the middle of nowhere in the darkness of the night, to unseen travel by foot to a compound near a bridge, where we will hide. We have intel that a truck with Badrai will pass by the bridge tomorrow. We will try to catch him then and my task will be to identify him as I'm the only one who has eyeballed him, once when he came yelling at Bashira for talking to me. Shortly after dropping off from the helicopter, we find ourselves crawling through a ditch when we hear a loud bang. We throw ourselves flat to the ground convinced we are under attack by the enemy. By reflex my eyes go for Captain James, making sure no harm has come to him. Surprisingly, his gaze is at me and he does not let go. I see his chest move in and out rapidly, breathing fast, in adrenaline induced fight mode. Time seems endless in this ditch, waiting for what the enemy will do next. Our eyes are locked, and I want to stay this way. The only thing I can think of, is that if I'm blown to pieces with my next breath, I want him to be the last thing I see. Then I feel a drop of water on the tip of my nose and hear thunder. No enemy. Bleeding thunder in Afghanistan, who would ever have thought. The moment is over, to both my relief and my loss as the eye contact now is broken and we continue towards the compound. There are two rooms in the rough building. Captain James orders me to set up a temp med centre in one and the others hang in the other, waiting for first light. Of course, I do as the CO tells me.

Smurf seeks me out. Before we left camp, he gave me his mother's engagement ring. Discouraged by Captain James he did not propose for real – thank god – but he asked me if I want to wear it around my neck, like a lucky charm or something.

I don't have the heart to refuse him. I have told him I only want to be his mate, but I have not done it too harshly. Partly because I want to remain his mate, but more so because I feel he is in a bit fragile state of mind and I do not want him to end up in a bad situation because his nut is not fully functional. But it is starting to get to me, make me feel awkward and I must set him straight the moment we get home. I do not feel the emotional bond he is talking about, not with him anyway, just completely inappropriately with the boss. Except that he fucked everything up withholding the tiny detail of a wife and kid(s).

Now, I only listen with half an ear when Smurf rants on about his feelings for me, how things would have been different if he had called me that time after we shagged behind the Indian take away, long before we came on tour together, and about what we will do when we get home. Take a trip to Vegas? Not sure where that idea came from as my mind has been focused on other things, like that Captain James is in the other room and I'm replaying his look at me in the ditch in the cinema in my head. Then suddenly he is here, in the flesh, and nods to Smurf to join the others so he can talk to me.

The boss is always tall, but sometimes he feels even taller, like this giant looking down at me. Funnily, the giant looks a bit insecure and when he talks he does it fumbling with the words, the most eloquent man I know. He knows I'm still pissed with him and, more important, he seems to care. He tells me everything looks shipshape, talks about that we are not in an ideal position here in the compound when we are going to try catch Badrai. I have my back turned to him, busying myself with my task and give him the silent treatment, but I listen to every word he

says, the tone of his melodic voice and I know him well enough to know what his face looks like just by hearing the voice. I would love to turn around and touch his lips with my fingers, silence him and place my lips there. But I'm still mad and he is still my CO with family and all, so obviously that will not happen. He is quiet for a moment and I hear him inhale as if to prepare for a challenge.

"I have a son. He's part of my life. Of course, I wanted to tell you, but it never came up"

I never expected he would engage in this conversation here, in this situation, the 100% correct army man. I turn to look at his conflicted face.

"You really hurt me."

"All I want is to make you happy."

Even if my heart jolts with happiness when he says that, I find it hard to believe. I look away.

"Well you fucked up big time." I'm amazed I manage to sound so cool, is it possible that I have the upper hand in this conversation?"

He comes closer, entering my space.

"In that ditch, I thought we were going to die..."

"So did I." With him so close, thinking or getting something witty or angry out of my mouth becomes harder.

Missed me

"I turned around and looked at you... and I knew you were the last thing I want to see."

Now I have a serious lump in my throat, only manage to croak "Ditto."

Although I'm far from satisfied with that answer, it does not seem to deter him and then he does the unimaginable, leans in and places his lips on mine. Softly. They are dry, warm, he parts them and so do I, letting our tongues meet. This is the most perfect kiss ever. Seriously, no kiss has ever had this effect on my body. No kiss has ever been so longed for, yet so unexpected. With one hand on the small of my back, the other one on my bum he presses me against him for a minute meanwhile we continue snogging. Then he breaks away but give me the feeling it took him some considerable willpower. He gives me a smile, a version I have not seen before and that may be because I have never seen him turned on in combination with apologetic.

"We need to wait out. We must focus now."

"I know" I say, breathless.

Timing was good, because someone shouts from the outside that the target is on its way and it is time to move. Our eyes meet once more, knowing both want to shrink the distance between us, but now he is out the door. If nothing more ever happens between us these past surreal minutes will be the best of my life.

Chapter 3

July 2014, Brize Norton

Little did we know then that the day would end in disaster. In hindsight, we should have understood it would all come crashing down on us. Apparently, Smurf had looked in on me and Captain James when we kissed and during the mission to capture Badrai he lost it, freaked out completely so him and Bossman lost focus. I was told later that he had accused Captain James of bringing personal to the battlefield, coming between Smurf and me. He was right about the personal, but wrong about him and me because there had never been such a thing beyond being friends, except in his mind. Anyway, that moment of lost focus enabled Badrai to shoot at them from the back of the truck we had stopped. Both were injured. Smurf took a bullet in his arm, but not too bad. Captain James on the other hand, took a serious hit in both his leg and abdomen and blood was squirting out with every beat of his strong heart and he squirmed in pain.

Surprisingly, I did not freeze in panic at the sight of the man I just had kissed being deadly injured. My CMT training and experience kicked in and on autopilot I treated them both, stopping them from bleeding out. I would not let any of them die on my watch. Then, in the corner of my eye I saw Badrai, who had managed to dodge out of the truck and take cover, aim at us, having us in clear sight. Also meaning I had eyes on him. Automatically, without really engaging my brain, I pulled Captain James gun and put a bullet right between Badrai's eyes. Killed the insurgent who wanted to kill my love, killed Bashira's father.

Captain James and Smurf were medivac'ed to the army hospital in Bastion. When I joined them there, allowed because I'm a medic, not for personal reasons, Smurf was conscious, but Captain James had already had to be resuscitated several times and he was wheeled into surgery just as I arrived. My heart cringed. We should not have kissed that perfect kiss. I should have known things would go bad from there, because I have never seen a happy ending yet in my life. I was not able to do anything but return to the rest of 2 section and wait out for news. I would have taken those bullets for them if I could change things. Or, I would have changed it earlier on, not gotten involved with Bashira, angered her father and set these events in motion. But then the boss and I would probably never had kissed - and I would not have wanted that undone for anything in the world. Catch 22, as Captain James would have said, eluding to a situation without any optimal solution.

April 2014, Cyprus and UK

Captain James survives the first critical stage and him and Smurf are to be transported directly back to UK for further hospitalization. The rest of us are packing up and will go home via Cyprus, for a week of decompression and normalization. I'm not sure what normal is anymore. If it is home in Newham. If it is crawling around a ditch with the rest of 2 section. If it is sharing my bowl of coco-pops with Captain James while laughing together at the thought of me sharing them with Sohail instead. If it is stealing a kiss with him with 2 section next door. Or, if it is waiting to know for sure if he will live or die. I really do not know anymore what the normal life of Molly Dawes is.

Anyway, decompression has the opposite effect on me than it is intended to. Impatient and edgy, I cannot wait to move on, come home so I can go visit the hospital. The others notice, but ironically, they all think it is Smurf I'm most concerned about. I'm not, for two reasons; it was just a flesh wound and he will make it, and I don't love him as anything but a mate. Cyprus is beautiful, the kind of resort I once only dreamed of coming to, but it is wasted on me now and I keep much to myself until we finally board that plane to Brize Norton.

Surprisingly, my family is at Brize Norton to welcome me, mum, Nan, even dad. They have come here, for me – I never thought they would.

"Of course, we had to welcome our girl home!" mum says, hugging me. I sniff her familiar, safe smell and it stirs my heart but all I can think of is to get to that hospital, or I will not have peace. I dodge the transport to barracks with the rest of 2 section, well aware I'm not allowed to leave but I just don't care right now. I have to see him even if there are repercussions and my family gives me a lift in the car they have borrowed for the occasion. When I get there, I cannot even walk like a normal person through the corridors. I run, which is not very efficient as I'm not sure where I'm going. After what feels like an eternity I manage to localize them, but that gives me no comfort. Smurf is up and about but Captain James is just having another emergency surgery, and that is never a good thing. Smurf and I wake together, seated next to each other at hard plastic hospital chairs. He has come to his senses and he is my mate again, nearly as worried about the Bossman as I am, and the only one who knows how I really feel. He holds his arm around my shoulder and I lean into him, giving in to the comfort of a friend and let my tears

run free. Smurf is like me, so much more in my league than Captain James. Yet, I will never be able to love him. I feel his lips to my hair, but I choose to ignore it.

Many hours go by before they return him from surgery and even more until he finally becomes conscious again. We are both exhausted but refuse to move from where we sit. When I finally see Captain James stir drowsily in his bed through the window, there is such happiness and relief in my heart. I have no idea if there will ever be anything more to us, but for now, knowing that he survived is enough. After a while, he spots us through the window and waves us in with a tired hand. Connected to ECG machine and drip tubes, he looks at us through half-closed eye lids. I think it makes him happy, but he is too drowsy for showing any strong reactions. Maybe he does not remember the events before he was shot. Amnesia would be so fucking unwelcome because I would never dare to tell him how I feel if he did not remember, or worse, try to kiss him. Even if he is sedated, and showing of very nice bare torso, it is still the Bossman lying there.

We chat for a short while, the three of us, both me and Smurf eager to know he is feeling well under the circumstances. Although it is probably morphine-induced, we are relieved that he seems okay. Smurf takes that as his queue to leave us alone and says he only wanted to check in on him and now that he knows he is alright, would not want to miss the hospital breakfast. Captain James may have forgotten what went down before he was shot, but Smurf certainly has not and is kind enough to leave us alone, even if I know it must be breaking his heart a bit.

I'm nervous about the twosomeness, but the boss signs for me to come closer and when I do, he takes my hand. Even when he lies pale in a sickbed, the hand is warm,

solid, so much larger than mine, although depleted of its usual strength. Not that I have held it more than once before, but my memory is very detailed around that. I think this is a good sign that he remembers and would like to investigate further, but we are interrupted by a lovely little copy of Captain James rushing through the door and automatically let go of each other's hands like they were burning hot. The mini Captain James is accompanied by a blonde woman who, as far as looks goes, is a much better match for Captain James than I would ever be. I presume it is the ex-wife, Rebecca. Her cool symmetric features are a perfect complement to his chiselled ones like he looks on the occasions when he puts on his most stern face. I have not seen much of that version lately come to think of it, more the version that grins at my cheekiness and the version that looks softly into my eyes - and now the drowsy one. He tightens a bit at the sight of her but relaxes again with the boy at his side.

"Hi there, scamp" he says to his son, then nods in my direction telling him that I helped him in Afghanistan, that he would not be here without me. Would have bled out. I have only thought of it as being my fault he was shot in the first place. I much prefer his take on it.

I feel the need to leave, give them some family alone time. Who knows, maybe him and his ex-wife will make up. A lot can change after having been so close to death and I would not want to stand in the way of a family re-union. Not if it would make the boss happy, not if it would make the little boy happy.

"I had better leave, Sir."

"It was good to see you, Dawes." Our eyes meet and his seems to tell me he would rather like me to be here than her, but I cannot be sure.

"Ditto." Once I hated that word because I had hoped for something more romantic coming out of his mouth when I told him I found it hard to wait out and keep my hands off him. Now it is secretly bonding us and the most romantic word unromantic me can think of.

While Captain James is occupied, I go to see Smurf. Suddenly we hear some commotion down the corridor, coming closer and then the entire 2 section enter the room, occupying it with their frames and their loud jokes. My grin is as wide as to my ears, how I love these noisy boys. Even after a day without them I miss them. Corporal Kinders first gives me a stern look and I expect to be scolded at for dodging coming with them back to barracks, but he just tells me it was understandable. I will have to come back with them today though. I am relieved, but as my time here is running up I take the opportunity to sneak back to Captain James for a while. I can see through the corridor window he is alone now, and he gives me a sign to enter and a lovely, weary smile.

"Is Rebecca gone?"

"She left when I was on my second tour." He is stating the facts, without sounding bitter. "I was never any good at the settled life she wanted. Always preferred being on tour, living out of a Bergen. It was all I ever wanted."

I realize it must not have been easy to live with him, if you are a normal person, when he did not want to share a "normal" life. Luckily, I'm not very normal either.

"...until I met you."

Did I hear him right? I almost look around for a button to put him on replay, so I can be sure. Did he just say that I have changed him into wanting something more than the army? As I am not sure, I don't know how to respond to it and change subject.

"I don't think I could have lived with myself if I actually had gotten you killed."

"It was not your fault. I was the officer in charge. I failed you, and the rest of the platoon. I'm resigning my commission, it happened on my watch."

"You did not fail anybody!" I feel devastated. He is the best commander I can imagine. How will the British army survive without him? More important, how will I survive without being able to rest my eyes on Captain James dressed in his combats?

"What will you do?"

"I'm not sure. What I *do* know, is that there is nothing in our way anymore."

He puts his hand to my cheek, caress with his thumb. His eyes locked in mine and behind the drowsiness I see a longing. Now there is no question about it, he remembers *us*, and he does not seem to regret it.

"You will have to wait out - for me to be well enough. Then I would love to take you on a date."

Missed me

I cannot believe he just said that. When I leave him to head back to Kinders and the others, for transport back to the barracks, I'm so happy that I need to wiggle my bum to the song playing in my head. Hopefully no one saw.

May 2014, UK

I did not feel confident that we would ever get to have a date for real. Thought it was something said in the hospital environment in the closeness to his own death, that would never be effectuated in reality. But after a month or so, when he was discharged and staying in Bath with his parents for rehab, he asked me again. Asked if I could imagine coming down to Bath and go on a date with a crippled man. As that would ever make him less attractive to me.

I. Have. A. Date. With. Captain. James!

I have been nervous for days in advance. Invested in a new dress, a lovely one, the most beautiful dress I have ever owned. Yet, now in the morning of the date day I'm wondering if it nice enough. And if I'm good enough. I have spent hours preparing myself. I'm trying to look my prettiest me but effortless, as if I had not been hours in front of the mirror. When ready, I know I have never looked better, half thanks to my efforts, half thanks to my rosy cheeks and the twinkle in my eyes in anticipation of the date. My large green eyes have always been my greatest asset, and second to that my shiny dark hair since I stopped dyeing my locks platinum blonde. (Don't know what I was thinking there really, looking at old photos it looked really cheap and did not match well with the tone of my skin either.) Smurf once told me my smile is intoxicating, so maybe that is fine too. Army life has also

made me really fit so I look fresh these days. Still, the thought if I can ever match him is there in the back of my mind.

Once, I sneak peaked at Captain James while he was doing some weight-lifting with bare upper body, not to show off but because it was too hot for anything else. His muscles flexed and moved in the most mesmerizing way, and I thought to myself that if I had to choose between being able watch this every day for the rest of my life under the condition that I had to live in celibate, and never see him work out again and be married to a guy of the kind I had used to date and shag every day – I would easily choose the celibate option. Unbelievably enough, it seems like if I play my cards right I may not have to choose. Maybe I will get to see the Bossman in the nude without the question of celibate ever coming up. Oh, just the thought of it makes my cheeks even rosier and I feel a surge in my abdomen.

Captain James has suggested we meet in the restaurant where he has reserved table. I got the feeling maybe it is because he did not want to limp there in my company but preferred to be there ahead of me. I'm nervous he will not be there at all, that I will arrive at that posh restaurant to an empty table and stand there feeling like a fool - but no, he *is* here. I see him before he sees me, which gives me a few seconds to take him in, unnoticed. His tall legs tucked in under the table, drumming the white clothed table surface with his fingers, giving away that he is a bit nervous too. Or maybe just restless because I'm a little bit late. It has been a while since I walked in high heels so I'm not that quick-paced, but I had to prioritize looks over speed and comfort today. When he looks up and sees me, fixing his gaze on my figure, I'm rewarded for the hours spent in front of the mirror. The only

civilian clothes he has ever seen me in before is t-shirt or tank top and shorts, never a dress like this – and I can tell he likes it. A lot. He gives up a smile that reaches all the way to his brown eyes, that also seem to widen at the sight of me and it makes my heart melt. He rises from the chair and comes to meet me, limping a little, but I'm just happy and surprised that he is able to get up and walk without needing a crutch. He gives me a kiss on the cheek, that is a first.

"You look beautiful."

"Thanks, you don't look too shabby yourself." That is a great understatement. He looks gorgeous in shirt, a navy coloured jacket and well-fitting jeans, his curly hair more orderly than I'm used to see it and I get the urge to tousle it, but I don't. I cannot believe this man is waiting here, for a date with me. Not a blind-date even, he knew what he was going into. He is a stranger, not the man who has given me orders, who I have goofed around with, who I once have kissed. I feel intimidated, by him and by the fancy restaurant. This is not my element, it will be difficult to be my cheeky self here.

"Even with my limp?" he asks in response to my comment. I knew it, he is uncomfortable about it.

"Especially with the limp" I assure him and make him smile again. Me, I just can't stop smiling. We sit down and have a try at conversation. I love being here with him, but it feels so strange.

"It seems nice, Bath I mean. Are you going to stay here, boss?"

Missed me

Again, he smiles. "Charles."

"Charles?!"

"Are you smirking?"

I am. I just can't help it. Charles, like a fucking royal. How will I ever be able to call him that? When I have fantasized about the two of us in bed together, I never dreamed of calling him Charles. Boss or captain would feel more natural, but he does not seem to agree. Not that I said that out loud, but he seems to be reading my mind.

"What's so fucking hilarious about Charles? What are you going to do, call me bossman for the rest of our lives?"

I freeze. Not in fear but because I wonder if there is anything to it, has he really pictured a future for the two of us? Or did it just blurt out without any deeper meaning? I cannot help trying to dissect it.

"A bit previous there, weren't you?"

But he does not let me rattle him, just smile back and says, "It's chemistry" and I'm dying a little bit inside, of happiness. He asks if I want him to choose for me. Why would I want that? After 6 months on army rations, I'm in the nicest restaurant I have ever been – why would I let someone else choose for me and risk he chooses something I don't like? Like snails. I have heard they serve that in some posh restaurants, although it is hard to believe someone would voluntarily eat those slimy suckers. He does not look offended, though. Instead he eyes me like he would

like to undress me and do something else entirely than have a meal. Or eat *me* perhaps. How am I going to be able to dine if he keeps looking like me like that?

While we wait for the food, he tells me he will be staying here and go for rehab in Headley Court for a while. He asks how I have been coping at home, and the truth is, not very well. I long back to Afghan and not only because he was by my side then. I miss the life there. I worry about Bashira. I deprived her of her family, how is she coping? I find it hard to be still, to find a calmness in my night. The major has been in touch and asked if I'm interested in another tour, mentoring Afghan medics. Captain J... Charles I mean, tells me he cannot imagine a desk job and I agree for my part. He laughs like I have given him proof of something.

"You see, the kinship is just as undeniable as the differences. Maybe we're more alike than we know, than was obvious from being on tour."

I like the thought of that, but then he takes my hand and places a kiss there. I nearly laugh out loud. Why on earth did he do that? It was such a dry, unpassionate gesture that did not do it for me at all, not even when it is him. To keep myself from bursting into laugh I say, "Did you just wipe cabbage on my hand?"

"I don't want to soil the napkin." This, the banter, now we are on familiar ground and I feel better.

I feel confident enough to tell him how lost I feel, here at home.

"I think you should go on this tour training Afghan medics."

"You would not want me to stay here?" I don't know how I dared to ask, maybe because I did not think first. It feels early to presume he would want me by his side.

"I want you to be brilliant." I wonder what he means, and he continues. "It means, I love you."

My heart jolts, but I cannot take it seriously. Maybe he loves me like he loves all of 2 section, like the platonic love he feels for the noisy bunch.

"You don't even know me, you only know the me on tour."

"You can see the tip of an iceberg and still know it's an iceberg" he replies.

"You're calling me an iceberg?" Now we both laugh, and it feels comfortable. Then he seriously says;

"I think you don't have a choice, you need to go. You're only half way through with your journey. You're not going to find the answers you need if you're stuck here with me, driving me back and forth to rehab."

I love him even more, for not wanting to hold me back. For being so generous as to encourage me to go. But I don't say that, only: "I can't drive". It makes him laugh again. It makes him feel the need to kiss me. *I* have felt the need to kiss him since I entered the room. We lean forward but are interrupted by the waitress. I consider strangling her and shove her into the huge china vase standing in the corner. I think he can read my thoughts because now *he* is smirking.

"I have been desperate to kiss you, since we first kissed" I confess.

Missed me

"My parents are at Lake Garda, the house is empty" he waits for my reaction and I giggle.

"What's funny? There is nothing funny about that." But there is, just the way he said it, like he was desperate to lure me back to the house. He raises his one eyebrow, looking amazingly sexy.

"Well did it work?"

It definitely did. The surge is there in my abdomen again, or maybe it has been there constantly since this morning.

We stroll back to the house, it is walking distance even with his limp. If the restaurant was intimidating, the house is worse. It is so big and beautiful, with a magnificent staircase that somehow freaks me out. Don't know why but it makes me think of some horror movie I saw once and if he was not here I would have turned and left. He looks like he belongs here. I feel that I don't. But he just leads me up the stairs and I follow.

-OG-

He lies next to me and I can hear from his breathing that he is fast asleep. I'm wide awake and, to be honest, a tad disappointed. To use a metaphor, it was a bit like planning to take a vodka shot, expecting a bit of roughness and heat, only to find you were drinking a glass of lukewarm milk instead.

When you have been pining and longing for someone for months, not believing you would ever find yourselves naked together, at least not in a situation that did not

involve embarrassment of some sort, when that moment finally comes you do not want it to be *too* soft and gentle. It is not like I'm a delicate flower waiting to be picked, but he treated me like one. Don't get me wrong, I love that this is romantic and different from all the fumbles in my past, I just expected more... well *more*. I have the feeling I just have slept with Charles, so cleanly shaven and extremely neat in his light blue shirt without a crease and well-combed hair. Not the Bossman - and truthfully, I wanted them both. It is not exactly like I wanted him to lift me up, throw me on the bed and pin me to it, but...wait, maybe that *is* what I wanted. Even if the injury and the limp only actually affect his leg, I somehow have the feeling that it may be hampering and holding back all of him. Or maybe I'm wrong and we just don't have proper chemistry. Right now, I'm glad I'm not one of them religious people who wait with sex until after marriage. Talk about buying the pig in the poke in the worst way. Not sure Charles and I are going to make it past this stage, but maybe with a few more tries there will be more passion. Or, maybe posh guys like him are just not as passionate as us poor sods? I just thought he would be.

Next morning, we do not have time for another try so I cannot find out then. I need to catch the train back home because I have made plans with Bella before I knew I would spend the night. Did not want to make assumptions.

If I had known what sadness that would come between us, I think I would have stayed longer that morning. Taken the opportunity while I could. What happened next was that Smurf came for a surprise visit.

June 2014, UK

The doorbell rings, I open, and I find a package outside. When I open it, a red dress is revealed, looking very much like one Smurf said he would get me if we went to Vegas. I had not expected him to hold me to that promise, but here he is, jumping out from behind the corner and wants us to book the trip on his expense. Even though I'm not that excited about the trip, I like to be in his company again. Beside the date with the Bossman (sorry, Charles) this is the time I feel best since I came home. Joking around with my mate Smurf. I know he loves me, but I hope we will get past that. Like I love the Bossman and hope we will get past the not so hot sex.

Then something odd happens with Smurf. During the day he is complaining about headache and bad eye sight and suddenly he passes out and I cannot get contact with him. One moment he was pretending to play football at our local arena, the next he is lying unconscious in the grass and I have to call for an ambulance, panic running through my body.

He never regains consciousness. My mate died today. We will never go to Vegas together - and now I feel guilty for not wanting it more than I did. He had a haemorrhage, a small bleed in his brain, that had gone unnoticed and eventually became the death of him. My god I miss him already, miss that Welch wanker. It is surreal that he is gone, and I cannot stop crying.

-OG-

Charles and I have stayed in touch since our night together, but Smurf's funeral is the first time we meet again. Not an occasion to try to develop our relationship. It

would not have been possible, and I would not have wanted to. I'm so filled with sadness and I feel guilty. Guilty that I as the medic had not noticed somehow, that my friend was slowly dying. Guilty I did not love him like he loved me, and that Captain James and I had been indiscreet, or if you will - unprofessional, enough for him to discover the feelings we had. It is impossible to know when the bleed began, but if it was not during Badrai's shooting the stress might anyway had worsened it. And I feel I'm to blame.

Outside the church, Smurf's mum stops in front of Captain James and with empty, tearful eyes and with dead voice say to him:

"I gave the army my boys, and they gave me back a flag."

I think everyone can agree that is a really shitty, heart breaking trade. First it had been Smurf's twin brother Geraint and now Smurf. I see Charles flinch at her words, like she has slapped him, and I know his feeling of guilt is even worse than mine. Smurf was in his charge and he feels he has failed, although there were so many small things leading up to this, not leaving one man, or *any* man, guilty of it. I want to rush over to him, hug him, sink into him and comfort him and be comforted by him, but it would be just wrong. Instead we find ourselves facing each other, a few decimetres apart, talking to each other like we had no other relationship than that of captain and private. Unnoticed by others, our eyes tell something different though. I'm desperate to be alone with him again but I'm leaving for Afghan in a few days. I'm so eager to go, can hardly wait, knowing I need to do this to find myself. Find the Molly I want to be. But at the same time, I wish

Missed me

we had more time to find out if there really is an *us* before I leave. I want it to be, but I am far from certain.

Before he jumps into a car with some other officers, he touches my elbow briefly and with low voice says:

"Come back to me."

"Always, Sir."

Chapter 4

July to October 2014, Brize Norton and Afghanistan

So, now that I'm standing here, Bergen on my back and waiting for my third departure from Brize Norton, I feel like enough events to cover a lifetime have happened since I left that grey October day. I feel good about wearing combats again. It feels safe and part of the more confident Molly-personality that has been growing inside me since I entered basic training and I'm looking forward to step on Afghan's dusty soil again even if I know it will not be a sunny vacation. The British army is in the process of handing over Camp Bastion to the Afghan Ministry of Defense. The handover is aimed to be final later this year but even if we will decrease our presence, the situation is far from stable with frequent Taliban attacks occurring, and we are doing what we can to train ANA personnel to strengthen their abilities.

My part in this is I will mentor Afghan medics. Just the thought, I, Molly Dawes, will mentor others. My knowledge and real-life experience considered valuable to pass on. Even if I would not admit it to anyone, I'm so proud of myself that there is a possibility I will burst. Prouder of this than of the Military cross I was awarded by Her Majesty the Queen upon our return from the previous tour. For "actions above and beyond duty" because I was willing to risk my own life to save a fellow soldier's. Only I know, I was not that brave. I was scared shitless, but I didn't feel there was any other option. I could not let Smurf bleed out and I could not stand 2 section and especially Captain James looking at me like I was a little piece of incompetent shit anymore. If there was even a small possibility to save Smurf I could not pass on it, and I had to prove myself. So, it was not the conscious selfless

act they have made it. It was spinal reflex mixed with selfish aim and half of me felt like a fraud when it was awarded to me. But this, the Afghan medics listening attentively to every word I say, knowing it may save the life of themselves and others, *that* makes me proud through and through. I needed to come here, not only for them but also for me.

I also feel in doubt I was truly worth the Military cross because saving Smurf was only temporary. Painfully temporary. He only lived some six months after my rescue op and I still feel I failed him somehow. He is on my mind quite often here because I have so many good memories of him from Afghan and I still expect him to show up from around the corner any minute and tell some cheeky joke. Our friendship was complicated by other emotions towards the end, but he is still one of the best mates I have ever had. Maybe *the* best, and good friends are not easily replaced. I know I will miss him forever. Even if Charles is both my friend and my lover, we do not come from similar backgrounds like Surf and I did, and I know there are things about me and where I come from that Charles will not fully understand. I think it is difficult for him to even imagine what it is like in my neighbourhood streets and in my family's small house, cluttered with toys, laundry that need folding, empty cans of lager and too many inhabitants for the surface. Or, to imagine my family, seven ill-bred kids with two parents of no education or even proper jobs, my father drunk much of the time, my mum knackered from taking care of everything, and on top of that we have Nan squeezed in living with us. I'm not sure if it is laughable or tragic that he in comparison has grown up as the lone child in that huge beautiful house with only his parents. I'm afraid that he will never understand my world and scared I will never fit into his. And the fact that we now

are lovers... if it does not work out, then I'm not sure we will be able to stay friends either. That terrifies me. I wish my friend Smurf was still here and we could talk about it – but then again, my feelings towards Charles was the one thing we could never talk about.

I think of Charles a lot, I do, but he feels so distant, like a dream. My memories of him from here, from the FOB in the Helmand province seems so much clearer than the ones from home. Like a technicolour movie compared to an old grainy black and white. Even our date in Bath would be the black and white film, meanwhile our kiss here while waiting out for Badrai, sparkles in colour. Sometimes I think every conversation we had here, every tiny word, is etched deep in my memory. When he disapprovingly told me, he should probably be thankful I was not wearing stilettos for the first PT session. When he told me, he would adore me for always if I brought him Rosabaya. When he had me "volunteer" singing "Don't go breaking my heart" in duet with him and I realized I had such a total and inappropriate major crush on him. When he asked me to come back to him... but *that* he did on the graveyard in Newport too. Were we only ever meant to be an infatuation on tour here in Afghanistan, not suited to be a couple at home? Are these memories better than what can possibly come? He is fantastic, but is he mine? 'What happens on tour, stays on tour' we joked among the recruits already during basic training. I did not realize then, that I actually might want to bring something home from tour one day.

There is also someone else occupying my mind. Bashira. My little soul sister. I have worried sick about her and even though Kaseem, our interpreter during the last

tour, has tracked her to a safe-house in Kabul and told me she is fine, I'm not able to fully believe it until I have seen it with my own eyes. I feel I owe it to her to secure that she is doing well. Her father did not treat her well, like other Taliban not keeping his daughter in high esteem, but due to my involvement their world was turned upside down and he was finally killed. By me. Badrai deserved it, for what he did to Bossman and Smurf and the other crimes he was sought for to begin with, but Bashira did not. I need to make amends somehow.

I have nagged Kaseem until he said he wished Badrai had put a bullet through his head, so he did not have to listen to me, but he finally very reluctantly promised he would arrange for me to meet Bashira. We will go to Kabul in two days and it is the only thing on my mind right now. Beside Captain James. A teacher once said I could not hold two thoughts in my head at the same time, barely even one. Obviously, he was wrong.

"Private fuckin' Dawes!"

Automatically I straighten myself and look up to see who is using my rank in such a disrespectful manner. The voice is familiar, but I cannot quite place it until I see his face, the eyes sparkling with amusement even though he tries to put on a serious act. He was quite cute in basic training, but during the two years that have passed since, Corporal Geddings has become a full-blown hunk. If anyone would try to compete with Charles for the most beautiful brown eyes, Geddings could maybe give him a match. But then again, no. No one has such eyes as Charles. Anyway, I'm glad to see him and I feel a wide grin on my face.

Missed me

"Good to see you too, Corporal Geddings."

"It's Sergeant now, actually" he smirks.

"Congrats then."

Without waiting for an invitation, he sits down in front of me and I cannot help but noticing that he has probably increased a size in only muscles since I last saw him.

"Fancy finding you here. What have you been up to, Dawes?"

"To give you the highlights, after saying good bye to basic training and you, I trained for CMT and was deployed to Afghan for six months. Apparently, I did something right because the CO asked me if I would return and mentor Afghan medics."

He raises his brows and whistles. It looks like I have managed to impress him a little bit. Good, I wanted to.

"I always knew if I pushed the right buttons to get you through basic training, you'd do well" he muses.

"So, it has all been to your credit?"

"Yeah, who otherwise?"

I know he is teasing me but still I cannot resist saying:

"I was awarded the Military cross."

Missed me

I don't pull that card often, never in fact, but I want to prove myself to him. Show him I was the wheat, not the chaff; the clay, not the shit - or whatever metaphor he used while shouting at us the first day of basic training.

"Well, there you go." He tries to make it sound like he thinks that was due to his excellent training too, but I can see that now he is duly impressed, and he asks me to tell more about what happened. I have not particularly liked talking about it to people who was not there, people at home, but I like telling Geddings. I even tell him I was terrified.

"Don't you realize that just makes it braver, that you did it anyway? We're all afraid but not everyone can overcome it."

I have not thought about it like that before, but I like his take on it.

We sit like that for a long while, catching up on what has taken place since we last met. I tell him lots of stories about 2 section, but none about Captain James. For some reason I feel like keeping the two of them separate. Geddings will be here for the remainder of my tour and when we part I'm already looking forward to seeing him again. We don't have the same CO, meaning we are not in the same chain of command and a friendship will not be frowned upon even if he is superior ranking.

-OG-

I'm so happy to see Kaseem again. We have been through so much together and I consider the widowed teacher, turned army interpreter, turned university teacher again to be a friend. I think he sees me as one too, it never seemed to be an issue

that I was a female foreigner. For long I only saw him in combats when he accompanied us during our mission. Dressed in regular shirt and trousers it is easy to picture him teaching a school class. As always, it breaks my heart to think of the wife and daughter he lost when Kabul was bombed and his house and everyone in it turned to dust. I know he has wished many times that he had been there with them instead of at work, but I'm glad he was not so I got to know him. Today he is in a good mood, albeit concerned about the risk I'm taking coming to Kabul and meeting Bashira. But he knows there is no way talking me out of it, he has already tried more times than we can count. We have two hours for our excursion before I must return to base and drive by car through streets where many houses are empty, bombed shells, to the safe-house where Bashira now lives. I'm wearing a niqab for the occasion, only showing my eyes, not to expose myself. When we finally stop and enter the guarded building, Kaseem pretend I'm his wife and I keep quiet. For once I have no problem keeping my mouth shut. There is a quite large and surprisingly beautiful atrium in the middle of the building and there are several kids around. First, I do not see her and get a flash of panic that she might have been moved and I have missed her. Then, there she is. She sits on the ground, facing another girl the same age. They are playing something, maybe *sang chill bazi*, the game she taught me, and we often played. She is laughing, a sound that is like music to my ears, and she looks like a little girl her age should. Happy, carefree. Beautiful. I love Bashira, love her like she was one of my own sisters and seeing her like this makes me indescribably happy. I approach her and now she looks up. First without recognizing me and I feel my heart drop in disappointment until I remember I'm wearing the niqab. I pull it down to show her my face and she immediately jumps to her feet and gives me the sunniest smile. "Molly!"

We hug for long and wrapping around my arms her tiny body, the hug mends something inside me. We do not have long together, but it is enough to know she is well and she is happy. With the help of Kaseem, we will be able to write to each other and keep in touch. She is learning to write in school now, so she will be able to write herself. Maybe she will even learn English. At least *one* little girl has been given the chance to go to school by our presence here. I don't know if the army would consider that enough for a mission accomplished but it is a stepping stone, and for me this one feels so vitally important.

When we drive back my heart feels light. The Bashira-shaped hole in it has been healed. I tell Kaseem that every penny I can spare, I will put in a savings account for Bashira, to help her afford education. Who knows, maybe she will get higher education than me (not that difficult), maybe she will be a teacher like Kaseem. Maybe my little soul sister can be anything she wants to be.

-OG-

This tour is meant to last for three months and the days go by quickly. Charles and I send text messages and there is the occasional call, but the reception is crappy, and the conversations leave me feeling more frustrated after than before. It is like we cannot get anything that matters said because when we get started there is always disturbance on the line, and he feels distant and surreal. Visiting Bashira was real. Teaching the Afghan medics is real. Corporal Geddings is real. I hesitate to call Charles again.

Missed me

Geddings and I see each other quite a lot. I like his company. In the evenings we often sit talking over a cup of tea or a game of cards. I even teach him *sang chill bazi*. Sometimes others join but often it is just the two of us and I do not mind. One evening we sit beside each other on a bench. There is a comfortable silence between us, when he suddenly says;

"You know, you were a teeny tiny bit right that time when you said I was jealous of Chris Ingram. I mean, you were wrong assuming that he was kicked out of basic training because of that, but right that I was a bit jealous."

Now, that's a confession I did not expect.

"What, you mean you were jealous we had a fumble behind the barracks?"

Now he turns red, embarrassed.

"Well, I didn't know if you really had, even though there were rumours. But I was jealous of him being with you. That he was allowed to be with you. And I was not."

"Did you fancy me?" I elbow his side, teasingly, finding it hard to believe that Geddings would find me irresistible somehow already then, even if I think there might be a tiny spark now, but he looks back at me serious.

"Maybe."

Now there is tension between us, the easy atmosphere from moments earlier gone. I can't resist asking;

"And now?"

"Now is different." I feel relief. And disappointment.

"Now I fancy you even more - and I'm allowed to."

I'm sitting here beside this seriously attractive guy, who is a top bloke. I would be lying if I said I have not fantasized about him once or twice. Okay, maybe even more times than that. But I never expected... I feel the warmth of the side of his body against mine and it suddenly feels mined to sit beside him. It would probably be for the better if I just rose and left, but it is too tantalizing to remain. I'm too curious about where it will lead. Our faces are very close now and I know this is the last chance to avoid a possible kiss. But I don't.

We kiss. Corporal Geddings and I kiss. It is a very nice one and I could easily give in to it, deepen it, but I sense it is wrong. It is the wrong man I'm kissing here, not the one I really want to. I feel it very clearly in the pit of my stomach and even more in my heart, and I retract. I can see the disappointed question in his face.

"Sorry, it's the 'it's-not-you-it's-me-thing'. You're really a top bloke and I like you..."

"But?"

"...but there is someone else. In very early stages, but I need to see where it is going when I come home, and I don't want to blur it..."

"...by being with someone else?"

"No." I feel a bit ashamed for leading him on just because I was curious if he really would kiss me, and maybe because I needed the confirmation, but he takes it well.

"Fair enough. I really like you Dawes, if you change your mind let me know." Agilely he jumps up, prepared to leave.

"Friends still?"

"Friends still" I confirm with relief.

He leaves me, and I remain seated where I am, filled with emotions. The unplanned physical contact with him has made me long for Charles. To be in his arms, feel his warmth, the scent of him, kissing him. Now I long for him so much that my body aches, so much that I almost do not know why I came here in the first place. Why I chose to leave him before we had tried us out when he amazingly enough had shown me that he wanted to. Logically, I know that the reason I went away was that I needed to find myself, rely on myself, to feel that I can match him - and he encouraged me to go, but what if I have done that and he is not there waiting for me when I come home. Then I will stand there with my newfound self-confidence but without the man I love. I will regret it for the rest of my life. Right now, my heart is not at all in agreement with the decision made by my brain. And why was I so hung up on the sex part? Stupid stupidity. Our night together was beautiful, and he treated me like I'm the only woman in the world he would ever look at, but I'm not used to someone showing me in such a gentle wonderful way that I mean something to them. I feel now that I might have mistaken the presumable lack of heat for him not wanting me enough, when it might just as well have been him wanting me in the best possible way. Right now, I feel I would be happy if I was only allowed to hug him for the rest of my life. Suddenly, I'm counting down the days until the Hercules will bring me back to Brize Norton, desperate to get back

to him. I can only hope that he will be there, and I have not completely fucked up the best thing that has ever happened to me.

October 2014

Nervousness. My entire body is filled with it like an electric current radiating from my heart out to my fingertips and toes in a tingling sensation. I'm headed for Charles' parents' house, Royal Crescent, Bath. He doesn't know, I plan to surprise him – and if I am unlucky his parents too because I do not know if they are home. I decided not to call. I was afraid that if the call was as bad as the ones we had in Afghan, we would decide never to meet again. And I don't want that. I want to see him more than anything. Even if a month has passed since the kissing mistake with Geddings my feelings have remained the same. It reminded me how much I want Charles. Like, want-him-badly-with-every-fibre-of-my-body-want-him. He is my friend, who I just love to be with, talk to and banter. I feel safe with him, knowing he is both strong and genuinely good. He is the hottest man I have ever known, and apart from our one half-failed, slightly stiff try of getting it on, there has been sparks flying between us. And I love him, I love him so completely that it almost hurts to think of it. So, I must give this a chance, or several, not run away at the first sign of a bump. If he wants to.

I knock the door, it has one of them old-fashioned golden knockers, and with heart beating so much it threatens to jump out of my chest, wait quite a while for the door to open. Half relieved, half overly disappointed, I'm starting to think nobody is home when I hear a shout, dampened by the door "I'll be there in a minute!"

Finally, the door opens and there he is. For a moment I just savour the look of him. So tall and handsome, the dark curly hair dishevelled. He is wearing a checkered shirt with his jeans and has protective gloves on, looking like he is in the middle of some kind of renovation work. I just love the look on his face when he realizes it is me and lets me in. It is the face of a mischievous boy, but on a grown-up man who knows what he wants. He looks pleased to have me here, but I have the feeling that under the surface it is more than so – he is in fact ecstatic.

"Missed me?" is all I can figure out to say. If I had butterflies in my stomach before, it is more like a flock of swallows fluttering their wings there now.

I am not sure what I expected would happen next, but even though I hoped that we would end up in each other's arms I did not dare to hope for *this*. The moment I'm inside, his lips find mine - and yes, this kiss feels so right, in the pit of my stomach and in my heart, even between my legs come to think of it. I find my back pressed up against the door, his lean muscular body pressed to mine. And it is hard, not soft. Not too hard, it is just that he really wants me and does not want even a millimetre of space between us. We have not even really said hello in words, too busy with the non-verbal communication.

He lifts me up like I was a feather, well maybe not a feather but something quite light, and carries me through the house with amazing multitasking ability as he manages to keep snogging without tripping over. We may need a search party later to localize all our clothes because they come off as we pass through the rooms, up the stairs. To be honest, we only get halfway up those gigantic stairs before we must have each other. I'm starting to appreciate the size of the stairs that previously just

freaked me out. It is quite convenient that the steps are so broad I can easily fit my bum there. And I appreciate the carpet covering too, very soft to my bare skin. Actually, the steps are so broad that even his gorgeous arse can fit on them, we try it out when we switch positions for a while and I straddle him. Eventually it becomes a bit uncomfortable though and with an impatient groan, he interrupts to carry me the remaining part to his bedroom. Once there we slow down, none of us wanting this to end too quickly, rather last all day if possible. He covers me in kisses and then, his eye locked in mine pauses to say:

"I love you."

Those words, they have never come out of my mouth to any boyfriend, only to my family. It has never felt right before, I have not felt trust, I have not felt *loved* - so I have never said it. Now I do, and it feels almost like singing it out;

"I love you too." Nothing could be truer, I genuinely do with all my heart.

- OG -

Later we lie on the bed, curled up together, quiet until I break the silence.

"Are you okay?"

"Why is in the world wouldn't I be?" He says that softly, like it would be very strange if he felt anything but happiness right now. "I'm lying here with the only one person in the world I want to be with and we have just made love.

"It was different from last time..."

"It was... did you mind?" He lies on his side, head held up, supported by one hand. The other hand's fingers trace gentle circles on my skin.

"No" I smile. "Honestly, I was a little worried after last time we didn't really have any spark. I felt you were so restrained somehow, maybe did not want me like that for real."

He looks surprised and a little hurt. "Molly, you're so fucked up that you don't even recognize a guy that wants to take care of you. And loves you. Yes, I felt a bit restrained maybe, because I wanted to make sure you knew this was not a shag to me, but something beautiful. I have wanted you for so long and I wanted it to be special."

"I'm not used to someone treating me like I can break" I say bashfully.

"I know you won't break physically, but I have the feeling people have not been there for you, not let you feel you could trust them in your life. I wanted you to feel that with me."

I'm so stupid. Obviously, I don't know how to see real love even if someone scribbles it on my nose. How fortunate I am that Charles is patient and willing to look past me being so amazingly stupid. I move closer to him, fit my body into the curve of his and bury my face by his collarbone.

"I should have known. I'm sorry."

We definitely have chemistry. How could I ever doubt that? So much that if we were a chemistry lesson we would have sent the whole chemistry lab through the

Missed me

roof, fuming with smoke from some explosion. If I thought the first time was a bit bleak, this was the opposite and it was definitely the Bossman and Charles combined making love to me. Well, maybe predominantly the Bossman. And I can tell you that I just love the lovely things that he did to me, that we did to each other. I may need to do this again in ten minutes or so, I hope he is up for it.

"I may need to repeat this in five minutes or so" he breathes against my neck. I hope you are up for it"

Yes, we are definitely on the same track now, me and my love, Bossman Charles James. Will never again complain on lack of chemistry or passion, and everything else I hope we can work out together.