



*The Christmas Card*

by Miss Piony

An Our Girl FanFiction

# The Christmas Card

*December 26, 2018*

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*This story is a Christmas gift for oo-Lisa-oo who wished that someone would make her favourite movie, 'The Christmas card', into an OGFF. So, I watched it, and this is what it inspires me to write. Hope you enjoy it Lisa and anyone else who reads it too.*

*In this A/U story Molly lives in a fictive country village and CJ is pretty much his usual self but without a marriage and kids in the past.*

*Thanks to Tony Grounds for the characters I'm borrowing and to 'The Christmas card' for inspiration.*

*x*

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## Chapter 1

### **Afghan, forward operating base (FOB) in Helmand province, Dec 25, 2013**

This was the second year in a row I found myself in Afghan over Christmas. I had not been here all through the year, but just like last year I was here on a six-month tour stretching over Christmas, my third tour in total to Afghan. One could think it would all be routine by now, but even if my experience had increased with each tour it never became routine. We could not allow ourselves to ever relax, because the day when we were anything but one hundred percent focused and alert, would be the day everything went to shit. It is tiresome to never be able to relax completely, but you only realise exactly *how* tiresome when you set foot on English soil again and go back to normal.

Do not get me wrong, I like being on tour. I feel free when I am, I like the simplicity of not having more belongings than can fit in my Bergen, but I would prefer not to be over Christmas. I miss celebrating Christmas in my parents' house in Bath, I miss them, I miss snow or at least cold, I simply miss being at home. I try to pretend that I do not, that I'm perfectly fine being out here even on Dec 25, because I want to try to keep the spirits of my men up. We try to celebrate as good as we can here, but I know all of them miss their families terribly a day like this and we still have a few months to go before they will be able to hug their loved ones. My main goal as captain is to get them all home in one piece, not like on last tour when one of the lads, Geraint, was shot by the Taliban. I do not know how many times I have relived that moment, seeing him take the shot and fall to the ground, then crawling two-hundred metres and drag him back with me because I would not let the Taliban have his body. The least I could do, was to deliver this boy who had been in my charge back to his mum, so she could give him a decent funeral. I did not want anything like it to happen ever again, but the risk was always there.

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Probably it was those events that made me feel more emotional, more out of balance this Christmas Day than I had last year. I felt sad and lonely as hell, just did my best not to show it.

"Captain James?"

I looked up and Corporal Kinders was standing in the tent opening.

"A mail delivery came with the helicopter that just left."

I had heard the rotor blades of a helicopter arriving from Bastion and then leaving again but had not reflected much over the familiar sound. Now I felt a small hope, maybe there had been a Christmas letter from mum. I'm a grown man, a captain in charge of a platoon, but out here I miss my mum like never before. I'm not sure if that is pathetic or a natural reaction to the circumstances.

"Anything for me?" I asked casually, not really wanting to show him that it would mean a great deal to me to receive greetings from home this day.

"Not for you personally, but there was a bunch of Christmas cards that people back home have written to soldiers deployed abroad over Christmas. To keep our spirits up."

I could not help giving up a small laugh.

"Stuck in this dusty hellhole with the Taliban watching us and they think a letter from someone we don't know will cheer us up? I appreciate the effort, but I think the positive effect of a stranger's Christmas card might be limited."

"Don't say that until you've read yours. There's probably some old lady who has written something heart-warming to you."

"I'm sure I'll find something in there that makes up for sitting by my parents' fireplace having eggnog."

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"I've always thought eggnog is nasty, one of the only good things about being here over Christmas."

"Are you kidding? No Christmas without eggnog... except this year... and last. Okay, so do you have a card for me then?"

"You got the honour to pick first since you're the boss."

Kinders held out a bunch of letters in a fan shape for me to choose one. I let my hand hover over them and then finally picked one randomly.

"Thanks, Kinders. Now double away and I'll read this thoughtful and encouraging letter."

He left, and I opened the letter. It contained a card that someone seemed to have made themselves and inside it a letter of several pages.

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### ***Snowhaven, Dec 5, 2013***

*First, apologies for this letter. You clearly got the short end of the stick when you got mine because I know these other ladies around me will write high quality, beautiful letters in cheerful Christmas spirit, meanwhile I'm not so sure what this will be.*

*I'm Molly by the way and my sister Bella dragged me with her to this charity event at our local church tonight. She had heard it had something to do with our troops and thought it might be an opportunity to meet some handsome soldiers, but she had gotten it all wrong, not a soldier in sight. Not any other men full stop, except for the vicar. It was just women writing Christmas letters to unknown soldiers deployed abroad over Christmas to keep their spirits up. Bella wanted to back out of it, but I felt we could not just leave now when we were here. She did anyway because she does not care much what people think, so now I'm left here alone - on a Friday evening I can add - and trying hard to figure out what to write*

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*to you, whoever you are, wherever you are. But I'll do my best to cheer you up, okay?*

*I live in a country village, Snowhaven, where I was born and raised. Have you ever seen 'Midsomer Murders'? Snowhaven is like that. Well, except for the murders which is fortunate, but the rest is much the same. It looks very quaint and peaceful, but in fact there are quite many intrigues going on under the surface because people have nothing better to do than stick their noses in each other's business. At the same time everyone knows each other and helps each other, so there is both good and bad sides to being as close as we all are. I have been thinking about leaving and maybe I will one day, but everyone I love lives here. That is a good reason to stay, don't you think?*

*My dad, Dave, is the pub owner. The pub is the heart of our village. I know some of the ladies sitting here tonight, writing, would argue it is the church, but most know it is the pub really. That is where people meet, laugh, fall in love, make plans, fight. That is where life happens.*

*Dad used to be an alcoholic, but he has been sober for five years so ironically, he is the only one in the pub who does not drink nowadays. He was not a very nice man when I grew up. Nice to the customers, not so much to mum and us kids. Not that he beat any of us (even if it came close a few times) but there was plenty of verbal abuse. Then five years ago, mum threatened to leave him and this time she meant it. Got her own place to stay and all, and you can imagine how that got the village talking. Deep down inside dad has always loved her, even if he had a strange way of showing it, so that finally made him stay off the drink and after a few months she moved back in.*

*You see, I think that for many years, dad sort of held a grudge against life for robbing him of being in the army. When he was young, he enlisted and did basic training. He did very well, and I've seen photos from his passing out where he looks proud as a peacock. Mum and he were already together and very much in love I've been told. They got married shortly after his passing out and he looks*

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*incredibly happy in the wedding photos too. Right before he was going to be deployed for the first time, he was home on leave for a week, went jogging in the forest, stumbled and broke his leg badly. It healed over time so now you would only notice a slight limp, but he was deemed unfit for service. It made him bitter and he started drinking. It was not until mum left him, that he realised that even if he did not have the army he had everything else he ever wanted out of life; he married the love of his life, had kids, friends a thriving business - and at the prospect of losing it he finally shaped up. He is still very sentimental about the army though. Any passing soldier risks to be told the long story of his glorious days in basic training and what heroic deeds that may have taken place had he ever been deployed.*

*I think dad realised he liked both himself and life much better sober. Life has been better for all of us since. Mum liked him so much more this way that it resulted in another little brother. He is twenty years younger than me! I still cannot believe they did that, made another baby. It makes it impossible to pretend they do not have sex. I mean, of course I have known they probably have had sex since the second youngest of us kids was made, but I prefer not to think of my parents in that setting. Another baby was indisputable evidence they were still at it. Eeeek! Anyway, sorry for that side track, writing in ink, otherwise I probably should have erased that part.*

*In total, I have five brothers and sisters and I'm the eldest, so I guess I'm supposed to be the wise and responsible one. Maybe I am, considering I stayed here writing while Bella just left, even though we came here on her account. My mum, Belinda, works in the pub with dad and they also have a few rooms for guests to stay over, like B&B, and she takes care of them too. I help quite often in the pub and B&B but also have another job. I work in Mr. Adam's little book slash antiques shop. Sometimes I volunteer to help out in my uncle's, Dr. Chapman's practice, just because I like it. If I was to study for something, I think it would be for being a nurse. I dream of it sometimes, leaving to go study - maybe come back to live here again afterwards, working, or maybe stay away. I don't know. I'm not sure what*



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*I want with my life yet, but I feel it is about time that I knew soon. But how do I know? How did you know you wanted to be a solider?*

*First, I did not know what to write in this letter. Now I find it difficult to stop. Sorry for babbling on about my life, but it was a relief "talking" to someone who does not know me, who will not judge me, at least not to my face. Here everyone has an opinion of who I should be and what I should do.*

*I said that everyone I love live here. It Is almost true. My boyfriend is travelling so much for work he nearly does not live in Snowhaven anymore. His name is Dylan, but everyone calls him Smurf. I'm not sure why he got that nickname when we were kids (yes, we have known each other since then), maybe because he has a bit protruding ears. I think it is a funny name and so does everyone else, but he does not appreciate it particularly. Sometimes I think he takes himself a bit too seriously. He works for this company which imports wine and that is what sends him travelling. He goes around Europe, US, South America, Australia to find new exciting wines to import. Or at least he gets all excited about them. Me, I like a glass of wine but find it difficult to taste the difference when he arranges one of his wine tastings and goes on about complex bouquet, tannins or something. I do not dare to tell him that even if I like wine I actually prefer a beer. We have been going out for ages and know each other well, so it works to have a distance relationship, but when friends around me start moving in with each other and getting engaged I'm thinking about if it is maybe time for us too, to take our relationship to the next level. He does not seem very eager, though, and frankly I'm not sure if I am either. Not sure if we are made for each other. I have not told anyone, but since you are at a safe distance I feel I can tell you. You probably could not care less anyway. Also, I'm a bit scared to bring up the discussion how we would live our life then. I think he wants to keep travelling, and as I've said, I'm not sure if I want to leave the village, especially not to travel around the world constantly. One day I must make up my mind, but for now I'm playing ostrich, burying my head in the sand. Or in the snow - lol.*

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*Snowhaven is full of these odd characters. Not me, I'm very average. I already told you about Mr. Adams' book slash antiquities shop. Apparently, he used to be a very successful business man in London. Then one day he got fed up with it all, resigned, moved here and started his little shop. It is vastly popular among the tourists passing through and he had so much to do that he hired me as a help. I love working there among all the old pretty things and he has taught me a lot about antiquities even if it has happened that I sold some valuable piece far too cheap. He said he could live with that for the joy to have me in the shop, which was very kind of him. Then we have Ms. Brannigan, she has the cutest bakery where she sells fantastic pastries. Everyone knows she has a crush on the butcher, Mr. Dudley - except for him, totally oblivious to it. Maybe one day they will get it on, he is single too. I hope they will. Someone who for sure always will be a spinster is Ms. Finch because she has like twenty cats, I'm not kidding. I visit her sometimes but never eat anything because I'm afraid I will get cat hairs in my mouth, it happened once. Then there is Mr. Gibbons and Mr. Lewis. They say they are just friends who share a house. Everyone knows they are a gay couple but are polite enough to pretend they do not understand as long as they do not want to come out of the closet themselves. My best friends, besides my sister Bella, are Jackie and Katie. Both their boyfriends live here in the village too and Katie and her Matt just moved in together and sometimes it makes me feel pretty lonely that Smurf almost never is here. Being the fifth wheel on a couples' night is always a bit awkward, even when it is with you best friends. It is a strange thing to feel like a single when you are not.*

*This time of the year it the best in the village. It is lovely in summer too and we always have a lot of tourists passing through, but in December when the whole village is decorated and there is this big Christmas tree on the small square and there is a Christmas market and an ice rink where you can go skating and lots of carol singing – then it is pure magic. Somehow the location of our village gives us a different climate zone than the rest of Britain, which always ensures snow in December. You need to ask a weatherman for the explanation, I'm just grateful. On Christmas Eve, it is tradition that more or less the entire village comes to the pub in the afternoon and we have the best time. Like a village Christmas*

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*celebration. For Christmas, even Smurf comes home so then everyone I love is really here. I would not want to be anywhere else in the whole world then.*

*Anyway, I hope your Christmas, wherever you are deployed is not total shit. That you get some kind of Christmas meal and gift and that there are no bombs going off on a day like that. I guess what you wish for most is to come home and see your loved ones, like I get to see mine. When I leave from the church in a few minutes, I will look up at the stars. You can see thousands of them out here on a clear night and even if I do not have a clue about what most of them are called, I just think it looks amazing. I will find an especially big and bright one and make a wish for you. When you read this letter, you can look up at the same sky and see the same stars, and maybe find the same big and bright one and know that my wish for you is that you also will get home to be with your loved ones soon. I wish you all the best and a Merry Christmas.*

*XXX*

*Molly Dawes*

*P.S. Realise 'XXX' was overdoing it a bit since I do not know you, but as said, writing in ink so it is difficult to take something back.*

*P.P.S. In addition to not being so good at writing, I'm obviously also crap at this scrap booking thing, or whatever you call it when you do your own card. So sorry for the card too, as I said you really got the short end of the stick.*

## Chapter 2

### **Afghanistan/England, winter, spring and summer 2014**

When I had finished reading the letter, I read it once again, smiling and laughing out loud to myself. I took a closer look at the card that enclosed the letter and could only agree with Molly's own observation that DIY cards was not her forte. Not only had the letter cheered me up, it had transferred me to that village. I could visualise it clearly, how it looked now in December, with houses decorated and everything covered in snow. I could picture the villagers, Ms. Brannigan and Mr. Dudley and the others. How they would all meet in the pub on Christmas Eve, Dave and Belinda behind the counter, Molly helping out. Here I had some trouble to imagine though. What did she look like, the author of this letter? She gave no clues. I could not even be sure about her age even if I guessed between twenty and twenty-five.

For the rest of that tour, which was pretty uneventful, I read Molly Dawes' letter at least once a day. It kept me going. Not just reading the words but thinking about what she and the other inhabitants in Snowhaven were doing now. After New Year, I imagined them cleaning away the Christmas decorations and later welcoming spring, the village turning green instead of snow white, snowdrops, crocuses and later tulips appearing. I imagined Dave and Belinda welcoming and saying goodbye to guests at the pub and B&B. I saw Molly working in the little book slash antiques shop, maybe help some tourist find something special and I saw her help her uncle in his practice. For some reason I felt sure she was great with the patients. I could not see her face clearly but I could imagine her frowning as she focused on her task. I wondered if she had taken any step closer to her dream to study to become a nurse, or to move in with Smurf or get engaged to him. Meanwhile I hoped she would pursue her dream to study, I for some reason avoided the pictures of her with the boyfriend. In my mind she looked different on different days, but she always had this intoxicating kind smile which warmed my insides.

When the tour was over, me and my platoon were home for a couple of months. I settled in the normal routines at the regiment and saw my friends and parents in my spare time. I did not read the letter that often then, but I knew it by heart and thought of her every once in a while. Here at home I did not need her words to encourage me like I had needed them on tour, but I did not forget. At one point I even looked up where the village was situated but of course had no intention of going there.

In the summer I attended the wedding of one of my best friends, Elvis Harte, who married the girl who was the love of his life, Georgie Lane. They already had two beautiful little girls and now they finally came around to tie the knot officially. It was such an amazing day and for some reason I thought more of Molly Dawes than I had in long time. Maybe it was because the wedding was held in Reading, where Elvis and Georgie had decided to settle and when I drove there I had realised that Snowhaven could not be very far away. Maybe it was because the day was filled with so much love and affection. As Elvis bestman I was in one way very much part of it, but as single who had come there without company I also felt like I was a bit outside, just like Molly when she went out with her friends who were couples. When Elvis and Georgie said their vows and kissed as husband and wife, it was so solemn, beautiful and true and I wished I also shared something like that with someone special - and then suddenly she was there again in my head, this girl that I did not really know and who certainly did not know me at all. An elusive dream that was all she was.

### **Afghanistan, Autumn 2014**

In the autumn I was sent on another tour to Afghan. Almost without thinking about it, I packed Molly's letter, now frayed from the many times I had unfolded and folded it, despite that I kept it enveloped in her ugly yet lovely little DYI card which was also ridiculously dear to me. I almost unconsciously knew that I needed to bring it with me, that this tour would be hard and I would need her words to keep me strong.

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It all started out promising. Besides me and my section, I had friends staying in the same base. One was Elvis, who was a captain like me but leading a special forces unit who were there on a parallel mission. The other one was captain Azizi, who belonged to the Afghan National Army. We had served alongside on previous tours and become friends. I was glad to have them both with me and thought it would make this tour easier, but things had changed. They had changed. Elvis had always been a daredevil, fearless and radiating cheekiness and a sense of immortality that always cheered up everyone around him. Now he was morose, like a bleak copy of himself.

"What's up?" I asked one evening.

"I'm missing Georgie and the girls."

"Don't you always when you're on tour?"

"It's different now, it's become worse. I'm afraid of dying in a way I never was because I don't want to leave them alone. I think this will be my last tour."

"Will you resign?" I knew Elvis loved the army but he loved his little family even more.

"Or transfer to another role where I can stay home, where I don't have to keep risking my life when so much is at stake."

"For what it's worth, I think you're making the right decision. What you and Georgie have is beautiful. I must admit I envy you and hope I will find love like that one day. If there's anything worth leaving the army for, it's without a doubt that."

"Thanks, mate. Let's both just survive this tour and I'm sure you'll find yourself a gal too. Coming home in one piece for one last time is all I wish for."

Captain Azizi had changed in a different way. We had both used to believe that we with joint efforts would be able to turn Afghan into a better place. This time I found him disillusioned, doubting there would ever be a true change, that we would be

able to beat the Taliban. It was quite depressing talking to him, to see that he had lost his faith and seemed willing to give up.

Many evenings, in the solitude of my tent, after talking to one or the other of the two - one longing desperately to return home to his loved ones, one longing for his country to have peace, I felt like crying. In contrast to my previous tours, this one hardly offered me any joy and like Elvis I longed to go home, even if nothing or no one specific were waiting for me. Those evenings I read Molly's letter again, and again. Let my fingers touch the paper, stroke over the letters as if it would bring me closer to her, away from the hellhole I felt Afghan had turned into. Without her knowing it, it was like she held my hand and guided my way through this.

Then came the horrible day that I wish I had not lived to see. The day when Azizi betrayed us and we were caught in an ambush. Several of my men were injured in the fire but that was not the worst of it. Elvis and his team were there with us and he went up on a roof because he had seen a sniper hiding up there. I was the officer in command and I ordered him not to go, but true to his maverick character he did anyway. I was not up there with him, so I cannot be sure what happened next, but he probably found an IED there and tried to disarm it. I do not know if it had a timer or if someone triggered it remotely, but it does not really matter. The result was the same anyway, the IED went off in Elvis' face and threw him off the roof of that building. I heard the explosion, I saw him fly through the air in what felt like slow motion and hit the dusty ground. I was by his side in seconds, tried CPR, called for our medic but the moment I saw his burnt face and unseeing eyes I knew it was too late. He would never return home to Georgie and the girls again and all I could think of was how could we possibly tell her that he would not.

When I returned to my tent that evening when Elvis had died, I brought out Molly's letter and unfolded it with trembling fingers. This time I did not read it. Instead I was telling her what had happened that day, spoke to her for a long time in the silence and only put the letter away when my tears threatened to fall on it and smear the ink. I felt like she was my lifeline this day, the one thing keeping me sane after the loss of two friends - one due to betrayal, one because he died. I blamed

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myself for trusting Azizi, not noticing he had turned on us and put us all in the dangerous situation that led to Elvis' death. I had been the commanding officer, I had not managed to get everyone home safe and even if I knew Elvis strictly speaking had not been under my command as he was SF and the same rank, and never had been one for following my orders anyway, I felt I carried the weight of his death. I would miss him immensely, but that would be nothing compared to Georgie and the girls.

"I will miss him Molly, I don't know life without him. He's been my best friend for so long and it will so damn empty. And Georgie... how will she survive?"

No one answered my questions, yet I sensed a friendly presence there with me almost like receiving a hug for real.

Next day, we all returned to Bastion and I had a debrief with my CO, Major Beck.

"I think you should take some leave James."

"I don't know, Sir."

It was not that I wanted to stay in Afghan, but I felt lost and unsure how to handle a leave, which would allow me plenty of time to think and feel.

"It was not a suggestion, it's an order. Elvis was one of your best friends. Azizi another friend..."

"...so I thought."

"We all did. You have nothing to blame yourself, but you need to deal with this before you can move on. You will see a psychiatrist back home, before you return to service. That's another order."

I nodded, not agreeing really but knowing I had no say in this.

"There's also something I think you might want to do when you return home."



He put a pair of identification tags on the table. He did not have to say, I knew it was Elvis'.

"Bring these back to Mrs. Harte, will you?"

"It's the least I can do, Sir."

I picked them up and quickly bid him farewell as I feared that the lump in my throat would turn into actual tears.

### **England, Dec 2014**

I had been home for a month and was struggling to get used to normal and to accept that normal meant a life without Elvis. It was surreal that my vivacious friend had returned in a box. I had been to the funeral, I had seen everyone crying, I had cried floods myself but none of them would come out during the funeral, not even when I hugged Georgie and remembered that the last time I did that was at their wedding, not even when she was handed the flag and I thought that was the lousiest trade ever; your love and children's father for a flag. Still I could not wrap my head around that Elvis was gone. I had followed Beck's orders, I was on leave, I was seeing a psychiatrist and would continue to do so for the foreseeable future but so far I could not say it was helping. Some days I was sad, some days furious with the pointlessness of it all, some days I felt guilt and some days I was just blank, empty of emotion. Then I brought out Molly's letter and when I read it emotions were sparked again, small seeds of happiness penetrating the numbness and, as always, curiosity awoken, wondering what was happening in the villagers lives right now.

I was beginning to get bored and restless. My parents had since long planned to go abroad for Christmas. I had been supposed to be in Afghan still, so I had no plans but to sit lonely in my parents' big empty house in Bath with too much opportunity to think depressing thoughts. I was not too keen on that.

Then I had this idea of something that would both give me purpose and keep me occupied. I had forgotten to bring Elvis' identification tags and give to Georgie at

the funeral. I had told her then and we had both agreed I would not send them with mail but come visit her and the girls in Reading sometime soon and bring the tags personally. Now would be a time as good as any to go there. I made a call to Georgie to check it was okay with her, this was not the type of visit I wanted to be a surprise visit. She said they would be glad to have me, so the next day I hit the road.

### **Reading, Dec 18**

With one week to go to Christmas, I found myself at Georgie's doorstep. I hesitated a moment before ringing the doorbell because I knew that entering Elvis' home without finding him there, would once again confirm that he was gone for real - but he would be no matter what I did so finally I pressed my finger to the doorbell. Georgie opened, the girls around her feet and we hugged for long.

"It's so good to see you." She smiled but I could see her tears were not far away, and neither were mine.

"Uncle Charlie!" The girls were hugging my legs because that was as far as they could reach. I bent down to hug them too, two little girls with the colours of Georgie and Elvis, dark hair and brown eyes and skin that looked tanned even in winter. Living reminders of him, proof that he had been here among us and never would be forgotten.

We had dinner together and I helped tuck the girls to bed. Georgie had offered me to stay the night already when I called to ask if I could come and when the girls were asleep, we sat down talking, reminiscing Elvis. I gave her the identification tags and she put the chain around her neck.

"You know he spoke about you all the time, on this tour more than ever." I told her. "All he wanted was to come home to you."

She bit her lip.

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"He was supposed to be home for Christmas this year. He had started talking about leaving the army, for us. He did not want to keep risking his life, did not want to leave me and the girls alone. And now.." Her voice broke.

"Still, I consider myself lucky."

I looked at her in silent disbelief, how was she able to think of herself as lucky in this situation?

"I found the love of my life. He loved me too, we had two wonderful girls and I got to be his wife. Not everyone gets that much out of life, not even if they get to live a long one. I will always love him, I will always miss him, but I'm also grateful for what we got."

"Oh, Georgie, I admire you for being so strong. I was only his friend and I'm not able to stay that positive."

"I don't manage every minute of every day, but I try to feel like that at least once every day. I don't want sadness and bitterness to consume me. I have to be strong for my girls, they need me more than ever now."

"You're absolutely right to do that. It's just that I'm so mad and sad he died, that you're a widow, the girls have no father and I've lost my best friend. I keep thinking about if I could have done anything different that day to prevent it. If I could have known that Azizi would betray us if I had been more alert. If I could have prevented Elvis from going up that roof so he would not have been there when the IED exploded. I told him not to go up there, but I was the officer in command – I should have *ordered* him..."

"Charlie, stop! Don't do this to yourself. You know that Elvis didn't take orders from you, hardly from anyone, not when his mind was set on something. I don't blame you, no one else does, please don't do that. I know it's the last thing Elvis would have wanted. He would have wanted you to mourn him, drink to him, remember

him but also to walk on and have a happy life, not waste yours grieving his. Will you promise not to do that?"

"But I..."

"Will you please promise not to do that? For mine and Elvis' sake. That's all I ask of you."

I nodded. I knew I still had a long way to go, many hours with the psychiatrist and my own thoughts before I would be able to let this go completely, but her words made me feel a bit lighter. Like she was giving me absolution.

"Will you go home to Bath tomorrow, to stay there for Christmas?"

"I was thinking of going somewhere else first."

She raised an eyebrow, looking curious.

"It sounds like you have a secret, please do tell."

"It's a bit stupid, really." I told her about the card I had gotten last Christmas, how it had followed me through the year and helped me in my darkest hours.

"I looked up the village once and it's not that far from here."

"You're thinking about going seeing that girl!"

"I was, but maybe it's a really stupid idea. I have absolutely no idea who this girl is, and she does not even know I exist. She might freak out if I show up there, think she's gotten herself a stalker."

"You could go there and not tell anyone why you're there. Just pass through on your way somewhere. You said she works in the pub..."

"She did a year ago, I don't even know if she lives there anymore."

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"Take a chance! You have nothing to lose, just go there, visit the pub, look out for a girl named Molly and if she's there and it feels right, talk to her. Life is too short to waste. We both know that."

"Thanks for the advice, I'll think about it until tomorrow morning."

And I did, literally. I lay on Georgie's couch that night, wide awake, trying to figure out if I should go to Snowhaven or not. It was so close so in a way it would be stupid *not* to go, but what if I got disappointed? If I was disappointed in the village, in the villagers, in *her*. Then that letter would not be a comfort anymore. Could I handle life without that lifeline? Finally, I fell asleep, but it was a restless sleep and I dreamed of Elvis.

"What are you doing, mate?" he asked me. "Why are you hesitating? Go visit that Molly-girl, I'm curious too. You owe me that, since you're alive and I'm not."

Then he gave me a hug and I woke up with a warm, fussy feeling, knowing I had no choice but to go.

I hugged Georgie and the girls goodbye, wishing them a merry Christmas, promising I would return soon and that they would get to know everything about my visit to Snowhaven. It broke my heart they would spend the Christmas without Elvis, but I was glad they had each other. I tapped Snowhaven into the GPS and drove off.

## Chapter 3

### **Snowhaven, Dec 2014**

When I drove into Snowhaven, I saw at the first glance that the village would not disappoint. It was exactly as I had imagined, exactly as Molly had described. Quaint little houses, beautifully decorated for Christmas, everything covered in a layer of snow and I just loved it. I parked my car and walked the narrow streets until I found the pub, which did not take me long. I assumed there was only one pub in the village so that it must be the one, *The Rose and Crown*. It was lunch time, and this was a place as good as any to have it, so I entered with heart thumping in my chest and slightly sweaty palms. Of course, no one took special notice of me, just another tourist passing through.

I sat down by the counter and looked around. It was a very nice pub. I mean there are pubs and there are pubs, and this one was definitely on the nicer end of the scale. Especially now when it was decorated for Christmas with garlands of holly, red ribbons and small brass bells. Someone had clearly put an effort into it.

"Can I get you something, stranger?"

A girl had appeared behind the counter while I was looking around.

Was this Molly? I was not sure why, but if it was I was slightly disappointed. Maybe because her smile was not as warm as I had imagined. She looked a bit sharp, like the street-smart kind of girl. My first impression was not like I had imagined her to be reading the letter, but as she was there behind the counter and was too young to be the mother, it was likely her.

"You work here?"

"What does it look like? Of course, I'm working here, you prannet. That's why I'm asking what I can do for you."

## The Christmas card

I wanted to know if she possibly had written a Christmas card to an anonymous soldier a year ago, but I did not feel I could ask this girl. I could have lunch though.

"Do you have a menu?"

"Over there."

She nodded towards a chalk board where different dishes and offers were written white on black.

"Okay, I'll go for the chicken salad club on rye bread... curly fries, extra crispy if that's possible... and since it's Christmas I'll have a hot chocolate with marshmallows."

"Really?" Her eyebrows were raised in surprise and I guess it was a somewhat strange combination.

"Yes, please."

"Okay", she shrugged her shoulders, now looking disinterested, like it was not her job to question what the guests ordered.

"Is there a toilet I could use?"

"That way." She nodded towards the back of the pub and I went there while waiting for the food to arrive. When I was in there, my thoughts were spinning on. I needed to find out if this was her, or I would be as curious when I left as I had been when I came. At the same time, I knew that if this was Molly, I was disappointed for some undefined reason. Even after a minute in her company I could feel that we did not have the connection I had somehow hoped we would have. A silly hope maybe. She had written that letter in one evening more than a year ago and probably forgotten all about it. I had read it hundreds of times and it had come to mean so much for me and I felt like I knew her. Our starting points now when we finally met were very different. I took a deep breath and went back to the bar.

## The Christmas card

When I returned, my food was already ready at the counter where I had been sitting, but my seat was occupied by another girl who just was splashing ketchup over my fries. When girl #1 reappeared, the new one said;

"Bella, I thought I said 'to go' when I called you. I have to back to the shop."

"You *did* say that, that's not yours."

"Ooops, I'm so sorry! What are the odds? Who's is it then?"

"His."

The girl behind the bar, who I now knew was not Molly but Bella, nodded my direction and the girl in my seat turned around. I met a pair of large green eyes who looked apologetic and below them a mouth shaped in a large grin that did not look so apologetic, rather like she found this hilarious.

"You ordered chicken salad club, on rye bread, curly fries, extra crispy and hot chocolate with marshmallows?"

"Yes."

"But *I'm* the only one who orders that."

"Not anymore it appears."

"I'm not sure if that means you have excellent taste or bad taste", she smiled. "Do you mind that I put ketchup on?"

Normally I would have used half the amount of ketchup that she had, but I shook my head.

"Because I'm really in a hurry and should take my food to go so I'll just give this back to you, but if you *do* mind I can give you some of mine or I'm sure Bella will serve you new fries."



"No, it's fine, really."

"Here's yours."

Bella put down a paper bag in front of the green-eyed girl.

"Enjoy your meal and Merry Christmas", the girl said and headed for the door.

"Wait." She turned around. "Since we share the same taste in food and drink, will you at least tell me your name?"

I had to know. She fired another of her intoxicating smiles at me.

"Of course, I'm Molly."

And she was out the door. Of course, she was Molly. I had known she had to be Molly the moment she turned around. I had known when I met those eyes and when she smiled at me. I also knew I would not be able to leave Snowhaven until I had met her again.

## **Molly**

Meeting that stranger in the pub was unsettling. First, I nearly got a Julius seizure when I turned around and saw him because he was so freakin' good-looking. Taller than everyone I know, and I got the impression he was seriously fit under that shirt of his. He had thick, curly dark hair, the kind you just want to reach out your hand to rake through (or possibly grab and pull the person closer to you) and the most perfect face. High cheekbones, a straight nose, chiselled chin, a full lower lip (made for kissing... no, no, no! Snap out of it Molly! *What* are you thinking!?) and the most beautiful brown eyes. Secondly, he had ordered *my order*. I mean, I have worked in that pub many years, taken thousands of orders and I do not think I have come across anyone else who orders exactly that. My Christmas special. Lastly, and most disturbingly, those brown eyes looked at me like he already knew me and knew me well, as if I had told him my secrets. His gaze made me feel stripped not only of my clothes, but of my skin, of my defence to the outer world. It was so

unsettling that I thought it best to leave as soon as possible and hurry back to the shop even though there was no immediate urgency because Mr. Adams had said I could take a break after all. As I ate my take-away meal, I kept thinking about that he was having the same and who was he and what was he doing here and why was he looking at me like he knew me better than anyone. I hoped he would leave soon. I also hoped he would stay around. I'm not sure which wish that was strongest.

### **Charles**

She left so quickly, but in those few minutes she was there she seemed very much like the girl I had imagined.

"Do you want new fries, or?" Bella asked.

"No, I'm fine, seriously."

Bella left me to my meal, not knowing that my mind was fully occupied with thoughts of her sister. Finally, I had met her. My guess was that she was twenty-three but always hard to tell exactly. When she had jumped down from the bar stool and stood before me, she had been so petite, her eyes level with my chest, yet she somehow seemed to radiate strength rather than fragility. She had this long, dark hair which looked silky smooth. I wanted to run my hands through it, I wanted to put my lips to it. I had hoped for something, but I had not expected this. One minute in her company and I craved more. One minute in her company and I had an undeniable crush. What would then an hour do to me if I had the chance? I was not sure if I ought to stay or if the best thing to do was leaving, but it did not matter. I knew I would not be able to make myself leave.

"I see you have a B&B. Are there any rooms free?" I asked Bella.

"Tonight, there is, but then we are fully booked through Christmas. Are you visiting someone?"

"No, just passing through."

"So, do you want one? Room, I mean."

"Yes, I'll take it."

One night in Snowhaven, it sounded like the title of a romantic movie.

"Tomorrow there's a Christmas market by the church. I can recommend it, it's very popular both among locals and tourists. I can walk you there if you like."

I thought that it probably would not be that difficult to find the church if one went outside and looked for a church tower but accepted her offer as I thought it might be an opportunity to get to talk to Molly again if she was there too. Once I had finished my meal, Bella handed me the keys and showed me the direction of the stairs. I went upstairs, curious. Even if Molly was not here right now, and even if this was only her family's business, not the home they lived in, this pub and the rooms were very much part of her life and places where she had spent a lot of time. The room was very neat and cosy, more feminine than masculine with its chintz curtains and flower-patterned bed cover. It smelled of some kind of potpourri, but not overwhelming, only a pleasant scent. I stroke with my hand over the bed cover, wondered who had made the bed. If it was Molly, Bella or their mother. I found it unlikely that it was Dave.

After inspecting the room, I put my coat on again and went for a walk through the village. It was a quite large village, with a decent number of shops, the square with the Christmas tree Molly had written about and a fairly big church. That was where she had written me the letter, I remembered with a smile.

In the evening I had a meal and a beer down in the pub but sat in a corner keeping to myself. She was not there this evening and I was happy observing the other guests, guessing if any of them were the ones mentioned in Molly's letter. I got to see Dave and Belinda, of course. I was glad to see that his glass remained filled with water, not beer during the evening. He still seemed to stay sober and him and Belinda looked like a happy couple, putting their arms around each other affectionately every now and then even when it was busy hours in the pub. So far,

I had found things exactly as Molly had described them. I wondered if it would continue like that tomorrow, or if I at some point would find myself disappointed.

I slept like a baby in that room, better than I had slept for ages and woke up fresh and feeling happy. After breakfast, Bella found me, and we walked together to the church. Molly was nowhere to be seen and it made me a bit nervous. Today was my only chance of seeing her again. I had to leave this afternoon as I did not have a room for the following night.

It seemed like the entire village plus a whole lot of tourists were there for the market, judging by the crowd. There were stands both inside and outside the church, selling decorations, trinkets and edible things.

"Let me introduce you to some people, then I need to head back to prepare the check-out rooms for this afternoon", Bella said. "Mum, dad, this is Charles James. He has been staying in one of our rooms. Mr. James, this is Dave and Belinda, proud owners of the pub."

"Nice to meet you, but please call me Charles."

"Welcome to Snowhaven, Charles. I hope you've enjoyed your stay so far?" Belinda asked.

"Very much. The village is lovely, and I slept like a baby in your room. I would gladly have stayed another night if anything had been available."

"Well, thank you. Unfortunately, Snowhaven is so popular around Christmas, that we're always fully booked for the holiday already in summer. How come you're visiting the village?"

"I was in the neighbourhood visiting a friend and had heard nice things about the village, so I made a spontaneous visit." It was not untrue, even if it was not the entire truth.

"And what do you do for a living?" Dave asked.

"Now you're being a bit nosy, love." Belinda elbowed his side.

"I don't mind. I'm in the army. I'm a captain, but I'm on leave right now."

I saw a light turn on in Dave's eyes and remembered Molly's words that any soldier passing by would get to hear about his glorious days in basic training. I think Belinda knew what was coming too, because she excused herself and left the two of us before he had the chance to open his mouth.

"Is that so? I used to be in the army too. Not as an officer, but as a private..."

He went on talking but I did not mind, unlike his family, I had not heard his story before and found it enjoyable. I also thought there was no harm letting a man tell a story that meant much to him. Suddenly he interrupted himself, though.

"Molly, come here, there's someone I'd like you to meet. One of our guests."

I turned around, and there she was. She had a red coat, a knitted white hat and a matching long scarf wrapped around her neck, her cheeks were rosy from the cold and she looked really, really pretty. I had to bite my lip to prevent myself from giving her a ridiculously big smile, one which would not be motivated considering we did not know each other. She gave me a smile that simultaneously was a bit shy and mischievous.

"We've already met, even if I didn't catch your name."

She held out her mitten-clad hand and I took it.

"I'm Charles, Charles James."

"When did you meet?" Dave asked from the side. I did not let go of Molly's eyes and she did not let go of mine.

"When I tried to nick his food", she smirked.

## The Christmas card

"Molly, that's hardly a way to welcome a new guest."

"I know, but he had ordered what I always order, complete with hot chocolate and marshmallows. That never happens, so I thought it was mine. I gave it back though, didn't I?"

I nodded.

"With extra ketchup on. Very generous of you."

It was a trivial little conversation, but I never wanted it to end. I realised I was still holding her hand and in the same moment as I saw that she did too, and quickly but reluctantly let it go.

"Do you have family in town?"

"No, I'm just passing through."

"Then we should make you feel so welcome you never want to leave."

I knew she was just being polite, but it still stirred some butterflies in my stomach.

"Charles is in the army. I was just telling him about..."

Molly interrupted him smiling but firmly and I smiled inside because I knew it was because she had heard Dave's army stories more than enough times.

"Then I'll leave you to it boys. It was nice meeting you again, Charles. Have a safe trip home."

She left, and I immediately missed her company.

Once Dave had finished his story, I said it had been great meeting him and now I would take a tour around the market. I looked for Molly's red coat as I walked between the stands but did not see her. I was considering if I should pay a visit to Mr. Adams' book slash antiques shop before I left for a last chance to talk to her.

Things did not feel finished, on the contrary it felt like something wonderful had barely gotten started and I was not up for leaving Snowhaven at all. Just as I started walking away from the market, I heard someone calling for me. It was Dave, who seemed to want something and now hurried across the street. Simultaneously a car came around the corner, in far too high speed for the narrow village streets. I realised it would not be able to break before it hit Dave and my spinal reflexes kicked in. I ran and hurled myself on him to push him out of the car's way. We both hit the icy ground hard and I was not sure how bad the fall had been for Dave even if it surely was better than being hit by the car.

"Dad?!"

Molly was suddenly there, kneeling beside us.

"Dad, are you all right?"

Dave just mumbled something.

"Please, help me take him to my uncle. He's a doctor and his practice is just around the corner. He can judge if we need to take him to the hospital."

I did not think Dave had hit his head or hurt his neck, so I thought it was safe to move him and helped Molly get him up and half carried him the few steps to Dr. Chapman's practice. I sat down in the waiting room meanwhile Dave was being examined and I saw Belinda arrive too and hurry inside. It took another fifteen minutes but then they all came out, Dave on crutches with his left foot in tight bandages.

"My hero!" he exclaimed, and I felt myself blush.

"Not really, I was just in the right place at the right time. I'm glad to see you up and on your feet. One of them anyway."

"No, thanks", he said with emphasis. "I'm sure those soldier reflexes of yours saved my life. Now I got away with a sprained ankle and bruised shoulder instead of

something much worse, even if I'm not sure how I shall manage high-season in the pub with *this*." He nodded towards the bandaged foot.

"We're so grateful you were there", Belinda said.

"We all are", Molly added and gave me a smile that could melt ice.

"You need to come home to us for dinner tonight, so we can thank you properly."

"I'd love to, but I need to leave for home this afternoon. There are no rooms available, so I can't stay another night."

"None for rent maybe, but we have a spare bedroom in our house. It's yours if you want it."

I did not want to intrude in their home and looked hesitantly at Molly.

"I don't know... I don't want to impose on your hospitality."

"You're not", she said. "We all want you to come. Inviting you to dinner and give you a bed is the least we can do after this."

"I would appreciate talking some more to a fellow soldier", Dave pleaded.

"And I won't take no for answer", Belinda finished off their persuasion campaign.

I let my gaze jump between them and they all genuinely seemed to want me to join them. There was no valid reason to say no to something I also very much wanted.

"Okay then, if you're sure you want me."

"I am. I mean, *we* are", Molly said.

"Then, it's settled, welcome to the Dawes family", Dave said, and we headed for their house, me feeling all giddy at the prospect of seeing Molly's home and spend the night under their roof.



The Christmas card

## Chapter 4

"Do you have any luggage left at the B&B?" Molly asked me.

"No, it's already in my car."

"Then I can come with you and show you the way to our house. It's not that far but I guess you'll want to bring your car?"

"You'll go with me in my car?" I heard myself sounding more surprised than was reasonable.

"Unless you have some kind of phobia to having unknown girls in your car?"

"No, not at all."

She was making fun of me and felt I was behaving like a fool, only because it seemed so surreal that the physical shape of the same Molly that had written me the letter now would be sitting beside me in my car.

During the short drive, she chatted and pointed out things we drove past. The shop where she was working part time, the school, the small museum where the history of the village apparently was on display. We soon arrived to the Dawes family's large, brown brick house which was situated in the outskirts of the village. Like many other houses in Snowhaven, it was amazingly beautifully decorated. No multi-coloured lights or raindeers, but hundreds or even thousand warm white lights, many feet of garlands made of fir and numerous baubles in red and gold. She noticed my reaction.

"It's a bit overwhelming, I know, but we really love Christmas decorations."

"It's amazing. I thought my parents were good at Christmas decorations, but this is in another league. Do you make all those garlands yourselves?"

"No, Nan knows a guy who does them and then we add the lights and baubles. It's a family tradition to decorate the house last weekend in November each year, so we're fully prepared when December comes."

"It's a nice location here, where there's larger gardens than in the centre."

"It's not very far but it would have been more practical if it was next doors to the pub. My parents fell in love with this house long before they took over the pub and when it was up for sale one day, they could not resist buying it – and we have needed a large house because I have many siblings."

"How many?"

Of course, I knew that. They were six in total, Molly the eldest and her youngest brother was twenty years younger than her – she had told me in her letter.

"We're six. You have already met Bella, then there's Liam, Timmy, Lucy and little Bill. I'm the eldest and Bill's only three."

That would make her twenty-three, like I had guessed.

"Do you have brothers and sisters?"

"No, it's only me and my parents."

She frowned slightly.

"I find it difficult to imagine growing up without siblings. Was it lonely or did you like not having a bunch of noisy people around?"

"Both, I think. I would have liked to have a brother or sister, but it wasn't my choice really."

We entered the house and I got occupied taking it all in. Already in the entrance it was apparent that a large family lived here, because the floor was cluttered with

shoes and boots and when Molly opened the wardrobe to hang our coats there, the coats and jackets already in there threatened to flood out.

"Sorry, it's a bit messy", she said, but I liked it. Liked the feeling of coming home to a house that one could see was crowded even when one did not see all the actual persons living here. The atmosphere was warm, cosy, the interior made of natural materials like lime stone and dark wood, mixed with curtains and cushions in tasteful fabrics and wool blankets hanging over the arm rests of the couches and armchairs, book shelves from floor to ceiling filled with books, photographs and trinkets. In the centre of the living room, there was a fire place where a fire was burning right now making crackling sounds. One could see that it was a home which a family had built up over a long time, with lots of love. In addition to all the visual impressions, it smelled wonderful, like someone was baking. Molly sniffed too.

"It smells like Nan is making her famous apple pie, you're about to get lucky tonight. Do you like it? The house?"

"It's everything I thought it would be", I said without thinking.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I mean, when you meet someone you imagine what their home will be like. This is just like I pictured your home would be when I met all of you." Just like I had pictured it all those times I had read her letter and tried to imagine her and her family in their home.

"Is that a good or a bad thing?" she laughed.

"Good, definitely. It's a very nice home, very cosy and inviting."

"Thanks."

I could see it made her happy.

"Come on, I'll show you your room."

She guided me upstairs.

"Here is it. Bathroom is around the corner and I'll get you some towels. Take your time to settle in and I'll see you later."

I looked around, this was totally surreal, finding myself in Molly's house even stranger than having her in my car. I felt I ought to tell her about the card, that it had brought me here. The longer I waited to tell her, the stranger it would seem once I did. I did not want to come across like a stalker, but realised I might. Like I had been obsessed with her letter and sneaked my way into her home, but I did not feel like a stalker. I felt like a very normal guy who had been affected by a letter in a way I could not explain myself, and even more affected by the writer once I met her. Ending up here in this house due to Dave's accident was just coincidence, fluke – luck, I hoped.

When I went downstairs again, Belinda asked me if I could do her the favour of going out to the garage and get some extra chairs. Besides me, her brother, Dr. Chapman and his family would come for dinner and her mother, who they all just called Nan was already there.

"I'll show you were they are", Dave said and came along on his crutches.

The large garage seemed to also be something of a man cave for Dave and was even more cluttered with things than the house. To my surprise there was sleigh in addition to the car. Dave saw my surprise.

"It's my hobby project. Belinda has always wished to go to the Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve in a sleigh, but even here where we usually have much snow in winter, one can't be certain that it's possible to travel with a sleigh, so I'm putting wheels on it."

## The Christmas card

I smiled because it was a bit crazy yet very loving gift for his wife. Then I spotted some framed photos on the wall. One was obviously a young Dave in uniform, another was him and Belinda getting married. There was also one of a very beautiful natural scenery, a waterfall.

"Is this somewhere nearby?"

"Yes, it's actual a memorial place over fallen British soldiers, only a few miles away. Very beautiful, in summer as well as in winter. You should visit before you leave the neighbourhood."

"Maybe I will."

"What are you doing for the holiday, Charles?"

"Me? I don't know to be honest. I was supposed to be in Afghan over Christmas, but then something happened which I prefer not to talk about, and I was sent home earlier for some R&R. My parents had already planned to go to Italy, so now it will only be me in their house in Bath. It almost makes me wish I was back in Afghan because there I at least had the company of my men. I guess it will be me and a bottle of whisky."

"Then I have a proposal for you."

"Okay?"

"Stay here."

"I couldn't Dave..."

"Wait, hear me out, it's a business proposition. With my sprained ankle I'll be of little use in the pub and this is the busiest time of the year. I'll need to find someone to replace me and that's not easy because everyone else is also so busy around Christmas. Please stay and help me in the pub, and you can stay here in our room and also celebrate the Christmas with us. It would be working for room and board

## The Christmas card

and you would be the one doing us a favour. I need your help and you would be more than welcome. Fate brought you here."

It was an offer I wanted to accept more than anything, staying in this lovely house and get to know Molly better, but I felt I could not accept it without being honest with him.

"Not fate exactly." I cleared my throat, slightly nervous and he looked curious.

"You see, last year when I was in Afghan, I got this Christmas card."

I took the card out from my coat pocket and showed him.

"It was Molly who wrote it to me, or rather to an unknown soldier. I've read it so many times and I was curious about the village, about her and when I was nearby..."

"...you could not resist coming here."

"No. Is that very weird? That a grown man would travel here based on this card?"

"*She* brought you here." Dave looked surprisingly cheerful.

"I feel a bit weird about it anyway. Would you be okay if we kept it to ourselves for now? I don't want Molly to freak out, I promise you I'm quite normal. If I stay I'll tell her but I'd like her to know me a bit first."

"I can see that you are - normal, don't worry. I won't say anything, and it doesn't matter how you got here, I'm glad you're here with us now."

I was relieved over his reaction and we brought the chairs inside and found the dinner just ready. The entire Dawes clan, except Bella were gathered this evening. She and her boyfriend were in charge of the pub tonight, someone obviously had to be. The meal was fantastic, a roast with oven baked thyme potatoes and Nan's apple pie with custard afterwards. They were a noisy bunch, the Dawes, very different from my own family of three. Passing bowls with food back and forth

## The Christmas card

across the table, interrupting each other, the younger kids talking with food in their mouths and placing their elbows on the table, everyone laughing much. I loved being with them. I looked up and caught Molly watching me.

"What?"

"You seem to be enjoying yourself?"

"I am."

"Not overwhelmed then? I mean, since you said you don't have siblings."

"No, I realise what I've been missing."

"Dad told me you might be staying?"

"Would you be okay with that?"

"Yes, of course. It's great if you can work in the pub, we can't afford to be one person short this time of year."

After the meal, everyone went outside for a snowball fight. It was already dark but all the Christmas lights adorning the house lighted up the garden too. We were two teams, Dave the happy referee and Molly belonged to the enemy side. She was a fierce snow fighter and hit me several times. I was very pleased when I finally managed to throw a snowball at the nape of her neck, so it found its way inside the collar of her coat, where I knew it would melt down her back.

"Oh, you..."

"You what?"

"Nothing?"

"Really? I thought you were about to say something really impolite to a guest of the house?"



She spat her tongue at me and quickly made another snowball, threw and hit my scalp. I was laughing so my stomach hurt, smiling so my face muscles got tired. I had not been this happy since Elvis died, or maybe even longer ago. An hour's snow fight with the Dawes family did things to me which hours with a trained psychiatrist had not managed. Whatever it turned out to be, I knew this detour was the best thing that had happened to me.

### **Molly**

Later that evening, the guests were gone, the little ones had gone to bed and mum and dad were probably watching telly up in their bedroom. The house was unusually peaceful and quiet and I sat by the kitchen table helping dad with the accounting for the pub, drinking hot chocolate and then Charles joined me. His hair was a bit dishevelled after the snow fight, he was dressed in t-shirt and joggers and looked generally gorgeous. I liked having him around. The way he saved dad from being hit by the car was amazing, and he was kind and funny and in no way the posh twat one could have misjudged him for going only by his looks. He did not feel like a stranger intruding in our home, more like he easily fit in and almost belonged with our family. Yet, the unsettling feeling from our first encounter lingered somehow. A bit like when someone tickles you with a feather; it feels good, but it is disturbing too. Those brown eyes that seemed to get stuck in mine, or if it was mine that got stuck in them - and the feeling that he knew me despite that I had never met him before yesterday. And seriously, it should be forbidden to look that good in t-shirt when someone (I) tries to focus on important things like accounting.

"I thought I would take something to drink", he said. He had this melodious, almost singing voice.

"Help yourself, there's hot chocolate in this thermos, mugs in that cupboard. There's even marshmallows in a jar if you'd like that. I seem to remember you're a fan of marshmallows."

He smiled and prepared himself a mug of hot drink and sat down in front of me.

## The Christmas card

"What are you doing?"

"Helping dad with accounting."

"Sorry, if you're working I won't disturb you."

"No, sit, please. You're not disturbing, you're saving me from getting bored to death."

"You don't like it then?"

"No."

"What do you like to do then?"

"Like anything, or work?"

"Both."

I got the feeling he was genuinely interested, not just making small-talk.

"I like both my jobs, the one in the pub and B&B, at least the part where I meet people, not the accounting, and my other one in the shop. There I also like the customers, helping them find the right book or antiquity for them, but..."

"But what?"

"My favourite job is in my uncles practice."

"You work there too?"

"I volunteer, because I like it so much."

"You don't want to do that full-time then? Work with patients for real like a nurse or doctor?"

## The Christmas card

I spun my empty cup. This was the £10000-question I had asked myself many times.

"I don't know. Maybe. Yes. I'd love to be a nurse, but to be that I would have to leave Snowhaven to study for a few years."

"Is that a problem? Could you not imagine living anywhere else?"

His brown eyes looked at me searchingly.

"I think that's what I find difficult to decide. Everyone I love lives here, that makes me not want to leave, but maybe it would be worth it to be able to work with what I really want to. What do you think?"

"I have a feeling you would be a brilliant nurse, and I think you would find that those years the studies take would pass very quickly. In the end you need to follow your own heart, but don't you think you would regret it if you didn't at least give it a try?"

"Maybe."

I liked the way he encouraged me without pushing me to choose something I was not sure was right. My parents and many other villagers wanted me to stay, Bella and my uncle absolutely thought I should go. No one used to tell me to follow my own heart. Least of all Smurf, he just wanted me to follow him. Smurf. I was not in the mood for thinking about him right now.

"Your family is great, your parents are great."

His words warmed me. I liked that he liked them, for some reason it was important to me.

"Aren't they? They've had their ups and downs through the years. Dad used to drink too much, and mum even left him at one point, but they sorted it out because they truly love each other and now I think they're better together than ever. They have

this relationship where both give and take, listen to each other and respect one another. I guess that's what I hope to have too."

I went silent, thinking but not saying that I was in a relationship but far from sure it ticked all those important tick boxes.

"I think that's what we all hope for but it's not that easy to find", he said seriously.

"What are your parents like?"

"In one way very different from your parents, but when it comes to the love they feel for each other they're quite similar. So, my role models aren't that different from yours."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

The question slipped out of me, I had not meant to ask. He smiled and plainly said;

"No."

I was happy about the answer, without any good reason and relieved when mum interrupted us to fetch a glass of water, so he never got to ask me the same question in return. I had wondered for a long time if Smurf and I were really made for each other, if he was the soul mate I was meant to be with, but now for the first time another man made a small part of me wish that I was single. It was a very disturbing realization and before mum left again, I got to my feet, said that I was tired and should go to bed. And I did, but sleeping was not easy, not with the knowledge that a handsome captain named Charles James slept in the same house.

## Chapter 5

Next morning, Dave and Molly brought me to the pub to show me how everything worked out there. I was a complete novice in the field, if one does not count being a bar customer as experience. There had not been too much of that either in the last years. I had been a frequent pub goer in my student days and when Elvis and I were cadets. That changed long before he died. First we reduced the frequency because we both wanted to stay fit and realised we did not like the loss of focus that being pissed meant, then it happened even more seldom as he met Georgie and prioritized family life. I had only been pleased to see it, see that Elvis was done jumping around among women even if I sometimes missed his company. Now I stroke with my palm over the smooth counter, polished by all the elbows leaning on it over the years and felt sad that we would never get to have a beer together again.

"You look sad? Is it the prospect of working in the pub?" Molly asked me.

"No, I'm looking forward to it actually. I was sentimental over a lost drinking buddie."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I already had talked to her about it many times, she just did not know.

"Maybe some other time. Now I'm here to learn the bar so I can be of help."

She looked at me, for a moment without her cheeky smile.

"Okay but know that I'd love to listen if you need to talk."

I nodded, suddenly unable to say anything because I knew she meant it and that meant a great deal to me.

## The Christmas card

It seemed it would not be too difficult to handle the bar if only I could serve beer and wine. People did not tend to order fancy drinks here, except the occasional G&T and that was a drink which I knew how to make with eyes folded.

As Bella had been working last night, she had missed the latest development.

"Are *you* going to work here?"

"Don't you see that I'm the new Dave? Or his replacement anyway?"

"I dare say that the ladies will be pleased with that replacement", she smirked and then, turning to her father; "This will be good for the business you know, at least for the female customers."

"Oi, are you saying I'm not as appealing to the ladies as captain James?"

Dave chuckled, and I felt myself blush. I know I do not look bad but unlike Elvis, I have never been very good at taking advantage of it. I had dated a bit, had a few longer relationships but in the last years mostly stayed single as I anyway had been away on tour much and even at home focused on my job. I was really bad at flirting though and the possibility of women hanging in the pub because I was standing in the bar made me uncomfortable. I'm the kind of guy who prefers to hang in the corner of the bar with my friends.

"We open at lunch time", Dave continued. "Maybe you can take your first shift then with Bella to get started when it is still quite calm, then take a break and continue the evening shift with Molly after dinner tonight?"

I was already looking forward to working with Molly. Nothing wrong with Bella but it was Molly I wanted to be with.

"Do you want to join me for a walk before you start? It's still an hour until the pub opens and I'm not due in the shop yet either", she now said.

## The Christmas card

"Yes, give him a tour – and make sure you show him our favourite spot", Dave mused. I did not know why, but I got the feeling that he liked the idea of Molly spending time with me.

"Sure, let's go."

We walked the streets, still almost empty at this hour of the day and came to the outskirts of the village in the opposite direction to where the Dawes family's house was located. The street changed into a narrow, winding, snowy path, first leading us over a field, then into a forest. The fir trees were covered in thick layers of snow, the bare leafy trees were covered in crystals, making them sparkle in the sunshine. Suddenly we came to a clearing among the trees, and there was a small pond, covered with ice. It was such a serene and beautiful place.

"This is my parents' favourite place. Dad brought mum here for a pic-nic on their first date, he proposed to her here and they even got married here."

"I can see why they like it. I've been around the world, but places as beautiful as this are rare."

"It's even better in the summer."

"I can imagine."

"The only thing missing is a bench so one can sit down and enjoy it."

We stood there silent for a while, looking at the frozen sparkling scenery and I imagined a young Dave and Belinda getting married in a green version of it. I liked being here with Molly, almost even more when we were silent than when we spoke. Liked the mere presence of her next to me.

"We need to return now", she finally said, and I had the feeling she was only reluctantly interrupting the comfortable silence.

## The Christmas card

We went back to the village and I was about to head inside the pub, Molly to continue to Mr. Adams' shop, when a black sports car came driving down the street in high speed and stopped outside the pub with squealing breaks. I nearly made a comment to Molly about that it had to be a jerk driving like that here and such a car must mean the driver was trying to compensating for shortcomings in some other area, when I glanced at her and saw that she was smiling, indicating that she knew the driver and I swallowed my comment.

Out of the car came a guy her age, but the way he dressed in a suit and full-length wool coat suggested that he was trying to look older and distinguished. It is difficult to look distinguished when one is not taller than he was and has protruding ears though, and instead his outfit looked a bit ridiculous. He made me think of Dopey in Snow White. He did not look bad otherwise, with dark hair and ice blue eyes, but I got the feeling this was a guy I would find hard to take seriously, meanwhile he would expect to be taken very seriously. I instantly disliked him, and even more so when he walked up to Molly and gave her a kiss. I had hoped that Smurf was out of the picture, but apparently he was not.

"Charles, this is my boyfriend, Dylan."

I shook his hand, the first person in Snowhaven I did not like. He looked suspiciously at me.

"And you are?"

"Charles James."

"Charles will be helping us in the pub for a few days. Dad sprained his ankle yesterday and with the high-season and all we needed a pair of extra hands."

He still did not look very pleased but chose to ignore me, turned his back to me and spoke only to Molly.

"Are you on your way to the shop?"



## The Christmas card

"I am."

"Then I'll come with you and ask if you can have the afternoon free."

"I don't know, it's really busy days before Christmas."

"I'm sure I can convince Adams. I think I have the right to spend time with my girlfriend when I'm finally here."

I had to bite my lip not to tell him that it was hardly everyone else's problem that he chose to stay away from his girlfriend and that he could not expect the village life to evolve around him when he returned, but it was between them and none of my business, so I kept quiet. I said goodbye and went inside with a damp blanket of disappointment over me. I had felt like Molly and I connected just in the way I had hoped, but I must be mistaken because she already had a boyfriend. Sure, I remembered that she had doubts about him, but if she stayed with him, must that not mean that she still loved him?

Despite this distraction, my first hours in the pub went very well. Even my stern mentor, Bella, was pleased.

"Very promising start, Charles. You might consider starting a pub of your own after this experience."

"I promise I'll consider that as an alternative career to being a captain."

In the late afternoon, I returned to the Dawes house for a few hours break and dinner before Molly and I were to work the evening. Unfortunately, Smurf was there as Molly had invited him for dinner. He was in a bad mood because Molly had not managed to take the day off as Mr. Adams needed her and she came home at the same time as me. He was very surprised seeing me at the house.

"What are you doing here *Charles*?"

"I'm staying here, in the guest room."

He turned to Molly.

"He's staying *here*?"

"All the B&B rooms are occupied around Christmas and at Mrs. Jones' pension too, you know that. We need the help and mum and dad offered him the room. Nothing strange about that."

"But I'm not staying here", he sulked.

"Because your parents have a house where you have a room, remember? Stop behaving like a little boy, Smurf."

"Dylan!"

"Sorry." She looked at me and she looked simultaneously embarrassed, I assumed over him questioning me staying there, and amused, I thought over the Smurf/Dylan thing. She was right when she wrote that he took himself far too seriously. I found it difficult to accept that she wanted to be with him, he seemed to be a schmuck, but she had said they had known each other since they were kids, maybe that explained it. I left them alone but as I walked up the stairs I heard that he did not let go of the subject.

"Have you let a stranger into your home? You never know if you can trust unknown people..."

"He saved dad's life, I told you, and he's in the army. I think he can be trusted."

"So he's not even a bartender? He's a bleedin' private? There are twisted freaks in the army too."

"Zip it, no need to be upset. No, he's not a bartender but he seems quite capable of handling the job. And he's not a private, he's a captain. Sure it's not the green-eyed monster that bothers you?"

"I'm not jealous, I'm just protective. I want my girlfriend to be safe."

I smirked to myself, because I had the feeling that that piece of information would disturb Smurf. He was the type of guy that did not like to feel inferior to anyone, but quite easily did. I had seen his type in the army and the way they usually made themselves feel more important was by repressing others. I hoped he was treating Molly well even if I did not like him.

Before the dinner, the family gathered around the big dining table because Smurf had offered, or rather insisted, to hold a wine tasting.

"I'm not sure this is a good time", Molly had objected. "Charles and I should not be drinking a lot before working."

"I think it's really unfair of you to go working this evening too when I'm here. The least you can do is to allow me to have some fun before you go. Come on, you know you can spit it out if you're worried about getting drunk", he said. "I've brought some really nice wines. This red one is a merlot from Chile with a fantastic bouquet..."

I watched Molly swirling the wine around in her glass, putting on the face of a connoisseur. She met my gaze and looked embarrassed, like she knew I could see she was just faking it.

"Do you like wine?", I asked innocently.

"Yes, I find it fascinating how different they are, the colour, the smell, the taste."

"The complex bouquet and the variation in tannins?"

"Yes", she lied shamelessly. "You too?"

"I know a bit about wine, but I prefer a beer." I grinned, and she looked at me suspiciously, then whispered.

"Me too, but don't tell Smurf."

"Now you will taste a really fine wine and see if you can have a guess what country and grape it is", Smurf said.

He seemed totally oblivious to that he was shooting above the target, that it was obvious that even if the Dawses enjoyed a glass of wine they had no need to analyse its components. He on the other hand, had a need to shine with his knowledge. Now he poured a dark brick red wine into the glasses from a bottle where he had covered the label, the colour so deep one could not see the bottom of the glass looking into it from above. He looked challenging at me.

"This is a notch better than what you get to drink in the army", his voice was disdainful for no reason and despite that I had not intended to first I could not resist giving the little shit what he deserved. My parents had a huge wine cellar and my dad had taught me about wines since I was a teenager.

I swirled by glass, inhaled deeply and then had a taste.

"Dense and full-bodied, well-defined tannins and stringent fruit acids..."

I saw his eyebrows raise but I was not finished.

"I taste fruit... berries, raspberry and blackberry, some spicy notes and bay leaf. Long after-taste... My guess is this is a wine from France, from the Rhône wine region. To be even more specific, I think it is a Châteauneuf-du-Pape, bottled by Guigal, probably from last year. And it's not *one* type of grape. Even if it's mostly Grenache noir, there's part Syrah and Mourvèdre too. Am I right?"

Smurf looked like he had eaten a lemon and I mentally high-fived myself.

"It's from this year."

"Amazing!" Dave said. "How could you guess?"

## The Christmas card

"My parents have fine wines as a hobby, so they have taught me a thing or two over the years, but I prefer not to over-analyse what I drink. I'd rather just have a glass and enjoy the taste."

"Well said", Dave giggled and I saw that Molly had to hold back not to giggle too.

Belinda tried to smooth things over.

"Anyway, thanks Dylan for arranging this. Now we need to clear the table so we can eat before Molly and Charles have to leave."

I think everyone enjoyed the dinner, except Smurf who looked like a thunder cloud. After the meal, he said he could drive us to the pub and when he dropped us off and said goodbye he got his revenge, even if I could not be sure he was aware of the effect on me. Outside the pub, he pulled Molly to him, groping her arse possessively and gave her a very long, deep snog for being in public. I turned my gaze the other direction and almost felt like vomiting. I really hated his guts.

"Sorry about that", Molly said as we entered.

"No need to apologize for kissing your boyfriend."

"Maybe not, but he's a bit overly affectionate when we haven't seen each other for some time."

"He's away a lot then?"

"He travels much for the wine importing firm and when he doesn't he works in their office in London and only comes here weekends."

"And you're fine with that?"

"I don't know. Anyway, time to work."

## The Christmas card

We had a few great hours working together. We were like a well-oiled machinery, completely compatible and managed to have a lot of fun while serving the orders. I thought Bella had a point, I liked this so much I could almost consider it as an alternative career, at least if I got to work alongside Molly.

After the final round of beers had been served and the last customers left, we cleaned up the place together and Molly locked. It was only fifteen minutes walk to their house so off we went in the cold winter's night. The snow creaked under our soles and our breath came out as smoke.

Molly stopped.

"Look up."

I did as she said and was overwhelmed. The sky was clear and here were there was not city lights like in London or even in Bath, there were layers upon layers of thousands of stars. For once one could see that the sky was bottomless.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Amazing. Do you know any constellations?"

"Hardly any. I think it's a bit like the wine thing. I don't need names for them to enjoy them."

"I agree."

In that moment, which was perfectly romantic, gazing at the stars after a night of fun team work, I was dying to pull her to me and kiss her, but I knew it would have destroyed everything as she already had a boyfriend. I wondered if he knew how lucky he was.

"But I have one favourite star which I have named. That one."

She pointed to one of the brightest shining ones.

## The Christmas card

"What do you call it then?"

"*The unknown soldier*. Don't ask, it was just a silly thing."

She started walking again and I caught up with her, walking in silence. I glanced at the star, which I now felt pretty sure was the one which she had made a wish to on my account. Wished that the unknown soldier who got her card, I, would get to come home to my loved ones. Now I made a wish of my own, that I would get to stay with her.

## Chapter 6

### **Molly**

I do not know what it is about Charles. The more time I spend with him, the more I want to be with him. It is easy, fun, safe and intriguing all in one. What worries me is that my feelings may not be entirely platonic, as they should be considering I have Smurf. Charles way of being makes me feel all warm and fuzzy, and the way he looks and looks at me makes me feel flushing hot in a different way. Totally inappropriate but I just cannot help it. I would never cross a line when I have a boyfriend, but is it wrong to even feel that way when I cannot do anything about it? I was not even sure if I was happy when Smurf arrived yesterday, I was so content in the company of Charles that his arrival felt like an interruption. Maybe I even wished that Charles would kiss me last night, the setting with all the stars was almost too perfect to waste and I also knew, which disturbed me, that Smurf would never had appreciated it. He is more focused on making a fortune with his feet on the ground than gazing at the stars with me. But he is my boyfriend. I need to shut this down, this thing with Charles. Inside me I mean, because nothing improper has happened. I promise I will be a true angel for the rest of the Christmas, not a taken girl gloating at another man than my own because he is shittin' hot.

### **Charles**

I'm not very good at sleeping in as the army life has made me get used to waking up around 5 am. At 7 it already felt like I had slept half the day away and I silently went downstairs to make myself some coffee. It turned out I was not the only one up early. Dave and Bella sat by the kitchen table. Dave's sprained ankle hurt so he found it hard to sleep, Bella was to my surprise known as the early bird in the family.

"Coffee? Tea?"

"Coffee, please."



"So, what do you think of Molly's friend, Smurf?" Bella asked.

"Boyfriend, isn't he? I don't know, I've only met him briefly."

I had an opinion but was a bit wary to share it. He was the boyfriend and they had known him for long, meanwhile I was just the stranger passing through.

"I think meeting him briefly is enough, for everyone except Molly. No need to be shy about what you think around me and dad, we're not fans of Smurf you see."

I was surprised to hear the contempt in Bella's voice, talking about her sister's boyfriend.

"You don't like him? Why?"

"Apart from the obvious, that he's a prick, he's not there for her. He keeps stringing her along, always traveling in pursuit of some new goal. She's lonely but stays with him because of some misguided loyalty. She's a great girl and he uses that."

"That was a harsh review of him."

"But true", Dave confirmed.

I was not sure why they told me this.

"She should be with someone else, someone who truly appreciates her."

Bella nodded in agreement to her father's words and I was starting to wonder if they were trying to encourage me to pursue Molly.

"What are you gossiping about?"

Molly had entered the kitchen and I hoped she had not heard what they said.

"Just said you're a lovely person who deserves the best", Bella smiled.

## The Christmas card

Molly looked suspicious.

"Doesn't sound like something you would say."

"She did, actually", I confirmed. "Sorry, I'll leave you for a while and go for a run."

"Would you mind if I came with you?"

She was oblivious to the glances her dad and sister exchanged and I chose to ignore them.

"No, it would be nice. I'll get changed. See you in five?"

I normally had a routine of regular running and weight lifting even when I was on leave, so I would not feel like a sack of potatoes once I returned to service. I had slipped during my road trip, though and now I was beginning to feel desperately in need of a run. Molly was in quite good shape, but I had to hold back considerably anyway compared to my usual pace. It was worth it, to be running with her. It was amazing to run through the snowy landscape and feel the cold air rasp my airways, be aware of her running beside me, hear her breaths, knowing her heart was beating fast like mine. I wondered how everything about her could be amazing, even taking a jog. Again, all I wanted was to stop her, pull her to me and let our breathless, cold lips touch. She looked so happy when we finally got back to the house and she stood panting, one hand at the wall to balance herself while stretching her thigh.

"That was great. I wish I had someone to go running with me to keep me motivated but no one in my family wants to. I love it but it's hard to get my arse out of the couch alone."

"And Smurf?"

She met my gaze.

"He's not here that often and when he is, running isn't his thing."

## The Christmas card

"How long have you been going out?"

"Since I was nineteen, so four years. He started this job two years ago and since then we've had a distance relationship."

"What exactly is it that he does?"

"He's an international wine broker."

"Spending much more time internationally than with my daughter." Dave had come outside and once again I could hear in his voice that he was not pleased with Smurf.

"Dad, stop it. He's trying to make a career. He'll settle down one day, I'm sure."

I could hear in her voice that she was not entirely sure and wanted to cheer her up. Not because I was Team Smurf, but for her sake.

"In the army, there are many distance relationships. There's no choice really when we go on tour."

"And it works?" Dave asked.

"Not for all, but for many. I think the important thing is that you have a relationship built on love and trust to start with, then you can handle not being together all the time."

She looked a little happier, but Dave grunted;

"Built on love and trust... exactly, *that* is what's needed." Making it clear that it was not only the distance in the relationship he questioned, but the foundation of it. I felt it was a discussion I should not be part of and was heading to go take a shower, when he stopped me.

"Could I ask you another favour Charles?"

## The Christmas card

"Yes?"

"They called me from the village. They're running low on the Christmas trees they sell for charity and wondered if I could arrange some more. I have promised to earlier as we own some forest, but now with my ankle it will be difficult for me to cut down the trees. Will you help me? I know you work in the pub later too, so maybe it's too much to ask?"

"No, of course I'll do it."

"I can come too", Molly offered. "We can go as soon as we have showered. I mean, each of us have showered. Separately. Not together, of course."

Of course not, even if that would have been another amazing experience. I should not let my thoughts go there.

Coming out from the shower, I got a disappointing surprise. Smurf had arrived and volunteered to help cutting down trees.

"When he heard you would help, he was very eager to help too." Dave hissed to me with a wink.

We all got into a truck which belonged to the Dawses and drove a bit outside the village, where the family owned some land. Dave directed us to which trees we were to take. Just as we were about to get started, Smurf's mobile buzzed and instead of declining the call he took it. It seemed to be work and meanwhile Molly and I worked together to cut down trees and load onto the truck, he kept talking and talking. She did not comment it, but I saw her purse her lips to a tight line which seemed completely unnatural to her. He sure knew how *not* to make her happy. Just as we loaded the last tree, he hung up and looked surprised.

"Are you already ready? That was quick."

"Or it was a long call", Dave said flatly.

## The Christmas card

"I'm sorry Molly."

"No need, we got the trees we needed anyway. You can make it up to me by joining me tomorrow when I have a shift to stand selling them."

"Okay", he said but did not look very enthusiastic. It annoyed me how he only seemed to care about his job and himself, not these wonderful people or anything else.

When we got back, and Molly and Smurf had disappeared into the house, I had a question for Dave.

"There's some woodwork I'd like to do, and I noticed you have both machines and tools in your garage. Would it be okay if I borrowed them and some material? I was thinking to make a small surprise."

"Of course, just help yourself. I like people who make better use of themselves than just talking on the phone."

In the afternoon, Molly worked in Mr. Adams shop and I worked with Bella in the pub.

"Are you coming to the dance tonight?" she asked.

"What dance?"

"They missed to tell you? Besides the Christmas market you've already been to, there are two other big events in Snowhaven during Christmas time. On Dec 22, there's the village dance and on Christmas Eve everyone meets here in the pub. That means that everyone is slightly drunk when they go to the Midnight mass which maybe isn't completely appropriate, but it's tradition. Tonight the pub is closed because everyone will be at the dance anyway."

"Well, if that's the place to be, then I suppose I'll go. I haven't been to a dance in ages. We have these officers' balls every now and then, but it must be at least a year since I went to one."

"This will probably be less fancy, but I think you'll have a good time."

After closing the pub, Bella and I hurried home to get changed. Not that I had a big wardrobe with me, but I changed the black t-shirt I had on for work for a clean white shirt at least and tried to make my hair look a bit less unruly. 'Time to get a hair-cut', I thought to myself. The others had already left, Bella and I were late-comers and when we arrived the dance was already in full swing.

I immediately searched for Molly and found her dancing with Smurf. She was wearing a red dress, with tight fitting top, showing her slender figure and a wide skirt, flowing around her when she moved in the dance. I could not take my eyes of her. I only wished I had had a rubber large enough to erase Smurf from the picture.

Dave came to stand beside me.

"Molly looks like she's having fun", I said to him.

"She deserves better."

"I may not be Smurf' biggest fan either, but he seems to be treating her pretty well, doesn't he?" I had not seen proof of it really, but I kept hoping that for Molly's sake. Even if she could not be mine I wanted this girl to be happy.

"For the moment maybe, even if I'm not totally convinced about that either, but not in the long run."

"It has lasted quite a while already?"

"Nothing but a long stretched out romance. Every time she talks to him about the future together he disappears, to pursue some new goal to secure their future."

"Maybe now he's ready to commit?"

"That's exactly what we're afraid of."

"We?"

"Bella and I, the cynics in the family. Belinda wants to think the best of everyone, so she keeps hoping he'll make Molly happy, but I don't think he will. You know, *I* didn't always make Belinda happy because I was too full of myself, my disappointment of not being able to stay in the army, but I hope I'm making up for that now because she gave me a second chance which I'm still not sure I deserved."

"I think you did, because the two of you seem very happy now."

"We are", he beamed, "and if you'll excuse me, I'll try to go and take my lovely wife for a swing even with these crutches."

I watched him limp away and felt a bit lonely, because there was not really anyone else but Molly that I wished to dance with. I saw that Dave did not go straight to Belinda, but first to her sister-in-law, Mrs. Chapman and whispered something in her ear which made her smirk. Mrs. Chapman then walked over to Molly and Smurf, tapped him on the shoulder and seemed to ask if she could cut in. My gaze went back to Dave, who looked very pleased and nodded me in the direction of Molly, like he was urging me to act fast. Had he made Mrs. Chapman interrupt their dancing, so I could dance with Molly? It seemed like it.

There was nothing I wanted more, but I felt a bit shy as I approached her. What if she said no? Maybe she did not want to dance with anyone but her boyfriend.

"Care to dance?" I tried to sound casual, but my heart was pounding in my chest. I had not needed to worry. She gave me a big smile and said yes. When we only had danced half a minute, the song changed into a slow-dance. It seemed strange to interrupt already. I looked questioning at her and she nodded and then somehow just merged into my arms.

## The Christmas card

Never had a woman's body felt so right next to mine. Her body shape seemed to follow mine perfectly and no matter how close we were, I felt it was not close enough when I held her to me, firmly yet carefully. My hands found their way down her back but stopped before I reached further down than was appropriate. She leaned her head to my chest and I let my lips touch her hair. Her arms were around my neck, her hands touching the hair at the nape of it. We did not talk. I closed my eyes and let myself disappear in the moment, her scent, her warmth, it was like everything else around us disappeared except for the music – until someone tapped my shoulder. Angrily, it felt like, maybe he had tried to get my attention for some time. Smurf looked up at me, his face filled with poorly disguised fury.

"Do you mind if I take my girlfriend back."

Molly also looked a bit like she had been startled from a dream and now was embarrassed over his apparent jealousy.

"It was just a dance Smurf, I told him.

"Dylan!"

"It was just a dance Dylan, nothing else happened here."

Except me falling even deeper in love with his girlfriend.

He stared at me like he was ready to challenge me for a duel and Molly obviously was uncomfortable with the whole situation.

"I'll go and freshen up."

She disappeared to the ladies' room and I left the fuming Smurf and went to take something to drink. There Dave found me again.

"Was it a nice dance, with Molly?"



## The Christmas card

"It was", I snapped somewhat impolitely, still disappointed it was over and not in the mood to talk about my vain hopes.

"He's not the right guy for her. I know true love when I see it and I do not see that when she's dancing with Smurf." He said nothing about what he saw when *we* danced.

"I appreciate that Dave, I really do, but in the end it's Molly who has to decide that, isn't it?"

"Indeed, it is, but no harm helping her make the right decision." He mused, and I got the feeling that he in this moment felt like Santa, helping people getting the gifts that were meant for them. I could not help smiling at him.

"Sometimes people just want to be left to their own decisions, even if they're not the best."

"Have you told her why you're here yet?"

"No... I don't feel right about it now that I know she has Smurf. I guess it would only make her feel uncomfortable. I'll help you in the pub and what else you may need help with over Christmas, Dave, but then I'll leave."

He shook his head and I got the feeling that he would try to prevent it if he could. I was done dancing and decided to go home and continue my little woodwork project instead. I walked back in the cold winter evening, watched "my" star and all the other thousands. No matter what happened, I knew that the dance with Molly tonight would be one of the highlights of my life.

## Chapter 7

Molly had the day off from the shop because she had volunteered to sell Christmas trees for charity, the same trees we had chopped down the day before. Smurf was supposed to join her and make up for just being on the phone yesterday. They were to open up at nine and Molly was ready at half past eight, standing in the hallway looking for his car. Quarter to nine he still had not arrived and she was pacing impatiently. Another five minutes later he called. She looked sad when she hung up.

"He won't make it, work emergency. Can anyone drive me? I'll be late if I walk now."

I saw Dave frown, Bella look angry and even Belinda sighed.

"I can go with you. I don't mind staying and help you sell the trees if you want me to."

"Really? I'd love some company. This is nice with company but quite boring to do alone."

She rewarded me with that adorable smile of hers and I thought I would have sold thousand Christmas trees if it meant being with her.

---

The trees practically sold themselves. Everyone wanted a tree these days and only the better if part of what they paid went to charity. I was surprised there were so many last minute buyers though.

"We've had our tree a couple of weeks already, but I guess everyone does not have time to start as early as us", Molly said. "Hi Ms. Finch. You want a small one? The cats don't like big trees? I understand, let's find you a small one then. I think I saw one over here."

## The Christmas card

She led the middle-aged, thin woman with frizzy hair to a tree that seemed to be exactly what she was looking for.

"Oh, my little kittens will like this", she almost purred.

I understood this must be the spinster with twenty cats Molly had written about in her letter. When she had left, happily with tree in tow, Molly whispered.

"It's *not* little kittens. She has at least twenty full-grown scary cats with claws. She's so nice but the cats horrible. She loves them though."

Next came a couple, or I was not sure if they were. They seemed like they wanted to hold hands but they did not and they seemed a bit nervous about being there together.

"Ms. Brannigan and Mr. Dudley, how nice to see you! Let me see if I can find two pretty trees for you. Here we have two really fine ones", Molly said.

Aha, the butcher and his secret admirer.

"They both look very good, but... errr..." Mr. Dudley cleared his throat. "We only want one."

Molly looked questioning at them.

"You see, we're celebrating *together* this year", Ms. Brannigan added, her face red like a tomato.

"Finally!" Molly grinned and hugged them both. Now both looked embarrassed but also very proud and happy.

"Ms. Brannigan's secret crush on Mr. Dudley has been common knowledge to everyone but him for years. It seems like something finally opened his eyes. I'm so thrilled for them", she told me when they walked away.

## The Christmas card

So was I. I had hoped for a happy ending for them since I read her letter. I loved how Molly seemed to take joy in everyone else's happiness even on a day when her own boyfriend had stood her up.

"Are you okay with me being here instead of Smurf? I understand it must be a disappointment that it's me instead of your boyfriend."

"I'm disappointed he didn't come when he had promised to. It's not the first time... First he is almost never here, then when he *is* here he suddenly has to go off to something more important even if we have made plans." Then she smiled. "But I'm not disappointed you are here, I have such a great time with you Charles. It feels like I've known you much longer than I have, like you're a really good friend I can be myself with. It's strange."

I cleared my throat.

"I feel the same." At the same time as I was happy she felt like that, it disturbed me a bit to be in the friend-zone - but I knew I could be nothing else when she already had a boyfriend.

---

At noon our shift was over.

"Do you want to go for a walk before we have lunch?"

We walked towards the pond, Dave's and Belinda's special magical place.

"You seem lighter than when you first came here, happier", she said.

"I think I am. Staying here, being with your family, being with you has made me happier."

She bit her lower lip and looked down.

## The Christmas card

"What were you sad about, when you came?"

I had told her before, right when it all happened and many times thereafter so it was not that difficult to do it again. The words came out so much easier than when I was talking to the psychiatrist because I knew she actually cared and wanted to tell her.

"On my last tour in Afghan, my best friend was killed in front of me."

I saw her eyes widen in horror. I told her about Elvis, who he had been, what he meant to me, the family he left behind him and how he had planned for this to be his last tour, the guilt I felt, the thoughts about if I could have prevented it. She listened attentively without interrupting, let me tell what I needed to say without questions, just kept my gaze and nodded. I saw her eyes fill to the brim with tears, which at some point poured over the edge and ran down her cheeks and she dried them away with the arm of her coat. I was crying too.

When I finally had told her everything and went silent, she stepped into me and hugged me. This tiny girl wrapped her arms around my waste and gave me more comfort, holding me, than anyone had. I'm not sure how long we stayed like that. Until my tears dried leaving a thin cold, salty layer on my cheeks.

"Thanks", I said at last.

"For what?"

"For listening, for holding me."

She just smiled.

"I'm glad you told me. I realise it's hard. I realise that there's nothing I can say to take the pain away, but you can talk to me anytime."

"We should probably get back though. We've been here for long and the others will wonder where we are."

## The Christmas card

We started walking but then I slipped on an icy spot hidden under the snow, and so did she and like in some cliché love move we both fell so she landed on top of me.

"I'm sorry", she giggled.

"Not your fault, it's icy", I smiled back and did not at all mind having her over me.

Her happy face was so close, our breaths-turned-smoke mingled, her green eyes locked into mine. We were frozen like that, breathing. Then she did the unthinkable, closed the small distance between us and kissed me. First hesitantly, then when she felt me responding to it, kissed me deeper, more intensively. Our lips parted, touching softly, tongues flitting out to probe each other gently, then hard and hungrily. I buried my hands in her hair, held her to me. I could not help it, I poured all my longing for her in that kiss, all the feelings I had built up reading her letter, and the new and even stronger feelings I had developed when I got to know her. I'm not sure I was breathing anymore, there was only this, her, we, now. She pulled away to take a deep breath, her eyes a bit glazed, her lips swollen and she focused on me, then she seemed to come to her senses. The spell was broken.

"What am I doing?"

She seemed to be talking to herself rather than to me.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what I was thinking. I'm not that kind of person... I'm with Smurf and I'm not fine with cheating. It was a lovely kiss but... I can't. I have to go." She unsteadily got to her feet.

"Molly! Let me go with you."

"No, I need to be alone."

I did not want her to leave like this, upset, feeling like she had done something wrong. Well, technically it was wrong but it had felt so completely right. How could it then be wrong? But it was her decision not mine and I did not want to push her

even if my body was already aching to hold her again. So, I let her go alone, like she said she wanted to and then walked home alone after her. The touch and taste of her lips lingering on mine. I had not kissed her first, she had kissed me. Did it mean anything or was it one giant mistake to her? I did not want to be her mistake, I wanted to be the one she wanted to be with. When I came back to the house I decided to leave her some space and avoid her for now, went to the garage and continued my project which was beginning to take shape.

---

### **Molly**

How could I? I did not know the answer to that. It was not because he was undeniably attractive. It was not because I felt sympathy and sadness for him when he told me the story about his dead friend. It was not because he made me laugh all the time and smelled so intoxicating, a faint smell of expensive aftershave, mixed with shampoo and *him* underneath. It was because it felt *right*. *He* felt right. The kissing made my stomach clench and my heart beat harder and faster because it felt so right. Being that close to him had not been capable of thinking, I only did what every kind of nerve in my body, sensory and motor nerves, told me to do; place my lips to his - and in the moment I did, it felt even more right. It was like when I touched him something ignited in this otherwise so controlled man. His response overwhelmed me, excited me. The hunger in his kiss, the want, like he had waited years to kiss *me*, only me and no one else, even if I knew that was not possible when we had met only days ago. I have never been kissed like that, like I was everything to him, like he wanted to bring me to a bed and make love to me for hours and then spend his life with me. Nothing like it, but I have to forget it. I must. It felt completely right, but it was wrong.

---

I sat in the kitchen with mum, shaking and tearful and she had prepared me a cup of tea. Asking for that was she only thing I had managed to utter before composing

## The Christmas card

myself a bit. I hoped he would not come home at once and had the feeling he would not.

"I kissed Charles, mum."

Her eyebrows raised but she said nothing.

"We were at your and dad's magical spot, by the pond and we slipped and then I kissed him. He didn't kiss me, *I* kissed him. I love Smurf but I kissed Charles."

"You were probably wrapped up in the moment, love. It was just a brief lapse in judgement."

"I'm not sure. What if it wasn't? Mum, what scares me is that it felt so right. I'm not even sure if I'm able to regret it."

She took my hand.

"I can't tell you what's right and what's wrong Molly. You have to listen to your heart, sometimes it will tell you things you did not expect to hear."

"But I've been with Smurf for so long."

"That alone is not a reason to stay with someone. Not a reason to leave either. You should be with the one you *love*, the one who's right for you and that decision is yours."

"I don't know how I'll be able to meet Charles again."

"I'm sure you'll manage and if you decide it's Smurf you should stay with, then Charles will leave after Christmas and you'll never have to see him again."

Even though I feared meeting him after this, the thought of not seeing him again was so depressing I made me want to cry. How was it possible to have so ambiguous emotions?



I did not see Charles more that afternoon. I knew he was not supposed to work in the pub until in the evening, but assumed he decided to stay out of my way and despite that I did not want him to disappear for good, I was relieved about the time-out, that he did not force his presence on me after what had happened. Then it occurred to me that he might be angry because I had kissed him and then ran, and that thought gave me no peace either.

In the late afternoon, mum had prepared dough for Christmas cookies and she, dad, Liam, Timmy, Lucy, Bill and Nan were all baking when the front door opened and I nearly jumped out of my skin because I thought it was Charles. To my relief and disappointment (yes, I must admit disappointment), it was Smurf. I was not sure if I was mostly mad or disappointed that he had stood me up that morning. If he had not I never would have kissed Charles, but I knew that only had to do with that the opportunity would not have arisen. Kissing Charles had nothing to do with revenge on Smurf for not showing up, it did not even have anything to do with feeling lonely. The kiss had only been about Charles and me.

"Hi all", he now said with a grin. "I was wondering if I could steal Molly away for the evening?"

I was not sure I was prepared to be alone with him tonight after what I had done to him today, been unfaithful and not even regretted it for real, but everyone nodded and said yes and of course, except dad who muttered something. I know he does not think Smurf is right for me, but frankly I do not care. I have to decide who is right for me.

"Put on something nice, baby, we're going out for dinner."

I knew that when Smurf took me to dinner it was usually to some fancy place, then when we were there he would glance at the menu and I would see in his face that he thought it was too expensive and even if he said nothing I would always feel forced to choose one of the cheaper dishes on the menu and skip the desert. Well, tonight I did not deserve any desert anyway, but I went to put on a nice dress so I would fit in the restaurant.

## The Christmas card

It was not that difficult to guess where he was taking me, because there is only one restaurant in Snowhaven which Smurf thinks is worth the name, an exclusive Italian restaurant called *Limoncello*. When we got there, the place was empty which surprised me very much as it was high-season.

"Where are all you guests tonight?" I asked Martha who showed us to a linen clothed table with candles lit.

"We're closed for tonight, except for a private party."

"Can we really stay then?", I asked Smurf when she left.

"The private party is us, silly", he said and looked terribly pleased with himself.

I felt a small wave of panic build up inside because I suddenly had a feeling where this was going. Not today, not after what had happened today.

"What are you up to?"

"I just wanted to spend some quality time with my lovely girlfriend."

Martha came with a bottle of Dom Perignon and poured two glasses.

"To us", Smurf said and his eyes sparkled with excitement.

"To us."

"Oh, I can't wait any longer. I know I should wait until Christmas and gather your family, but I can't wait anymore..."

No no no no!

He pulled out a small box.

"Molly, will you do me the honour of marrying me?"

"Sm...Dylan!"

The box contained a ring with a large diamond. It was so not me, I'm not a girl who ever has wanted a big rock on my finger, but he never cared to find out.

I was not sure what to say, but I knew that a 'no' would mean a finality to things I was not prepared for.

"Yes?" I whispered and he had already started putting the ring on my finger, certain what my answer would be. My eyes teared and he took it for happiness, I was not sure what it was because I felt such mixed emotions in this moment. He kissed me and I could not help thinking of another pair of lips that had touched mine this day - and now I was engaged.

"This will be so great. Once we're married, we'll be travelling the world together you and I."

His words made me wonder even more if I was making a giant mistake, but I just downed my champagne and ordered my food. This evening I took the lobster - and chocolate mousse for desert, but it tasted nothing.

---

## **Charles**

I did not see her again that evening. I heard that Smurf had come by and taken her out and it made my stomach twist. I hoped that I might get a chance to talk to her when things had calmed down a bit. I wanted to make sure things were not awkward between us. I was in love with Molly and only wished her happiness. If that to her meant being with Smurf, I would accept it without another word. My parents have always told me that truly loving someone means putting their needs before your own. I had never imagined that it would mean leaving a woman I loved to a man a found abominable.

The Christmas card

## Chapter 8

### Molly

When I woke up next morning, it was with a knot in my stomach and first I did not remember why, but then it came back to me. I had kissed Charles and then I had gotten engaged to Smurf. Of course, things did not feel right with Smurf when I had not cleared the air with Charles. I had to. Immediately. Almost manically I got out of bed, put on t-shirt and jeans, went to the guest room and knocked on the door. He was always up early so I expected him to be awake and entered without waiting for his response. When I did, it seemed like I simultaneously startled him and woke him up, but I was too much in a frenzy to care. I sat down on his bedside and he practically flew up to a sitting position. That was when I realised this might not have been a very good idea. His upper body was naked (and perhaps the rest of him too under the duvet but I told myself he must be wearing trunks at least) and when he sat upright I could see that his bare chest and stomach were every bit as muscular as I had imagined when he had clothes on. I nearly lost focus, nearly forgot what I was there to say.

"Molly?" He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, then looked at me, his face confused.

"Sorry for barging in here like this, but I need to talk to you."

He kept looking at me, now curious and with a faint smile at the corner of his mouth.

"Okay, I'm all ears."

He leaned back against the headboard and I wished that he would cover up a bit because that would make things easier. His hair, unruly after sleeping fell into his eyes and I had to stop myself from reaching out a hand and pull it away, until he did it himself by raking his fingers through his locks.

"I need you to know that I got engaged to Smurf last night", I blurted out.

## The Christmas card

His smile vanished, his expression became completely blank and his eyes darker than usual.

"What are you telling *me* for?" He said, but softly, not harsh.

"Because of what happened yesterday. I'm sorry I kissed you, I didn't mean to lead you on."

He kept his eyes trained on my face but shifted from my eyes to my lips, making something inside me shiver.

"I'm not sorry."

"What?"

"I'm not sorry you kissed me." He looked me straight into my eyes again. "The time I've spent with your family, you, that kiss, I'll have that with me for the rest of my life. I'll never regret any of it, least of all that kiss."

His words made me both happy and troubled. This was not going as I had planned, I was here to put an end to it but it did not come as easy as I had imagined when I strode in here.

"Molly...", he raised his hand as if to touch my cheek, but I jumped up from the bed before he actually did.

"No. No, I don't want to hear what you have to say. I can't, it's not fair to Smurf. I shouldn't have come here."

"Molly...", he said when I was by the door already. "If this is what you want, this engagement, then I'm really happy for you."

I walked out and felt like slamming the door even if he had done nothing wrong, but I closed it gently as I did not want anyone to notice I had been in there.

## **Charles**

When she first came surprising me in bed, I thought maybe there was a chance for us after all, but her words and actions killed that hope efficiently. She was engaged to Smurf. She had accepted to marry him. I would not try to put a wedge between them, she had made her choice. Maybe it had not even been a hard one.

When I came downstairs she was gone and I hid myself out in the garage for a few hours. Working with my hands did not exactly keep my mind off things but it kept me going. I knew I could not stay here longer, not like this, it would only put Molly and myself in a difficult position. I would stay tonight because it was Christmas Eve and the night of there year when they had most guests in the pub. I had promised I would help them and I would, but I would not stay tomorrow and celebrate Christmas with them. I had been looking forward to it, but now it would only be painful to see Smurf sit beside Molly and hold her hand.

Dave came to see me. I think he was curious about what I was working on, but I covered it up as I wanted it to be a surprise for him too. It turned out he also wanted to have a chat man to man.

"I guess you've heard by now?"

"About Molly and Smurf getting engaged? Yes."

He looked at me searchingly.

"And what do you have to say about it?"

I took a deep breath.

"It sucks. You know I'm in love with her and I think she knows too, but she has made her choice. After all, they've been going out for years and she has only known me for a few days."

## The Christmas card

"Smurf is not the one, you need to fight for her."

"I believe she has her own will and right to make a decision. I can't intrude where I don't belong."

"You have to do the right thing."

"The right thing to do is to move on. I won't interfere with her happiness."

He seemed to realise that was the end of the discussion even if he did not agree with me.

"Funny, we've all just known you for a few days, but you feel like family Charles. I'll never feel that way about Smurf. I wish you could stay with us."

"I can't. You understand that, don't you?"

"I do."

"I'll finish this up now before it's time to go to the pub. Can I borrow your truck for a while?"

"You've made me very intrigued. Won't you tell me what it is?"

"No, you'll get your gift on Christmas Day like everyone else." I laughed and nudged him to leave the garage. I appreciated talking to Dave. I would miss Molly's family almost as much as I would miss her.

---

*Everyone* was in the pub that evening. I got the feeling not only all the villagers of Snowhaven, but maybe from some nearby villages too because it was completely crowded. Spirits were high, beers downed, and songs sung. We were busy behind the bar but had time to enjoy ourselves too. I thought that this was the last of those things that Molly had written me about, which I would get to experience, and it was



even merrier than I had pictured it. Smurf was there of course, but I did my best to avoid him and it managed quite well until he came and leaned against the counter with the purpose to talk to me, it seemed.

"I thought you would be gone by now, *Charles*." As usual he pronounced my name with disdain and I thought that was a stupid thing to do for a man who went by the name Smurf.

"Why is that."

"What with Molly being engaged", he smirked.

"What has that got to do with me?", I asked coldly.

"I just got the feeling she meant something special to you." He looked so spiteful, acting like this had been some kind of competition and I felt like punching his face.

"Okay, *Smurf*, I'll share a secret with you. I *am* in love with her, but she loves you. I just hope you're doing this for all the right reasons, not because you suddenly felt jealous when I turned up. You're a lucky man."

"Love, not luck had a big part of my good fortune", he was smirking even more now that I had admitted I was in love with his girl.

"Cheers to that then", I said and turned my back on that wanker. It took quite a bit of self-discipline not to hit him, but I would not want to destroy a joyful evening for everyone gathered there. I was angry, but most of all I was frustrated and sad because everything he said and did indicated Molly would not be happy with this man.

---

**Molly**

## The Christmas card

I saw Smurf talking to Charles and it made me uncomfortable. Not that I thought that Charles would say anything about what had happened between us, but I got the idea that Smurf might not be nice to him. I do not know why I would think so lowly of my boyfriend, my fiancée, he was probably perfectly nice. I had a short break from serving and was having a glass of wine with my friends Katie and Jackie. When Smurf came over to us, judging by his movements and his glazed eyes, I could see that he had had too much to drink. For someone who works with wine he does not stand his drink very well.

"I just had a very nice chat with Charles over in the bar", he slurred. "It's pathetic really that he hangs around here and in your house."

"How can you say that? He's been helping us and he's nothing but kind."

"That's only because he's in love with you Molly, and how pathetic isn't that when you're in love with me? When you're engaged to me."

He burst into fits of laughter but none of us joined him. He continued his rambling.

"He should move on, not stay around. I guess he will when you leave anyway."

"When I leave?"

"Yes, when we're married and you're coming on the road with me or stay in the City. Next year we won't celebrate Christmas in this shitty place, maybe in the French Alpes."

I was shocked.

"Smurf, we have not really discussed where we'll be living and now, tonight, is maybe not the right time."

"We can discuss all you want Molly, but it won't be *here*. You know that. I was finished with this place years ago."

## The Christmas card

"Do I? I love Snowhaven, I love my family and everyone else here, they're important to me."

"Tut tut, I'm sure it doesn't take too much to convince you in the end."

He tried to kiss me, his breath smelling of alcohol and I turned away, so he kissed me on the cheek instead. Dad came and saved me from this disappointing conversation.

"Time to close the pub and for everyone to move on to the church for the Midnight Mass."

It was a bit irregular to go to church slightly drunk, but that was what the villagers in Snowhaven always had done so no one questioned it. Even the vicar was in the pub this evening, even if he always had only one glass of red wine.

Dad had his sleigh with wheels parked outside with horses and all. It was finally ready, and this was the first year he would fulfil mum's wish of going to the Midnight Mass in a sleigh. The whole family could not fit into it at the same time, so first he took mum, Nan and the little ones, then came back a second time for me, Bella, Smurf and Charles. Oddly, I found myself sitting between Smurf and Charles, under plaids and a fur. It could have been an amazing sleigh ride through the Christmas decorated village where snowflakes now were falling down on us slowly, but I was a bit too troubled to enjoy it. I could not help feeling that the side of my body that was pressed to Charles somehow felt warmer, which made me want to lean that way instead of in Smurf's direction which should have been the natural choice. Charles did not look at me, he looked the other direction and I wondered what he was thinking, feeling right now. If he was lost like me.

When dad stopped outside the church, Smurf excused himself and said he had to find the toilet before the mass began. His face was a bit greenish and I feared he had to go vomit. Bella and dad had disappeared inside, but Charles was still sitting in the sleigh.

## The Christmas card

"Are you coming?"

He gave me a lovely smile, for a moment replacing the stern-face he had had during the sleigh ride.

"You go inside, I have something I need to do."

He did not promise he would come, but I thought he would. He did not say goodbye, so I did not think he would leave.

"Double away, Dawesy", he nodded in the direction of the church entrance and I felt I had to go.

Inside, I sat down in the bench where the rest of the family was already seated and took in the sight of the many candles and the choir standing in the front, waiting to sing for us. I always loved the Midnight Mass, but now I felt restless and worried. I glanced towards the doors again and again, but Charles did not come. Smurf came after a while and sat down heavily beside me.

"What are you looking for?" he sputtered when I once again glanced at the entrance. "Or should I say *who*?"

I was thinking about Charles all through the mass. Not my boyfriend beside me, not the vicar's words until he said;

"Now, let us send a prayer to our soldiers who are deployed abroad over Christmas."

It made me want to cry. In fact, I could not hold back anymore. The one soldier I cared most about was close, but not close enough. Not here beside me.

"Excuse me", I said and stood up and paved my way outside. The cold air hit my face, but I welcomed it, it made me feel like sobering up even if I had not been drunk to begin with. Dad's sleigh was empty, Charles nowhere to be seen and I hated not knowing where he was. The doors swung open and Smurf stumbled out.

"What the fuck, Molly? Why did you walk out like that? Everyone will wonder what my fiancée is up to."

I looked at him, drunk, annoyed, worried about what others would think but not about how I felt, and in his eyes, I did not catch one spark of love. Suddenly I knew with certainty what the right thing to do was.

"I'm sorry Smurf, I can't do this."

"Do what baby, stand outside the church in the cold? I agree, let's go inside."

"No. This."

I pulled the engagement ring off my finger and held it to him in my palm. He stared at it.

"You must be kidding me."

"No."

"You're turning me down? For what? For a loser-life in this loser-village? Come on Molls, we can do so much better than that."

"I'm not sure I can do any better than this, at least not with you. We don't belong together anymore Smurf. I was in love you once, but now I'm not. That's the only thing that matters right now. I'll have to figure out the rest of my life later, but this, you and I, ends now."

He grunted furiously, said no more but took the ring from my palm. He made no wishes for my life to turn out well even if it was without him, but then again, I had hardly expected that. He did not go back inside, instead strode away down the snowy street. I went inside, more at ease than before but I knew my mind would not find complete peace until I had talked to Charles.

When we all returned home, the house was dark and Charles apparently already asleep, so I would have to wait to talk to him until in the morning.

---

Christmas Day. How I hoped it would turn out better than Christmas Eve, but since I had already righted one mistake, chances were good. Now I only had to right the second one.

When I woke up, I jumped out of bed and nearly ran to Charles room, knocked at the door but just like the day before did not wait for his answer. Yesterday I had been eager to say I did not love him, now I could not wait to tell him that I *was* in love with him. The sight of the room made me stop in my tracks. The bed was empty and made up. There was no sign of him, no clothes, no bag, nothing. My heart wrenched with anxiety and I rushed down the stairs and looked outside on the driveway. His car was gone too. Charles was gone.

I sat down heavily on the couch. How could he leave without saying goodbye? I had no idea what to do now. We had never need to call each other while he was here, so I did not even have his mobile number – and I desperately wanted to talk to him. The rest of the family had heard me rushing down the stairs and now they all came, curious about what was happening.

"Charles has left, without saying goodbye." I had to fight not to start crying.

"Maybe that's for the better?" mum asked.

"No, mum. It's not for the better! I realised that yesterday and I wanted to tell him, but now he's gone."

"There's a letter here in the Christmas tree", Nan said. "*To the Dawses*, it says."

"Open it", dad sounded as impatient as I felt and took the letter from Nan who is not famous for being able to speed things up. He opened it and read out loud.

## The Christmas card

*Snowhaven, Dec 24, 2014*

*Dear All,*

*The last week has meant the world to me, the way you invited me into your home, your lives. I will cherish every memory and wish you a lifetime of love and happiness. I have to leave now, maybe I will see you again one day.*

*With love,*

*Charles James*

*P.S. If you follow the map you will find your Christmas present.*

"Should we really go before breakfast?" Nan asked.

"I don't know about you, but I won't be able to eat until we've done this", I said, and mum and dad nodded.

We got dressed quickly and then all of us squeezed ourselves into two cars and drove where the map showed us. We had to walk the last part and where it was marked with a cross, we found ourselves by the pond. Something had changed though. By the waterside, a wooden bench stood. It was beautiful, smooth, polished wood, obviously hand crafted and it had a twirling inscription; "*Where the magic begins.*"

"We've always said the only thing missing here was something to sit on", dad said.

"Our magic place, he made it even better", mum said with tearful eyes.

"Has he made this by himself? He must have put in so many hours."

On the seat another envelope was placed, on the outside of this one it said; "*To Molly*".

## The Christmas card

How my heart was beating as I opened it, desperately hoping it would give me some clue to his whereabouts. Out of the envelope fell a card. A card someone had made themselves, not very skilfully I thought and then realised it was the card *I* had made over a year ago and sent to some unknown soldier. How could it be here? I could not make the pieces of the puzzle fit, so I read the letter that came with it.

*Snowhaven, Dec 24, 2014*

*Dear Molly,*

*I have fallen in love with you twice now. Once when this beautiful girl stole my crispy curly fries, and the first time when an unknown woman sent me this card and the loveliest letter I have ever read. You have no idea what that letter has meant to me. I have read it more times than I can count, and it literally saved my life because I had it, you, with me in my darkest hours. Thinking of you, imagining what you were doing in your little village, kept me going when days were hard. When I was in despair, I shared it with you even if you never knew. Finally, I could not resist coming to see you and the village, and it was everything I could have dreamed of. So, I fell in love a second time, with Snowhaven and its people, with your family, but most of all with you.*

*I'm sorry, I had to leave the church tonight because I cannot take this anymore and I will be gone when you wake up tomorrow morning. I'm sorry for not saying goodbye. It is not because I want to hurt you, I never would. It is because I cannot keep hurting myself more and I will if I stay.*

*I want to thank you for showing me how amazing love can make me feel. I hope all your dreams come true.*

*I love you.*

*Charles*

When I finished reading I looked up at the others.



"So, this card brought him to Snowhaven?"

"No, *you* did."

"Did you know dad?"

"He told me, but he was afraid to scare you off if he told you before you knew him. Was afraid you might take him for a stalker."

I could not help giggling because Charles was the least stalker-like person I could imagine.

"Dad, I need to find him. What should I do?"

"I have an idea."

---

## **Charles**

I left Snowhaven with a heavy heart, but I knew it was the right thing to do. Now that Molly had made her choice, no matter how bad I thought her judgment was in in this case, it was for the better if I left her and Smurf to lead their lives in peace and tried to move on with my own. Despite my sadness, I felt so much lighter than when I had set out on this road trip. It felt like a life-time ago. Molly and her family had shown me I was able to feel happiness again after Elvis' death and nothing would take that away.

There was one thing I wanted to do before I left the neighbourhood. Dave had shown me a photo of a nearby waterfall and told me there was a memorial place for British soldiers. It seemed fitting to go there and reminisce Elvis on a day like this.

The photo had not done the place justice and it turned out to be even more beautiful in real life. The water was not frozen despite the minus degrees and it was cascading

down, wild and dark but tantalizing. There was a bridge over the water, where one could stand watching the scenery and there was a brass sign with an inscription.

*This bridge is dedicated to those brave men and women who served the British Army abroad and never returned home.*

I let my fingers graze over the surface and then gazed out over the water masses and talked to Elvis.

"You were right, mate, when you said I one day would fall in love like you had with Georgie. I met this amazing girl, woman... The one thing I want is to be with her. Too bad she was already taken, by a guy named Smurf. I'm not kidding! He doesn't deserve her, and I don't say that only because I'm jealous, but he really is a price asshole. Even her family thinks so. I can't believe she doesn't see it, but they've been together since they were teenagers so maybe one is more forgiving, or blind, then. I know you would be asking me how the bloody hell I can leave her to him and... I don't know. I honestly don't know. I thought leaving was the noble thing to do when they got engaged, but now when I'm standing here talking to you I don't feel as certain anymore. Her dad thought I should stay and fight for her. Was I wrong not to? Yeah, I now you would tell me I made a mistake, that I should go back. Go get your girl you would say. God, Elvis I miss you! I'm obviously not capable of making the right decisions when I don't have you to juggle with. You never thought you would hear me say that, did you? But I admit, you had your moments of wisdom. I miss you like hell Elvis. I would give anything to see you again."

I went quiet, felt I had said everything that needed to be said. Like with any good friend, silence was always comfortable between us. Like it was with Molly too. I should go back to her. Tell her straight out I loved her and thought she was making a mistake when she chose Smurf. If I did not tell her she would not even have the chance to choose me. Maybe she would not anyway but I should not run without trying. One has to play to win. Of course, she would now my feelings already by now. My letter had told her everything. I wondered what she had felt when she read it.

## The Christmas card

My thoughts were interrupted by a familiar and very welcome voice.

"Captain James, didn't you forget something?"

I looked up and there Molly was standing, smiling at me.

I let go of the railing and turned to her, smiled back so big that my lips nearly met at the back of my head.

"And what would that be?"

"Saying goodbye properly, to me."

She took a step closer.

"You never struck me as very formal."

I took a step closer to her.

"I swear if you ever leave Snowhaven again without saying goodbye to m..."

I had taken a last step towards her, reached out and pulled her to me and bent my head so I nearly touched her lips but stopped a few millimeters apart with my eyes fixed to hers. I did not care about Smurf and what had happened to him. She was here, it must mean that she had chosen me but I wanted her to show me, wanted to be sure. She proved me right when she put her arms around my neck, pressed herself closer to me and let her lips touch mine in an all consuming kiss until I knew nothing else for a long time.

Finally we let go slightly and I felt her lips smiling against mine with the same joy I felt and she whispered;

"I love you. Will you now please come back and celebrate Christmas with us, you prannet? I'm not sure dad will forgive me otherwise, he thinks I was chasing you away."

She nibbled my lower lip, half driving me mad.

"I was already thinking about turning back actually and if you continue with *that* I've no choice."

"What? This?" She nibbled my lip again. "I've wanted to do that since I first saw you. I knew that a man who had such great taste in food must be delicious to kiss."

"Is that so? Then you had better kiss me again and I'll adore you for always."

"Always?" She gave me a coy smile.

"Always."

We kissed again and I was so happy my heart threatened to burst. She had given me the best Christmas gift anyone could ever give me.

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***A/N: This is the end of this story as far as it is inspired by 'The Christmas card', but there might be an epilogue to explore what happens after this.***

***If nothing more gets posted before tomorrow evening (New Year's Eve), I wish you a Happy New Year. This was the year I discovered fanfiction and writing for You really adds a silver lining to my life. I just love fanfic and the way it allows changing any story like I want to, which usually means a larger portion of romance and a HEA because I'm a sucker for that. All the best wishes for 2019!***

**x**

**A/N: Thanks for all the kind reviews to this story, I needed that more than usual. Not because life is bad (even if my three-year-old is currently pushing my patience to the limit) but I really have not been successful in writing the last days. I had intended to return to my other story, but it just won't come to me. Instead an idea for a different one popped up which is always dangerous because it's so tempting to write it down immediately. I will go back to '25 days...', just have to find it first. Might have to read it from start to current finish, which I normally never do. I have not read any of my finished stories actually, I guess I'm afraid that in retrospect I'll find them inadequate and want to take them down. Anyway, enough of self-doubt and in the meantime an epilogue to this one.**

**X**

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## Epilogue

I was almost a bit nervous to return to the Dawses after my grand exit, but I had not needed to be. They were thrilled to see me again, that Molly had found me and convinced me to return. Even more thrilled that we now were a couple, which was obvious to everyone as soon as we got inside the door and Molly took my hand.

"Look who I have with me!" and they all came hugging us.

This was my best Christmas Day ever, up to then at least. My parents called from Italy, worried I might be sitting alone in the big house in Bath, drinking and grieving Elvis and they were happy to learn that instead I was in a village called Snowhaven, celebrating with the large, noisy family of my new girlfriend. I could almost hear from mum's voice that her eyes were filled with tears of joy.

After eggnog, turkey, mince pies, and candy enough to deck a grown man in a sugar induced coma, we played board games and relaxed in front of the fire. Molly and I

were never far apart during the day, the novelty of being allowed to touch each other too wonderful. When it finally was time to go to bed, I headed to the guest room where I had stayed before and reluctantly kissed Molly good night. I did not want to part but I would not presume we would share bed on our first evening together, especially not under her parents' roof. She kissed me back with a mischievous smile and went to her room but ten minutes later there was a light knock on my door. Unlike the last time she had come here, she was now dressed in pajamas. A flannel one in plaid pattern and normally not the sexiest garment, but on her it was a whole different thing, especially as she still had the mischievous smile on her face, closing the door behind her. Very sexy if you ask me.

"As much as I love to see you again, what are you doing here?"

"You don't want me here?"

"More than anything! But your parents, are they fine with it?"

"I didn't plan to announce it to everyone, but yes, I know they don't mind."

"Smurf didn't sleep here?"

"That's only because I didn't want him to lately. I'm born six months after mum and dad got married so they've never been able to keep presences up and I don't think they care either."

"Come here then."

I patted the bed beside me and she rushed over and nearly jumped into it like a frisky puppy, making me laugh. I could not quite believe she was here in my bed and all I wanted was to lay her down in it. There was something I had to say to her before I felt right about spending the night together, though. In one aspect I would not be able to be better than Smurf and I wanted to be honest about that. The easy choice for now would have been to ignore it, but I wanted this to be something lasting and then I could not avoid bringing it up.

## The Christmas card

"Molly... there's one thing I want to talk about up front."

We were both of us sitting cross-legged, facing each other and I took her hands, entwined my fingers with hers.

"I had something else in mind than talking, but if you insist."

"Do you realise that my job means I won't be able to be here all the time? In that way I'm like Smurf. I will go on tour sooner or later, sometimes I might be gone for six months."

I could see in her face that she had not considered this, which was not strange as *we, us*, was a brand new phenomenon.

"The difference is I want to be here, I can see myself living here in Snowhaven and I want to be with you more than anything, but my job will sometimes take me away. I don't want to start this, and you feel I've hidden from you that I have to leave."

"But you want to come back?"

"Always."

She seemed to be taking it in, thinking about what it would mean to her.

"Thanks for telling me."

"How do you feel about it?"

My heart was thumping with anxiety, what if she said 'no thanks, this is not for me'?

"Honestly, I hadn't had time to think about it, not thought much about that it's part of a soldier's life to go away and maybe even get injured. Of course, it's not ideal, not what I would have chosen..."

My anxiety grew to a hard knot in my stomach.

"But I don't really have a choice because I want to be with you, more than anything and knowing you want to be with me too is what matters. I'll probably hate it when you leave but I suppose I have to take the good with the bad."

"I'll do my best to make it *very* good when I'm here", I reassured her and pulled her to me, up on my lap, feeling allowed to now that we had talked about this.

"Then I have quite a few ideas", she smirked.

"You do?"

"Mmmmm..."

Her lips were touching mine, making my skin prickle of the sensation. Kissing her was possibly the most amazing, thrilling experience I had had for years, or ever, now suddenly further enhanced as her hands found my bare chest and started trailing paths on my skin, going further and further down.

"I was wondering when I was in here yesterday if you were sleeping in trunks or naked."

"Is that so? I thought you were busy telling me about your engagement?"

"I was a bit unfocussed, suppose that's why the whole engagement thing did not work out."

"Anyway, I think it's time we get you out of this pyjama too and then you can find out about my trunks."

My hands found their way under the harmless flannel garment and I heard her gasp when I touched the skin at the dip of her waist.

"I'm ticklish", she laughed, then stretched her arms above her head so I could pull it off and she sat half naked in front of me, the most beautiful sight I have ever seen.



At some other point I would use this ticklishness for sure, but now that was not what I wanted and I just pulled her closer to me, to feel her naked skin to mine and kissed her again.

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## **Snowhaven, Christmas 2015**

### **Molly**

Charles has been away on tour for four months, on a humanitarian mission in Kenya. It is the longest we have been apart, and I've missed him like hell. I have written to him and there has been the occasional letter from him, and in between the snail mail deliveries we have been able to e-mail, send text messages and even call every now and then. He has told me that this is very different from the possibilities to stay in contact with family they had when he was in Afghanistan, because they were in an actual war zone then. I'm glad we had not met yet then because I'm not sure how I would have handled it. Even now my body aches of longing for him. I never knew it was possible to miss someone in such a physical way before, I never did with Smurf. With Charles it is like every fibre of my body is drawn to some distant point down south in Africa, a bit like you see flowers grow in the direction of sunlight. Even though this makes it hard to be apart, it is also what makes me sure that he is the one for me. The way I miss him, I feel certain this is right, that it is him I'm supposed to be with for always.

I'm back here in Snowhaven for Christmas and he will come home in a few days too, but otherwise we live in Bath these days. Not permanently, but while I'm studying to be a nurse. Charles encouraged me to take the jump and study to be what I have dreamed of and I started this autumn. We live in his parents' crazy big house. They are not there most of the time and when they are, they are the sweetest people one can imagine. This Christmas they are not abroad like they use to otherwise and will come here to celebrate with us and my family.

## The Christmas card

We have agreed that we will decide where to live once I have completed my studies. Charles can imagine living here, but the thing is that I, who never thought I would want to leave this place, now that I have him can imagine living pretty much anywhere. It is like anywhere with him is home. It is strange how one person can change you without even trying to change you. Smurf tried to change me the whole time and never managed, but it was because he was not the right one. I have a feeling Charles is willing to change things for me too. He has mentioned he might transfer to another role, so he will not have to go on tour, or maybe even leave the army. I will not push him, but of course I would love it. Especially if we have kids one day, not that we have talked much about it yet.

My mobile buzzes, Charles name lighting up the display.

"Hi, love."

"Hi", I hear how ridiculously happy my voice sounds but know it will only make him happy too.

"What are you up too?"

"Just loitering, going to the pub later. You?"

"I've been overseeing our medic giving inoculations to some Kenyan children."

I guess he won the competition of who has been most useful today. My amazing boyfriend.

"I'm afraid I'll have to make you disappointed..."

It feels like someone has thrown a bucket of ice-cold water over me, suddenly I know he will say he will not be able to come home over Christmas. This was not just a social call.

"...I won't be there in two days.

## The Christmas card

I take a deep breath, knowing he will be even more disappointed than I so I must try to act maturely not to make him even sadder. I'm interrupted by the sound of the doorbell ringing and I'm the only one home, so I have to go open.

"Molly? You went all quiet?"

"Sorry, I'm here, just didn't know what to say and someone's calling on the door so I'm heading downstairs to open..."

"I'm sorry, Molly...."

With disappointment pulsating through my body, I open the front door and there he stands, mobile to his ear and with a cheeky grin on his face. My jaw drops, and he puts away the phone in his coat pocket.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't wait another two days."

"You bastard, do you know how disappointed..." but I interrupt myself to throw myself into his arms. I hold on to the rough fabric of his coat, cold and slightly damp from the falling snow. He wraps his arms around me and presses his lips to my forehead. I'm trying to grasp this is reality, must feel him, before I can even kiss him.

"Are you real or is this a Christmas dream?"

"I'm real, I promise. Are you? I've been day dreaming about you so much when I was away that I'm not sure either."

"I'm real too."

When I have not seen him for a while, I'm always struck by how gorgeous he is, especially in his uniform. Somehow, I'm also always surprised how good a kisser he is. Not that I don't remember that he is good, yet the reality is even better. Now he murmurs to my mouth.

"Did you say that you're home alone?"

"Yes."

"Great, then there's no one here to see us". He scoops me up, kicks the door closed and carries me up the stairs and whispers with his lips to my neck;

"I can't wait to show you how much I've missed you."

---

### **Charles**

She has fallen asleep next to me. It is only in the afternoon, but I guess we exhausted each other, I'm just too happy to be back here with her to fall asleep. Love to take in that I'm lying here beside her again. If I'm honest I'm also feeling giddy and a tad nervous about what I'm planning to ask her this Christmas. Tucked in my Bergen there is a small box with a circular content, which I picked up from the jeweler's shop where I ordered it already before I left for my tour. I was thinking if I should wait until New Year, considering Smurf proposed to her right before Christmas next year, but now I do not know if I'm able too. If I wait I will probably be acting weird all Christmas, making her think something is wrong instead and I do not want that. Maybe I should just pop the question when she wakes up. The more I think of it the more I like the idea. No drama, just her and me. Yes, I will do that.

Now that I have made that decision, I'm able to relax and just watch her eyelashes flutter as she sleeps, the woman I love more than anything.

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THE END