



*Once upon a long
time after
The Jump*

An Our Girl FanFiction
Miss Piony

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Will the present heal the past, or will the past crush the future?

A story taking place many years after Captain James and 2 section jumped off the cliff in Bangladesh.

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Chapter 1

If someone had observed him striding down the corridor, they could have guessed his mood only by listening to the sound of his footfalls on the tiled floor; quick, hard - annoyed or even angry. He had been summoned to his superior's office without delay, so had had to interrupt the task he had been very focused on and get his arse over there, wondering what the arrogant bastard wanted with him this time.

He knocked on the heavy wooden door and a smug voice asked him to enter.

The grey-haired woman sitting by a large desk, cluttered with books and piles of journals and papers, did not even look up to acknowledge him at first, instead let him stand there waiting like a school boy before the headmaster for a minute or two. That was the usual routine, showing who was in power. Even if it was not a surprise as he knew her ways too well after nearly four years under her leadership, he impatiently rocked back and forth on his feet, not to let his frustration come out in any other way which he might regret. Finally, she looked up on him with piercing blue eyes. Her sharp face makeup free as always, she made no secret of that she thought that only silly people wasted time on such vanities.

"James. Good.", she greeted him, but with the displeased face of someone looking at something the cat had dragged in.

"Ma'am."

She took him in and noticed the new glasses, circle shaped with a black frame, quite similar to Harry Potter's. A look that used to be nerdy but recently had become trendy again.

"Glasses, I see. That becomes you."

Before he could thank her for the surprising compliment, she added;

"Finally you *look* like you might be intelligent enough to actually fit in here, at this honourable faculty, rather than in a swimwear commercial."

He felt his cheeks heat. It was not the first time, she taunted him over his good looks which was unfair as he hardly could do anything about them. She made no secret of that she did not think that he belonged here in the hallways of the Department of Psychiatry at Oxford University. Part of why he was blushing was because when he first had put on the new glasses, the thought had indeed crossed his mind that they might make her treat him with an ounce more respect. Obviously, that would not happen. Seeing since he had not managed to prove himself to her after four years of hard work, he could hardly expect a pair of glasses to make any difference.

"Are they just for show or do you actually need them?"

"They're reading glasses."

"Then you don't really need them now. Since you're not reading."

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"No."

She smirked, and he thought for the umpteenth time that he hated Professor Watson and could not wait for the day when he was done with his PhD studies and was out of here. If he continued with a post doc, it would definitely be elsewhere.

"I'm sure I didn't distract you from something important."

It was not a question, because she did not care. The way she said it, it sounded like she thought *none* of his work important.

"I was trying to wrap up the paper I'm submitting to the Lancet. My final publication before defending the thesis"

"Well, good luck with getting that accepted." Again the arrogant smirk. A professor was supposed to support his or her PhD students, but he could only dream of ever getting any help from her.

"Anyway, I need your help, James. You're so good at making people feel welcome..."

Oh no, he knew that the very rare times she flattered him it was because she wanted something from him.

"...therefore I will do you the honour of welcoming a new guest researcher who will transfer from the Department of Physiology, Anatomy & Genetics for a while. I made a deal with her supervisor months ago. Now I can't even remember what I got out of the deal and I realise I can't spare the time."

Neither could he, he had enough on his plate with his own research, finalising his publication, the thesis and on top of that the mandatory teaching. He did not need a tail in the shape of a guest PhD student in addition to that, when his goal was to complete and get away.

"Ma'am, I..."

"No, need to thank me James, I realise you consider it an honour that I put such faith in you."

He knew there was no point arguing. He could not afford to fall out with the professor with only months to go. He may not like her, but she was powerful in this surprisingly small world. His only hope of ever getting back at her would be to be successful in his research and prove her wrong and the hope of that was one of the reasons he fought so hard.

"I will have Miss Dawes sent to your office tomorrow. That was all."

With that she dismissed him, returning to her papers. He left, cursing silently over the extra work and fleetingly thinking of another Dawes he had known and lost a long time ago.

He had tons of work to do and he managed to forget the whole thing during the afternoon and the following morning, until someone knocked on the frame of his

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office door, which he unlike the professor liked to keep open when he was in. He did not look up first, only hummed an absentminded response whilst tugging at the dark curls at the back of his head.

"Yes?"

"Are you Mr. James?"

At the sound of the unfamiliar female voice, he raised his head and locked eyes with hers. Time seemed to stand still when he lost himself in those extraordinary light green eyes, he stayed silent long enough for the situation to turn slightly awkward, before he snapped out of the spell and cleared his throat.

"That would be me. And you are?"

"Ms. Dawes. I will be a guest researcher here and I've been told you are to be my tutor."

"Your tutor?! I don't know about that. I've been asked to welcome you Ms. Dawes, show you around, that's all, but I won't officially be your tutor. That's the job of Professor Watson."

"It was she who said it would be you."

He felt his pulse increase. Damn woman! If Watson could even be called a woman, she was rather an emotionless machine.

"Okay, well see about that", he said grimly but realised he would not get out of at least giving her the first introduction. "Let me show you around anyway."

Sighing, he got to his feet and she had to angle her head to keep looking at his face as he unfolded his long legs to standing position and suddenly towered over her. She looked shy, even a bit intimidated and he realised that so far he was doing a shit job making her feel welcome. It was hardly *her* fault that Professor Watson had dumped her in his lap. Figuratively speaking he quickly told himself, as the idea of her in his lap was somewhat disturbing. He walked around the desk and held out his hand to her.

"Welcome the Department of Psychiatry."

"Thanks."

She smiled but he abruptly turned around, started walking.

As they took the tour around the department, she cautiously told him that she was to stay there for three months. She had been looking forward to joining the famous Professor Watson's research team, as both she and her usual supervising professor thought it would give her new valuable perspectives to her research. He did not have the heart to tell her that Watson was a prize arse who was unlikely to offer either help or inspiration. She would discover soon enough that she would have to look elsewhere for that. Not to him though, if he could avoid it.

He glanced at her sideways as they walked. It was difficult to say how old she was. Maybe his age, maybe a few years older. Her bone structure was delicate, she had a golden skin tone and long, smooth black hair. Combined with those unusual green eyes, she was very pretty. No, beautiful in an exotic way was a more accurate description. He cut the thought off right there. He had as a rule never to mix work and dating. If he had not had the good sense anyway, past cockups in that area, which had impacted his life heavily, would have been enough to deter him from it. Many other undergraduates, teachers and professors played that game, but he thought it would make life unnecessarily complex. There was plenty of girls around both at the university as a whole and outside of it, so there was no need to get emotionally involved with those he worked close to. Truth was he had more trouble fighting cheeky proposals off than finding an attractive date as most women found his looks appealing, sporting features complying to the golden ratio measures, brown eyes and dark wavy hair combined with an athletic frame. He did not hesitate to enjoy their company and had dated a variety of girls over his years here, but never gotten deeply attached to anyone. Now that suited him well, as it meant he only had himself to consider when he was finished here and could chose to move somewhere else, maybe even abroad.

He brought her by all the offices and labs, introducing her to everyone working at the department and they were all more welcoming than *he* had been, but on the other hand they were not forced to be her tour guide. At the end of the tour, they stopped by Watson's office and he popped in his head after knocking. She looked at him like he was trying her patience with his face.

"I'm just showing Ms. Dawes around and I wondered which room we shall place her in?"

"Oh, didn't I say? As we are a bit short of space, I figured we could place an extra desk in yours. As you anyway will be tutoring her."

"I- What?"

"As we agreed yesterday, James. Have you already forgotten or are you just dafter than I thought?"

He heard Professor Watson chuckle as he fuming closed the door.

"Okay, let's go find you a desk then, shall we? It seems we will share room for the duration of your stay here", he said to the girl through gritted teeth. She tried to keep up with his long strides and noticed his tense shoulders and stern face.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be an inconvenience."

He stopped and turned to her.

"It's not your fault. It's just that I'm currently finalising my last publication and thesis as I'm scheduled to defend it in a few months and I have absolutely no time tutoring someone new and I would have loved to have my office to myself during this period. This is fucking bad timing."

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He knew it was unfair to put his frustration on her, but he could not help himself. This was such an important time in his life and he did not have time or energy to put on anything outside the things he absolutely needed to get done. So typical of Watson to set this up, he nearly wondered if she did it to spite him and ruin his work. Yet, he felt he ought to offer some kind of apology.

"As we're going to share room, you might as well call me by my name. I'm Samuel, you can call me Sam."

"I'm Betsy. That's what my friends call me."

She smiled, and he bit his tongue not to impolitely say he was in fact *not* her friend and what would he then call her and tried to ignore that his stomach flipped in a disconcerting way at the sight of that smile. Betsy seemed too common a name for a girl with such smile and eyes.

A/N: Thanks for the reviews! Glad I managed to intrigue you and have you guessing how all fits together.

Whilst I admire writers who have that discipline, I never have the full story ready in my head when I start; I have a general idea and then the rest comes gradually. In this case I got a new idea for this chapter which fits better if Sam is doing his PhD at the Department of Psychiatry, so I went back and changed that but no need to re-read chapter 1 just because of that.

I have a lot going on in RL at the moment so it isn't as easy to focus on writing and I'm more likely to update a few times a week than daily for now. Just to set the expectation. Enough said, happy reading!

x

Chapter 2

Seated by her desk with him opposite at his, she sneak-peaked at him through the curtain of her own silky black hair hanging before her face. She took him in; watched his body language, regularly making small moves, tapping, drumming, stretching, as if he did not like sitting still for long; the mop of dark hair, which she

noticed was unruly instead of arranged in neat waves today because of the damp weather; and his focused expression as he wrote on his laptop, sometimes chewing the inside his cheek or his bottom lip, sometimes raising or frowning his brows as if he had an internal dialogue.

When she first saw him a month ago, he had reminded her of someone, but she could not remember who or even if the memory was good or bad and had quickly shrugged it off as that distant memory hardly had anything to do with him anyway. She had thought he seemed like a jerk that first day, when he so reluctantly had received her. Had thought him unkind, unapproachable, brash and full of himself. How wrong she had been.

As if he felt her gaze on him, he looked up, their eyes met, and he flashed her a big smile which reached all the way to those chocolate brown eyes and warmed her insides.

"What?"

She felt her cheeks flush, caught in the act of observing him. Not as discrete as she had intended.

"Nothing... I was just thinking that sometimes first impressions are wrong."

"For better or for worse?"

"In this specific case, for better. Not that I'm talking about you", she smiled.

He smiled again too, that almost shy and therefore all the more irresistible smile. She had noticed that unintentionally it had become a goal of hers to achieve that as many times a day as possible.

"No, I figured you couldn't be, as I'm the dog's bollocks at making a great first impression."

They continued grinning at each other, their eyes engaging in silent conversation even if neither of them was sure exactly what they were saying. Something good, something which induced a fuzzy feeling in the pit of their stomachs.

He was not sure how it had turned into this; from reluctantly accepting that he was forced to share room with her, to thinking the best part of any day was when she was sitting there in front of him. He had in fact been sulking for the whole first week, hardly said a word to her. He knew he was behaving like a petulant child but could not stop himself. He had tried to avoid taking on the role as her tutor and only answered monosyllabic when she asked something, which made her stop attempting to talk to him after a few days but every time he met her green eyes he had felt a sting of bad conscience.

Professor Watson had agreed to have one initial tutoring session with Betsy, to discuss how her research could benefit most from the time spent at the Department of Psychiatry. He had expected her to be desolate when she returned, but instead she had almost skipped into the office until he gave her a stern stare for disturbing him. It seemed like the session with the professor had been rewarding and she was

full of inspiration. The two had made up a plan for her on what to focus on and after that she had been impressively self-reliant. He was amazed at how different the professor seemed to act towards her compared to him and wondered if it was because she was a woman (unlikely) or because the professor for some reason had hated his guts from day one (more likely).

In the end he had picked up on the conversation again, as he increasingly felt like an asshole. Started asking what her research was about, started telling her about his, moving on to asking questions about her as his curiosity was increased. He realised that not only did she provide insightful comments to his work, he very much enjoyed talking about *anything* with her. She made him laugh, she made him engage his brain in new ways. He had not experienced this with someone in a long time.

Betsy was from London and had moved to Oxford when she started her studies a few years back. He told her he was from Bath and likewise had moved here to study, following in the footsteps of his dad who also been a student at this university once. She made no secret of that her parents never would have been able to afford the tuition fee had she not been offered a scholarship. He did not consider that something negative, it only made him realise how brilliant she must be. He shared that his parents certainly did not lack the money to pay the fees and he had rather felt forced to come here; forced by tradition and expectation. He had only come to appreciate being here over time, when he had realised what a privilege it actually was to find himself among such brilliant minds and that a lot of people would give

up a lot to be in his place. He admitted that during his years here he had changed from a somewhat spoiled brat to a mature young man, or at least he hoped so even if he sometimes had a backlash and turned into that brat again – like when professor Watson forced him to take on unwanted tasks. They both laughed at that, knowing full well what he eluded to but having moved past that.

He learned she had two younger siblings, one brother, one sister, and they and her mum still lived in London, but her dad had passed away in cancer a few years ago. He was dearly missed but life went on without him, they were strong and loving as a family. She got to know that both his parents were alive but had divorced when he was only seven and he had two half-sisters from his mum which he was quite close to. In many ways they were so different, both their personalities and their backgrounds, yet he felt strangely connected to her.

Sam quickly noticed, that even if he in one way lost time chatting to Betsy and helping her with her research, he got so much in return both in terms of advice and inspiration that it felt like he was moving forward faster now that she was here, and the end goal seemed more reachable than ever. It was just that he found himself wishing this would not end because he enjoyed working with her so much, but no matter if *he* stayed longer at the department or not, *her* time would be up after the three months. This partnership would not last forever anyway. He tried not to think about that and just enjoy it while it lasted.

Over the years, many had asked Sam how come he had chosen the particular subject of his research. On most occasions he answered something vague, that it was an interesting topic that deserved further research, because the truth behind his choice was so personal that he did not want to share it with everyone. When Betsy one day asked he found that he actually wanted *her* to know.

It was a rainy afternoon and both shuddered slightly where they sat in the office as the old stone wall buildings were chilly on such a day.

"I'm going to get myself a coffee to try to warm up, should I get you one too?" He agilely got to his feet.

"No thanks, but a tea would be nice. Don't you know by now that I'm a tea girl?"

Sam knew full well that she always had tea with milk and half a lump of sugar, but he did not want her to know that he paid so close attention.

She gave him a mischievous smile. "My mum always says; '*Never trust a man who chooses coffee over tea*'."

"Why is that? I didn't know drinking coffee was an indication of bad character?" he laughed.

"I dunno. Dad was a firm tea drinker, so it doesn't have anything to do with him. Well, he *was* drinking tea and he *was* the most steadfast person you can imagine so in that way he proved her point. Either it is just a proverb she has made up, she

does that a lot, or it has to do with someone in the past. Mum is usually right about most things though, so I had better watch out with you."

"I suppose I'll have to show you that I'm trustworthy anyway."

He said it as a joke but realised he meant it. They locked eyes with serious faces, his heart for some reason thumping hard, before he turned and walked out to get the drinks, thinking how that conversation had derailed. Why would he have any reason to make her trust in him? There was no need. They were colleagues, that was all. Even if to be honest she felt more like a friend than a colleague, a friend he liked very much.

He returned from the kitchenette a few minutes later, two steaming mugs in hand and gave her one. They both sat sipping their brews, warming their hands on the mugs.

"How come you chose PTSD as your field of research?" she asked as if she just had come to think of the question while he was gone. "I mean, of course it is very interesting, and the field could certainly do with more research and novel treatments, but is there a specific reason why *you* chose it?"

He met her eyes over the brim of the mug, put it down on the desk and leaned back in his chair.

"There was, *is*, a specific reason – yes."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Usually not, but now... I don't mind talking about it with you. It is because of my dad. He suffered from PTSD. I would say from when I was around ten even if it went undiagnosed for quite some time, years even, until it worsened to the degree that no one could turn a blind eye to it. It changed him; affected the way he was at work, affected the way he was at home, the choices he made and how he treated the people who loved him. He was a completely changed man when it was at its worst. I was too young to fully understand, but it impacted my life in so many ways. Mum and dad were already divorced since long and for a while he wasn't allowed to see me at all. I couldn't understand or accept it, that people thought it might be dangerous somehow for me to be with him, or even worse that he might not *want* to meet me..."

His words trailed off and his gaze was absent minded, fixed somewhere in a distant past and full of painful memories. It hurt inside her too. She knew much about losing loved ones.

"I'm so sorry Sam. That must have been so very difficult. What happened then?"

He returned to the present, met her concerned and sympathetic eyes and realised how good it felt talking to her about it.

"In the end he got help, accepted help, but only after hitting rock bottom very deep and hard. At length, we were allowed to spend time together again, but for a long

time it was hard for me to forgive him for the things he had done when he was ill, when he wasn't himself. Even if he wasn't really in charge of his decisions, *he* and no one else made those choices and it impacted me and others. I think I chose that focus for my thesis because I wanted to understand that better and try to help others in the same situation. Both those ill and the people, the kids, close to them. Does that sound presumptuous?"

Moved by his story, she tried to blink away some excessive fluid from her eyes, not to make a twit of herself. She had a feeling he would not want her to pity him, he was too proud for that, but she could not help *feeling* for him.

"No, not at all. That sounds like the best reason ever to want to know more about something. To understand your own past and to help. Is your dad alright now?"

"Yes, he has been okay for a long time, this happened more than ten years ago, but I think he will never fully accept what it cost him. It cost him his career as he knew it, but he says that was the least important loss. He is still grieving time lost with me, but at least we found our way back to one another. I think the hardest part, what he will never get over is that it cost him the love of his life."

"Your mum?"

"No, it was over between them way before that. It was a woman he met after the divorce and started over. They were together four years, married, and I loved her

too. I still believe they were made for each other, but the fucking PTSD got in the way. Sorry."

He looked embarrassed over his language.

"Don't worry. I'm not that sensitive and it seems justified. Did she leave him?"

"He drove her away, quite brutally. I prefer not to go into details, but he really crushed everything between them to the point that there was no turning back and she had to go even if she loved him. And me. I know she loved me but she explained we couldn't stay in touch when things were as they were, it was too hard. Sometimes you have to cut all strings to survive I suppose. I didn't know the details back then, but I knew it was *his* fault she left, and I missed her so much. I hated him for it, for what he did to her and me. I know now he loathed himself too. He has told me that he can live with the harm the PTSD did to his career, but he'll never forgive himself for the time he lost with me or that he lost her because he drove her away with his actions."

"It sounds so terribly sad, for everyone. He actually told you all this? You must be very close?"

"We didn't use to be. We had a relationship, sort of, after he was allowed to start seeing me again, but it was only when I started my graduate studies and chose to focus on PTSD, we began sitting down and talking for real. For hours and hours. Somehow my research worked as an "excuse", I think maybe he needed that. He

finally let me in, dropped his guard and shared it all with me for the first time. I guess he realised he could when I wasn't a child anymore. He didn't have to try to protect me. Knowing the truth made me finally come to terms with what happened and leave it behind."

He felt so far away, sitting behind his desk. She wished she could give him a hug, but jumping up from her seat, crossing the floor and close her arms around him would have felt like crossing so many lines. She was not sure he would have accepted it and remained seated where she was. He continued talking.

"You know, if no one cares about my research, if my thesis fails, then I still have achieved something because I found my way back to dad for real. I'm able to move on because I have let go of the bitterness and resentment towards him and towards life for just being shit for a while. Realised it doesn't mean it has to continue on that track, it *can* be good. I'm probably happier now than I have been since I was ten."

"I think that is more than most researchers can hope to get out of what they do."

"I think it is."

"And him? Has he been able to move on?"

"In a way. He works helping others who are in the situation he was. He feels he has a purpose that way and I know he is very happy about him and me, but I don't think he ever will get past losing *her*. I think he tried dating at some point, but always ended it before long. I asked if he doesn't miss being with someone and he said he

does, but he can't be with the wrong person when he knows what it feels like to be with *the one*."

"Did he ever tell her? Did he meet her again after they split up?"

"I asked that a few years ago. He said that after he got well, and his life was back on track, he had looked her up, but she seemed to live a happy life with someone else. She had moved on, had kids and everything so he didn't want to interfere with that. He let go without contacting her. I guess that is what real love is."

"What? Letting go?"

"Yes, letting go even if it breaks your heart if you think that is what is best for the other."

"Now you nearly have me crying Sam, this was the saddest thing I have heard in a long time. I hope I never have to make such a choice in my life."

"Neither do I."

They were solemnly quiet for a while, sipped their brews which had become tepid by now. She was just going to ask what actually had happened to his father, that made him end up like that, the underlying cause of the PTSD, when Sam's phone rang. He answered, and she knew from his tone of voice and expression that it was the professor.

"Your wanted?" she asked when he hung up.

He sighed.

"Unfortunately. From one festive conversation to another I assume." Then he smiled. "Don't get me wrong, I really appreciated this talk. Even if my research is about PTSD and I work with it daily, it is very seldom that I tell people why I chose to do it. Why it matters to me. I liked telling you. Thanks for listening, Betsy."

She watched him leave with a lump in her throat, sad over the past. Sad over the things that he, his dad and the wife had gone through. It was heart breaking to think that sometimes love was just not enough to keep two persons together for life and others suffered in the wake of it, like Sam who had lost a step mum he apparently loved. All this seemed to explain why Sam to her sometimes seemed a bit lonely, even if he was the type of popular young man that both girls and boys wanted to spend time with. In a way it also explained why she felt a strange kinship with him. Her past experiences which sometimes made her feel like an outsider even when she was with friends and loved ones. She wished with all her heart that his life would be happy going forward. Scraping on the surface of him, layer upon layer revealed itself and the more she got to know, the more she liked him.

A/N: Thank you all for the massive response. I just love being so drawn into a story that I cannot resist writing it. Not sure this chapter will make you any wiser but hopefully it is enjoyable anyway.

Chapter 3

Alexa Jones was in high spirits as she crossed the court yard and entered the building where the Department of Psychiatry was located. She was looking forward to an evening she was sure would be the fabulous beginning of something even more amazing. She had bagged the date that essentially every single girl at this university would die for, probably some of the non-single ones and the gays too. To her knowledge, he had not dated anyone at all for well past six months, but this evening he was hers and he intended for him to stay hers. She would not waste this chance, he would realise what an exceptional catch she was. His true match in looks, mind and wealth.

She knew that she always was a gorgeous girl, yet she had spared no effort preparing for this evening and was dolled up to the nines. She had skipped all lectures after lunch and gone for a full manicure, pedicure, facial and waxing so she only had the perfect landing strip left. She knew exactly what she hoped would land

there already tonight. Usually she kept them waiting at least until the third date, but this was special and she could hardly wait.

After the beauty salon she had continued to an appointment with the city's best hairdresser. Not that her long naturally blonde hair needed a haircut, but no one could wash and blow dry a hair to the same perfection as a pro and only the best was good enough for this occasion. At home, a brand new set of lace lingerie and a black dress bought especially for the occasion, had been waiting to wrap her toned body. She had finished off the look with a carefully applied makeup and a pair of heels to make her long well-shaped legs even taller. When she glanced in the mirror one last time before leaving, she looked sensational. She knew he would not be able to resist *this*. The only question was how long he would be able to keep his hands off her and how long she would make him plead for it.

The first time she had seen him was last year when he had held an unforgettable lecture for her class, replacing another teacher who were sick that day. What a replacement! She had not heard a word of that lecture, too busy admiring his handsome face, drowning in his brown eyes, fantasising about the promising shape of his torso underneath the shirt and tried to judge the size of what was sadly well-hidden under his jeans. The rest of the female audience had probably had thoughts along the same line, but she had decided then and there that she would have him one day. Afterwards she had done her research about him; Samuel James, PhD student, equally clever and athletic, apparently from a minted Bath family.

Satisfied with the outcome she had made sure that their paths crossed every now and then.

She knew that he was bound to notice her sooner rather than later. He was definitely not the absent minded research type that was too common here, yet it had taken him surprisingly long to take the bait. In fact she had had to dangle it right in front of his nose by finally asking him if he would take her out on a date. He had looked surprised. Of course, even a dashing guy like him could probably not believe his luck when a girl like *her* asked him out. She could hardly believe that she had stooped to ask. *She*, who never had to ask, but sometimes the end justifies the means. He had accepted, naturally, but he had not looked as thrilled as could be expected. Probably he was too shocked and grateful. Now she planned to surprise him again. It was always good to keep men alert by adding the element of surprise, even if a pleasant one.

He had not suggested anything inventive for the date, just to go grab a beer and something to eat at the pub and she had tried to convince herself that she liked that he kept it low key. If he did not feel he had to go out of his way to try to impress her, it meant he was equipped with good self-confidence and *that* she liked because it usually meant a man was more assertive in bed. He had suggested they would meet outside the pub in half an hour, but she planned to go and pick him up at work instead. It would be a cute gesture and it would make people start talking about them. She liked the thought of the rumour mill being about *them*. He was

not her teacher, so they had nothing to hide and the sooner everyone knew that he belonged to her, the better.

She had done her research diligently and knew exactly where his office was located, down a corridor on the second floor. Expectantly she made her way there, could hardly wait to see the look on his face when he saw her on his door step in this tight black dress. This time Friday afternoon many offices were already empty, people taking an early weekend, but she knew for a fact that he was something of a workaholic and often stayed late so she felt confident she would find him here. When she approached the office she did indeed see that the light was on and heard voices. She recognised his, but to her surprise there was also a female voice and the talking was interrupted by laughter, as if they were engaged in friendly banter rather than in a work related conversation. The door was open, and she stood there a few seconds, watching them before she cleared her throat to make her presence known.

He was sitting perched on his desk, relaxed and with his face scrunched in laughter. There was a second desk opposite to his and a petite girl was sitting behind it laughing so much it looked like she could pee her pants any second. When they noticed Alexa, both appeared startled which was an acceptable reaction. It was less acceptable that he looked disappointed over the interruption. In fact, he looked like he wondered what the hell she was doing there. Like he had even forgotten they were to meet this evening. Impossible.

"Alexa? Hi, what are you doing here?" he asked, eyebrows still raised in surprise.

She walked over, making sure not to hurry too much so he would get a good look of her sexy tall legs as she worked the 4 inch heels, and pecked him on the cheek. He did not look best pleased and she made a note to herself that public display of affection did not seem to be his cup of tea.

"I just thought it would be nice to come by and surprise you, instead of meeting outside the pub."

"Oh, right." He glanced at his watch as if he did not have a clue what time it was and had forgotten that he was supposed to meet her in fifteen minutes. "We'd better get going then."

His eyes shifted to the girl behind Alexa's back and she turned around to look at her again. She instantly disliked her even if she clearly was no competition. On a Friday evening she was without makeup, had her long, thick black hair in a messy bun and was simply dressed in a white top and jeans. Even if Alexa had to admit that her figure was not half bad, she looked very plain. Some women simply did not know how to use their assets, which made the world a far better place for those who knew how to. Like Alexa. In addition to plain, she looked a bit deflated right now. Sad even. The poor little thing probably had a crush on him and was devastated to find out he had a date. That was probably why he seemed a bit bothered that she was here, because he kindly wanted to spare his colleague's feelings. Alexa had no such concerns.

"Won't you introduce us, Sam?" she purred.

"Err, well yes. Alexa, this is Betsy. She is a guest researcher here for three months. Betsy, this is Alexa, we..." he interrupted himself as if he was unsure what to say.

"Sam is taking me on a date tonight", she helpfully filled in. When she looked at him, she could swear that his cheeks had turned pink. How adorable.

"Okay, let's go." He said curtly and picked up a black leather jacket from a chair and pulled it on. Dressed in that over a well-fitting white t-shirt, paired with slim jeans and sneakers, she thought he looked so hot that she was willing to go to bed without passing the pub, as if she was playing a grown up sexy version of Monopoly where something else than estates was the coveted prize.

Before leaving he paused in the door way with his gaze fixed on the skinny little thing.

"Goodbye Betsy, have a great evening", he said but his voice made it sound like he said "I'm sorry."

"Have a great evening", the girl generously said, but Alexa could tell from her tone she did not mean it and had to bite her lip not to let out a mocking laugh. That girl really had it bad for him.

Sam sat opposite the perfect blonde creature in a pub booth where she had wiped the seat clean with a wet wipe before sitting down. He had ordered a beer and a

burger and chips. She had ordered a glass of white wine and a Caesar salad without dressing, bacon, parmesan or croutons, which seemed to leave her with romaine lettuce and chicken. At least she ate her food, whilst he after one bite of the burger just pushed the chips it around his plate. He found it hard to focus on her. Too many other things were competing about the attention in his mind and it was not his thesis, even if he otherwise was busy wrapping it up these days.

For one thing he had had the weirdest conversation with Professor Watson today, one which made him wonder if he had to re-evaluate the woman completely. She had called him to his office after reading the final draft of his thesis. He went there prepared to be torn to shreds.

For the first time ever, she acknowledged him as soon as he entered instead of leaving him waiting and graciously nodded for him to sit down. She stared him right in the eyes, elbows placed on the desk and tapping her fingertips together. After a few long seconds she spoke.

"So, Samuel James, I managed to squeeze something good out of you in the end. Something great in fact."

"Come again, ma'am?" he said in disbelief. Had she really said that?

She nodded towards the thick pile of paper which was a printout of his thesis.

"This. This is good stuff, but you already know that don't you?"

"I'm proud of it, but to be honest, I never expected to hear praise from you. You have never let me know that anything I do is any good, on the contrary. Especially memorable was the time when you told me a brain the size of a water melon was required to understand what I had written."

She smirked.

"If I had given you praise early on you would never have made the effort. The day you came here, you weren't really prepared to work for it, I could spot that from miles distance. The only way to make you go all the way was to provoke you, make you angry, make you want to show the old bitch. *Me* that is", she grinned.

"You don't think I'm a useless idiot?"

"I have always known that you're not. With this thesis and your publications you will show the rest of the scientific community that you're not just a pretty face. I predict that you have a brilliant future Samuel James and I wish you every luck. That said, I have a few minor suggestions how you can improve it even further before you send it off to printing. Come here..."

He had been shocked, he still was. When he had shared it with Betsy afterwards she had laughed heartily.

"You said it yourself; you were a spoiled brat when you came here. It seems like Watson found the right triggers to transform you into a determined man and a great scientist instead."

"All this time, she has driven me mad!"

"Would you had made it otherwise, or would you have left before you really got started? Before you realised what it gave you in return?"

"Maybe, I don't know. Christ, I still can't believe she manipulated me!"

He had had it on the tip of his tongue to ask her if she wanted to go out and have a beer together to celebrate that the thesis had passed the professor's scrutiny, but right then Alexa had interrupted them, much to his disappointment .

Why had he even accepted a date with her?

This was his first date in a long time and he had almost reluctantly accepted. Over the years as a graduate student, there had been an inverse relationship between his dating of girls and the efforts he put into his work. He got accepted as one of Professor Watson's PhD students based on his excellent merits and interviews, but when he started he had been something of a player. Professor Watson had a point there. He had been used to getting by on his high intelligence without much effort and would spend all his free time on ladies, drinking and practicing sports. Gradually he had understood that here more was required of him, especially as Watson provided practically no support at all. Spurred by her obvious contempt for him, he had spent more and more time on his research, less on dating and drinking, whilst he still kept fit with early morning runs and martial arts classes

several times a week. When he realised the research also made him come closer to his dad, his efforts had doubled.

The last six months or so he had not bothered to date at all, but now for some reason accepted when Alexa Jones asked. Maybe it was because he moments before had caught himself daydreaming of Betsy and harshly had told himself to stop it. It just would not do. She was his close colleague and even if it was temporary, he appreciated her too much as a friend to cock it up by having an affair with her. He would not admit to himself that he actually wanted to ask her out for real and was scared shitless at the thought of what would happen if she said no and even more scared of what would happen if she said yes. Alexa had seemed like the perfect distraction. Except she was not.

He looked at the immaculate beauty before him. Her petal like pink lips moved, but he did not hear what she said. Her features were perfectly symmetrical, her blue eyes huge with long eyelashes. She had amazing blonde hair and to be honest a perfect body – but it did *nothing* to him. He felt absolutely nothing. She had not made him laugh once, but to be fair maybe because he was not listening. He did not want to be here.

Where did he want to be? Suddenly the answer was easy. He wanted to be with Betsy, that was all he really wanted. The thought that she thought he was on a date with someone else suddenly made him nauseous. Well, he *was* on a date with someone else but he needed her to know that was not what he wanted.

"You are such a great listener", Alexa just said as he tuned in again. "Most guys only want to talk about themselves, but you haven't interrupted me once."

"I'm so sorry, but I have to go", he blurted out.

"What?"

"I just realised there is somewhere else I need to be."

"But we're on a date! You can't just ditch me!"

"Sorry, I'll pay for the food and drinks at the bar before I leave and you can stay if you like. Keep munching your tasty lettuce."

"You asshole! No one walks out on me, ever!"

"I guess sometime has to be the first. Have a great evening."

He was gone and Alexa sat there fuming, but not alone for long as an old fling passed by and she decided that he would do as a replacement shag just to get rid of some steam.

Sam hurried back towards the office like he could not afford to lose another second. He had been gone maximum an hour and hoped Betsy would still be there, because he desperately wanted to find her. He did not know her exact home address and he did not feel like calling her, felt he wanted to see her face to face and would not

know what to say over the phone. He ran up the big marble stairway two steps at a time and strode down the corridor, but only to find the office empty. A small lamp was still on, but she was not there. He felt so cripplingly disappointed that for a while he just stood there staring at her desk like that would make her magically appear, without being able to decide what to do next.

"Did you forget something?"

She leaned in the doorway, smiling, returned from some other room. His relief was palpable, yet butterflies fluttered in his belly at the sight of her. God, he loved that smile. Loved everything about her.

"You?" he said.

"What?"

"It is unbelievably stupid, but I forgot you."

Slowly, he walked over to her. To stand only inches apart, him looking down on her, she tilting her face up towards him, eyes locked. She looked a bit confused. He was way out of his depth, he had no clue how she would react; if she would welcome it or push him away, but he risked everything on one card and bent down and kissed her.

Chapter 4

Never had skin felt so soft under his fingertips. Never had a woman smelled so heavenly or tasted this sweet on his tongue. Never had he felt so close to anyone or had such a sensation of completeness being inside a woman when she came undone around him. He never wanted it to end and immediately when it did, he wanted it to start over again.

Last night had been crazy. As soon as he kissed Betsy, there was no stopping them. She wrapped her arms around his neck and answered the kiss without reservations. He could feel she wanted it as much as him and wondered why the hell he had waited to do something that felt so incredibly right.

That first kiss was like igniting a fuse and in a second they had gone from well-behaved colleagues to lovers. They had so nearly gone all the way then and there on his desk. Papers and journals had already started dropping down on the floor as he placed her on it whilst kissing each other breathless, when he came to his senses and realised that no matter how much he wanted her, he did not want her like *this* the first time. Reluctantly he pulled away a little and she giggled during the brief pause, aroused and slightly embarrassed.

"This... I... I didn't want to go on that date. I wanted to be with you", he admitted with ragged breath.

"I think it's kind of obvious by now that I wanted to be with you too". Her eyes twinkled, with pupils dilated just as his.

"Come with me to my place?"

"Yes." Her soft voice did not reveal any hesitation.

"Are you sure? Maybe we should go on a date first or something?" he offered gallantly.

"I already know you, Sam. I don't need a date to know I want this. All I want right now is for you to hold me, be close to me."

He had absolutely nothing further to object and holding hands and sometimes pausing for another lovely snog, they half-ran to his flat. It was only ten minutes away but that seemed too far. Once there, the most amazing night of his life had happened.

It was only now, in the morning light that fear and doubt came seeping into his mind.

Betsy woke up feeling his strong arms around her, the length of his warm body spooning her from behind and a wave of utter joy travelled through her. She had been crushed last evening when that blonde, unfriendly amazon had turned up. During the time they had known each other, Sam had not once mentioned a girlfriend and even if that did not mean he would ever be interested in *her*, it had induced an unconscious hope in her which she had not even been aware of until last night. He had not told her he had a date planned that evening either, so the unpleasant surprise had been total. Not that his dating was her business, but as soon as she saw that Alexa, her heart had dropped.

First she could not even put her finger on why. He was her colleague and friend. If he went on a date that did not change any of that, so why did disappointment strike her so hard? It was like a punch in her face followed by a dull ache inside her which persisted when they were gone. Numb, she remained at her desk, staring at his empty space, already missing him. She always missed him when he was not there, but more this time because he was with that horrible girl. He, who was so humorous and down to earth, what was he doing with such a girl? Then she admitted to herself; it would not have mattered if it had been a really sweet girl, she would have disliked the fact that he was on a date with *anyone* because she wanted it to be *her*.

Even though she was alone, the realisation made her blush. It also made her even more sad and frustrated. If Alexa was the kind of girl he preferred, it was evident that *she* would never stand a chance. In a way it was not surprising because he was the sort of impressive man that women turned their head after so of course there

was competition, but she had felt like they were growing so close. Like they somehow belonged together, even if she only now realised she secretly had wanted it to be something more than a platonic relationship. How foolish of her.

Her only plan for the evening had been to watch a movie with her flat mate, Suzy, but she lingered a while longer in the office because she wanted to be alone, nursing her sadness for a while. In the end she felt that she ought to go home after all, because she needed some distraction to stop imagining what *they* were doing right now. Images of him and Alexa kissing flashed by in her mind and made her feel like crying, or maybe puking, or both. She was already dreading him telling her about his fantastic date on Monday and pondered if she should call in sick.

Last thing before finally going home to movie, *Ben & Jerry Cookie Dough*, and maybe a full bottle of wine to go with it, she went to the rest room. When she returned she found him there, with drooping shoulders, looking lost. Her heart had jolted at the sight of him. Now when she had realised how she felt about him, his unexpected presence was somehow intimidating. She had not understood why he had come back, had searched for the answer in his eyes which had lightened up when he saw her, but only fully understood when he moved over and kissed her. After that, everything that followed felt so natural, so right and it still did now in the morning light.

She felt him stir and turned to face him. He was awake, and his brown smiling eyes were reflecting every feeling she had.

"Hey you."

She moved her hand up to his face, caressed the stubble and then they kissed good morning. They had hardly talked last night and before doing it now either, they found they needed to make love again. She was not even sure for which time since they had stumbled into this flat leaving a trail of clothes behind them as they made it to the bed. She only knew she could not get enough of him and it was the same for him with her.

Whilst exploring her mouth with his tongue in the most delectable way, he moved her closer holding the cheeks of her bum. Still lying on the side facing each other, he pulled her leg over him. They just stayed like that for a while, kissing, before he carefully eased himself inside her, causing her to moan slightly. With eyes open and firmly locked, they moved slow and sensually. He held on to her as hard as he dared without hurting her, grasping sometimes her bum, sometimes her shoulders, whilst she entwined her fingers in his locks and pressed him closer to her using her leg. The only sound was their uneven breaths, mingling because they were so near, and as they came closer to the edge, the breathing was interspersed with moans from them both. They did not increase the pace even towards the end this time, the feeling of the friction of skin to skin was so perfect anyway and their presence in the moment so intense that they needed nothing more. Only the moans got louder as he burst inside her shuddering body, before they stilled and went quiet, kissing, catching breath, smiling and still joined for some time.

She propped her head up, softly traced the outline of his lips with her index finger and smiled.

"This was unexpected, considering I didn't think I stood a chance yesterday."

"What do you mean?"

He ran his fingers through her silky long hair and realised he had wanted to do that since he first saw her.

"When that Alexa came to get you. I thought that if she was the type you liked to date, someone like me would never have chance. And please don't tell me now you came back because she dumped you."

"Of course not." He had to pull her to him in another potent kiss because he could not stand the thought there was even the slightest chance she might think that was the case. "To be honest, I had nearly forgotten I even went on a date with her yesterday. Just like I had forgotten I had it planned when she came, because I enjoyed being with you. That date was the least important part of the evening. Disaster to tell the truth, because I never wanted to be there. The only good thing about it was that it made me realise that all I wanted was to be with you, like this, not just like a colleague or friend."

"And you didn't know that before?"

"Did you?"

Once upon a long time after The Jump

"No", she giggled. "I realised when you were gone, realised I had wanted it to be me and felt like a miserable loser."

"But you weren't." Again, they had to kiss.

"Okay", he then admitted. "I *knew* I wanted it at some level, but I didn't admit it to myself. I have always had this rule about not dating close colleagues and I liked you too much to want to burn any bridges."

She cocked an eyebrow.

"So, is that what you think you have done now? Burned bridges? Made a mistake?"

"No! I mean, I don't feel that way at all. I don't regret anything, this is... this is just amazing."

She knew that he meant what he said, but she also sensed there was something else.

"But still there is something that bothers you, isn't it?"

He did not want to spoil the moment, but he wanted to be honest with her.

"I'm also a bit frightened, I must admit."

"Of what?"

Of the things that had made him shun any long term relationship, stay disconnected to any girl that tried to get near to him and shut off and end it as soon as it started to feel a bit serious. A coping strategy that had been effective up to now, but was useless now because with her he felt that he *wanted* to let her in. It was equally lovely and unbelievably scary.

"What if we don't work out together? Or... what if we do? I'm soon finished here and haven't decided what to do with my life afterwards. What if we end up living far apart?"

Even if he had not planned to verbalise his concerns, it was like he somehow wearing his heart on his sleeve today, like he could not keep his feelings from her even if he had wanted to. Her expression was one of utter fondness and she cupped his face in her hands as if she wanted to protect him.

"Sam, you think too much. This is Day 1. It is a lovely, lovely day and I intend to enjoy it, enjoy *you* to the fullest. You always risk something to win something when you start seeing someone, but I think that if we are meant to be we will find the answer to all those questions in due time. We don't need to think of all possible problems and their solutions today and I would not have this undone for *anything*."

Now she took his hand and kissed his palm, then put it to her own cheek. He felt lighter inside.

"I know, and neither would I. It's just that I have seen that love isn't always enough to keep people together and I guess it makes me a bit cautious."

"You're thinking about your dad now?"

"Uhum."

They had not talked more about his father since the day when he had shared why his research was about PTSD. She had wanted to ask more, but there had not been any natural opportunity when she had not felt like she would be snooping if she asked, and he had not spontaneously volunteered more information.

"What happened to your dad was incredibly sad and I've thought a lot about it since you told me, but you are not your dad and I'm not *her* and that was very special circumstances. Nothing says that the same will happen to us, not if we don't let it. Please don't worry, not today. I have the feeling this is the start of something really good."

Just like her, all he wanted was to enjoy the present, so he pushed aside his concerns. For now forced himself to stop assuming the worst or building walls against her to protect himself. Instead he pulled her closer to his side, his arm around her and she nuzzled into the dip by his neck.

"I have that feeling too", he said, now smiling.

They just lay there for a while, revelling in each other, until her stomach rumbled loudly.

"Do you have any breakfast home? I'm starving."

"Will scrambled eggs and bacon do? That's what I usually make for myself on a weekend."

She nodded and thought how many things there was to know about him, that she did not know yet. Small but important things. This night she had learned that he was the best lover she had had and that he preferred to sleep on the left side of the bed; that his bed sheets were fresh even when he did not expect company (because he had made it clear he *never* had expected Alexa here); that he wore black cotton trunks when she unzipped his jeans and that he was even more fit underneath his clothes than she could have imagined; that his hair looked adorably messy in the morning and that he despite his confident appearance was more afraid of their budding relationship going down the drain than she was; and now that his weekend breakfast was scrambled eggs and bacon. She was looking forward to learning many more such personal details about him and hoped he would let her stay around to do so.

As he started preparing the meal, she enjoyed the sight of him doing so in only trunks and also let her gaze wander around the flat. Last night she had paid very little attention to the surroundings, only focused on him. Just by a quick look around it was obvious that he had more money to spend than she did. The flat she

shared with Suzy was cosy but much simpler and tiny compared to this one which he had all to himself, but she knew already that this would not matter to him. He would likely enjoy staying at her place just as much, they would only have to be quieter in bed. She bit her lip at the thought, felt a heat between her thighs. She had not known it was possible to want someone this much.

She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his lean body from behind, leaned her head to his back. After a few moments of just enjoying this, he turned around spatula in hand and took her in, dressed in a light blue shirt of his which to her was almost a dress. With only a few buttons buttoned he found her irresistibly hot and wanted her again, but knowing she was hungry, he only put his arms around her and pressed his lips to her hair. He reflected how small she felt under his hands, almost fragile. Yet she had shown him this morning that she could be a solid rock, full of joy, optimism and strength, holding him if he waivered.

"Are you my girlfriend now, Betsy Dawes?" he asked.

"If you want me to be", she said with her lips to his chest.

"I do."

Even if he was totally scared of what it might mean in terms of becoming dependent on her, of losing himself in his feelings for her, exposing himself and risking getting hurt, the truth was that there was nothing he wanted more.

Once upon a long time after The Jump

A/N: Sorry for not answering all the questions that seem to be out there just yet, but I wanted to let these two sweethearts enjoy each other and get closer for a bit first. I'm a bit partial to a young and innocent romance.

A/N: Thank you for all lovely reviews and guesses how everything is connected. You will see...

Chapter 5

The following weeks, Sam felt happier than he could remember feeling for a continuous period of time since when he, dad and Molly had been a family for a few years. Those years when the grownups were madly in love yet had made it completely clear that they wanted him there in their midst, that he was loved too, not an intruder in their relationship. Those were years when his dad had stayed home for longer periods than ever before; laughing, playing, present, carefree and happy instead of distant and restless like he had been with Sam's mum. Rooted instead of on the run. Those perfect, precious days had continued one after another, like wild strawberries lined up on a straw - until uncle Elvis died. After that things were never the same again, instead moved in slow motion towards a bitter end. His dad distanced himself from Sam and Molly, stayed away for long periods again and on the rare occasions when he was with them, his expression was absent or tormented like he no longer was able to enjoy their company. Sam had seen them drift apart, unable to do anything about it. He and Molly had tried to support one another, but he was not enough. Dad broke her heart and then she was gone.

Sometimes he brought out those good memories from a locked box inside his mind, like a beautiful little snowglobe to shake and watch the glitter swirl for a while, but then always put it away because in the end the loss was so painful that he could not endure the beauty of it. She was gone and so was that happy version of his dad, even if he remained in body. It was a consolation and part of a healing process that dad and he had found their way back to each other in recent years, it really was, but the sweet and far too short time with Molly somehow still remained the golden standard for pure, unadulterated happiness as far as Sam was concerned.

Now that had changed. Now there was Betsy.

One day he and Betsy walked through the park holding hands. The sun warmed their backs and a breeze made cherry blossom petals swirl around them like a pink spring version of snow. Suddenly he thought of that time when he, dad and Molly had gone to the pier in Brighton. He had been too old to hold hands really, yet he had that day. Walked between them, holding both their hands in between riding carousels, eating cotton candy and laughing so their stomachs hurt. The essence of happiness. Walking here now, holding Betsy's hand as the blossom petals fell around them in the warm breeze, felt the same. For the first time in forever it was like he was inside the imaginary snowglobe instead of outside, watching it.

He had found happiness of his own and he had no intention of ruining it or letting it slip through his fingers like his dad had. There were moments when he was scared, when he thought the wisest thing might be to run the other direction before

he fell even harder, but he did not. Instead he held her closer, kissed her sincerer and shared his laughs and his body with her as much as he could.

There was a moment when she lay next to him, when he had an epiphany looking at her sleeping form, fully realising what his father had meant when he said he would not try to be with anyone else than Molly. If you once had known what it felt like to be with *the one*, no one else would ever do as replacement. He understood that feeling now. It simultaneously made him very sad for his dad and so very happy for him and Betsy. It was early days, but he knew this was *it*.

Work was more fun than ever now when they were together, but he was grateful that his thesis was finalised and he only had to prepare for the oral examination and thesis defence, because it was hard to focus when his mind was so full of her. When she was there in person, all he wanted to do was to snuggle up with her, kiss her, feel her, smell her, be drawn into her intoxicating laughter. When she was not there, all he could do was *think* of the same things. It was like every part of him, every cell in his body, belonged to her and strived to be near her. When he was near her, there was a calmness in him and the sensation of utter completeness and joy.

They spent much time together alone, but they also opened the doors to each other's worlds by quickly introducing one another to their friends. As both were persons who were easy to like and the affection between them was so apparent, they were quickly accepted as a couple by all. Betsy's flat mate Suzy instantly

approved of Sam, even if she said she wished Betsy had met someone who she would feel more comfortable showing herself in front of relaxing in old joggers and no makeup. Suzy also admitted that although she missed her flat mate when she spent so much time at Sam's place, she preferred that to the happy couple staying in Betsy's bed. They made it difficult for her to sleep as they were not as silent as they intended to be.

Even Professor Watson smirked when she one day caught them kissing in the office and they flew apart quick as a flash, with pink tinged cheeks.

"I had a gut feeling this might work out", she chuckled, turned and left without saying what she had come for in the first place.

They stared at each other and burst into fits of laughter.

"Did she just admit that she played match maker?"

"I think she did!"

"Christ, I never thought I would see the day."

She was happy through and through.

She had not been unhappy before, far from, but this was different. This was right.

Betsy carried a different baggage with her from the past than Sam. She had the security of a very loving relationship with her family. They were her safe haven and she knew she would always have them to fall back on no matter what happened. Yet, there had been a time when she too had felt unwanted, when she had been treated badly. She seldom allowed herself to dwell upon it and never spoke of it, but that past experience was lurking in her subconscious. It did not make her weak tough, it made her strong. She had survived the worst betrayal without breaking and that left her knowing she could survive almost anything. Despite her almost fragile appearance there was therefore another strength to her core than there was to Sam.

She was cautious too. She did not let just *anyone* in, but if someone proved themselves to her she would embrace them and take them to her heart. She had done that with Sam like with no one before, because he touched her like no man had. She tried to put her finger on what it was with him, sensing it was not only the combination of masculine confidence and boyish vulnerability. Despite that they only had known each other for a short time, she could not shake off the feeling that there was a connection, something which made them belong together.

Unlike him she had been in a few long relationships, even lived together with a guy called Dwayne for some time. Her mum had never liked Dwayne much for not fully explained reasons. She just maintained they never felt right, and in retrospect Betsy agreed with her. Especially now, when this relationship was growing on her. It was like she did not only learn more and more about him, but also about herself.

A new catalogue of emotions seemed to open inside her and she realised she had never known what it meant to love a man for real. The intensity of her feelings after only having known him for a few months, been lovers for weeks, sometimes frightened her. Even if she did not say it to Sam, it scared her just like it scared him. She loved him so much that she knew it would hurt beyond belief if he left her, but she could not stop herself from feeling it. She had never believed that stopping herself from loving, staying emotionally unattached, was the answer to not getting hurt. She believed in passionately giving all when something felt right, bear or break, otherwise she would not lead a life worth living anyway. This was not something she put into words inside her mind, it was just the essence of her being.

Never had anything felt as right as this, as being with Sam, so she gave herself fully to him like she never had before. No walls, no reservations, she only wanted to be his and for him to be hers.

"I can't see you on Saturday", she told him taking a sip of her tea.

His head snapped up from the book he had been reading.

"Why not?"

"Mum called me before. She was supposed to work, but there was a water leakage at the hospital, so they had to close down her ward temporarily. Now she has the

weekend off and wants to come visit. She will stay in a B&B though, so if you want I can come for the night?"

"If I want to? Of course I do. It is bad enough I have to spend the day without you."

He watched her silently for a while, appreciated how beautiful she was, sitting in the window sill with rays of sun reflecting on her dark hair.

"I have another idea. If you don't think it feels too early."

"What is?"

"My dad is actually driving here for the day too. We're going to meet up in the afternoon for a bite and plan for the reception I will have after my examination. Normally it would be mum's type of thing, but she and her hubby have rented a house in France for a couple of months and will return just in time for the whole thing. I have been wanting to ask you if you wanted to join us for dinner. If you like to we could have dinner all four of us. In a restaurant I mean."

"The four of us? Your dad and my mum? We both get to meet the parents?" she giggled.

"Why not? It might take away the drama if we meet them both like that."

"It might...", she sounded a bit hesitant. She was not sure she was ready to meet Mr. James yet after the things Sam had told. Maybe he was this stern, grumpy old man who would not approve of her one bit. She was not sure if bringing her mum

would make it better or worse, it depended on what mood mum was in. She was not one for posh people or licking arses, but if she was in the right mood she might at least behave nicely for Betsy's sake. Then she sighed to herself, knowing she was a bit hard on her mum because the truth was that she would do anything for her. She already had done *everything* for her and would hardly embarrass her in front of Sam's dad, even if she sometimes swore like a sailor claiming the habit was an occupational injury from her previous job.

"Please Betsy, I would love if you met dad before the examination day. You will meet then for sure, but there will be so many others around that day. I would love if he got to know you a bit, and you him."

"Well, I am a bit curious about him..."

"Please..."

He moved closer, pulled her to him and placed his lips next to her earlobe, making her skin prickle.

"Please, please, please."

"Okay. Okay, we'll have dinner with you. I may need lots of wine though."

"That can be arranged", he grinned, relieved and happy she had accepted. "I can make a reservation at *The Head of the River*. Then we have a nice view over the water, but it isn't too pretentious."

"Yeah, it had better be something where mum can afford to pay the bill herself because she won't have it any other way."

She smiled, still quite not believing they would actually let their parents meet and that she herself would meet his dad, but Sam did not seem bothered at all. She decided she would wait until Saturday to tell her mum, so she would not change her mind about coming.

He put her down on the bed and moved over her, pulling her dress over her head in one swift move.

"We will be late", she giggled but he silenced her with a hungry kiss, fingers inside the lining of her knickers.

"I'm sure they're able to entertain each other. He is a gentleman, he will buy her a drink and they will be fine. I, on the hand, will die if I can't have you now."

Supporting himself on one arm, he unbuttoned his jeans with the free hand and she gladly helped him push them down over his hips, then wrapped her legs around him.

Her mum had arrived by train this morning and they had spent the day together. Had lunch, done some shopping, talked, and Betsy had bashfully broken the news they were having dinner with her new boyfriend and his dad much to her mum's

amusement. Betsy had been relieved to find out she did not object at all, on the contrary her mum said she was looking forward to it.

Even if she always had a great time with mum and they sometimes felt more like sisters than mother and daughter, she held back a bit in telling about Sam. Unsure how much of an open wound the loss of her dad still was, if mum could bear hearing of a love story.

"You like this Sam, I take it?" her mum had smiled. "Or you would not make me meet his dad?"

"That was his idea, but you're right. He is something special, you will see."

"I trust your judgement. Well, with the exception of Deayne, but 'Sams ' tend to be good guys, I knew a wonderful one once."

"A boyfriend?"

"No. A friend, sort of", she said curtly.

Betsy felt her mum withdrawing the way she sometimes did, for unknown reason acting like a seemingly harmless subject was mined and all one could do was accept and leave it be. There were certain conversations she did not want to enter, and the best thing was simply to move on.

"I want to make a good impression on his dad. Will you help me buy a new dress?"

"Of course I will, but if he doesn't like you he is a prannet."

When Betsy went to Sam's to get changed, her mum had checked in at the B&B and they agreed to meet up at the restaurant at five. An appointment she and Sam would be late to due to the wondrous things he did to her in bed.

She had longed for him all day and when she returned to his flat to get changed, he showed her that he had missed her too. They had intended it to be a quickie, but skin to skin they were unable to make it that. Caught up in the magic of the moment they forgot about time and wanted it to last forever. Lips grazing and bruising, bodies clinging to one another, moving in perfect synchronicity. If they were late to a dinner, what did it matter?

After the shower, they stood in front of the bathroom mirror, brushing their teeth meeting each other's gaze in the mirror, grinning stupidly the way you feel like doing when you are totally in love and know it is reciprocated. He thought that he had the most amazing girlfriend in the world and he could not wait to introduce her to his dad. It would be a first, no girls had previously been allowed to meet his family. He was also slightly nervous about meeting her mum. What if she did not like him? Maybe she had imagined Betsy with someone completely different.

"So, you haven't actually told me what to expect from your mum. Is she the exotic beauty you got your looks from, or is that from your dad and she is just a boring Brit like me?"

She stared at him with a funny look on her face, a mix of amusement and confusion.

"Was that a strange question?"

"No." She shook her head, giggling now. "I just can't believe I never told you. I thought I did, or I just assumed..."

"What?"

"That I'm adopted. I don't look like either of my parents."

He stared at her, dumfounded.

"You're adopted?!"

"Yes. I probably didn't think to say because it isn't something I think of daily. You know, to me they're just mum and dad, or well dad *was*."

"Yeah, of course it is like that for you and it doesn't *change* anything for me", he smiled. "It is just such a surprise. Here I have imagined that you the copy of your beautiful mum and that some lucky English bloke named Dawes was your dad."

"Nah, Dawes comes from mum. They were married but she chose to keep her maiden name for some reason. I asked once, and she said that a person shouldn't change name too many times in her life. Not sure what she meant by that."

"So, where do you come from? I assume you weren't born in London then?"

"No, in Afghanistan. I'm from a province called Helmand. I only came here in my teens, I grew up there."

He put down the toothbrush he still was holding and broke eye contact in the mirror. Felt he had to look her in the eyes for real and sat down on the lid of the toilet chair, his mind spinning. Afghanistan, a country which always had exerted some strange attraction on him even if he never had set foot there. Maybe because it took his dad away from him for so many years of his childhood, maybe because it was there many of the events that led to said dad's PTSD had occurred, or maybe because that was where same dad's sad-ending love story once had started. He had used to love that story, asked *her* to tell him when she tucked him to bed. Tell him how the stern captain had not been able to resist the mouthy but beautiful cockney private so he in the end fell for the temptation to kiss her in secret and then they knew it was *them*. He had loved that human side of the dad he hero worshipped, until he as a more cynical teenager had realised it probably was not the smartest move to fall in love at work when you were not allowed to. Especially not when you fucked it up completely.

"That's unusual, isn't it? I mean both as a country for adoption and that you weren't adopted until you were that old?"

"Yeah, maybe." She shrugged her shoulders. "The circumstances were a bit unusual at least."

"How so?"

"I met mum when she was there working, several years before she adopted me. We stayed in contact and she helped me. I had a messy family situation to put it mildly, so for a few years I lived under the care of the Afghan social services sort of, but Kabul was very unsafe and there were other circumstances... I had family members who tried to get to me because they thought I had dishonoured them, and the situation became untenable. In the end mum decided to adopt me and brought me here to keep me safe."

A tiny alarm bell had started ringing inside Sam. Suddenly he had so many questions that he hardly knew which to ask first, but one thing felt more important to get clarity in than everything else.

"She was working in Afghan? Doing what? I thought she was a nurse?"

"She is now. Then she was in the Army, as a medic."

Sam's field of vision suddenly seemed to narrow, his mouth got dry, his palms turned sweaty and he could hear his heart pounding very loud and fast in his ears.

Once upon a long time after The Jump

"What? You look like you have seen a ghost. Is this a big deal to you?" she asked, curious over his unexpectedly strong reaction.

"Betsy, what is your mum's name?"

"Why?"

"Just tell me!"

She jumped when he raised his voice

"Molly! It is Molly. Would you tell me what the actual fuck is wrong?"

He had to lean his head towards the cool tiled wall, trying to take this in, to grasp the enormity of it. Why had he never asked? Because it had seemed so farfetched that of all Daweses in the world it would be *her*, that the possibility had not even struck him. Because before he knew Betsy was adopted it had seemed completely ruled out there was a connection as he had known the entire Dawes family when Betsy already was born, and he knew for a fact she was not part of it then. Now he understood that was because at that point in time she still lived in dusty Afghan. Molly had adopted her *after* everything... If she had been the biological child she could never have been Molly's, but now...

"Oh, Molly..." he almost sobbed.

Betsy sunk down on her knees in front of him, took his trembling hands.

Once upon a long time after The Jump

"Talk to me Sam! What's wrong? You look shell-shocked."

Then something else struck him; the imminent disaster.

"Fuck! Dad... the restaurant. They will be there before us!"

"We already said before..."

"Yes but then I didn't know. She won't want to meet him. Not like this. Hurry! We must go, I'll explain on the way."

He moved to get out of the bathroom, but she grabbed his arm, suddenly scared by his reaction.

"No! Tell me now! I need to know what is wrong. What is it about my mum?"

He took hold of her shoulders, looked her into the eyes and inhaled deeply before speaking, not sure if he wanted to steady himself or her before he told her.

"Betsy, your mum, I know her. Or I *knew* her. She was married to my dad, she was my step mum."

Now it was her turn to stare at him, trying to grasp what he was saying.

"They met in Afghan when he was a captain in the Army and she a medic in his section. She used to be Molly James. She never said?"

"No... she never talks of the past, what her life was like before dad and before she adopted me. Only sometimes we talk of the things I already knew because I was there, about the Army and being in Afghanistan. She does it for my sake, because I don't want to forget *all* of it, like my biological mum and my little brothers and sisters, but I know she finds it hard. I thought it was because her friend Smurf died and others were injured, never knew there was anyone she *loved*. I never thought there was anyone serious before dad, she wasn't that old when they met."

"Because she was really young when she met my dad. I think she must have been only twenty-four when they split up."

"Younger than us..."

"Younger than us."

There was a moment of silence, maybe the calm before the storm.

"So she was *the one*? The one he made leave him when he was ill?"

"Yes... I think she may hate him for what he did." His voice broke and he was close to tears.

That triggered her and suddenly she nearly panicked.

"Oh my God, you're right. She can't run into him without warning! I must call her."

Betsy ran to get her phone from the handbag and dialled Molly's number with trembling fingers. It went directly to voicemail.

"She probably ran out of battery. She always does, forgets to charge it and I keep telling her..."

Sam tried to call his dad, but he did not answer either. Maybe this was a day when *everything* was working towards a total clusterfuck or the disaster had already happened and that was why no one answered their bloody phones.

"Get dressed and I'll call a cab."

Before they moved, he grabbed her and hugged her hard to try to induce strength in her. Suddenly he was the calm and rational one. His father's genes asserted themselves, his natural reaction composure instead of distress under pressure.

In a frenzy, both got dressed and were out of the door in two minutes. The cab took another five unbearable minutes before it arrived. They knew they would not be there in time to prevent *them* from meeting each other without being prepared for it, but they hoped to get there in time to save the day or pick up the debris.

A/N: Thank you for the overwhelming response to the previous chapter. Must admit that I had an increased pulse whilst writing it, even if I knew what I planned to happen.

A guest reviewer asked about timeline and as I cannot PM guests I will set it straight here. I think CJ was 28, Molly 20 when they met. For this story I have imagined Sam 7 and Bashira 10 then. Maybe the gap was wider in the series, but I'm applying creative freedom. In the present Sam is 25, which makes the others 28, 38 and 46. Thirteen years have passed since Molly and CJ went separate ways. Too long if you ask me, but the important question is if that means it is time for them to reconcile or if simply means that it is too late...

Chapter 6

When Sam and Betsy rushed into the restaurant, they first did not see any of the two people they frantically were searching for and for a moment hoped they were the first to arrive after all. Then Sam recognised the back of a tall man standing by the bar, by the looks of it waiting for something the barman was preparing.

He strode over and put his hand on the man's arm.

"Dad, I don't think now is a good time to drink."

"That would be £2", the barman interrupted and with a thud placed a bottle of mineral water and a glass on the counter.

"I'm not, though God knows I could need it", said Charles James. "Molly was here."

"I know."

"You know?!" Charles looked at his son in disbelief, trying to puzzle the pieces of information together.

Standing a few metres away, Betsy's eyes darted between the two men. Their looks were almost identical except for the age difference of twentyish years, which to Charles added some definition which was still lacking in the more boyish Sam. There were a few lines to his face and streaks of silver by the temples of the still thick and otherwise dark hair, but he was far from the old man she had imagined and must have become a father at a young age. He clearly belonged to the category of men, who like George Clooney and Sean Connery, stay attractive or look even better when they age.

She did not remember him from Afghanistan, but truth was she did not remember the faces of any of the male soldiers. They had only ever been a uniform mass in combats and helmets, somewhat frightening even if she had been told they were there to help. Only one soldier had stood out, had connected with Betsy with her kindness, care and courage – her soul sister, Molly. Then there had been Quaseem,

the widowed Afghan teacher turned Army interpreter, who helped them understand each other and later to stay in contact through letters he forwarded and by visiting her at the orphanage in Kabul. He had become a friend too and they still stayed in touch with him. The other men were never important to her. She had never realised just how important one of them were to Molly.

Now Charles' dark, troubled gaze fell on Betsy and his jaw dropped as he for a few seconds took her in. She was older, a woman not a girl, and her skin paler when not exposed to the blazing Afghan sun, but her features were much the same and those astounding light green eyes unforgettable. He recognised her without a shadow of a doubt.

"Bashira!?"

He now looked even more confused than before, faced with a second ghost from his past.

"No, dad. This is Betsy, my girlfriend." Sam moved closer and put his hand on the small of her back. Including, protecting. She loved when he did that.

"He is right, Sam", she said softly. "My name is Bashira too."

"Then why...?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"When my little brother was a baby, he called me Bashy and it turned into Betsy. I kind of liked it so everyone started saying it. Only mum calls me Bashira."

"Sam", Charles interrupted. "Did you set this up? Did you plan this? For me and Molly to meet?"

"No! For fucks sake! Do you think I would do that to any of you? We didn't know the connection, the coin dropped today, this afternoon. Too late. Where is Molly?"

"Yeah, where is mum?"

"She left just before you came barging in. We ran into each other inside the entrance..."

"And? What happened?"

"She just stared at me and said she couldn't stay in the same room as me, then she turned and left. I was too shocked to try to stop her. I thought it was a coincidence she was here but now I realise it wasn't."

His eyes rested on Bashira again. "You call her *mum*?"

"She adopted me."

He took it in, nodded. It made perfect sense in so many ways. He had always known that Molly had lost her heart to one other person than him in Afghanistan, and even

if he had been a jealous twit at one point he had realised pretty soon that it was not to another man.

"I need to go find her", Betsy said, turning to Sam.

Sam felt torn. He knew his dad needed him now, but he also wanted to be with Betsy. He needed to bridge over the gap that suddenly seemed to have opened between them, but she made the choice for him.

"I need to talk to her. Alone. I will go look for her, maybe she has headed back to the B&B. I think today isn't the best day to meet. I'll call you later. Okay?"

She turned to go but he moved and was by her side and put his arms around her, said with low voice close to her ear.

"Go, but come back to me, no matter what."

He wanted to tell her and get reassurance in return that their parents' past did not affect what they were to one another, but she pressed her lips to his as her only response, right now too shocked over the turn of events to be able to give any promises about the future. It did not go unnoticed and his heart ached when she walked away.

Charles observed his son as Bashira left. Saw his hurt gaze follow her with undisguised love and two things hit him. That Sam's feelings for this girl, albeit a new relationship, were as strong as his own always had been for Molly and that the

difference was that Sam saw no reason to hide those feelings from others like he had.

In the very beginning, when he was her commanding officer, Charles had hidden his feelings from Molly and everyone else and even denied them to himself because they were forbidden. Then there was a period when *she* knew because he, unable to hold back, had exposed his feelings to her, but he had to keep hiding them from everyone else and was unable to be physical with her even though it was all he wanted. When she finally was out of his chain of command and they were free to show the world, he still found it hard to relax and do that. Not in the presence of close friends, Sam and his parents, but on any official or work related occasions. He could not help feeling it would tarnish their professionalism if he held her hand or openly looked at her with all the love he felt. He tried to compensate for it by showing her how he adored her every second they were alone; in the words he said, in the way he touched her, in the way he finally allowed himself to let his gaze rest on her – the most amazing woman he knew.

When it all was over, and he was recuperating from the PTSD and started to *feel* again after years of nothingness, he regretted that badly. Regretted that he had not showed her every second of every day no matter who was watching. Regretted he maybe had left her in doubt of what he felt even those happy years and the idea that she might have thought it was because she was not good enough for him to show affection in public was eating him away. He wished he had not

missed one single moment of closeness as the dreams of that was what he now lived of, what kept him going.

Of course there were things he regretted even more than being reserved in public; the fact that when things got hard he had withdrawn and pushed her away; that he had ran and gone on tour after tour, leaving her and Sam behind; that he had made her finally leave him because she could not stand living with a numb man who showed no emotions when he looked at her and who never touched her anymore, who stopped telling her he loved her even when they were alone. Most of all he regretted that he had not stopped her when she during a distance call to Bangladesh said she had to put them out of the misery their marriage had become. He should have thrown himself on the first flight home, instead he had gone and shagged another woman. A woman whom she *knew* and at one point had considered a friend, a woman he cared for but did not love or even desire, but only used as a nail in the coffin to end him and Molly, to make sure there was no turning back. His actions had seemed cruel but necessary and logical then. When he came to his senses they only seemed cruel and foolish.

The remorse was always there but today when he had seen her, and she had stared at him with eyes wide in shock, without so much as a glimpse of happiness at the sight of him, the guilt and regret once again felt overwhelming.

Sam turned to the man behind the bar.

"Two whiskys, make them double."

Charles could not hold back an amused smile even if the situation was anything but amusing.

"I thought you said no drinking?"

"That was when I thought you were about to meet Molly, didn't know it already had gone to shit. I think we need this now. *I do.*"

Charles flinched at the raw pain in his voice and eyes.

"You hate me right now." It was not so much a question as stating a fact he thought was true.

Sam sighed and raked his fingers through his curls, not even aware how similar his body language was to Charles'.

"I don't hate *you* dad... but I hate that your past seems to return and fuck up my life when I was happier than I have been since... since we had Molly in our lives. I'm in a really good place now, or I was until this afternoon."

Silently they awaited the drinks. Charles did not know what to say as they were no words enough to cover how sorry he was about *everything*.

When the barman put two tumblers in front of them, Sam immediately took a big gulp of the amber coloured liquid and winced at the sharpness of it.

"Can't understand how people drink this for other reasons than to drown their sorrows."

He took another gulp, then put down the glass.

"If she had told me her real name, maybe I would have understood sooner."

Bashira. Bashira. Bashira. Despite that she had been living in Afghanistan then and he never met her until she knocked on his office door, she had very much been part of their lives all those years ago, through the stories Molly and his dad told him and through the love Molly felt for the girl. Thinking about it, it was as if Molly had had two children then, him and Bashira, although Bashira at a distance. Molly used to tell him about a brave little girl who was her soul sister. A girl who always beat her playing *sang chill bazi*; who did not have the same rights as girls here at home did (and did he understand how lucky he was to be allowed to go to school? Molly never had until she met Bashira); who was seen as less valuable than a boy and who's father wanted to kill her because she had helped Molly and her friends. His dad instead told the story of how incredibly brave Molly had been when she helped rescue Bashira when her cruel father had put a bomb vest on her. Charles told Sam how his heart had stopped beating that day, when Molly risked her own life to save that girl. When they both finally were safe, and his heart started beating like normal again, he had known he loved Molly and could not stand the thought of losing her.

Sam had loved those stories and Bashira had been like a mythical creature who had been instrumental in bringing his dad and Molly together, herself unbeknownst. He had fantasised about her, that a girl with black hair and green eyes was his friend, that she was *his* soul sister too. If he had heard that name anywhere again, he would have asked questions and then he would have found out before today about the connection. It would not have changed some things, but they could have prevented this disastrous meeting between his dad and Molly. Him and Betsy would have had a chance to talk about things, the two of them. He felt how he desperately needed to be with her. Alone. Hold her and know it was still *them* and that his dad once hurting Molly would not make Betsy back away from *him*. Fear of her leaving him because of the past was like a hard knot of angst in his stomach in this moment.

"Tell me about her. I only know you have a girlfriend and you wanted me to meet her. Since that never has happened before I understood she must be special."

"She is. She... I don't know what it is about her. Everything just feels natural with her, like it is supposed to be. When I'm with her I'm happy, calm. I can tell her anything and she makes me laugh and I just can't get enough of her. I could look at her all day and I just want...", he interrupted himself, realising he did not want to speak with his dad about the physical parts of their relationship even if that was as wonderful as the rest, but Charles could very well guess from his son's blushing cheeks. He smiled sadly, because Sam's words could just as well had described the

way he once felt about Molly. His feelings were still there, but the easiness and closeness long gone.

"We had a bad start because I was sulking over Professor Watson making me act tutor for her and share my office, but when we started talking it was like there was this instant connection."

Pensively, Charles swirled around the whisky in his glass.

"It is not that strange really. I mean, there *is* a connection. Through Molly, through the past."

"You mean to say that maybe I should be grateful for it?" Sam snorted disdainfully.

"Maybe it even brought us together?"

"I'm not saying anything except that there is an undeniable connection, for good or for bad."

"Don't expect me to thank you for it."

"I'm not, believe me."

But even if Sam's words were harsh, he could not help thinking there was something to what his father pointed out. He had never felt like he belonged with someone in a way that remotely resembled what he felt with Betsy. Maybe that was because they had shared something long before they actually met.

"We have only talked about me. How did you feel when you ran into Molly after all this time? You haven't seen her in...is it thirteen years?"

"She hasn't seen *me* in that long, but I saw her once about eight years ago. When I felt well enough to contact her, felt like I was me again and thought maybe, just maybe I could try to ask for her forgiveness or at least try to explain. I found out where she lived and learned that she shared address with some bloke, but they didn't have the same name, so I thought maybe it wasn't serious. I waited outside the house, a nice little townhouse and finally she came out, pushing a baby in a stroller. She looked tired but really, really happy so I just watched her for a minute and then I turned around and left. I was so incredibly glad that she had found happiness, but..."

"What dad?"

"I cried until I had no tears left."

Now it was Charles turn to take a big gulp of his whisky, leaving the glass empty and he waved for new ones. "Then I did not see her until today."

"And how did you feel then?"

He shook his head.

"First shocked, then happily surprised, then just fucking sad when I realised she couldn't even stand being in the same room as me after all this time. That all that I made her feel was that she wanted to run the other direction as fast as she could."

"But that means she feels *something* for you still. If it was over and forgotten for her part, she would have been indifferent, stayed and small-talked. This is in a way better."

This time Charles snorted.

"Yeah, right."

"Why won't you fight for Molly? I know she is all you want."

"She is, she is all *I* want for me, but more than anything I want to her to be happy. I certainly didn't make her happy back then. The way I treated her, I lost every right to her, to try to be the one to make her happy. I have no right to waltz into her life again and turn it upside down. If she has peace and happiness I want it to stay that way. Without me."

"But you're not over her, you haven't moved on."

"The important thing is that *she* did. She built a life with someone else, got married and had kids. As much as it pained me to find out, it also made me happy – for her. I won't be the guy to appear like a Jack in the box and say 'Hi, here I am again, and

I have always loved you even if I behaved like a dickhead and by the way would you leave your husband to be with me again'. It doesn't work that way."

"I get that, but..."

"There is no but." His face was stern and there was a finality to his words, end of discussion.

"But he is dead."

Charles shifted his gaze from the drink he had been nursing.

"What?"

"I don't know that much about their relationship, how it was, but he passed away in cancer a few years ago. Molly is alone with the kids. I think Timmy is eight and Tamara six."

Charles made a sound like he was in agony and downed the new whisky in one go. If he were a different man, he might have rejoiced in that she was single again, but his first feeling was pain over her loss. That she once again had lost someone she loved and was alone with two children.

"All I ever wanted was to make her happy", he repeated like mantra, wondering how he fucked it up so monumentally.

"You sure had a funny way of showing it for a while."

"I know it seemed so from my actions, but in my mind I thought that if I could make her leave me, she would be better off than living her life with the fragment of a man I felt like."

"Okay... if you say so... but that was then. A very long time ago. Won't you at least talk to her? Whatever the result is you won't break up a marriage. In worst case, maybe she will still think you an asshole, but maybe you both will feel a bit better for talking to each other."

"I would if she wanted to have anything to do with me, but Sam as I said, she couldn't even stand being in the same room as me."

"Maybe it was just the shock, maybe she will change her mind when she calms down."

"Maybe." His voice was filled with doubt.

"I could send Betsy a text and let them know where you're staying, in case she wants to see you?"

He had planned to drive back later that evening but that was already ruled out after the strong drinks.

"I could check if they have any free rooms here..."

"Please do. I know you will regret it if you don't at least give it that chance."

The Head of the River was not only a restaurant and pub it was also a four star hotel and after chewing his bottom lip for a few seconds, wondering if it was a wise decision or not, Charles headed over to the reception to check if they had any available rooms. He returned five minutes later, a key card in hand.

"Okay, I have a room. Please text Betsy to tell Molly that if she changes her mind and wants to speak to me, I'm in room 23. She can come any time before 11 tomorrow, because that is when I will check out. Please say... it would make me very happy if she came. Now, would you like something to eat after all so you're not completely rat-arsed when Bash... Betsy comes home to you?"

He put his arm around Sam's shoulders, to pull him to him in a hug and Sam let him.

"I just hope she does."

Chapter 7

Betsy hurried out of the restaurant with the urgent need to find Molly. She did not know the full history, but she knew enough to think her mum must be in a state, distressed after having stumbled upon her, to Betsy previously unknown, ex-husband after all these years. She wanted to be there for her, support her. She also needed some answers, but that came second.

She hoped that maybe Molly had not gone far, so she decided to check the surroundings before heading to the B&B where Molly was staying and once again cursed her mum's habit of not having a charged mobile phone. When she saw a small, dark haired woman at some distance along the river side her relief was palpable.

Molly was sitting on a bench, staring at the water, looking blank rather than tearful or flustered and to Betsy's surprise eating an apple. She looked up when she heard steps approaching on the gravel path.

"I was bloody starving", she said, as if eating an apple needed explaining rather than why she was sitting here. "Was expecting to have dinner by now, but something came in between."

Once upon a long time after The Jump

Things were maybe not total disaster if her mum had the presence to feel hungry and eat, but Betsy anyway sat down close to her and put her arm around Molly's shoulders. Then she could feel her shivering.

"I know what happened. I know why you're sitting here instead of inside the restaurant."

Molly turned to her with surprise.

"What exactly do you know?"

"That you ran into Charles, your ex-husband."

"How do you...?"

"...who also happens to be the father of my boyfriend, Sam. Sam James. Remember him?"

Her voice did not contain any accusation. Betsy only wanted to let Molly know that on a superficial level she knew about things and how they were connected.

"Oh shit."

Molly took a last bite then threw the apple core into the water. Her gaze followed it as it plummeted, and she looked a bit like she considered following it under the surface, shimmering temptingly in the late afternoon sun.

Betsy hoped she would not withdraw into herself like she often had when certain topics came up, even if Betsy now had an idea why she used to react like that. Then she decided she would not let her this time. There was too much at stake here and she was dying to know more. Dying to know how Molly had gone from being married to Charles, Sam's step-mum, to sitting here on a bench, a widowed single with an adopted daughter plus two kids of her own. Not once during all the years they had known each other, been first friends, then mother and daughter, had she mentioned another family, another life. Had her dad known?

Betsy glanced sideways at her mum who kept her gaze fixed at the water. Did she really know her *at all*? Observing her more carefully, she realised Molly today had made an effort for the special occasion. Gone was the usual pony tail or messy bun, her hair hung loose in shiny blow dried lengths. Her standard outfit of jeans paired with a t-shirt or hoodie was replaced by a light blue dress with a pattern of small white flowers. Daisies maybe. Betsy knew Molly did not care much what others thought of her appearance. That effort had been made for *her*, so she would not need to feel embarrassed over her. She had thought she knew everything that mattered about her mum, like that she would do such things for her. Now she was not sure.

"Mum are you alright?"

"I don't know."

"We didn't plan for this to happen, me and Sam. Neither of us knew, we understood this afternoon... but you have never said anything."

Molly's only answer was to inhale a deep breath of air. She was still struggling to understand that she had faced Charles today. That he had stood before her, tall as ever, older but still as handsome and with eyes that after the initial surprise had twinkled like they used to. Not been dark pools of indifference. She could never be indifferent to *that*, to him, but when he smiled she had been unable to reciprocate. Shocked she had given in to the spinal reflex to run instead. As Bashira spoke, she understood he was not here by coincidence, their lives were becoming entwined again through her daughter and his son. How was she supposed to handle that?

"Will you tell me what happened back then? Before you adopted me? I'm trying to understand."

Molly grimaced.

"I prefer not to talk about it."

"Well obviously, since you never have, but it is important to me. *Sam* is important to me and I think I need to know for his and my sake. Otherwise it will be like this dark secret looming over us, maybe without reason. Maybe it wasn't even that bad?"

Molly snorted out a bitter laugh.

"Oh, it was worse than bad. It was really fucking horrible. You don't want to know."

"Maybe I don't want to, but I *need* to. But not only for us, I need to know what is going on with you too."

"He means that much to you?"

"He does. I have never felt like this."

"Not even for that tosser Dwayne?" Molly bumped her shoulder into Betsy's.

"Stop it, I'm serious. I love him." She had not told Sam yet, but it was the truth.

Molly stared at her, also serious.

"Well, he always was a special boy. The best. I loved him too."

"And his dad?"

"And his dad", she admitted sadly.

Molly sighed and realised there was no escape from telling the story she had tried to forget for so long.

Through the Army grapevine, I got to hear about it long before he returned from Bangladesh. Got to hear that the moment I had set him free, or not long after, he

had screwed her. At least that was how I needed to think of it; maybe he made love to her but the thought of that was more than I could handle. I don't know who took the initiative, maybe both, but either way he bedded her on tour. The section medic. He, the man of principle, who had been adamant we would wait out when we fell in love in Afghanistan. He who never liked to show affection in any work related situations even when we were allowed to, hardly even on regimental Family days. The only logic conclusion seemed to be that he had not fully wanted to, not with me like he wanted it with her, Miss Picture Perfect. Worst thing was that I had liked her, felt that at least he was in safe hands on tour with a medic like her. Hah!

Before that, I had imagined that when he returned home, we would sit down, have a sincere conversation. He would have realised that he missed me like I missed him and wanted to be with me more than anything, that he couldn't accept that I let him go. He would say he wanted to receive treatment for his raging PTSD and beg me to come back to him, the way he had pleaded that time in an Afghan tent, holding my hand for the very first time.

When I heard, I knew that would never happen. He didn't want me anymore, maybe he never had. He had married me, but even before Elvis passed away he had been hesitant to have a baby with me. Said he had to think about if he wanted to start over with Sam already so grown up. It saddened me, but I thought he only was afraid of his shortcomings as a father and might come around, we had time because I was young, but after Elvis he would not even discuss it. The few times

we slept with each other he started using condom, as if he didn't trust that I wouldn't lure him into having a kid. Or maybe it was just the feeling of skin to skin he could not stand anymore. Then he stopped touching me altogether, maybe when he realised that the one he wanted was her.

I couldn't stay and wait for the humiliation of them returning home as a couple, maybe move into our home with her as Sam's new step-mum. I just couldn't stick around for that. Not even for Sam, though he meant the world to me. Charles had shattered me into pieces and I had to try to pick them up, run, and piece myself back together elsewhere.

I did that, slowly, bit by bit. Step by step. Filed the divorce papers. Left the Army, couldn't imagine staying in because I knew my path would cross with either him or her sooner or later and I couldn't stand the gossip, imagined or real, about our divorce. I started training as a nurse instead, moved to Birmingham. I started a new life there as Molly Dawes and no one knew of the baggage that was him and Sam. No one knew I had been married. I felt lighter that way, although far from healed. It was almost like they never existed, except when I was alone and still cried in my pillow because he never came after me. He didn't contact me with so much as a word besides his signature on the divorce papers and a sum of money transferred to my bank account. My half of the home we had had, reduced to a line of digits. I thought I would never touch that money, but surprisingly it came to help me to get what I most wanted. Well, what I most wanted beside the man I had loved. Still loved.

When I was doing my practice in the hospital as part of my training, I got to know this guy who was a paramedic working in the ambulance crew. His name was Simon. We started talking during breaks, first just coincidentally but we liked each other's company, so we hung out more and more often and he became a really good friend. It was only that, friendship, starting with banter which was in a way healing after all the seriousness, sorrow and misery there had been for such a long time with Charles. It was a relief to be with someone who wanted to be with me and we laughed so much together. He was Charles opposite in nearly everything; average length so I didn't have to stretch my neck looking at him, on the verge to slightly chubby, had blond curly hair, bright blue eyes and dimples, reminding a bit of a cherub. He was not handsome but endearing and everyone liked him. He had an intoxicating laughter and always seemed happy, was always able to see the positive side of things. He was not a stickler for rules and even if he had people dying on him in his line of work he just saw it as the other side of the coin that he was saving lives. He was not shallow, there was simply no dark side to him, only light. To me, he was soothing like aloe on a sun burn.

With Simon, I finally talked about Charles. Told him everything, all the good there had been in the beginning and all the sadness, desperation and sordid details towards the end. I told him that despite all, I still loved Charles and part of me always would. He was the only one I told because I knew Simon would not pass judgement I could not bear, neither on Charles' actions, nor on me for still loving him. He simply was my friend and for once he did not see anything funny in a situation, just listened, hugged me and comforted me.

Even if he may have wanted to, Simon never made a pass at me. He never made me feel uncomfortable by trying when he knew my heart, no matter how broken, belonged to someone else. Then something happened which changed everything.

During my first tour to Afghan, I had met one other person than Charles, who changed me profoundly. You, Bashira. It pained me that I had to leave you behind when I left to go home, and you were the main reason I returned. During my years in the Army, I had the possibility to come back and meet you every now and then, with the help of Quaseem. When I left the Army to study that became increasingly difficult. Going there alone as a female tourist was not recommendable. We kept in touch through letters, but I missed you and I always worried about you. I had a constant bad conscience because I could not help feeling that my actions had set the ball rolling so you ended up where you were, in the orphanage, without your mum and with the male part of your family looking for revenge. No, don't say anything. I know you mean to say that if it hadn't been for me you would have been the child-bride to some old bearded Taliban, but I still felt bad for you being on your own. It was a hole in my heart and it grew bigger when I had left Charles and as I worried more and more for you. You see, during the time in Birmingham, Quaseem's reports really started to worry me. The number of suicide attacks in Kabul increased and it also seemed like your brothers had been close to locating you once. I was dying, I literally was dying not knowing if you were safe, if you would make it and I felt so powerless being so far away from you.

One evening during a break I couldn't stop myself from crying before Simon. Said to him that if I had been allowed, I would have adopted you, brought you here. He asked why I couldn't, what stopped me if I wanted it so much? I told him I had done my research and not even under the circumstances would a single woman like me be allowed to adopt from Afghanistan. They wanted a couple, I needed to be married.

"Marry me", he said. I looked up at him, wished he wouldn't joke in this moment but when I saw his sincere face, I realised he wasn't joking. He meant it. He offered me the most generous gift anyone ever could. "I'll marry you Molly, so you can adopt her."

"You're crazy. I couldn't let you do that! What if you fall in love with someone else and want to marry her for real?"

He smiled and told me that in the unlikely event that he fell in love and that girl was stupid enough to fall in love with him too, then we could always get a divorce, but by then you would already be here and safe.

I wouldn't let him do it, I couldn't, but then the situation got worse. Quaseem called me and told me that your relatives had located you in the orphanage and issued an attack. You were unharmed, but another child had been injured although he would be fine, and you had now been moved to another safe house, away from the friends you had. It had taken Quaseem a week and pulling every possible string to locate you, but he couldn't visit you anymore. I knew I had to do something, I could never live with myself if you had died. So, I accepted Simon's

offer. We married and with Quaseem's help the paper work for the adoption was arranged. The money I got after the divorce payed the fees, so in the end something good came out of that misery. Within a month we flew there to get you, to bring you back home with us to UK. I hadn't been so happy for years as when you first put your feet on British soil as my daughter.

We didn't tell you then, but we had only just moved together before we brought you home and even if we shared bedroom we had two single beds, standing at a safe distance from one another. We were your parents, but we stayed friends, not lovers for a long time. For years.

"You never loved dad?"

"Wait, I haven't reached the end of the story yet." Molly smiled through her tears and took Bashira's hand.

Having you in my life healed me in so many ways. The love I felt for you, the future I saw in you. I know you think I saved you, but you saved me just as much Bashira. You and Simon. I felt endless love for you and in time love grew between me and Simon too, not only friendship. I think he loved me long before I loved him, but there was a day, a moment when I realised I loved him too. Not the all-consuming love I had felt for Charles, I don't think I'm capable of feeling that twice

in my life, but I loved Simon in a different way and it made me really happy. He knew it was different and he accepted that. I never had to feel like I deceived him in any way, because he knew everything from the start. Years after we married, we became lovers for real, moved together the single beds and after some time were lucky to have your brother and sister.

I was truly happy for some years, managed to leave the past behind except sometimes when a memory flashed by. I never allowed myself to linger there though, my life was with my family, with Simon and you children and I was so proud of the young woman you became. Still am. When your dad got ill, it felt so unfair, like destiny was fucking me but all the way to the end he managed to be sunny and hopeful. Tried to keep any of us from turning bitter. Said that he had had the good fortune to find the woman of his dreams and live with her to the end of his days and that was more than most people could hope for. The only thing that worried him was that he would leave me on my own, but he said he had faith in that I would make it. He knew I was strong. He also said that he hoped I would find love again one day, that I was too young and too good a catch to stay single for the rest of my life. Made me laugh and cry all at once. It was only in his very last moments he once cried and said he wished he didn't have to go so soon, but that he always would love me and wish me happiness. He promised he would look down on me from his cloud. Christ, I don't even believe in such bollocks, but I can so imagine him like a cherub with wings looking down on me from a fluffy cloud above, wishing for good things to happen to me. I always think of that when I miss him, and that is often.

"I sure could have needed that today, him looking out for me. He probably took a nap and then Charles appeared out of nowhere."

Betsy remained silent and tearful, had to take the story in. *She* was the reason why the two person she had considered her parents for more than ten years had married. Their love story was not what she had thought, but still pure love, for each other and for her.

"Maybe he did. Look out for you."

"How do you mean?"

"Maybe he thought it was time for you and Charles to meet again, after all this time and with him gone."

"Why would you think that? After everything I told you about what Charles did? Look, I chose to tell you this story because I wanted you to know that I moved past him and that I lived very happy years with your dad. So, I don't have a problem with you seeing Sam, in fact I'm looking forward to seeing him even if it might be weird first, but you can't expect me to sit down for dinner and be all polite with Charles. That would be too much to ask. Especially if it includes her."

"Who?"

"My former mate turned shag, assume turned girlfriend and wifey when I didn't stay around to watch."

"I have no idea what happened to her, but she isn't part of his life. Never was. According to Sam there never was anyone after you."

"Whatever... You have seen him now. Can you imagine that man staying single that long?"

"I dunno, mum. Maybe if he chose to? Sam told me he lost the love of his life and he will never forgive himself for that. He has said to Sam that no one else will ever do because he once had *the one* and screwed it up when he was ill."

"I'm not sure he was talking about me. Did he really say all those things to Sam?"

Molly swallowed. It was hard to imagined that the man who had been an expert at bottling up his feelings, had talked so openly about them with his son. That would be a remarkable change. She tried to stay cool, but her heart was pounding hard and fast. He had seemed so happy when he saw her. Was it possible that after all these years he still...? No, she would not allow herself to think like that. Not when she had moved on, put a lid on, been happy about the here and now.

"He made his choice a long time ago. He slept with someone else, then never came after me to even try to explain or say sorry."

"Do you know that for a fact? What if he did?"

She had thought she did, now she was not so sure anymore.

"Won't you at least talk to him? Is it so bad that you can't even be in the same room as him?"

"I don't know... I panicked when I saw him."

"Maybe it would feel good to hear what he has to say?"

"I don't know Bashira, maybe it would just feel like shit. It hurt so very, very much and I don't know if I can handle to feel that again. To be reminded more of it than I already have today. I don't think I hate him anymore and I don't want to, don't want to let bitterness and hurt guide my life."

"But do you still love him?"

Molly could not answer. She did not know. All she knew was that a minute in his presence had been enough to turn her world upside down.

"I don't even understand why you care if I do? I thought you might be upset there had been someone else than dad, not want to push me back into his arms?"

"Dad is gone and we can't do anything about that. I want you to be happy. If it means finally putting your past behind you, or if it means some kind of reconciliation with Charles, that is not for me to decide. I think you can't just leave it as it is, too many loose ends for you to find peace, but whatever you chose to do I will be by your side."

Molly shook her head and two women smiled at each other. Soul sisters forever.

Betsy's phone buzzed from a text message and she looked at the screen.

"It is from Sam. He sent Charles number and says that he will stay here in room 23. You can come see him anytime before 11 tomorrow morning and he would be very glad if you did." She looked up on Molly. "Will you mum? Will you go see him?"

Molly chewed her bottom lip.

"I don't know. I still don't know what to do even after your beautiful pep talk. I need to be alone and think for a while. I think *you* need to go see Sam. He is probably dying to be with you after all this and I don't want him to hurt. You go home, and I'll stay here for a while, then probably go back to the B&B."

"But..."

"I really need to be alone, please."

Reluctantly Betsy got to her feet. Reluctant to leave Molly, reluctant to return to Sam when so much was up in the air.

"I wish you would see him when you have the chance. If for nothing else, then just for closure."

"I'll think about it, I promise. Tell Sam I love him and I'm looking forward to seeing him soon, okay?"

Once upon a long time after The Jump

"I will."

Then she stepped in and hugged Molly, long and hard.

"Mum, thank you for bringing me here and for marrying dad."

"Are you kidding me? Those were two of the best decisions I have made in my life.

I love you. Now go get your boy."

Chapter 8

Charles paced back and forth in his hotel room wearing out the carpet, much resembling a caged animal. He was too restless for watching TV. He would have liked to go for a intense run but would not leave the room in case *she* came then. He was thinking of having a shower but did not dare that either as he would not want to open the door half-naked, would have felt utterly embarrassing and wrong given the situation. So with thoughts spinning he was just pacing, anxiously waiting and hoping.

Hours later, he lay stretched out on the bed spread, hands tucked under his head as if to anchor them, not knowing what else to do with them in all his restlessness. It was late, semi-dark outside the window and she had not come. Likely would not. All he could think of was what she was doing now, now when she was closer to him than she had been for years but still not within his reach. What was she thinking, feeling? He wished he had not upset her too much with his mere presence, or with the realisation that he was the father of her daughter's boyfriend. His stomach rumbled, and he wished he had eaten more earlier when he and Sam sat down but both of them had left their plates half-full, lacking appetite. They had been equally tense. Sam had sent the text and only got the answer back that Betsy/Bashira would deliver the message, no response that Molly would come, no reassurance that Betsy would come home to Same either. Charles could see his own feelings mirrored in

Sam's face and he hated that his son once again was hurting because of him. It was the last thing he wanted.

He had almost dozed off when there was a faint knock on the door. For a moment he thought that hope played a trick with his senses, but there it was again, more distinct this time and suddenly he was fully awake, his heart beating erratic. He got up and for a second paused by the door, swallowed and ran his fingers through his hair, then opened. He instinctively knew how to angle his head, so their eyes would meet if it was her on the other side and so, his brown eyes immediately locked with her green ones as the door swung open. His breath hitched at the sight of her; his lovely little cockney, except that she was not his anymore.

Without saying anything she stepped towards him and he backed into the room, to let her in. She did not look around, just kept her gaze fixed on him without smiling and when he backed another step she followed and closed the door behind her using her foot.

"Molly, I..."

He was not prepared for it, when she closed the gap between them.

"I don't want to talk, not know."

He felt a jolt go through him as she grabbed his arms and half led, half pushed him towards the bed, moving with him, until he bumped into it and they stopped. In surprise he simply followed. She moved her hands up over his upper arms, his

shoulders, to coil around his neck, grasped his curls and pulled him to her in a hard kiss. Then, using the weight of her body she pushed him down on the bed and followed him, was over him. Again, both due to the element of surprise and because his body wanted to follow her lead, he let himself fall down even though he normally would have stood steady on his feet if such a small person tried to move him. She kissed him hard again, this time coaxing his lips open, letting her tongue slide in. His body immediately responded to her presence, he had dreamt of this so many times, yet he broke away after a few seconds now using force. He took hold of her face between his palms, made her look him in the eyes. Both were panting.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Molly. Is this what you want?"

Her stare was so intense, her eyes almost glazed but he craved the eye contact. Needed to know that she *saw* him.

"I don't know. Yes. Yes, it is. If you want me to stay, you have to hold me like it matters to you. Show me."

For moments they just stared intently at each other, really stared, like it was a competition and neither wanted to fold down, like they wanted to gaze into each other's souls. Then he nodded in acceptance and pulled her to him to let her kiss him again. He feared that she was only here to fuck him and leave him as a sort of punishment, as a way to get him out of her system once and for all and hurt him in the process if she could. Her initial aggression implied just that, but he decided that if that was all she would give him then he would take it. One last time no matter

how, so he would have one more memory, one more time of being close to her. Maybe he would come out of this more bruised than before, but there was no way he could pass on it if she said she wanted him to hold her.

When her lips now met his, she surprised him again. It was different. Now cupping his face with her small hands, she kissed him so softly, grazed over his lips with hers before deepening the kiss again. Then kissed the corners of his mouth, dotted kissed along his jawline, his neck. His eyes fluttered shut at the sensation, wondering if it was really true. When she returned to his lips he felt some wetness and the taste of salt. As their eyes met again he saw that she was crying, and he realised that he was too.

"Molly..."

"Hush, I said no talking. I need to *feel* that I mean something to you."

Then he sat up, with her straddling him, cradled her head in his hands, buried his fingers in her hair and kissed her again. Poured all of his longing, all his love in that kiss and it lasted for long.

"Unzip my dress", she whispered a command in his ear. He obeyed.

As the zip came down, she stood up in front him and let the dress fall to the floor. She stayed like that, standing before him in only underwear so he could take her in. Almost challenging she showed him the way she was now, showed she was different, awaiting his reaction. Yes, her body had changed, a little less taut without

the daily army training, a roundness to her belly which had not been there before carrying the babies, but he thought her so beautiful. He revelled in every curve, every surface of soft skin. He moved to the edge of the bed and still sitting, let his arms come around her, pulled her to him and placed his lips to her belly, inhaled her, let his hands graze everywhere he could reach like that, over her lower back, her bum, her thighs. Then he leaned back a little, placed his palms on her hips and grazed over the belly with his thumbs, subconsciously feeling rather than thinking that he wished it had been *his* babies that had made it change shape, but that he was happy that she had had them, that she had not been without just because he chased her away. He chose to focus on what he had before him now, not the past.

"Still so beautiful", was all he said as his eyes wandered up to her face again, meeting hers and they widened with joy.

He pulled her to him again, sat her on his lap and kissing her, removed her bra. He watched her face as he did that, but then his curiosity got the better of him and he had to look down. Her breasts had changed too, a little bigger, a little less perky but all he felt was desire at their perfection. He looked up into her face again, as if asking if he was allowed and for the first time she smiled at his open awe and gave a little nod. Given permission, he simultaneously cupped one breast, caressing the already stiff nipple, meanwhile he let his mouth latch over the other with a grunt of desire and desperation. She held on to his curls, held him to her, leaning her head back arching towards him and gave in to the sensation his touch created on her hot skin. She did not know if this was right, but she wanted it, *needed* it like

oxygen. She had never thought that he would want her, need her again, but by God he did. Right now that was all that mattered.

Her hands found the hem of his polo shirt and nestled under it, for a moment stroke his still flat stomach, his back but then was overtaken by the need to feel more of his skin and moved it up, pulled it over his head. She stopped, to take him in like he had done with her, appreciating him but thinking it unfair that babies had not changed him like her, his body as hard and lean as it always had been, then met his eyes again smiling. He felt a giggle build up inside him at the enormity of it all, the woman of his dreams here in the flesh, touching him, smiling at him instead of looking at him with cold eyes or saying words of hatred.

Again their mouths met as they moved further up on the bed, their hands not pausing their exploration, their rediscovery of one another. She had a little battle with the buttons of his jeans, he pulled in his stomach to make it easier for her and they both sighed with contentment as she won over the last button and the lining slacked so she could pull them down his hips as he raised them from the bed in silent collaboration.

"Still no regrets?" he asked with raspy voice, afraid of the answer but wanting to make sure.

"Still, no."

When her hand reached the lining of his trunks, he grasped her hand and stopped her with sudden alarm in his eyes.

"I don't have any condoms. I never thought... It's not like I carry condoms in my wallet these days. Should I run downstairs?"

He realised he could hardly count on her to be on the pill either. She was not, but she did not want him to leave, knowing that if she was left alone in this bed she might have second thoughts and she did not want that.

"No. I'll take care of it tomorrow, stay with me. Just stay."

Then he rolled her over, so she lay on her back with him beside her and almost reverently pulled her knickers off and let his own underwear follow. When her hand moved down to touch him, a part of him that she once had been so familiar with, his eyes widened. He knew he would not be able to take much of that or he would come before he even was inside her. It had been too long, and he was a red-blooded male, here with the only woman he wanted. He desperately needed to be inside her but wanted to make sure she was ready for him. So he reached down to feel her, touched her downy hairs and felt her press herself to his hand, welcoming it. When his fingers slid between her folds he felt how wet she was and a sound resembling a sob escaped her. Encouraged he touched her there, not presuming he still knew what she liked but sensitive to her every reaction. Circled his fingers softly on the outside, carefully probing inside, and as she continued to push herself towards him, slid two fingers fully inside her whilst continuing to let the pad of his thumb circle

more insistently. He kept his eyes locked with hers and saw her coming closer to the edge, her lips forming to a perfect silent o and he let his lips come crashing to hers whilst continuing to apply his fingers. To his surprise, she took hold of his wrist, made him pause and he looked to her to see if something was the matter.

"I want you inside me. Want you inside me when I come."

Softly she now pushed him to lie down and positioned herself over him. Slowly, holding her own weight by placing her palms his stomach and leaning on her arms, she lowered herself over him. He sensed that she needed to set the pace and let her, only gently holding her hips with eyes trained on her face and she pushed herself down over him, so slow he could almost not bear waiting out, but at last they were joined. With him fully inside her, she paused to bend over him and kiss him and he stroked her cheeks, moved away her hair from her face, grazed down her back to let his hands find her hips again and pull her closer to him so there was not the slightest gap of air between their groins, never letting go of her eyes. Now they moved together with the synchronicity of two bodies who knew how to move in perfect tune. Still sitting up, she leaned back so he would come deeper into her and he held her, grazed her breasts, no longer able to hold back groans, all the time looking at her with adoration. Then he pulled her down to him, wanting her closer, feeling that even if it was amazing she was too distant.

"You said you wanted me to hold you like it matter to me. Then let me", he murmured close to her ear and she stayed like that, their upper bodies connecting, his arms around her, continuing to build the perfect rhythm.

He tried to hold out for as long as he could, never wanting this to end, but after his previous administrations she was as primed as him and soon neither of them could refrain from increasing the pace, the hardness of their moves, fast taking them towards a climax. A climax which made their bodies tense, shudder, her walls hugging him tight as he, buried deep within, released into her, screaming each other's names before they silenced one another with a kiss, shocked by the intensity of the physical reaction. As they stilled, and she relaxed on his chest, he let out a long low moan. A moan of longing fulfilled, of homecoming. They stayed like that for long, silent, as he stroked her hair, moved away a few strands that were glued to the film of perspiration on her forehead.

He did not want to move or break the silence, afraid that that would be it, all there was. Afraid that she would get up and get dressed, say that this had been a goodbye and she never wanted to see him again. When she after some time stirred and moved his heart was out of his chest, but it was only to go wash herself and then return and fit herself into his side. He put his arm around her, pulled her even closer to him filled with an immense joy that at least it was not over yet.

Finally, he heard her pull in a breath, preparing to speak and he braced himself for what was to come.

"I needed to know if it could feel like that again", she said.

He waited, picked up the vibe that she needed to talk in her own time.

Once upon a long time after The Jump

"You stopped making love to me like that long before you left me. I didn't think you could ever again. The way you withdrew from me... you hurt me so much for so long. You left me long before I said it was over."

"I know."

No denial, no claiming that it was *she* who had left him. He fully admitted it was he who had left long before she said the words.

"I know, and I can't tell you how sorry I am for that. I have never stopped regretting it."

She felt him press his lips to the top of her head.

"I never dared to hope I would be allowed to hold you like this again."

She placed her hand on his chest.

"We need to sort ourselves out, for Sam's and Bashira's sake."

"Is that the only reason why you are here?"

"It is a very good reason, but no. I'm here for me too. Probably more for myself", she added as an afterthought.

"Do you hate me Molly?"

Lying on her side, she propped her head up to look at him.

"Did it feel like that before?"

"No, it didn't. Not at all", he smiled. "That is what surprises me. I love this, but I didn't expect it."

"Neither did I", she smiled too. "But I needed it." Thoughtfully, she circled her finger around his nipple and amused noticed how it turned all pointy. "So much time has passed, so I guess some feelings, some bitterness has washed away sort of. Some of the things I thought I would feel if I met you again, I just didn't feel them. It shocked the hell out of me to run into you like that, but I didn't feel the anger I always thought I would. Water under the bridges and all that, I suppose... but there is much to talk about. Charles, I need you to talk to me. You never did back then, you ran and then..."

Her words trailed off, unwilling to even mention what had happened in Bangladesh. It still irked her, filled her with contempt, still hurt.

"I wish I had, but I didn't know how. I thought I was so strong, and I thought I only could be if I kept it all inside, then it would go away somehow. I didn't want to share, didn't want to include anyone in my misery, make myself weak or drag you down. I know now I wasn't strong, I was just breaking down slowly until there was nothing left of me. "

Now she stayed silent, let his words flow without interruption. She had waited so long for this and given up hope she ever would hear any type of explanation from him, especially not whilst enjoying the warmth of his naked body next to hers.

"It was like after Elvis there was this hole inside me and no matter how I tried nothing could fill it. Not you, not Sam, not work. Instead it was like the edges of that hole kept collapsing into it, so it grew larger the whole time, eating away everything that was good until there was only nothingness inside. I wasn't even angry anymore, just indifferent, empty. It was then I started hurting myself and others, *you*, just to try so feel *something*."

"And *did* you feel something, when you hurt me like you did? When I left you?"

"Only hopelessness, Molly. It was like I *saw* it happening, but it was happening to someone else and had nothing to do with me. Bangladesh was my last tour and I came home a broken man with nothing waiting for me except Sam and I wasn't even allowed to see him for some time. I was on sick leave for long, for physical injuries and for my mental state. I know you said long before that I had PTSD even if I refused to listen, but by then it was obvious to command too, and I was not allowed to serve. That made me fucking angry, but it also made me finally accepted treatment. I didn't think I needed it, but I went... and then it fell apart for real, everything caught up with me; Elvis, my bad choices at work, worst of all what I had done to Sam and you. I didn't care my career was down the drain, that I never would make a Major, but I regretted everything about how I had been to you. The

counselling went on for years and in the end I gained some acceptance that I could not change the past, just try to do something better of the future."

She was lying down with her head on his chest again, hearing his heart beats as he spoke. The rhythm surprisingly fast for a fit man in resting position.

"Why didn't you come after me?"

"I did... but I was too late. I went to see you but found you occupied, coming out of your house prepared for a walk with your baby. It must have been your eldest one."

"Timmy. Then it was eight years ago", she reminisced with equal amounts of warmth and sadness in her voice at the memory of the baby and the thought of that *he* had watched her from the shadows.

"I didn't want to intrude then, it wouldn't have been right. I watched you from a distance and you looked so happy. I realised it was too late for us, you had moved on. I had no right to disturb the life you had created for yourself, not even to apologise."

Even if she felt sad thinking he had been there, close to her just observing and not let her know he was there so she had missed him, she knew he was right.

"I *am* glad you didn't. I was in a good place then. If you had appeared, the timing would have been all wrong. It would only have confused things."

"You loved your husband?"

He could not prevent himself from asking even if he was not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"I did." That hurt him even if it should not have come as a surprise.

She paused, not sure if it was fair to Simon saying the words on the tip of her tongue but she could not stop them. "I loved him, but not like I once loved you."

She felt his body relax next to her, as if he had held some tension inside waiting for those words.

"That was then, I don't know now. Don't think too much of this too soon", she warned.

"I know, I wouldn't. I just... I can't help being happy to hear that our love was special to you, because it was to me."

"You didn't always make me feel like it, you know. Not even before."

"Surely you must have known? The night in Bath? When we got married? Those and so many other days were the best in my life, it must have shown?"

"When we were alone yes, but when we were anywhere near anything Army related... I always wondered a little if you were really proud of me then, as your girlfriend, as your wife or if you didn't quite think I fit in among the other Officer's wives..."

He pulled her closer, with tears in his eyes.

"You didn't, you were far better. I was so proud and so in love I sometimes didn't know what to do with all those feelings. I couldn't believe that I had you because I adored you so much, but I felt that if I let all that out among others it would make me look ridiculous, weak. An Officer so in love with his wife that he could not keep his hands of her in public. I have regretted that too, it was a foolish notion. I should have held your hand, I should have kissed you, because it was what I wanted. If you ever were to take me back that is what I would do."

"You did, with *her*."

She felt him tense at them mentioning of the elephant in the room, the biggest fuck up of his life.

"You slept with Georgie Lane on tour. I have always known, but I guess you knew that I knew."

"I won't deny it", he swallowed. This was the hardest part of all and he was unsure if she would ever be able to forgive him for it. *He* sure was unable to. "It had nothing to do with my feelings for you, or any feelings for her for that matter either. I was ill. I made catastrophic decisions on every level, personal as well as professional. I'm not expecting that to excuse anything, but that is how it was. What happened with her had nothing, *nothing* to do with love. The two things I regret most in life is that I didn't stop you when you said it was over and that I slept with

her. As I said, right then it was like it was all happening to someone else, but when it caught up with me, the guilt and shame and remorse were... I thought I was going mad because I could not go back in time and change it."

She stared at him and managed to speak with a calm she did not feel inside.

"And was it... was it a relationship that went on, that lasted? When you came home too?"

"It wasn't. It was once, then nothing more. I lost my last ounce of self-respect that night, only to regain some of it years later... but I fucked up, I know, and I regret it so bitterly even now. I don't expect you to forgive me Molly, but I *am* sorry. I'm so fucking sorry and I will be for the rest of my life."

She lay down again, broke eye contact and instead stared into the ceiling, but he noted to his relief that she did not move away from him.

"I don't know", she said honestly. "I don't know if I can forgive you, but it is so long ago, and I don't feel like I did then. They say that comedy is tragedy plus time... I wouldn't stretch that far in this case, I will never be able to laugh about it, but it does not hurt the same way either. I guess that what I would need to know is that it wouldn't happen again, that you wouldn't let me down like that again."

"Never. I would never." He felt a tiny grain of hope at the possibility she would even consider trusting him again.

"How can you know?"

"Because I'm not ill anymore and I know myself better. Because I wouldn't put myself in such a situation again. I never went back to active service. I'm still working for the Army but to help others who have been diagnosed with PTSD. Apparently the latest research says that those suffering from it have a better prognosis if they are helped by someone who has been through something similar. In a way it feels like I'm making amends that way."

"What do you do?"

"I lead group sessions and have individual coaching, like counselling, with them."

"You make them talk, you who never talked?"

"I do *now*, and I guess that having been in that position has ironically given me useful experience. It seems I have quite a talent for helping them, judging by the results. But Molly, to answer your question; I know myself in a different way now, and I *am* different even if I'm also the man you knew in the beginning. I don't know if that is enough reassurance for you."

Neither did she. All she knew was that it was apparent that things were very different now from when they were bad and that it felt so incredibly good to be back in his arms. She was not sure if that meant that she would forgive him, or that she could trust him. Time would have to tell. She *did* know that she did not feel the urge to shout at him, to hit him, to run away from him, that had vanished over the

years. He had continued to love her, he had come after her, never forgotten. She could not just brush that off, because she still had feelings for him too. The moment she had seen him today, those feelings had returned without being accompanied by the hate and anger from long ago. Time had passed, there had been Bashira, Simon, Timmy and Tamara. She had lived a rich life without him and she was changed too, but she had always missed him even when she did not admit it.

"I don't know yet, Charles."

His brown eyes met hers full of sincerity.

"If you never want to see me again, there are two things I need you to know when you walk out that door; I will regret what I did to you to the end of my days and can only hope you will forgive me, and I will love you for always."

To his surprise she giggled, and she noticed his hurt face.

"That's just so dramatic and I... I'm not ready for such big words, maybe never will be. Let's just see, okay?"

He remembered that big words or grand gestures never had been her thing. He loved that he was able to make her giggle again. It did not matter she would not say she loved him, he had not expected her to.

"Does it mean you will see me again? This isn't goodbye?"

He almost did not dare to hope.

"It isn't goodbye." I want to see you again, see what this is and by the looks of it we might end up as in-laws", she giggled again. "That's weird, isn't it?"

"Very weird! You really went back to Afghan and adopted her? Not that I'm surprised because you had a soft spot for that girl from day 1."

"Yes, she was in danger. Quaseem helped me arrange it. We..." she hesitated.

"Simon and I got married so I would be able to adopt her."

"But you loved him you said?"

"Later. First he was just a good friend. Strangely, Bashira helped me move on. The joy of having her in my life sort of patched me up and I was able to feel love again. Are you jealous?"

She looked at him with amusement, knowing how jealous he sometimes had been in the past.

"In one way yes, in one way no", he admitted. "I'm glad you had that, I wanted everything good for you even if I could not give it, but I can't deny that I wish it had been me who got to spend all these years with you." He caressed her belly. "Who was the father of your babies."

She snorted. "I remember you were very hesitant to kids, even before everything."

"It's true. I was foolish, afraid. I'm glad though we didn't have any when all the shit happened, it was bad enough that Sam and you had to live with it all."

"He seems to have turned out alright anyway?"

"Not to my credit. When I got around to being myself again, he was already a great teenage kid. I think you had something to do with that, and Rebecca too I must admit, credits due where credits due."

"You too before everything went to shit."

"Well, maybe a tiny bit of good influence then."

"He always admired you."

"Not after I had made you leave. He hated me for some years I think, and we only found our way back to each other fully when he started with his graduate studies and focused on PTSD and we sat down and really talked, both of us were ready for it then. I'm so proud of him you know. When he was considering career choices, I once asked if the Army wasn't an option. He told me the Army could stick something up its arse after what it had done to me and you and then he ended up working with PTSD, figuring out how to make life better for people like me. I think it is pretty amazing."

"It is. And if he hadn't come here he wouldn't have met Bashira."

"No", he smiled.

"And if you hadn't left me I'm not sure if I would have ended up adopting her, so then she wouldn't have been here."

"Then maybe they would have met elsewhere. Perhaps he would have joined the Army, been deployed to Afghan and met her there. It seems like they were meant to be."

Like you and me, he thought but did not say. Avoiding the big words she did not want.

"Maybe so", she said and thought the same.

She turned to him and pulled him in for a kiss.

"Come here, please."

She willed him to come over her, so she could feel the weight and warmth of his body on hers, heavy but not too heavy, their forms fitting so perfectly, her soft curves with his hard planes. They fell silent, their lips busy clamping to one another. She felt his growing hardness press against her anew and she wanted him again too, wrapped her legs around him, parting herself for him, inviting him in. They did not know for sure what tomorrow would bring, or in fact tomorrow was already here because by now it was well past midnight, but all there was now was the sweet sensation of connection as their bodies touched and he was inside her, held tight by her, moving in slow pace. This time they made it last long and when it was over they fell asleep in each other's arms, happier and more fulfilled than any of them had been in a very, very long time. He was afraid to wake up and find her far away on the edge of the other side of the bed regretting it all, or even worse

gone, but when morning light came he woke with her spooned as close to him as when he had fallen asleep.

A/N: Maybe Charles motives for sleeping with Georgie deserves further exploration than given here, but I feel that I have already written the only explanation that in my mind holds up in *Despair & Hope* and I don't want to repeat myself. If you don't feel he explains himself enough here, I suggest to re-read Chapter 2 of that story. It is a different version of them obviously, but I see the same reasoning for this version of Charles. I also think that the long time and the events that have passed in between in this story, would make Molly's reaction different. After all, time and love does heal a lot. She is the one who has experienced happiness, not him. She would not have wanted to be without her kids or Simon and that part of her life would never had happened if Charles had not let her go. Bla bla rambling on, maybe the only one who cares what I thought. Hope you enjoyed anyway.

X

A/N: I'm back and everything is fine, thanks for asking. I have missed writing but life has just been busy to the brink of madness. In the past month I bought a new house, prepped and sold the current, went on a business trip to Cambridge in between plus lots to do at work and at home in general. I enjoyed the trip enormously because I have not been in UK since I lived in Cambridge six months 22(!) years ago. Now, only one more week's work to survive before annual leave.

I have not only lacked time to sit on my bum and write, but the story simply was pushed out of my head and now I have tried to find my way back to it. This will be the last chapter of this story though. I'm always a bit unwilling to write the last chapter but this was after all first intended as a one-shot and I think we are well past that.

Maybe I ought to apologise for not issuing a warning about upcoming hotness in the previous chapter, but I thought it would be a spoiler. Usually, I let my versions of Molly and CJ be friends and talk and talk before they get to it, so I felt like doing it the other way around this time. They did after all get to talk afterwards if anyone still was paying attention by then.

Chapter 9

After the half-hearted dinner with his dad, Sam headed home, dragging his feet because he was not looking forward to returning alone to empty rooms instead of walking through the door hand in hand with Betsy after a nice dinner with their parents as he had anticipated. He had considered giving Betsy a call but decided to keep his distance and respect her wish to have some alone time with Molly. When or if she wanted to talk to him, she would. He hoped to God it would be *when*.

When he woke up this morning, he had been so incredibly happy. Betsy was to meet her mum at the train station already at ten, so they got up unusually early for a Saturday and he made her breakfast whilst she had a shower and got dressed. When she joined him in the kitchen with damp hair, smelling fresh of that shampoo he loved and took the plate and mug he handed her, it had struck him that he could easily imagine *every* morning of his life like this.

Over the last weeks he had been considering different options of what to do after passing his final examination and leaving Professor Watson's research group. This morning in the kitchen it had dawned on him that his choices now would be limited to those that meant he could keep seeing Betsy. He would not go abroad for a postdoc unless she could join him, he would not accept a job offer in a location too far away. He wanted and needed to see her almost every day, to be part of her life, that was what mattered most to him.

That had been his conclusion this morning. Now he was not sure she would want that; want to stay his girlfriend, want to make plans for a future together.

He knew that Molly had loved him once, but she had also loved his dad and what *he* had done, what he had put her through, seemed almost unforgivable. What if Molly told Betsy that she could not stand a connection with *any* James? What if she made Betsy choose? He was far from sure that he would be the one chosen then, because the bond between mother and daughter was obviously very strong. The Molly he once had known would never have forced Betsy make such a choice, but that was before his dad slept with another woman on tour. One who Molly had considered a friend, which made the betrayal so much worse. *Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned*. Was that true for Molly?

During their many talks during Sam's first year of research, Charles had revealed everything to him. Gradually he had unfolded his and Molly's story to Sam, the X-rated version of how their loving relationship had spiralled down, the full picture his son never had known before. The last piece he shared tearful and full of shame, when he reluctantly admitted what he had done only a few days after Molly had said the marriage was over. Unable to look Sam in the eyes whilst telling this sordid part of his story, he had taken a large gulp from the beer bottle in his hand and fixed his gaze on a dark corner of the bar they found themselves in that evening.

"I always knew she didn't mean what she said. It wasn't over for her. It wasn't over for me either, but I wanted her to think so, to make her let go of me, because I felt like shit personified and didn't want to drag her down with me. So I did the one

thing I could think of, that would really end it for both of us. For me because I knew I wouldn't do such a thing when I was in a sound loving relationship. For her because she would despise me. Hate me."

"What did you do?" Sam asked wide-eyed.

"I slept with someone else. On tour. The medic."

"Dad!"

Charles looked into Sam's appalled face which once again reminded him of the magnitude of what he had done back then, not that he had forgotten. Not only had he slept with another woman when he still was Molly's husband, but on tour and in the same role that Molly had held when they once met, somehow tainting even the beginning of their love story. He could hardly have done anything worse.

"Yes, Sam, I totally deserve the way you're looking at me right now." Charles' voice broke. "In one way I'm not sure if I'm doing the right thing telling you. Maybe you'll never respect me again, but I've been thinking... Our talks, since you started your research, it has meant a great deal to me and I have realised that I want you to *know* me. Know *all* of me, the real me, including the mistakes I've made. You have known for long that I'm far from perfect, now I'm trying to explain why I have done some of the things I have in the past. You're a grown-up and you're entitled to the truth and to decide what you make of it, but more importantly you are my

son and I don't want to keep pretending that I am or have been someone different than I am. I'm tired of keeping appearances up."

Sam had stayed silent for a while before he spoke, measuring his words carefully, despite his young age wise enough not to say anything he would regret later.

"I'm shocked and appalled, I won't deny that. Finally I understand why Molly left like she did. I need to think about this dad, need to take it in. I'll call you when I have."

He had grabbed his coat and left Charles, walked away just like Molly and Betsy had today. The difference was that Charles was his dad, he had no other and he loved him no matter what. He had called him after a week and said he appreciated the honesty and wanted to move on from there and so they had.

Sam paused outside his door to reach for the keys. Years had passed since they had that father-son-talk and even if he had found Charles' actions horrible, putting the cards on the table had made them grow closer. He had forgiven his dad the past, but today was another trial in the present. Maybe Betsy, faced with the facts of their parents' past, would not want to be with him anymore. Maybe it was simply too much to stomach.

He opened the door and stepped inside, prepared for silence, but soft music was playing, and the lights were on. *She was here*. His heart made a little somersault.

"Betsy?"

Once upon a long time after The Jump

She appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. She had changed clothes and was dressed in her favourite among his t-shirts. He always loved the way it dwarfed her. She looked comfy, like she was waiting for him and had no plans to go anywhere. To his utter relief a smile was playing on her lips.

"You're home already?"

"I found mum and talked to her, but then she needed to be alone."

"So you don't know if she went to see dad?"

"No. She said she would think about it. I told her she should go, if only to get closure. She wasn't as upset as I thought she would be, quite calm actually. Come, I've just put on the kettle."

He followed her into the kitchen and leaned against the worktop, watching her as she prepared two mugs of tea. Appreciating that she was here.

"Did she tell you about what happened back then?"

"Yeah... So hard, for both of them."

"What dad did..."

"He fucked up, he really did... but he seems to have suffered too from what you've told me. Suffered more than enough, don't you think?"

Once upon a long time after The Jump

"Knowing him... having seen him and talked to him over the years, *I* think so, yes.
But do *you*?"

She nodded.

"In the end it is only the two of them who can fix things between them. Ask forgiveness, forgive."

"And if they don't? What if Molly still hates dad?"

She stepped closer, her eyes locked in his.

"I don't think she ever hated him. I think she was just terribly, terribly hurt because she loved him."

"Still... would you want to be with me then? If she can't forgive him?"

Then she laughed a lovely laughter, like small bells jingling, closed the remaining gap between them and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"As much as I feel for both of them, they are *them* and we are *us*. I won't let their screwed up past stop the best thing that has ever happened to me."

"I'm the best thing that has happened to you?" He cracked up in a smile so wide it would never end.

"Yup."

"You mean that? Seriously?"

"I do. I love you, Samuel James." She kissed him on the mouth and relief flooded over him. She would not push him away over this.

"I love you Betsy... or Bashira? What do you want me to call you?"

"You can call me anything you like as long as you stay with me, but I'm most used to Betsy these days."

He just smiled and kissed her again. Neither of them felt like sitting down by the kitchen table, the distance between them would be too wide. Instead they brought their mugs to the sofa and cuddled up close to one another.

"Do you know that Molly used to tell me stories about you? Even dad told me stories where Molly was a heroine and you played a part. I loved those stories, they were more exciting than Harry Potter."

"No? What did they tell you?"

Entwined on the sofa, he told her everything as he remembered it, as an adult realising that the story had the rosy shimmer of a fairy tale which probably had not been the real daily life of Bashira. Realised that if all was true, her childhood had been harsh.

"Did all that really happen?"

"It did."

"The part where your father put a suicide vest on you too?"

"It is long since I thought of him as my father. He was my biological father, sure, but I never had a father-daughter relationship with him. I was never worth anything to him, except like a merchandise he could trade for something he wanted more. My mother loved me, but she was so repressed." She shook her head sadly at the memories. "The first real family I knew was when I came to live with Molly and Simon and they became my parents. They have always shown me they loved me and coming here, to UK, I was free in a way I never would have been allowed to be in Afghan. I remember good days, good moments there too, but I would never have been able to go to school like here. I would never have been allowed to fall in love with whom I wanted, decide who I marry. I will not throw away any of the opportunities given to me, especially not you."

"You're saying you think you will marry *me*?" He flashed her a cheeky grin.

"I think you're a bit previous there", she giggled.

He pulled her even closer to him.

" Maybe so, but it was you who mentioned marriage first. You know, if I believed in fate, I would say everything seems to have led up to this... to us meeting each other and falling in love. Molly and dad going to Afghan and meeting you..."

"...Them falling in love and getting married...", she filled in.

"Yeah, and dad's best friend's death and the PTSD and the divorce, because otherwise Molly may never had adopted you and then you wouldn't have come here."

"But I did. I *did* come here and walked into the office a sulking researcher who turned out to be quite charming after all."

"Really? Who was that?"

"As if you don't know, you numpty."

She turned her face up to his to let him kiss her and he was not late to pick up the message and gave her an intense kiss.

"You know I want to be with you when I'm done? That I want to make plans for my life after the examination together with you?"

"I didn't know..." Smiling she nibbled his bottom lip. "But I'm thrilled to hear it because I want that too, and my plan for the immediate future..."

"Yes?"

"Can you please take me to bed?"

"Sounds like an excellent plan to me."

It was the day of the ceremony. Sam was dressed to the nines in white shirt and navy blue suit and tie, looking absolutely dashing but as usual unaware of it. He paced around mumbling to himself, waiting for the moment when it was time for him to enter before the assembled audience.

Charles strolled in, nervous too under the surface even if he pulled off to look cool as a cucumber. This was after all a big day for his only son and consequently for him.

"Feeling ready?"

"As ready as I can be. I wonder if any preparations in the world are enough not to be nervous on a day like this. I'm afraid I'll make a mistake, and someone will eat me alive."

Charles snorted.

"And who would that be? Not Betsy I imagine, or Molly, or me. Not even your mum even if she is a perfectionist. Do you care about anyone else?"

"Not really."

"There you go, nothing to be nervous about then."

"Easier said than done." He adjusted his tie knot for the umpteenth time. "Were you? Nervous?"

Charles delayed his response to think back of how things had been.

"With your mum I was nervous like a cat on hot bricks. We were so young, and I wasn't entirely sure it was right. It turned out it wasn't, but I'll never regret it because it gave me you. With Molly I knew for sure it was right, that it was everything I wanted, yet I was nervous. Feared I would screw it up somehow, because I was so unbelievably in love and I couldn't believe I would be allowed to stay as happy as I was that day. That came true too as you know."

Sadness passed briefly over Charles' face before his expression transformed into a happy smile.

"The second time with Molly, I wasn't nervous at all. I was still as much in love as the first time but knew both myself and her better. I felt certain we had already gone through the worst challenges a couple can be faced with and made it through to the other side. Not side by side together all the way, but we came back to each other and we will stay together always. I knew that for sure on our second wedding day, so all I felt was gratefulness for a second chance, happiness and anticipation. And love of course."

"I know this is right too, without a shadow of a doubt."

Charles seriously met the brown eyes that were a duplicate his own, then smiled.

"Well, I have seen you together and I know that too. I think you're lucky enough to get it right the first time and I think you'll be very happy."

"Thanks dad."

"I can hardly take any credit for that. You handled that part of your life brilliantly on your own, just as you have with so much else. I hope you know Rebecca and I are very proud of you? Molly too of course."

Sam only nodded, as he by now had a lump in his throat. Charles' eyes were also suspiciously glossy.

"Alright, I think we need to pull ourselves together. We can't leave the ladies waiting, can we? Let's go in."

The two handsome, suited men entered the crowded little church, where Sam took his position by the altar. Charles first gave him a reassuring pat on the back, but then went for a full hug before he stepped to the side.

Sam's gaze wandered over the first rows. His mum and grandparents were seated next to Timmy and Tamara, Betsy's little brother and sister, who oddly had become his step-siblings too when their parents got back together. He saw aunt Bella come scurrying down the side aisle as fast as she could in her high heels, with eyes fixed on Charles and a look of distress on her face. Sam laughed to himself as he realised the reason was the baby in her arms who had started making displeased noises.

"You had better take her, or she might scream throughout the entire ceremony", she blurted out when she stopped in front of an amused Charles.

"Oh dear, we couldn't have that", he said with soft voice, directed more to the baby than to the reluctant baby sitter Bella, as he took the little one in his arms and held her close to his chest. The rosy baby snuggled into him and immediately went quiet when she sensed the familiar body shape and scent of Charles.

Sam smiled again. Despite that Stella was six months old, he still was not used to the sight of his father with a baby in his arms, but it was one that made him happy. He had given up the thought of any sibling's on Charles' side so many years ago, that it had taken some time to fully adjust when dad and Molly had broken the news.

It seemed like they had been a bit nervous to tell him and Betsy that they were expecting a baby together. Molly stuttered slightly as she said the words, whilst Charles held an arm around her in an almost protective manner as if he feared a negative reaction.

"We realise if this is weird to you. I mean, it will be a brother or sister to both of you and since you are together... well, that *is* weird." Molly had wriggled uncomfortably on her chair and Charles was drumming his fingers on his thigh until Molly grabbed his hand to hold it instead.

"We wanted this very much and we're very happy. We hope you can be happy for us too, even if it is a bit screwed up", Charles chipped in.

Betsy and Sam had looked at each other and burst into laughter. By now they were already used to and fully accepting a messed-up family tree and this added complication was indeed a happy one.

"I can only speak for myself and I'm really glad, but a bit shocked or at least surprised. Not because it will be weird, but I didn't expect more siblings. To be honest I thought you were too old by now..."

"Oi, don't be cheeky. I'm only turning 40 next year. There are lots of 40-year old mums out there." Molly grinned, knowing Sam meant no offense and relived he seemed to take the news well.

"I was talking about dad", he grinned in return.

"You had better watch out young man, or I will disown you." Charles tried to put on a stern face but for once failed miserably, looking more like a giddy school boy now when there was no negative reaction.

"As it takes nine months I'll have some time to get used to the thought at least."

Sam had accepted the imminent baby immediately, as had Betsy and both had been looking forward to its arrival, yet it had been strange to see her in Charles' arms for the first time and realise his dad was a dad once again. It had been strange but

touching and once again he got to know a new side to his father, one which he appreciated very much and hoped he would be able to copy if he one day had kids of his own.

Standing behind Betsy, Molly smoothed a strand of her hair in place, then let her hands rest on Betsy's shoulders and their eyes met in the mirror.

"Do you miss your mother? Do you wish she was here with you today?"

A look of uncertainty and something that resembled guilt passed over Molly's face.

Betsy moved a hand to place it over Molly's.

"Of course, I have thought of her, thought I wished she could see me this happy and dressed like a bride, but you are my mum too and we are close in a way I never could be with her. You are the one I truly wouldn't have wanted to be without today."

Molly gave her a radiant smile, she had worried she would not be enough on this special day.

"I wish dad was here too."

"You know that I'm always thinking Simon is looking down on us from his cloud, especially on a day like this. He wouldn't miss it for the world."

"I know, and I think so too."

Neither of them mentioned Betsy's biological father. No one would have wanted him here and they preferred not spoiling the day by thinking of him even briefly.

"I have something for you."

Molly took out a small jewelry box and gave to the surprised Betsy, who opened it. It contained white gold necklace with the most beautiful blue sapphire pendant.

"I had it made for you because I thought it could be your '*something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue*'."

"I love it! But it looks all new to me?"

"In a way it is, and definitely new to you. You know the story of Smurf. Once he gave me his mother's wedding ring. I told him I only saw him as a friend, but he asked me to keep it for him for now and I agreed to wear it on a string around my neck, never on my finger and said I would return it when he found his girl. He never got to do that though... So, you can say I borrowed it, and it *is* old. His mum didn't let me return it after his death, said he would have wanted me to keep it, but I never wore it again. Last month I used it to make this pendant instead and asked them to add a blue stone. I think that is a worthier use of the ring than just having it hidden in a drawer and I wanted to take something sad and turn it into something good, like we have done with so many other things in our lives."

"I think that is so beautiful, thank you."

"I had something engraved on the back of the pendant, but it is so small it is almost impossible to read."

"What does it say?"

"Soul sisters."

"Oh, mum you're making me cry before it even has started."

"No, no, I didn't mean to." Molly reached for a handkerchief and both carefully dabbed under their eyes not to smudge the makeup.

"It's happy tears though. I love you."

"And I love you, both like my daughter and a sister. You have been special to me since the day we met."

Sometimes, Molly had thought to herself that the love she felt for Charles and the love she felt for Bashira, had started to grow simultaneously back in Afghan and were somehow so connected that she could not quite separate them. During her first years with Charles, being without Bashira and worrying for her had left her with a hole in her heart not even he could fill. The many years without Charles, after she had brought Bashira home to safety, there had instead been a vacuum after him. Only now, when she had them both in her life, together with the other children, she was finally complete. The circle of love was closed.

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"Now I had better bring you in to Sam or he may worry you have jilted him at the altar."

"As if I could. I'm crazy about him and can't imagine my life without him, but you already know that."

"I do and I'm so, so happy for you. I can't think of anyone I'd rather see you marry."

"Not strange since you're crazy about his dad."

"Weird but very true."

Giggling like two teenage girls they prepared to enter the church.

An acoustic guitar began playing Pachelbel's *Canon in D* and the double doors at the entrance of the church swung open. Sam immediately re-directed his gaze there and unconsciously clenched his jaw in fear of *anything* that could happen between this moment and the moment she said yes, but there was nothing to fear. Only good things came to pass.

Betsy was standing in the door with Molly by her side as she had decided that she wanted her mum to walk her to the altar on this day. Betsy looked ethereal in a wedding dress with a fitted bodice of Chantilly lace, a full-length wide tulle skirt and a beaded belt at the waist, showing her delicate silhouette to perfection. Her hair was made into a soft updo with white flowers dispersed in the dark locks

instead of a veil. Sam almost stopped breathing at the sight, unable to believe that this almost supernatural beauty was to be his wife, but as she came closer he saw her green eyes seeking for his, twinkling with happiness. Once their eyes met, she did not let go and as she walked up the aisle she smiled the widest smile. It was like there was only the two of them in the room. He knew then for sure that nothing would ruin this day.

Molly walked next to her eldest daughter, her heart swelling with pride and joy. All those years ago, when she left Charles and consequently left Sam behind, she could never have foreseen that a day as happy as this would come; that she would get to walk her daughter Bashira to the altar, where a totally smitten Sam would be waiting for her to make her his wife, whilst Charles, her own beloved husband for the second time around, waited for her to join him, holding their baby.

A year or so after they had reconciled and were already married again through a small ceremony at the register office with only Sam and Betsy present, Charles had asked almost bashfully, if she could imagine having another child. He had told her he would fully understand if she did not want it but that he would love to have a baby with her. It took her by surprise and at first she had been hesitant to start over. Not because she had not forgiven him or did not trust him, she did by then and had proven it by accepting to be his wife again, but she was hesitant to go through another pregnancy, breast feeding, and nights deprived of sleep.

However, time went by and she saw how great he was with Timmy and Tamara, taking them on as his own. He showed her daily in every way possible how much

he loved her and her own love for him grew stronger than ever; different, deeper, more mature. Gradually she started longing for a child with him, one that was half him, half her and one night in bed when he started touching her she told him she was no longer on the pill. He paused, looked at her searchingly and saw in her eyes that she meant what he hoped. The love making that followed was more passionate and intense than ever.

If it happened already that night or during one of the many intimate moments in the weeks that followed was not possible to tell for sure, but they liked to think that it happened that special night and soon Molly's baby bump was growing. She had an easy pregnancy, even if there were a few more health checks for both her and the baby this time as she was turning forty that year. Nine months later they welcomed baby Stella to the world, immediately adored and spoiled by everyone in the family.

Molly had not regretted her decision one second; not through the pregnancy when Charles was there every step of the way; held back her hair during the few episodes of morning sickness, cried at the first glimpse of the baby form at the scan and later on froze in amazement when he felt her kick. Even if this was not his first child, Sam was so long ago, and he had been on tour for part of that pregnancy and missed much. Now he savoured every day more than the more experienced Molly and she laughed at him when he googled the development of the baby week by week, like she had done with Timmy but not bothered once she got pregnant with Tamara. Now, during her third pregnancy she did not really feel the need either but took

great joy in letting Charles inform her that the baby this week was the size of a kiwi; now had a beating heart; now was fully functional and only growing in size before it would come out to them. Most of all she enjoyed the happy expectation in his eyes and when the baby finally made its entrance into this world and she saw Charles holding the tiny, perfect creature in his arms, she realised that Stella was the final piece of mending them. They were what they always had been meant to be; a loving family. Their life paths had taken a detour, for good and for bad, but now they were intertwined again and would not drift apart a second time. She felt certain of that.

Despite that Stella had been with them six months by now, Molly also was certain that she would never tire of the sight of Charles with their daughter. As she walked up the aisle by Betsy's side, she watched him. After one long admiring look at the bride, his gaze had shifted to her, the most important woman in his life. Now he watched Molly with a look of unbridled joy and she took him in too, enjoyed the combination of handsome, impressively tall man in black suit and tiny baby cradled in his arms and she wondered to herself if it was very inappropriate that she wanted him badly right now. When she left Betsy by Sam's side and went to stand by Charles, he looked down on her and whispered.

"You look as beautiful as the bride."

"You're not supposed to say that", she beamed.

"Am I allowed to tell you I love you very, very much then, Molly James?"

"You are, and I love you very, very much too, but now you have to stay quiet because I want to hear our children getting married."

And so, they stood, side by side and watched Sam and Betsy promise they would love one another for better and for worse, sealing it with rings and a kiss, knowing that they too would hold that promise true for the rest of their lives.

A week later the quartet plus Stella found themselves at Heathrow. Molly and Charles had come to see Betsy and Sam off for their honey moon trip.

"Promise to take care of yourselves now", a tearful Molly demanded as she hugged them both hard.

"We're adults mum and you know it is a different ball bag now from when *we* last were there. Once we get to Italy you can stop worrying completely."

"Worrying is a mum's privilege no matter how grown-up and independent the kids are. You will get that one day."

After Sam had passed his final examination with flying colours and graduated as PhD, and his thesis and publications had received great acclaim, he had received many job offers both in UK and abroad. One had been to join a private clinic based in Oxford, treating PTSD patients, but although it was tempting it was only part time. Then Professor Watson had offered him to stay in her group also for a post-

doc, admitting she would be thrilled if he stayed. A half year earlier that would have been the last option on his list, but with the vastly improved relationship he now had with Watson and the prospect of staying close to Betsy, he had gladly accepted and spent part of his time at the university, part at the clinic working with patients.

Within a few months Betsy had moved in with him and they had remained in Oxford, but a few months ago she had completed her PhD too, Sam was done with the post doc and they felt ready for some adventures.

For their honey moon they had decided they wanted to visit the country that was Betsy's roots and Sam always had found alluring; Afghanistan. Over the last decade, the situation in the country had improved and stabilized in ways few had dared to hope, with the few remaining Taliban well-controlled and suicide attacks being a memory of the past. Now, the newlyweds would spend a week there before flying to Italy where they would stay at Sam's grandparents' villa by Lake Garda.

Molly was both excited and a bit envious about them going to Afghan, but could not help also feeling motherly concern.

"We will be fine mum, and we'll text you and send photos. It will almost be like you're there."

Charles put his arm around Molly and pulled her close to him.

"Did you know that Molly once seriously considered living there permanently in some little mountain village, because she thought it was 'proper nice'?"

"No!? What happened that made you change your mind?"

"I pointed out to her there was no Wi-Fi and then she realised there would be one or two other things she might miss from home."

"Yeah, like Top Shop and Starbucks", Molly reminisced.

"Do you remember what else you worried about that day?"

"Bashira. I worried about Bashira."

"Some things never change, do they?"

All laughed, and both Molly and Charles got a fuzzy warm feeling in the pit of their stomachs, thinking back to that day on patrol between the green mountainsides of Helmand. The initial ice between them had been broken at that point, he had realised she was indeed 'the nuts' as a medic and they had shared one of their first laughs together at the thought of the Newham born and raised Molly living in the Afghan mountains. It was also the first time he had realised how much he appreciated that she made him look at Afghan with different eyes than he had before, during any of his previous tours.

"Anyway, we had better go through security now, so we don't miss the plane. I promise we will come back to you, not settle down in the Afghan mountains", Sam said.

"No, I would also miss Top Shop and Starbucks too much. And you." Betsy stepped closer to give the trio one last hug and kissed Stella on her forehead. She was sleeping in Molly's arms, blissfully unaware of her surroundings and the goodbyes being said.

"Oh, just go now before I start crying. See you in two weeks, but I want many photos! And give Quaseem a hug from me."

They watched the newlyweds disappear after one last wave goodbye.

"I already miss them."

"They will be fine you know."

"I know, and so will we."

"And so will we. You would want to go with them, wouldn't you?"

"I would. I would really like to go back one day, now when it is peace. Visit Quaseem, see what Kabul looks like now, go for a mountain hike maybe. But you wouldn't want to return, would you?"

"I have thought about it. For some time, I wondered if it would give me closure to go back, but then I realised I have already had my closure; by finding my way back to Sam, by finding my way back to you and by Stella coming into our lives. All I want and need is here, I don't need anything else to be happy. I think you should

go one day though, with Betsy or maybe with all of the kids to show them where their big sister comes from."

"I might do just that, but I think it will have to wait until Stella is older. For now, I'm one hundred percent content here, by your side."

Charles wrapped his arms around Molly and held her as close as he could without squeezing Stella and bent down and kissed his wife for long. So long that the baby finally stirred and began making sounds.

"I think someone is saying we should go home", Charles mused.

"We should probably head for the house, but as for being home, I am already. It's where you are, Charles James."

"As glad as I am to hear that, I'm wondering if you ever will let me have the last word, my gobby little Cockney?"

"Very small chance of that happening. Can you live with that?"

He cocked an eyebrow in the way she loved so much and smirked.

"I think I can. It's a small price to pay to have you in my life for always."

THE END

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A/N: Hope you enjoyed. As always, thank you for following to the end and thank you for all the reviews because they truly encourage me to keep writing.