



# ALL IS FAIR

## IN LOVE AND WAR

An Our Girl FanFic

MISS PIONY



## All is fair in love and war

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*Captain Charles James is off for another tour to Afghanistan. As an experienced war hero, he knows to always be prepared for the unexpected, yet he finds himself knocked out of balance when his platoon is joined by a ghost from his past, in the shape of army doctor Molly Dawes. Turns out she is not the only one from the past haunting him.*

*This is the story following the prequel "Young love – or how it all began" letting us know what has happened to the quartet of friends and enemies later in life. The setting will be familiar, but as the past was different, so will the future be for the characters we know and love.*

*Thanks to Tony Grounds and BBC who have created the characters which I borrow for a while for my story.*

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## Chapter 1: Charles

Despite that I was running late I was in a good mood that grey October day. My transport had been late picking me up from my home in Bath, but I knew the airplane would anyway wait for me at Brize Norton. The section could hardly leave without their captain and it had just allowed me time to drink one last cup of decent coffee and prepare for many months when I likely would get none. Unless I had my Nespresso machine sent there... now that was a thought.

I was in a good mood because we were finally to take off for a tour to Afghanistan after six months of training the section, 2 section as they were called. It was the fourth tour for me but the first for them, and I had done my best to prepare them. It was a promising group of young men and I felt quite confident they were as ready as they could be for the real deal. I was really looking forward to getting out there with them. There is something special about being on tour. Even if it is deadly serious and you have to guard yourself at all times, there is an easiness to that life, a freedom which I do not experience in any other place. It is like I can be myself for real on tour, like nowhere else.

This time the sense of freedom was enhanced even further already before leaving UK, because my divorce had just gone through. Rebecca's and my marriage had never been good and the last years were a disaster which I gladly had fled from by going on tour time after time. We should not have gotten married in the first place. It was clearly a mistake and truth be told I had behaved like an ostrich, almost literally hiding my head in the sand of Afghan and pushed the problem in front of

me instead of dealing with it but I think that maybe I just did not care enough to muster the energy to end it. When she got too fed up with my absence and indifference and finally was unfaithful while I was on my previous tour, it was just the last nail in the coffin and we both were in complete agreement to divorce. It was such a relief now that it was over, and I could leave without a bad marriage and dissatisfied wife hanging over me. I was sure she would be much happier now too, with the teacher colleague she apparently was going out with. I could not care less and maybe that had always been the problem, that I did not really care about her. She just happened to be there and was pretty, nice and eager at a time in life when it felt appropriate to find someone. It was just that she was only that, someone, not *the one*. I think I proposed mostly because she thought she was pregnant and when it turned out to be false alarm, it did not seem appropriate to take it back and we stupidly went through with it. But no more.

So, this day I felt light as a feather. I was to take off for another tour with a section I thoroughly enjoyed leading and I had no strings attached to home. The future seemed bright.

In a way it is funny that I chose the army, chose to go to Sandhurst and train to be an officer after uni. Voluntarily chose a predominantly male environment, a hierarchical one with strict rules and regulations, despite that I once in boarding school had longed to get away from just that. But I guess that familiar things appeal to the human nature and I was shaped both by boarding school and by growing up as the son of a Brig, so in the end it felt like a natural choice. And I liked it. I felt at home in the army, felt at ease when I was m on tour, when I was hanging out with the privates as well as when I took my place among the officers. Somehow this had

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become my world and everything outside it was secondary. I think Rebecca noticed that quite soon and it was another reasons it did not work out.

When the vehicle finally stopped outside Brize I hurried inside, only to find Corporal Kinders calm and on top of everything. That is the beauty of surrounding yourself with good people, sometimes you can allow yourself some slack - although in this case it was not actually my fault I was running late.

"Captain James, good to see you, Sir", he greeted me.

"The full section is here", he then informed me. "They are gathered outside on the tarmac for the mandatory photo shoot. We were just waiting for you to join."

I nodded in confirmation.

"In addition, an army doctor will join us on the flight, for transport to the army hospital in Bastion."

Camp Bastion was the large military base where we were first to arrive in Afghan, to then continue to a smaller FOB in the Helmand Province.

Kinders flipped through his papers.

"Dawes is the name. Of the doctor I mean."

I could not help but smiling, as I was reminiscing another Dawes.

"Sir?"

"No, nothing. It's just that I knew a Dawes once, but that was a girl."

"This is too, Sir. Well, not a girl but Dr. Dawes is a woman."

There must be many people named Dawes, yet I got an unsettling feeling when I learned this Dawes was female. Surely for no good reason and I just shook it off. We went out on the tarmac where 2 section were gathered, although behaving quite disorderly and I needed to raise my voice to get them to pull themselves together.

"How long will it take to make you massive cockwombles to pull yourselves together for a bloody photograph?!"

With satisfaction and an inner smile, I saw them all straighten their backs and take their places, and I took my place among them. But as the photographer took the photo, my eye was caught by something moving on the right-hand side of my field of vision and I could not help turning my gaze there. It was a woman. By the uniform and dark blue beret apparently the army doctor. Twelve years had passed but it did not take me one second to recognise Molly Dawes. *Doctor* Dawes as it seemed. She was occupied checking something in her Bergen, so her focus was not on us, on me, which gave me time to compose myself. So many times, I had imagined meeting her again, but never in *this* setting. Not in the army setting. Never had I imagined that she too would find her way to the army, like I had. I panicked on the inside although I'm quite sure I managed to keep the indifferent outside the army had taught me. Keep my emotions in check at all times. I did not want her here, here in the world where I needed to stay alert and focused on my task, leading my men and fighting our enemies. She had absolutely no place here. I would have loved to meet her anywhere in the world, but not here. I decided I

would have to pretend like nothing, to her, to all others, to myself. I looked straight ahead again and ignored her as we finalised the photo shoot and boarded the plane.

I think she did not notice me first. I was just another man in uniform, but when we sat down in the plane I found myself closer to her than I had wished, as she sat diagonally across me. I tried to avoid looking at her, but it was terribly difficult, even unnatural, during such a long flight. Especially as I felt myself *wanting* to look at her all the time. In the end, I could not resist, and my gaze made its way to her face. By then she was already looking at me, searchingly. She was examining my face and now I felt that she scrutinised any reaction on my part. I gave her nothing, ensured my face was carved in stone as I simply gave her a courteous nod to acknowledge her presence. She looked surprised. I'm not sure if it was surprise because she recognised me and had not expected me there, or surprise because I did not seem to recognise her, or maybe both.

"Charles?" she said.

"It's common protocol to use ranks here. I'm Captain James", I said. "Do I know you?"

"Don't you?" she asked, and those green eyes seemed to look into me, wanting to know my innermost secrets, but I had no intention of giving them away.

"No", I said, probably one of the most dishonest statements of my life.

She looked confused and disappointed.

"I'm Molly Dawes. We knew each other a long time ago, when we were kids."



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Yes, we were kids, but on the verge of being adults. And I had desired her in an adult way at the same time as she had been my best friend. Very, very dangerous past to reminiscence in this setting. I just could not afford that.

"I'm sorry. You need to remind me, where would this have been?"

I was amazed at my own capability of lying right to her face.

"When you were at boarding school. My father was the headmaster there. You don't remember?"

She looked at me incredulously. Of course, because how could anyone forget something like what we shared? But I felt I had to pretend, because if I admitted to that, she would bring up memories and it would all come flooding over me, the feelings I had back then. I smiled politely but distantly and said;

"I'm sorry, but no, I don't remember. It was a long time ago and it's a time in my life I prefer not to think about."

She bit her lower lip and looked sad.

"Okay. It was a time that meant a lot to *me*."

I felt my heart cringe at those words, but I did not take back what I had said, and I made sure my voice did not sound very regretful when I said;

"Sorry, Dr. Dawes, I just don't remember."

Then she said sharply;

"If we are going to keep to the correct ranks, Captain James, it's *Captain* Dawes to you."

Of course. Army doctors would have minimum the rank of a captain, and I felt like a school boy who had been put in his place by the teacher.

She looked away and so did I, despite that what I really wanted to tell her was that I *did* remember, in more detail than could be expected. Despite that I tried to push it away, I remembered more for every minute that passed sitting across her in that damn plane. I would have loved to ask her what she had been up to all these years. Then it struck me that as she was an army doctor she would have gone to Sandhurst for her training just like me. How ironic that we somehow had chosen the same direction, but due to the age difference not been there simultaneously and only now we crossed paths again.

I kept my ears open when Kinders asked about her previous experience. That way I got to know that she had gone through basic military training, followed by training to become an Army doctor and gotten a full degree in medicine. So, as could be expected she was both a soldier like me *and* a doctor. She had been working as a General Duties Medical Officer, so far mostly based at home and only participated in exercises abroad. This would be the first time she went to a real war zone and she admitted to both being excited and terrified. It stroke me as corageous that she openly admitted being terrified but still did not at all seem to hesitate about going. Then again, it did not surprise me that the girl I once knew seemed to have developed into an extraordinary woman. I always thought she would. I was just so damn uncomfortable about being close to her in this setting, why in all these

years could I not have run into her in a supermarket or something instead of here. It hit me that in case, just in case, I would develop feelings for her again, I would find myself in a situation much similar to the one many years ago, in an environment where rules and regulations made romantic feelings inappropriate. That time it was because she was the headmaster's daughter and I'm a student, and in addition she was so young compared to me. Now, the age gap had shrunken to nothing, but the army setting would make it just as improper. It was out of the question to let any feelings sprout when full focus had to be on the job. But I did not know why I even bothered thinking about it after all that time. With a row of dates, girlfriends and even a wife between then and now, there was no reason why my teenage crush should affect me in any way. Or at least I did my best to convince myself of that, but my good mood was gone and I had an unsettling feeling in my stomach throughout the flight, as I did my very best to avoid looking at her openly at the same time as I could not stop sneak-peaking at her – the woman who was the girl I once had loved.

## Chapter 2: Molly

I was so excited that day when I finally was to depart for Afghanistan. After all my years of training, the day I had been waiting for had come and I was going to what had become known as the world's best trauma hospital. It knew it would not be easy, but it would be the experience of a lifetime, and it was what I had wanted for so long.

That morning, I was standing a bit on the side, observing 2 section who were waiting for their captain to join them, so they could take a photo before the take-off. Finally, he came striding, a tall, dark haired man in uniform and beret and shouted, commanding them to get themselves in order. They quickly obeyed, and he slipped in among them, his back straight, looking right ahead into the camera. It only took me a second to recognise him. I involuntarily gasped for air and bent down to start fumbling with my Bergen, pretending I was looking for something, to give myself time to compose myself. After all these years, this was the last place where I would have expected to come across him. I never thought he would be an officer. I knew his father was, but it had never seemed like he considered to walk in his footsteps. The shock made adrenaline flow in me, although I'm not sure if it was the fight or flight mode my autonomic nervous system wanted to trigger. Neither was appropriate for the situation at hand, and I just stayed on my knees and kept pretending to go through the Bergen for a while. I was surprised that the bare sight of him could stir such feelings in me, it must be the shock. For goodness sake, more than twelve years had gone by, I was engaged to another man and there was no reason why seeing my teenage love would cause such a reaction.

I avoided looking at him as we boarded the plane, but I was wondering if he would recognise me. We were seated diagonally across from one another and I knew that sooner or later we would look at each other. And then I thought 'why not?', I might as well take the bull by its horns and acknowledge the past. Except for my foolish mistake to kiss him we had only been good friends and it would be nothing strange to acknowledge that.

But *he* did not.

Once he finally met my eyes there was not a flicker of emotion, nothing that indicated he recognised me too. When I asked straight out, he denied it and said that was a time he had done his best to forget. Maybe it was like that, that he had hated everything about those school years so much that he repressed everything about them, even our friendship. Anyway, it was like talking to a wall. It hurt me. Never had I imagined it would be like this meeting him again, that he would totally deny me. It also made me angry, angrier the more I thought about it throughout the flight. How could one forget something like that? And even if he had, how could he not even be curious to find out what I remembered of our apparent connection? What a twat he had become. The flight was a hell and I only longed for it to be over, so I would be able to remove myself from his company and disregard how it hurt that our past was apparently nothing to him, when it had been such an important part of me all these years even when I did not think about it actively. My thoughts were spinning. Maybe it was only for the better that I did not like him. Now I would be able to put it all behind me, no need to dream about a boy who had turned into a rude man who clearly did not want my company. Maybe he had an issue with women being in the army in general, because he did not even want to look at me

after we had ended our sparse conversation. If he really did not recognise me, he still could have been civil like anyone else. I think Corporal Kinders and the privates in the plane were all more interested in me than he was, just as a fellow soldier. The adult version of him was truly a disappointment. Well, if one disregarded his appearance that is, because he was for sure pleasant to look at. His dark wavy hair was the same, but he was even taller than I remembered and still lean but heavier built somehow, with broad shoulders. The air of authority and confidence was new, the shy sweet boy long gone it seemed. Back then he was in the border zone between boy and man, now he was definitely the latter. Pity that such a handsome man seemed to be an asshole.

During some of the nearly eight hours flight time I talked to Kinders, the medic called Ruby and the others, but then I also closed my eyes and pretended to be sleeping while I let my memory transport me far away over the years that had gone by since I saw him last.

After our strange good bye that early summer's day, I moved to mum in Italy and we remained there for a few years. She was together with a wealthy Italian guy, Giuseppe, and we stayed with him in Florence. It was great years. He was the ideal stepfather, easier to be with than my biological dad, and we became part of his large, warm family. I spent several years in one and the same school and finally found friends which I got to keep for a longer period. I learned fluent Italian and had the chance to excel in school, something our constant moving had made difficult before. Giuseppe was a renowned heart surgeon and when we discussed my future he encouraged me to consider medicine studies. He was a very inspiring man and even after mum and he broke up, her restless soul urging her to move on,

we stayed in contact. They parted on good terms too, so she did not mind that he remained sort of an extra dad to me.

I found the thought of studying medicine intriguing, but I also had the idea that I would want a job with an element of adventure. Funnily, I stumbled over my future profession when I happened to zap into a documentary about army doctors on the telly and it seemed to me like that would be the perfect mix of what I was looking for in a job. Mum, dad and Giuseppe joined together in the efforts to help me find out how I should go about to achieve becoming an army doctor. I applied, went through selection with interviews, was finally accepted to and started at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst when I was nineteen. First, I went through basic military training, then continued to achieve my degree in medicine. After graduation, I completed my two foundation years at the Queen Elisabeth's Hospital in Birmingham. I loved all that, but I longed to "get out there". For an army doctor, there is a variety of roles to choose from back home, but the reason that I wanted to become one in the first place was that I wanted to experience the more adventurous side the job could offer and help where it was needed most, not immediately settle in rehabilitation medicine or something similar.

As soon as my training and experience fulfilled the requirements, I signed up as voluntary to be sent to the army hospital in Bastion and the day I got the note saying that I had been accepted was one of the happiest in my life. My fiancée, John, was not as thrilled. He was concerned about the dangers it might entail, but I told him this was what I had been training for and wanted, and that he had known who I was when we got together. He saw in my eyes that he had no say in this, so then he just told me he was proud of me and kissed me. After all, I know he loves

me for the independent woman I am, even if he sometimes may wish I was less so. Anyway, I would only be gone for six months.

So, despite that it could be dangerous, despite that I would be away from John for half a year, I had only felt happy anticipation until I ran into Charles, no *Captain James*, that morning and he put a damper on my joy. It felt so good sticking my own rank up his face. I noticed he had not seen that coming and I cheered inside that I had manage disturb his perfect, annoying balance if only for a second. I would not let him destroy this experience for me. Anyway, Kinders had told me that 2 section were not to stay in Bastion so likely I would not come across him much once we got there. They were to continue to a smaller FOB at some distance from Bastion. As I sat in that plane I felt that the longer the distance and the more Taliban between us, making the distance difficult to cross, the better it would be because it is very awkward to try to ignore someone you once had a deep connection with, and even harder being ignored.

When we landed in Bastion, I said good bye to 2 section and was guided to female quarters for the hospital staff where I would be staying for the upcoming months. Captain James barely bothered to say bye, let alone wish me luck like the others did, just gave me a short nod and turned his back to me. It was really hard to accept that this was what he had turned into and I could not resist, with extra cheerful voice, saying to his back;

"It was very nice to nearly meet you again, Charles. No sorry, Captain James I mean."



I saw him freeze but I spun around and walked away before he could say anything, at least leaving with the satisfaction of having had the last word.

One of the first persons I met, was a female CMT called Jackie. She had been in Afghan for a year, both in the hospital and out in the battlefield, side by side with other soldiers. She seemed like a well of experience to me and I immediately started asking her questions about everything. It is one thing to learn things back home, and a whole other thing experiencing them in the field. She was very kind and once I had dropped off my things and quickly freshened up, she took me for a tour around the hospital. Just as we had finalised the tour and sat down with a cup of tea each, an alarm went off. I looked questioning at her.

"It's the helicopters coming in with casualties. They will need us at the ER, come!"

"Me too?"

"That's what you're here for, isn't it?"

Of course, she was right, I had just not been mentally prepared for it already then, after the long travel, without any proper introduction or sleep or even a meal between, but I realised that whatever I could contribute with might be of value. It was just that it turned out not to be much. Many of the worst casualties that come to the hospital in Bastion, are transported back to England after a few days and most of them end up at the hospital in Birmingham – so I thought I would be prepared, that I already had seen most of it. But this was different. The ambulances that transported the injured the last distance from the helicopters arrived and the men they carried out on stretchers were either screaming with pain despite the

drugs they had been given, or silent in an even more disquieting way. I had seen many patients with missing limbs, but none that only just had lost them, where the stump was still a mass of meat completely drenched in blood. I had been so sure my training would kick in, but it did not. I just froze, and totally useless watched Jackie disappear with a team to take care of a wounded soldiers, only moved to the side when I felt people bumping into me but was unable to remove myself from the scene altogether. Then I felt someone taking my firmly by the elbow, leading me away. I looked up and it was a stern-faced Charles. I'm not sure which feeling was strongest, relief of leaving that chaos, or annoyance over that he was the one to take me away. He had me sit down on a chair further down the corridor, where it was calmer – and less bloody. I felt myself breathing more normally and the nausea slowly disappeared. When he saw my eyes focus normally again, he said;

"Don't tell me we have an army doctor who can't stand the sight of blood. Then you are clearly in the wrong place. You need to shape up, Captain Dawes. This is not the ER."

I could not think of anything clever to say back to him, because in this case he was right. I really needed to get my shit together. And I did not follow the last part, about this not being the ER. He saw my question and sighed about having to explain.

"This is nothing like the series, the ER, where handsome people float around in white uniforms. You will find that the reality here is definitely much more brutal."

Of course, I had not expected it to be like that old favourite series of mine, but neither had I been fully prepared for this.

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"Why are you here?" I just asked.

"I wanted to donate some blood before we leave tomorrow. As you have seen, the need is huge. I was just ready when I saw you."

Standing there like a moron. How I wish he had already left.

"Will you manage without fainting now?" he cocked his eyebrow in the most annoying way.

I just nodded, and he got up.

"Better luck next time, Dawes."

He left, and with that the bastard was the one of us who got the last word after all. Damn it.

Later, I met an exhausted Jackie. There had been unusually many casualties coming in that day, even for being here. Some had died, but many would live thanks to the fantastic efforts of the medical teams.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

I told her how I had frozen and that Captain James had come and taken me away. I ended with;

"He really is prize asshole."

She looked surprised.

"Really? That is not what he is known for. He's known as a great officer and immensely popular among his men. He would also do anything for them. On his last tour he risked his own life to save one of his men, crawled 200 meters while the Taliban was shooting at him to drag that soldier into safety and have him brought here. He is recovering back in England now instead of being dead. Also, I think most of the female staff here has a minor, or major, crush on him because he is always so charming, but unfortunately he's married."

What she said disturbed me in more than one way. Apparently, Charles still had many good sides, but he definitely did not choose to show them to me, so he must really dislike me for some obscure reason. Illogically enough, I was also disappointed to hear he was married – as that would have made any difference to anything. Especially not since I was engaged myself.

As I was lying on my bunk that night, I found it hard to sleep. Not because it was uncomfortable, even if it was, but because I could not find calmness. Due to the change of time zone I was not tired yet even if the day had been long and eventful, but I realised that the thing, or the person, that kept disturbing me was Charles James. I knew that this night he was still here, in Camp Bastion, as 2 section would only leave in the morning. I was wondering if he already was sound asleep or if he tossed and turned like me.

### Chapter 3: Charles

I was not able to sleep that night. I tossed and turned on my bunk and could not stop thinking about her. Molly Dawes. *Doctor* Dawes. *Captain* Dawes. Twenty-four hours earlier, I had known nothing of her current life and was perfectly fine. More than fine, overjoyed about leaving for tour and being newly divorced. Not because I wanted to see other women, but because I was free from a loveless marriage – and the last thing I wanted was to get tangled up emotionally again any time soon. Least of all at work, and right now work was my life. If I let anything else than work be in focus, I might jeopardise both my own and others' lives. Yet, it was like already less than a day after meeting her again, I had her under my skin, and under my eyelids as soon as I closed my eyes. I saw her standing there in the corridor outside the ER, paralysed as people efficiently moved around her to help the wounded. I had realised that she had panicked, something that could happen to anyone the first time at the sight of such a bloody mess, literally. All I wanted was to scoop her up in my arms, hug her and whisper in her ear that it would be fine. That she would learn to cope with this and do better the next time, she would be an excellent army doctor – because I had no doubt about that. Instead I took her quite brusquely by the arm and talked to her harshly. In addition to that it would be unthinkable to give her a hug, I thought that provoking her might help her more than a hug would because the challenge would spark her. She might be so annoyed with me that she would be brilliant already next time just to show me she can make it, even if I'm not even there by then – but it made me feel like a prick. I did not even know why I reacted like that around her, I'm not that sort of unkind person, not with anyone else - so why with someone I once liked so much? No, there was no point lying to myself in retrospect. Someone I *loved* once. Maybe that

was the problem, even after a day, an hour, or even a minute – I was afraid I would fall for her again. But why would I, the past was past and now she was just anyone, right?

When dawn finally came, I was exhausted but relieved because that put an end to my shallow slumbering and after a quick breakfast we were to board the helicopter that would take us to the FOB. That would put some distance between me and Dawes and with that I would be able to stop thinking about her and focus fully on my job.

We did exactly that, me and my section, focused on the task at hand. Beside Corporal Kinders, they were ten privates of which one, Ruby, was a CMT. A soldier like the others but also trained to give the first acute help if any of the others were injured by a gunshot or IED, as well as help us all stay fighting fit at all times by treating daily ailments like blisters, common cold or sprains with a tented medical facility as his base. The soldiers were all young, restless and eager to experience what they considered to be the real army life in the field, get a chance to eye the enemy and take them down. But they were also inexperienced in the real-world setting and they were all in my charge. My goal was not only to complete our mission but to get them all home alive, each and every one of them. The mission itself could appear easy enough, to ensure that the local girls could go to their school like the boys did – but with the Taliban always hovering nothing was ever easy in Afghan.

After arrival and getting acquainted with the FOB and the ANA personnel we were to share it with and collaborate with, we soon started going out on shorter patrols

to get to know the surroundings and the local people. Some of them were curious and kind but shy, some were cautious or even hostile. We had to stay alert all the time not to miss any potential threats. After a week or two we had settled into a routine. As we got to know the surroundings better, we extended our patrols. In the early mornings, I had PT sessions with the soldiers, before it got too hot in the blazing Afghan sun - often to my amusement and their pain but the purpose was to keep them fit for battle. We made it secure for girls to attend school, we had scoff of dubious quality, hang out with each other and some of the ANA soldiers, played games to pass time, slept and started over. It was a quite repetitious life uniforms there were any incidents. In a way, we both longed for action and not, because it was a break to the routine and was exciting somehow but on the other hand it seldom meant anything good. An insurgent shooting at you or the school is not exactly what I would call a positive event.

One afternoon some of us were sitting in the shadow bantering, meanwhile some of the lads were working out in the provisional little gym we had set up to stay in shape. Then Ruby excused himself, said he needed to go to the loo and started walking away, but he did not get far before I suddenly saw him vomit uncontrollably and then fall to the dusty ground. I immediately got up and ran to him but when I reached him it was impossible to contact him, he was unconscious and cramping. Even though I had no idea what was happening to him and was not hundred percent sure it was the right thing to do, I started CPR and shouted to Fingers to call in a medevac. The helicopter probably came quickly, but it felt like it took an eternity because I was so afraid I would lose him. He did not regain consciousness on the way to Bastion hospital and not when we arrived either. I had to come with him, I would not leave one of my men alone in a situation like that. A

team of doctors and nurses took him away behind shut doors and I paced around impatiently, until a nurse told me it may take many hours until they knew what was wrong with him. They were running different tests and had to wait for results before they could say anything, but as he was in intensive care and monitored and his vital signs stable, he was probably out of immediate danger right now. I sent a message to the rest of 2 section that Ruby likely would be all right but that I would stay in Bastion overnight with the hope to get to know more. Both Corporal Kinders and Major Beck were anyway at the FOB, so it was not like I left them without CO. Having done that, I just sat down and leaned my head in my hands and closed my eyes for a while. Tried to rest after the shock. It had come out of the blue, one minute he was fine and then gone. What the fuck had happened?

"Are you all right, Charles?"

It was a kind question, but I anyway felt my skin pricking with goosebumps because I recognised the voice asking. Also, no one else would come up with the idea to call me Charles around here. I looked up and there she was. In all the turmoil I had not thought about that she would be here. She seemed to have come right from a trauma situation or surgery because she had a green plastic apron on top of her t-shirt and combats and there were stains of blood on the clothes. Apparently, she had overcome her fears from the first day. I was glad to see that, it made me proud of her – as if I had any right to.

She sat down on the chair beside me.

"Yeah, I'm okay. It's Ruby, they have taken him into the ICU."



I explained what had happened and she looked concerned, this was not the typical patient here.

"It was great that he could be taken here so quickly where he will get the best possible care. He will probably do fine."

I noted that she did not promise me anything she could not keep for sure, which I liked. I have experienced hospital staff saying that everything would be all right, and then someone died on me. I prefer to be told the truth, that it might be okay but not for sure. As she said it, she put her hand on my knee in a comforting way. I think it was a reflex more than a conscious move on her part but we both instantly became very aware of that hand there. How wrong it felt. Or how right. She immediately removed it, but it left a burning sensation on my skin through the fabric of my combats. She got up.

"Anyway, I have to get back, but I'll check on him and if I hear anything I'll let you know. Okay?"

"Okay, thanks."

She walked away and left me confused and only with half a brain focused on Ruby's condition.

Later she returned with a cup of tea and a sandwich and I accepted them wishing she would not be so kind, because it made it impossible for me not to be kind to her in return. Made it more difficult to keep my distance. It seemed like she had taken over Ruby as patient and she had some news about him.

"The test results tell us that he has an ETEC infection."

"What is that?"

"It stands for *Enterotoxigenic E. coli*, which is a nasty bacterium. It can cause traveller's diarrhoea and in countries like this it is a major cause of diarrheal disease. It is transmitted via food or water that has become contaminated. It seems like Ruby has gotten a really bad version of the infection, so it wiped out his system completely very fast, it shut down and he collapsed. It is not the most common way for the symptoms to present themselves, but it can happen like this. He will be all right, but he will have to stay in the hospital for some time. That is not very usual either, that you must stay hospitalised but when you get it this bad... He will need drip with rehydration solution and naturally stay in bed. Antibiotics may or may not shorten the duration of the infection, but we will give him that as a precaution. Even when he is discharged and allowed to leave the hospital he will not be fit for service for many weeks because it will take the body quite some time to rid itself of the toxin. In addition to that, he has cracked a few ribs slightly, so they need to heal. It seems someone was a bit too fervent doing CPR"

She smirked, and I felt myself blushing, I do not why really. I was just trying to save his life. Too bad I did not do it perfectly, but he will survive and that is what matters.

"You will have to get yourself a replacement medic for a month at least", she concluded.

I had not thought of that. I leaned back in my chair and exclaimed;

"For fucks sake!"

"I'm sorry, but it's hardly my fault. I'm just the messenger here."

"I know, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say it out loud. It's just that we will need a medic *now*, I won't take the men on patrol outside that FOB unless we have a medic with us. It's just too dangerous. And I know it will not be that easy to replace him so quickly. The medical staff is in high demand everywhere."

Frustrated I sighed and then felt that it was appropriate to add;

"Thanks anyway for updating me and I'm so grateful that he will be okay, that it was nothing worse. He scared the hell out of us when he just passed out and cramped, I thought he would be dead when we got here. It's my nightmare, you know, have to tell the parents, or the family of one of my men that he will not come home again."

I do not know why I blurted out that confession, but it reminded me of how easy it always was talking to her. How I could tell her about everything, except what I felt for her.

"Well, you won't have to this time at least", she smiled at me. The things that smile did to my insides, it was really for the better that I was to take that helicopter back tomorrow and get away from her.

"Good luck finding your new medic and have a safe trip back."

She left me, and I was relieved at the same time as I immediately missed her.

"For fucks sake..."

This time I was whispering the words to myself but felt as desperate as when I said them earlier.

Part of the evening I spent talking to the Lieutenant Colonel Shaw who was the CO of the hospital, to try to find a solution. I wanted a medic to come back with me when I left the next day. He was very unwilling to let anyone from the hospital go as they always needed all the people they had, and more, but he also realised we needed someone out in the field or our hands would be tied and our presence useless. The orders were clear that a medic should be part of every section because their presence and CABC saved life like nothing else.

"I'll see what I can do" he reluctantly ended our conversation.

I also called Major Beck to ask him to pull some strings and he said he would do his best. Just before I went to bed I got a text saying that it had been resolved and a medic would come with me the day after. That left me with one problem less, but I still found it difficult to sleep due to the proximity of Captain Dawes and her infectious smile.

Next morning, I was eager to get back to the FOB and impatiently waited by the helicopter, ready for take-off except that the promised medic had not showed up yet. I was starting to get annoyed, thinking Shaw maybe had changed his mind about letting someone go.

"Now I'm here, Captain", a voice said beside me and startled me, so I almost jumped. I had not seen her coming.

"So, I see, and it's very nice of you to come and wave me off but there was really no need, Dawes."

I could not help smiling at her as I said it. I had absolutely no idea why she had come, but I felt I could spare a joke on her now that I was anyway about to put some distance between us again.

"They did not tell you? I will replace your medic until he is well enough to return."

Only then I noticed the Bergen she was carrying. I felt my smile vanishing and my palms getting sweaty. No, not this. Not having her close to me, under my command in the small FOB. Seeing her every day, talking to her every day, risking our lives alongside every day. I did not manage to hide my reluctance.

"Do you have a problem having a woman as your medic, Sir?" she asked me.

I swallowed and resented that she would think I was that kind of man.

"No, of course not Dawes."

"I just thought you looked like it for a second, but fine then, then we're off I suppose."

And she threw her Bergen into the helicopter and followed herself. So did I, with a heart beating fast and loud, filled with fear about where this would lead.

## Chapter 4: Molly

I'm not sure why I put my own name forward as Ruby's replacement medic. The official version, the one I told my boss, was that it was a good opportunity to get some field experience. To understand what it is like for the men out there. He bought it and reluctantly agreed, as he had to send someone anyway and it could be me just as well as anyone else.

The other possible reasons I kept to myself. One was that it would be a terrific way to annoy Charles when it was so evident that he did not want to be near me. I thought it would be a suitable revenge for him denying remembering our friendship, which I just did not buy. The more I thought of it, the less his "amnesia" seemed believable and then the alternative was that he for some reason chose to pretend he did not remember. Another reason was that I wanted to get to know what he was really like nowadays. What others, like Jackie, had told me about him was so different from what he had shown me so far. Maybe that would be different if we worked side by side a month. The day before, there had been moments when he actually seemed quite nice. Then there was one reason I barely wanted to admit even to myself. When I found him sitting there outside the ER, with his head in his hands, he looked so vulnerable and reminded me of the Charles I once knew. And his concern for Ruby and the way he confessed how he was afraid of having to be the one to let the men's families know they were dead, was so beautiful genuine. That sent a disquieting flutter through my body and I needed to find out what it was, or I would not get peace. I just hoped that that little flutter was not like they say about a butterfly flapping its wings; a small movement that might cause a storm somewhere else much later.

Then there was the other side to it - I could not find any good reason *not* to go. Well, there was the fact that I did not want to be near Charles, but at the same time I strangely enough did so it was kind of levelled out as an argument. Lastly, I knew John would not like it - but that has never kept me from doing anything and anyway I did not have to tell him right away. And when I did I would certainly not tell him that my new CO was my old fling, some things are just better unspoken.

So, crazy as it was, I found myself in a helicopter with Charles towards the FOB. He did not say much, but he did not have to. The expression on his face when he understood I would be his new medic was priceless. Thinking about it, that alone was worth coming. The downside of this was of course that I would find myself under his command. Even if I was a captain too, it was clearly so that here he would be the CO. I had accepted that by going there and it would be interesting to see how it would play out.

Once we arrived he gathered 2 section and briefed them about Ruby and informed them I would be the replacement medic. His tone of voice was absolutely neutral then, not reveling anything about what he thought of it. As long as one did not take him with complete surprise he seemed to have the ability to work like a machine, efficient and emotionless. He asked Kinders to show me the med tent and the female quarters, where I would be staying alone as I apparently was the only woman in the FOB. All the guys were very welcoming. I think they felt they already knew me a bit from the flight and thought it would be fun to have a female among them. Maybe they also thought themselves lucky to now have a fully trained doctor instead of a CMT. When Kinders dropped me off by the tent where I would be sleeping he asked;

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"Does it feel okay?"

"Yes, why wouldn't it?"

"This was not really what you had signed up for coming here. This will be quite different from being in the hospital. More dangerous for sure."

I smiled at him.

"I realise that it will be different, that's why I wanted to come. I wasn't commanded to. I volunteered when I realised you needed someone."

"Now that's the spirit we like", he smiled back. "I'm sure it will be just fine. Scoff in an hour, PT session with Captain James tomorrow at zero six hundred."

When he had left me, I did not feel as confident. I hoped it would not turn out to be a giant mistake to come here. I already felt a little bit lonely in my tent and wished that it had been okay for me to stay with the others, but then I shook it off. I had made a conscious decision to come here and now I would make the most of it.

Next morning, I made sure I woke in time and got dressed for the training session. It was just that when I got out from the tent and saw the others, I realised I had the wrong outfit for the occasion. I had t-shirt, shorts and trainers on. They were all in full kit. Charles looked at me from top to toe, rolled his eyes and with a tone of contempt like I really should have understood it, said;

"Well Dawes, I guess we should be grateful you're not wearing your stilettos. It's full kit on."



I gritted my teeth as I went back in and changed as quickly as possible. How was I to know? He did not have to be an ironic arse about it. Not a great start of my first day here. Anyway, once we started running I had the chance to redeem myself. I'm a runner. I run all the time, to stay fit, to clear my thoughts, because I like it. I have run several marathons and had no problem to keep up with the others and outrun half of them, which I know that most of them did not expect. Charles did not comment, just nodded when I reached the finishing line but to me it was a victory simply that he did not have anything further to pick on me about this time.

Over the next days I got settled into the routines they had already established. Although I did my best not to show it, I was very nervous the first times we went on patrol, but after the first week that weaned off. I soon realised that as a doctor, there was a lot I might be able to help the locals with, in addition to be of service to my section. I suggested it to Charles and asked if he would be okay with it and after giving it some thought he gave his permission. He would not let them come to my med tent because he would not risk letting them inside the walls of the FOB, but I could help them with the things I brought with me in my med kit when we went to the village. It was very satisfying to see how grateful mothers were to get help for their little ones, who otherwise might have gone untreated even when they were in obvious need of medical care. It was difficult not to get personal with them. Unlike my fellow soldiers, I soon knew most of the women and children in the nearby village by name and I grew fond of many of them. Some were hesitant to begin with, but I slowly built a relationship with them and then something happened which made me gain their trust completely.

One afternoon as we were in the village, the others were patrolling near the school and I was providing a woman who suffered from tooth ache with some painkillers, another woman came running with her little boy. I had met him before, his name was Aryo and he was four years old. He had managed to spill a kettle of boiling water over his own legs. I immediately tried to cool him and give him first aid treatment and called for Captain James. The boy was screaming, the mother was crying, others were unsettled, so it was quite a chaotic scene when he came striding even though I made my best to calm them down.

"What's happening Dawes?" he asked.

"The boy has burned himself. I have done what I can, but he needs to get to the hospital in Bastion and be treated there to prevent that he does not get persisting injuries, I think the burn may be quite deep in the tissue and we also need to prevent it from becoming infected otherwise this may turn really bad."

"We should not get involved with the locals, Dawes. They should see their regular doctor."

"But then it will be too late! And they may not be able to see a doctor at all. I know that the Bastion hospital accepts locals too, if justified. And this is! Please, let me arrange a helicopter transport for him. This can make a big difference for the rest of his life."

I could see Aryo's mother worriedly try to follow our argument, her beautiful brown eyes going back and forth between us, looking hopeful to get help for her boy. I could not let her or the boy down by giving up the fight easily.

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"Don't you recognise and order when you hear it, Dawes? Don't get in-fucking-volved!"

"Sir, I respectfully have to disagree. Aren't we here to try to make life better for the locals? Should we really limit ourselves to exactly what is our mission, when we can do more? This boy can either be injured for life, or if treated right he will heal almost completely."

"Didn't you hear what I just said Dawes?"

Then I lost it, lost my patience, lost my temper. What did he not understand in this serious situation?

"Damn it! How can you be such a formalist when you have *this* right in front of you! When you can make a real difference to someone's life! ..."

The rest of the sentence I mumbled to myself, more thinking out loud.

"Even if I think you have said more than enough it seems like you have something else to add Dawes? Then you'd better speak up because I can't bloody hear you."

I looked him right into his eyes and furiously said;

"I just can't believe the boy I loved for a year turned into *you*, at least he had a spine. Sir."

I saw his eyes widen, he opened his mouth as if to say something but then closed it again and turned around and walked away. I bit my tongue and thought to myself that I had crossed the line and there would for sure be repercussions. Fortunately,

only the Afghan women and children were present so none of the other soldiers had heard our exchange, but it was bad enough that I had spoken like that to my CO. Still I was more devastated about the boy and so mad at Charles that I almost did not care.

As it turned out, my words must have had some effect on him anyway, because after a while a helicopter flew in and they took the boy to the hospital. In time, he fully recovered and would be able to live his life without being disabled by his burn injury. After that day, I sensed that I had gained full trust from the local women. Their men may not have looked upon it favourably in all cases, but it was difficult even for them to say no to free care for their children. Especially when they saw how Aryo recovered.

However, I was clearly not high up on the popularity ranking of Captain James and later that evening he called me to his tent. It is an understatement to say I was nervous when I went there. His expression was stern, his eyes hard and when he spoke it was with low, controlled voice.

"Who is the CO here, Dawes?"

"You are, Sir."

"Correct. Good that we agree on that. You may be a captain too, but here I'm the CO and we can have nothing else. I don't ever want you to challenge my orders again like you did today. You may *think* what you want about my leadership, but you follow my orders. Is that clear?"

"Chrystal clear, Sir."

I know I would have done the same thing again and again just to help Aryo, but it was better to keep quiet about that. I just wish I could have taken back the last sentence I said to him earlier, wished I had not shared that information and put myself out there. He did not mention it but the warning in his eyes was clear when he continued;

"You're not endearing yourself to me Dawes. Tread carefully. Dismissed."

Good advice but treading carefully is not my strength in general and it was even more difficult near such a living mine field as him. As I was about to leave the tent, I stopped and looked back.

"Thank you, captain."

"For what?"

"Changing your mind. That boy will be all right thanks to that."

He did not say anything, and his expression was impossible to read. I had no clue if he was a little bit glad he had come around, or if he would had liked to hit me if it was not against the regulations – so with those words I just left him. I had been wrong. Being closer to him, I still did not get to know him better and my feelings were at least as complicated before. He made me both disappointed and furious when he was so distant, not only to me but to other things. I wanted to shake him to wake him up, or maybe slap his beautiful face. He stirred up feelings in me that were... just frustrating. It suddenly occurred to me that John never made me feel this way. The thing was, I was not sure that was an entirely good thing, the lack of

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this kind of feelings in our relationship. The lack of this super-annoying but at the same time very vibrant spark.

Captain James did not eat with the rest of us that evening and the guys commented on it.

"What was the matter with the boss?", said Mansfield Mike.

"Not sure, but I've never seen him in such a bad mood as he was this evening", answered Brains.

"Do you know, Dawesy?"

"I have no idea."

Some things a girl just has to keep to herself.

## Chapter 5: Charles

Of all the things she had said and done that day, that I had every right to be furious about, only two were circling around in my head on repeat. *She had loved me for a year. And she did not think I had a spine - now.* Information that may seem simple enough, but for me it was hard to process.

*If* she had loved me for a year, it had been the entire time we knew each other back in boarding school. Had she been in love with me from day one, like I had been with her, and we wasted a year? Or, not wasted it, because it was wonderful, but we could have done even more of it instead of just pining for each other. Even now I could feel that my body remembered how I had longed to be with her every moment.

But she certainly did not love me now, she did not think I had a spine! She thought me a formalist who stuck to stupid rules and regulations instead of following my heart. It made me so... so fucking mad. Unfortunately, I also had to admit she was right. I had always been uncomfortable about breaking rules for some reason. It seemed to be in my DNA to play by the book, do the right thing. Was it not that which had prevented me from telling her how I felt that time? That and fear of being rejected and lose her as my friend. Maybe that was a sign I did not have a spine then either, which was a depressing thought. Anyway, it had prevented me from being truly happy, and still I continued down the same track. Was it even so that I was not being the best soldier, the best commander I could be because of that? Because I was thinking too much and obeying the rules. I thought of her words 'should we really limit ourselves to exactly what was our mission, when we could do more? When we could make a real difference to someone's life, even if

only a single individual?' When I was scrutinizing myself, my actions and decisions, applying the new Insta-like filter she had provided me with, I came out short. I did not like who I had become, or maybe always had been.

When I walked away from her in the village, I was fuming with anger. But as soon as I cooled down a little, I felt that I could not let that little boy suffer only because I did not want my authority challenged, or because it was not standard protocol to care for the locals that way. She might even be right that it was okay to take such a patient to Bastion, after all she would know that better than me. If we could help the boy, we had an obligation to and soon I called in the helicopter.

Still, I knew I would have to reprimand her for being insubordinate. I had not been looking forward to that, and it was just as hard as I thought it would be. To tell her off even though I thought she was right, to see the despise in her eyes, to not walk over and kiss her when it was all I wanted. When she had left, I realised I needed to talk to her for real. Sit down and have an honest conversation about *everything*, stop hiding from the past and admit my feelings - but it would have to wait until her temporary assignment as our medic had ended. Then I laughed out loud at myself, once again I was set on doing things the right way. Wait out. But I did not want to spoil anything or get any of us in trouble and breaking army regulations could lead to far worse repercussions than breaking the boarding school rules. Besides, she would likely only remain under my command a few weeks longer, so I would not have to wait long. Those weeks would be difficult to ride out, but I just had to.

Then things suddenly got even more complicated.



The following afternoon, a helicopter arrived from Bastion. We were not really expecting anyone, so I got curious and went to meet the guests by the gate. Or guest, it was only one and I was staring at him as he came striding with his usual nonchalant step and sun glasses on. Apparently, he was expecting a warmer welcome than a silent stare.

"Hi Elvis, great to see you!" he shouted to himself. "One could think you should look happier seeing your long lost best mate!" he complained.

Normally I would be, happier, now I thought of how this might complicate things with Molly. But I had to smile.

"Great to see you, Elvis! What are you doing here?"

"I was in the area and have a few days off duty, so I said to myself 'why not go visit your old friend Charlie in his godforsaken FOB?'. I have a bottle of whisky with me so tonight we will sit in your tent and talk and get drunk."

"You know I can't drink when I'm on duty" I grinned.

"I know, perfect - the more whisky for me! I'll drink and talk, and you just listen and talk" he grinned back. "That is the least you can do for me because I suspect you will not be home in time for my stag party."

He was right about that. Elvis was to get married in a few weeks. I had arranged permission a long time ago to go home and be his best man, but it would only be a short leave for just that, so I would not be able to join a stag party. It was great to see him. Normally I would be thrilled, but now I could not help thinking about

Molly and how it would complicate my life further that he was here. He would never do something as stupid as pretending he did not know her. Luckily, I knew she was in the village helping out this afternoon, accompanied by some ANA soldiers which would give me some time to prepare Elvis and avoid a super-awkward situation.

Like me, Elvis had chosen to become a soldier. Or maybe because of me. When I after a couple of years at uni had told him I considered Sandhurst, he had decided to tag along, and I was only too happy about that. He never had any real study ambition in uni and I know he was thinking about how to escape his mum trying to set him up to marry a nice Italian girl, so the army was the perfect escape for him. The time together as cadets was so much fun and when I after passing out started working and went on tour, he tried out for special forces. With the combination of his intelligence and supreme physique, he naturally made it and now he had been 'traveling the world killing people' for some years, as his disappointed mum put it. Or had made the world a safer place, as one also could put it.

I brought Elvis with me to my tent where we could talk in privacy.

"So, is everything prepared for the wedding?"

"I think so. Georgie has been on regimental duties back home for the last months, so she has been able to handle it. It won't be a huge wedding and as you know it will be at the City Hall in Manchester. And as I will wear the no. 1 dress uniform my outfit is ready. I have had to answer if I prefer chocolate or vanilla for the wedding cake, and if we should have roses or peonies on the tables, but you know me anything will be fine if I just get to marry Georgie."

I had only met Georgie a few times and liked her, but most importantly, Elvis had finally fallen for a girl. She was a private too, a medic and they had met in Afghan. He was attracted to her instantly, but she did not want to date a squaddie, so he had to fight for it and that spurred his interest. Once they actually dated, it quickly developed to a passionate romance and they had been together less than a year when he proposed. To me it seemed a bit hasty, especially as they had not spent that much time really being together due to their jobs, but it was in line with Elvis' spontaneous personality and not for me to judge. As long as he was happy, I was happy for him.

"And you? All is well in the world?"

"Erm... yes."

He raised an eyebrow.

"You don't sound too convincing. I thought you would be ecstatic, with the divorce finalised and all?"

I realised this was the time to tell him about Molly. He would anyway discover otherwise, as soon as she returned from the village.

"Things have become a bit complicated around here."

He looked curious.

"Sounds interesting, tell me."

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He poured his first whisky despite that it was only late afternoon, but as he was off duty I had no objection. On the contrary I wished I could have had one too, to get me through this. I knew that Elvis would not be merciful about the way I had been acting. Still was.

"To make a long story short, our medic, Ruby, got ill and we have a replacement medic."

"Okay?"

"It's Molly Dawes."

Judging by his shifting expression he was traveling down memory lane to our school years and a smile lit up his face.

"*That* Molly Dawes?"

I nodded.

"Then you are in trouble Charlie, aren't you?"

I gave him a weak smile in return and sighed.

"In deep shit, mate."

I told him about how I had panicked when I first saw her at Brize and made the stupid decision to pretend I did not remember her from school. Elvis looked at me incredulously, shook his head.

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"You're such a prannet, Charlie! How the hell could you think *that* was going to work out?"

"I only thought I would have to keep it up for the flight. I didn't know she would be our medic then."

"But now she is..."

He laughed so hard that he got tears in his eyes.

"I love this! You like to have your life so tidy, everything placed in its own correct box, but it never works out like that, does it?"

"Thanks for your compassion with my difficult situation."

"So, it has not been working smoothly having her as your medic?"

He continued laughing and dried away a tear from the corner of his eye.

"It has been challenging to say the least."

"And, how is she? I mean, what is she like nowadays?"

I cleared my throat and honestly told him;

"Amazing. She's an amazing woman."

His expression was one of epiphany.

"You have fallen for her again! My god, you're as much in love with her as ever!  
Does she know?"

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"Absolutely not! I mean you're right, I *have* feelings - but she knows absolutely nothing about it and it has to stay that way as long as she is a medic under my command."

"Charlie! Wasn't it exactly that reasoning that led to that you lost her twelve years ago? Are you doing the same thing again? Seriously?"

"This is the army Elvis. If I don't follow the rules more is at stake than it was back then, we could both lose our jobs. Anyway, she will only be our medic a few weeks more, so I don't have to wait long."

"I will never understand your priorities, Charlie. You need to use your brain less and follow your heart more. I think that would make you a happier man."

Maybe he is right, but I just do not know how.

"Elvis, I need to ask you a favour..."

"No Charlie, I won't lie for you."

"I'm not asking you to pretend you don't recognise her, but could you please support my story that I don't remember much of those days? Just while you're here."

"You're such a fool making things difficult for yourself, but okay. I will do that. But then you better do a damn good job as my best man!"

"I will. Thanks Elvis."

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I was relieved that he had agreed not to out me completely to Molly, but I was still a bit nervous about them meeting each other. Elvis is unpredictable, so one can never know for sure what he will do.

## Chapter 6: Elvis

I was not prepared for the unsettling feeling that emerged in the pit of my stomach when Charlie told me that Molly Dawes was around. So many years had gone by, but I was reminded of strong feelings that I had done my best to forget. Love and jealousy. I was not sure how it would affect me to see her and despite that I ridiculed Charles about his way of approaching it, I had to admit that denial seemed to be quite convenient.

I met her next morning on my way to breakfast, hung over from the whisky I had downed last night. I saw her before she saw me and had the chance to take a good look at her. Even in t-shirt and combats, with her hair in a strict bun and no makeup, she was stunning. So was my Georgie, but meanwhile Georgie was very pretty in a more common way, Molly was something special - as she always had been. Petite but very proportionate and, despite her small size, strong-looking. Her eyes were as large, green and radiating as I remembered. Army doctor, not every woman was cut out for that, but the courage was something they both had in common. It was easy to understand that Charlie had fallen for this beautiful woman again and I felt a pang of jealousy at the thought that he now was divorced from his loveless marriage and would be free to pursue Molly as soon as she was no longer under his command. Which was stupid, as I was going to marry myself in a few weeks.

"Captain Dawes", I called out.

She turned and saw me, and it did not take long before she recognised me.



"Elvis Harte!" she smiled. "This place is getting crowded with former pupils from The King's School."

"Indeed."

"I didn't know you were in the army too, this was a nice surprise. And I'm glad you seem to have a better memory than your friend", she said sarcastically, and it was easy to see that she did not fully buy Charlie's story. I did my best to defend him.

"Those were tough years for him, with the bullying and all that. He has done his best to forget."

"If it was that hard he could have focused on remembering the good parts. And having been badly treated in the past is no excuse to behave like an asshole in the present, that's a choice you make", she snapped.

I agreed with all that. It was just that in the end, the good memories had probably been more painful than the bad ones for Charlie and he likely just wanted to protect himself from experiencing the same again, but I did not say that. Instead I said;

"It's probably wise not to call your CO an asshole."

She looked at me searchingly, like she wondered if I was going to report it to him, but then I just grinned and asked if she wanted to join me for breakfast and catch up on life since we left school, which she seemed glad to accept.

Of course, she had been to Sandhurst too, but later than me and Charlie, as she was younger, then in Birmingham for her foundation years to become a licensed MD. But before all that she had lived in Italy for several years and she impressed me

when she suddenly switched to fluent Italian. It turned out she was still half-way adopted by an Italian family. I knew her previous stepfather Giuseppe Conti by name as my parents were acquainted with the famous heart surgeon. I could not help but thinking that my mum would have loved Molly, liked her more than she did Georgie who did not know a word of Italian and was a Manchester girl through and through. We were just having a laugh about the first time when Giuseppe had tried to convince Molly and her mum to eat the local speciality *trippa*, tripe, which they had found disgusting, when I looked up and saw Charlie standing a few meters away, looking at us with dark eyes. I realised that he was jealous, jealous of the easy banter between us which he had been stupid enough to abstain from. I would support his story, but I would not treat her in the same way as he had chosen to. He could not ask that of me, jealous or not.

"Charlie, come sit here with us" I shouted to him, just to mess with him as I knew he would not be able to come up with a good reason not to. Messing with Charlie is just too much fun to resist, and I continued when I did not move to give him space to sit beside me, so he was forced to sit beside her. Very close to her. He is good at keeping a cool appearance but if you know what small signs to look for, like I do, you could see that he was stressed out.

"We were talking about Italy. Molly has lived there you know, and my parents know her stepfather."

He nodded, and it seemed like he felt he needed to show some interest and asked;

"Do you miss Italy?"

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"It's quite long since I moved back to England, when I started at Sandhurst, but yes I still miss some things. Family, friends, the climate, the food... oh, god I really miss the food! I mean, who do you need to screw around here to ever get a decent meal?"

I just could not resist smashing the ball she was serving me.

"Charlie maybe?"

They both stared at me. They both blushed. I looked back at them innocently meanwhile I burst into fits of laughter internally.

"I mean, he's your CO. He should be able to fix you a decent meal, take care of your most basic needs."

Charlie abruptly got up on his feet.

"I forgot I'm needed in the Ops tent."

"You have not finished your breakfast."

"I'm not hungry."

"You should not neglect *your* basic needs, Charlie. It will just make you moody."

If looks could kill, I would have been *so* dead, but he had to make do with leaving like a whirlwind.

"What just happened? What did I miss?" Molly asked.

"Nothing really, I just could not resist teasing Charlie about something."

She kept her curious look but seemed to realise I would tell no more and changed subject.

"How long are you staying Elvis?"

"I'm leaving the day after tomorrow."

"If you don't have anything else planned, would you like to accompany me to the village today? I managed to get a shipment with vaccine and I'm currently trying to give it to as many of the kids as I can."

"Yeah, I'll come with you."

"Great, we'll leave in an hour."

When we had finished breakfast and I left the mess tent, I ran into Charlie. He did not look happy.

"What the hell was that?"

"Relax mate. I was only having fun."

"At my cost."

"Is that so bad? Everything is not always life and death you know, sometimes it's just a bit of fun. Anyway, I'm going with Molly to the village, so you won't have to see me for a few hours."

He nodded and looked like he thought I was trying his patience and he would not mind me gone for some time, then said;

"Elvis, please behave. That's all I ask of you these days."

I gave him my cheekiest smile and promised nothing.

In the village, I watched Molly as she injected children with vaccine, using the back of the truck as a makeshift clinic. I saw how the local women seemed to have full confidence in her, as they let her treat their kids. They even looked like they considered her a friend and I thought to myself that if we had even more women in the army we might end wars more efficiently because we would have other means to do so. Somehow women seem to bond across boundaries in a different way the we men do. Molly looked so kind and gentle when she handled the kids, despite that she clearly was a soldier. Most of the women did not know any English, but she signed using her hands and had learned a few words of Pashto, and it also seemed like a little girl who at least knew some English helped her to interpret. I was in awe of what she accomplished in the few hours we were there. As we were packing up to leave for the day, I saw that the little girl pulled her aside and talked to her in low voice. I wondered what was going on. When Molly jumped into the truck, she had a stern look on her face.

"What's going on Dawes?" I asked her.

"I think I may just have received some intel about an imminent attack at the mountain checkpoint", she said.

There was a CP in the mountains close to the FOB guarded by our ANA allies. If the Taliban were planning an attack we had to warn them. As soon as we returned to

the FOB we went to see Charlie and requested to speak with him and Major Beck in the Ops tent. Molly briefed them.

"You know I have been providing care for the local women and children and I'm quite sure I have gained their trust."

The two men nodded.

"Today as we were finishing up, Bashira, a little girl I've come close to, said that the women wanted to warn me about something. Because they like me and don't want to see me harmed. She told me not to go to the mountains tomorrow. I asked if she meant the CP and she confirmed that. I asked if there would be an attack. She didn't answer that, but I could see in her eyes that that was it. The Taliban are going to attack the mountain CP and we need to warn them."

Charlie and Beck looked at me for confirmation.

"Look, I didn't hear this, but I could see that these women trust and care for Captain Dawes. If they told her this, I think we should trust the intel and act on it."

"I agree", Charlie said. "I have seen you with the locals and I know they trust you. Especially after the boy."

"One life for another", she said and looked him straight in the eyes.

"Yes", he said, and I got the feeling that there was a wordless conversation going on above the heads of me and Beck. Finally, Charlie broke the eye contact and turned to Beck.

"I think this is trustworthy intel and we should act on it, Sir."

The major agreed and so it happened that 2 section, accompanied by ANA soldiers and I headed for the CP at dawn. Even if I was off duty I had been allowed to join. The soldiers at the CP had already been warned but we thought they may need back up.

Upon our arrival, they informed us they had noticed some activity around a normally deserted compound at some distance, so we kept our eyes on that. After a few hours on guard without seeing anything, and I was starting to get bored and restless, shooting suddenly began. Bored no more, we opened fire in return. We could see that we hit some insurgents, but there were one or two who were out of reach and who kept shooting.

"Charlie, if I climb around that hill on the east side, I can surprise them from the back and take them down."

He frowned.

"It would be risky Elvis."

"Not riskier than I'm used to or can handle. We won't get to them like this."

Finally, he gave his approval and I sneaked away. Normally, I would have taken one or two guys with me to cover me, but we thought that might draw attention to me and defeat the whole purpose of me going, so I went alone. I considered this a piece of cake, as I was used to far more advanced operations with my SF team. Maybe that made me sloppy and caused me not to pay enough attention. Coming

up behind them, I did manage to eliminate the two we had identified, and I thought the mission complete by that. But I missed that there was a third insurgent, hiding behind a wall. I heard a shot and felt a burning sensation in my groin. Shit, shit, shit.

"I've been hit" I communicated in my headpiece as I sank to the ground and noticed how the insurgent ran away in the corner of my eye.

"How bad?" Charlie asked.

"Quite bad. I'm bleeding a lot and I won't be able to move. I'm not sure if it's clear here but I need a medic. Quickly."

The pain was intense and when I looked down I saw blood pumping out of the bullet hole. I needed help fast or I would bleed out. For fucks sake, that would be such bad timing with the wedding and all.

"Charlie, you need to send Dawes, or I will bleed out."

After I had said those words I felt strangely dizzy and then I passed out.



## Chapter 7: Charles

As I had foreseen, it turned out challenging to have Elvis around. I had counted on him being a tease, but I had not counted on being jealous myself. When I spotted him and Molly sitting together in the mess tent, talking in Italian and laughing, it made me feel things towards my best friend which I'm not proud of. Even though he was going to marry in a few weeks, it was obvious that he had turned on his charm on max level. Or, maybe the problem is that he is unable to ever turn it off. Trying to charm any girl who has passed puberty up to granny age is just his natural state, but I wished he could resist for once with Molly when he knew how I felt and my hands were tied. But no, instead he had to mess with me.

He made me sit down beside her. I'm not sure if he realised it or not but we had never been that close, she and I, not since we met this time around. Hardly back in the old days either. Now the entire right side of my body was touching her left, from shoulder, down to hip and leg. It was hard to focus on anything else because I felt like all my blood was drawn to the touching surfaces, making them heat up. And then he began joking about her and my basic needs and we both knew it was not food we were talking about. I could only pray that she did not get it.

It was a relief to get rid of them for a few hours, but I was a bit worried about what he might say to her when they spent time together. However, when they returned it was clear that they had been professional, focusing on work only and had important intel to share.

I took what she had to tell seriously and once again I was impressed by her. Thanks to that she had gained the trust of the local women we got information we otherwise

never would have had, and it might very well save the life of the ANA soldiers up at the mountain CP. She had proven that engaging with the locals on a personal level could be a good thing. She was right, and I was wrong. During the briefing in the Ops tent I tried to convey to her that I had changed my mind. Without words, as it was not the time and place to say out loud with Beck and Elvis there, but I'm not sure if I managed.

I was focused and alert when we headed for the CP, but not especially worried. With the intel we had, which they did not know we had, it seemed we would have the upper hand and take them out without too much trouble. But then shit went down. I allowed Elvis to try to ambush some remaining elusive insurgents, which normally should have been easy for him, but something went wrong this time and he called out that he had been hit. That he would bleed out if he did not get help from the medic. From Molly.

I was in agony, my best friend needed help not to die and the one who could give it was the woman I had feelings for. We did not know if it was clear up there at the compound, if it was safe or if she would risk getting shot by an insurgent too if she went. Situations like this was exactly why I did not want to be emotionally involved with anyone related to my job, it blurred the sight and made decisions difficult when they should be straightforward.

"I must go to him", she said.

"We don't know if it's safe."

"We never do, do we? It's my job. Don't hesitate because I'm a woman, Sir."

I realised I had no valid reason not to let her go and I certainly could not leave Elvis to bleed out. Of course, I had to send her to him. I nodded.

"You go, and me and Brains will cover you. Be careful Dawes, the insurgents may still be around."

"I will be, Sir."

We moved forward, Molly at some distance ahead of me and Brains, and we had eyes on her and the surroundings all the time. Moving carefully, watching one's every step takes time, but she finally reached Elvis with us on her heels.

"He's gone off." I heard her say in my headset. "He's lost a lot of blood. I'll do what I can to stop it, but the bullet hole is too high up for me to put the tourniquet in a good place to stop the bleeding. I need to put pressure on with my fingers. You must call in a medevac."

I told Brains to stay where he was and keep looking out, meanwhile I moved in closer and soon reached the unconscious Elvis and Molly. She was right. He had taken a hit near his groin and it was not possible to get the tourniquet above it, so blood was seeping from it at a steady pace. God, not Elvis who always had seemed immortal with all his cheeky courage, and not now when he just was getting married. I saw how Molly tried to plug the hole with bandages and put pressure on with her hands, but I wondered how he would manage going up the winch to the helicopter without bleeding out. She must have thought about the same, but she acted so calmly and composed, doing whatever she could.

Suddenly Elvis came to. He grabbed my arm, fixed his eyes on me and with panic in his voice said;

"Don't let me die, Charlie!"

"I won't, you're going to be okay. Who will otherwise mess with me, if you're not around?"

And I did the same thing I resented when others did, promised something I did not know if was true, but I would have done anything to make him feel safer in that moment.

Then he passed out again.

The helicopter finally came and hoisted down the winch with a harness to bring Elvis up with. Suddenly I realised that Molly was preparing herself to go up too.

"What are you doing, Dawes?"

"I must go up with him, keep the pressure on the wound. Otherwise he will bleed out."

"No way! It's far too dangerous! You will be exposed up there, an easy target to shoot if the insurgents are still around and aiming at us."

Her green eyes looked at me seriously.

"There are two options here, none is ideal, but we have to choose whether we like it or not - and you know that. Either I go with Elvis, with the risk of being shot but he *can* survive, or he goes alone and dies for sure. How do you want it, boss?"

How *I* wanted it? I wanted neither! But she was right, we had to choose. She continued.

"You're my CO, but I'm a doctor. If he goes alone, he will die for sure. You need to trust me on this one. Please let me go."

Our eyes were locked and there were so many things I wanted to say to her.

"Okay Dawes, I know you're right. I will not give you an order to go because it's beyond what I could ask of any of my men, to risk your life like that to save someone else's, but I won't forbid it either."

Still a small part of me hoped that she would not risk her own life, not even for Elvis, but of course there was no other choice for her. Not being the person she was.

As she rapidly secured the harness around herself too, she smiled at me and said;

"Thanks, Charles."

I should have told her it was Captain James to her, but I did not, I just returned her smile and was dying on the inside that I had to let her go.

My pulse raced, and I felt slightly nauseous as I watched them being winched up in the air and after what seemed like an eternity get inside the helicopter where I knew the MERT would tend to him immediately. I heard Brains cheer behind me when they disappeared inside the helicopter and even if part of me was cheering too because they had made it safely, I lashed out;

"What she did was stupid beyond belief! Risking her life like that."

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"It was also very brave, Sir" he said sheepishly.

Then I had to smile at him and agree.

"Yeah, it was also fucking awesome."

And he grinned back at me.

The moment she was gone, I felt like there was a Molly-shaped hole in my heart. I knew it would be there until she returned.

The rest of us made our way back down the mountain to the FOB. The major was concerned about Elvis of course, but pleased we had managed to avert the attack. Without Molly's intel things could have ended far worse. Soon we also got news that Elvis was out of immediate danger. With proper care his life had been rescued and with both him and Molly safe I could exhale.

All I wanted now was for her to come back to me. That evening I sat up in the watchtower of the FOB, watched the beautiful scenery of the sunset and the vast fields outside the walls and thought of her.

We did not know for sure when Ruby would be fit to return, but likely in a couple of weeks. That meant only a few weeks until I would be able to tell her how I felt. But it was also dawning on me that it meant only a short period longer when we would be this close to each other every day, when I had the chance to let her get to know me for who I am now. I was beginning to re-evaluate my way of acting towards her, my clever plan. From start, I had been so afraid of the feelings I might develop for her that I had tried to keep my distance, but that had not helped. I was

lost anyway, probably from the moment I saw her again at Brize. My efforts to keep my feelings at bay had been futile. That meant that there was no real point of sticking to the indifferent and even rude behaviour, which felt completely unnatural to me. I still could not tell her what I felt as long as I was her CO, but there was no real reason I could not spend more time with her and at least be civil. It would be such a lovely change compared to trying to avoid her at all cost or act in a way that would repel her, which probably had been a stupid idea from the start. I realised that now.

I also thought, that unless I did that, behaved nicer, kinder – more like my usual self, she might not even be interested to hear me out the day I would try to explain my erratic behaviour to her. Why would she if I had given her no reason to want to be with me? When she returned to her regular duties as doctor at Bastion hospital she might only be so glad to get away from me that she would not be interested in learning about my idiotic feelings. Stupidly enough I had not thought about that risk before. Actually, I was not sure I had produced a sane thought since I set eyes on her, I had only been a complete idiot.

The events that day had reminded me how precious and fragile life is, and the jealousy I had felt when I saw Molly with Elvis had reminded me that I could take nothing for granted with her. Now that I admitted to myself that I wanted her, wanted her more than anything, I realised that I had to fight for her even if in the little things. Like treating her as the wonderful person I really thought she was. I could only hope that would change her opinion of me and bring us closer during the time she would remain here.

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And so, I made the decision then and there that I had to try to change things between us as soon as she came back. I slept better that night than I had done the entire tour, like coming to this conclusion somehow gave me peace and I could hardly wait for her to return.



## Chapter 8: Elvis

I was floating, in the border zone between awake and unconscious. There was pain... there was Charlie ensuring me everything would be fine... then I think I heard Molly insisting on coming with me and I felt myself leaving the ground with her arms around me, thinking that now I was going to heaven... then nothing until I woke up in the hospital. At least it looked more like a sterile hospital room than heaven or hell, and that was confirmed when a nurse came through the doors.

"Glad to see you're awake, Captain Harte", she said. "How are you feeling?"

I did not feel much pain, probably thanks to some drugs, and judging from a quick visual inspection I was not missing any limbs.

"Quite okay. What happened to me? I remember we were up in the mountains but then it's a bit blurry."

"You were shot in the groin and lost a lot of blood, but Captain Dawes saved you. She went up with you in the helicopter because she thought you would bleed out and die otherwise. You should thank her when you see her, you know, because she put her life on the line for you. Luckily you both made it."

She shook her head.

"Madness, but very brave."

It was clear that she would not have been willing to take the same risk with her own life to save a squaddie.

All is fair in love and war

"We've taken the bullet out, stitched you together and you got a blood transfusion. With that the wound should heal fine, but you need to rest."

She left me, and I thought that it had been a close call, closer than ever before. I had not paid enough attention and if Molly had not been there I would have paid a very high price for that.

I dozed off and when I woke up again, she was sitting by my bed side.

"Hi soldier" she said with a smile that could melt an ice berg.

"Hi."

"You will be fine."

"So I've heard."

"With the bullet removed you will even be well enough to walk down the aisle in a few weeks like you had planned. Lucky for your girl it did not hit you a bit further to the left, then it would not have been much of a wedding night."

"Lucky for my girl that you saved my life, otherwise there would have been no wedding at all."

"I just did my job. Elvis"

"You apparently did more than that, judging from what I've been told. You did not have to go up that winch with me. I'm surprised Charlie allowed it."

"Captain James was not exactly thrilled about me going, but I convinced him you would die otherwise, and he realised there wasn't really any choice."

Even if I knew Charlie would have done anything to save me, I understood what it must have cost him to jeopardise the life of the woman he loved. It could not have been an easy choice. Oh, Charlie-boy, he was probably pacing around back in the FOB worrying and impatiently waiting for her to return.

"Well, thanks for convincing him and thanks for saving me, I owe you one. You really are an extraordinary girl... woman, Dawes. Do you know that?"

She bit her lower lip and looked away.

"Not everyone would agree to that."

I knew she was referring to Charles. If she only knew what he thought of her.

"I guess that I will be even less popular with Captain James after this."

I doubted that but that was for them to work out. She changed the subject.

"I guess you will fly home in a couple of days. Are you looking forward to your wedding?"

I knew she asked it mostly like a rhetorical question, to be social, not really expecting any other answer than yes. That had undoubtedly been the answer until a few days ago. Coming here had turned everything upside down and now I was not as sure anymore.

"I am... but I can't help thinking about..."

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She looked concerned when she heard my hesitance.

"What Elvis?"

"How do you know it's right?"

She gave up a little coarse laugh.

"Getting married? You're not asking the right person, I'm not an expert in the field. You know, I have this wonderful person at home who loves me and yet I'm wondering if it's right. Sometimes I even think it was one of the reasons I came here, to put distance between us and gain some perspective - but I'm still as much in the dark. Yet, I have to believe that it will be all right in the end - for me and for you Elvis."

"And if it's not?"

She smiled reassuringly;

"Then it's not the end."

I liked that thought. I liked her.

"Anyway, I just wanted to stay around here in Bastion until you woke up. I must get back to the FOB now."

"Take care of Charlie for me, so he can be my best man."

She shrugged her shoulders.

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"I will, if he only let me. It seems like he really dislikes having me around, probably would not let me near even if he got shot. I think I know you better after these days than I know him after several weeks. It's so strange when once I used to think I knew everything about him, but now he is so guarded. And yet..."

She interrupted herself, but I knew what she had meant to say.

"And yet you have feelings for him?"

She shook her head.

"No, I couldn't have, for so many reasons. I told you, I'm with someone else. I'm just fond of the memories I have of the Charles I once knew."

But I could see in her eyes that I was right, even if she did not want to admit it to me or to herself. I could have told her in that moment about Charlie's real feelings and ended their misery. Told her that he loved her and probably always had, but for some reason I could not bring myself to it. That would have been the right thing to do for my best friend and this amazing girl who I owed my life. But even if it was completely illogical, jealousy had my heart in a firm grip and made my tongue mute, and I remained silent as she got up to leave. Then we just said good bye.

"Good luck Elvis, I wish you a happy married life."

"I wish you the best too, Dawes. I'm sure we'll meet again."

When she had left, I lay there, looking at the closed door where she had disappeared and listened to the monotone sound from the monitors. Part of me felt

ashamed of what I had done, or rather *not* done. Part of me felt relieved that I would soon leave this place, and part of me was already missing the company.

The hospital beds were always needed for the most highly prioritised casualties and already the next day I was transported back to UK and the hospital in Birmingham, where I stayed a few days more before I was allowed to return home. My Georgie is a tough girl, but when she first came to visit me at the hospital she was crying. She was beautiful as ever when she came in, sat down beside me on the bed and kissed me – then tears started streaming down her face.

"You scared the shit out of me Elvis. When I first heard you had been shot I thought I was going to lose you."

I just held her to me, placed my lips to her hair.

"I don't know how I would be able to bear that, not now when we are so close to our life together. The wedding is not that important to me, but this, being with you. Always"

I should only have felt happiness and love in that moment, but her words – *always* – made me shudder. I do not know what was wrong with me. If it only was the aftermath of being close to death, or if there was something else. An unsettling feeling that had been growing since I came to the FOB there in Helmand. I buried my head by her neck, inhaled her lovely scent, felt her warmth and tried to rest peacefully in that, but instead I felt my heart thumping like crazy and a small wave of panic building up inside of me.

She made me look at her again, gently touched my face.

"I have missed you so much this time Elvis. I know for sure that you are the love of my life and there is no one in the world I would rather be with. I love you."

"I love you", I whispered, because at least that much was true. I loved Georgie, but in that moment, I was no longer sure that she was the love of *my* life and that she was the one I should be with. How can so much change so quickly. Or maybe it was not a quick change, maybe it was something that always had been slumbering there that now had been awoken irrevocably. But when I looked at her beautiful face and in her eyes saw so much love, trust and gratefulness of having me there, I knew I would not be able to hurt her, to tell her that I had doubts. How could I, when I did not even know for sure what I wanted to do about those doubts? For a moment I felt completely lost, but then I tried to shake it off and just enjoy her company. Tried to tell myself that it was common wedding nerves, and all would be fine before the big day.

The next two weeks went by so quickly. Georgie had some time off duty but was caught up in the preparations. Choosing the decorations, planning the table setting, the final touches on the wedding dress which I was not allowed to see, ordering the bridal bouquet. I tried to take part, but somehow, I felt alienated, distant. She noticed at some point and asked what it was, but I just blamed on feeling some pain in my wound even though it was healing nicely.

"You're not having cold feet?" she joked.

"No, of course not."

I hugged her, but more because I wanted to end the conversation than because I wanted to be close to her. I just could not tell her anything else, could not hurt her – because I loved her despite that everything was feeling so strange. Simultaneously, I was thinking of Charles with Molly in Afghan. What were they doing now? Would they maybe find their way to each other? Would he wait out as he had said? Had she maybe already returned to her duty in Bastion, so he would be allowed to tell her his feelings, and if so what would she think of it? I had a thousand questions and no answers, they just kept spinning on repeat in my head until I was completely confused and my mum, who is a wise woman even if she can be very annoying, asked me;

"Are you all right my boy?"

"I'm fine *mamma*."

"You're sure you're happy? You *do* want to marry this girl?"

"Yes, I want to marry Georgie. I love her."

"Then what *figlio mio*? What is bothering you, I can see there is something."

"Nothing! Nothing, okay. I'm fine and I'm marrying Georgie and I'm thrilled about it."

Her brow eyes were fixed on my face, urging me to tell the truth, but I did not change what I had said. Instead it was like her concern spurred me to show everyone that she had been wrong, and during the last days I took part in the preparations like I had not done before and felt quite happy about it.



The evening before the wedding, Charles called me. He was home and prepared to take on the role as best man. I was alone as the couple are not supposed to spend the night before the wedding together and I had gone back to London to pick my uniform up.

"I'm so glad you're alive and can go through with this wedding Elvis. You really had me worried there for a while. You mean the world to me you know."

"I know, thanks mate", I said with a lump in my throat.

"I'm sure you will look damn handsome in your no. 1 tomorrow, there's no way Georgie will jilt you at the altar."

It was just a friendly, reassuring joke but my heart was cringing due to my own insecurity, which was very much there again this last evening before I was to tie the knot.

"And how has it been over there since I left?"

"Good... Fine... I'll tell you more sometime but now we need to get to bed both of us so we're ready for your big day."

"Yeah, I suppose we had better. Sleep well Charlie"

"Sleep well, Elvis. I'll see you tomorrow outside the City Hall."

I hung up the phone and felt torn. So many feelings. Is it possible to love two persons at the same time? Is that maybe even the natural thing when there are so many wonderful people in this world and it is unlikely that just one single person

could cover all our needs, and we have just made it difficult for ourselves with social constructs? Had not Molly also hinted at feeling torn about her feelings, although I must admit it did not seem to involve me.

I loved Georgie and I never wanted to hurt her and no matter if I had doubts or not, the only way not to hurt her was to marry her the next day. With those premises, the only deduction could be that I had to go through with it, I was to get married to Georgie Lane. Before I finally went to sleep I heard Molly's words echo in my head and they gave me some comfort:

*"Everything will be all right in the end – for me and for you Elvis."*

*"And if it's not?"*

*"Then it's not the end."*

## Chapter 9: Molly

As I sat in the helicopter flying back from Bastion after saying good bye to Elvis and saw the rust coloured dusty plains and green hills flash by beneath me, I felt nervous about meeting Charles again. Even though he had agreed to me going with Elvis in the end, it had been preceded by an argument and once again I had challenged him as my CO. What would his reaction be to that now that he had landed? Up at the mountain it had been a heated situation where a man's, his best friend's, life was at stake. However, it was at least as important to obey orders in such situations or everything might end in chaos. Would he hold that against me?

I entered through the high, heavy metal gates and heard them close behind me with an ominous sound. That meant I was now in a protected environment, but I felt exposed rather than safe as I saw him standing there, waiting for me. He seemed taller than ever, towering over me, with his arms crossed over his chest and a stern look on his face. I had only been away a day. Still, seeing him again did things to my insides.

"If you think you're going to win any plaudits for that ridiculous and foolish act you pulled off you're 100% mistaken", he said, and my feelings changed into annoyance and disbelief considering what I had achieved. Then a big smile lighted up his face and I realised he was messing with me, which was a surprise.

"That's what my commanding officer told me after I had risked my life crawling to get one of my men while the Taliban were shooting at us."

I felt my tense shoulders relax a little.

"With that said, thanks Dawes for what you did for Elvis. You went above and beyond duty, risking your own life to save his. You have proven yourself both as a doctor and a soldier and you have impressed me. It takes a fair amount to do that. Well done."

God, I hoped I was not blushing because this he could have said to any of his men. But coming from him, to me, when he had seemed to resent me all this time - it meant the world to me. I felt like he was throwing me into an emotional tumble dryer where I now was spinning around without being able to control it. I had wished and hoped for him to like me, to be nicer to me – but now I realised that I had no idea how to handle it if he actually changed. All I could say was;

"Thank you, Sir."

"You don't really have to 'Sir' me, we have the same rank, remember?"

"Yes, but you still are my CO as you have pointed out on a number of occasions."

"Only for a few weeks longer."

He looked me straight into my eyes as he said that, and there was an undercurrent to the spoken words – but I could not figure out what it meant, and it just left me utterly confused. He nodded his head towards the med tent.

"Now piss off Dawsey and make yourself useful."

Then I had to smile.

"You just called me Dawsey."

"Yeah, so?"

"You called me by my nick-name. Clearly I'm winning you over with my incredible charm and magnetism."

I snorted at the thought of something so ridiculous but felt happy at the tiny sign of a defrost. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Just go."

I'm not sure what had induced the change in him, but something had undoubtedly changed between when we headed up to the mountain CP and my return from Bastion. He no longer shunned my company, he no longer avoided talking to me and when he did talk to me he seemed more relaxed, he smiled, he laughed. I realised that he finally was treating me more like he did his other men. The difference was that I was not a man and the effect this charming version of him had on me was dangerous. Things were difficult before when he was a distant asshole, but they were more difficult now. I made sure I was not the one to seek his company, but it did not help, because he now sought mine – and when he did I could not resist it. It would also have been strange to run away from my CO. There was nothing inappropriate going on though, except in my mind. It was only friendly banter, but that was exhilarating enough.

During the next weeks I so often found myself being with him, without knowing how he ended up there. Like when a shipment came from Bastion with new medical supplies for the FOB and vaccine for the locals, and I needed to sort it all in the med tent. He volunteered to help without me asking for it and we stood side by side

in the med tent, sorting the boxes and small talking, at some point moving for the same box and touched hands which caused both to quickly retract the same hands and I could not look at him because I felt my cheeks turning hot.

On my regular tours to help in the village, he came along and no longer only stood on the side watching me and the surroundings, but instead offered to assist me and we worked efficiently together, sometimes in silence, sometimes chatting easily. One of these days a small boy climbed up into his lap and Charles tickled him, making the boy burst into fits of laughter. He sat with his head bent to look at the boy and I watched the delicate place where the nape of his neck met his dark curls and thought of two things; that I would have liked to touch him there softly and that it looked like he one day would be a wonderful father. He looked up and caught me watching.

"What Dawes?"

"Nothing. It's just nice to see you in another role than our stern commander."

He cocked an eyebrow.

"I'm still your stern commander."

"Yes, but it seems like you have a soft side too."

Then he seemed a bit embarrassed and went back to tickling the boy again, provoking the loveliest laughter.

There were fun moments too. When his mum had sent him badminton rackets and feather balls, he had me play with him. He was far better than me, but I did my best

to put up a fight even though it was exhausting in the heat and distracting when his t-shirt slipped up every time he was aiming for the ball, showing off his flat stomach. But he just teased me and laughed as he made me run and I wondered where this man had been hiding before.

Still, there were also those moments when he stepped away a bit from the rest of us, but I rather had the feeling that he wanted to maintain some distance, to keep the respect of the men in his role as commanding officer by not taking part in all their crazy pranks even if he often showed that he appreciated it to some level. When Fingers and Dangleberries arranged a small obstacle course and split us in two teams to compete, he did not participate in any team, but he looked on while laughing and cheering. I was the last contestant in my team, competing with Brains from the other one and we were very even. I heard Charles shout;

"Come on Dawes, show the guys that the girl can beat them!"

I do not know if it was that, that spurred me, but I won over Brains anyway, making my team the winning one. Happy, I stood panting after the finishing line - when Fingers and Dangleberries surprised me by each pouring a large bucket of water over my head. They claimed that was the prize and a good one in the blazing sun because it would cool me down after the effort.

"Dawes, you look like a drenched cat", Charles laughed.

"I know, glad that you find it amusing. Thanks much guys!"

"I have a towel over here."

Instead of just throwing it to me, Charles came to stand in front of me and wrapped it around my shoulders like a cape meanwhile looking at me. I think he just meant to do it for fun, but the moment somehow became loaded. It moved me back in time, twelve years, to that time when I had arrived in a café, soaking wet from the rain, and realised my shirt had become transparent and my bra was showing, and he saved me from embarrassment by putting his trench coat around my shoulders. As he now wrapped the towel around me it was like all the noise around us disappeared, it was only us that existed. His hands touching my shoulders lightly as he put the towel in place, his eyes looking into mine and his smile fading away in the sudden seriousness between us. And I could see in his eyes that he remembered too. No matter what bullshit he had told me, I *knew* in that moment that he remembered. Then Fingers shouted;

"The rest of us could need some TLC too boss, you can't give the female any favours!"

He was joking, but Charles stepped away and broke the eye contact and shouted back.

"She won, didn't she? That entitles her to some perks, female or not. But if you're missing your mum Fingers I can come and tuck you to bed tonight. Maybe you want me to sing a lullaby too?" he grinned.

"That would be excellent, boss. Already looking forward to it", Fingers grinned back and the moment had passed.



Then the time came for his permission to go home for Elvis wedding. In a way it would be relief, an emotional break for me, but I was also dreading it. He would be away for less than a week, just a quick visit home to attend the wedding but I knew I would miss him the minute he left. I was also expecting to any day get message that Ruby was well enough to return as 2 section's medic, which meant I would go back to Bastion. Then I did not know when I would see Charles again, it was not like people commuted back and forth between the FOB and Bastion just pop over and say hi.

The evening before he was leaving I went over to his tent to say good bye as I knew he would be picked up in the early dawn. I cleared my throat outside to make him aware of my presence before I entered.

"Come in."

So I did, and there he was standing in combats but without a thread on his upper body, fresh from the shower. It did not seem to embarrass him – and why would it? After all men can be half-naked and it is nothing strange at all. It was just that I felt a surge going through my body seeing his amazing torso for the first time.

"Hi Dawes", he said seemingly unaffected."

"You're leaving tomorrow, boss. I just came to say goodbye."

"Thanks."

He began folding some clothes to pack but made no sign of putting any of them on. I could not take it anymore.

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"For god's sake, can you please put on a t-shirt! I don't know where to look when you walk around like that!"

He looked surprised, then smirked.

"I didn't think you were that easily embarrassed, Dawesy, but I can definitely put on a t-shirt if it makes you uncomfortable."

"It's just that I never know where to look when people are half-naked. Avoid looking feels so prudish, looking feels... I don't know... awkward. I guess I just prefer people with clothes on."

"Always?"

Now he was teasing me for sure.

"Most of the time", I answered dryly and exhaled in relief when the t-shirt was finally on. Not that he looked bad in t-shirt, combats and wet hair either but it was less embarrassing to look at him. I changed the focus of the conversation.

"Are you looking forward to going home?"

"In one way I am but in one way I don't like to leave you. I mean, all of you, 2 section. Take care of the boys when I'm gone, will you?"

"Don't I always?"

He smirked again.

"Yes, you do."

"I might not be here when you get back, though. If I get word that Ruby is fully recovered, we will make the switch."

He looked surprised, like he almost had forgotten that this was a temporary thing.

"That's true. Then I'll have to come and see you next time I'm in Bastion. I'll be looking forward to that."

His eyes, meeting mine, were twinkling as he said it. I was thinking that maybe it was for the better if he did not visit me, but at the same time there was nothing I wanted more, so I did not say. I needed to get away from Charles. I needed to be closer to Charles. It is strange how many conflicting thoughts and feelings there is space for in the limited cell mass that is our brain. I was also reflecting on how things had changed. Only weeks ago, I would have expected him to cheer at the thought of me leaving, now he wanted to visit me. Why had he changed? I had absolutely no idea what was going on inside his head. All I knew was that if I had been allowed to, I would not just have made do with a dry 'good bye and safe journey'. I would have reached out and touched his cheek. Then I would have leaned in and kissed him and unless he pushed me away, I would never had stopped. I would never had stopped. God, these forbidden thoughts. When he said good bye, I had the feeling there was something more he wanted to say but that he held back. Maybe I was just imagining.

After he left the following morning, I could not help but counting down the days until his return. I was wondering if he had fun at the wedding. If he would dance with any pretty girls. Then something struck me which I had somehow escaped my mind. He was married, there was a Mrs. James. He would of course go with his

wife. I began to wonder what Afghan was doing to me, was I becoming completely delusional? Not only did I manage to forget that he was married, I nearly managed to forget that *I* was engaged. I really needed to pull myself together. He was my CO, nothing more – and soon he would not be that either. Then I received word from Bastion that Ruby still was not fully fit. The infection had really been unusually difficult to get rid of and I was required to stay in the FOB for at least another two weeks. I did not know if I should laugh or cry. I seemed I was caught up in an intricate emotional spider web and just got more tangled in the sticky thread as soon as I tried to move the slightest.

The day he was to return, I think I walked around with high blood pressure and speedy heart rate from the moment I woke up until the helicopter landed to drop him off. Then my heart raced even a little faster. All of 2 section had gathered to greet him, welcome him back. I kept a little bit in the background because I did not trust myself, that I would be able to present the needed poker face when I saw him. Strangely enough, coming from his best friend's wedding, he did not seem happy. He gave us all a court nod and brief smile, then his face turned distant and stern and he excused himself saying he was tired after the journey and needed to be alone. We exchanged glances among us, wondering what the matter was, but he just walked on and disappeared into his tent. I felt disappointed that he had not acknowledged me even with a look and wondered if things were back to how they had been in the beginning.

Later I was alone in the med tent, and he came in and sat down heavily at the bunk. I did not say anything, just waited for him to tell me what medical problem he

needed help with – but when he started talking it seemed like it was only talking he had come for.

"There was no wedding."

"What?"

"Or, there was a wedding, with guests and a beautiful bride waiting – but Elvis did not turn up."

I looked at him in disbelief and could only echo what he said;

"He did not turn up?!"

"No", he swallowed. "Everyone was gathered in the City Hall. I was waiting outside for Elvis. Then he texted me that he couldn't make it."

"That's it? Nothing more?"

"I tried to call him, but he didn't answer. Then I texted him and said he couldn't do like this to Georgie. He bloody well had to turn up and marry her. Or at least tell her to her face that he wouldn't. Then he answered that he just felt he could not go through with it, but he knew he would not be able to tell her to her face, so he had to do it like this. I had to deliver the message."

He buried his face in his palms and seemed devastated.

"Dawes, I had to tell her! Tell a girl in a wedding dress that the man she loved and was waiting for, would not turn up and I did not even know why. It felt like I was

killing her when I delivered the message. I can't believe he let her down like that. I thought I knew Elvis."

I was shocked, but I thought of the doubts that Elvis had expressed at the hospital. Had they grown during the weeks before the wedding? What had happened?

"What happened then? When you told her?"

"It took some time for it to sink in, but then she was absolutely crushed. I mean she trusted him completely and he betrayed her. I could barely muster the words to tell her. I know he loves her – how could anyone do that to someone they love?"

I had never seen Charles so emotional, he was nearly crying, his eyes filled with tears. I was surprised that he wanted to share this with me, but also glad in a way. I just wished I had dared to comfort him with a hug, but beside it being inappropriate I did not trust myself. He continued;

"Her family came and took care of her. Took her away from all the waiting guests. I just sat there in those big stairs inside the City Hall and looked at the flower decorations and the bouquet she had dropped and it all felt so damn tragic. I just didn't get it. It was so screwed up."

"Did you talk to Elvis again before you returned?"

"No. I tried several times, but his mobile was switched off and he did not return any texts. It was like he had disappeared from the surface of the earth. I have no fucking idea what went on in his head. I feel like I don't know my best friend. Have I misjudged him completely?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"There is a theory in psychology that even if actions may seem completely illogical to everyone observing from the outside, the person doing them usually have a reason that is logical, justified and fair in his mind. Elvis probably thought he had a good reason, we just do not know it or understand it – and if we did we might not agree with it, but to him it seemed like the right thing to do. And it seems to me there isn't much you can do now. He needs to clean up his own mess."

"Yeah, he does, but I can't help wondering how they both are doing now. Both him and her. I think they must both be miserable. People should not put people they love through things like that. We should take care of each other."

Now he looked straight into my eyes and I felt my heart pounding loudly. I wasn't not sure what he was talking about anymore.

Then Mansfield Mike came stumbling in through the tent opening and it seemed he might have sprained an ankle while playing football.

"Sorry, Sir, was I interrupting anything?"

"No, I just needed a painkiller for my headache and I got that", Charles lied swiftly.

"No more sports for you if it means getting injuries. I need you fully fit for battle at all times."

"No, Sir. I mean, yes, Sir", Mansfield Mike blurted out and Charles shook his head and I had to smile. Sometimes it was like the privates were kids and he their father, although he would be a very young and handsome father for having this bunch of

noisy men as kids. Agilely he jumped up from the bunk and when he did, happened to stand disturbingly close to me.

"Thanks, Dawes."

I looked up at him.

"You're welcome. If there is anything more I can do..."

"I'm afraid not, not now at least."

Again, I got the feeling that he was talking about something else than the obvious, but with Mansfield Mike there I could not ask, and I do not know if I had dared to anyway. He left us to take care of the sprained ankle and in my mind, I was wondering what it meant that he had confided in me. I wondered more about that than what had happened with Elvis and his bride.



## Chapter 10: Molly

Then things happened which distracted me from thinking about Charles. There was a development of events which involved first Bashira and later her father. Bashira was the village girl who on many occasions had helped interpreting, using the little English she knew, when the other women came to me with their own and their children's ailments. We had grown fond of each other and we used to joke that we were soul sisters. I so often thought that I hoped she would get to have a future outside the village which did not only encompass marrying too early and have a bunch of kids with a man who thought of women as a lower standing race. She was clearly intelligent, and it would be so wonderful if she had the possibility to study and chose her own direction in life, but I knew the odds for that happening were not great. I had reflected on how even the girls born in the poorest circumstances home in England probably had a higher likelihood of making choices of their own for their lives, than she had. It all comes down to an unfair matter of luck of where one is born.

Bashira was the one who had conveyed the message that there was an attack planned at the mountain CP, even if I got the feeling that the message really came from all the village women as a thanks in return for me helping them. I had not thought about that it might expose Bashira to danger if someone found out, someone who had been part of planning the attack. If I had thought of that, I would have tried to protect her.

We were out on one of our regular patrols, when we spotted a group of local women at some distance and they seemed to be upset about something. When they recognised me, they started shouting and waved for us to come closer, which we

did although guardedly to make sure it was not a trap of some kind. When we came closer we saw something lying on the side of the road. It was Bashira. The little girl had been badly beaten and first I was not sure she was alive. She was bruised and bled, and she was unconscious, but when I kneeled beside her and examined her I could feel her weak pulse and, thank god, she was breathing. I would not be able to treat her properly there though, or even if I had taken her to the FOB because I had no clue if she had internal injuries. Just looking at the state of her it seemed likely.

"Oh my god, Bashira. What have they done to you?"

I turned to the crying, upset women. None of them was her mother, but they all knew her.

"Who did this? Who did this to her?" I asked. No one said anything.

"Who did it?!" I shouted desperately.

"Father", one woman whispered.

Her own father. I could not believe a man would do that to his own daughter, but then again, I knew how little the girls were worth to many of the men here.

"Why?"

They all seemed scared, but another woman finally said;

"Bashira talk. To you."

Then I understood that somehow the warning she had given us must have become known and this was the price she had paid for it. I was devastated.

Charles was standing beside me and I met his eyes. I could see that even he, who always maintained a cool surface, was affected by this.

"We must get her to the hospital. She must get proper care, or she might die. We owe it to her, it's because of what she told us..." I nearly started crying.

"You don't have to convince me Dawes. We will see to that she gets to Bastion."

And for the second time Charles called in a helicopter to have a child taken to the Bastion hospital. I went with her and was there when she was assessed. The scan showed that she had internal injuries, but not more severe than that she would survive. I stayed overnight because I hoped to be there when she woke up. I wanted her to see at least one familiar face after what she had been through and I sat by her bedside, watched the monitor for any sign that she was regaining consciousness. Finally, I fell asleep but woke up by an alarm going off. A nurse came rushing into the room, but it seemed like the alarm had started only because Bashira was waking up. When she finally opened her eyes, I was holding her hand.

"Bashira, my brave girl."

"Molly", she whispered.

"You don't have to be afraid, you're in the hospital and no one is going to hurt you more. You understand me?"

She nodded.

"Did your father do this to you? For talking to me?"

She nodded again. I had seen her father once, when he came shouting at her in the street. He was a man with beard like most other Afghan men, but he had piercing eyes which I never would forget.

"I'm so sorry Bashira, but here you are safe. We will take care of you. Now you just need to rest."

But she had something she was eager to tell me.

"Molly, you must hurry. You must find him. He did the attack in mountain. Now he will bomb hospital."

Was she saying what I thought she was? Had he been the brain behind the attack on the mountain CP, and was he now planning another one?

"Is he planning an attack on the hospital?"

"Big bomb. Everybody die."

An attack of the hospital would be a devastating blow. Not only would it kill people in the hospital, but it would also prevent taking care of further casualties. It had to be stopped.

"Where is he?"

"They make bomb near home, soon will take here."

I had to reach out to Charles and inform him, so actions could be taken immediately.

"Thank you Bashira! I must go now and warn others, okay. We will stop your father. The nice people here will take care of you and I will come back. You will be fine. You're my soul sister, remember?"

She nodded and smiled.

I contacted Charles and told him what I knew, so he could alert the right people immediately. Security was always high around the hospital but now it had to be increased and measures would need to be taken to try to stop Bashira's father. When the helicopter brought me back to the FOB there were already intense activities ongoing and Charles came to meet me.

"Dawes, come with me to the Ops tent."

In addition to Charles and Major Beck, there was also an American officer present. It seemed like the American's had had their eyes on Bashira's father, or Badrai as he was called, for a longer time, but they had rather thought he collaborated with the insurgents than that he was one himself. With the intel they had gotten from me that theory had been overthrown and it was now the highest priority to find him and stop the attack.

"Have you seen Badrai?" Major Beck asked me.

"If you mean if I have seen Bashira's father, then yes."

"Would you recognise him?"

"Without a doubt. Even if he shaved his beard off, I will never forget his eyes."

"Good, then you may be the only one who can identify him, because we know him by name but not by appearance", the American officer stated.

It seemed like they had intelligence that Badrai had already began his journey towards Bastion, on the road, in a truck. They had a pretty good idea of which way he was most likely to travel. They were not sure if the bomb would be in that same truck or if that was transported separately, but the best way was to get to that truck and catch Badrai.

The American pointed on a map.

"The truck is most likely to come this way. We don't want to give him warning, then he might blow the bomb up in our faces. We need to take him by surprise when the truck would anyway make a natural halt. Over here is a bridge guarded by the ANA, where all passing vehicles are stopped. We need to be there when the truck stops. Captain Dawes, as you are the only one who have eyeballed him, it's absolutely essential for this mission that you are there to identify him. So, we know ASAP if we have the right man or if we must keep looking."

I nodded. Charles intervened.

"Then I assume all of 2 section will go, Captain Dawes will not go on her own."

I was so glad he said that, I was starting to feel terrified. It was agreed that during the following night a helicopter would drop 2 section off at some distance from the bridge and we would get there by foot, protected by the darkness and then hide in a deserted compound near the bridge until the morning, when the truck was likely to pass. American forces would be hiding nearby in case we needed back-up, but

hopefully the surprise element would make things run smoothly. In the meantime, others would continue to investigate if there were other possible vehicles where explosives could be transported, in case they were not in the same truck as Badrai.

When I left the Ops tent I was shaken, my legs felt like jelly. It had been difficult to see Bashira injured and learn that her father had done that to her, and now I was going to be the main person in an operation to catch him. I would have to stand eye to eye with him and identify him – possibly in the closeness of a whole lot of explosives. It did not exactly sound like a safe operation. I had wanted adventure, but this was maybe a bit excessive.

Charles came after me and grabbed my arm.

"Are you okay Dawes?"

"No, I don't think I am. I'm scared as hell."

I think I saw compassion and concern in his eyes.

"I know I just have to do it, but I'm dreading it."

"It's okay to be scared, but don't forget you will have the entire 2 section, and me, with you."

If I had him with me I thought I could do almost anything.

"You will be all right, and once this operation is over you will be able to return to Bastion."

"What?"

"You didn't hear? We finally got word that Ruby is fit for fight and will come back to us. That means you can get back to your regular job in the hospital. I assume you will be relieved to get away from the field after this."

He did not seem sorry at all that I was to leave, in fact it almost seemed like the thought of me being in Bastion instead of here cheered him up. It made me want to cry.

"I'm sorry, I will be fine, but I think I just need some time alone."

And I tore away from him and hurried inside the med tent, where I still did my best to hold the emerging tears back, because I did not want to be caught crying. He did not care I was leaving, I was nothing more to him than one of his other men despite that it had felt like it on a few occasions.

As planned, were transported to the intended drop of place and the helicopter left us there in the darkness. We found a nearby ditch, a quite deep one where we would be able to march in the right direction without being too exposed. This was a dangerous part of the operation, moving in no man's land where we would be an easy target in case the Taliban were around, spotted us and attacked us.

The ditch was narrow and we all walked in a line, me and Charles last of all. Just as the others had disappeared out of our sight around a bend we heard a loud sound. Enemy fire. By reflex, we threw ourselves to the ground. However, Charles reflex was to throw himself over me, to keep me covered. We lay there panting, his face only centimetres from mine and even in the faint light I could see that he was looking at me, tense and waiting for what would happen next. If we had been



discovered by the Taliban we would likely die there in that ditch, we both knew that. I was thinking to myself that then he would at least be the last thing I saw, so things could be worse, even if he did not care particularly about me. He seemed to think the same and without warning, he closed the small gap between us and pressed his lips to mine. First just briefly but without thinking, I responded immediately, pulled him to me, did not want to let go of his lips once they had touched mine. The second time our lips touched, it was not a soft kiss. It was desperate, passionate, wanting. More like a kiss you would exchange when making up after a fight, before moving on to hot sex, than a first kiss between two persons trying it out. It was absolutely breath taking. There were no reservations, no holding back in that kiss. If we were going to die then I intended to kiss him for as long and as much as I could, to enjoy my last seconds to the fullest. His lips, his tongue, the pressure of his warm body against mine, despite the miserable situation I was in heaven for I do not know how long. Then we heard another loud bang, and we felt raindrops. Thunder, not enemy fire which had seemed more likely here in Afghan. We heard the others start cheering on around the bend. We stopped the kiss and looked at each other like we have woken up from a dream. He looked embarrassed and pulled back and got to his feet. He gave me his hand to help me up, but as soon as I stood he let go.

"Are you all right Dawes?"

"I am."

"I'm sorry for what just happened, I shouldn't..."

"You don't have to say anything. Please, you know this is not the right time to talk about it, boss."

I called him 'boss' on purpose, to remind him of where we were. That 2 section were waiting for us, we were in enemy country and needed to keep moving. He looked at me searchingly, but just said;

"Right, let's move, Dawes."

There were no words to cover what I felt, and I had wanted to stop him before he said anything to try to take it back, to erase what had happened. In the rain that now was pouring down, we continued marching to the CP and in my head, there was chaos. Moments ago, I had thought I would die and then kissing Charles had felt so natural, like the only thing I wanted to do for the rest of my short life. But now, I would live, and I was engaged to another man. I had been unfaithful to John. Where did it leave me? Who was I really? What did I want? And what did Charles want? He was walking behind me, and I was so aware of him. Part of me wanted to run away from him, far from him, home to John. Part of me wanted to stop, turn around and step into Charles and kiss him again. And again. And bring him to my bed. But that would not be right. That was not the kind of person I was, not an adulterer. Neither was Charles. For Christ's sake, he was married – how could he kiss me like that? What was this for his part? Did he have feelings for me hidden under that cool surface of his? Or was it just a spur of the moment thing because he thought we were going to die? But even so, why would he kiss me if he did not have feelings for me? I was engaged, he was married, yet we kissed like there was nothing we wanted more in this world. The few minutes we had clung to each other

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in the ditch left me completely confused and without answer to any of my questions  
as we walked on in silence.

## Chapter 11: Charles

In that ditch, I truly thought my last moment had come and all I could think of was that at least I was with her, and there was nothing else I wished for as an ending to my life, if it had to end. Except kissing her. Her face was so close, her lips were so close, and I just felt there was no more time to waste and then I just did it. It was not even a conscious decision, for once I did not let my brain decide. And she responded, drew me closer to her, parted her lips, let her tongue meet mine. For a minute I nearly forgot where we were, I could have gotten undressed and made love to her in that ditch because everything else was forgotten - 2 section as well as enemies. Then the raindrops fell and broke the spell, woke me up from the dream. Talk about losing focus – completely. But then again, if I was to die that sure would be the way I would choose to go.

When we moved forward again, and I watched her slender back in front of me, I thought of how I wanted to get this operation over and done with and then to be alone with her sometime soon. Tomorrow was the last day she was to be a part of 2 section, then she would return to Bastion. I would be allowed to tell her my feelings, and after what just had happened I dared to hope like I never had before, that she felt the same. I had to seek her out in Bastion as soon as possible and talk. Or maybe not talk, maybe instead continue where we just had interrupted. Anyway, let her know – and know myself, somehow, what we meant to each other.

Soon we reached the compound we were headed for and now I had to stop dreaming and focus on the present to make sure we survived it. We all hid and rested there in the empty building until the morning came. Molly sat on the floor at some distance away from me and I barely dared to meet her eyes because I was

afraid I would expose my feeling for her to everyone then. I wondered if she was nervous, or afraid, as she was the one who would have to identify Badrai. Probably and I wished I could have moved closer to her and put my arms around her and told her everything would be fine. We would get through this together, although I was far from comfortable putting her through this even if she was tough.

When dawn came we made sure we had eyes on the road where we expected the truck with Badrai to come driving, and on the bridge where it had to pass and would be stopped for a check. We were all on our toes, but as the hours went by and the sun rose higher in sky it got quite tedious waiting. At high noon a truck finally came driving on the dusty road and we immediately became fully alert again.

The truck drove up to the point at the end of the bridge where the ANA, who were informed of our presence and the plan, stopped it for what seemed to be a regular check for any passing vehicle. That was our sign to move and we crossed the bridge, approaching the truck from behind, which we did with caution. We could not know for sure who or what was in that truck. If it was Badrai alone, or if he had other insurgents with him, and if there were explosives too. It could also be a truck full of innocent people and then we neither wanted to scare them nor hurt them. When we reached the truck and positioned ourselves around it, the ANA soldiers had already removed the cover that had been over the back of the truck and revealed that at least there were no explosives to be seen. They must be transported to Bastion in some other way. Some people were seated in the back, however all seemed to be women although all of them, as could be expected, wore niqab or even burka making it difficult to identify any of them.

For a moment I turned away from the truck, to discuss with the ANA soldiers if it would be possible to ask the women to show their faces to Molly only, woman to woman, so we could be sure that Badrai was not hiding under those clothes, which were indeed convenient attire for anyone who wanted to disguise themselves. Suddenly, before any of us could react, one of the presumed women agilely jumped down from the truck and pulled Molly to her. From under her clothes she conjured up a long knife which she held to Molly's throat. She had her back against the truck, so she had cover from behind and held Molly in front of her as a human shield. It all went so fast, in a second Molly had become a hostage.

"Back away", a dark male voice hissed in broken English. Then louder;

"Back away and lower your guns, or I'll cut her throat."

To show us he was serious, he pressed the sharp blade against Molly's soft skin, so drips of blood emerged, and she squealed. I saw the fear in her eyes and the same fear was squeezing my own heart, but I had to stay on top of this - for her.

"Let her go, you have nowhere to escape here."

"Oh yes, I do. You're going to let me get into that truck and I will drive away."

Ha said a few words in Pashto and the women who sat in the truck immediately fled out of it. Apparently, he wanted no excess luggage. He kept his eyes on me. I kept mine on him, on Molly, on the knife that could end her life with one swift move. I could not let that happen. I signed to 2 section to retreat a bit and backed a few steps myself, to make him feel less threatened.

"Now I will move slowly to the driver's seat. Make no sudden movements or I'll kill her."

I still held my gun pointed at him, but the way he held her I could not shoot him without risk hitting her instead, which he of course knew.

"For once a woman is of use", he said with mockery in his voice. "She will come with me. If you follow me she dies. I will use her well."

The tone he had in his voice when he said the last, sent shivers through my body because it painted pictures in my mind of him abusing her. I could not let him take her, but I could not risk shooting her either. I did not know what to do and I was afraid my feelings for her were clouding my judgement. Then I met Molly's eyes as she looked straight into mine. She mimed;

"Don't let him take me with him. Shoot."

I could not talk back because Badrai would see, but I tried to tell her with my eyes that I did not want to risk hitting her. She just repeated;

"Shoot."

And when I looked into her eyes, I realised that she meant that she would rather take the risk to get hit by a straying bullet and die, than go with him and let him get away. Still I hesitated, I would not be able to bear it if she died by my hand. My mouth was dry, I heard a whizzing sound in my ears from my blood pumping.

"Shoot, please."

Then I pulled the trigger and the bullet passed right next to her ear and hit its target, between Badrai's eyes and he fell to the ground. It was over. Still it took a few seconds before any of us could move, then I stepped closer to Molly and took her in my arms.

"You're all right, Dawesy. You're safe. It's over."

She was shaking and sobbing, and I held her for a while. It did not even appear strange to any of the others present, given the situation. Only I knew that I had the woman I loved in my arms for the first time and it was extremely difficult to finally let her go. It felt completely unnatural. For a moment she had been where she belonged and when we stepped apart I felt empty and cold, deprived of the touch of her.

We called in the American back-up troops that had been waiting at some distance and they soon came driving. The dead man was stripped of the niqab he had been wearing so we finally saw his face and Molly was asked if she could identify him. She nodded;

"Yes, it's Bashira's father, it's Badrai."

That meant we had succeeded half-way. Badrai had been caught, but we had not located the explosives and we did not know who he had been collaborating with and if they still would go through with the plan to attack the hospital. However, the Americans as well as special forces were on it and our part of the operation was over and we were to return to the FOB.



As we drove the long way back she sat opposite to me. Sometimes when the vehicle moved on the bumpy road, our knees touched. It was not the way I would have liked to comfort her, but it was better than not touching her at all. I was not my normal calm self, I was trembling, shaken by the thought of how close it had been, how easily Badrai could have slit her throat and she would have been gone. I had also killed a man at very close distance, and that does not even leave a soldier like me unaffected, but I had the feeling this had very little to do with my reaction in this moment. It was the immediate danger she had been in that did this to me. Tomorrow morning, she would leave. I did not know how I would be able to stand it after this.

When we finally came back to the FOB, it was already beginning to get dark. I told the rest of the men to go get some scoff and then get to bed early but asked Molly to come with me to the Ops tent to de-brief with Major Beck. We informed him of what had taken place and at the end of it he nodded;

"Well done, Captain James. If you had not killed Badrai we don't know what would have had happened, with him or with Captain Dawes."

I did not feel any pride for having killed a man, for extinguishing a life, I was only relieved that Molly stood here beside me. That was all that mattered.

Beck informed us that special forces had managed to locate another truck with the sought explosives and succeeded to overtake it and apprehend the men inside. It seemed like for now, an attack of the hospital had been averted, even if there was no way to know if another would be planned. It was a pity that we had not had a

chance to interrogate Badrai, but the men that the SF had taken were for sure being questioned as we spoke. Beck continued;

"I understand this is your last evening here, Dawes. That you are returning to the hospital tomorrow to resume your duties there?"

"Yes, Sir."

"You have done an excellent job here. Not every doctor is cut out for being in the field, but you have proven yourself on numerous occasions. I'm sure Captain James will agree to that."

I nodded, and he went on;

"I hope your time in Bastion will be less eventful."

"I hope so too, Sir. I prefer taking care of casualties to having a knife against my own throat."

"Fully understandable. I hope that if our roads cross again it will under happy circumstances."

"Thank you, Sir."

He gave us permission to leave and we did, walked out of the tent into the warm Afghan evening where the crickets now were having a concert in the darkness. I have grown to like that sound. I even miss it when I'm back home. We walked side by side, Molly and I, and my heart was thumping inside my chest and I felt something that resembled panic. She would leave so early, this might be the last I

All is fair in love and war

saw of her before that. Suddenly I knew with certainty that I could not let her go,  
not like this.

## Chapter 12: Molly

We left the Ops tent together, Charles and me. I was not feeling terrific exactly, the last twenty-four hours had been shattering. First the tension I had felt before the operation itself, then the bewildering and earth-shaking moment in the ditch, and last Badrai taking me hostage. The feeling of him grabbing me brusquely, and the cold steel of the knife blade against my throat. The sharp pain when he pressed it harder and the sensation that something warm was seeping down my neck. Panic when I realised he planned on taking me with him. His hard, warm body which smelled of sweat repelled me, and I knew what he had done to his own daughter, so I could hardly expect him to have any mercy on me, a foreign woman that meant nothing to him. I could think of nothing worse than going with him, then I would rather take the risk of getting shot then and there. But I trusted Charles, trusted that his bullet would hit the target. Time seemed to stand still when our eyes met over his gun and I begged him to shoot, still I was shocked when he did. The deafeningly loud sound, the bullet brushing past my ear, then being released from Badrai's hard grip as he fell to the ground and the pressure of the knife disappearing simultaneously. I think I would have sunken down to the ground then, if Charles had not caught me in his arms. But he held me, like he never had before and told me everything would be fine. I wanted to stay there. I would have been fine staying in that spot forever, if it had meant I could keep his arms around me – but of course I could not. It was only a limited time he could hold me before anyone would have thought it strange.

When we finally got back to the FOB, all I wanted was to go to my tent and cuddle up in my bunk, land in everything I had been through, everything I felt, but we had

to de-brief with Major Beck. It was exhausting to relive it all in words, although Charles did most of the talking. The major seemed pleased with our achievements but when he towards the end thanked me for my time here in the FOB, I was painfully reminded that this was the end of it. I was to return to Bastion. Even if I was looking forward to working in the hospital again, which after all had been my aim when I came here, I was not looking forward to leaving Charles. I could almost not bear to think of it. There were so many questions unanswered in my head after our kiss, but I did not know how I would dare approach him about it to get any answers. From an army regulation perspective, that kiss had been highly inappropriate, forbidden – how could we even mention it?

As we left the tent, we walked in silence in the evening darkness, side by side and I was thinking that this might be the last I saw of him for I did not know how long. When we walked we were nearly touching, until we suddenly did, our hands brushing against one another and then he softly took my hand, pulling me to stop. His touch sent a jolt through my body, it was so unexpected.

Without letting go of my hand, he took a deep breath as if preparing himself for something and said with low voice;

"Come with me. Come with me to my tent."

I met his brown eyes, to see if he could possibly mean what I thought and hoped he might mean. I knew I probably should not come, for both our sakes. There was no legitimate reason for me to be in his tent at this hour, but, being the hour it was also meant that very few people were around to see us. The rest of 2 section were probably already asleep. His eyes begged me to come with him and I knew there

really was no other option than to say yes, when every fibre of my body wanted to go with him to see what he wanted with me. So, in the darkness we went, unnoticed.

Once we came through the tent opening, he pulled it closed after us, lighted a small paraffine lamp after a bit of fumbling with the matches, and then turned to me. The whole situation felt surreal, and yet so right. Being here alone with him. My mouth was dry, and I swallowed nervously. He took a step closer, then another so there was nearly no space left between us.

"I lied", he surprisingly said.

"What?"

"I lied. I recognised you the moment I saw you at Brize Norton, Molly. I just did not know what to do, I panicked and denied it."

I noticed that for the first time he called me by my name, not Dawes or Dawesy, but Molly, and it gave me a warm feeling inside.

"Why? Why would you panic, we were friends back then, weren't we?"

He slowly shook his head and his face looked like he was summoning up enough courage to say what he had to say.

"Because... because I was so in love with you then. You have no idea. When you disappeared, it hurt so much – for years. I have dreamed of meeting you so many times, but I was not prepared to meet you in the army after all that time. I was afraid that I would feel things for you again when I shouldn't, and I didn't know how to handle it."

He was in love with me. He was in love with me too in school, and we just wasted it. For a second, I felt grief, but then I focused on what we had here, now.

"And do you? Do you have feelings for me?"

I almost do not dare to ask because I do not know if I can handle the answer, whatever it is.

"I do", he confessed with a small laughter. "I have tried to fight it, but I can't. Against my better judgement I'm as much in love with you as ever and I could not let you leave without telling you. Not after this morning, when we kissed. It gave me some hope..."

He looked questioning at me, waiting for me to say something. I'm almost not able to because my inside is in such a turmoil.

"I loved you too! You were my first love and I thought I was going to die when I had to leave you. I didn't of course, but I never forgot you. It really hurt me when you denied me when we met again, I couldn't understand why you would do that."

"But now you do?"

I smiled weakly.

"Yes, but I still think it was an idiotic approach."

"What can I say, I'm so sorry Molly that I have been such a fool. I'm not used to things, or persons, knocking me out of balance, so when it happened I was not prepared."

"You can't be prepared for everything in life Charles. Everything is not logic."

"I know. I've learned the hard way" he smiled.

There was a moment of silence, and I realised it was my turn, he still did not know how I felt now.

"Charles, I *do* have feelings for you now too. I didn't plan for it to happen either, but I do - but you are married, aren't you?"

He looked almost surprised when I said that, like there was some important piece of information which I have missed, and he explained;

"No. I was, but I'm divorced. It went through before I came on tour."

He stepped closer and raised his hand to caress my cheek.

"I'm free to love who I want. Well, if we disregard army regulations."

When he told me that, it was like a dam burst inside me although it was feelings instead of water that came flowing over me. I did not want to speak any more. I knew this was the moment I ought to tell him I was engaged even if that did not mean anything to me anymore, but I could not make myself bring it up because then there would have been questions and more talk, and I did not want that. We had wasted so much time already and I did not want to say any words that could come between us in that moment. Instead I stepped even closer to him, wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down to kiss him. And this time I stayed there, I did not run away like the fourteen-year-old Molly had done. And he did not push me away. Instead he pulled me closer to him and kissed me back.



Unlike this morning, when we thought we were going to die, this kiss was soft, we tasted and explored each other slowly, taking our time. I was here and now in that kiss like I had never been before. I was trembling, and he felt it, so he interrupted and looked at me with concern in his eyes;

"You're trembling Molly. You *do* want to be here? You want this? I would never want anything you don't..."

I put my fingers to his lips to hush him.

"No silly, I'm trembling because I want this so much. Too much. There's nowhere else in the world where I rather want to be now, than here with you."

"You want to stay with me? You know we can get into trouble?"

"I know, and I don't care. Not after today. I thought I would die twice, and any of us could die any day here in Afghan. I don't want to regret anything because I held back. I don't want to not have been with you when I had the chance – not now when I know you love me."

"I feel the same. I know the rules are there for a good reason, but I... It just doesn't matter now. All I want is to be with you."

And then we kissed again, even deeper than before and my whole body was awake, wanting him. He kissed my neck, then loosened my hair from the tight braid I always had to comply with army dress code and smiled mischievously when it fell free over my shoulders. Holding my hand, he led me over to his bunk and gently had me sit down. Then he kneeled in front of me and put my one boot clad foot

onto his lap and started to untie the shoelaces. He did it slowly, while watching my face in the soft light from the lamp. Oh, how I loved the way he looked at me in this moment. When he was done with the first and gently had pulled it off, he did the same with the other. Then did the same with his own combat boots. I enjoyed looking at him while he did this, but It felt like it took half an eternity and even if he was close, I yearned for him to be closer. Finally, he came to stand in front of me, on his knees between my legs, and kissed me again. Slowly, we removed the rest of our clothes, piece by piece while caressing each other. Clothes that were identical except for our underwear. It was surreal but wonderful, I wanted to touch and kiss every part of him. I had never longed so much to be skin to skin with another person and when he finally lay down with me on that narrow bed, it was everything I had ever dreamed of. More than I had been able dream of. I had never given myself to anyone so unrestrained, without reservations before. There had always been a small part of me that I had guarded to myself, only now realised I had always kept it for him – because he was the only one for me. Always had been, even when I thought I was over him. I whispered to him;

"I have always wanted you."

As we melted together and moved, slowly and then faster until we both climaxed, we did it in complete silence as we did not want anyone to discover us, but when I came I had to bite his shoulder because otherwise I would have screamed out loud. It was so beautiful, such total fulfilment and completeness after so much longing and so much uncertain love – finally the circle was closed. This was the way it had always been meant to be, everything else had been a deviation from the natural order, I felt that so strongly now.

When our breathing slowed down, our heartbeats returned to normal pace, he whispered in my ear;

"I love you, Molly Dawes. I always have, and I always will."

"And I love you, Charles James."

We fell asleep with our bodies tangled, feeling secure in each other's arms, two rootless persons finally feeling at home like never before.

When I woke, the first faint light was seeping through the tent canvas and I realised I had to go to my own tent if I was not to be discovered. Even if I strictly speaking was no longer under his command from this morning on, it was better if no one knew and I also knew that the helicopter would come for me shortly after dawn. I looked at him and felt such tenderness, he looked almost like a child in his sleep with the dark curls dishevelled and the long eyelashes fluttering against his cheeks. We had not slept much, and I could not bear to wake him when he slept so beautifully. I was sure we would find a way to meet soon, having spent a magical night like this together, so I just touched his lips softly with mine and wrote him a note before I sneaked out and over to my tent, where I quickly packed my things in the Bergen and went to meet the helicopter that was to fly me back to Bastion. As we left the ground and I saw the FOB becoming smaller, to then disappear behind us, I felt happier and more complete than I ever thought was possible.

## Chapter 13: Charles

I woke up to the sound of a helicopter taking off and the light of the early morning, and for a moment I thought it was any morning. Then I registered that I did not have any clothes on and wondered how come I had slept naked. Then it all came back to me in a flash, the wonderful night with Molly - but before I could rejoice in it, I panicked from the realisation that she was not beside me and that the sound I heard was likely the helicopter transporting her away from here. Was it possible that she had left without saying good bye after *this*? I jumped out of bed and was nearly prepared to run out of my tent naked and wave to the helicopter to return, even if everyone would think me a lunatic and it would for sure expose what had happened between us. Then my gaze fell on a handwritten note, tilted against a cup on my desk.

*You're so cute when you sleep, I just could not wake you after having exhausted you. I loved everything about this night. Come see me soon.*

*Love, Molly*

I was still disappointed she was gone, but my fears faded away and I found myself smiling. *She loved everything about this night.* God knows I did too. I allowed myself to lie down for a while again, not to sleep but to think, feel, reminiscence. After all this time I could barely believe that we finally – finally! – had spent a night together. I had had quite a few women over the years but nothing even came close to this. When Elvis and I went to uni, and later when we were cadets together, I realised that the man I had turned into was attractive to women. Very attractive even, judging from the way they threw themselves at me. I was somewhat surprised

and enjoyed it, but I never could take it seriously. To me it seemed like they fell for the nice façade of a good-looking wealthy man, that was not really the real me. I treated them accordingly and never let them in for real. Do not get me wrong, I did not treat them badly on purpose but my heart was not in it and then it never ends well. I think I had the idea that there was this one girl who had liked me for who I was, for my inside, before my outside made me an eligible bachelor. I had given her my heart and it ended up completely broken. I never wanted to experience that again, the pain had been too raw, too consuming. All I allowed any other girls to be over the years was a distraction, entertainment. A way to pass time and enjoy myself, but I never really felt I belonged with any of them. None was my soulmate, my other half, my true love, yin and yang or whatever you like to call it. Definitely not my ex-wife who I had done my best to stay away from after we got married. I knew it had been a foolish and unfulfilling way to lead a life, but I had not known how to do it differently because I was afraid it would hurt too much and because no one had measured up to my first love.

This was different. Or, thinking of it, rather it was the same as it had been the first time with the same girl. Molly. That love hit me, knocked me off my feet and I could not do anything about it. Actually, did not *want* to do anything about it once I had accepted it happening again. I wanted to be lost in her, belong to her, let her know that she was my everything. There had never really been anyone else and probably never would be – not if I had a say, because now I wanted to stay with her. This night, it had been madness to ask her to come with me - but I had to. It had come to a point when I felt I could not waste any more time by not telling her how I felt, army regulations had to stand aside because this was my *life*. And she had wanted to come. And she had not wanted to leave. The immense happiness I had felt when

I understood that she wanted to stay with me, that she wanted me like I wanted her. Then to kiss her, undress her slowly, feel her soft skin under my fingertips for the first time. I think that is the closest I have ever come to something feeling sacred. Tracing the contours of her body in the dim light of the paraffine lamp, the challenge of making love silently when all I wanted was to call out her name. Her eyes meeting mine, widening with pleasure as I entered her, the mutual sensation that we fully belonged to each other. I had never felt so complete as I had this night. For the first time I was giving all of myself to a woman. I wanted to relive it with her, soon.

After a while I realised I had to turn my focus back to work, to this day. Go out there and be the captain my men needed and put Molly aside for now, so despite that I was reluctant to wash her scent off from my skin, I had a shower and got dressed. Put the uniform on, put the captain on. The guys were already up, having breakfast in the mess tent and Ruby was back among them. The same helicopter that had taken Molly away had of course brought him. He looked a bit thinner, but otherwise fine.

"Welcome back, Ruby! So great to see you again!"

I sat down in front of him.

"Thanks Captain James! It feels great to finally be back. I have missed you guys."

"We have missed you too, even if it was a pleasure with some female company in your place", Fingers said. "Boss, can't we have both Ruby and Molly? That would be so great!"

I could not help smiling when he said that. It would indeed be great. On the other hand, Molly and I could not have a relationship if she served under me, so in that way it was better that she was in Bastion. But god, how I missed her already. Ruby was an excellent medic, but he could of course never fill the gap Molly had left behind as far as I was concerned.

"Good idea, Fingers. I'll ask Major Beck if the army can make an exception for 2 section only, so we can have *both* a CMT and a doctor."

"Will you really, boss?"

"No, you prannet! Of course not, but I agree it would have been nice. Now piss off and get ready to get out on patrol."

I attempted to eat my own breakfast but had no appetite. All I could think of was her. Then I thought that I wished Elvis was here, so I could have talked with him about it. I still had not heard a word from him since the disrupted wedding and I missed my best friend. I would have liked to share my joy with him in this moment and would have liked his advice how to go from here. Although, on second thought, he might be a lousy advisor considering how things had turned out for himself. Finally, I collected myself, got up and tuned into "captain mode" rather than "lovesick puppy mode" and managed to keep my focus on the things that mattered during the patrol. However, once we got back inside the walls of the FOB, my thoughts strayed to Molly again. When I saw the med tent, my instinct told me to go over there and talk to her, until the logic part of my brain reminded me that now it was Ruby who was there instead of her.

As the day went on, I grew more and more frustrated about the fact that we had not had the chance to say good bye properly in the morning or exchange promises of seeing each other again, and I felt insecure about that the spoken words of love only had been said right after making love. Everyone knows that in the post-coital emotional heat one can say and promise things that do not hold true once you cool down. However, in this case, for me, it was 100% true. I loved her, and I wanted her to know that for sure. I also needed to hear it from her again - was it really possible that I was so fortunate that she loved me too? I did not have the possibility to simply call her and even if I had I would not have wanted to. I wanted to look her in the eyes, I wanted to hold her again. In the late afternoon I had come to the conclusion that I at least had to try to do that – meet her face to face. I did not want to let her slip through my fingers again because I had not done everything I could. I would not be passive this time, she was worth everything to me and so worth fighting for. So, I went to see Beck and asked if I could get permission a day or two and go to Bastion to deal with a private matter. He looked at me searchingly. It was an irregular request, but during the four tours I had served under him I had never asked anything like it, so he must have understood it was something important to me and thus agreed. As I was about to leave the tent he said;

"Give my best to Captain Dawes."

I felt my cheeks heat up.

"What?"

"Just in case you run into her in Bastion", he smirked.



I wonder if the sharp eyes of my commander had picked something up even before we admitted it to each other. Anyway, Major Beck proved once again that he had a very sharp and attentive mind.

Next day I made the same flight Molly had done the day before and I was so excited over the thought that I was getting closer and closer to her by the minute and soon would get to see her. I knew the pilot, Ham, superficially and started chatting a bit to distract myself so time would pass quicker.

"I guess you flew Captain Dawes too yesterday?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"So, did she seem to be in a good mood? I mean, finally allowed to return to Bastion from the wilderness?"

I was fishing for information how she had seemed after our night rather than her feelings for her return, of course.

"Oh yeah, she seemed to be in a very good mood, was even humming when she did not think of it."

I smiled, he had given me the confirmation I craved, and I just longed even more to see her. However, he continued;

"And I bet she was even happier once she got back to Bastion."

"How come?" I asked light-heartedly.

"Because her fiancée was waiting for her there."

"Her what?!" A shock wave went through my body. Surely, I must have heard him wrong.

"Yeah, isn't it wonderful? He had flown in to surprise her just in time for her return. We can all need a bit of romance in time of war."

I felt complete dismay. Then betrayal. Then doubt. I could not be true, it just could not. Not considering what happened between us.

I knew that the only way to get true answers was to see her, to ask her and not trust second hand information. Not assume anything, not assume the worst. Maybe there had been a fiancée, but it was over now. Maybe there was a good reason she had not told me and spent the night with me. But no matter how much I told myself not to panic until I had talked to her, I could fight off a wave of emotions building up inside me – and none of them were good. I had no doubt whatsoever that she had wanted that night as much as I, but suddenly I feared it did not mean the same to her as it had to me.

When we landed, I immediately headed towards the hospital with big strides. I would lie if I said I was calm. My insides were in uproar, thoughts spinning, heart pounding and all I wanted was to see her, so she would be able to set this straight. She would laugh and tell me the info Ham had was wrong, there was no fiancée. Or if there was, that she had sent him off after telling him she was in love with me now. Inside the doors I stopped the first person I saw, a nurse, and asked if she had seen Captain Dawes. She thought for a moment, then said that she actually had seen Captain Dawes only a few minutes ago, and that she had seemed to be on her way to the canteen. I knew where it was since before and hurried along the corridors.

No one paid attention to me striding along, a lot of people were in a hurry here although most of them with the purpose to save lives – but on the other hand, I felt like my life was depending on this. Depending on getting the answers I needed from Molly.

At the entrance to the large canteen I paused and let my eyes search the room for her. I saw her almost immediately. She sat with her back towards me, but I would recognise her anywhere even from behind. Her tiny frame, the shiny dark hair in a tidy braid which now reminded me of the recent occasion when I had been allowed to let it loose and run my hands through it, pull her to me and kiss her. But I was not able to linger in those pleasant thoughts, because opposite Molly a man was sitting. He was holding her hands and his face had the foolish expression of a man being completely and utterly in love. It would have been endearing if his feelings had not been directed towards *my* Molly. It would have been endearing if I had not recognised him as my old nemesis. The man sitting in front of Molly, and who by the looks of their intimacy indeed was her fiancée, was John fucking McClyde, a.k.a. Bones.

Like the rest of us he was in army gear, so seemingly also a soldier. I felt my body freeze in panic. I felt nauseous. I experienced a combined shock over that it was actually true that she had someone else - as they were holding hands it seemed very much like the relationship was alive, not ended - and that that person was the one who had caused me most pain in life. Well, if one disregarded the pain I felt when I lost Molly the first time. How fitting and ironical that the two persons that had been my main source of pain had found each other. In that moment I again felt like the little boy which had allowed himself to be bullied by Bones. I shrank from the

self-confident Captain I now was, to the terrified boy of the first school day when he had set years of hell in motion. I just could not cope going up to them and ask Molly what was actually happening, if she had tricked me on purpose or what the fuck this was. I just could not make myself do it. Instead I turned on the spot, left them behind me and departed, or rather fled, from Bastion back to the FOB as soon as I could make the helicopter take me - and I did not try to contact Molly again.

## Chapter 14: Bones

For some time after boarding school, I continued the track which my parents, or rather my father, had designed for my life, as I went on to study at the university. But as time went by and I more and more became an adult with a will of my own, I increasingly questioned my father's authoritative and not always sympathetic manners and I felt that I needed to break free. Without announcing it beforehand, I went traveling. If I had talked to my parents first, I knew my father would have tried to stop me by using any possible method, ranging from extortion to cutting money off. The latter he did of course, when he understood I had strayed, but I found ways to get by.

Initially, I just went back-packing through Europe, then on to Asia and South America. I had saved money which I used in the beginning. Later, I took whatever work there was to find in the places I came to, in bars, in farms, in building-places. It was a relief to cut the ties to the past, become a different man than the boy I had been. I lived a very simple life, but the perk was that when I did not use my father's money he had no influence on how I lived my life. I loved the places I went to, I loved the people and I loved making myself useful using my hands instead of just living of my parents' wealth.

Eventually, after a few years of vagabond life, I started to think about how I wanted to spend the rest of my life. I felt I wanted to keep traveling and having a portion of adventure, but I also wanted some direction, some purpose and achieve something. During my travels in Asia I had come in contact with both Buddhism and Hinduism and the concept of *karma*. Even though I was not religious, the philosophy spoke to me and left me with a disconcerting feeling that my

own *karma* was in a quite bad shape due to my actions in boarding school and I ought to spend my life doing something to make up for my old sins. I came up with the idea that I would join the army. It might seem contradictory if you think of soldiers as people killing others, but I was rather thinking of the good one could contribute with as part of the British army, fighting terrorists and other bad guys, helping locals by protecting them or assisting in outreach projects. There seemed to be many different opportunities once I started looking into it in more detail and I decided I would aim at becoming an officer and then try out for the special forces.

I was admitted to Sandhurst without too much effort and I enjoyed the time there. I made sure to have a different start than I had back in boarding school. Not only because such behaviour would not have been tolerated in this setting, but it was also a person I never wanted to be again. It was great to form friendships that were based on mutual respect and fun, rather than fear. At some point I got to hear that incredibly enough, Charles James and Elvis had also gone to Sandhurst but already left when I started and were already in service. I was relieved that my years of traveling had ensured we were not there in parallel, because then my past actions and reputation would have haunted me, and I would not have had the clean slate I wanted. At one point, I learned that Charles had gotten the Sword of honour, because he was the best cadet passing out his year and after that I was set on achieving the same. Even if he was not there to compete with me in person I could not let him beat me for some reason. It was me who had behaved badly against him, but since the day in the café when I had seen Molly Dawes being so happy and easy in his company, he had been a thorn in my side. Actually, another reason why I was glad he was not here now, was because I knew he and Molly had had something special: Even if I did not know what it had been for sure, or how that

had continued after we left school, the thought of it still bothered me in some silly way.

Then, one day as I was walking through the hallways at Sandhurst I saw her again. Molly Dawes. She came walking with another girl, or rather young woman, talking and laughing and it was obvious she was also a part of the academy. I recognised her immediately and when our eyes met I saw a flicker of recognition in hers too, but mixed with confusion.

"Hi", I said. "Do you recognise me?"

"I do, but I don't remember from where? Can you please remind me?"

Determined not to be mute in her company as I had been back in the days, I told her;

"We met when I was in boarding school and you stayed there with your father, the headmaster. I'm John McClyde."

I held out my hand and she took it. I'm sure she had a perfectly normal hand but when we touched, it was like a mild electric current went through me. The effect she once had had on me was still there. She probably did not feel the same, but I could see that when I told her, she recalled at least the situation, maybe even me.

"Now I remember! That was such a great year. I'm Molly, in case you didn't remember my name. It was such a long time ago."

She told me she was in training to be an army doctor. She was on her way to a lecture and could not linger but when I asked if she would be interested to meet for

a coffee another day and catch up on what had happened since then, she happily accepted and gave me her number.

I waited three days before I called, but only because I did not want to seem needy. I spent those days thinking of her and what I would say once I called her. When I finally did, it went so easy. She was just the nicest person in the world and without playing hard, agreed to meet for a coffee the day after. I was nervous, but I had not needed to be, she was as easy in person as she had been over the phone. I liked that about her, that there was no pretence like with so many other girls. She seemed to be herself and I was myself in return and we talked for hours, about everything and nothing. She told me of her life in Italy since she left school and to my relief I understood that Charles was not part of her life and had not been since then. It also seemed like he never had confided in her about the things I had put him through, so I did not need to defend myself against any justified charges. It actually seemed like she did not even know that him and Elvis also had gone to Sandhurst before us and now were officers and I never felt the need to enlighten her, the less any of us thought of those two, the better if you asked me.

I had always thought of Molly as the one who got away, without me even daring to have a try at winning her. I somehow felt like with the new direction I had chosen for my life, it was fate that had given me a second chance by making her cross my path again. This time I would not waste the chance. This time I felt worthy of trying, like I could meet her eyes without breaking contact because she would otherwise see into the depth of my soul and find it inadequate, or even black. Now was different and I would make the most of it.



I quickly tried to make it clear to her that I wished for more than just ending up in the friends zone, even though I would let her take her time to think about it - or rather feel if she had or could develop the same feelings as I had for her. From early days, I did not leave her in doubt about my feelings and then one evening when we had been out for something that very much felt like a proper date, she put her hand in mine and asked if there was any way I could convince my roommate to sleep in another room. I said yes without even thinking of it, knew I just had to persuade Robin, as he was called, to stay away even if it meant a big fat bribe.

If I had been in love with her before, it was nothing compared to what I felt after that night. I felt like we belonged together for sure and she seemed to feel the same. We were an official couple from then, through the remaining days at the academy and then when I started my career as active soldier. She went on to complete her training and then did her foundation years at the Birmingham hospital. Whenever I was home from my travels with special forces, that was where I landed, with her. We saw much less of each other than I would have wished but I still felt a security in us, like my love for her, our love was the foundation which everything was resting upon. We had chosen careers which would sometimes keep us apart for long, but I felt convinced that we would always come back to one another. That nothing could come between us.

This time, things had been different though. Previously we had been apart mainly because my job as an SF soldier took me away regularly but as we were both independent persons I had never felt that it harmed our relationship. This time it was for a longer period and I was not the only one gone and she at home where I knew what she was doing. She was in a war zone and even if she was a doctor in a

hospital she could find herself in dangerous situations. I worried for her and I had missed her immensely. When I heard she had left the hospital to work as a medic in the field, I was all but thrilled, in fact it kept me sleepless at night. When we had a rare opportunity to speak and I told her of my concerns, she just brushed them off, annoyed. Said that she after all was a soldier too and that I could not expect her to stay confined. I found that comment a rather hard and unfair way to disregard my feelings, but she just would not listen to me. For the first time I got the horrible feeling that there was a distance between us that depended on something more than just the physical distance, and it pained me that I was not there to talk to her face to face and make everything feel all right again. Over the next month the irregular contacts we had did nothing to sooth my worries - on the contrary they grew.

Therefore, when my team and I had finalised an operation not too far from Camp Bastion around the same time as I knew she was supposed to return there, I decided to give her a surprise visit. I arrived at Bastion the day before her, so when her helicopter landed I could be there and receive her. When I felt the wind from the rotor blades against my face as it descended, my heart was pounding with an uncertainty I had not felt in her presence for several years, as everything had seemed so natural ever since we met at Sandhurst. I told myself that I was being ridiculous, that the moment she stepped out everything would be the same as always. As great as always.

She did not notice me at first. She jumped out and swung her Bergen over her shoulder and I noticed with pride how she never had any problem to carry her kit even though she was such a small person. Small but strong. She looked happy and

relaxed – until she saw me. The expression on her face was not what I had hoped for. First, she looked like she could not quite grasp that it was me standing there, then she looked like she had seen a ghost, finally she gave me a smile, but she did not look as happy as she had done *before* she saw me. It did nothing to resolve the knot I already had in my stomach, but I tried to joke it away.

"One could think that it was some horrible surprise waiting for you here, Molly Dawes, not your boyfriend."

I shouted over the helicopter sound. Then she dropped her Bergen and ran to me, put her arms around my neck and hugged me.

"John, is it really you?"

I felt relief at the touch of her and managed to convince myself it had only been the shock of seeing me when she did not at all expect it which made her react like she first did. My mouth sought hers and she responded the kiss, although somewhat reserved. It seemed like she felt it herself because she explained;

"I'm a bit embarrassed about kissing in public here."

She had never been especially embarrassed about kissing in public before, but I had to admit that this was a different setting, very strictly army, so maybe it was not so strange. At least I told myself so. I offered to help her with the Bergen and my other hand took hers. It was just so lovely to see her again. We had been apart three months, but it felt like even longer. I definitely needed this visit to be able to stand the remaining three months she was planned to stay here.

She had to report her return, but she was not expected to work this first day, so we would have some time together. I had also arranged so we would have a room of our own, like steady couples living and working here could have and I could hardly wait to be alone with her. Once she had reported her presence, we tried to find somewhere a bit private, so we could sit down and talk, catch up more than we had been able to at a distance. She now seemed a bit tired. I pulled her into my lap.

"Are you okay Molly? Is anything the matter?"

"I had a rough day yesterday, I thought I was going to die twice."

Even though she was alive in my arms now, just the thought that something could have happened to her made my stomach turn.

"What happened?"

She told me about the operation to try to capture an insurgent, where she had been vital in identifying him. She told how they thought they had been discovered by the enemy while walking in a ditch on the countryside, where they were completely exposed, and had been half scared to death before they understood it was thunder. I had to laugh about that, even though it seemed like Molly had found that moment so intense that it was hard to laugh about even afterwards. Then she told me how the insurgent, Badrai, had held her hostage with a knife to her throat, but that her captain had saved her by putting a bullet between his eyes.

"There must have been a risk that he would hit you instead? How could he make that call?" I demanded worriedly.

"I told him to shoot. I would rather take the risk of dying than going with that man."

My brave Molly, still it disturbed me that she was willing to gamble with her life and even more that the captain had been willing to do it. But I sensed there was no point in saying that, she would only be vexed with me, so I changed subject;

"Otherwise, did you enjoy being there? With that section, out in the field?"

Her gaze was fixed in the faraway horizon when she answered;

"It was quite hard at first, to get accepted and to get used to it. Then I liked it." She returned her look to me. "I will miss it now."

For some reason that answer built on the knot in my stomach. I did not know what it was about the whole thing about her being out in that FOB as a medic that caused some sort of reaction in me. Almost like jealousy which was completely stupid. It was work, nothing more, nothing less and the only thing there was not to like about it was the danger she had been in, and that was over now. She was safe here with me. What she said next also soothed my concerns a bit.

"I really liked working with the locals. I was able to set up sort of a temp clinic in the village and help the women and children, give vaccines and help with other things. It felt like I made a difference there."

I felt proud of her again.

"Next time I go on tour, I would like to go for an outreach project. Then I could do even more of that type of work. Even if it's interesting and rewarding to help the

casualties here, I think I like that even more, helping common people who are in need."

I could not stop myself, even though I should have known my words would only cause trouble;

"You want to go on tour *again*?!"

"Yeah, is that so strange?"

"No... it's just that I was hoping that at some point we would settle down and, well you know, maybe have kids."

"You mean we have kids, *I* settle down and take care of them and you continue touring with your SF team?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, but that's inevitably how it would be, isn't it?"

I could not tell her that she was wrong, because that was how it would be – but what was the alternative if we ever wanted to start a family? I knew I wanted that with her. I knew it when I asked her to marry me, I knew it long before that – and I had thought that she would want the same once she had finalised her training and tried out the tour life, which she definitely would have had by the time she went home from Afghan.

I looked away because I felt my eyes get damp, despite that I fought it. She touched my cheek.

"I'm just ready as an army doctor, John. Even if there are lots of jobs at home for me, I want to take the opportunity to go abroad working some more before I start thinking about having kids."

"And before we get married?"

She was silent some seconds too long for it to be a good silence.

"Yes, before we get married too. I'm not ready yet."

"Why Molly? We've been going out for years. I'm ready as hell, why aren't you?"

I really did not want to pressure her like that, it just happened – because I loved her so much.

She jumped up from my lap and spat;

"What's the problem John? We've just met again after three months apart and a lot has happened in that time, not all of it easy. Do you think it's the best time to pressure me about kids and marriage? Then you're seriously mistaken. Can't you just take it a bit easy? You know that the whole settling thing scares me a bit."

I *did* know, but never before had it scared me that it scared her – for some reason it did now. It was like our relationship suddenly seemed volatile and I could not stand it. I also knew that the only way to make things good right now was to leave it, and to say I was sorry. I got on my feet and took her in my arms again.

"I'm sorry Molly, I didn't mean to pressure you. We can talk about those things when we both have landed at home again."

I felt her relax in my arms, the minefield averted for now.

We had a non-romantic typical army dinner because it was what was available and then I told her of the room I had arranged as a surprise, so we could spend the night together. She smiled but the flutter was again there in my stomach, I was not 100% sure she really was happy about it – and later in the room she added to that feeling when I understood that she only wanted to *sleep* with me, like closing your eyes and drift off, not something more erotic.

"I just can't John. I'm just a bit upside down right now. I'm exhausted, and the events yesterday really took their toll on me, and we've just met again, and it feels like we've already been fighting. I'm just not at all in the mood. Can you please just hold me this night? I'd love to be close to you, just not have sex."

Normally, I would have loved just being close to her too even if I wanted her like crazy, but there was something about this whole situation that just did not feel right. I could not make that feeling go away. As I held her in my arms that night, lying behind her spooning her, her slower breathing indicated that she soon fell asleep, but I could not. I lay awake with my lips to her hair, felt her warmth, her lovely and familiar scent, with the feeling that something was terribly wrong, and I was not sure if it could be fixed. I even got the strange feeling that this might be the last time we were together like this and silent tears streamed down my face until I finally fell asleep. Was I losing her? Had I already lost her? What had changed, and why?



## Chapter 15: Molly

In my face! That was where my infidelity slapped me the moment I happily jumped out of the helicopter and saw John standing there. The man who loved me and had done absolutely nothing to deserve what I had done to him behind his back.

It is strange how something can seem completely right from one angle, and completely wrong when you look at it from another. It seemed so right that Charles and I, after finally having confessed that we both loved each other long ago, and now loved each other again – or still, would not waste another second before we fell into each other's arms. It also seemed so wrong that I, who was engaged to a man who had always made it clear that he loved me and would do anything for me, who had been my boyfriend for years and stood by me through hard times, should spend a night with someone else. There are always two sides to a story. Which one that is the one that gets sympathy and should entail the 'live happily ever after' depends on who the storyteller and the listener are. However, I knew that I had done John wrong.

I felt that my face exposed me the minute I saw him, that it was impossible to pretend happiness when I was caught off guard like that and I rushed into his arms and buried my face to his chest just to hide it. But once I was in his arms, he also felt so familiar and safe and I knew that the last thing I wanted was to hurt him. I wished I could hide there and not take responsibility for what I had done, and not need to make difficult decisions that inevitably would end up hurting someone. The only question hanging in the air was who that someone would be. Then he kissed me, and it felt all wrong. My lips were still feeling swollen from a whole night of lovely snogging with Charles. A night when we just had not been able to stop

ourselves, when sleeping had been the very last thing we wanted because we were so consumed by discovering each other intimately. I did not know how to go from that into John's arms. I know there are people who are capable of such things, but I was not. Two things worried me; that what I had done was wrong, and worse, that even so I did not regret it the least, instead I longed to do it again. And again. And again.

John took my hand as we walked, and I almost wanted to retract it, because I got the creepy feeling that he would be able to tell just from that touch what I had done. Of course, he could not. He only chatted on as usual, probably noticed nothing.

Looking back to the beginning of us, I did not fall in love with John at first sight. Not even at second sight given that the first time was actually in boarding school when I already loved Charles, so I did not pay that much attention to John. When we met second time around at Sandhurst, I first just thought it was nice to see a familiar face. I thought it might be nice to talk of past days together and hear bit about what he had been up to since then, but already over our first coffee I got the feeling he was interested in more and he later confirmed that. I was single, and he was a terribly good-looking, nice guy and it was impossible not to feel attracted to him. It was not like I had not had boyfriends since Charles, who never actually was my boyfriend. I always seemed to have a tail of boys after me for some reason, but I had never been in love for real since him. When I met John at Sandhurst, he was very much a man not a boy. The experiences he had made during his travels had made him grow up. I liked that. I guess I had always felt older than I really was due to the rootless life I had lived with my restless mother. It felt like he was a match

for me. I was not sure he was *the* man for me, but he was the one I wanted to be with now and we became a couple.

Being with John was uncomplicated and fun. He was cheeky and had humour but at the same time he was immensely caring towards me. He always complimented me and made me feel special, and he always took care of me. During the last year at Sandhurst, my mum was diagnosed with cancer. My beloved mum. She never settled, she was always on the run, I'm not sure if she was running *to* something or *from* something, but in the end the cancer got her and made her stop. Cornered her. Killed her. Then John was there for me like no one else. My dad had never done intimacy well. My Italian stepdad Giuseppe was better at that and had no qualms about crying floods of tears, but after the funeral he had to go home to Italy meanwhile John was there every day. Both before and after. Mum loved him and said he was a keeper. Those words stayed with me, as she did not stay for very long herself after saying them and maybe that was one reason we stayed together. When I moved to Birmingham he moved in with me when he was home. It seemed like the logical way to do it. I had an apartment, why would he not live there when he was home from his travels, so we got to spend as much time together as possible? But then there were times when I realised that I actually enjoyed it quite much when he was away. I liked being alone in the apartment, liked being able to focus on my job, liked being able to go out with friends without anyone, John, wondering when I would come home. Yet, I felt very happy when he returned home too, so I thought that maybe we were made for each other as the life we had chosen would naturally make us be apart and together in cycles. Maybe that was what was perfect for me?

Still, it was a shocker when he proposed. He went all in, surprised me on Valentine's day when I thought he would not be home. When I returned from my day at the hospital he had filled the apartment with roses, candles, prepared a nice dinner and champagne and went down on one knee and proposed to me. Grand gestures are not really my thing, so I had to fight not to just giggle it away, because I understood that he was serious, and really wanted to spend the rest of his life with me like he said. I think I was a bit overwhelmed and tried to find a way not to giggle, and so I said yes. Once the word came out of my mouth, I felt like taking it back, unsure if I was ready for it – but he looked so ridiculously happy and I knew there was no turning back. It is not like you joke with someone that you accept their proposal and then take it back. You just do not. So suddenly I found myself engaged to be Mrs. McClyde at some point.

Some days I just felt happy about John and me, but sometimes I had serious doubts. Felt like I was too young and had so much left to experience before settling down, but I also loved him. So, I was a bit of an emotional rollercoaster, but John never knew. He just thought we were fine, on the path to a bright future.

I had always known that I wanted to be posted abroad once I finally became an army doctor and when the opportunity in Bastion appeared, I did not doubt for a second. In one way I thought that John would understand as he had the same wish to travel the world for the army himself, but when I told him I had been offered a position, I felt that he was hesitant or even reluctant to letting me go. Not that it was his decision, and so I went. Would I have done the same if I had known how it would turn out? Hell yes! No matter the consequences, I would not have wanted any of it undone. Except Badrai holding a knife to my throat, but then again, if he

had not done that, maybe Charles and I would never had reached the point when we could not hold back and told each other how we felt and then we never would have had the night of my life. Emotions are complicated. Life is complicated.

When I met John again, I felt like I at least had to give him a chance. Spend some time with him when he had come all the way here and really get some clarity in how I felt. Both because he deserved that after these years together when he had showed me nothing but love, and because I did not trust that life in the FOB had not messed my normally functional brain up completely making me stray only temporarily. I had to find out.

It all started okay, but then came the discussions about kids and marriage. And I *knew* that it was not the thought of not being able to go on tour again that caused the reaction. I simply doubted if I wanted to have kids and get married with *him*. And I wondered how I would have felt if Charles had asked me the same thing. Anyway, I hated fighting with John about it, hated making him sad. Then things got worse. I thought I would get a break from the emotional turmoil when we had to sleep separately, but he had arranged a room for us. I'm not sure how I managed to pull off a happily surprised face. Maybe I did not. I felt panic building up inside me because I felt I would not be able to bring myself to sleep with him. Not only would it feel wrong after spending the previous night with Charles, but I also felt strongly that *I did not want him*. Not even a little. So, I came up with the lamest excuses. I was not sure he bought the, he looked so disappointed and sad that it crushed my heart but still it did not make me change my mind. You cannot have sex with someone because you pity him if you do not desire him. It was even difficult to lie next to him, being held by him. I forced my breathing to be slow, so

he would think I slept, but I lay wide awake staring into the darkness and it all just felt even more horrible when I thought I heard him sob. That was when I understood my weirdness had not gone unnoticed and that I was hurting him, and I knew for sure that I would continue to hurt him. And hurt myself because I would always feel love for him, just not the same love *he* felt – or, more importantly not the all-consuming love I felt for Charles. No matter how sweet, caring and loving John was, my feelings from the night with Charles remained. That had been right, everything else was a deviation to the natural order. I wanted to be with him, I had to be with him. I felt it so clearly when I lay sleepless in John's arms.

I probably could have gotten out of working the next day too because I had a visitor, but I told him I had to, and we could meet for lunch. I needed those hours away from him, to prepare myself for what I had to do. For what I had to put him through. Taking part of an amputation and removing shrapnel from a man's stomach were good distractions throughout the morning, but much too soon lunch time came, and I went to see John in the canteen.

He looked to immensely happy about seeing me again although only a few hours had passed, so I almost did not know how to tell him. For a moment I thought that maybe I could postpone telling him until we got home, he would anyway leave the day after. But I pushed that thought away. It would be coward and it would be wrong. It was not how I wanted to act towards him and it would be an ugly start to Charles' and my relationship. I wanted it to be based on honesty and it was bad enough that I already had cheated on John and not told Charles about that I had a fiancée. I would not be happy continuing down that track, I had to come clean. I just had to muster the strength.

John sat in front of me, looking so happy and in love and held my hands and I did not know how to start. Then suddenly it was like I felt Charles presence, giving me courage. I even had to look over my shoulder because I got the feeling he might be standing there, but of course he was not. The I realised I could not tell John there, among everyone having lunch. We needed to find somewhere more private. I got to my feet, abruptly and he looked surprised.

"Come let's go for a walk."

He looked confused and suddenly scared and my heart already ached over what I was going to do to him. As soon as we got outdoors and away from people, I was unable to hold it back any longer and blurted out;

"John, I'm so sorry, I cannot do this anymore."

There, I had said it. I almost felt relief already because I was on my way to being honest, even though the hardest part remained.

"What do you mean Molly? What exactly can't you do?"

"Everything...be with you, be engaged to you."

His face froze in disbelief and pain.

"Are you breaking up with me?"

His voice almost broke, saying it.

"I think I am John. I'm so sorry, but I don't have a choice. I don't have the right feelings for you."

All is fair in love and war

"You don't love me?"

"I do, just not like that. Not like I want to spend the rest of my life with you, marry you, have kids together."

"If it was our argument yesterday, I'm sorry. I don't want to push you. I can wait for as long as you want..."

"No! I'm sorry, but no. I don't want you to wait for me, because I feel I won't change. You are such a wonderful man, but my heart is not in this relationship as it should be."

"I never should have let you come here..."

"You had no say, because I wanted to go. And one of the reasons I wanted to go was because I was already uncertain about us. I needed the distance between us to gain some perspective and now I know for sure that it can't be us."

"So, it's only that? Doubts about us?"

I did not find that so "only" but as he continued I realised what he was aiming at.

"There is no one else? You have not met someone else?"

The army is quite a small world, chances were that he would get to hear about me and Charles at some point. I preferred to be honest with him, so he would hear it from me even if it hurt.

"I might have. I think I have, but I don't know yet. Anyway, he is not the important thing right here in this conversation, because I knew deep down this was not right



before I came here. I was one of the reasons I came here. No matter if I had met someone else, you and I are not right together."

"You met someone else..." the hurt in his eyes, I could hardly stand it.

"Didn't you hear me? This is about you and me. I don't love you the way you should be loved John. We're not meant to be."

He turned away, but I could see that he was crying.

"I love you so much Molly. You are my everything."

"I know, and I feel like I don't deserve it. I wish I could tell you I feel the same, but I don't, and I know I never will."

He returned his tearful gaze to me.

"Then I guess there isn't much more to say."

I wished I could have comforted him in some way, but I knew it was not possible but without taking back the words I just had said – and that I could not do. I did not love him. I loved Charles. Nothing could change that.

He stepped into me and hugged me, then gave me a soft kiss on the lips.

"Farewell Molly. I sincerely hope you will be happy, and I hope I will not see you for a very long time because it would hurt to fucking much."

He turned around and left and I did not see him again before he departed from Bastion. I knew that by the time I got home, he would without a doubt had cleaned

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the apartment in Birmingham from his things. I felt immense sadness. I also felt relief and joy. Now I was free to be Charles' woman and I could let him be my man – the man I loved above anyone else.

## Chapter 16: Elvis

"Hi Molly!" I said and sat down in front of her. She nearly jumped out of her skin in total surprise, I'm not sure she was pleased to see me though.

"Holy shit! What is it about people and just appearing out of the blue these days?!"

I got the feeling she was talking about someone else than me.

"You don't like surprise visits? I was in the neighbourhood."

"That's what people keep saying but who the fuck just happens to be in *this* bloody neighbourhood?"

It was not like her to swear like that, or to seem so annoyed and jumpy. I felt that I had to dig into this.

"Would you mind telling me what this is all about? Not only me appearing here, I reckon?"

She avoided the question by asking another herself.

"From what I heard about you, you vanished into thin air at your wedding. What happened?"

That was a question which I was not fully prepared to answer, not right now anyway so I gave her an elusive smile.

"Seems like we could have an interesting conversation you and I, Molly but I need to go for a briefing now, just wanted to stop by when I spotted you. Can we meet up later?"

She nodded. I noticed that she looked a bit pale, and thinner than when I last saw her in the FOB. I hoped she was okay, but maybe it was the hard work in the hospital that was taking its toll on her. Taking care of the constant stream of casualties was not a walk in the park, I knew that and admired her for still choosing to do it.

I went for the briefing. My SF team and I had been called here to blow up a Taliban cell. I had of course accepted without any objections, but I had felt a bit uneasy about coming to Afghan this time. I know that the world is a smaller place than one would wish sometimes and one always tends to run into the people one wants to avoid most. In this case it was Charlie and Molly. The reasons were two; I was not up for the emotional turmoil that might involve, and I was not in the mood for defending my past actions to any of them. From her comment I understood that Charlie had told Molly about my wedding-escape upon his return to Afghan. It is difficult to defend something to someone else when you are not even able to defend it to yourself.

Yet, just now I had had the chance to avoid her and I did not. She would not have seen me unless I had chosen to sit down at her table, I could have scurried along to my briefing and then probably left Bastion without running into her, but I guess I'm a masochist and I could not resist talking to her when I saw her. I wondered how long she had been back in Bastion and how things had developed between

Charlie and her before she left the FOB. Maybe I would get some answers later, but hardly without giving some myself. That had been obvious already from our brief talk. I had better brace myself for being in the dock. I knew my actions did not look pretty from the outside, so the best thing was likely to share at least some selected truths.

We met when she had finished her shift and went for a walk. Again, I noticed that she did not look well, or happy for that matter but she wanted to start talking about me rather than herself. I would have preferred the other way around but felt it was not negotiable.

"It is good to see you again, Elvis, it really is – but what happened with your wedding? I know you had some doubts when we talked in the hospital, but from that to jilting your girl at the altar? I would not have expected that from you."

"Me neither Molly. I'm not proud of myself, not at all. I wish I could change things, but I can't without turning back the clock. I wish I could have told Georgie sooner, so she did not have to live that day, and me neither."

"But you don't regret cancelling the wedding?"

"No, that was the right thing to do."

"Why?"

I did not tell her about all the conflicting feelings I had had. Did not tell that I might have feelings for another person than Georgie, instead I told her about the event that last minute had emerged as a valid way to escape it all. Well, almost valid - I

suppose dumping someone on the wedding day can never be completely justified no matter the reason.

"Because that day I was not prepared to get married. You know I had some second thoughts, but it was not that which made me decide in the end. In the morning of the wedding day, this girl I used to date when I met Georgie came knocking on my door."

"And you realised you still had feelings for her?"

I gave her a hurt look.

"No, I'm not so shallow that I would sway like that Molly. Debbie didn't come alone. She had this little girl with her, Laura, and she didn't even have to tell me – just by looking at her I knew she was mine. She was a copy of photos of me as a kid. I didn't know of her before, didn't know I had a daughter. It was just a bit too much information to process and then go get married."

"Oh, shit Elvis. How could you not know?"

"Debbie and I just went out a couple of times. Then I went to Afghan, met Georgie and fell in love with her and I ended it with Debbie by sending a text to let her know we were over. She was already pregnant then, but she chose not to tell me and had the daughter. Later, she changed her mind and thought I had the right to know and get involved with Laura if I wanted to. And I wanted to, it was just a coincidence and bad luck that she chose the wedding day to come tell me."

"I can see why she chose not to tell you. You didn't exactly handle the breakup nicely."

"We had only gone out a few times, people do much worse things."

For some reason she blushed, it seemed like I hit a sore spot there.

"Remember, I didn't know she was pregnant."

"No, how convenient for you", she said dryly. A bit unfair I thought, as after all Debbie was the one who chose not to say anything.

"And are you with Debbie now?"

"No! She's the mum of my daughter, nothing more. She's even seeing another bloke. We just share Laura. I try to meet her as much as possible when I'm home."

"I still find it hard to understand how you could do that to Georgie. Have you talked to her afterwards? Explained?"

"I realise it may be hard to understand, but everything was just chaos inside me that day. Logic did not exist, maybe not human decency either – just reflex behaviour, which happened to be to flee from an extremely difficult situation. As I've said, I'm not proud of it. I *have* tried to contact Georgie afterwards, when everything had calmed down, but she won't take my calls or answer my texts. She even changed number. I sent letters, but they were returned unopened. Her family won't help me to reach her either."

"No wonder really, Elvis. You really did something shitty – and coward."

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"Have you never Molly? Are you always perfect?"

The look in her green eyes was like she was reminded of something painful.

"No, I'm certainly not so I should not judge you, but I can understand where Georgie is coming from when she cut you off like that."

"I think she may be on tour now, god knows where."

"But you still don't wish you had married her it seems?"

"No, just that I had ended it differently. Debbie gave me the excuse to do what I should have done much earlier, end our relationship."

"Have you talked to Char... Captain James?"

"No. That is a conversation I want to have face to face even if I'm dreading it. He has such a strong moral code, so I know he won't go easy on me. Not to mention how furious he will be at me for forcing him to be the one to tell Georgie I could not go through with it."

"Yeah, why did you do that? Why didn't you at least tell her yourself?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I knew I couldn't do it face to face. I knew I couldn't see either her or Charlie and still go through with cancelling it. If I had seen them, I would have married her I think."

She sat quiet for a while and seemed to digest all this.



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"Can you be my friend anyway Molly?" I asked.

She smiled.

"I think I can, just never ask me to trust you to marry you."

I smiled weakly in return.

"I don't think I will ask anyone to marry me in a long while, I've had enough of that kind of excitement."

Then I thought it was about time to change subject from me to her.

"How about you then? Are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Her tone was defensive, telling me that everything probably was *not* all right even if she said so in words.

"No offence, but you look a bit tired and pale. And you don't look happy. Is anything the matter?"

She sighed and seemed to consider if she wanted to confide in me. In the end she seemed to decide that she did.

"I've been back here in the hospital for one and a half months now. Right before I left the FOB, Charles and I... well, we found each other."

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I felt a sting in my heart. So the star-crossed lovers had found each other at last. I did not really want to hear but could not resist digging deeper, again the masochist Elvis.

"In what way?"

"We told each other that we had feelings for each other."

I read between the lines that there might have been a bit more than just telling but it did not feel appropriate to pressure her and maybe I did not want to know those details either.

"But didn't you already have a fella'? At home?"

"Yes. I told you I was not perfect, which is why I should not be judging you. I *did* have a boyfriend at home, a fiancée even. We had been going out for many years but already before I went to Afghan I was doubting us and thought my time here would be a good opportunity to think it over. Then I met Charles again and fell in love with him... I knew for sure I had to break up with John... and I have, I did that first thing when I got back here."

"But you don't look sparkling in love now. What have happened since?"

"Nothing! Absolutely nothing! At least nothing with Charles."

Now she looked incredibly sad.

"When I returned here, I was so happy. I was convinced we would stay in touch and find a way to see each other soon. But I have not heard anything from Charles, not one word."

That seemed so strange. I knew of his feelings for Molly, why would he give her the silent treatment?

"Have you tried to reach him?"

"Possibilities are a bit limited here as you know, but I have tried and I have had as much luck as you did with Georgie. I even wrote a letter like you, but nothing. I guess it was just a one-night stand for him even though I let myself believe it was much more."

She blushed again, apparently, she had let a little bit more information slip than she had intended to. I tried to not paint pictures of them in my mind, but this made it all more confusing. Charles would never had slept with Molly and then stayed off the radar.

"And you're sure he's alive?", I joked because it almost seemed more likely that he would be dead than do this to her.

"I thought of it, you know, but if he had been injured he would have passed through here. And anyway, I have checked with others, and he seems to be alive and kicking. He just doesn't want any contact with me for some reason."

She looked at me with tears in her eyes.

"I thought we had something special. I guess I was wrong and I feel like a silly teenage girl who have been stood up big time."

Once again, I had the opportunity to tell her that I knew that he loved her like he had loved no other woman, but once again I could not make my mouth form the words.

"I'm sorry Molly, I am. I cannot figure out what would make him behave like that."

"Maybe he's just the twat he seemed to be when I first met him at Brize Norton. At least I prefer to think about it that way, because it hurts less."

"But you don't regret breaking up with your fiancée?"

"No regrets there. Like you I know I made the right decision. I wish I didn't have to hurt him, but sometimes you must hurt others to do what is right for *you*. In the end we cannot live our lives for someone else, when we only have one."

This wonderful, wise girl. She was so right and talking to her made me feel better about the decision I had made with Georgie even if I wished I had done it in a different way.

"I'll talk to Charles whenever I see him. I'm not sure I will this time around but surely when he gets home. I guess one month remains for both of you?"

"One and a half, we were both planned to be here for six months. I'm starting to long for home. In the beginning I never thought I would, but now I do. With everything that has happened, it's not quite the same any more. I was so happy here for a while, and now I'm just not."

"I hope you have some good last months here, and then and a safe trip home. I need to go prepare for our operation now, we leave early. It was good to see you Molly. Promise me you'll take care of yourself."

"I will. You take care too, Elvis. And don't go breaking any more hearts."

"I won't. It's too exhausting", I laughed but actually felt quite sad.

I gave Molly a hug and left. My mind should have been completely focused on the upcoming operation, but I was wondering what the hell had happened and wished I could make Molly happy again. What had made Charlie act the way he did?

## Chapter 17: Molly

I really did not get it, no matter how much I thought about it. And that was *a lot*. If mental energy could be converted to electricity, the energy I spent on thinking of Charles would probably be enough to power a small town. How was it even possible to spend a night like we had and then just drop it? How could it have been a one-nighter? It sure as hell would not have been if I had any say, but it is difficult to argue for something if it is dead silent from the other end.

Once John left Bastion, I continued to struggle a bit with my feelings towards him. I felt sad knowing I had hurt him and I had a bad conscience that the two relationships had overlapped, but at the end of the day I was mostly relieved that it was over. Even if the surprise visit had been hard to live through, it had given me the opportunity to break up with him face to face, instead of calling him – or worse, deceive him until I got home. I knew I would not have handled the latter well, I'm not a naturally deceitful person and it would have torn me apart and not been a good start for me and Charles. I do not like playing games and now I would not have to. Putting John behind me, I focused on the present. During the days I threw myself into the intensive job at the Bastion hospital. Living and working in Camp Bastion was so different from the FOB. The camp was gigantic, like a whole town there in the middle of the Afghan desert with almost thirty thousand inhabitants, its own airfield, and even a Pizza hut. Unlike in the FOB when we went out on daily patrols, I was not expected to go outside the walls at all here. If I had no valid reason, I would only endanger myself for no reason. Even though the camp was big and I for sure had enough to do, it made me feel slightly confined and I longed back to the relative freedom of the FOB. That was of course not the only reason I longed

there. For the first week after my return I was happy. I expected to hear from Charles somehow, any day. But I did not. There was generally bad reception with mobile phones in Bastion and even worse in the FOB, but it worked every now and then. I sent him texts. No response. I tried to call him. No answer even if the signal went through. First, I just missed him, then I started to worry, and this knot began to form in the pit of my stomach. After two weeks I wrote him a proper letter, on paper and all and sent. I kept it cheerful, included no questions of why I had not heard anything from him - and still there was no response. I knew there had not been any incidents involving 2 section, so he should be fully functional and capable of contacting me but for some reason he did not.

Previously I had replayed our night in my memory because it was so amazingly lovely, and it kept me going until I would meet him again, but now I started replaying it with a critical eye on. Had there been signs that it did not mean the same to him as it did to me? Had he been hesitant in any way? What words had actually been spoken? But no matter how I scrutinised it, it seemed to me that night had been about pure love and I could not for my life understand how he could cut me off. He must have come to some conclusion this was really bad for his army career or something. But how could he make such a choice?

During the days I buried myself in work, so I had to think of him as little as possible, but during the evenings when there was not much to do except working out at one of the gyms or socialise with others, which I was not up for at the moment, I felt how heartbroken I was. I had completely given in to my feelings for him that night and waking up from that hurt immensely. I got by, but I no longer enjoyed being there. So much reminded me of him, which meant that so much was painful now

that he had chosen to break with me. I could not even hate him for it, I loved him too much.

A welcome opportunity to think of other things came when my boss, lieutenant colonel Jenkins, pulled me aside one day and asked if I would like to take part in an operation beyond the walls of the camp. He knew of the work I had done in the village and this was similar but in larger scale. A dedicated team would over the next months, regularly reach out to villages in the vicinity of the camp to offer children inoculations. I immediately accepted even though he emphasised it would be potentially dangerous. Not only had I found that type of work rewarding when I did it, but it was also a chance both to get something else to focus on and to get outside the walls. Maybe it would be the one thing that would prevent me from breaking down, not feel so fragile and emptied of energy as I did now. From then on, I participated in those excursions twice or three times a week, driving to different locations to inoculate children. Naturally accompanied by regular soldiers, heavily armed, who always looked out for us and we always stayed vigilant ourselves knowing anything could happen anytime. I almost found a daily rhythm which allowed me to stop thinking about Charles and believe that I would be able to endure this until it was time to go home, even if I still was as confused as ever about why things had turned out this way.

Then Elvis came and messed with my head. Talking to him brought it all back to me with full force and it hurt again like being hit by a truck in full speed. I think it was both that to me he is so connected to Charles that being around Elvis is almost like being with Charles just that he still is out of reach, and the fact that he also seemed very surprised about Charles acting this way. Like it was very



unrepresentative of him doing something like that. He even mentioned, in relation to his own shortcomings, how strong Charles moral code is. Apparently, not so strong that he could not just sleep with a girl and then dump her for no reason – but if that was a first it was even more hurtful to think of. That *I* specifically did not mean more to him. The only thing that gave me a little hope was that Elvis promised he would try to talk to Charles when they met, but I had little hope that he would make him change his mind if he did not want me. It is not like you can talk someone into loving someone else.

A few days after Elvis' visit I was away with the team giving inoculations. We were in a small village where we had not been before, and I did not like it. I do not know what it was, but that day I just had this creepy premonition, like the surroundings were hostile and we were being watched. That was probably true most of the time, but that day I really felt like I had enemy eyes on me. I asked my colleague, Will, if he had the same feeling but he shook his head.

"Not more than usual Molly. Don't let it get to you. Let's just finish this up and we'll be off back to camp."

I got the feeling that he thought I was being a bit girly over-sensitive, which I did not want to come across like among all these men, but I could not shake it off. Then hell broke loose. A couple of IEDs exploded, at the same time as shooting started. The locals fled, we threw ourselves to the ground and the soldiers who were there to guard us answered the fire. One of them, private Jones, had been standing a bit on the side. I saw him take cover and fire at the insurgents, but suddenly he took a hit in his arm. I had to go to him, do my job, stop the bleeding. I crawled on the

ground, taking cover best I could, and I was terrified but so focused on getting to him. I finally did and managed to put a tourniquet around the arm to stop the bleeding. I had heard back-up force being called in and knew we could expect to see a helicopter any minute, so if we just could avoid being hit we would likely be saved soon. Right now though, the insurgents seemed to have the upper hand. Then I felt someone grab me from behind, brusquely pulling me away from Jones. I saw that he saw it and tried to protest but could of course do nothing, injured as he was. I tried to wriggle and fight against it, but the someone who held me was strong and then I felt a gun to my ribs. Then I was thrown on the back of a truck, someone gave me a hard punch in the face and all went black.

When I became conscious again it was still black, even though I had my eyes open. I felt rough fabric against my mouth and understood I must have a canvas bag over my head. I could feel that I was still on the back of that truck, driving on bumpy roads with high speed. I tried to move but realised that my hands and my feet were tied up, hard and painful. My head ached from the punch I had gotten earlier, but most of all I was scared. More scared than I ever had been. I knew the Taliban would only keep me alive if they thought I could be of use to them, as soon as I was not they would easily kill a western woman. If I was lucky they might shoot me, if I was less lucky they might cut my head off and put it on public display. I lay there trembling and knew my only hope was if they could exchange me for something, or if the SF were able to track me and free me. My odds were not brilliant. I hoped that private Jones would survive so he could tell others I had been taken, even if they would figure out sooner or later anyway.

I have no idea how long we drove, or what direction, but it felt like it went on for a horrible lifetime and my body hurt as I was being tossed around as we turned. Finally, we stopped, and I heard men speaking in Pashto. Bashira had taught me a few words, but not enough to understand it all. I just heard *woman* and *doctor* but had no idea if they said they would kill me or do anything else with me. Next thing, I was pulled away from the truck, stumbling as I could not see. I fell and hurt myself, but no one cared a shit, just dragged me with them, even by the hair which was painful, then threw me into a room, or cell. I could not see but I heard a door close and lock behind me. They had untied my feet, so I could walk, but my hands were still tied. I could not do anything but sitting down, wait, breathe, try to stay sane. Tried to think of something that would give me comfort and my mind drifted to Charles, but then I remembered he was not mine to take comfort in. He had made that clear. Instead I tried to focus inside me, tried to find strength in what I had inside me, but I cried. Salty tears that just ran down my face as I had no way wiping them away. If I survived this, I would probably survive without him somehow, but right now I was not convinced I would get to live at all.

Hours passed by and I dozed off, only to wake up in fear when I heard someone unlocking the door and again drag me with them. When we paused, they pulled the bag off my head, so I could see and breathe freely. My eyes adjusted to the sudden light and I saw a group of bearded men in front of me, none of them friendly-looking, but that could hardly be expected. One was lying down and had a bullet wound in his leg. They talked and gestured, and it was not difficult to understand that they wanted me to treat him. I did my best with the quite primitive equipment they had to offer. Of course, it hurt like hell when I removed the bullet and cleaned

it up, which made him cringe in pain and scream, and my efforts were rewarded by getting beaten as if I was hurting him on purpose.

Once I was done, I was thrown into the cell again. I was wondering if this was what they had wanted me for and now my time was up, but at least they had not put the bag over my head again which at least was something. Someone brought me some water and bread, which I took as a sign they might not kill me right away. Night fell, and I tried to sleep a bit, but it was almost impossible with the body so tense from fear, so I welcomed the morning light when dawn came even if I wondered what this day would mean to me. Would I live to see the end of it? Again, I heard the door being unlocked and tensed. In came a man I had not seen before and the look in his eyes was so cold, like he genuinely hated me.

"I know you", he said in broken English.

"I don't know you. Who are you?"

"Don't speak!" He pushed me, so I fell to the ground. "You destroy my family."

"Your family? I don't understand, I don't know you?"

"First my sister, corrupted her, took her away. Then my father. Your fault he is dead."

I just stared at him and tried to connect the dots using my fussy brain, then the coin dropped.

"Are you Bashira's brother?"

He did not seem to think me worthy of a response, but I understood that was how it must be. That did not exactly comfort me, as I realised he had a whole lot to be bitter and revengeful about when it came to me. I wondered how he had been able to track me down, but then again there were not that many female British doctors around so if he heard one had been captured he maybe thought it he would check me out – and here I was. His lucky day – not mine. I thought to myself that this turn of events did not seem to increase my chances of surviving and he confirmed that by what he said next.

"You pay. You pay for what you did – with your life."

Then he left and exhausted, hungry, and terrified I vomited in the corner and felt like a humiliated remainder of a human being who might have a very limited time left on this earth. Never had I been so afraid.

## Chapter 18: Charles

When a Chinook flew in and it unexpectedly turned out to be Elvis with his SF buddies Spanner, Peanut and Spunky that were approaching, I had mixed feelings. I was as always glad to see my best friend, but I was also royally pissed off with him for what he had put Georgie and me through. However, when I was close enough to see his facial expression, it was unusually grim for being Elvis and I realised this was not a social call.

We greeted each other stiffly compared to how we usually were, I wanted him to know I had not forgiven him.

"I reckon you're not here to see me this time, so should we head for the Ops tent?" I said.

He nodded, and we went inside and were soon joined by Major Beck.

"There is a hostage situation and we think the primary might be held nearby." Elvis explained.

I tensed, because hostage situations were never pleasant business. We did not negotiate with terrorists, the best we could hope for was a successful rescue operation and I figured that was why Elvis and his crew were here. He cleared his throat before he continued.

"Unfortunately, the primary is someone we all know."

Now I was no longer tense, I was frozen, waiting for him to tell me who it was – and when he did my worst fears came true.

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"It's Captain Molly Dawes."

Elvis watched me intently, which was not strange as he knew of my feelings for Molly even if he did not know about the turn of events since we last met. More surprisingly was that Beck too turned to me immediately, as if to check my reaction. I think I did not show more than a tensed jaw and my fingers tightened their grip around the edge of the table top I was leaning against. Yet, Beck asked;

"Are you all right, James."

"Why wouldn't I be, Sir?"

"I think we both know why."

There was a moment of silence, then he added;

"After all she has been serving in your section."

But I could see in his eyes that it was not what he was referring to. I knew he had had some kind of suspicion when I went to Bastion, but I thought that might have gone away when I returned as a thunder cloud rather than a man happily in love. Apparently, not completely.

"Yes of course, I would be worried for any of my men, present or past."

Not like this though, not like the earth crust had opened in a big crack underneath me and now was threatening swallowing me, but I made a mental jump out of it and zipped it closed. This was not the time to fall apart. I had to keep myself together - for Molly. No matter how things were between us, all I wanted was for

her to be freed and well, and I had to take active part in that not sit in a corner and sulk over things that could have been.

"What do we know Elvis?"

"She was taken from a small village over here" Elvis said pointing at the map which was laid out on the table. "She was there as part of a team giving inoculations to the local children, when they were attacked by the Taliban. Others were injured but she was the only one they took. We don't know if it was because she's a doctor or because she's a woman."

I sincerely hoped it was because she was a doctor, because if they took her because she is a woman her chances were even worse. A doctor they had need for to treat someone, a woman would be used in worse ways. No that those worse things could not happen after they had used as her skills as a doctor... I had to stop myself there because I could not handle the thought of her going through that.

"When was she abducted?"

"Almost a week ago."

I gasped for air. She had been a hostage to the Taliban for nearly a week and I had not known until now. She had probably lived a week in hell, the best we could hope for was that she still was alive.

"And what do you know of her know? Where she's being held? If she's alive?"

Beck asked the questions I was dreading to ask myself.



"Our intel tells us they may be here." Again, he pointed to the map, to a location that was closer to the FOB than to Bastion. "We've had eyes on a Taliban cell which we think are located there, for some time. We believe that this cell is the one which the man you killed, Badrai, was connected to, and his son, Ahmad, still is."

"Then they might have a motive for revenge towards Molly!"

"They might, but it might also be coincidence. Anyway, the plan is to strike towards the compound tomorrow at first light and extract the primary."

It was hard to hear him talk of her in such distant words, "the primary". It sounded like she was a pawn in a chess game. If she was killed, she would become "the body". I had to stop my thoughts again, not to despair. Elvis continued;

"We know they are a quite large cell, so my team needs assistance. I want 2 section to join and another special forces unit will too, one of the best. I expect they will arrive here within the hour."

Beck agreed to 2 section taking part in the operation. For my own part I would not have been able to stay behind even if Beck had ordered me to. Then I would have gone anyway and taken the consequences, no matter what they were.

We agreed we would meet again later for a briefing with the full section as well as the other SF unit, to lay out the final plan. Elvis and I left the Ops tent and headed towards mine. We both knew we needed to have a talk without Major Beck around.

"I thought she would be safer in Bastion than here", was the first thing I said to him.

"She would have been if she had stayed within the walls, but you know Molly. She loves to help the locals."

"She does." I sighed, she was so fantastic and so stubbornly and stupidly brave. Hopefully that would keep her alive now.

"Can you cope Charles? Can I trust that you can handle coming along on this operation when you are emotionally involved?"

"I'm not emo..."

"Let me stop you right there, mate so you don't waste your breath. I don't care what lies you are trying to convince yourself to believe, but I *know* for a fact that you *are* emotionally involved when it comes to Molly."

I chewed my lip, fucking Elvis, why did he have to know me so well?

"I *was*. Emotionally involved that is, but I'm not anymore."

"When will you understand that no one cuts off their feelings like that, Charlie? You're just fooling yourself. And what happened anyway?"

I had longed to talk to my best friend about this, even if I was mad with him.

"On her last night here in the camp, I told her how I felt about her – and she said she felt the same. We... we spent the night together."

"Charlie-boy! I'm so thrilled! I never thought you would bend the rules like that, well done!"

"Zip it, Elvis. It shouldn't have happend but it did. When I woke up next morning she was already gone. She had left a note... said she loved the night and I should come see her soon."

"But you didn't, or?"

"I did. I went the next day, Beck gave me permission and all."

"And then, what happened?"

"On the way there, the pilot told me he had taken her the day before and how great and romantic it was because her fiancée was waiting for her in Bastion. I could not believe it. I had to see with my own eyes. I mean, we had talked about me being divorced, so she had every chance to say something about that too, but she didn't. Not a word about a boyfriend or fiancée. I found her in the canteen at the hospital. She never saw me, but I saw her with *him*. He looked like a smitten moron. Do you know who it was Elvis?"

"No?"

"Bones! John McClyde, the bullying asshole from school. Apparently, he's army too."

"What the fuck Charlie! Did you go over and punch his face?"

"Believe me, I wish I had. In my dreams since then I did, but in reality, I just turned and walked away. Seeing him made me feel, not like me *now*, but like the boy I was then, who didn't have a chance to stand up to him. You know like in a bad American movie of a high school reunion, when everyone falls into the same role they once

had no matter what they're like now? *Exactly* like that. And I felt so betrayed and used by Molly. That night, the words she said to me, it could have meant nothing to her because she was with *him*."

"Are you sure he was her boyfriend, not a colleague or so?"

"They were holding hands and he looked like he was very much in love. Definitely boyfriend."

"And you haven't talked to her since?"

"No. I buried myself in work here, shut her off. Didn't answer any calls or text, threw away a letter she sent me. I'm not up for a deceitful game. I wore my heart on my sleeve for her and she just crushed it. I don't want to see her again. Or, I didn't until this, now I want to rescue her – but I can assure you it's job only."

Elvis looked like he was digesting this. He opened his mouth as if to say something more, but then just closed it again. It was rare that he kept his mouth shut, so even he seemed to be taken by the story.

"Okay, if you say so I have to trust you."

"But now it's about time we talk about you Elvis. You have quite some nerve showing yourself here. Don't for a second think I have forgiven you for what you did on your wedding day."

I gave him my sternest look and he had the decency to blush.

"I know what I did was wrong Charlie, and I'm so sorry that I put Georgie through that! And sorry for making you the messenger, but please let me explain. Maybe you still won't forgive me but at least you might understand."

And then he told me the incredible story about his ex knocking on his door and that he had a daughter – and that he had realised, although late, that he did not love Georgie enough. It all poured out of him and afterwards we sat silent for a while. Then I smiled at him.

"Laura, huh? That's a pretty name. A pretty girl too?"

"Spitting image of her father" he proudly grinned.

"Not so pretty then", I joked back, and I think he knew I had at least partly forgiven him.

"I still think it was a shitty thing you did to Georgie, Elvis. She really deserves an explanation and a huge apology, but I understand if she's not interested in hearing you out by now. By the way you own me a big fat apology too, even if I understand you better now."

"I'm so truly sorry, I am Charlie."

"Apology accepted. Now let's focus on making this a successful operation. There simply is no alternative, is there?"

"No, there isn't."

We heard a helicopter approaching and figured it had to be the other SF unit, so we went out to meet them. As the three men approached, Elvis and I looked at each other in disbelief.

"I can't bloody believe this!"

"Me neither, what the fuck is *he* doing *here*?"

Walking towards us was none other than Bones. This operation was turning out to be a not so cheerful boarding school reunion. I wanted to smash his face.

"Well isn't it Charles James and Elvis Harte! Still attached to the hip like Siamese twins, how touching that you have stayed together", he sarcastically greeted us.

Even if this was a surprise, I was more mentally prepared this time than in the canteen in Bastion. This was my territory, this was where I was a well-renowned captain over my section and he was just a visitor. This time I did not feel like the school boy. I felt like myself, confident, strong and pissed off. I crossed my arms over my chest and looked down on him, taking full advantage of that I was nearly 4 inches taller than him these days.

"Cut it, Bones. We're here to do a job, let's act like professionals. I won't take any of your crap from school. If you even come close to it I will lob you out of this FOB unarmed and let the Taliban have their way with you. Is that understood?"

He seemed taken aback and answered with a much less cocky tone;

"Yes, Captain James, understood."

"Anyway, we don't have time to be pissing about, we have a rescue operation to plan."

Then it hit me that not only did I dislike him, but it was highly irregular that he as Molly's boyfriend was part of this operation and I halted my step to ask him;

"Have you been informed about who the primary is?"

"No, we just flew in and were put on this as urgent assistance was needed."

"Elvis, will you give him the briefing pack?"

I watched Bones face when he opened the manila envelope. Even if the last thing I wanted was for Molly to be the hostage, I could not help but taking pleasure in bringing the news to him. Sometimes revenge is sweet, even if it also is petty – and he did not disappoint me. His face dropped and went all pale and he looked up at us.

"Is this some bad practical joke?"

"I can assure you it's not. Captain Molly Dawes is the primary."

"For fucks sake!"

He crouched on the ground for a moment, buried his face in his palms and gasped for air. I almost felt sorry for him, but just almost. Then he looked up.

"You know who she is to me?"

"Yes, so I'm questioning if you're the right man to take part in this operation", I said icily, but Elvis intervened.

"Charlie, maybe he isn't but we need him and his team and there isn't time to replace them with another unit. It's far better to include them than to have too few people on this."

I knew he was right, so I nodded in agreement.

"Okay then, let's do this, for Captain Dawes' sake. But I don't want anyone to fail because they're fucking emotionally involved, get that?"

Bones was still shaken and just nodded, but Elvis eyes twinkled. I knew that he found it totally amusing that Bones and I would have some kind off stand-off involving the woman we both had been, or in his case still was, involved with. However, even if I acted confident on the outside I was shaken too. It would be hard to rescue her to see her leap into his arms, but I would much rather have her alive in someone else's arms than dead and I would do everything in my power to achieve that.



## Chapter 19: Bones

When I saw those two fuckmuppets, I thought that I was beginning to hate Afghan for real. It was bad enough that it was the place where the woman I loved had left me and fallen for someone else, now I apparently had to face my past sins here too.

It did not start it well. Or to be honest, *I* did not start it well. The same second the comment about them being attached to the hip like Siamese twins left my mouth, I wished I had not said it. It was so unnecessary to begin like that when I so many times had wished I could make amends to Charles and now when I had the chance, I instead made sure we started on the wrong foot. The difference from back in school was that he immediately made it clear that he would not take it. His voice was like a whiplash when he told me to cut it, or else he would lob me out of the FOB. And he was so damn tall, so that alone was enough to make a man feel intimidated. He was definitely not a small boy that would let himself be bullied and he wanted me to know. I got the message loud and clear and I was not sure he needed me to apologise for what I had done in the past anymore. It might be that he had put it far behind him and could not care less, and that the need was mine alone because it still made me feel soiled. Even though I was not thrilled about meeting him again, this might be the opportunity to make amends like I had always wanted.

Since Molly broke up with me, I had been travelling almost constantly. I only went home to Birmingham for a few days to get my things from the apartment and put them away for storage until I had decided where I would settle. I did not want them there when she got back, so I would have to face her. I preferred never to meet her again because I knew it would hurt too much when she was not mine. Spanner,

Peanut and Spunky noticed that something was the matter of course. Even if none of us are very talkative, you do not work and live so close with anyone without learning how to interpret even small signals, and my foul mood might not even had been that subtle. In the end I confessed to them that Molly had left me but that I did not want to mention it further, did not even want to hear her name again – and then I did my best to pretend like she did not exist. Days were quite okay, there was so much that required my focus anyway, but the nights... I missed her like hell and I do not know how many times I cried, not the image of a strong special forces captain exactly. By now almost two months had gone by and the worst despair had faded and turned into more of a numb state. I could only hope that in time it would evolve further so that got over her completely.

When Elvis handed me the briefing pack, I just tore the manila envelope open like so many times before, prepared to read about a mission like any other. Then *she* stared at me from the photograph. She was serious in the photo, not her usual smiling self, but still so beautiful. My amazing Molly, who was not mine anymore. Why had they put her photo here? To wind me up? I was utterly confused for a moment, but they soon set me straight, she was indeed the primary. She had been taken by the Taliban and they had had her for nearly a week.

I do not know how I managed to keep from falling to the ground because my legs went weak, or how I managed not to scream, or vomit – because I felt like doing all those things. But I kept myself together and managed to convince them that I could do this, could be a part of the operation even though they seemed to know about Molly and me and therefore questioned my participation.

We were to have a joint briefing with the two SF teams, Charles' section and Major Beck, informing about the plan and outlining everyone's role.

"As we will have three officers of the same rank on this operation, I want to make it clear that this operation will be led by Captain Harte", the major said. "It's a special forces operation where 2 section will support, and I understand you are not suitable to lead it for personal reasons Captain McClyde."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he continued with slightly raised voice;

"In fact, I'm very hesitant to letting you participate at all but I understand you're needed so I'll have to allow it but make no mistake – you will follow Captain Harte's orders to the point. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

I knew he was right, if I had the chance of saving Molly's life while it would jeopardise someone else's, I still would have to do it – and that is not the way for an officer to behave, everyone's life should be worth equally much. So, no, I was not suitable to lead because my actions would never be objective. When we were done, we split up, went for scoff and then were supposed to get some sleep before our early take-off. I could not sleep, however. I was worried sick for Molly, but it was not only that.

During the briefing I had realised that they all knew Molly, except for Elvis' men. It hit me that it was here, in this FOB that Molly had been medic. She had been serving here under the command of Charles which she never had mentioned. Was it during that time that her feelings for me had changed? It almost had to be

because she had not been in the hospital for long. Was it possible that she had developed feelings for Charles? If so, did he return them and had anything happened between them? I felt myself turn into the green-eyed monster, my thoughts were spinning, my heart racing even though I was lying down. I realised I would not get peace until I had talked to Charles.

When I left my bunk, I did not have a plan, but it formed spontaneously on the way over to his tent. Now I had an opportunity to clear the past with him, I could start with that and then try to see if I could find out anything else. I could see there was still light in his tent, so he was not asleep either, but I anyway called out before entering, to not start off wrong by just barking in there.

"James, can I talk to you?"

"Bones?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Okay, you may enter."

He sat by his desk, seemingly going through some papers and he nodded to me to take a seat in the other chair. He said nothing, just looked at me with his brown eyes and waited for me to make a move. The same eyes that had looked like a sad puppy's eyes on the first school day, now they were dark and piercing and made me nervous. I cleared my throat.

"I didn't expect to meet you like this after all these years. I knew you had gone to Sandhurst too, before me, but I thought we might never come across each other."

"I wouldn't have missed it if we didn't", he said coldly.

"Please hear me out, that's all I ask. I have something I need to say."

He just nodded courtly.

"I'm sorry for what I did to you. I thought about it so many times after we left school and I wish I had done things differently. Wish I had been a different person."

He snorted disdainfully.

"It's true, I wish I hadn't done all that."

"No one made you Bones, it was *your* choice to pursue me from the first day. That first year was hell for me. Not only the things you did to me, but you scared everyone else away, so I was a complete outcast until Elvis came. Do you know what it feels like to be totally alone in a place like that?"

I swallowed.

"I guess I don't, but I was afraid of something like that happening to me and thought the best way to defend myself..."

"... was to attack someone else? Someone smaller than you. You mean to say you did not have a choice? We *always* have a choice, Bones. If you were afraid of not having friends and I looked like I did not have anyone on my side, you could have offered me friendship instead – and then we would have been two against others. But you *chose* the other way. Don't come here and play the victim of circumstances and try to make me feel sorry for you, because I never will."

"I just wanted you to understand why I did it."

"You know what? I don't care. Maybe I did once, but not anymore, because I'm a big boy now and I don't need your apology. In school I needed it. It would have meant the world to me if you had accepted me, if you had told me I was not a useless shit in your eyes after all – but instead you nearly broke me, and I carried it with me for many years. It took time and other friendships to wash that away, to build my self-confidence, to believe that I was someone that others wanted to be with – but finally, I managed to break away from the image you had painted of me in my own mind. I'm proud of that, but absolutely *nothing* of it was thanks to you and now I don't need your pity or your apology."

What he said stung, I realised that what I had done to him was far worse than I ever understood, and he would never forgive me.

"I admired you, and I was jealous of you", I confessed almost without meaning to.

"What?!"

His disbelief was complete, which was not strange.

"I admired that you never squealed to the teachers, you just endured what we put you through – that took some serious survival skills and in a way courage. I was not sure I would have been that strong."

He just stared at me like I was mad.

All is fair in love and war

"...and I was jealous of your friendship with Elvis. You were such great friends. The friends I had... well, it was built more on power balance and fear than true friendship. I wish I had what you had."

He gave up a hoarse little laugh.

"Poor Bones, no real friends so you had to be jealous once I finally got one. Give me a break, it's pathetic."

I could not stop now, I had to go on and check his reaction.

"And last year I was jealous of your friendship with Molly Dawes."

I saw him stiffen.

"Well, that's in the past, like everything else."

"She served here, under you."

"Like the rest of 2 section."

"So, you didn't become special friends then again?"

His facial expression did not reveal anything.

"I'm not sure what you're implying Bones but I sure as hell don't like it. Dawes served here, she was an excellent medic, and then she went back to Bastion – to meet her fiancée if I'm not mistaken. That is why *your* role is questionable in this operation, not mine."

All is fair in love and war

"But..."

"I'm warning you, not another word. Then I'll go to Beck and have him take you off this mission. Is that understood?"

I did not know why it felt like he was my superior and I had to answer to him, when we in fact were of the same rank.

"Perfectly understood."

"Tomorrow, we will both take part of this operation and do *everything* to save Dawes, follow every little order that Elvis give us. We will save her life, that is the only thing that matters. Our past – that it is our past, and it does not matter. I could not care less. When this operation is over I hope you leave and I never have to set eyes on you again."

I nodded and prepared to leave the tent, when he spoke again and then I finally heard some emotion in his voice;

"You must understand Bones, that bullying someone like you did with me, leaves scars so deep that an apology twelve years later is not enough. No words can *ever* be enough to erase something like that, and it's you who must live with that knowledge, not me. I have moved on by now. Just because you have decided to finally confess like I was some priest I'm not going to give you some fucking absolution."

He really made me feel like a piece of shit.

"...and by the way, Dawes deserves someone better than you. Someone far better."



I just left then, because I had a lump in my throat. The conversation had not turned out liked I had hoped or imagined when I many times had thought about how it would be if I asked him of forgiveness. Somehow, I had always thought he would accept my apology, forgive me and be glad, so I would be freed from my guilt. He sure had relieved me of that misconception. The only upside of the talk was that he did not at all seem like there had been anything between him and Molly. In fact, it seemed like he still believed we were a couple which made his reluctance to including me in the operation even more understandable.

Who knew, if everything went well tomorrow, maybe Molly would come back to me. Maybe I would be able to take her in my arms and take her away from this hellhole. That thought gave me some consolation, but I still hardly got any sleep before dawn came.

## Chapter 20: Charles

Bones coming by like that got me out of balance for a moment. Out of balance in addition to what the whole thing with Molly already had achieved. I did not want him to apologise, not now when I had moved on and was perfectly fine thinking him a douchebag. The past was a valid reason to hate him officially, even if my hidden main reason now was that Molly had chosen him over me. Or rather, that she had had him all along and I was just the little extra on the side, like a holiday fling in the Afghan desert. And everyone knows what happens to holiday flings when you return home, they are quickly forgotten in favour of your normal life.

It felt good being cruel to him, not give forgiveness when he asked for it, to feel that I was the one in power – but only for a short moment. As soon as he left the tent I felt the bitter aftertaste in my mouth. It is not easy being revengeful when you are a decent person in your bone marrow. I knew it must have taken him quite some courage to come and apologise like he did, and he must also be going through hell over Molly. How ironic - our worst nightmare bonding us. It even seemed like he might have suspected that I had feelings for Molly and I wondered why, but at least I thought that was one area where I managed to sooth his concerns. I would not jeopardise the operation by risk having a jealous boyfriend coming along. The whole situation was complex enough anyway.

We left at dawn, transported by helicopter that dropped us off at a safe distance from the cluster of compounds where we had intel that Molly would be somewhere, and then carefully moved forward on foot. I had never been so tense before an operation, everything was at stake this day. Elvis and his men sneaked closer as a vanguard and took the guards at the entrance by surprise and took them out. We

then followed and swarmed the compound. We needed to find Molly immediately, so no one would get the idea to cut her throat as a last desperate act before being captured or killed, but when the door to the part of the compound where she was thought to be held was knocked in, it was empty. Bullets were fired here and there, and I saw enemies falling, but my eyes sought desperately after her. It seemed some men had managed to jump on a truck behind the buildings and drive off. Had they taken her with them? Or had they already killed her? I heard Elvis in my headset.

"Does anyone have eyes on the primary?"

"Negative."

No one had seen Molly, where the fuck was she? I was beginning to panic.

Then she came walking, slowly around a corner, and she saw me too.

"Charles."

Her voice broke so it was a whisper rather than a shout for help. I would have wanted to run to her, but I could not - because she was wearing a bomb vest. Before leaving they had put on a bomb vest. Someone else shouted;

"Eyes on the primary! She has a bomb vest on, back away!"

Activity became even more intense. Everyone moved away from her like she had the plague. The situation was communicated, and I knew from previous experiences that a disturbance signal would be transmitted so that it would not be possible to detonate it from a distance if a remote control was connected to it, but the danger that she might do it just by her own movements remained.

My heart broke when I saw her and it physically hurt in me to see what they had done to her. She was beaten and bruised. She had a cut on her forehead and no one had cared to clean the blood away, so it had just dried, and she was smudged with dirt. She was thinner than when I last saw her, and her lips were dry like they had not even given her enough water to drink. It looked like she barely had the strength to walk, and when she stumbled and nearly fell I knew what I had to do. In a few big steps I reached her and held her. Not hugged her, it would have been too dangerous, I could have blown us both up if I squeezed the west, but I held her under her arms to make sure she would not fall, and I sought her eyes with mine.

"I'm here Molly."

"It can blow up Charles, you should go away, keep a safe distance."

"No way I'm leaving you alone with this Molly. I'm staying right here, and we'll get you out of this thing."

Tears were streaming silently down her cheeks, drawing patterns on her dirt smudged skin. I wanted to kiss those tears away but now was hardly the time even if she had wanted me to.

Then Elvis came running from the other side of the building.

"Charlie, what the bloody hell are you doing?"

"I'm keeping her from falling Elvis. If she does, you know the bomb might go off. I hope the disturbance signal does its job and then you'd better call in a bomb team fast as hell."

Elvis signed to Spanner to take care of that. Then Bones came running too, but froze in his step when he saw Molly in the bomb vest.

"Molly!"

"John?"

He looked like he was going to come closer, but Elvis grabbed him.

"Don't even think about it mate. Charlie has her, so she won't fall, the rest of us will keep our distance until the bomb team arrives."

"But..."

"That's an order McClyde! I don't want any casualties because you were emotionally involved and could not follow orders. You'll keep your distance."

I reckoned that Molly must be disappointed that it was me instead of him holding her, but she did not look it. She kept her tearful eyes locked in mine and I was foolish enough to think that it almost appeared like she had feelings for me, but I snapped out of it. If there was one time in my life when I needed to be fully focused and alert it was this one. And I had to give her courage because I definitely saw panic in her eyes, and who would not feel that dressed in a bomb vest. I had to keep talking to her, to keep her calm.

"I'm here Molly, and so is Bones, and Elvis and all of 2 section. We're here to help you. Everything will be all right, you'll make it. Who did this to you?"

"Badrai's son, Ahmad. They've been keeping me alive to treat one of their men who was injured, but Ahmad told me already days ago that he planned on doing this as soon as the man was well enough not to need me... Put a bomb west on me and leave me in the village near the FOB. It would be revenge on me for Badrai, and revenge on the village for the women warning me of the attack on the mountain CP. When you came storming in here he just changed his plan and put it on before he fled."

"God Molly, I'm so glad we made it here in time, before he left you in the village..."

"I still have to make it out of this... What if I don't Charles?"

"You will, I won't let anything happen to you! You're not alone."

She looked like she almost did not dare to believe that, and it hurt inside me to see that she would think that I would not be there for her.

"I thought I was. Alone. It has been so horrible Charles, so horrible... When I was locked up in that cell I tried to think of things that would keep me strong, that would help me through this... and I thought of you... but then I realised you were not mine to think of, that I only had myself to turn to."

The intensity of her crying seemed to increase if that was possible. She made me confused. Why would she think of me, not Bones? She had chosen him over me. If I was not hers, it was because she had chosen it to be so, but it made me devastated to think that she had not been able to find strength in me if she had needed it.

"I don't understand Molly... You're with Bones... or John, aren't you?"

"No", she whispered. "No, how can I be with him when I only want you... even if you don't want me."

"I thought... I thought you loved him, that you were engaged."

"We were, but I broke up as soon as I got to Bastion. I know I should have told you, but I was afraid I would destroy everything before it had even started... and now it seems I did anyway. Did you think I was with him?"

"Yes", I whispered.

"Is that why you didn't want to talk to me? But I told you I loved you! I have always loved you, and I still do."

This was such an absurd situation to feel happiness, yet that was what I felt. Pure happiness because she loved me. She was not his, she wanted to be mine. I knew no one had heard our words because of the distance they kept due to the explosion risk, but they could of course see us. Yet, I leaned my forehead to hers, so we touched. All that mattered was that I wanted to comfort her.

"I love you Molly. I never stopped loving you. I was just so incredibly hurt because I thought you were with him and I was nothing to you."

"How could you think that after our night?"

No, how could I? I had once again been a complete fool and now she was standing here with a bomb west on, so I could not take her in my arms and we were both at risk of being blown to pieces. If that happened I would at least die happy man, but it would be a bloody waste – we had to make it through this.

"I'm not sure Molly. Now it all seems so stupid I can't believe it myself, but we'll get you out of here, and I'll make it up to you. I promise you that."

Then I looked up because I saw Spanner returning in the corner of my eye. It did not seem like he had good news though, judging by his facial expression when he talked to Elvis. I heard Elvis voice through the headset.

"There is no bomb team available, Charlie. All are away on other missions and we can't wait."

"Fuck! What should we do?"

"I'll have to try to disarm it. You know I'm trained even if I'm not as skilled as the bomb team, but it's the best we can do. I'm coming over to you now."

I told Molly what would happen and saw the fear in her eyes. Why of all days was no bomb team available today? I saw Elvis explain the situation to the others around him and seemingly asked them to increase the distance to us even further because they backed away. I saw Bones, his face distorted in agony and he tried to convince Elvis he should come too, but I could read a "no fucking way" on Elvis lips. In this moment I felt sorry for him too, he obviously truly loved Molly and this day he had to live through hell.

Once he had been handed some tools that may come in handy, Elvis came towards us, walking slowly. It was not the right time for any fast movements.



"Hi Molly. It's good to see you although I wish it was under other circumstances. Quite a mess you got yourself into, huh? But Charlie and I are going to get you out of here in no time. Okay?"

"Okay..."

"You trust us, right? That we'll do anything for you?"

She looked into my eyes and I saw a faint smile in the corner of her mouth and I smiled reassuringly back, even though fear was squeezing my heart too.

"I do."

"Good, then let's get started. Charlie, I need you to move away a bit, so I have free access to the west and can wriggle it off. Can you please move down and stabilise her by holding around her legs instead?"

I did as he told me. Unlike her upper body, her legs I could embrace without risk and then I felt her trembling. All I wished for was for this to be over. Elvis had a closer look at the west.

"I will try to get this west off you Molly. I can see that in addition to the remote device for triggering, there seems to be a timer. It will probably be activated once I pull this thing off from you. What the two of you need to do is run as soon as I have taken it off, towards the others. I will throw the west in the other direction in case it explodes."

"And you Elvis?"

"I will run too, of course" he smiled.

I knew how dangerous this was. If we were unlucky and there was no delay on the timer, we might as well blow up, all three of us.

"We can do this", Elvis ensured us, and I hoped he was right.

"Thanks for being here, if there's anyone I trust to do this, it's you", I said to him and he gave me his cheeky grin.

Then I turned my head up to Molly, to look into her eyes again in case it would be the last time and I held my breath when Elvis said;

"Prepared? Now I do it."

Elvis started pulling the vest over her head, first slowly and carefully, then asked Molly to raise her arms and in a quick move pulled it the last bit over her head.

"Now Charlie, take her – RUN!"

And I did, got to my feet, grabbed her around the waist to support her and ran for all we had. When we had put some distance behind us, there was the deafening sound of an explosion. We felt the heat, and the pressure wave threw us to the ground. We just lay there for some seconds, trying to feel if we were alive and not missing any limbs. We were alive, and we were unharmed. Our eyes met again, where we lay beside one another and the sense of relief was palpable.

"Are you okay Molly?"

"I think I am. Go check Elvis. How is Elvis?"

She had been my first thought, but now I got up and turned around to see what had happened with him. Even if he had managed to throw the west away, he had been closer to the blast and now he was lying motionless on the ground.

"Oh my god, Elvis!"

I ran to him and kneeled by his side. He was still conscious although his eyes were dazed, he was bleeding from several wounds and he was also burnt. It was difficult to judge how bad his injuries were, if he would live or not.

"Call in a medevac!" I shouted and then leaned over him.

"Elvis, don't you dare go die on me. I need my best friend. Hang in there and the medevac will come."

"Charles..."

"Don't speak Elvis."

"I need to tell you... I'm sorry..."

"You have nothing to be sorry about, you're the hero of the day."

"But I must... I should have told you long ago... I knew that Molly loved you... I knew she wasn't with Bones anymore... so I could have helped you find your way back to each other sooner, but I just couldn't make myself do it because..."

His voice broke, so I guessed.

"...because you loved her too?"

Somewhere inside me there had been a suspicion that he might have feelings for Molly too, which was one of the reasons I had felt jealousy towards him at some point, and also one of the reasons why I had been so angry at him for leaving Georgie like he did, but I had never put words to the feeling I had. Not until now. And anyway, when he spoke, it turned out that I was completely wrong, as mistaken as any man can be.

"No, Charlie, I loved *you*. I have always loved you."

And with that confession he closed his eyes and became unconscious and I sat there stunned, like I had been struck by lightning, with my best friend – who loved *me*, in my arms until the medevac came and they lifted him onto a stretcher and transported him away to Bastion.

I saw that Bones had ran to Molly and held her, but it did not even make me jealous anymore. She was alive, which was the most important thing, and second to that she had also had made it clear that she loved me. I had nothing to worry about. So, when we got into the helicopter that would take us too to the Bastion hospital - me to be checked after the explosion, Molly to also be cared for after her ordeals as a hostage - I let Bones come with us. It would have been cruel to leave him behind when I knew he cared so much about what happened to her. I even let him sit beside her during the flight, with his arm still around her shoulder. It did not matter because now we knew, Molly and I, that is was *us*. There was no need to compete because I had already won. I did not take joy in the sorrow I knew it would bring him. I only felt joy in the certainty that Molly and I belonged together. Even if the one thing I wanted most in the world was to take her in my arms, I would be able

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to that for the rest of our lives. I could let him have this moment meanwhile Molly's eyes and mine did all the talking we needed for now.

## Chapter 21: Bones

I was bleeding out. Emotionally, not physically, so there was no tourniquet that was going to save me. When we sat in that helicopter taking us to Bastion, I felt like life was slowly pouring out of me. I was still holding her in my arms, but I already knew she was no longer mine. I knew that this probably was the last moment ever I would have her in my embrace, so I closed my eyes to press back the tears and made pretend for a few minutes more that we still loved each other, not that only I loved her.

It had been so painfully obvious when I saw Molly and Charles James together, maybe even more so because I could not hear what they said and just watched their body language. Just like that time in the cafe a lifetime ago, the chemistry between them was undeniable. I knew she had never looked at me quite like that. I could see that no matter how much James had denied any feelings between them, there was a bond - and that bond was love. I saw it already when there was space between them, but the whole thing seemed sealed when he leaned his forehead to hers, the emotions between them so strong I could almost touch them from where I stood, like the feelings had a physical shape and form.

This morning I had still nurtured some vain hope. Even if I was worried sick for her, I hoped that this was fate pulling us together, that this would make us ricochet back to one another, but if there was any ricocheting happening it was clearly between them. So, when I watched what happened, involuntarily made an inactive bystander when Elvis pulled rank at me, I was not sure what caused me most agony; the fact that it was not sure that she, they, would live, or that if she did it would be to love another man than me. Yet, when it was over and the bomb had

exploded, I had to run to her and make sure she was fine, and my relief was endless when she seemed to be. She clung to me when I held her, but I knew she was only seeking comfort in a familiar embrace in this moment of utter distress, not seeking comfort in her lover. To my surprise, James did not claim any right to stay next to her as we sat down in the helicopter, but then I saw their eyes meet and I understood he felt he did not have to. I suppose I could have felt bitter, but all I felt towards him right then was gratefulness for having helped her through this. I closed my eyes to shut out their silent communication and only tried to stay in the feeling of having her next to me, as I knew my time was running out.

When we arrived in Bastion, they were both taken for medical examination and I felt redundant and lost. For a second, I contemplated if this was the cue when I should make a quiet exit, never to return - but I could not make myself do it. I had to have a proper ending with Molly. Otherwise I knew I would wish for one for the rest of my life. If one cannot have the fairy tale one wished for, one should at least try to end it instead of keep lingering in limbo. So, I waited outside the room where they had taken her, until a nurse came out and said that if I wanted to visit her it was fine, and I went in with a heavy heart.

She was lying in a bed, tucked between crisp white sheets. They had done a good job cleaning her up and tending to her wounds, but she still looked torn which was not strange considering what she had been through. She smiled at me as I entered, but I also saw grief in her eyes. She did not know that I had already understood and also knew that this would be a farewell.

I sat down by the bedside and took her small hand in mine.

"You came back for me", she said.

I gave her a weak smile.

"I didn't really. The team was called in but then I didn't know you were the primary. I would have come even if I had known, but they sure as hell wouldn't have sent me if they had realised the connection. And it was only just that Major Beck allowed me to go once he was informed – but we were needed, so out of two bad options..."

She nodded.

"They thought we were still together, you and I...", even if I tried to keep it together my voice broke and I saw her bite her lower lip. I changed subject slightly.

"I understand it must have been very hard... being captive and not know what would happen."

"You know me, I tried to keep my hopes up, but it was not easy. They kept me alive because one of them was injured and needed me, but I was told that as soon as he was well enough they would put that bomb west on and place me in the nearby village. I could only hope that a rescue operation would reach me in time, but I was really starting to despair. I knew that today would have been the last day..."

I squeezed her hand.

"But it went well Molly, thank God. You do know I wanted to come up to you when you had the west? I would never had hesitated, but Elvis wouldn't let me. He was afraid I would fuck it up because I was emotionally involved with you. Maybe I would have, because it wasn't easy thinking straight."



"I know. I know you would do that for me." The sadness in her eyes mirrored my own. I knew she did not want to hurt me. I knew she loved me, just not like she loved *him*. I think she might even wish it was possible to love two different men, so she would not have to hurt me.

"John, you know it's not us, right? You know this does not change anything?"

Finally, I could not hold back, no matter how much I wanted to, and I felt warm tears run down my cheeks. I had to wait before I spoke and when I did I sniffled.

"I know Molly. I had some small hope when I realised this would make us meet again, but I understood today..."

"What did you understand John?" she asked softly and touched my hair.

"When I saw you, you and Charles James, I realised that there is no return. You love him, and he loves you and nothing I do can ever change that."

She spared me from dishonesty by not denying it.

"I didn't mean for it to happen. I didn't mean to fall in love with him again."

"But you did."

"I did... You know I never want to hurt you..."

"But you must, mustn't you? Because you cannot give me what I want."

"No, I can't, and it breaks my heart."

"Not as much as it breaks mine."

The tears kept streaming and I had to look down. Reality was almost too painful to bear, so unfathomable. This was the end, without return and somehow, I understood it fully in a way I had not the last time we parted, even if it hurt already then.

"I won't be able to stay friends with you Molly, not when I wanted so much more, still do and will for a long time I fear. I won't hate you, don't worry about that. You're far too wonderful for me to ever hate you, but I won't be able to stay in touch and if I see you I might run the other direction, because I don't think I can do polite acquaintances. Not with you. Do you understand?"

"I do", she was crying too now. "I wish it wasn't good bye, but I understand if it has to be. I will miss you immensely. I wish things were different..."

"But you still want to love him."

She did not say yes, but I knew she would never had made a choice that would erase that love. A love that maybe always had been there deep down inside her.

"I wish I didn't have to hurt you and I wish you all the best. I wish you everything good in your life John."

I was glad she did not say that she hoped I would find another love, that would have been so condescending. But she knew me so well, she knew what would hurt me even more and refrained from saying such a thing.

"Will you hold me one last time?" she asked. I wanted that, I wanted that more than anything right now. I sat on the edge of the bed and held her in my arms, for long silent moments when the only thing that was to be heard was our mutual sobbing. All my senses were aware, imprinting this in my memory, the feeling of her small, warm, soft body and her silky hair against my cheek, and her scent. This was the last good bye and it was good bye forever. Finally, I whispered in her hair;

"I love you Molly, I love you so much and I wish you all the best too. He'd better take care of you."

"I love you too, John. Take care of yourself, love."

She gave me one soft, sisterly kiss on my lips and then I got up, collected myself and dried away my tears with the back of my hand and just nodded, as if to say to her and myself 'Enough John, time to get a grip of your life and move on', even if I knew it would take a long time before I did. Then, even though my body was already screaming for her, wanting to dive into her arms again and hope she would say this had all been some cruel joke, I turned towards the door and left, meeting a doctor on my way out.

I closed the door behind me and just stood there, taking deep breaths for a moment, until my gaze fell at another man sitting waiting outside. His eyes were filled with sympathy and he nodded to me to sit down on a chair beside him. Part of me just wanted to run as far away as I could, but part of me also wanted to talk to Charles James to get some closure with him too. I sensed that this would be the last opportunity.

First, we sat quiet for a while, both unsure who should start and how. I wanted to hate him, but strangely enough I could hate him no more than I could Molly. In the end I spoke;

"We've said good bye. You won."

"I never saw it as a competition. I wasn't trying to get to you, didn't even know about you before I already had fallen for her. I just love her. I realised that I always have, there has never really been anyone else."

Maybe it had not for her either and that hurt, it hurt so fucking much.

He continued;

"If it's any consolation... when you asked me... I thought she still was with you, I didn't think she had feelings for me. I thought she had chosen you and felt what I imagine you do now. I thought the feelings were one-sided on my part so there was no reason to tell you, plus I didn't want to risk making jealousy cloud your judgement and jeopardise the operation."

"I guess you think it serves me right... for what I did to you once. It's like I have to pay for what I did to you then by losing the woman I love to you now. Like bad *karma*."

"I don't feel like that... I don't take pleasure in your sorrow no matter what you think. There was a time when I hated you, but I don't now. I have had a good life, I don't have any regrets. I don't believe in karma stuff. I believe there is luck, and I believe we make choices of our own that determine the direction of our lives. That

means there is not just one chance to do right, but many chances to choose direction. To me it seems you have changed a lot since we knew each other, you seem to be a good man and I wish you no harm. And as for the karma, isn't that supposed to determine how your next life is to be, not this one? If so, you still have plenty of time to work on the next one becoming a good one if you believe in that. I believe we have *one* chance, *this* life, so we must make the most of what we have here. Still I haven't been the best at it myself, afraid to take risks even for things that meant much to me, afraid to show love because I thought it was inappropriate or against regulations. But life is too short and fragile to waste time, I've learned that the hard way."

"You're saying I should move on."

"I'm not trying to give you a pat on the back and tell you what to, or tell you to pull yourself together. I know it won't be easy, I'm just saying don't waste the life you have by growing bitter. Don't do that to yourself because you deserve better."

He was quiet for a moment, then added;

"I also wanted to say, that in case you need my forgiveness for the past, you have it. And I wish you the best."

I wanted to hate him, but I felt an immense relief over his words. Like there had been a knot of angst inside me all these years for what I had done to him, and now he set it free, so it instead flew up in the sky like a shiny soap bubble, finally popping somewhere above our heads.

"Thanks, I appreciate that. I should go now, but Charles..."

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"Yes?"

"Take care of Molly. Love her like she's worth loving, I wish her nothing but happiness."

"I will, I will love her and take care of her. Take care of yourself, wish you all the best too."

And as a strange ending to this day, or maybe to our entire history, we shook hands to acknowledge that we mutually forgave one another for the sorrow we had caused, in the past as well as in the present. We were bonded by our love to one woman.

Then I walked away without looking back, knowing I left Molly with a man who loved her with all his heart, just like I did.

## Chapter 22: Charles

I did not like that I had to let Molly out of my sight once we got to the hospital, but I had no choice as both of us required a medical examination and I told her I would come find her as soon as I had been checked.

"Everything looks fine, Captain James", the doctor told me and turned off the small flash light she had used to examine my eyes. "I will just flush with saline solution to clean away some dust from your eyes."

I blinked when she was done.

"Can I go then? I need to go see what's happening to Captain Harte and Captain Dawes."

"Harte is in the operation theatre and I think he will be for a few hours longer, but we will keep you posted about his condition. Captain Dawes on the other hand will probably be ready to see you soon, even if she needs a bit more extensive examination than you after her time as a prisoner. You go get yourself something to eat and drink in the meantime."

I nodded, and my insides clenched at the thought of what she had lived through there, locked up in that cell and beaten and mentally tortured by the knowledge that they would eventually put a bomb vest on her – and she had not even been able to find strength in thinking of me, because she did not think I loved her. Fate had been kind to us, allowing us to live and clear the misunderstandings away so we now both knew we loved each other.

I followed the doctor's advice to go grab something to eat, more because I wanted to pass time than because I was hungry. There were too many emotions going through me to have focus on any physical needs, except holding Molly. There was the exhausted feeling that came when the adrenaline rush of the action filled morning hours had subsided. There was relief because both Molly and I would live. I felt immense happiness because she loved me, and she knew I loved her - the cards were finally on the table. But also, I was frantic with concern over Elvis, we would not know for hours or even days if he would live or die. I did not know how I would be able to bear losing him if I did, he was my best friend and since we got to know each other he had always been there through thick and thin, even from a distance. I could barely imagine a life without him in it. I also felt confusion, over the feelings that Elvis had expressed before he went off. He had told me he *loved* me. The way he had said it, I knew he had not meant brotherly love. He loved me like I loved Molly.

I was not angry with him for what he had apologised for; that he had kept from me the knowledge that Molly loved me and prevented us from finding our way back to each other sooner. I could not feel anger, not in this situation when he was hovering between life and death and when the motive had been his own feelings – but not for her as I might have thought. If he lived, and God knows I hoped he would, we would have things to work out. How we should function as friends after that confession, which naturally was a game changer. I wanted us to stay friends and hoped he would want that too, because even if I loved him too, it was as my best friend and friendship was the one thing I was able to offer. I prayed we would get to have that conversation.



After passing time in the canteen, I checked what room Molly was in and headed that way. I peeked through the window and saw that Bones was with her, sitting by the bedside holding her hand. I saw that it was a difficult moment for them both and did not want to interfere, so I just sat down outside to wait. Finally, he came out, but a doctor went in at the same time, so I realised I would have to wait some more and then I thought I could just as well talk to him, if he wanted to.

It pained me to see Bones, his feelings of loss and grief so raw that he could not hide them but concerns for him came far down on my list today, after Molly and Elvis. Still it felt good talking to him. I understood that he now knew it was Molly and me, and it felt like some kind of closure both for him and for me to talk things through. I doubted that we would see each other again, I got the feeling that in the future he would make detours to avoid us if possible. Our handshake was a fitting end to our past.

Just when he had left, the doctor came out from Molly's room and I quickly got to my feet.

"Do you have any news about Captain Harte?"

"He's still in the operation theatre. His condition is stable but remains critical. He had internal bleedings which have to be stopped. We will let you know as soon as there is any new information."

"And Captain Dawes?"

"She has been through an ordeal. Even if she seems to be a strong personality there are things she might need help to deal with in the long run to handle this, but

physically she will be all right within shortly. She's getting an IV drip now but that is only for nutrition and ensuring she's properly re-hydrated, because they have not given her much food or water. Otherwise she only has quite superficial bruises and wounds which will heal in a week or so. Captain Dawes is fine considering the circumstances, they will both be fine. You can go in and see her."

I nodded and eagerly opened the door, just quickly reflecting that it was odd that the doctor said they would both be fine when he just had said that we did not know about Elvis yet, but I assumed he only wanted to comfort me.

She looked a bit pale and shaken by emotions, but she gave me the sunniest smile. When I turned to sit down on the chair beside the bed, she protested and moved to make room for me beside her on the bed instead.

"I want you here Charles. I want to be close to you."

So, I fitted myself to sit beside her tiny, warm body and pulled her to me, so her head rested on my chest. She was not under my command. There was no fiancée. There was just us and we were free to hold each other like this. She seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

"Finally, we're here. You and me, where we should be", she sighed with contentment.

"After twelve years. One could almost say we've been moving with the speed of continental drift", I smiled, and felt both happy for the present and a bit sad that it had taken us so long, but mostly happy.

She smiled too, I heard it in her voice when she spoke, even if I did not see her face when it was nestled by my collarbone.

"Now we have the rest of our lives together to look forward to."

Then she looked up at me, like she got nervous that she had been a bit previous.

"We do, don't we?"

"We do", I reassured her and stroke her cheek with my thumb, then sought her lips with mine. It was only the third occasion we kissed and the previous one was two months away, so it was still such a new and wonderful sensation. Her soft lips, her tongue meeting mine as we deepened it, the taste of her. It excited every nerve in my body and I could keep kissing her forever. Finally, I interrupted because I had things I needed to tell her.

"I love you Molly, and I don't get how I could mess things up like I did. I'm so incredibly sorry that you thought I just didn't care after our night together, but I had gotten the wrong end of the stick. You see, I came here the day after you had gone back. I couldn't stay away because I wanted to make sure you knew how I felt – and then I was told your fiancée was here, and I saw you with Bones...."

"Why did you just leave? Why didn't you come and talk to me? I would have explained... I mean, I know I also messed up. I should have told you about him, but first I didn't know if there really was anything between us, or if only I had feelings for you and then there was no reason to talk about my boyfriend. I would just have felt silly to say something, like I assumed anything. Then when something finally did happen I could not bring myself to talk about him. I knew by then he was not

the one I wanted to be with anymore, he felt so distant and I had wondered already before I came here, and all I wanted then and there was you. I didn't want anything to come between us. So, I made the mistake not to tell you. Afterwards, back in Bastion, I didn't know that you had found out. I thought you just dumped me for some other reason. Like that it would be bad for your army career, or that you simply did not have feelings for me."

"I don't know how you could think that after our night."

"And I don't know how *you* could think I would want to be with someone else after that either, you prannet", she smiled. "We were equally stupid."

"Mmmm, no more of that."

We kissed again.

"You wondered why I didn't come talking to you when I got to know about Bones, and asked you how things were. But when I saw you with him, I just froze. I never told you Molly, but Bones was the one who bullied me back in school. When I saw him, it was like I was transported back to then... I felt so small and inadequate and unable to stand up to him. That feeling subsided and I went back to who I am now, and then I regretted I hadn't faced you both, but it was too late. I was already back at the FOB."

She looked appalled.

"Not John, I can't believe *he* was the one who did that to you."

"I'm not lying", I said, feeling felt a bit defensive, but I had not needed to.

"I don't mean like that Charles, I *do* believe you're telling the truth. The way I know him, I just find it hard to believe he was able to do those things to you. To me it seems like two different persons."

"I think he is a very different man now Molly. When you got to know him at Sandhurst he was different than in boarding school. He has changed. We have talked quite a bit actually, and he has apologised for what he did. In the end I forgave him. Or, maybe I forgave him a long time ago but now I let him know. I think it has been hard for him to bear the weight of it up to now, but now it's in the past for both of us."

She shook her head, still finding it hard to grasp that her boyfriend for many years was also the one who had haunted me. Then she cupped my face between her palms and said;

"But now that doesn't matter anymore. Now it's *us*. No more secrets, no more assuming wrong things, no one coming between us – no person and not the army either. We can't let that happen again - whatever happens we must remember that we love each other."

I nodded and held her even tighter to me.

"We will never forget that again, I'll make sure of that."

"I want to be with you like this all the time."

"I wish I could be with you every day and every moment now, but you know I have to return to the FOB and I assume you stay here. Only for a month though, then we go home and then we can be together for real."

She was silent for a few seconds.

"I'm not staying here for the last month. They're sending me home."

"What? Why? I thought you were fine? Won't they let you work here again when you recover? I thought the doctor expected it would only take days?"

Even if we would not be able to meet anyway if she was here and I at the FOB, she would feel a whole lot closer to me here than if she went back to UK. I hated the thought that she would, and it made me worried that they did not consider her well enough to stay here, but she continued to explain.

"We said no more secrets... and the doctor just told me something... and I can't wait to tell you this but I'm also a bit afraid.

She kept her green eyes locked in mine and took my hand and put it under the hem of the hospital shirt, put it on her flat belly with her hand on top, so I felt the soft skin there. For a second, it made me confused as it did not feel like the time and place for a seductive gesture, but almost immediately I sensed this was something else. Suddenly the doctor's odd words echoed through my mind; *'Captain Dawes is fine considering the circumstances, they will both be fine.'*

"Molly?"

"Yes."

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"I mean..."

"The answer is yes", she smiled but also looked slightly insecure.

I did not to ask the question that immediately followed in my head, bit my tongue and managed to avert creating a new rift between us, even if I was dying to know – but once again it was like she could read my mind.

"And just in case you should wonder, John and I never... it's only been you."

I should have known that, yet the relief flooded over me, and in its tracks the joy. An overwhelming feeling of happiness.

"Molly, I have to say it out loud so I'm sure I understand this right - are we having a baby, you and I?"

She nodded.

"It's still early days, two months gone as I'm sure you can figure out, but if it has survived the last week I'm quite sure it will survive anything."

Now I had the largest smile on my face and my reaction made her respond in the same way, she was beaming at me, the uncertainty now vanished.

"Persistent like its mum."

"You're happy?"

"Ecstatic! I'm sure I will be terrified too when I start thinking of how I shall cut it as a dad, but right now there's only pure happiness."

"You want a baby with me?"

"More than anything. Of course, I had thought that we would get some time only you and I first, before we started thinking of a family, but I have learned lately one can't plan everything, and if it means I have you...Yes Molly, I want it. I want it so much. Have long have you known?"

I resented the thought that I had not been there when she realised she was pregnant with *our* child.

"I didn't know for sure until the doctor told me just now, so I was a bit shaken when you came in here. I didn't suspect for real until this past week. There were signs earlier, but I only thought it was because I was heartbroken over you. Everyone told me I looked so pale, I was tired and didn't have any appetite. I didn't get my period, but I didn't pay attention to it. During this week I started feeling nauseous and vomited. First, I just thought it was a reaction to the situation, but when it happened several times I started connecting the dots. You know, the thought that I might be carrying your baby gave me some comfort when I was alone in that cell, made it feel like it was two of us there, a small part of you, instead of just me. I guess I could have worried about being a single mum, but I didn't. I knew that if I got out of there, I would want this baby no matter what and everything would be all right. And today the doctor confirmed it. Too early for an ultrasound but when we get home we can go and see it."

I could have been terrified, but I was not. It was a bit surreal, yet it felt strangely right. We would have quite a few practical things to work out, like that we did not live together at home, but I just knew that we would do fine.



"I'm glad we both found out now. I want to be there all the way. I want it to be the two of us in this."

We let our lips touch again.

"I said I had expected we would have more time alone the two of us before we had a baby, but you know, when I get home we have six months before the baby arrives. We will make the most of that time. I will take you on so many dates, Molly Dawes", I said with my lips next to her ear. "I will squeeze in all the dates we can possibly need into those months, and then I will ask you to marry me, and then I *will* marry you."

"Oi, don't I have to say yes to the proposal first", she laughed.

"Are you telling me you would turn me down?", I smirked.

"No, but a girl has to keep her integrity you know. You can't just go assuming things."

"I suppose I shouldn't, but we just agreed to put all cards on the table, so I thought I would let you in on my plan. And after all, we're already expecting a baby, I think that beats getting married in terms of taking a relationship to the next level. What do you reckon, does it sound like a good plan?"

"It sounds like a wonderful plan."

We had to kiss again, and then we just stayed in that room for hours, holding each other and talking about our future and anything else. It would be hard to be without her for a month when I wanted to be with her every second, but bearable as I knew

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with certainty that we had a life together ahead of us – and not just the two of us,  
but as a family.

## Chapter 23: Elvis

I'm not 100% sure when I realised I had feelings for Charles. It was after boarding school, although when I looked in the back mirror I understood in retrospect that the jealousy I had felt over Charles and Molly was not due to my feelings for her, but my feelings for him.

Until Molly entered the scene it had been the two of us, us friends, and my trail of girls who I loved but did not *love*. Suddenly Charlie admitted he had feelings for someone, deep and sincere feelings. I did not like it but for long I thought I only feared to be left out, to be the fifth wheel, and that I actually cared about *her* when I felt jealousy. Only afterwards, when she was gone, I realised I did not miss her. I did not have feelings for her, instead I was relieved she had disappeared out of the picture. On the other hand, I could not imagine being without Charles, even if I still thought it was only because he was my best friend. And so it happened, that I accompanied him first to the same university, then to Sandhurst because I wanted to be with him. Even though we both were seeing a lot of girls, none woke my jealousy because I always knew he did not truly love them. Not like he had with Molly. He cared more for me as his friend, than he did about them as dates or girlfriends and later even the wife, and so everything was fine in my world. Until I gradually realised that my feelings for him were deeper than the feelings I had for any of the girls I ever saw.

When I acknowledged that to myself, inside my head put words to the diffuse feeling I had had for so long, it hit me with full force and left me utterly confused about myself, about my own identity. I just could not identify myself as being... gay. Was I really? Or was I a straight man who just happened to be in love with my best

friend. In the end I landed in that it did not matter what label I put on it, I would have to hide it and get over it anyway. Not because it was shameful that I was in love with a man. Even if I would not have been totally comfortable coming out with it, I had both an uncle and other friends who were gay and considered wonderful people by everyone, so it had nothing to do with that. No, I kept it a secret because it would have been totally pointless admitting that I loved this particular man. I knew that Charles did not have any such feelings for me. Sure, he loved me too and I was important to him, but only in the capacity of his best friend. Telling him might just scare him away as my friend and that was the last thing I wanted. So, I buried it deep down inside me, and continued to be as happy as I could be, sharing his life to the extent I could.

When we passed out from Sandhurst we chose slightly different directions, when I joined the SF and due to our careers, we saw less of each other. I think it was for the better. Even though I still appreciated his company immensely when we had an opportunity to meet, it was like my feelings subsided somewhat. He had his life with a wife I knew he was not happy with and did his best to avoid, I had my life with the fling of the moment and we both had the army.

Then I met Georgie, and she was different from all other girls. She was an amazing beauty, but it was not that which captured me. She was brave, witty and confident. She did not need me, she did not worship me, but I wanted to be with her like I had not wanted with any other girl. I thought that I finally was over Charlie and had found the woman I was supposed to be with. I wooed her with all that I had, and finally she seemed to fall for me and made me a very happy man. I felt I just had to go with the flow now that everything had fallen into place so nicely – and so I asked

her to marry me, and she said yes. We went ahead with the wedding planning and everything was perfect until I was sent to Afghan for an operation shortly before the wedding and got the stupid idea to visit Charlie.

Maybe that visit would not have caused any problems, unless Molly had not been there. It did not take long before he admitted he had feelings for her again, although he was doing the exact same thing all over again; not telling her. That made all my repressed feelings emerge to the surface again. The jealousy towards her because he loved her, my own feelings for him. It was a bit of an emotional chaos really, but I kept telling myself that when I got out of there, got back home to Georgie, everything would be fine. This was just wedding nerves and I would feel secure in my love again once I met her.

Then the incident at the mountain checkpoint happened. I was so close to losing my life. Molly saved me, but what I remembered from the dazed moments when we were waiting for the medevac, was Charlie being there and ensuring me he would not let me die because he needed me in his life to mess with him. When I woke up in the hospital, I was grateful to be alive but even more unsure than I had been before if marrying Georgie was the right thing. When I came home, and we reunited, I knew for sure that even if I loved her, she was not the love of my life. She could not measure up to him and it would not be fair to marry her under those circumstances.

I'm not sure how I would have dealt with that if Debbie had not showed up that morning before the wedding, giving me an excuse that enabled me to run without having to admit my feelings for Charlie out loud, but I probably would not have

gone through with it anyway. The thought of going up to the altar but with the person I loved already standing there, on the side, instead of walking the isle with me was unbearable. It was a coward escape, but I took it and even if she does not know it, Georgie will be happier without me because I would never have been able to give her all of me.

My intention remained never to tell Charlie, there was nothing to be won by doing so. I never would have, unless I had thought I was dying. If I was going to leave this earth, I both wanted him to know how I felt about him, make sure he knew Molly loved him, and apologise for not helping them to find their way back to each other sooner and explain why. Because I was a selfish bastard, yes, but a selfish bastard in love with someone I could never have. That makes you do strange things, things I'm not proud of and will always regret.

Of course, now that I survived, I regretted the part of confession that concerned my feelings and was wondering where it would leave Charlie's and my friendship.

-OG-

The second time I woke up after the surgery, he was sitting by my bedside. When he saw me awake and trying to focus on him, he smiled, a smile of total relief.

"It was about bloody time that you woke up. You had me worried there, Elvis. Haven't I told you I need you around, because who will otherwise wind me up like you do?"

I smiled back and considered if I should fake amnesia, pretend like that whole conversation after the bomb had gone off never had happened. But I knew

that *he* would remember and that it would be an unfair burden on him to be the one to alone carry that knowledge and deal with how to handle it, if I pretended I did not remember.

"It's good to see you, mate. I thought I might not see you again."

"I thought so too for a while, thought that bomb got you."

"I don't mean only that, Charlie. I was thinking of what I told you... that you might not want to see me after that."

"We don't have to talk about it now if you don't want to. We can do it when you're feeling better."

"I'm feeling quite okay right now, actually, even if it's partly drug induced – and I'm afraid if we don't have this talk now we might never have it. We might pretend like it never happened, but it would still come between us."

He just nodded and stayed silent, waiting for me to say what I needed to say.

"I meant what I said, about my feelings for you. I have known for a long time... but honestly, I thought I was almost over you. I loved Georgie, I wanted to marry her and thought that would be fine but when we met here, and you spoke of your feelings for Molly... my jealousy made me realise it was still the same. Anything else was just pretending. I didn't love Georgie enough, not enough to marry her. I would only hurt her – and I didn't want that. I know I did anyway, but probably less that if we had gone through with it."

He looked sad and a bit awkward. I know the feeling, I have felt it many times when girls have told me they wanted to be serious in a relationship and I felt it was instead time to move on somewhere else.

"You know I don't feel the same, Elvis, don't you? You mean the world to me, but not like that."

"I know! I'm just so fucking stupid that I can't help feeling it anyway. I didn't plan on telling you. In fact, I had decided I would spare you from that and never tell you, but when you think you are about to die you get the idea you want to leave with a clean slate behind you. I'm not exactly the first person to confess something on their presumed death bed, am I?"

"Probably not", he smiled weakly. "But now you will live, and I'm so fucking happy about that, but we need to figure out how we continue."

"You still want to be my friend?"

"One hundred percent yes, I want to be your friend. But can you be only friends?"

"I'm quite sure I can. We've managed quite fine up to now haven't we? And in a way it's a relief you know, no more secrets. I just have to move on. I mean, I already have this wonderful daughter to focus on, and someday I hope I will find love too with someone who loves me. Like you have."

Suddenly I felt anxious.



"Is everything okay with Molly? How did she manage when the bomb exploded? And are you two fine? You looked it when you stood there talking to each other with a bomb west between you, you looked like you both were in love."

He grinned, and I do not know if I had ever seen him look so happy.

"She made it without significant injuries, she's just recovering from the week with the Taliban. And we're fine, we're more than fine – even though it's not tanks to you, you moron..."

"I *did* apologise for that, but I do again now that I'm myself. I'm so bloody sorry about keeping it from you. If there is anything I'll always regret, it's that. I had no right... and I didn't want to, I just couldn't make myself... It was hard, I knew it meant you would live happily ever after with her. It was selfish, egoistic and stupid beyond words... and if you tell me now it's working out between you, I'm truly very, very happy for you. Truth is Charlie, I only wish you happiness. It's all I wish for you."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it. You have been an asshole, but I'll forgive you for that. I think you made up for it when you risked and nearly lost your life to save Molly. I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am to you for that. Molly and I, we have talked everything through, cleared all misunderstandings – about our feelings for each other, about Bones. I'm just the happiest man on earth, Elvis. I'm not saying that to hurt you."

"I know, and I don't expect you to go tip-toeing around me. I rather deserve a punch in the face if anything. Is she still in the hospital too?"

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"No, they have sent her home, back to UK."

"Why?"

He hesitated briefly, as if he wondered if he really should share that with me.

"Since we agreed we'll keep the honest approach... She's pregnant. We're pregnant."

Again, the look of intense happiness in his face. I could have felt jealous, but I only felt glad too, to finally see Charlie like this. Finally looking like he had found home, something or rather someone that meant the world to him.

"Congratulations! I can't tell you how happy I am for you."

We continued talking, like best friends, for a long time. About his feelings for becoming a dad, the excitement mixed with nervousness that he would not be a good enough dad, which I ensured him that he would be for sure. We joked we could go on playdates with other kids in the park. We talked about where he and Molly would live when they got back home, we talked about that I wanted to get back to work again as soon as my injuries were healed. It felt almost like it always had, but even better. The secret was out, and he still accepted me, we were still best friends.

When he was about to leave and already in the door, I said;

"Charlie, if...no *when* you get married, don't hesitate to ask me to be your bestman, if you want me to be. I would be damn proud to be, you know."

"Thanks, Elvis, I definitely will. There is no one else I would want for the job."

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"So, we're still friends then?"

"Always."

## Chapter 24/Epilogue: Molly

When I met Charles again after twelve years apart, it was a grey October day on the Brize Norton airfield. When I returned to UK five months later it was spring, and everything was so different. I left the country engaged to one man; I came home madly in love with another, knowing that he felt the same way about me and carrying our baby as a tiny seed growing inside me.

One of the first things I saw when I stood waiting for my transport from the airport, was an early brimstone butterfly. It sat on a flower next to the curb and flapped its wings a few times, before it suddenly took off and flew away in an irregular pattern like butterflies do and disappeared. It reminded me of the thought that had gone through my mind when I found Charles sitting outside the emergency room the day when Ruby had fallen ill. He had not made a good second first impression before that, but now he was sitting there with his head in his hands, looking so vulnerable and reminding me of the Charles I once knew. I had wondered if he was still in there somewhere, inside that twat, and that sent a disquieting flutter through my body, something I needed to find out what it was, and it was one of the reasons I signed up to go to the FOB.

I had thought then, that I hoped that that little flutter inside me was not like they say about a butterfly flapping its wings; that it might cause a storm somewhere else much later. But it had indeed caused a hurricane. Charles and I clashing again coincidentally, had had ripple effects that had affected us, our entire lives and those around us. Things had changed momentarily, people had been hurt, but most important – we had found our way back to each other and true love. Sometimes it is out of your control what you set in motion – and I had no regrets. The only thing

I would have done different was to tell him how I felt sooner, but he was so stubbornly keeping a mask on that it was impossible to guess that he felt the same about me until he kissed me in the ditch.

Now, however, I was sure of his feelings. The naked and sincere feelings he had expressed both under duress when I was standing with the bomb west on, and later in the calmness of the hospital when he held me in his arms. There is something with Charles, that makes me feel so safe and *home*. I who rarely have had much of a fixed home during my life, I feel that in him. He excites me like no one else too, the best combination one could wish for in a partner, and I could hardly wait for him to come home and join me.

The week as Taliban hostage had been hell. The beating, hardly getting any food or drink, and most of all the fear knowing that it would soon come to an end, that they planned to kill me. On the first day I vomited, I thought it was a reaction to Ahmad telling the devilish plan he had for me and it made me feel like such a sad debris of a human being, but when I puked again and again every morning, I started to wonder. That was when I realised my period had gone AWOL since I slept with Charles and that there had been other signs which I had disregarded. Now that the thought had rooted in me, I felt certain that this was how it was, even without a pregnancy test, and that gave me comfort. I did not panic at the thought that Charles did not want me, and I might be a single mum. Instead it felt like a beam of light inside me, giving me strength. Part of him was with me there and as for being a single mum, my own mother was the perfect role model. Most of my childhood she had brought me up on her own, by choice rather than because she was jilted, and the men had never had any lead roles in my upbringing, they had

only been supporting actors. I knew without a doubt that if I made it through this, I would want this baby more than anything despite that it was only months ago that I had told John I did not want children yet. I just did not want it with him. I hoped that Charles might want to be part of the baby's life even if he did not want to be part of mine, but I knew I was capable and strong enough to make it either way.

Yet, no matter what I had told myself, my joy knew no limits when I understood he loved me. When he ran to hold me without hesitation, despite my lethal attire. When he told me I was not alone, not in that situation, not in anything, that he had thought I was with Bones and had backed off, but that he never had stopped loving me and asked for forgiveness for having been a fool. In that moment, even with the bomb west on, I felt safe and I felt certain that we would make it somehow. It nearly cost Elvis his life, but thank God he survived. I'm not sure how we would have been able to live with such a sacrifice, but now we do not have to find out.

They allowed Charles to stay with me that night in the hospital. After hours of talking, kissing and cuddling, we fell asleep spooning one another. Lying like that, with his breath against my neck, his arm safe and heavy around my waist, the length of his body pressed to me and keeping me warm, it was one of the best moments in my life and I was filled with happiness and hopes for the future.

A month after my own return to UK, I was back at Brize Norton to meet him when he returned. I did not want to wait a minute longer than I had to because I had missed him like crazy, so we had agreed I would pick him up. We would then together go to his parents' house in Bath, which was where they lived these days when they were in UK, although I understood they were still doing quite a bit of

travelling. I was slightly nervous. What if it, despite everything, felt awkward and strange when we met? And when we went to Bath, I would probably get to meet the parents. What if they did not like me? And what would they say about the pregnancy? It did not show yet, my tummy as flat as ever, but I thought we might want to tell them anyway because otherwise they would wonder when a baby arrived already in six months.

I so had not needed to worry when it came to Charles. The jolt of love that went through me when I saw him, was reflected in his face the moment he saw me. He just dropped his Bergen and held out his arms and strode towards me, and I ran to him and seconds later I found that my feet no longer had contact with the floor because he was lifting me. He did not care one bit about everyone around me, he kissed me like there was only us in that room and like he wanted to undress me and do all sorts of lovely things to me and when our eyes met, they gave me the same message. I wrapped my legs around him and let him hold me and joked:

"We had better take the chance doing this now because in a few months my belly will be in the way and I will weigh too much for you to lift."

"I doubt you will ever weigh too much for me to lift but we will have to be careful with the belly then. I'll find other ways to carry you if I need to", he smiled and let his lips touch mine again before putting me down.

He had been through the mandatory week of decompression in Cyprus and he was tanned and looked amazing.

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"You look like you've been on vacation rather than spent six months in Afghan", I told him.

"Do you know how much I wished I could have skipped that week? A week of leisure and no purpose other than relaxing, I longed for you even more than in Afghan. No sunny vacation in the world is better than this."

"Brize Norton airfield?" I teased him even if I knew what he meant, and he elbowed me softly in the side.

"You! Nothing is better than you."

Happiness bubbled inside me.

"So, we're off to Bath then?"

"Yeah, let's go. No point loitering around here for longer."

I owned a car, a MINI Cooper which I loved, but when I saw him standing beside it, it looked a bit on the small side for his long legs and I smirked at the realisation that he would have to fold himself together to fit into it. He saw it too.

"Well, lucky that I'm used to uncomfortable after the flight."

"And after six months deployment... I would think that almost anything seems comfortable in comparison."

"At least the army's vehicles are spacious, which is more than you can say about this."



I slapped him playfully on the arm and told him that if the ride was not good enough he could find himself another, but then he kissed me and said that the company made up for any other shortcomings of the car. He offered to drive as he said he had been idle for so many hours in the plane and felt like it. I loved to sit beside him. See his large, strong hands on the wheel, turning it, just letting go to shift gear. I loved the normality of him and me sitting in my car, driving somewhere together for the first time. I put my hand on his knee and he glanced at me.

"What?"

"I love this."

"Driving in a tiny car?" he smirked.

"Stop harassing my car", I said with a faked stern-face. "Being here with you, doing something perfectly normal. Not being in a war zone with a bunch of army regulations between us."

"I love that too. I've been dying to have that with you, just everyday life together."

He let go of the wheel with one hand, to place it over mine.

"So, how do you feel about meeting my parents?"

"They're home? I wasn't sure if they would be."

"Yeah, the one time I would have appreciated to have the house to myself, or rather with *you*, it seems like they are home. You're not nervous, are you?"

"I am! I'm going to meet your parents for the first time, and not just for an hour or so but stay over... and what will they say about us having a baby? Maybe they will think I lured you into this relationship."

"Oh, but you did. Not with the baby, but because you're so amazing that I just can't keep my hands off from you" he teased.

I loved it when he put it like that, but still felt slightly insecure about how his parents would take it. He saw that and became serious.

"You don't have to worry, Molly. I'm sure they will love you and only be happy about becoming grandparents, and I will in no way leave them in doubt that I want this as much as you. We're in this together and I'm so proud to bring my girlfriend home to them."

It was the first time he called me his girlfriend and when we sat silent, I tasted the word. It tasted very sweet.

Finally, we stopped in front of the house, an amazingly beautiful old house in a street formed as a half-circle, where all facades were identical and faced a large green lawn. The impression was magnificent and maybe I would have been intimidated if I had not spent my teenage years living in a *palazzo* in Florence, owned by my Italian stepfather at the time. This house was small in comparison and I could bet that just like Giuseppe's *palazzo* it would have its drawbacks when it came to heating and plumbing. Such old houses are often more appealing to look at than to live in. Anyway, I was glad to have that experience in my baggage, so this sight did not scare the shit out of me now, as I was nervous enough just at the

prospect of meeting the parents. The stories I had heard about Charles' father in the past had not lead me to believe he was an easy man.

I was wrong though, wrong about the house and wrong about the people that lived in it, I sensed it as soon as we came inside the heavy door. This was not an ancient museum populated by stiff figures, it was a warm and welcoming home and his parents matched it. Or, rather it was the house that reflected them. I knew that when Charles grew up they had been travelling a lot as his father was an officer, and that Charles had felt abandoned when he left him at the boarding school. I knew he had always had a lot of love for his mother, but that the father seemed to have been strict and distant. However, that seemed to have changed with age and retirement. It was a jovial elderly man that greeted us. He welcomed Charles with a handshake and a pat on the shoulder rather than a hug, but it was still apparent that he felt affection and was glad to see him – and me he hugged without reservation.

"Welcome Molly, welcome to our home. I'm Gerald and this is Alice"

And Alice was just the loveliest, kindest woman and I instantly knew we would be friends. They were both so happy to have their son home and safe from another tour and even happier that he seemed to be in love. When we told them the news about the baby that evening, after I had said no to a glass of wine, they both were tearful with emotions – and only good ones. It seemed like they thought that Charles had been absolutely right to divorce, but that they also had thought that meant he might end up dedicating his life to the army and not get himself a family. Well, life is full of surprises.

I was thinking his parents might be old-fashioned and expect us to have separate bedrooms, but Alice had prepared one room for us, with a gigantic double bed. The bed sheets were patterned with small roses and the same pattern was duplicated on the chintz curtains, and there was an abundance of decorative cushions also in flower patterns, and the wallpaper featured yet more roses – not really my style, but very cute and homily. It was a stark contrast to the rough environment we have found ourselves in until recently. When we went up the stairs to our joint bedroom, Charles held my hand and led the way and it felt like we were up to some mischief – but this time we were not. This time we were completely in our right to do this, spend a night together. It would be our first night in a real bed together. There had been the bunk in his tent – a lovely and special night but forbidden so we had had to be careful and quiet. Then there had been the night in the hospital bed, but then we had only slept next to each other. This would be the first night alone in a room with a real bed where no one would disturb us and when he closed the door behind us, I was filled to the brim with excited emotions.

Suddenly he scooped me up in his strong arms and carried me over to the bed and put me down on the fluffy duvet, so I sunk down a bit among the roses.

"In a hurry, are you?"

He just laughed, "I think we have waited long enough for this Molly. Far too long. I think I have always dreamt of laying you down on a bed of roses."

"I just knew you were hiding a true romantic under that stern surface."

I giggled but suddenly I did not feel like jesting anymore, I only wanted to take this moment in, being here alone with Charles among a surreal number of roses. I pulled him down to me in a kiss, then started coaxing his shirt up from his jeans.

Earlier that day, seeing him in civilian clothes had been an new experience. When I picked him up he was still in uniform and shortly after our arrival he headed for the shower and then came back in shirt and jeans. It should not have been unexpected but it was. It threw me back to the time I first saw him, even if he was a boy then, not a man like now. And I felt a surge of desire and a wish to strip him of those clothes immediately, but I had had to wait out. Now finally, I was allowed to.

Just like in his tent, we did not rush. Even if the desire for him was overwhelming, I wanted this to last and he seemed to feel the same. We let our lips graze, keeping our eyes locked as I unbuttoned his shirt and then sat up to take it off. I wanted to just look at him, the beauty of him, let my hands run along his back, rest on the planes of his chest, caress the muscles on his stomach and I felt him just watching me when I did, and inhaling deeper and faster showing that he enjoyed what I did. Then he bent over and kissed my neck, my earlobes, nibbled my lips and undid the buttons of my blouse.

"The first time I get to undress you from anything but a uniform", he whispered almost reverently, thinking along the same lines as I, and he gasped slightly at the sight of my breasts in a white lace bra, but almost immediately undid the clasp and released them from it and cupped them in his hands instead. I felt my nipples immediately respond with pleased tautness. And we kissed again, deeper, fuller

and I let him pull me up on his lap so I straddled him and we stayed like that, grinding against each other and letting our hands graze of every part of our bodies which we could reach meanwhile we kept kissing, until we could not take it anymore and had to remove jeans, knickers and briefs all in one go and he lay me down on the rose covered sheets again, covered my face and collarbones with little kisses, paused and gazing deep into my eyes said;

"I love you."

"I love you."

Then we were joined, in the most lovely and ecstatic way. Just like the first time, I gave him all of me, felt like in this act I shared all of me with him, without saving some little secret corner of me to myself. Like all my feelings were on the outside, connected to him – and that I got the same in return as we moved faster, deeper, like he was rooting in me. We lingered on the edge of pleasure as long as we could, but finally could not hold back and tipped over, our bodies shuddering from the intensity of of it and this time when we did not have to be quiet we were calling out each other's names. When we slowly came down to earth again, we stayed where we were for long, unwilling to separate or even move a little. This had been too wonderful, and I wished we could just stay like that until he nibbled my ear and whispered;

"The best thing is that is that we get to do that again, whenever we want."

"Maybe not *whenever* we want as long as we are under your parents' roof", I smiled back at him and was grateful that their bedroom was in a different part of this big house, so we could be sure they did not hear us.

"Whenever we want", he repeated. "We'll just say that the pregnant woman needs some rest and I will join her because otherwise she will be moody."

"You're such a bad boy", I giggled. "They will clearly understand what we're up to."

"And I clearly don't give a fuck", he laughed. "I just want to be with you, no matter what."

As it turned out, we did not have to make up much excuses. Gerald and Alice were away often during our days in Bath and we spent most of that time in bed. Discovering each other's bodies and likes and talked about the future in between, our only main break was when Charles took me to the first of the dates he had promised he would fit in before the baby came and brought me to a beautiful restaurant nearby.

The plan we made up for the future was that we both would request to be placed in Aldershot, where Charles had been already before this tour. There we could both work, me practising medicine until the baby came and when it was old enough also resume my career, and we could create a home together. The distance to Bath would not be that far if we wanted to visit his parents for a weekend. I was not emotionally attached to Birmingham anyway, so I had no problem leaving. I had only lived there during my foundation years and the flat I had would only remind me of John even if he only had passed by between his different missions. Sooner or

later, Charles would go on tour again, but not to Afghan as the British Army would be exiting within shortly and he would try to stay home as long as possible, to be there through the pregnancy and when the baby was born. There would of course be millions of other things to work out along the way, but we had an initial plan which we both were completely content with and I knew that things would work out because we were a team.

The transfer went easy for me and I kept working until some weeks before the baby was to arrive. Already in that time I made several friends, which made me feel secure that I would be in good company the day when Charles inevitably would be deployed. But he was here now, and very much so. We both delighted in seeing the baby the first time when we went to the ultrasound and later on feeling it kicking, although he complained it was unfair that I could feel it from the inside long before he from the outside and I told him that after all it is not that comfortable being kicked in the stomach and he told me to stop whining and then we kissed and made love. We did that often, not only because we realised the baby would take some space when it arrived and maybe allow less of that, but because we simply could not keep our hands off each other. And Charles kept his promise to take me on as many dates as we possibly could fit in and he was very inventive about it, and then he actually *did* ask me to marry him, like he also had said he would although I did not take it too seriously in the hospital. He told me he loved me beyond words and without a doubt knew he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me, and would I make him the happiest man on earth by accepting his proposal? I felt the same, so I said 'Yes!' without needing any time to consider it. A month before the baby came we got married. I had the fortunate kind of pregnancy which displays itself only as a big belly, so I could find a beautiful wedding dress and actually felt like a proper



bride rather than a container ship walking down the aisle. Elvis was Charles' bestman and Allegra, my best friend from the time in Florence, was my bridesmaid. Both my biological father, which Charles once had dreaded when he was headmaster Dawes, and my stepfather Giuseppe were there. The only one I really missed was my mum. I always wished the cancer had not taken her so early but more strongly this special day than others, but I had a feeling she was there with me somehow, smiling because I finally got to marry my love. My first love. My *only* love.

Charles was incredibly handsome in his uniform and when he said;

"I do", his eyes mirrored the love in mine.

And he was right, even with only one month to go until due date he had no problem to lift me, when he took me in his arms and carried me through the door to our home. The house that was home because we both lived in it.

And when our beautiful baby girl arrived, we gave the name that had been my mother's but also was a bit of a tribute to Elvis, our friend, my saviour and the one who would also always love Charles. We called her Ellie, and unlike both of us she grew up in a settled home where both parents were present most of the time and where she later was joined by her little brother and sister, a home where no one was on the run to or from anything, and where there always was love. Endless amounts of love.

-THE END-

All is fair in love and war