

A person with long, dark hair is seen from behind, wearing a black and white horizontally striped shirt. They are looking out over a bright sunset or sunrise, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a strong lens flare and illuminating the scene in warm orange and yellow tones. The background is slightly blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.

Despair

and

Hope

An Our Girl FanFiction

Miss Piony

Despair & Hope

Feb 5, 2019

*My version of the showdown between Molly and Charles three years after Bangladesh. I finally wanted to tackle the elephant in the room that end of S4 is to me and try to answer the question 'what the f*** was he thinking'. The story I for long refused to even think of but which ended up being one of my favourites to write.*

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A/N: This follows the screen plot except one little detail at the end of this chapter.

This is planned to be two parts, inspired by two songs I'm listening to at the moment and my February mood which rarely is light. I'm not made for living in a place as dark and cold as Sweden this time of year, often feeling like I'm getting by rather than living – but writing helps. So, warning, sadness ahead but you know I never leave it like that in the end.

First part is Molly's thoughts on a winter's night.

Would recommend listening to the songs while reading if you can to set the mood, first one is Sorry by Halsey.

The wonderful characters belong to Tony Grounds and BBC and even if I may not always agree to what happens to them on screen, I'm very grateful they were created in the first place, so I can borrow them for a little while.

Part I: Despair

So, I'm sorry to my unknown lover

Sorry that I can't believe that anybody ever really

Starts to fall in love with me

Sorry to my unknown lover

Sorry I could be so blind

Didn't mean to leave you

And all the things that we had behind

Someone will love you, someone will love you

But someone isn't me

Sorry - Halsey

I sat on the bed, knees pulled to my chin, arms hugging them, like I was protecting my own naked body. The only light in the room came from the streetlights outside, casting a dim light through the window, distorting everything with long shadows and illuminating the naked man lying sprawled over the crumpled sheets. He was

Despair & Hope

sound asleep since long. I had tried but failed. First lying close to him, with his arm around me but I'm not a cuddly sleeper these days. I only ever was for a passing period in my life - or maybe it was with one specific man rather than a period of time. Then tried discretely moving away from him, still lying down, but sleep just would not find me. Now I have been sitting here, maybe an hour, maybe longer, watching, thinking. Sometimes I *see* him and even let my fingers trail a path over his broad back, sometimes I'm lost in the distant past or an elusive future just staring out the window. Thinking about what the two of us are, what he is to me. What he is *not*.

It saddens me that he is blissfully unaware what is on my mind but that I will have to let him know when he wakes up, when the cold light from the streetlights is replaced by the even colder light of winter dawn. I would like to run instead of staying and tell him it is over, but I have to be brave. Have to be better than... no I'm not ready to let my thoughts go there.

Maybe he knows already. I have not been kind to him lately. Even making love tonight was because I wanted to sooth harsh words I said to him, because I could not bear the sadness in his eyes. I wanted to hold him and let him know everything is okay, but it is not. He probably loves me, and he is so good to me, but because of that I need to run away. I run away when things are good, because if I stay and love I'm sure I will get hurt – again, and I cannot stand that.

I did not think he would fall for me, because I never really expect anyone to do that. It happened once, a long time ago but it did not last and what is there to fall for,

really? A cockney who moved up a notch in the world when she joined the Army and got herself the MC for actions I cannot even be fully proud of? A girl who fell madly in love with her commanding officer and to everyone's amazement married him thinking he loved me too? A woman who still is grieving being left behind by the husband she adored, not knowing for sure if it was PTSD or another woman who made him end it? I'm all those things but I'm not sure if any of it is worth to love and I'm afraid he will wake up and see that one day. Then I would rather leave before. That is what I do these days, run before someone can run away from me.

I just realise I have stayed a little too long this time, he might actually love me already, and I will inevitably hurt him when I leave. I never planned on breaking his heart, but I will, to protect my own which is already too bruised.

Once I trusted one man completely with my heart. You. I allow myself to think of you now, it is difficult to keep the thoughts at bay at this lonely night-hour even if I'm pretty skilled at pushing you to the back of my head during the days now when years have gone by. For some time, I thought we would last forever, that I had the fairy tale. I have never been so happy. It hurts to think of how young and naïve I was when I did not believe anything in the world could come between us. It turned out so many things could; distance, our different backgrounds even if you had assured me that would never happen... death... your illness... cheating... Although technically you were not cheating because I had told you that you were free to go, but I never thought you would. I thought you would come back to me. Always. You had promised me you would adore me for always and I believed you.

God, I never really understood the way you laid your eyes on me in ways that no one ever had before. Like I was someone wonderful, someone who meant something very special to you, like I was a precious gem you had found, not just some little gobby girl from a council estate in Newham. I guess that was why it hurt so much when you stopped looking at me like that. Somehow proving me right in what I had known all along, that I was not worth to be looked at adoringly with your brown chocolate eyes. But I fell for it, fell for it so hard - and I wanted to believe.

I'm not even sure why you stopped. I'm not sure if it was when your best friend was killed, or when you thought you constantly had to be there for the girlfriend he left behind, or when I did not manage to measure up to what you needed when you were I despair. Because despite all the things I blame on you, I can see now with the clarity that time and experience adds to my perspective, that I was not there for you either when you needed me. I fell in love with a strong man, one I adored and idolised. I did not handle it well when you were not that man anymore. When you withdrew inside yourself, became silent instead of charming, angry instead of my safe haven and, finally, blank, devoid of any emotion, least of all showing any love.

I thought I tried, I really thought I did, but truth was I expected that you somehow could snap back into the man I first knew if you only wanted it enough. That was why I set ultimatums when I thought I had tried everything, when I had supported, begged and cried. I had tried to be there in your grief, but you pushed me away, I begged you to seek help but you would not listen and when I finally humiliated

myself, crying, you gave me a hard stare and told me to grow up, turned and walked out the door for your transport to Brize. That was the last time I saw you.

Now that I'm older and wiser and have learned that everything is not black and white, I'm not so sure anymore that I did *everything*. But I have tossed and turned every scenario and I still do not know what I could have done different to not make you leave that day, or to make you come back to me. I ended it during an international phone call with crappy connection, because I thought that threat would finally send you running back to me, but instead it sent you to *her* bed. So, you can rightfully claim I was the one to end it, but I know it was not over for me until you slept with her. Maybe for you our relationship started dying slowly the day when Elvis fell from that roof and took a piece of your soul with him, love disappearing gradually until nothing was left. For me it died when you slept with her and my love still remains like a dull unwelcome pain.

I do not even know if you only shared her bed once, or if you started a relationship afterwards. One of the guys in 2 section warned me already while that Bangladesh tour lasted, wrote me an e-mail, and I did not stay around to find out more, just fled when you were still gone. Could not bear the thought to face you or anyone who had been there. You never came after me. Six months later I sent you the divorce papers which you so kindly signed without even trying to contact me. After all, it was routine to you, you had done it before. I cried when I got one copy in return, with your beautiful signature on. Cried until I felt like an empty shell. Stroke over the signature with my fingertips as if it would bring you closer to me,

when it really was then end. I wondered if this felt any different to you than with your first wife, if it was all just about moving on for your part. Wondered how you so easily could discard what we had. But you did, it was there in wet ink. For *us* it was the end, but I have not been able to move on.

It is so hard to leave you behind. Three years have passed since I packed my bags and walked out, but I still know your birthday and your mother's favourite song. Why does the brain hang on to such useless, unwanted information instead of freeing the space for more important things? I still know how you like your coffee and when Nespresso omitted Rosabaya from their assortment of coffee capsules I fleetingly wondered how you would get by and if you still saved the box I once had given you. The one you said you cherished too much to ever open it or even untie the red ribbon. Maybe you just finally cracked it open and invited *her* for a cup when you got back from tour. I still know you prefer plain white cotton briefs and that you are a bit obsessive when ironing your shirts, never able to leave the smallest crease. I know you always use Marc Jacobs' Bang aftershave and like to sing along watching Baz Luhrmann's Moulin Rouge and I remember how I laughed in surprise the first time you did and the way you kissed me then. I do not know how to forget.

I know I still love you, that's why it hurts so fucking much and I'm so, so tired of it. I wonder if I will ever be able to let you go. If I have it in me or if you have left a burn mark on my heart. I wonder if it is even human to feel that kind of all-

consuming love more than once in a life-time. Probably not. It is like lighting a fuse, once the fire reaches the end there will not be much left after the explosion.

For a period, I tried to hang on to the illusion that if I closed my eyes when making love to another man, I would be able to pretend it was you. Pretend you were with me again for a few precious moments. Only if I were very drunk did I ever manage that even for a split second. Even with eyes closed he would smell different, his skin would feel different under my fingers, the soft texture would be different, and the scars would not be there. Not the first scars that I loved because they reminded me how you had survived to be able to be with me, marry me, nor the later ones which reminded me how you time and again chose the Army and others over me, inflicting you more injuries and pulling you further away from me. Not even the back feels the same on another man, the one I know so well because I used to cling to it when we made love, later in the relationship stare at the muscular tense surface when you slept with it turned to me. You, who had said we would never be one of those couples sleeping back to back, smilingly spooned me and wrapped me in your strong arms. So many sleepless hours I spent staring at that back, wishing you would turn and smile and everything would be like before.

And even if I was able to disregard all *that* with eyes closed, no one - no one - ever moved like you.

We spiralled down together, I can see that now. Unable to break it, unable to be there for each other, but I had not given up when you gave up. I will never forgive you for that, or how you did it. Tears burn behind the back of my eyelids now,

wishing I was not doing this to myself. Torturing myself with the memories. Wish I could cast you aside like you did me and fall asleep hugging the man beside me, but I know the signs, know what this means. When you reappear in my mind as vivid as this, I'm already on my way and nothing he says or does can change it, because he will never be you.

Night is turning into morning. I finally slumbered restlessly for a short time, but now I'm awake again and despite that I'm lying down my pulse is racing wildly with angst over what I must do. How could I be so blind that I let it go this far, that I allowed him to fall for me. I do not have the right to make someone fall for me, when I know I will never return the feeling. It is not the first time I make this mistake, but I pray it will be the last.

As daylight slowly comes, I cannot wait any longer. I must get the words off me, must get this done. Must leave him, because I do not dare to let him love me and love him back. Must leave because I still, after all, love you.

Someone will love him, someone will love him for sure, but someone is not me – because I do not have it in me anymore.

I touch his sleep-warm shoulder, shaking him softly.

"Bones, wake up, we need to talk."

A/N: Thank you for all your lovely reviews!

The outline of this story has been in my head for some time and it has only been two parts, but now when I finally put "the pen" to the paper I realise two will not be enough to allow them the time they need and make it believable, so this is not the last. Not the first time I change my mind while writing, as you might know.

Sorry for all the sadness but my intention is that there will be light in the end because I can never let it any end other way for these two. Just like with the first part, I would recommend finding the song if you can because in my mind it truly fits with the post-disaster Molly and Charles, and I love it.

I think this is my longest chapter ever and I really poured my heart into it, so I would be very glad to hear what you think.

Part II: Hope

And as the floods move in

And your body starts to sink

I was the last thing on your mind

I know you better than you think

'Cause it's simple darling, I gave you a warning

Now everything you own is falling from the sky in pieces

So watch them fall with you, in slow motion

I pray that you will find peace of mind

And I'll find you another time

I'll love you, another time

Explosions on the day you wake up

Needing somebody and you've learned

It's okay to be afraid

But it will never be the same

Explosions – Ellie Goulding

My entire being is nervousness this beautiful day in May because for the first time in over three years I'm meeting Charles. It was I who took the initiative. I have been thinking about it ever since I broke up with Bones, finally accepted that I need this to close the book that was us or I will be stuck in limbo forever. My psychiatrist has suggested it for a long time, that I need to meet my ex-husband, but I have always refused, until now. I started seeing her after the divorce, realising I had some pretty heavy stuff to deal with. Not only Charles but my own experiences on tour. Sometimes I have wondered, if it had made any difference if I had gone earlier because she has helped me see so many things in a different light. Until now, she has not been able to convince me to face the past full on though. I have not been ready, afraid it will rip open the partially healed wounds instead of healing them, but now I feel I no longer have a choice. I need this, for myself, to be whole person living in the present not with one foot, or my heart, in the past.

I'm not sure what Charles has been up to these years as I did my best to shut out all information about him. I know he stayed in but have no idea if he has been on tours or moved on to a desk job or been promoted. I don't know where he lives, and I do not know if he is still with Georgie or with anyone else. All I know is I need to talk to him, but I'm not even sure what to say. Maybe it is more accurate to say I need to *listen* to him, finally hear what *he* has to say. I do not want to, but I need to.

Once I had made up my mind it was not difficult to get in touch with him. He has the same standard army e-mail address he always has had. Mine has changed

twice; from Molly Dawes to James and then back again. One of those small things that really hurt because the day I changed it to James I never thought it would change again and changing it back somehow made the breakdown of our marriage even more official than signing the divorce papers.

When I e-mailed and asked if we could meet up he wrote me back in a day. Neither of us asked any questions, neither of us offered any answers. I just asked if he was willing to meet me and he said yes. I guess he felt like me, that everything else ought to wait until we were face to face, but even his neutral answer made my heart jump out of my chest and my body tremble. I despise myself for being so weak that the mere thought of seeing him makes me react that way.

We have decided to meet in a park. He is travelling here from wherever he lives without making any fuss about it, just offered to come. This park is one where I like to go walking and running but not a place where we have any common memories because he has never been here with me, it is part of my life post-*him*. I hope today will not ruin it, so I will not want to come here again, maybe I should have chosen a place I like less.

I told him to come to the big oak near the hot dog stand and I see him from afar, already waiting. Feelings are flooding over me, so I need to pause and remind myself to breathe, closing my fists tight, pressing the nails into my palms, needing the pain not to turn on the spot and run. I cannot spend a lifetime running, it ends today. His figure is so familiar, from a distance exactly the same. The same man who I fell insanely in love with and who made me feel safe in ways no one had

before, the same man who hurt me endlessly and made me hate him, combined in one body. All the emotions he ever evoked in me still combined in *my* body, keeping me trapped in an emotional prison I cannot escape from. I'm not sure how I will be able to face him.

As if he can feel me observing him, he raises his head slowly, meeting my gaze. I move closer meanwhile we just keep staring, taking each other in, trying to discern what has changed. He looks handsome as ever, wearing jeans and a shirt, a thin knitted pullover thrown over his arm, but he will not be needing that this sunny day. His hair still thick and dark, no greys to be seen and he has not filled out, his body lean the same way it always was, his jawline still as sharp, not softened as it is for many men his age. Yet his face has changed, like he is a bit frayed around the edges. Like he has experienced sorrow and survived, but maybe just barely, no flicker of a smile in the depth of his eyes as it used to be. Or, I'm just imagining, projecting my own feelings. Maybe he simply is older and leads a completely happy and content life and I'm wishing for him to be a little bit miserable because I am.

I'm wondering what he sees when he looks at me. Objectively I know, because I scrutinized myself in the mirror this morning. I do not have any wrinkles yet, still too young, but I was a girl when I walked out on him and now I'm a woman. I *thought* I was a woman then too, but now I know the difference. I have loved, and I have lost, that changes a person in a way I wish I had not had to experience. I will never be the same.

"Hi", he says warily as I approach him.

"Hi."

Neither of us knowing quite where to start. A hug is definitely not the next move. He dares a little smile and I feel myself achieving a bleak copy.

"Let's walk?" I finally say when we cannot just keep standing looking at each other any longer.

He nods and shoves his hands in his pockets in his usual casual way and it disturbs me how familiar everything about his appearance is after all this time, when in fact I do not know him at all. We stroll, we are in no hurry and we are not going anywhere, and he adapts his long steps to match my pace, the way he always did except when he was angry and when he did not want my company anymore. He stays silent and I guess I must get the conversation started as I was the one to initiate this. He must be wondering what I want with him.

"How have you been?"

"It's good to see you."

He speaks at the same time as me and his first simple words almost make me weep. He may think it is good to see *me*, but it is not good to see him, because my body is already aching with longing for him and sadness over the way things ended. Luckily, I do not have to say anything, leaving me time to control my feelings, because he chooses to answer my question, although wavering.

"Okay, I guess. Surviving."

He gives up a small, insecure laughter, not typically Charles really. I wonder what his answer really means.

I glance at him sideways. I quite like talk walking because then you do not have to keep staring each other in the eyes the whole time, making it less intensive, less intimidating to say what is on one's mind. But I start with questions that feel safe.

"Where do you live?"

"In Bath and at barracks, Bulford, combined. That way I can see Sam a lot."

I don't dare to ask if he lives alone or with someone. The mentioning of Sam stings in my heart. I left a child I loved behind too, but I did not know what else to do.

"Oh, Sam. I've missed him."

That much is not hard to admit, admitting I missed his dad too is unthinkable.

"He missed you too."

My lovely Sam.

"Was he ever angry with me, for leaving? Did he feel I let him down? Sometimes I have been thinking he must have been so disappointed."

In contrast to with his dad, I had said good bye properly to Sam. Hugged him hard and long while my heart was crumbling and told him that I would have to go away for some time. I had not admitted I never would return, though.

"He was disappointed and sad because he missed you, but he was only angry with me. I told him I had sent you away... I wanted him to know it was my fault you were gone, so he'd never hold it against you."

Sam was six when we met, ten when I left, and we were so close those years. I saw more of him than Charles did due to his many tours and I loved him like he was my own, never thinking he was a borrowed child I one day might have to return. Being reminded he was caught between us makes me immensely sad. Now he must be thirteen, going on fourteen and probably has more important girls than some temporary step-mum to think of.

"He hated me for it for some time", he continues, "and I do not think he ever has forgiven me but at least the relationship is better these days when I see more of him and can be a dad for real."

I can see how the truth would have been no good explanation to a child and I'm glad to hear they have become closer in the end. Part of me is amazed he allowed his son to hate *him* so he would not hate me. A flutter inside me, nearly every topic has hidden mines threatening to detonate any second. Too many emotions.

"Is he fine otherwise? School? Rugby? Girlfriends?"

He smiles his first real smile, one that is not a grimace, and which reach all the way to his eyes.

"Yeah, despite everything he's turned out great. Doing really well in school and sports and has a lot of friends. Too occupied with all that to pay any real attention to girls yet, but I have a feeling he's breaking quite a few hearts without having a clue."

Sam always looked like a mini-Charles, of course the teenage version is breaking hearts and the thought makes me smile too. I also smile because Charles always has been equally clueless when it came to his own effect on women, but some things are easier to spot in others than in oneself.

"I'm glad to hear it. I wish you could say hi to him from me, but I guess that may tear things up..."

My words trail off, thinking of what Sam might say then. If he still would care or if that was a long time ago, but it is bad enough that I shake my own universe up today, I would not want to move his even an inch if he is happy now. Charles just nods, and I change subject.

"You stayed in?"

"Just barely."

Again, the insecure laughter. He is obviously as uncomfortable as me, maybe he is waiting for me to lash out in fury any second.

"Desk job now though. Long time since I stopped going on tours, don't think I ever will again, it's better this way."

I begged him to stop, but then he would not. It hurts that he made the change he would not do for me for some other reason, maybe for *someone* else. Except if it was for Sam, but I will not ask.

"I get to see more of Sam", he ads and I exhale. Now I notice that a slight, almost unnoticeable limp is there when he walks.

"How's the leg?"

"Okay, hurts sometimes when there's a weather change. Just like my grandma's, if you remember her? Otherwise fine." He smiles again and so do I, how could I ever forget his grandma, an extraordinary old lady with the same eyes as him. Her birthday is also one of those unnecessary things I remember even if she probably is dead by now, and that she always insisted on champagne with the cake.

"You, Molly?"

He seems to think it is time to interrupt the flow of questions coming from me, even if they so far are of the harmless superficial kind, me trying to navigate to where he is in life now.

"My legs?" I attempt a lame joke, I'm not even sure why. Maybe because panic is lurking under the surface, panic over being here in his presence. I cannot fully grasp he is walking beside me here in the sun.

He bores his eyes into me, I can feel them even if I look straight ahead. Still able to make me feel small the way he did when he was my very displeased captain in the beginning of my first tour.

"How have you been?"

What does he want to know? That I have spent approximately 1211 days trying to get over him, while living a half-miserable life realising I will never trust and love anyone the way I loved him? That I've had three relationships but dropped them like a hot potato the day I realised the guy in question was beginning to fall for me? That I still cannot make love to another man without him being present in the bed? That he might have fucked me up for life but I'm hoping to change that today, or at least take one small step in the right direction?

"Fine."

When I glance at him, I can see in his face that my short answer was not very convincing and to my surprise he looks even sadder. Even if he deserves it, it makes my insides twist.

"Fine?"

"I'm still in the Army. Took one more tour but then I've been mentoring and training of other medics at home. Doing well, my CO wants to recommend me for promotion to be a sergeant, but I declined."

"Why?" he asks with surprise.

"This autumn I'll start studying to be a nurse."

"Leave the Army?"

"Yeah, I think it's about time."

He does not say anything to criticise my decision even though I know he always thought I might do a brilliant career in the Army and probably cringes at the thought of me giving it up.

"I felt I needed to make some changes in my life", I add, not adding that today is part of that puzzle too.

"I see."

We walk in reticence, making sure we never touch by accident.

"Still, that answers only what you've done, not how you *are*."

Did not think he would notice.

"Okay, I guess. Surviving."

Trying to avoid the difficult stuff by mirroring his own answer earlier, and it is the truth: alive but not really living, even if many things about my life is good; job, family, friends.

Then he is braver than me, after another pause asking his next question.

"And do you have a partner? Kids?"

"No."

That is all I give him. I'm just 27 so there is still plenty of time, if only I can get over him. Yet I wish I had more to brag about in that area, but I imagine I see his shoulders relax a bit like he was dreading the answer. I still do not have it in me to ask him, because even if I'm dying to know, I'm also afraid I will die when he tells me, but he offers the answer anyway.

"Me neither."

I remain quiet for a while with my eyes fixed on the gravel path we are walking on, because I'm afraid that the hard knot which is currently dissolving in my chest will morph into liquid form and come pouring out of my eyes. I do not want him to see how relieved he just has made me. *He is not with Georgie*. That has been my worst scenario all these years, that he is still with her and they are happily raising a family, but they are not. He knows me too well, however, he knows what has been on my mind.

"You thought I was with Georgie."

I swallow.

"Can you blame me?"

I stop in my tracks and turn to him, suddenly bitterly angry. Fuck him – after all these years I still cannot wrap my mind around how he could sleep with my mate, his dead friend's girlfriend on tour and not even be discrete about it. It is so not him, not the Charles I knew and loved. Delete/correct – I did not *think* it was him, but obviously it was.

His face is serious, but not the blank version I had to get used to towards the end of our marriage. The one who kept every single emotion bottled up, unwilling to let me in or let anything seep out, maybe because he was afraid he would explode. No matter how I tried to penetrate the surface time after time, he would not let me. Now it all shows, how hard this is to him, pain, grief and remorse distorting his beautiful features.

"No, I can't because it was what I wanted you to think."

I try to understand what he is saying. He *wanted* me to think he was with Georgie. Does he not understand how that would hurt me? How insensitive can someone be? And not just anyone, my ex-husband who I once thought cared about me.

He takes hold of my elbow and I flinch, the skin where he touched me burning.

"Sorry, but... Can we sit down for a bit? I have some stuff I really want to talk to you about and I can't get away from the feeling you're about to run."

"Maybe because I'm considering it...."

What he just said, I do not know if I can handle it even now.

"But you wanted to meet, Molly. I assume it wasn't because you want to talk about the weather, but because you wanted to talk about us. I want that too, even if it hurts."

I chew my lower lip and nod.

"There is no us, as you know. I wanted to see you because I need closure."

He gives me the wistful smile again.

"I'll try to give you that then. Come."

He gestures towards a wooden picnic table with two benches and we sit down opposite each other, me with the feeling that I'm staring my future fate right in the eyes.

"I'm not expecting you to forgive what I'm about to say, I just want to explain how my mind worked then, even if it seems very strange to me too now."

His eyes are like dark pools of emotion and I'm not sure I'm ready to hear this, but I've started this, I must go through with it. He takes a deep breath and dives in.

"I was convinced I was not good for you anymore, that I would never again be who you needed me to be. If I stayed with you I would just keep hurting you and pull you down with me and you know I always wanted you to be brilliant, as I knew you could be."

I snort with contempt.

"I don't even know what that's supposed to mean anymore, not sure I ever did."

"It means you're strong and smart and caring, you can achieve extraordinary things. Make others think in ways they didn't before, change the world in the small things. Like you did with Bashira, with me."

"Even if I was so fucking excellent I wasn't enough for you."

"No one was then, and I didn't want to ruin you. I knew I would if you stayed with me, but I knew I wouldn't be able to let you go..."

"But you did?"

"...unless I destroyed it. Unless I destroyed everything that was us and made you hate me."

I stare at him and he does not flinch.

"I used Georgie to ruin us. I pursued her, yes, and I welcomed her when she came to my room that night, but it was never about love or even attraction. She knew that. She was as fragged as me and she used me too, to be closer to Elvis for a moment, to feel safe, to try to forget. I don't think that worked very well for her, but what I did had exactly the effect I intended."

I stare at him, trying to grasp how he could be so cruel. I do not want to hear more but he will not shut up now.

"I was sure I could not make you happy, that I never would be able to be the husband you deserved again, or a good father to the children I knew you would want someday. I figured that as long as you would be happy in the end, then what I did would be right even if it was wrong."

Oh, the-end-justifies-the-means-speech. The officer with a battle plan. I don't know if I can take this anymore. It hurts, God how it hurts that he wanted to demolish what we had down to the last tiny brick with the biggest wrecking ball he could conjure up, even if he says his motive was that he thought he had to let me go. *I* never wanted to go even if it was the best for myself, because without him I'm just half of me. Once I had fallen for him I would never be the same without him even if he pushed me away and even when I have hated him, I have always loved him. How could he act so coolly? I'm unable to speak.

"Of course, I've regretted it every day since."

His voice breaks, and his eyes now glazed with tears.

"I woke up the morning after and she was gone, and it was such a relief, in two ways. A relief that she was gone, and we did not have to fake affection we did not feel in broad daylight. I felt soiled and went for a long shower and scrubbed myself..."

"Please! Please, spare me the details. I still can't bear to think of it", I manage to whisper. I do not want to imagine him needing a shower after a sweaty night with Georgie.

"I'm sorry, Molls. I just want you to know I never felt right about it, never enjoyed it. Afterwards I never knew how I even could... I still can't look myself in the mirror when I think of it. But I also felt relief that morning because I thought I had managed to end things between us, to set you free."

I put my fist to my mouth, to bite my knuckles but still cannot stop a sob of pain from coming out. Tears are streaming down his cheeks now. Anyone who saw us would have a hard time figuring out who is most in agony.

"I never meant for you to find out."

"No? Then what was the point of it?"

"For *me* to know it was over. To not be tempted to pull you back in. I've always known, that if I ever cheated on someone, it would mean that relationship was over. Elvis and I used to talk about that. You know he wasn't very concerned about being faithful and he often asked me why I kept to one woman at a time when there were so many out there. I always told him that if I ever, ever did cheat, it would mark the end of the relationship. I just knew I don't have it in me to live with being a two-timer, I would not stand the betrayal or the guilt it would entail and just continue... So, I figured if I was with someone else, well then it would be the nail in the coffin

for us. As I said, I don't expect you to understand, and definitely not forgive, because even to me that logic seems twisted now."

"But why Georgie, of all people? Someone I knew, Elvis' girlfriend."

"Because she was there, because she wanted it too but for other reasons. She walked into it with open eyes, knowing I did not love her. The only thing I deceived her about was *your* feelings about us, me and you. I told her that you had decided to put our marriage out of its misery and moved on, even if I knew you just said those things because you hoped I would come back to you. I was the one who had decided it had to end there but she never knew that."

I watch a mum efficiently clean her son's mouth from ice cream with a wet wipe at some distance, while he tries to wriggle away from her, while taking in Charles words.

"Apparently, Fingers had seen her leave my quarters in the early morning hours, and you know him, then everyone knew. It was awkward, but I just shook it off, told myself I didn't care what anyone thought. Then I heard a rumour that Brains had let you know and I tried to convince myself that maybe that was for the best after all, because that would for sure mean the end for you too. No more hopes of getting back together, letting me go. I'm not even able to explain how numb I was then, it was like I felt nothing. I didn't feel anything for anything. I knew I had lost the respect of the lads because they all adored you, but I just shut it off like everything else."

I can imagine 2 sections' reaction, even if I have never talked to any of them about it. I did not even stay in touch with Brains, the messenger, afterwards. It hurt too much even if I knew they were all my friends, my brothers, and probably would have taken my side.

"...But then when I got home, to our house, empty of everything that was you... I regretted it. I cried, cried for the first time since Elvis died. I had efficiently killed the one and only thing, besides Sam, that meant anything in my life - because I thought I had to. I thought I saw everything with clarity and no one else did, when it in fact was the other way around. My head was completely messed up and I ruined everything around me. I realised then, back in our empty house, I would never be happy again, but that did not matter as long as you could be happy again."

"But I can't! You think I'm happy? I'm not happy."

"Why can't you be?"

"Do you really not know why? I've tried. Oh, I've tried so hard. Tried to forget you, tried to focus on my work, tried other men..."

I can see how he is flinching at the thought and amid all of this it gives me some satisfaction that he may still be jealous, that I might hurt him a little bit.

"...but it never works out. You've broken me, and I don't think I'll ever be able to love anyone the way I loved you, not when you just threw it away."

His eyes widen, but his expression is hard to interpret because so many feelings seem to be there all at once; grief that I have not moved on despite his brilliant plan, understanding that I still love him, his own feelings about that, whatever they are.

"And none of them is you, not even when I close my eyes."

Now he shuts *his* eyes, like he understands what I mean, and it pains him to think of it. Good. I want him to feel a scrap of the pain I feel.

"I never wanted to hurt you. All I ever wanted was to make you happy."

It feels like we have had this conversation once before.

"You fucked that up big time, your logical plan didn't work. You hurt me like hell, but you didn't set me free."

Maybe I will be free after today, maybe this is the closure I need, but when I look at him I doubt it. I want to reach out my hand and touch his face, softly touch the new lines, kiss the sad mouth until it smiles, put some spark in his dark eyes again. I will never stop loving him, despite what he did to us, but it does not mean there ever can be an us again.

He looks down at the table, wipes away some tears.

"Then it was for nothing, all this pain was for nothing."

"So, it seems."

We stay quiet for a while, both trying to gather ourselves.

"How could you want to destroy us Charles? I'll never understand."

"I don't say that I do either – now. That was the twisted logic of my brain, but I was ill. You know I wasn't myself, you saw it and you tried to make me seek help."

"Are you now? Well? Are you yourself? Did that magically happen after a night with Georgie-fucking-Lane?"

He looks like my words are a punch in his stomach, but wisely abstain from telling me to calm down, understanding that would not have gone down well.

"There was no magic. First, I just sank deeper into darkness, isolated myself, didn't even see Sam or mum or dad. Didn't think I was any good for anyone. Was thinking I would hide myself on another tour, ask to be transferred to another section who did not know my history..." He snorted bitterly. "Yeah, I know, that's completely mad, like I would have been mentally fit. It didn't take a genius to see I wasn't. Luckily Beck did and stopped me. I was suspended from active service until my health was better and he ordered me to get counselling for my PTSD. Initially I refused, stubbornly maintained I was fine despite that I was living in a social vacuum where the only feeling I ever had was anger with everyone, until he said that if I didn't I would be discharged and forget ever working for the Army again."

"So, the threat of losing your precious Army did the trick..."

"Not really. I shut myself up in the house for weeks, was constantly wasted and let myself go completely, I'm glad you never had to see me like that, I would have been ashamed... then one day Beck came around and said he would have no more of this. He put me in a cold shower and made me have a shave, threw away whatever alcohol there was... took me out for a meal when I was sober enough to move, then put me to bed and I slept for real for the first time since Elvis died, I think. He waited on the downstairs sofa. Then he drove me to the psychiatrist and waited outside for the full session. He did that every week for two months, until I had improved enough to understand and accept I needed it and continued going myself. Still do even if not as often. I owe Beck a lot."

"That's what I should have done... I tried to make you with words, but I should have taken you, forced you. I knew you were ill." He was right, I have always known that, and the guilt makes me nauseous, he is not the only one who has wronged even if I think he tops me in fuck-uppery in this case.

"It would never had worked Molly. I would never have come with you. I needed to hit rock bottom and I needed for a superior officer to do it, not the love of my life."

I flinch at his words.

"Obviously not the love your life..."

"What?"

"Me, clearly not the love of your life as you left me."

He looks at me with desperation.

"Don't you see that's what I'm trying to tell you. You were the love of my life. There will never be anyone else for me, but I had to leave you. At least I thought I had to leave you."

I cannot hold back anymore because it is all too painful. I lean my head in my palms, trying to block him out and start crying. I cry so my body is shaking. Grieving a love that was so beautiful but that we both have shattered to pieces. He is with me in a second, coming around the table to the bench on my side.

"Can I hold you?"

"No."

I tell him no, because I cannot ever let myself depend on him again, but my body deceives me. When he kneels beside me and wraps his arms around my waist, leaning his head against my stomach, I do not have it in me to push him away. Instead I hold around him too, lean my head to his to bury my face in his locks. He feels right, he smells right, like the husband I loved. My tears wetting his hair.

"How could you Charles? How could you?"

He has no more explanations to offer, all he says is;

"I'm so sorry Molly. I'm so, so sorry for what I did to you, did to us. I'll never have words enough to tell you how sorry I am. So many things I wish were different."

Part of me still want to push him away but instead I let my body melt into his for a long time, saying nothing, until I'm finally depleted of tears. I gradually become aware of my surroundings again, of other things than our sobbing, my erratic heartbeats and him. The birds chirping, people talking and laughing further away. It feels strange that the spring sun is shining on us, cherry and apple trees blossoming and kids playing nearby. Strange that normality and happiness can exist alongside so much grief, but maybe that is the cycle of life. Maybe one time we were the happy ones and someone else grieving nearby without us noticing.

I came here today for closure. Now I no longer know what this is. So much to process that it could last a life time for someone with a brain capacity which prevented me from passing geography. He raises his head from my lap and cupping my face, wipes away my tears with the pads of his thumbs. I let him, but it reminds painfully much of another time in the beginning when he did the same. Then he comes up to sit beside me instead, but the side of his body is still touching mine. I can feel that he is shaking like I am.

We sit like that for a long time and then some more.

"Why did you never come to see me? Later when you were better?"

"I think I had forfeited that right, no matter what I might have wanted. I thought you would never want to see me again for good reasons, and I hoped you were happy without me. It was different now, when you asked to see me."

Again, we stay silent and when he takes my hand and laces his fingers with mine, I do not pull it away.

"What now, after today? We just say goodbye?" I finally ask.

He turns to me, searching my eyes.

"That's up to you. What you want, what you think is best for you. If you want to see me again, I'd like that very much."

Part of me wants to say yes immediately, part of me feels never, part of me thinks it would be best to wait a few years until my brain at least had a chance to process half of what he has said today.

"Maybe. Can I think about it?"

"Of course, take all the time you need and *if* you want to see me I'm here."

"Right here?", I smile weakly and nod towards the bench.

He smiles back, the second smile today that reaches all the way to his eyes and spontaneously he reaches out his hand to tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear, like he used to do.

"You know what I mean. Not *here* here, but you know how to reach me whenever, and I would welcome it anytime."

His words warm me more than the sun.

"Good, because it would be bloody awkward to have you staring at me when I'm out for my morning run", I smirk.

He just shakes his head, smiling and there is a second of normality in the familiar banter between us. We hug each other one more time before I walk away and leave him sitting on the bench and I know he will be watching me for as long as he can see me. Today was worse than I ever could have imagined. It was also so much better, even if I do not know how that is even possible. I have no idea what the future holds, but for the first time in forever I think there is a tiny chance Charles might be in it.

A/N: This will not be a story with a big plot. In this one, my focus is in the details of their feelings, their memories and trying to get past the hard ones. I'd like you to almost be there with them, don't know if I manage that.

Someone asked if there will be Charles' perspective too, but I have decided this is Molly's story. We get an idea of what he feels through her eyes, but you can also assume that everything he says is honest. This is not a story of deceit.

As always, thanks for all your lovely reviews. It warms my heart that so many seemed to enjoy the first chapters even if very sad. As with the previous ones, I recommend the song with the read.

Part III: Trust

You're keeping me awake at night

I'm losing all my appetite

My heart is beating out of time

My skin is cold, my chest is tight

You're keeping me awake at night

And I don't want you all inside my head

And I can feel you running through my veins

When I say, and I say, and I say

That "I don't want you in my life"

But you stay, and you stay, and you stay

And you never leave my side

Charlotte Lawrence – Keep me up

After the day in the park, I'm an emotional wreck. I'm not sure if I should contact Charles again or not, and it takes a few weeks before I make up my mind. It may not seem so long, but one is able to think and process a whole lot over fourteen days and nights, when one does not think about much else than one topic. One man. I get dressed, try to eat even if my appetite is not much to boast about, I go to work, see people and manage to do what I should, but my mind is constantly on the conversation we had had in the park and our past. I want to be with him again, it is what I always have wanted, but now when the possibility is there it scares me. If we would try and fuck up again, then it is truly the end. I thought so the other time too, but I do not know if I can bear it a second.

I lie awake at night, cannot stop thinking about him. It is like he is not only inside my head, but like my entire body is filled with him. Like he both occupies my thoughts and is running through my veins without my permission. I'm telling him to leave me alone, to let me settle without him, let me forget him even if I know I have not been very successful over the last years, but he will not leave me. He stays, like a heat in my blood, a whisper in my ear telling me that he will not go away until I see him again. Until I at least try this out to see what it may be, if only friendship.

I replay everything we talked about and I know that I believe him, believe that he was one hundred percent honest with me about how things played out and why it happened like it did. I know I will never forget, neither will he. The question is – can I forgive him and move past it? Do I have forgiveness like that in me? Can I even move past my own failures in it all? Truth is, I do not know. A long time ago

another boyfriend betrayed me with a friend of mine, cheated on me in a dirty toilet cubicle in a nightclub. It does not really get any cheaper than that. I just left them behind, hardly bothered to face them with it, let alone hear them try to make pathetic excuses. What Charles and Georgie did was far worse because they meant more to me, but circumstances were very different and because I love him he is also so much more difficult to leave behind.

My psychiatrist, Margaret, once told me of two different schools in psychology, one which believes that an individual's personality determines his behaviour, one which believes that circumstances influence behaviour more than anything else. She mentioned it at the end of a session and asked me to think about that until the next time we met. I did, a lot and I do now too. Somehow, I always land in the conclusion that I believe in a mix. Some people are just rotten and will always be, and I guess there might be a very limited number who always are good and do the right thing, but as for us normal poor sods I guess our personality will determine part of what we do and circumstances the rest. If I had stayed in Newham, I would never have found myself in circumstances that made me risk my life for another in a such a courageous way that people thought me worthy of the Military Cross. The other way around, if Charles had not witnessed his best friend die and blamed himself for it, if he had not gone on a tour when he obviously suffered from PTSD in the company of the equally fringed Georgie, he probably would not have cheated. It does not fully excuse it, but it explains it. Is it enough for me? I realise I probably never will know if I do not see more of him, but is it worth the risk of breaking my heart again? Such thoughts keep me up at night.

Finally, I give in and decide to call him. I'm nervous and still unsure if it is the right choice but when he answers and realise it is me, I can hear a huge smile in his voice and I feel the same smile over my own face. Oh, I'm missing him, it does not matter that I tell myself not to.

We start seeing each other. Not dating really, because there is nearly no physical contact. No holding hands, no wrapping an arm around the other's shoulder or waist, no kissing. It is more like when we first got to know each other back at the base in Afghan, minus the Taliban, 2 section, him being my CO and Army regulations dictating what we could do or not. Also, he is less confident and I'm warier, but still there is a resemblance in the platonic relationship we slowly are establishing. Now, with no one around dictating we must wait out it is us setting the pace on our own, reacquainting ourselves with each other through serious talks and easy banter. As we keep seeing each other, we relax gradually and there is more and more of the latter, less of the hard conversations as we get past them. I'm not sure which has the most healing effect; serious, honest exploration of the past or the banter. Maybe the combination.

We start off cautiously, but the more we are at ease, the more often we see each other as late spring transforms into summer. Our first meet up after the park is sharing a simple coffee (him) and tea (me, naturally) together, next we go for a stroll, followed by lunch the time after and eventually we start spending whole days together. We do not really plan it, it is just that when we meet we are both unwilling to let it end – but it always does because we do not spend any nights together and

I have so far not invited him to my flat. Somehow, that feels too intimate, like really letting him into my life again. We do this one tiny step at a time, not rushing with the risk to ruin everything. He lets me set the pace but at the same time shows me he is with me.

I try not to shy away from the difficult conversations as they come to mind, because I know we will not get anywhere if we try to gloss things over. One weekend when we are having lunch, I ask him about *her*.

"What happened with Georgie, afterwards?"

My heart is pounding, palms sweaty. I do not want to know, but I *need* to know. For a long time, I thought I did not, but now I know I need to know that nothing remains in the dark when it comes to her.

He looks like he expected the question to come one day, yet uneasy and he takes a gulp of water before answering.

"We sort of endured the remainder of the tour in each other's company. It was only a few weeks left and we did our best to avoid each other. It was all very awkward. It would have been even if the others hadn't known, now it was hell and both me and her kept to ourselves as much as we could. Not *together* though, I mean alone."

Even if this is hard to hear, I smile weakly at that he felt the need to clarify that and it does make me feel slightly better.

"You already know what happened with me when we returned, and she was never part of my life after that. We never talked about what happened, not on tour, not after. Neither of us could bring ourselves to be in the same room alone again. I guess we despised both ourselves and each other too much."

My relief is palpable. I have always wondered how much they saw of each other, if he kept wanting her, if he loved her for real. Even if he told me much in the park, I needed this confirmation too. He continues.

"As her CO, I know that she requested transfer to another section, another regiment. Even if I did not stay with 2 section, she couldn't either. Beck once thought it his duty to inform me she had stayed in, done well and been promoted – apparently also moved on and was seeing some bloke outside the army. I could read between the lines she had needed counselling to get there too."

"Does *he* know about Bangladesh?"

I had never asked before, maybe because I dreaded the thought that the man who had held a most beautiful speech to us on our wedding day, would know exactly how much shit our marriage had turned to.

"Yeah...". He looks at me, rueful. "If he hadn't heard the rumours already before, I told him when he came to the house to get me when I was wasted. Told him just what kind of despicable person I was and that it was better if he just left me to my misery, but for some reason he would not have that. He was kind enough to turn a blind eye to the serious breach of regulations due to the circumstances... but later

he said that even if he knew it was down to the PTSD he thought I was a bloody fool for throwing away what you and I had. Of course, I knew that by then, but I thought it was too late to do anything to reverse it."

Too late to reverse, but maybe not too late to move forward, I'm thinking to myself, looking at my apple juice, swirling it around in the glass. I shift to push around some crisps on my plate, suddenly have lost appetite at the reminder of *them*, but for the first time I also feel something else, something I never thought was possible.

"I feel sorry for her."

He looks equally surprised at that I'm able to feel that.

"You are?"

"I've hated her for such a long time. She was my mate and friendship rule no. 1 is to stay away from your mate's man no matter how long has passed since they were together. She didn't wait for us to even take off the wedding rings, but I can see now that she was ill too. She had lost her love, you were her only bond to him and when she tried to find some consolation, she alienated herself from you both as friend and CO, from the section, from me for sure... became an outcast. Once I thought she just got what she bargained for, but now I can see that she acted out of desperation, like you. I still hate her, but I feel sorry for her too. It's a relief really because pure hatred is really fucking tiresome."

He keeps his gaze fixed at me, serious and apprehensive.

"And do you still hate me too?"

"I hate what you did... but I don't hate you."

He swallows before speaking again.

"Do you ever think we can get past it?"

"I don't know", I say honestly, feeling a bit like crying. "I just know I want to try."

Then he gives me the loveliest smile and puts his hand down flat on the table, palm up, an offer for me to take it. I put my hand in his and we lace our fingers together, touching each other like the very first time we touched one another in a way that was out of limits for a commander and a soldier in his charge. We both look at the hands, what our fingers are doing, like they were living a life of their own out of our control. His thumb caressing over my knuckles. When I look up in his face again, his lips are slightly parted and eyes gooey like they were that time. That time he shocked me because I had never seen him like that, it had been unthinkable he would look at me like that, touch me like that. Now, it is almost equally earth shattering because I never ever thought we would touch each other like that again, or that he would give me that look that disappeared so long before the rest of him did.

"That's all we can do, isn't it? And I'm just so glad if you're willing to. I'm not completely convinced I have earned a second chance, but I can promise you I won't

waste it. I'm here Molly and I intend to stay for as long as you'll have me even if only as a friend."

He truly is here. In a way, I feel he is here like he never was before, not even when our relationship was at its peak the other time. Even when I knew he loved me, he was always on his way somewhere. Headed for tour, exercise, promotion, rehabilitation so he could back to work and all started over again. Even if he wanted me *in addition* to living out of a Bergan, which he said had been he all he ever wanted before meeting me, he still wanted *that*. I never dared to ask myself or him the question; if he had to choose between the two, would the choice have been me? In the end it was not, but then so much was already shit anyway. Now he makes me feel, without a shadow of a doubt, that he would chose me. Am I ready for that?

Some days when we say good bye and he heads for his car or I jump on the train, I feel so desperately much for him, that I just want to turn around and run after him, throw myself into his arms and kiss him. But I don't. Other days, or sometimes later the same day as I have resisted the urge to throw myself at him, I'm furious. Mad with him for what he threw away, resentful of what he did to me, livid that I'm putting myself through this, reliving the pain, uncertainty, raging at the risk it puts me of breaking my heart again.

Nobody can say the path is easy to finding a common ground again, it is rocky and treacherous. We take two steps forward, one backward, sometimes the other way around so I feel I'm back to square one and doubting if I ever want to see him again

– but then next day, I know I want to, I have to. He has said he is here to stay and then I cannot let go.

A few weeks later, he asks if I want to meet Sam.

My heart flutters with joy but I'm also mindful of Sam's feelings. Do not ever want to risk him getting caught between us and hurt again.

"You don't think it's too early? I mean, we don't know for sure where this is going yet, do we?"

The look he gives me, tells me that he knows exactly where he hopes this is going, but he still does not take it for granted and holds back saying it out loud. He rakes his long fingers through his dark curls, the way he always does when he needs a few extra seconds to ponder his response.

"I've thought about it - and I think not. I know he would love to see you, like me he never stopped missing you. We can tell him the truth, that we're only friends. If you at some point decide you don't want to see me anymore..."

He pauses, and his face tells me he hopes I will never tell him that.

"If you don't want to see me anymore, there's really nothing stopping the two of you from staying in touch. He's old enough for that now and I don't want to keep you apart."

Even if I feel a bit like Sam is a bait and I should wait until I'm surer about me and Charles, the temptation is too big. It is hard to resist seeing the boy I love and actually, I do trust that Charles would always see to his best, so I say yes.

When I go to Bath next weekend, they both come to pick me up at the train station. Even if Charles had not been with him I would have recognized Sam immediately, alike both his three year younger self and Charles. It hurts to see the physical proof that I had missed three years of his life; how tall he is, how his features are less child more man, his voice roller coasting due to puberty. I hold back a smirk spotting a few hairs on his upper lip which I'm sure he is so proud of that he has left them there on purpose. It heals to see he looks so well and so extremely happy to see me. In a few long strides he is with me, this manboy, now taller than me and we hug hard for long, without saying anything. So many emotions going through me, tears burning at the back of my eyelids and I do not want to let them out and ruin this moment which is supposed to be happy. I see Charles next to us, meeting my gaze but then turning away with a look like he too is struggling not to cry. His arms crossed over his body, tucked in his armpits in the familiar pose I once found intimidating, then realised was one he also used when he wanted to protect himself by creating some distance. Not get emotionally involved.

"It's so good to see you Molly."

The same words his dad had said in the park, but to Sam I can answer without hesitation;

"It's bloody fantastic to see you, but I think your dad needs to buy you some Gillette."

He looks confused and I see Charles smile at the corner of my eye. One emotional land mine averted without anyone being red-misted.

A sunny day in Bath, the three of us. We do not do anything special, but it is an amazing day anyway. We walk around in the city centre as if we all were tourists, not two of us living here and one been here many times before. Sam even goes into the tourist office for some leaflets of the most noteworthy sights. Of course, Royal Crescent where Charles parents still live, is mentioned, but there we do not go. Charles and me silently agreeing that seeing them would be taking things too far at this stage. We stroll, we eat ice cream, enjoy a long lunch and we talk and talk and talk and laugh a lot. Initially, Charles stays a bit in the background and let me and Sam do the talking, allowing us to reconnect, but unlike with him there are no barriers, no bitterness or hurt in our way so it is a matter of minutes before it feels like we never have been apart. He is older yes, but he is the same – and with him I'm the same as I used to be.

In the afternoon we sit on a bench, Charles and me. We find ourselves in another park and Sam has temporarily been distracted by some girls from school we ran into. After introducing ourselves we found it best to leave him alone and now we sit here in companionable silence. I think I catch Charles secretly admiring my tanned legs where they peep out from underneath my floral print summer dress

and that thought sends a surge through my body, but when I turn and look at him full on he actually looks sad.

"Are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because I know you and you look like a dying duck in a thunderstorm."

He cannot withhold a small smile but then the sadness is there again.

"You're right. Seeing the two of you today reminds me what a clusterfuck I made of everything."

"But we're having such a great time?"

"Exactly. I never should have allowed the two of you to split up. Seeing you together reminds me again how wrong I was about everything. How much pain I have caused."

His voice is choking, and I take his hand.

"No point crying over spilt milk, you know."

"I know."

I lean my head to his shoulder. I feel him hesitantly put his arm around my shoulder, holding me to him. We have not touched this much since the day in the park. It feels... sublime.

"We can make new memories." I say and right now I mean it.

He hums something, which I interpret like him agreeing but being too moved to say anything. We just sit like that until Sam returns from his admirers and we move apart. He looks suspiciously at us. It is possible that our eyes are tearful.

"What are you talking about?"

"You", says Charles.

"That those girls clearly have a crush on you", I giggle.

"What? Noooo!" His cheeks are turning adorably pink.

We cheerfully continue the afternoon in each other's company and finally walk to their house, where Charles has promised to cook us dinner. Just like he has not been to my place yet, I have not been to theirs and I'm expectant and nervous as I enter. I know that Charles is watching my face as we walk through the rooms. It is a light, beautiful house, clearly lacking the touch of a woman and of course I'm glad and relieved for that. There are no signs of me, that I once was part of the family. No photos, none of the things I left behind and even if I did not expect it, it hurts. Ridiculous. Just like my home holds nothing of him except some stashed away photos which I could not make myself throw away. It is natural after a divorce,

especially one like ours, yet I nurtured a small silly hope. I do not even know why, it should not matter.

Sam eagerly pulls me upstairs, never mind I'm a bit hesitant to go where the bedrooms are because I feel like I'm intruding. Charles seems a bit uneasy too and let us go alone, excuse himself saying he will start the dinner. So, it is Sam who proudly shows me his room which they recently redecorated to suit a teenage boy better. Apparently, he had a wall paper with Winnie the Pooh before and it seems like the mere thought of it makes him embarrassed. Then he leads me to the bathroom, the guest room and lastly his dad's bedroom. I can barely go inside that room, it feels so private to be where he sleeps, get dressed and undressed, but Sam will not let me miss any corner of the house which he apparently is proud of. It is a masculine room, from the colour choice to the lack of frills and decorative cushions. Clean, neat and a large bed which looks comfortable. I wonder if he ever has shared it with anyone. So, what? I have shared bed in these years and it has meant near to nothing. Still, the thought of another woman in bed with him is uneasy and I prepare to escape. Then I see it, on his bedside table. A small frame, not with a photo but with a crayon drawing. I would have guessed a child had made it, had I not known it was me when Sam and I sent him a letter when he was away on his first tour after we got married. It is heart framing one word. *Ditto*. Suddenly I know with certainty that the only woman who has been in this bedroom up to this day, if only in his thoughts, is me.

We return downstairs, me with my heart thumping in my chest. When I see him standing there in the kitchen, looking up at me smiling without realising what I just have seen, I know that I no longer only love my ex-husband like a dull aching pain I wish I could get rid of. I am undeniably *in* love with him. I am falling in love with him all over again, another time, under new circumstances. It makes me happy and it also makes me very scared.

We eat the meal he has prepared and I'm sure it is very tasty because he was always a good cook, but I cannot really taste anything due to apparent lack of saliva. I'm grateful for the glass of wine he pours me but say no to a second one, thinking it is for the better to stay sober enough to keep my tongue in check, not letting any unplanned words slip from it. Afterwards we sit in the small garden for a while.

"You don't want to reconsider? Stay the night in the guest room?" he asks. Not too insistent but with obvious hopefulness.

It is tempting, but I'm not ready to even sleep under the same roof as him yet. I am falling for him, but I do not know for sure if I want to or if I can handle it.

"Nah, I think I'll stick to the plan and take the late train home."

I can see disappointment fly over both their faces, Sam doing a worse job than his father to hide it, but then again, *he* has no reason to and his dad has practised hiding emotions for years.

"Okay, another time" Charles just nods.

I hope so. Another time. I want to give in to my longing, but I cannot.

Both accompany me to the station and hug me goodbye. I do not know if I'm fooling myself, but is it possible that it feels better and better to be held by Charles every time he holds me? Maybe because my urge to flee is diminishing. This time I feel his lips to my hair, kissing me on the top of my head.

"Come back to me." He says in low voice, so Sam does not hear, his dark brown eyes pleading when they look into mine.

Once upon a time, my response would have been 'Always'. With a body in uproar due to conflicting emotions, all I can say now is;

"Maybe, one day."

Then I enter the train and wave good bye. For now.

A/N: As always thank you for the reviews and PMs, your response is always inspiring me to continue.

I'm always a bit in love with the version of them I'm writing for the moment, but maybe a little more than usual this time. Unlike my AU stories this is how I truly would like it to play out for the "real" couple after what happened on screen. I hope the next chapters won't be confusing going in and out of the past.

There will be two chapters for this song because it got a bit long (not the first time that happens with me, I know). The second is more than half-written, so it will come soon. Trivia: the song is a bit of a flirt with S1 soundtrack as London grammar made some of the brilliant songs there.

Part IV: Scared of loneliness

Let winter break

Let it burn 'til I see you again

I will be here with you

Just like I told you I would

I'd love to always love you

But I'm scared of loneliness

When I'm, when I'm alone with you

London grammar – Rooting for you

I'm lying on my back on a bath towel, eyes closed, burying my toes in the smooth sand. The sun warms me from above, the sand from below. It is not too warm just perfect, so I feel like I'm warm through and through, from the outer layer of my skin all the way in to my core. Seagulls scream every now and then, telling me I'm by the sea if the sound from the waves and smell of sea weed had not been enough to let me know already. I do not know when the last time was that I felt

this at ease, so content with life. It was far from certain that I would come here. It is far from guaranteed that I will stay.

A few weeks ago, Charles called me and told me he had rented a cottage for him and Sam by the coast mid-August, and did I want to come? He knew I would have a month off between my last day as a serving British soldier and start of the nurse training and I did not have much plans really.

The offer takes me by surprise and I'm not sure how to feel about it.

"It sounds a bit shit."

"I know you don't think it does. You love the sea." He sounds confident enough, but I realise it must have summoned up some courage to ask.

I *do* love the sea and Charles knows, because he was the one to introduce me to it and saw me fall unconditionally in love. That is part of why I hesitate, there are so many memories.

When we were newlyweds, we drove to the coast for a weekend. On the way there, I told him I had never seen the sea.

"I knew you can't swim, but what do you mean by 'you haven't seen the sea'?"

"Oh, I've *seen* it on the telly, but I haven't really been. Well, on Cyprus obviously but I was a bit too occupied worrying about other things, like you possibly dying, to pay much attention that time. Didn't even dip my toes."

"You never cease to amaze me."

"Blame my parents who never took us outside Newham."

We arrived at the small pension in the early evening and before even unpacking, Charles pulled me with him down to the beach like he did not want to wait another second to show me some miracle. At this hour, most tourists already were gone or packing up their sunchairs and bags, leaving for the day. There was a calmness to the nearly empty beach I never had experienced before. I just stood there staring.

"It's so big."

He sneaked up behind me and wrapped his arms around me.

"Now, isn't what you usually say about..."

"Hush, you naughty man", I giggled. "Don't ruin this beautiful moment."

And it was all really a bit too sacred for any profane jokes, even I who always said I do not do perfect thought so. The sun had started to set, a gigantic orange disc lowering itself into the water at the horizon, leaving the sea an immense surface of golden glitter. It was breath-taking.

"You like the sea, I take it?" he murmured close to my ear.

"It's a bit scary because it never seems to end, but yes, I love it. I need to feel it."

I kicked off my sandals and walked into the waves, holding up my knee-length skirt, then stood there in all that golden glitter, so bright it was almost hurting my eyes, feeling the soft sand of the sea bottom between my toes and just laughed because I was so insanely happy. And when I turned around and looked at him, he had that special look in his eyes. The one I only ever had seen when he rested his eyes on me.

"What?" I smiled at him.

Then he purposefully waded out to me without caring his chinos got wet and pulled me to him, kissed me intensively, cradling my head softly in his hands.

"I love you so much. I didn't know it was possible to feel this way", he whispered against my lips.

It was one of the happiest, most romantic moments in my life. I have not been able to think about it without crying for such a long time, its beauty tainted by what came later. The loss too immense to cope with, so I pushed it aside. Now, I find that I can allow myself to linger there at least for a short while, because maybe there is hope. I'm still not sure I'm ready to go to the sea with him again under the current

circumstances, but maybe it is a chance to create new good memories which will allow me to also reminisce the old ones without pain. Yet, I hesitate.

"I don't know."

"We'd love if you join us and there will be space enough."

His way of telling me he is not assuming we will share bedroom and I cannot help but smiling.

"You don't have to stay the full week if you don't want to, but maybe a few days at least? Think about it. Please."

I do, think about it a lot. I want it, but I do not know if it would be a good decision or if I'm ready for the leap forward it would be. Like with everything since that day in the park, he does not push me, let me take my time and decide what I want - if I want *anything*. That has been part of why I have taken small steps towards him, one tiny step at a time and so far, nearly every step has felt right even if it also scares me. Especially the fact that I'm falling for him again, putting myself out there, terrifies me.

In the end I decide I must dare, or everything is already lost and the trio of me, Charles and Sam head for a holiday by the sea.

When we arrive after a long drive, it is already late. The drive has been a lot of fun, joking, singing, making up silly competitions and for a while I manage to forget that we are not just any family going on holiday. When I see the lovely little cottage, situated almost on the beach, I'm reminded that I will stay there with a man who no longer is mine and the feeling of insecurity takes hold of me again. Maybe it was the wrong decision to come here after all. Neither of them seems to think so, though. Like two puppies giddy with joy, the two tall-legged, dark-haired males hurry out of the car to explore the place. It is quite amusing to watch them as they open doors, curiously peek into cupboards and closets, take in the porch and agree on who will sleep where, generously giving me the largest room and I feel the smile spread inside me again.

"Will it be okay you think?" Charles looks at me, tugging the curls at the nape of his neck, searching for my approval and I can see that it matters to him.

"It looks amazing, the cottage, the location. Thanks for bringing me."

I try to hide my apprehension, but I think he knows it is there, lurking under the surface even if I want it to fly out the window and disappear forever.

He squeezes my shoulder briefly, a gesture to comfort me in a way he could do with any of his friends or men. His eyes tell me a different story, one I know they would tell only me.

"Thanks for coming. It means a lot to me", is all he says.

Later, after dinner, I'm sitting in the swing settee out on the porch, dangling my legs. I like swing settees, maybe because we never had neither that, nor a porch when I grew up and a sofa that can swing feels like a luxury. The evening is warm, and I can hear the waves rolling against the shore. Charles was not kidding when he said he had rented a cottage right by the water, it is almost as close as it can possibly be without water entering inside when the tide runs high.

Now he comes out and hands me a cold beer and sits down beside me, the swing settee creaks slightly under his weight.

"Put on weight, have you?" I smirk.

"Only muscles", he grins in return, and I feel some heat at the thought of that it is probably true.

Everything is easier when Sam is present, but he has escaped with his iPad for the evening, finally allowed to stay in touch with his friends or play games for a while. Now when we are alone, I cannot help thinking about if and when I might be ready to take a step closer to Charles, to be physical with him. The thought makes my insides twist in a combination of anticipation and fear. He sits next to me, looking towards the sea in the fading twilight, leaning back towards the seat, relaxing. He is wearing a t-shirt and I can see the veins and small hairs on his forearms as he rests them in his lap holding his beer, taking a sip every now and then. I always loved his arms, the masculinity of them, the way they changed, the muscles and

tendons played, when he moved. Always stupidly enjoyed watching them and his strong hands when he supply handled the wheel, driving a car. I resist the impulse to reach out my hand and touch the smooth, tanned skin, but sitting here beside him, I know I want him. I'm still not ready though.

"How do you feel about being here?" he asks without turning to me.

I take a sip from my beer, buying myself time.

"I'm not sure. I mean, I feel so much that I'm not sure what it adds up to."

"But you don't regret coming?"

His eyes still fixed forward, but I can feel him tensing next to me in anticipation of my response.

"No... I don't think so, but it feels a bit strange, unnatural, to be here alone with the two of you. Like we're a family, except that we aren't."

He sighs deeply, opens his mouth as if to say something, mutely hesitates, then finally speaks.

"You *do* know that I'm wishing for us to be, don't you? A family again. I don't want to put pressure on you, I just want to make sure you're in no doubt about how I feel."

Now he looks at me, but I do not dare to meet his eyes because I'm afraid to break down.

"I love you", he says softly.

I stay silent for a while. Engaging my brain before talking, deliberating my response, like he taught me long ago when I always opened my gobby mouth too quickly. I still do not look at him when I answer.

"I still love *you*, I told you already in the park. Always have, even when I hated you, and probably always will. But I don't know if it's enough to have a future together. Sometimes people stay together far too long without love, like my parents. Sometimes they love each other to bits but there's too much else in the way."

"Like?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought you would have an example, like your parents but the other way around."

I smile, unable to think of a specific example.

"Like... bloody Romeo and Juliet."

"Ah, I was thinking of real existing people we know of." He cocks an eyebrow.

"Like you and me, then."

I see his smile fade away in fear. Fear that I'm about to say that I see no future in this, but I do not feel like that. I just feel insecure.

"I'm just saying I don't know yet."

He exhales, and his shoulders relax slightly.

"This scares me for so many reasons, Charles. Even if I wasn't happy without you, I had found a way to survive. If we try this and it goes to shit again, I'm not sure I'll survive a second time. Do you get that?"

Finally, we look straight at each other.

"I do. I really do."

There is a light breeze and he moves a strand of my hair away from my face, his face filled with sentiments, so far from the man that checked out emotionally from our relationship when Elvis died. The man who made me feel lonely even when we were together.

"You see, you hurt me even long before Georgie. When you shut me out from everything you were going through. You made me feel lonelier *with* you than when I was alone. I couldn't cope with that again, the thought of loneliness when I'm with you terrifies me. Then I'm better off actually being alone."

"Molly, I..."

"I *know* you're sorry, but I also know you can't promise me it would never happen again. You never thought it would happen the first time, but you couldn't help it. So, this is about *me*, me believing it enough, wanting it enough to take the risk. I'm not quite there yet."

Now he stays silent for a while, takes in what I'm saying.

"I agree you have to believe in this, but know that *I* do. I think that therapy has taken me a long way from where we ended. I hope and believe it will never make me end up there again, in a person I don't even identify myself with. And I've given up tours, you know that. That said, I know you have to take your time."

I love that he seems to understand me. Like he used to before.

"Slowly, okay?" I lean into him and it feels good.

"Slowly", he confirms and put his arm around me and we sit there enjoying the summer evening, our beers and the company until it is time to hit our separate beds.

I'm lying on my back on a bath towel, eyes closed, burying my toes in the smooth sand. The sun warms me from above, the sand from below. It is not too warm just perfect, so I feel like I'm warm through and through, from the outer layer of my skin all the way in to my core. Seagulls scream every now and then, telling me I'm by the sea if the sound from the waves and smell of sea weed had not been enough

to let me know already. I do not know when the last time was that I felt this at ease, so content with life. My moment of relaxation is abruptly interrupted when a ball lands on my stomach, then bounces next to me, splashing sand in my face.

"Oi!"

Charles' shadow falls on me when he comes running and stops in front of me, laughing. Obviously, it was no mistake that the ball hit me.

"We thought you looked a bit too settled. Lazy even, already lacking in discipline private Dawes."

"I'm on bloody holiday, wasn't expecting any PT sessions."

He looks down on me from above, tongue in cheek, fully enjoying disturbing my peace. I have always been mesmerized by the way Charles' eyes can change colour. They can be a warm brown like melted chocolate when he is in a good mood; a dark steely brown to accompany his stern-face when displeased or angry; even darker, nearly black yet soft like velvet when they long ago were filled with want for me. I hope I never again have to see the dull, impenetrable and unseeing brown that was more or less constant during our last months as married. Right now, reflecting the sun and his happiness they are a twinkling golden brown.

"How about a swim? Sam and I are going in."

"Is it true you couldn't swim before dad taught you?", Sam chips in but does not wait for the answer before running after the ball which continued to bounce further away, now threatening to attack a family in the midst of their lunch sandwiches.

Another memory from that weekend by the coast a long time ago. Charles laughing and lecturing me in the art of swimming, supporting me, teasing me. Me whining he was a stern teacher and giggling when he got frustrated. Then when we got tired of it, we hurried back to the pension hand in hand and made love for hours instead. It makes me gasp for air before I can shake it off.

"Will you join us?"

I have been sunbathing in bikini bottom and a tank top and I do not feel prepared to take off more to be nearly nude in front of him. Maybe in a day or two, but not yet, especially not after that flash-back and the effect it had on my lower abdomen.

"Nah, looks a bit chilly."

It does not, the sea looks extremely appealing, its colour almost turquoise the way one always sees in travel catalogues.

"Suit yourself if you prefer lying here like a dried leaf, Sam and I will go swimming anyway."

In one smooth move, he pulls his t-shirt over his head, grins and throws it at me.

Seeing him without that t-shirt, only in swimming trunks far down his hips, does so many things to me. There is the predictable pang of desire at the view of his still boyishly lean, yet muscular body. There is the pain of the familiarity of a body my hands have roamed so many times but so long ago, and the scar still visible on his abdomen evoking more memories. Then there is a third, more unpredictable thing. His dog-tags are hanging around his neck. Nothing strange about that, but on the chain two circular, golden items are hanging too. One smaller, one larger, I would say the size of our respective ring fingers. He follows my gaze, looks down and when he looks up again his cheeks are blushing and he bites his lower lip.

"I keep them there... just in case... it felt right one day...", he stutters.

"Since when?" A tremble inside me.

"Since the day I returned and found yours lying in our empty house."

I just stare at him, frozen. He went to lengths to send me running and never came after me, but he never gave up hope. He has been keeping our rings next to his heart. I can see he does not know what my reaction will be. *I* do not know what my reaction is, besides utter surprise that he did that. My heart is beating so fast and I cannot breathe, maybe I'm having a heart attack.

" I...I couldn't put them away... I guess a small part of me was always hoping... "

The ball comes flying, hits his shoulder and the charged moment is interrupted.

"Dad, are you coming or what? Molls, won't you come swimming with us?"

"You go ahead, I might join in a while." Surprised I'm able to talk.

"So, was it true you couldn't swim until dad taught you? He said so."

"Your dad is full of shit", I laugh, and my heart feels light as I see them race into the water. Some time ago, I would have felt only sadness reminiscing Charles teaching me swimming. Now, when new memories are created as we go along, that one too makes me happy again.

He kept our rings, he kept our rings... the thought goes on repeat in my head until I think I hear the seagulls screaming it and when he does not see it, I bury my nose in his crumpled t-shirt and inhales his smell. The mix of his sun-warm skin, aftershave, him. The best smell in the world. For a second, I'm thinking I would like to bottle it up to keep, but then again, why would I want that when I have *him* here to smell?

This evening I'm lying awake in my bed. It is a perfectly comfortable bed, so it is not to be blamed for my sleeplessness. *He* is, once again. Yesterday I could sleep, but tonight I'm thinking of that only a thin wall separates us. He is lying there on the other side – with our rings on a chain around his neck. If he has not changed habits, he is dressed in white cotton briefs, maybe a t-shirt and I think he might be awake too. I feel more and more restless and finally I tiptoe to the kitchen to get a glass of water and maybe find some peace of mind. Naturally, he is already there doing the same and gives me a warm smile. I was right, he is dressed in briefs and

t-shirt and even if I have seen him in only swimming trunks today, the sight is unnerving now when we are alone at night.

"Trouble sleeping?" Raising his eyebrow teasingly. Butterflies in my belly.

"Yeah. Thought I'd get some water."

I move towards the cupboard to get a glass and he simultaneously moves to allow me access to the tap, which results in us colliding in the narrow space. I want him. God, how I want him, but I do not want to act out of spur of the moment desire and regret it, so instead of pressing myself towards him like I want to, I back away.

"Sorry", I say shyly, take a glass and fill with water.

He looks at me all intense, as if to figure out what I'm thinking.

"You think you can sleep now?" he asks.

"No." I take a deep breath, decide to take one small step. "Can I sleep next to you? I mean really just sleep?"

His features soften, the pensive frown erased.

"Of course, I'd love to. I just thought you'd never ask."

His body language suddenly easier than I have seen it in these months, like my request filled him with calmness. Me, I'm far from calm and easy but I need to be close to him.

We decide for my bed as it is the largest one and both lie down covered by a blanket as it is too warm for a regular duvet, slightly hesitant and self-conscious as we position ourselves because we are obviously not used to going to bed together. I cannot quite believe we will share bed again. Suddenly something important strikes me.

"What if Sam wakes up before us and wonders? I wouldn't know how to explain, and I don't want to make him confused."

"You don't have to worry about Sam. He'll sleep until I go and shake him awake. Teenage boys you know. He argues he has learnt in school that he needs it because his brain is changing so much, says his frontal lobe is developing so he'll be able to make rational decisions. Even if it's true I wish they could have withheld that information instead of making my job as a parent harder."

We both laugh softly and then I allow myself to relax. I inch closer to him and when he understands I want to sleep not just in the same bed but closer to him, he fits his body to mine. I feel him hesitate as where to put his arm, the one he used to wrap around me to cup one breast when we slept, so I guide him by taking his hand, lacing our fingers and pull his arm around me without letting go of the hand, feel the arm resting on me heavy, strong and safe. Without even looking at him, I know that made him smile. For a long time, I just enjoy lying there in silence and take him in, something I not so long ago thought I would never experience again. I hear his soft breaths and feel them too as his chest is moving in and out close to my back and we gradually fall into the same pace, two individuals in symbiosis. I tangle my

legs with his. When we lie like this my feet will only reach to his calves and I can feel his downy hairs tickle under my soles and the warmth of his skin warming them. I usually have cold feet for some reason. He always teased me saying it was illogical because with my short arms and legs the heart should easily be able to supply enough blood to keep them warm, then added that if it did not manage he did not mind keeping them warm for me. My feet have been cold for a long time, but now they are not.

Me, in a bed with him. That is something I have fought hard to keep out of my mind for so long. Now it is not a distant difficult memory, now is *now* and I fall asleep happier than I ever thought I would be again.

A/N: Lovely way to fall asleep but they still have some things to sort out between them. Something I always wondered how they would manage to deal with, so there will be another dive into the past. Will they be able to handle this and live happily ever after?

Thank you for your kind reviews which for this story really are blowing me away – blushing.

x

Part V: Rooting for you

I know it's hard

Only you and I

Is it all for me?

Because I know it's all for you

And I guess, I guess

It is hell and you are the only thing I've ever truly known

So, I hesitate, if I can act the same for you

And my darlin', I'll be rooting for you

London grammar – Rooting for you

I'm slowly waking up to sunny morning light, in his arms still and I feel like I'm home. We lie as close as we did when we fell asleep and it still feels right. I enjoy it for another moment, then feel an urge to get up. Create some distance to make sure I'm not just pulled into something too quickly and despite what Charles said I do not want Sam to wake up and find us like this. I'm definitely not ready for that. I

know it would raise expectations I'm not certain I can live up to and I do not want to be trapped. I know I'm moving with glacial speed, but when you have more than three years' worth of hurt to overcome, that is still pretty fast.

I sit up and he stirs next to me, opens his eyes and when it all comes back to him he looks very happy.

"Good morning."

He takes my hand and I let him hold it long enough not to alarm him, before I retract it.

"Time to get up."

I just say, but softly and smile. Despite that I can see that he does not agree, we get up and continue as if nothing extraordinary has happened. Have scrambled eggs, bacon and toast for breakfast, pack our beach bags and put on sun lotion even if all three already have a nice bronzed colour by now. We stay on the beach for a couple of hours, then after lunch head to the nearby village for ice cream and to stock up on groceries. The one thing indicating a change is when we enter the ice cream bar and he puts his hand at the small of my back as if to gently guide me through the door. I do not think he even was conscious of the move, but I jump a little at the touch, still not expecting that.

In the evening, Charles is cooking for us again and I sit watching him, listening to music, sipping a glass of wine and thinking. Over-thinking perhaps.

I'm thinking about that as usual he is the one cooking for us despite that I'm actually a decent cook these days, because he taught me the basics and then I've practised living on my own. Yet another thing I'm capable of doing without him even if it is nicer to do it *with* him. He does not know that though and we have just fallen into old patterns.

I'm thinking that he taught me to cook, swim, drive, dress for the right occasion, which fork to use in a fancy restaurant, think before I talk. Much like in that old movie we once saw at his parents' place because his mum loves it. *My fair lady*. It was not a favourite of mine, I thought that Higgins-guy was pretty superficial who only fell in love with a girl once she dressed better and talked posh and I was grateful Charles liked me like I was - in combats, no makeup and with Cockney accent intact. Later, looking back at our relationship from a distance, I still thought it was a bit like with Eliza in that movie. Like I had not been a fully grown woman ready to be his wife and life partner when we met. He had to groom me into it. It did not disturb me much when he did it, but I have thought much about it afterwards. How he always took the lead and I followed. Even when we loved each other, the relationship was not very *equal*, and I often felt inadequate even if he never wanted to make me feel that way.

My thoughts return to the cooking and I remember one time in the very beginning so clearly. As usual he prepared the meal and I helped make the salad, but that time he asked me if I could just fry some chicken filets whilst he did the sauce. I did not

tell him I never had fried chicken before, but it sort of became obvious when I burnt it completely. He sighed and jokingly said;

"Molly Dawes, have you really never been cooking at all? Even the most talentless cooks can fry chicken."

It was really stupid, but I felt my eyes fill up with tears and turned away.

"Are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

He did not believe me and came over, turned me around, looked at my face and then pulled me into his chest. We stood silent for a while, his arms around me, his lips to my hair.

"Will you explain how I hurt you? I thought you were tougher than this."

He had to wait a minute for my response, but I decided to be honest.

"I *have* been cooking, sort of. I made most of the meals to my brothers and sisters when we grew up... It's just that most of the time the only ingredients available were Tesco toast, Marmite and canned beans. You don't really become a gourmet chef with that. I know it's stupid but when I burnt that chicken, which *you* think is something everyone eats all the time and is a piece of cake to fry, it just makes me realise how different we are."

He kept holding me, maybe even tighter now.

"It just means we come from different backgrounds, and that only has to do with fluke. It doesn't mean that we are that different as persons. And even if it did, I love you for who you are. To me you are amazing."

I was unable to say anything because I still had a lump in my throat, but I felt so much better.

My gaze dropped to the frying pan with the poor black chicken pieces. It was lucky it was already dead because otherwise I would certainly have killed it.

"It won't be much of a dinner" I smiled apologetically.

"Fuck the chicken, we can call for pizza."

I adored him then.

I adore him now too, but I'm also seeing all those things in a different light. If PTSD and Georgie had not come between us, how would we have dealt with the balance between us when I grew into a mature woman who did not need his guidance in the same way. Would it have been for better or for worse if it, one day had not been natural for me that he somehow stayed my boss? It would have disturbed our balance, but would we have found it again? And would we ever truly overcome our different backgrounds? Can we now?

He hums while he is cooking, still happy and relaxed after last night as far as I can tell, and I know these thoughts just come to me because I'm afraid. Afraid that all these things, the past and the present, will make it go down the drain again. Afraid that he will not understand that not only *he* is different, but *I* am too. While he was gone I have changed.

While he stirs the frying pan and have a taste, I stay lost in my sombre thoughts drinking my wine.

I think that Charles did not really understand poverty until he met me. Naturally, he had seen poverty and misery on tour and fought to help those poor people, but that was all at a safe distance from his own doorstep, unrelated to his life. He had never fully understood or reflected over how little some people have here at home, in the backyard of his own country. Obviously, many of the privates who served under him came from far less privileged conditions than him, but he only ever met them at work, all dressed in the same uniform, never visited them in their homes, so even if he knew them or what he perceived to be important about them, there were also many things he was blissfully unaware of.

On our first proper date, he was already so certain we belonged together. When I protested that he could not be when he only knew the me on tour, he said half-joking that even if one only has seen the tip of an iceberg, one still knows it is an iceberg. Right then, I found it cute that he thought that he knew enough of me to

feel confident he loved me. Later on, I sometimes thought that it had been ignorant not to understand there was so much more of me to know.

Even if he was far more urbane than me, there were parts of the world, of society, I knew painfully better than him. How it is to have nearly nothing, not even proper clothes, enough food or sober parents. How it is to have no one around you who have any ambitions or hopes for their own lives, let alone yours and will feel threatened if you try to move out of their comfort zone and hold you back.

He, who always felt he had a natural given place in any room he entered, would never fully understand how I could doubt that anyone would welcome me, that I would be wanted or accepted because of how I was dressed, talked and conducted myself. Sometimes I felt there were so many invisible codes he adhered to without needing to think of them, but which I did not even know existed and I was always a bit afraid that I would embarrass him. Not be good enough, if not in his eyes then in others.

Despite that he never judged me, or anyone based on background, I could see that he was shocked the first time I reluctantly brought him home to my parents when I felt I no longer could avoid it. He was good at not showing it, but I was better at reading him and I could see he was shaken behind his unmoved facade. Shaken over the lack of *everything*: space, cleanliness, manners, education. Nothing was in abundance except kids and empty cans of lager. He was politeness and kindness all through the visit, did his best to melt in and say nothing that would make anyone feel embarrassed or inadequate. I could even see he had bothered to dress down,

wearing a t-shirt instead of his usual tailor-made shirts but even the quality of that t-shirt was something different to dad's faded one.

Even if my family thought he was a bit on the posh side they all loved him by the time we left, but I had a knot in my stomach. A knot of angst that he finally had grasped who I was for real, that I was not the brave soldier he had seen on tour, but a nobody from nowhere. A worthless girl from a shabby home. We did not say much during the drive to the hotel where he had booked us a room for the night as I had thought it might be pushing things to stay the night with my family. He checked us in and we silently went up the elevator. The whole time I was thinking that once we got inside that room the fairy tale would be over and he would break up with me. Instead, when he softly had closed the door, he turned to me with an expression which was hard to interpret and came over and held me tight to him without saying anything. He did not kiss me, but kept me to him until I started crying, crying over the miserable life that had been mine and which I today had been afraid would take him away from me. Now he showed me it would not, he only wished life had been easier on me.

"You're brilliant Molly, never forget that."

"I'm nothing", I whispered.

"But you are! You're everything. Unlike me you started from nothing and that makes what you have become so much more admirable."

I think that night I for the first time dared to believe that we could be something more than just an overdue tour-romance. That he liked more than the me on tour and in a way, it marked the true start of *us* to me. He had proven himself as the unprejudiced man he had claimed to be, and I gave myself to him unconditionally that night.

Yet, my lack of self-confidence lingered through our relationship. He had been the one to confirm my self-worth and when he started shutting me out in his grief after Elvis and due to the PTSD, my fragile confidence wavered. I started doubting if I ever had been good enough for him and wondered if he was beginning to realise that now, and it was the reason he did not want to confide in me. The reason why he turned away from me instead of relying on me. His inability to confirm me when he was weak, made me doubt myself and need reassurance which he was not able to give, making me doubt myself even more. And so, we continued to spiral downwards until the day we split up.

I did not figure all this out on my own, my psychiatrist has been instrumental in this. Margaret also has made me realise that over the years after him, my worth has been confirmed over and over again by others than him. My fellow squaddies who always appreciate my company and trust me with their lives; my superiors who have kept encouraging me to the same extent after I returned to being private Dawes as when I was Molly James, recommended me for promotion and lamented my choice to leave; my family, admitting that in spite of their initial reluctance, they are now proud of me being a serving soldier; the new friends I have made in

my own capacity without him by my side; finally confirming myself when I had the guts to apply to university to train to be a nurse and was accepted.

Once I needed him to confirm me. I do not need that anymore. That may be a good thing because now we are more equal. If I do not always need to lean on him, maybe he can allow himself to lean on me without everything being tipped over and out of balance. However, I'm also afraid it may be a wedge between us if he is expecting it to go back to the way it was. Maybe, my newfound strength and confidence will scare him if he becomes aware of them. Maybe he needs to be the leader in a relationship, maybe he needs to be worshipped and adored – but by now I know he is flawed and I'm not worthless.

He looks up at me and is startled by the worries I cannot keep from showing on my face.

"What's the matter?"

"I was just thinking."

"Sound dangerous."

It is. I hesitate if I really ought to bring this up but realise I must, to be able move on.

"I need you to know that I'm different. I'm not the same girl you left."

"I understand that."

I think he thinks he does, but I'm not so sure.

"But do you *really*? And can you handle it?"

He looks a bit shocked over my sudden outburst and I cannot blame him as he has not heard my internal conversation and was maybe in the romantic cocoon from last night.

"How do you mean?"

"I can't go back to how we were even before things started go wrong."

He looks hurt and taken aback.

"You didn't like how things were between us, not even in the beginning?"

I loved it. How can I explain without making a mess of everything?

"I did then, but I don't think I could have it the same way now. We were not very equal, were we?"

"I never thought of it like that."

"You probably didn't. *I* didn't then. It was so natural for you to take the lead and me to follow, we didn't even think of it, but when you wouldn't lead anymore, and

I wouldn't follow we were knocked out of balance and never found common ground."

He looks confused.

"For long, I thought you were so bloody perfect and I was ready to mould my life to fit yours."

"I was never perfect", he says defensively.

"I know that, *now*. You're just as human as I am – but can you live with a version of me who don't follow your lead? I don't know if you can."

I can feel him measuring his words before he let them come out, maybe realising this is a conversation where *everything* is balancing on the razors edge.

"I'd like to think that I can. I've always known you're strong and capable of much more than you thought of yourself."

My words harsh, questioning, almost unkind, driven by fear. His words kind, encouraging, driven by love and belief in us. It is like I'm trying to push him into admitting we are unlikely to make it if we try again, but he will not let himself be pushed in that direction. He stands firm, resolute in that he wants me back.

"If you didn't like the balance between us I'm sorry and I think it *can* be different. I want it to be too. I want us to lean on each other."

I hate that I'm hurting him. Now he is saying the exactly right words, but I'm still terrified.

"I'm just scared", I say weakly, unable to offer an apology for very real fears.

His eyes flash and for the first time there is a streak of anger in his voice when he answers, or maybe it is desperation.

"Don't you think I'm scared? I'm scared shitless! That you'll reject me, that you'll have me and then leave me. But I'm *more* scared not to try and lose you."

He turns his back to me to continue chopping vegetables, angry precise cuts, a sharp sound every time the knife hits the cutting board. As I'm an expert at reading his back I can see that he really is a little bit sad. The shoulders slouching slightly, looking down at the veggies with his neck bent. The soft curls there, maybe in need of a haircut but I love them as they are. He looks so vulnerable. I feel I cannot bear leaving him feeling sad like that. I move soundlessly to stand by his side and touch his arm softly. He turns to me, surprised because he did not notice me move. Without saying anything I curl my hand around his neck, let my fingers touch the locks I just admired, pull him down to me and place my lips softly to his.

Oh, this. I have not felt it for so long.

There is only the delay in response that comes from the element of surprise, then he drops the knife he held on the cutting board and put his hands around my waist.

Large, warm, safe hands, moving me closer to him. His lips firmly attached to mine, not for a second hesitating how to answer me. I can drown in him now.

"Has any seen my charger?" Sam brawls from his room and soon after appears in the door.

The warning he gave us was just enough for us to fly apart and he finds us leaning against the two opposite worktops.

"Noop, haven't seen it." I blurt out.

"Me neither."

Charles chest is heaving like he just has exercised. He looks giddy, caught in the act and terribly happy when he holds my gaze, the sadness gone. I have not seen his eyes glitter like that since before Elvis died. Me, I feel giddy, caught in the act, happy and apprehensive. Maybe I was a bit previous there. No matter how lovely it was I'm not sure if I was ready for it, but for a moment I did not think, just let my instincts guide me. I cannot deny that it was lovely.

"What are you doing?"

"Just cooking."

"Just cooking."

"Yeah, right."

During the rest of the evening, we are not as relaxed as we have been the past days. Sam seems oblivious to it, but we both feel a certain kind of tension after the kiss. I feel I want it again, need it again, but it frightens me because if we kiss another time a line is crossed, there is no way back.

When Sam finally is snuggled up in his room, we have cleaned away the last of the dishes in charged silence and it is time to go to bed, Charles eyes asks me if I want to fall asleep beside him tonight again, but I feel I must take a step back after the kiss.

"It's probably better if I sleep alone tonight", I say and see how he struggles to hide his disappointment, not to put any pressure on me. "I'm sorry... I shouldn't have kissed you before because I don't know..."

"It's okay", he says in a casual way I know does not reflect his feelings. He looks and sounds a bit like he did that time when he heard I had been with Smurf to Newport and got it all wrong, and he questioned why I told *him* nothing had happened between us. Underneath the cool surface there is longing and insecurity which I want to relieve him off, but I do not know how when I'm not sure what the right direction is. I wish I knew and I hope I'm finding out. When I go to bed alone I feel like crying. It has been a wonderful day, but I destroyed it with my doubts, the things I said and kissing him when I should not have. It takes long before I fall asleep and the bed seems mockingly empty without him, but finally I do. A restless

sleep filled with dreams I do not remember in the morning, but I know they were not the fluffy kind.

Charles has gone for jog along the beach. I think maybe he needed to be alone after yesterday and I could do with the space too, even if I long to be close to him. Sam and I are walking along the waterline, skimming stones and looking for seashells.

"Are you coming back to us, Molly?"

I am here now, but I know what he means. The concern makes his face look like a fragile child's again, the loved one I left behind. With Sam I have to be totally honest.

"I don't know Sam."

"Don't you love us?"

"I do, I love both of you but it's not that easy."

"Why isn't it? Does it have to be so hard?"

Fair question.

"Because we love *you*", he continues eagerly. "I love you and I dad loves you. I *know* he does. He'll never be the same without you."

I love to hear that they love me, that *he* loves me, but I try to explain what I have a hard time figuring out myself.

"We will never be the *same* even if we would be together. So much has changed, we're both different so it would be different."

"But maybe it would be something good?"

Maybe it would. I put my arm around his shoulders which still have not broadened into a grown man's.

"Do you know that you're the wisest kid I've ever known? Maybe it *can* be good. We just have to find out. And I'll never leave you again no matter what, your dad and I have agreed on that."

Then both simultaneously spot the perfect stone for skimming and giggling throw ourselves to get to it first. Sam beats me, but we remain lying in the sand, just roll over and stare up into the blue sky. There is only one lonely cloud.

"I bet that one will position itself above me for the rest of the day."

I feel like I deserve it.

"It's a cumulus", he says. "It means the good weather will continue, so you don't have to worry."

"Oh, I worry! I worry you will be an insufferable know-it-all like your dad."

I attack him and tickle him until he laughingly begs for mercy. I may be smaller than him by now, but I still have a few tricks up my sleeve. When Charles returns a few minutes later he finds us still laughing, panting and sandy. I look up on him where he stands, sweaty after the run and with his hands on his hips. He tries to put on his Captain Stern-face look, letting us know we're childish or even mad, but I can see that the sight really makes him as happy as I feel right now.

I walk around with a hard knot in my gut. I want to reach out to him, tell him I was out of line yesterday, make everything good again. I want to make him smile and laugh, I want to hug him, cuddle up next to him, but even after the moment on the beach this morning I'm not sure how to break the dead-lock. It feels like time is running out. In a few days we are leaving the cottage. If we have not moved past this then, I do not know how or when we ever will.

Of course, Sam decides this is an evening when he does not want to keep to himself, so we do not have the possibility to talk about serious stuff even if I could make myself do it. Sam suggests that we play some board games and then watch a movie together. We do and both Charles and I plaster on smiling faces, but I feel like we are circling around each other. Both want and not want to bring up the perilous topic of *us*. Every single moment during the evening, I'm aware of where he is. Too close to me, or too far away from me. His eyes burning on me telling me it is time that I make up my mind, his touch making my heart skip a beat when our hands touch accidentally playing Ludo, my breath hitching when he sits down next to me

for the movie, and the plot is completely lost on me. I'm going mad, I do not know how to handle this anymore. He is trying to keep his emotions in check, but I can see from the tick in his jaw, the darkness in his eyes that he feels like me. This is too much to take anymore.

It is a temporary relief when we say good night and go to our separate rooms, after he has shot me a glance which I'm unable to meet, but then I'm of course completely restless, cannot find a calmness in my night. The hurt in his eyes, his longing gaze follows me even in the darkness. I do not want to get hurt, but neither do I want to hurt him. I'm afraid to be with him, but I do not want to let him go. I want to stay away from him, protect myself, but I also want to kiss him so desperately. I want him. I want all of him. I want him to be mine and I want to be his. Again, not the same as before but a different version of us. It always felt like he was on his way somewhere and I followed best I could. Now he is here, he only wants to be here and is waiting for me to move so we can move together, forward - if I want to.

I did not use to believe in myself when he was not there to tell me I was good enough, was never enough just on my own. Now I'm confident in my own capacity, but I *need* him for other reasons.

He betrayed me, but I failed him too. He has done everything to show me I can trust him again and I feel in my gut that I do.

We had wonderful memories which we destroyed, but now we are capable of creating new ones and maybe restore some of those we dismantled too.

Should I go, or should I stay?

I think of Sam's words - why does it have to be so hard? And of Charles' words – he is terrified too but willing to risk all because the alternative of not trying is far worse. Can I do the same for him? Take that leap of faith?

There is no choice really. I have to be with him. I just have to.

With sudden urgency, I rid myself of the blanket and tiptoe to his room. I carefully open the door and silently shut it closed after me. I make a sound as I bump into the bed and he immediately sits up, unsurprisingly he is awake to. The moon lights up the room dimly and I can see questions and hope in his face when he watches me without saying anything as I approach the bed.

I know that this is right. It is what I want with my entire being.

I sit down on the bedside next to him. He still stays silent, as if he does not want to say anything that might make me change my mind about being here. I know that *nothing* can change my mind about being here now. I'm past that. I meet his eyes and place my palm flat on his bare chest, so it covers the two rings resting there. The metal slightly warm from his body heat, like the rings were alive.

"I'm going to need this back." I whisper because it feels like talking loudly would break the spell.

"You mean...?"

"I'm going to need you to put it on my finger again", I say without hesitation.

A sound that reminds of a sob comes from him as I put my arms around his neck and find his mouth. His warm, soft lips and I cannot help but kissing him hard, possessively. He *is* mine. He really, really is *mine* and will never be anyone else's. And I'm his, I have always been. If he is initially surprised, it does not take him long to catch up and respond and he kisses me back with the longing that three years apart has built up in us. Holds me so tight as if even an inch of empty space between us is too much to bear. Only pauses to ask;

"Are you sure? You're coming back to me?"

"I am. I love you, I want you, I can't bear the thought to live without you again now that you're here. I'm choosing you"

"You're all I want, nothing else. I understand it will be different but it's everything I want", he whispers before we stay silent, swiftly removing the layers of clothes that separates us. Nothing should be between us as our bodies reacquaint themselves. I need his skin on mine. As soon as the clothes are gone, we slow down because now we have all the time in the world and we want to linger in every little move, touch, every kiss trailing over skin and brushing over the other one's lips.

We move as one, hands clasped, not for one second shutting our eyelids because both of us want to see the one person we are with through it all. No pretending, no

shutting out needed because we are right where we want to be. His eyes soft, black velvet like they used to be when he wanted me, and he wants me now for sure. This is not how I remembered it. I never thought it possible, but this is better, maybe because we both fully appreciate what we have here and now.

There is only the sound of the waves rolling against the shore and the occasional soft moan we cannot help letting out even if we try to stay quiet not to wake Sam. It is difficult to stay silent though, so very difficult. When we reach the pinnacle together, I'm close to crying and I can see he is too. He is totally present and focused on me, his expression a combination of love, need and almost pained bliss. There is this moment which feels like the intensively orange sun rising over the horizon is inside me, even if it is in the middle of the night. That is when I have to mute my mouth by pressing my lips to his collarbone and he cannot help a groan escaping him.

Coming down slowly, he whispers;

"I hope to God Sam didn't hear that", and we both giggle. A second kind of release after all the tension of this day and intensity of making love.

Afterwards we lay silent in each other's arms, listening to the waves and it is like they are washing away the past. Not into total oblivion because we want to remember not to make the same mistakes, but pain and distrust are washed away and replaced with love and trust and a different version of us is starting anew.

You are the only one. You always were.

A/N: Enough of the heavy stuff even if I have loved to write this story. Just one last chapter of mostly fluff to show their life after they have overcome the hardships and can look forward. I hope you found the plot somewhat believable and even if you didn't that you enjoyed them ending up together anyway. I know I always do.

Would have loved John Mayer's 'Slow dancing in a burning room' as the song to this chapter, but as that one is about a break up it simply didn't fit beyond being about dancing. Love it more than the song I picked though.

Part VI: Joy

Premonition

See me spendin' every night with you

Under the kitchen lights

You still look like dynamite

And I wanna end up on you

Oh, don't need no place to go

Just put on the radio

You know what I wanna do

We can just dance to this

Dance to this – Ariana Grande/Troye Sivan

There was a period in my life when I did not think I was a cuddly sleeper, but it was for a transient period and in hindsight it probably had to do more with having the wrong company in bed. It is fortunate, because these days I would not have much of a choice, when most nights there are four of us sharing this bed. Sam is the only

family member who has the good sense to stay in his own bed, too old and independent to share space with the rest of us. If he did not go to uni here in Bath, he would have his own place already and he is rather dreaming of sharing bed with his girlfriend even if I think the sensible girl has not allowed him to yet.

Nowadays, a normal night starts with Charles and I spooned, as close we can, falling asleep peacefully in the way you only can in the arms of the one you love. Halfway through the night, Lucy usually calls for mum or dad and one of us drowsily go and get her, put her down in the warm space between us where she loves to be and soon she is sound asleep again. Not long afterwards, we are joined by Edward coming tiptoeing and wriggling himself to fit between us too. In the end, Charles and I lie in a V-shape, the children snuggled up between us but as we are unwilling to let each other go, we keep our feet entwined.

I would lie if I say we are fully rested in the morning, because those two little creatures toss and turn, sometimes lie completely across the bed and us, or with their little faces right in our faces, spreading their lovely warmth and special scent of child and taking up unreasonably much space in relation to their actual body size. It does not matter if I'm a bit tired though, because when he smiles at me, saying;

"Good morning, my love" and kisses me so I wish we had the bed to ourselves for a while, I'm the happiest woman in the world. He sees the glimmer in my eyes and whispers;

"Tonight, let's make it an early evening. Please, Mrs. James."

"Only if you change Lucy's diaper", I smirk, already longing to be back in this bed with him.

"Taken... I would have anyway", he gives me a filthy smile in return, reminding me my husband still is the hottest man I have ever known, and no one can make my belly somersault like him. Then he scoops Lucy up and we initiate our well-practiced routine to get everybody ready for the day. Another day in our common, completely ordinary, extraordinarily wonderful life which we both appreciate to the fullest because it nearly did not happen.

I truly had made up my mind that night when I came to him. Decided that I believed in us, wanted to let the past be the past and was willing to take the same risk as he was.

In the morning, we together free the rings from the chain around his neck and put them on one another's fingers. His hands are trembling slightly as he holds mine to put on my ring and then lifts the hand to press my open palm to his lips. His eyes are glossy, and I feel that mine are too and we stay silent, letting them say all that is needed. Our eyes say that we in many ways wish the last three years had never happened and we are sorry for the hurt we have caused each other, but in another way we believe all this has changed us fundamentally so we may be even better together than we were from the start. That we both are endlessly grateful to be here

in this moment and realise how fragile happiness is. That the love between us, which always was undeniable in all its unlikeliness, now is rooted in a way it was not before. We belong together, we know that with certainty now.

He runs his fingers through my hair and I can see how he enjoys the silky feeling. He pulls me to him and kisses me deeply.

"You don't know how much I've missed this."

I do, because I have too.

"And this..." He kisses me on the neck and gently nudges me to lie down against the fluffy pillows and I giggle with joy.

"...and this..." Dotting a trail of soft kisses on my shoulder and I close my eyes.

...and this..." His fingers tiptoeing over my skin, linger in awe by the dip of my waist, make circles over my belly, before they continue to the heat between my thighs.

"What if Sam...?"

He smiles, an adorable smile filled with the need to be as close to me as two persons can possibly be.

"I told you, he can stay up all night, but it nearly takes an IED going off next to his ear to wake him in the morning."

As meet his eyes, deep brown, pure love, whilst his fingers now find my core gently yet assertive, I can only arch towards him and moan. Unable to verbalise any further objections when this is all I want.

Allowing ourselves to do *this* in broad daylight, somehow makes it all even more real. It was not a wonderful dream what happened here this night. It was very real and neither of us will ever want to take it back, we just confirm it again and again with every enticing move, every whispered word of love. The rings on our fingers are only the material proof of what we know to be true deep inside.

"Do you want to let Sam know today? Or do you want to wait?" he asks when we finally become aware of the surroundings outside our bodies again.

"We can tell him, no need to wait out", I smile. I know Sam will be over the moon, his joy over us being back together for real only marginally surpassed by our own so I see no reason to wait now when *I* know what I want. When we tell him, he proves me right by the joyous shout he lets out, followed by pulling us both into a long, silent group hug.

We have a few more fantastic days in the cottage. Charles and I as glued together as we can be without embarrassing Sam and when we pack up, clean the cottage and lock it one last time I am a little bit sad to leave, but more exciting to explore what is to come next in our once again entwined lives. We came here as an odd trio but leave as a family again. I never dared to hope, but that is how it is.

A few weeks later, I started studying as planned and Charles returned to work. We saw each other as often as we could and adapted our respective homes so the other one would always feel at home, not just like a temporary guest. He kept clothes and favourite books in my flat, I got a whole wardrobe to myself in the house in Bath, a shelf in the bathroom and he asked me to please add some female cosiness in the shape of cushions, blankets, personal trinkets and whatever I wanted.

I was very serious about my studies, determined not to fail and sometime in the beginning I feared he might get impatient with all the hours I put into it even when he was visiting. Instead he supported me and cheered me on. He helped me prepare for exams and then proudly celebrated the successes, the ones that surprised me, but he seemed to have been confident all along would be my reward. He even pushed me to go celebrate with my fellow students when I thought I would stay home with him, telling me he would not want me to miss out the fun when I had all the hard work. Told me I did not have to stay in, because he would be here waiting when I was done. I think he wanted to show me that he was happy to adapt to me, that I never should assume that he expected me to just follow him again or that he would make me chose between him and something else. On those evenings when I did go out to student pubs with friends, I had fun and I was happy, but what made me most happy was to return home to the flat again and find him up waiting or already asleep in my bed and cuddle up with him. He was there. For me. Yet, I

was longing more and more for a continuous life with him, one where we would share a home for real again.

It is spring now, a year since Charles and I met again that day in the park. The day when we started to turn everything around and slowly, in winding ways, approached each other again. I do not know what my life would have looked like if I had not taken that step, but I think I still would have been just half a person, getting by but not living life to the fullest. Not like I do now.

I'm 28 now, the age Charles was when we first met each other. Funny, how I thought he was so terribly mature, sophisticated and authoritarian then, even if he sometimes surprised me taking a dip in a paddling pool, nicking my coco puffs or generally arsing around with me. Sometimes he almost feels younger now, but I suppose that is because I know the real him and he does not have the weight of having to be the officer in constant control on his shoulders anymore.

It is Friday and he has come to visit me for the weekend and we joined some of my new-found friends for dinner and beers out, but the need to be alone after two weeks apart makes us go home early. Last weekend he was away on exercise, so it has been unusually long since we were together and I'm desperately in need of him, behind closed doors. This distance relationship is starting to eat on me and I have at least two years of studies to go. Some days I do not know how I shall be able to handle it, but I do not want to give up my dream of becoming a nurse.

Back home, we both change for joggers and t-shirt and cuddle up in the sofa, snogging and chatting. He is in the mood for snacks he says, gets up to find himself a bag of popcorn in a cupboard and put in the microwave oven. He does not ask me if it is okay with me, just helps himself to it because he feels at home here - and I love it. This normality, I feel I want it with him all the time, every day when I get home. I feel it so much it is like an ache in my body. As the popping sounds and smell of the popcorn spread in the room, he notices the dark cloud passing over my face.

"What's the matter?" he asks with concern in his voice and the familiar frown of his brow.

"Nothing really. I just love *this*. You and me in a sofa, chatting about what has happened during the day, making plans for the weekend, you making popcorn. Maybe I'm greedy but I want more of it – and I don't see how, as long as I'm studying."

He returns to the sofa without waiting for the popcorn to be ready, sits down and holds me close to him. We stay quiet for a while and he keeps holding me and plants a kiss on my head. I feel this strange emotional mix of happiness over what I have right in this moment and sadness that I cannot have it *all the time*.

"I've been thinking about this too and I have an idea, but I've been hesitant to suggest it because I don't want you to think I take it for granted you would change your life for me."

I look up on him, curious what he has to say.

"I want you to know that if it only was down to me, I would gladly leave Bath, move to you here and commute to work - but I can't until Sam is older. In a few years when he is off to university or travelling or whatever he fancies doing, I'll have more options, but for now I must stay put in Bath. I don't want to leave him to live with Rebecca the whole time. I've missed much time with him already."

I nod, of course I know he can neither uproot Sam, nor desert him. I would never want that either.

"But I've missed much time with you too, at my own doing...and the truth is I want to be with you all the time. The options I can think of are that either we just have to stand this for a few years more and make the best of it, and I think we *can* even if it's tough - or you could transfer to Bath university."

He says no more, just looks at me to let me take it in decipher my response when I do.

For some reason I have not thought of this option before, my mind set on that where I started my training I would have to continue until it is complete, but he is right – the option is there. Would I want to leave the life I have started here to come live with him and Sam? Change London for Bath, leave my student room for *our* house, move away from my new-found friends and routines to have breakfast every day with my family and fall asleep in his arms? Would I feel that I lose myself again, changing my life for his sake? The answer is no, I would not feel

I lose myself because it would be for *our* sake and I know he is truthful when he says he would make the move if he did not have Sam to consider. To be honest, the only thing I would miss here would be some friends, but I think that those that are worth keeping in touch with, I will anyway, just like I have done with army mates since I left.

If I move to Bath, I will make the final decision for a life which *ours* again.

I'm completely ready for that.

He sees my face shift from troubled to light, eager to know my thoughts.

"I haven't thought of that before, that a transfer might be possible."

"I know it *can* be done but it's a big decision for you to make."

"It's not that big, really. You see, moving in with you and Sam full-time, be able to see you nearly every day... It would feel like coming home. I want that."

"Just like that? Are you sure, I mean I understand if you need to think about it."

His expression one of disbelief and extreme happiness. I put my arms around his neck.

"Are you trying to convince me I shouldn't?"

"No! I just... I don't want you to feel you're moulding your life after me again."

I know my words in the cottage kitchen has stuck with him and we both strive to be a different couple, one in balance who makes joint decision. This time, looking at what we both wish for the most - a normal daily life together - and the possible options, I'm willing to make the change.

"I know that, and I love you for it, but I *want* to be with you and Sam."

He puts on his mischievous face, tongue in cheek and twinkling eyes.

"Then I won't keep you from it, Dawsey. You're freaking welcome to move in with us."

And so, it happened, that I transferred to Bath that autumn and I did it as Mrs. James after a small ceremony in the summer. As it was the second time, we kept it to only the closest family and friends and I can truthfully not say if I was happiest the first or the second time we said yes to one another. Maybe the second time, because even if I was incredibly happy the first I found it hard to believe it was true and was somehow expecting to wake up from a dream, which I brusquely did in the end. Now I knew it was real and no one would ever be able to take it away from us because we would guard it wisely, together.

I still feel the same now, years later when I'm in addition to being Mrs. James, officer's wife, adored by my husband, also am a qualified nurse, mother of two plus a step-son and, as if that was not enough, dog-owner. Still living in Bath because that is what feels like home to all of us, but in a different house because we outgrew the first one.

This evening when I've picked up the kids I'm completely knackered and when I put the key in the door I'm thinking it is more likely I will fall asleep next to the kids when putting them to bed than having that hot alone time with my husband that I have longed for and promised him this morning. However, as we open the door we are met by amazing smells from the kitchen and Charles comes to meet us with a big smile for all, hugs for the kids and a deep kiss for me, showing he has not forgotten what I traded for Lucy's diaper change.

"I finished work early today", he smiles. "As the unromantic woman you so stubbornly claim to be, I'm sure you don't remember what day it is."

He is right, I do not, and I quickly flip through the rolodex of my mind. We got back together in summer, we got married for the second time the following summer, we moved together in Bath in the autumn and it is none of our birthdays. I really cannot figure out what this grey February day is because it is none of our anniversaries.

He watches my face with amusement as I'm thinking intently.

"Christ Molly, how is it even possible to miss it is Valentine's day?"

Ah, I might have seen a heart-shaped balloon somewhere at the hospital even if decorations generally are prohibited there, and maybe unusually many patients had flowers in their rooms come to think of it. Valentine's day explains it.

"Luckily, I remembered for both of us", he smirks.

He is right, he is the more romantic of the two of us but even if I'm not that good at it, I love it and I feel my face turn into one big smile.

"I'm preparing fishfingers and mash for the kids. You go and have bath and then we'll have dinner just you and I when we have put them to bed. Sound like a plan?"

"It does", I smile and kiss him again.

"Try not to fall asleep in the bath tub and drown", he shouts after me as I walk up the stairs. "That would make me very sad, on Valentine's day and all – you'd ruin it for me forever."

He did not need to worry. Even if I was tired when I got home, I'm looking forward to dinner with him too much now to fall asleep. I just let myself relax in the hot, foamed, perfumed water for a while, letting happiness seep through my body.

By the time I return downstairs, the kids have eaten and are already in pyjamas. I do not know what it is about kids in pyjamas, they are just extra adorable in a way that makes me never want to part from them. Maybe *that* is the thing, that when they are in pyjamas I know I will soon be saying goodbye to them for the night, or well, in our case for a few hours.

"Don't look at them like that."

"Like what?"

"With loving puppy eyes like you won't be able to leave them in bed."

I laugh because he reads me so well.

"Can you blame me? The best of me and you combined in these two. I love them to bits."

Both dark-haired, one with straight hair and brown eyes, one with curly hair and green eyes. Edward often talking without filter, like I used to do, Lucy calmer, taking the world in but not always verbalising her thoughts. I suppose she would be a bit previous if she did as she only is two, but I still have the feeling that she will be more like Charles.

"Of course, I can't, they're perfect and I love them to the moon and back, but tonight they won't have you. You're mine.", he says with a mischievous grin. I feel a surge through my body, suddenly longing for them to be asleep. Longing for him alone.

All four of us go upstairs for their bedtime story. I snuggle up with Edward, Charles with Lucy and he reads. Will I ever grow tired of hearing his well-articulated dark voice no matter what words come over his lips? I do not think so. The voice that once upon a time only spoke commands to me, now reading Peter Rabbit and I just enjoy the rhythm and soft sound without actually hearing the words, wondering if it is possible to be in love with a voice. If the rest of him was not there, I think I might still love only the voice.

"Hey, where are you?" He nudges me, the kids have fallen asleep.

"I was listening to you."

"Yeah, right. I stopped reading five minutes ago. Someone was lost." He smiles and holds out his hands to pull me up from the bed, so I'm for a thrilling moment pressed to the hard planes of his body, receiving an intensive kiss before he pulls me downstairs again.

Down in the kitchen, he has set the table, prepared with candles which he now lights and gives the finishing touches to the meal.

"It's Elvis' favourite recipe", he says. "The one he once shared with me in confidence and promised me it would floor any lady I made it for. Obviously, I never made it for anyone but you and I thought it was fitting today", he grins.

It always makes me happy to see that these days he is able to think and speak of Elvis with fondness and warmth without being overwhelmed by grief and guilt. Of course, he will always grieve Elvis, but he will never again let that overshadow his own life to the extent that he cannot live it. He knows that is not what Elvis would have wanted. Elvis stays with him, but now in a good way, just like when he lived reminding Charles to take life less seriously.

"Is that the one called something with *putanesca*?"

He throws his head back in laughter.

"Good guess, but it's the risotto with white truffles."

"Oh, that *is* good. I think Elvis may have been right, someone's getting lucky tonight."

With his face filled with utter happiness and contentment, he pours two glasses of red wine, but he leaves them standing on the worktop. Instead he comes over to me and holds out his hand.

"Dance with me."

"There's no music in case you didn't notice."

I try to escape because I've always been crap at all sorts of couple dancing because I find it hard to smoothly follow and let the man take the lead.

"Let the music be in your head. I just want to be close to you, Molly, dance with you for a little while here under the kitchen light. Like I know I want to for the rest of our lives."

"Even when I'm old and wrinkly? Will you still love me and want to dance with me then?"

"I know you'll be just as beautiful to me when you're old and wrinkly and that there's no place I'd rather be than with you, wherever that is. If it is in our kitchen, dancing, I'm perfectly happy."

As I know that I will be, so I let him pull me into his arms for a dance, find that his body follows mine just as much as I follow his when I melt into him – and as he places his lips to mine I can actually hear the music in my head.

I have everything I ever wanted, and I know he does too.

A/N: That was the end of it even if I never like to write the final chapter of a story because it feels a bit empty afterwards. I would love if you let me know what you think of my take on post-season 4, if you haven't already. Thanks for all reviews given during the way!

x

All my completed stories are also to be found in a more reader friendly e-book format on www.misspionyff.wordpress.com.

I'm on Twitter under my pen name @MissPiony if you wish to follow for story alerts or just say hi.