



# Reasons to Heal

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# CHAPTER 1

MOLLY RESTED HER HAND ON the door next to her. The vibrations of the police car gave her something to focus on other than the pounding of her heart.

“First arrest, hmm?” Her police training tutor, Gary, stated the obvious.

“First one.” The road was a stark black as she fiddled with her police-issue ID badge. It would be fine because she was strong. Her knowledge of police procedures was top notch. Things would be absolutely okay.

“Albert Coleridge has a girlfriend: Julie,” Gary said. “She’s a bit of a nightmare, but nothing compared to him.”

Another squad car passed them, and the occupants jeered at them. Molly smirked, around seventy percent sure they were being nice rather than bullying. They had no reason to bully her. “So I’ll be containing the girlfriend in the living room whilst you and Constable Reynolds make the arrest.” It hadn’t been a question, so she was pleased when he smiled at her sideways and didn’t reply to the affirmative. She’d said it out loud to get it clear in her head.

“Keep her calm. Use those police instincts. You’ll be fine.”

She chewed her lip, torn between admitting she didn’t have any instincts and staying quiet, accepting Gary believed she did. No need to make him worry about her skills; a female police officer just starting out. It was her first shift actually doing something beneficial rather than simply walking around Bristol or checking on old ladies. “I’ll try.” She gave him a nod.

He grinned and shot her a look she thought might have been understanding.

Why was her heart beating with such vigour? She squared her shoulders

and set her jaw. She pushed a hard look into her eyes, then remembered her task and softened her expression. *Just keep the girlfriend calm. Pacify her.* She nodded and hoped that her nerves would be imperceptible.

The squad car in front of them pulled up to the kerb. Constable Reynolds and his partner, Constable Brown, got out. The men were in their thirties; one was tall and lean, the other short and stocky. Both carried themselves with ease and confidence.

Molly tried to copy them without being too obvious. Gary pulled their car behind the other, tapped his hands on the steering wheel a couple of times, and then got out. The door banged closed. Then she remembered she was supposed to get out too. Gravel crunched under her shiny boots. The evening sun hurt her eyes as it dipped below the house they headed for. Her ID badge bounced against her chest. No need for a jacket yet. The July heat lingered.

Reynolds and Brown waited for them at the front door. Reynolds peeked in the front window and then grinned. "Looks like they're watching TV. That's pretty lush." The strength of his Bristolian accent tickled her, but she tried to hide it.

"No probs." Brown raised his fist to the wood. The door opened before he'd completed the first knock.

"Oh, right. Police, innit?" A man with greying hair and a stubbly beard, presumably Albert Coleridge, stood in stripy pyjama bottoms with his wrinkled chest bare. The smell of tobacco and old coffee stung Molly's eyes.

"Albert Coleridge?"

"Don't wear it out." Coleridge's eyebrows lowered. White hairs stuck out from both of them.

Gary waved his hand, an indication for Molly to go into the house. Coleridge stepped back and allowed her through, with a resigned sigh.

"I'm arresting you on suspicion of assault. You do not have to say anything..."

Molly slipped into the living room, her focus clear, and her job simple. Keep the girlfriend calm and out of the way. Easy. A smell similar to that which emanated from Coleridge seeped from the walls of the house, heightening the yellowing decor. Paper peeled from the wall by the gas fireplace. A cloud of smoke surrounded the heavily made-up woman who sat at the cluttered dining table.

“All right? Who’s you, then?”

“I’m Constable Blue.” She grimaced. “I’m with the police. I need to inform you that we are arresting Albert...Mr Coleridge.”

“Not for stealing sweets, is it?” The woman narrowed her eyes and stood, her lit fag at serious risk of dropping from between her fingers.

“I’m afraid not. Are you Julie?”

“That’s me.”

“Would you mind answering some questions?”

“What you arresting him for?” Julie squinted through the front window and scratched the back of her neck with long nails painted in a Union Jack design.

“Suspicion of assault. They...” Molly cleared her throat. “We believe he is responsible for the serious assault of Adrian Heather in Easton last night.”

“Hmm.” Julie pulled her mouth to one side. Then she cocked her head, perhaps listening to the goings on outside. The front door closed. “I’m not sure I want to answer your questions, Missy.”

Gritting her teeth, Molly tried to smile. “It’d be really helpful if you did. We need to gather as much information about the incident as possible.” She pursed her lips. “I’d much rather Mr Coleridge was kept in custody for as short a time as possible, wouldn’t you?”

Julie continued to frown but relaxed her stance. “Can’t say much; wasn’t there in Easton.”

“That’s okay.” Molly pulled her daybook out and clicked her pen. “As much as you know.”

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Many instances of “Good work, Blue,” and “Nice one, rookie,” later, Molly enjoyed a nice cup of tea in the squad car at the bottom of Castle Park. Gary sipped his own coffee, one elbow out of the open window and wearing an expression that reeked of satisfaction. “Good job. It was an easy one, eh?”

“The girlfriend didn’t want to talk initially, but I think I won her round.” Molly had no frame of reference but assumed Gary knew what he was talking about. It hadn’t been a chore. There had been no need to use any persuasive skills at all.

“Coleridge managed to pull a hoodie on and then came like a lamb. Must have just woken up or something.” He shrugged. “More action soon, I’m sure. Get you some interesting arrests.”

“I don’t mind.” Molly smiled, pushed a wisp of blonde hair from her face, and wiggled her toes in her brand-new boots. She considered her office attire for a moment. Fluttering spread within her when she thought about receiving her first uniform. The boots, at least, were getting worn in. She was ready for proper shifts and proper work. The boots would be worn at home as much as she could. It wouldn’t be good to have them rub her toes when she finally got around to chasing a suspect. “Actually, I’m more into the ‘helping the community’ bit of being a police constable.”

“That’ll change.” He eyed her, but a moment later, he smiled. “You’ll learn to enjoy the exciting things. Arrests, searches, breaking up fights outside clubs.”

With an attempt not to wince, Molly returned his smile. “It’s very different here. Bristol’s a big city.”

“That’s right. You’re from the seaside, aren’t you?”

“Kind of. It’s a small fishing village.”

“You worked in a shop before you started your training, didn’t you?”

Molly nodded. “Just a newsagent. And I looked after my brother and sisters.”

“Younger?”

“Quite a bit.” Molly gazed up at the sloping park, taking in the green of the lawns that shone as the sun continued to dip. A few university students sat with guitars and snacks. Someone was hula-hooping, skin-tight leggings shimmering with sparkles. “I’m from my mum’s first marriage.”

“Bit indecisive, your mum?”

She grimaced. “My dad moved to America.”

“Speak to him much?”

She shrugged. “I’ve not seen him since I was five.”

“Shame. Little girls need their daddies.”

She frowned and wanted to pout.

He held up both hands. “Hey, I’m just saying. Boys do too, but there’s something about a daughter-father relationship that’s special. I’m close to both my girls; they’re the princesses of my life too.”

“And I am not a little girl.” Molly tried a glint of humour in her voice.

Gary laughed. "Well, at five-foot-nothing, my love, you're not exactly a beanstalk, are you?"

She stared at her knees and shook her head, trying not to laugh. "Guess not."

"I won't take the piss, Molly. I'm curious to see how you fare against some of our big blokes, that's all." He sipped the last of his coffee and placed the cup back in the holder. "How are you doing in the fitness tests?"

"Good. Bleep test is fine. I used to jog a lot and ride my bike to work. It's, like, five miles."

"Good going. If we ever have to chase anyone down, I'll let you do the action-woman stuff. I'll just supervise."

"That is your job." Molly grinned.

He was all right, actually. A bit of bravado with the other male officers, but when it was only her and him, he softened a bit. Molly supposed he had a reputation to maintain. He wanted to seem like a hard guy in a cluster of hard-guy officers. That was fine with her. Who was she to rip that from him?

"It's not just the area that's different." Molly chuckled. "I'm so used to being around my siblings. Being around adults is strange." She laughed again, tightening her fingers around her cup.

"My wife says that sometimes." Gary's gaze was trained on a mother walking along the path with a kid in a buggy, another child slung against her front. "Spends all day with our girls, then I come home, and it's like she's been living in a bubble. A bubble mostly filled with *Paw Patrol* and *Bing*."

"Casey loved *Bing*." Her brother's bright-blue eyes broke into her mind's eye, and something ached in her. "I miss him. I miss all three of them."

"You going to visit?"

She nodded. "I need to wait for a break in my training."

"Good. Best to keep in touch."

"I text Adele every day. And I phone the little ones. Skype them sometimes." She traced the raised name of the café on her cup. "I've looked after them for...since I was twelve."

"Responsible thing, were you?"

Molly nodded and pressed her lips together. It was the little things she missed: kissing them goodnight, reading them a bedtime story. Even

though Adele was twelve and far too old for a story, she always crept in and lip-read whatever Molly was reading, without a word.

But she was doing what she'd always dreamed of, so she pushed the homesickness away and listened to Gary's humorous tales of lawful arrests from the last twenty years.

## CHAPTER 2

THE SMELL OF COFFEE SWATHED Kudzi like a comforting blanket as she stepped into the café. Cat was already there, her wide grin twinkling as brightly as her eyes. Kudzi waved and took the seat next to her, lifting her brows at the cup already steaming and filled with her favourite. “Latte?”

“Course.” Cat patted the napkin next to Kudzi’s cup, her smile smug. “I know what you like.”

Kudzi raised her eyebrow again. “You’re having mint tea again?”

Cat’s grin intensified, and she swept her elbow-length hair over one shoulder.

“You’re becoming a hippie.” Kudzi shook her head. “What will Mum think?”

“I don’t care.” Cat threaded her fingers through the handle of her cup and dipped her nose in the vapour. “John likes it too.”

“So long as John likes it.” Kudzi tapped her sister’s wedding ring.

“What do you think, anyway?” Cat fingered the end of a beaded braid, which emanated from a triangular piece of hair, flat on her scalp.

“Box braids always looked good on you. You’re a nineties girl at heart.”

“Retro? I’ll take that.”

They both laughed, and Kudzi shot Cat a knowing look. “John’s a fan?”

“Of course. I showed him a picture before I went to Gladys.”

“What with your new hair and changing taste in tea, you’re becoming a new woman.”

“New and improved.”

They spent some time sipping their drinks. Kudzi stirred the frothy milk, marvelling at how the coffee swirled and darkened it. They served the



best coffee at Café Revival. It was the perfect place to meet someone after traipsing round the market in search of a new hat.

After replenishing her caffeine levels, Kudzi grabbed her shopping bag and pulled out the deep-red fedora. The price tag dangled until she snapped it off.

Cat made a noise like a pigeon and relinquished her cup to hold out a hand. That was where the hat ended up, inevitably, and Kudzi chuckled as Cat set it on her own head.

“For my birthday, yes?”

“No. It’s mine.”

Cat pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. “But I like it.”

“Don’t care. Mine.” Kudzi tried to grab it back.

The beads at the end of Cat’s braids tapped against each other as she shook her head.

Kudzi huffed. “*Nyasha!*”

Cat folded her arms and glared, then relented and handed Kudzi the hat. “You’re not Mum. Don’t call me that.”

“Don’t steal my stuff.” Kudzi donned the fedora and tipped it forward before giving Cat what she hoped was an affectionate smile.

Slumping back in her seat, Cat sighed. “So it’s nice. I like it.”

“Reckon it’ll get me the girls?”

“Which girls?”

“The ones I pull in with my extra-special charm.”

A spluttering sound sprang from Cat, and she hid behind her mug. “Not Sindy?”

Kudzi shot her a look.

Cat averted her gaze but then caught it once more, the amused creases on either side of her mouth softening. “Just friends still?”

The floor squeaked under Kudzi’s trainers as she shifted in her seat. “We’re better as.”

A beeping sound made Cat fumble in her pocket for her mobile. She scrolled through it. Her eyes flicked back and forth, then squeezed shut, perhaps in frustration. Irritation, at least. “Another baby outfit photo from Mother-truly.”

Kudzi frowned. She laid her hand over Cat’s cold one. “She isn’t subtle, is she?”

“No.” Cat dropped her head backwards, groaning. “I thought I’d been clear. Perhaps not.”

“I can’t believe she still doesn’t understand your career comes first. And kids aren’t on the cards right now.”

Something dark flickered behind Cat’s eyes. “I’m starting to feel the pressure.”

“I know.”

A long huff and Cat relaxed once again. The hand under Kudzi’s became warmer. “I get that she wants grandkids. But I don’t want to be the one to give them to her yet.”

“Dad isn’t much help?”

“He keeps out of it mostly. Even John seems to escape from the room whenever Mum starts. He and Dad go and look at Dad’s lilies.”

“It’s good they have something macho to do together.”

Cat spluttered, then shook her head, a spark of something close to humour in her expression. “I’m not ruling it out. It’s just not in our plan yet.” She poked Kudzi’s forearm. “You’re so lucky.”

“I am not!” Kudzi’s cheeks burned. “There is nothing about my life that is lucky when it comes to our parents.”

Cat chewed her lip and removed her hand. “They’re not on you every moment for you to have children, though.” She wound the thin end of a braid around her finger in a way that told Kudzi she wasn’t yet familiar with her new style. “You don’t get that kind of pressure.”

A lump formed in Kudzi’s throat and tugged at her resolve. Irritation rose like coarse gravel. “I get a different sort of pressure.”

Cat stared into her mug. She fiddled with the handle. “You should tell them you’re gay.”

“And that would go...like a lead balloon in a turbulent river.”

“Interesting analogy.”

They shared another smile. It was only teasing; Cat knew it would never happen. Telling your Zimbabwean parents you were a big old lesbian would get you shunned from the family. And anyway, Kudzi didn’t need to. Things were okay as they were. Things were calm and content. Things were safe.

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Molly gazed around, the condensation from her bottled beer making her fingers chilly. It was the second time she had been to OMG Bar. It was the epitome of gay: purple lights and a long bar, even a peacock painted on the wall outside. The music wasn't terrible, and it wasn't too busy. It was just the ticket for someone unused to adult company and alcohol, especially both at the same time.

She swung her feet on and off the rung of the barstool. Glasses clinked as the bartender gathered a few clean ones out of the dishwasher. A couple of effeminate lads teased one another over to one side. They didn't look much older than Molly—students, maybe. There were two universities in Bristol, and students came from all over the world.

After a brief wonder whether Adele was enjoying the summer holidays, a group came in from the evening air. They threw their jackets and bags onto a stool in a corner. There were four of them, all women. Shrieks and laughter flooded the space as one of the women—a brunette with a baseball cap—shoved a short girl with a red bob. “Sindy, seriously.”

Molly tried not to blush. The redhead was cute—all cheeky looking with a nose stud and a lock of fringe that fell into her eyes. The other two seemed unimpressed with the brunette's antics. The redhead sat between the two unaffected women and put her hand on the knee of the woman on the left.

Her lips moved, but she spoke too quietly for Molly to hear. Whatever she said made the other woman, a dark-skinned woman with a red hat, roll her eyes and smile. She didn't seem to mind the hand on her leg. Molly reckoned they were together.

The two exchanged a quick kiss, a millimetre shy of friendly. The loud brunette looked in Molly's direction and grinned. Heat crept into Molly's cheeks. Seeing women together caused champagne-like bubbles to mix around Molly's belly. The only gay woman she knew back home was Mrs Linton, who lived on the marina in her big blue boat.

Enjoying the metropolitan society she had moved into only a few months ago, Molly shifted her gaze away from the group and gulped her beer. Best not let them think she stared. She swung her legs some more and hoped she didn't look like a country bumpkin in her plain jeans and T-shirt. How obvious was it that she was not a city girl? She peeked again. The group of four seemed all dolled up with makeup and shiny hair. Even

the red-hat woman had sparkly earrings plus a sort of bronze eyeshadow to complement her casual demeanour.

The brunette flounced over. Panic rose in Molly. She tried to relax, to not shrink back from the impending critique of her clothing choices.

The brunette held out a hand. “Jane.”

“Oh.” Molly blinked at her, unused to being the same height as someone else on her high stool. “Hi.”

Jane wiggled her fingers until Molly gripped them, making sure to shake with confidence. Or something that masqueraded as.

“Molly.” Perhaps a nod was appropriate.

Jane giggled. “Mate. What are you, twelve?” She leant in and hissed in Molly’s ear. “How’d you get in?”

“I’m twenty-four.” Molly didn’t mind. Being mistaken for someone younger than her age could often be used to her advantage. Child’s bus tickets. Discounted meals. “I...I get that a lot.”

“I bet.” Jane’s gaze travelled from Molly’s blonde, wavy hair to her scruffy trainers.

Molly’s face burned. “Um...yeah. They’re pretty—”

“Vintage.” Jane winked. “You should say vintage.”

“Vintage.” Molly smiled again. She glanced over at the group. They all frowned with blatant confusion in her direction.

“Anyway. Here by yourself?” The words dripped with flirtatious curiosity. The way Jane touched her finger to her baseball cap added to it.

Molly gulped. “Yep.”

“Jane. Christ, leave the girl alone,” said a voice from behind her. The dark-skinned woman with the redhead’s hand on her thigh gestured over.

Molly gave Jane an apologetic shrug.

“She’s new. I’m introducing her into the family.” Jane bellowed like some kind of referee.

Jane’s friend rolled her eyes. “Will you leave the young ones alone?” Her accent was thick, but her words were well formed. Molly thought she was probably African. She sounded refined.

Jane’s accent was pure Bristol—cocky with a hint of hard streetwise. Molly felt like a farmer in her presence.

“*She* can’t talk, lover.” Jane moved close to Molly’s ear again. “Only a baby herself. Not that you’d guess.”

Unsure how to respond, Molly shrugged again. Her smile stayed put, however, and she couldn't quite break eye contact with Jane. Jane had lines around her eyes, and, despite her countryside attire, she was maybe fifteen years older than Molly.

Jane poked her beer bottle, which moved an inch across the bar. "A beer woman?"

Molly nodded, her tongue dry.

"Better get back to these imbeciles." Jane nodded towards the group. "Buy you a drink next time...when you don't look so much like a mouse in headlights." She strolled away before Molly could argue that she looked more like a deer.

## CHAPTER 3

MOLLY'S HEAD WASN'T TOO FUZZY. The morning sun didn't seem to disagree with her quite as much as when she'd had a skinful on previous nights out, for which Molly was grateful. A Skype call with her mum and siblings was due, so she rose as quickly as she could, and showered. After she spent time in her towel, combing her long blonde hair out and wincing at any knots, she made sure her bedsit was neat for her mother's eyes.

At ten on the dot, her phone rang. She pulled on her last sock and reclined on her bed, tapping the button to open the call. Her mother's face came into pixelated view before smoothing out. Thank goodness for good reception.

"Hey." Molly shoved her phone between her raised knees and waved in case Adele was there too. Sunday mornings she was usually home. They went swimming before lunch but not until eleven. "How's you?"

Lilith smiled, but there was tension in her jaw and crinkles between her brows. "Not bad, Chicken. You?"

"Mhm." Molly nodded and looked around for her deaf sister. "Adele there?"

"She's in the garden, teaching Casey to kick the football."

"He knows very well how to do that." Amusement tickled her, as did the giggle that rose in her throat. "She kidding herself or what?"

"I don't know." Lilith shrugged. She was a slight woman—that was where Molly got her lack of height—with a blonde-dyed bob and thin lips. Four children and several unhelpful relationships with men had added lines to her face beyond her fifty-two years. "She's bossing him about like nothing I've ever seen."

“Preteen hormones?”

“She’s being a little madam.” Lilith closed her eyes and leant forward, as if her head was too heavy. “Chicken, I’m really struggling.”

“I’m sorry. Have you spoken to your boss?”

“Boss?” Her head snapped up. “Oh. Not work. Work’s busy but not unmanageable.”

“Then?”

“Adele. She doesn’t like Chloe one little bit.”

“Oh.” Molly was dumbstruck. She thought Chloe had been a sweetheart. Twenty-one years old and straight out of university. She was eager to learn and to look after the three little ones whilst Lilith was at work. First-aid trained. British sign language level three and then some. Her experience in the local deaf children’s group had made her a perfect match.

“Adele has this...this uppity manner. And yes, I am aware that her language skills are a lot better than Chloe’s. Heavens, whose aren’t? When that kid talks fast, even I struggle to keep up.”

Molly smiled. “Me too.”

“You’d think Adele would thrive in that environment. A chance to teach someone older than her how to sign? But no. She clams up and folds her arms and refuses to answer when Chloe talks to her. She won’t even lip-read.”

The memory of leaving four months ago, of Adele giving her those big eyes full of hurt and not even hugging her goodbye, made Molly’s stomach ache. “D’you...?” She chewed her lip and ran a hand through her wet hair. “Do I need to come home?”

“No. Absolutely not.” Lilith smiled, but it seemed forced. “You stay exactly where you are. I’m just having a moan.”

“You’re sure?” Molly’s gaze flicked over to her wallet. Did she have enough in her account to buy a train ticket?

“Chicken, you’re right in the middle of your training. We’ll be fine.”

Molly considered her mother’s creased face for a few breaths. Then she crossed her wrists over her chest and pointed to the screen.

“I love you too, Chicken.” Lilith copied the movements, and Molly was able to take a large gulp of air. Some of the concern washed away with it. “So tell me all about your week.”

Molly grinned and sat up straight. She recounted tales of the classroom,

the things she had learned about professional standards, diversity, and officer safety. “Then we went out into this scenario, and we practised stopping a member of the public who was driving unsafely. I had to PNC the vehicle—all fake, of course, for training purposes only—and then I found out she was disqualified from driving.”

“Such responsibility.” Pride shone from Lilith’s expression.

Molly’s chest warmed, and she wiggled on her bed. “I asked her to please step out of the vehicle, and then I arrested her.”

“Wow. Get you.”

They both giggled, which was followed by the noise of small feet pounding towards the screen. Casey and Patty both waved. Adele walked at a lazier pace behind them, her head down.

“Hey, guys.” Molly signed the words too. If Adele looked up, she would be included. “What you been up to?”

“Football!” Patty, two years younger than Adele and as blonde as the rest of her family, made a C-shape with her forefinger and thumb and wiggled it from side to side under her chin.

“It was funny, was it?” Molly lifted her brow.

Both Casey and Patty nodded. They looked behind them towards Adele, who had turned to one side.

“Someone tell moody-cow over there that she could do with actually looking at the computer screen, hmm?” Molly shook her head.

Casey gripped Adele’s shoulder and pointed to the screen. He signed the word “nice” and fingerspelled, “Mol.”

Adele frowned at him, and even Molly could tell she considered pretending she didn’t understand him. Casey’s pout suggested he could see it in her expression too. Then Adele turned her gaze to Molly and rolled her eyes.

“What’s the matter with you?”

Adele shrugged. “I don’t like the babysitter.” She also signed the word for “stupid.”

“She isn’t.” Molly shook her head. “She’s a nice woman.”

“She’s not very clever. She’s stupid.” Adele’s eyes seemed wet, but it was difficult to tell through Skype.

“You can teach her. Her BSL was okay. But she needs someone clever like you to help her.”



“She can’t make...” The connection broke up, so Molly didn’t catch Adele’s last sign.

“Eggy bread?” Lilith laughed. She shot Molly a frustrated look. “I’ll have to give her a training session on that. When I’ll have time, I don’t know.”

“Someone thought she was our auntie,” Patty said. “She’s very blonde as well.” She flicked her shoulder-length hair like some kind of diva and grinned.

Adele stood with a stony face and stuffed her hands into her pockets. A final shrug—and the pop of her fingers out for a moment to sign the word “pants”—and Adele left. That almost-teenage stomping could be heard on the stairs even through Skype.

“I’m sure she’ll come around.” Lilith sighed, running her hands through her hair. Casey shifted onto his mother’s lap and cuddled her neck. She squeezed him, and he poked her nose.

Warmth flooded Molly, like stepping outside on a sunny day. She thanked whoever had invented video chat because without it, she’d never be able to speak with her eldest sister. Being deaf made some of the simplest things impossible. Things most people took for granted. Like finding appropriate childcare.

“I’m sure she will.” Molly caressed the side of her screen with one finger before she glanced at the clock on her wall. “Umm. I need to go. Got breakfast and then a shift this afternoon. And I have to go over traffic law before I go in.”

“Safe day, Chicken.”

Molly nodded, signed “I love you” once more, and hung up.

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It was the last day of wearing her shirt and dress trousers to work. Molly rocked from one foot to the other outside a door she knew contained many items of clothing. Black trousers, crisp white shirts, black vests with a hundred pockets. And that hat—a bowler-type thing with a white-and-black chessboard pattern on it.

A couple of her fellow trainees hung around too, chatting. There was only one other woman, around Molly’s age, and the rest were men. Some were younger than she was.

Paul, a guy with brown hair and a cheeky grin, cuffed her on the shoulder with no real force. “How much are you going to have to get your mum to turn up those trousers, do you think, Mol?”

She shushed him and toed the carpet. She could turn up her own trousers. No need to involve Mum. “How you going to elongate yours? Get twice as many pairs and sew them end to end?”

The other guys laughed.

Molly kept her smile to herself, but smugness rose in her nonetheless. She smoothed her sleek hair, worn today in a bun at the base of her neck: the uniform policy. So neat. Why didn't she have a mirror? Maybe she could invest in some hairspray if she needed it. There was a Superdrug on her walk home.

The door finally opened, and each of the group was invited in, one by one. Molly went in last, high-fiving Paul as he left, all cocky in his uniform, which still had the creases from being in the packet. He'd have to iron them himself at home—if he knew how.

“My name is Sandra. What size are you, love? A ten?” A woman with curly grey hair and a salmon blouse with ruffled bits beckoned her closer.

“Um, actually...” Molly chewed her lip but forced herself to stand up straight. “Actually, I wear a men's thirty short.”

“Men's trousers?” Sandra furrowed her eyebrows. “Why do you need to wear men's clothes?”

“I find them more comfortable.” Molly was pleased to hear that her voice was steady and her tone friendly. A prickle of irritation made the hairs stand on the back of her neck, however.

Sandra looked at her for one long moment, tapping a pen against her teeth. A tape measure was slung over her shoulder like the strap of a handbag.

Molly stood her ground. She popped a smile onto her face and gave Sandra a little shrug.

Sandra sighed. “Right. A thirty, thirty?”

“That's right.” Relief washed through Molly. “Don't worry if they're a bit long. I'm a dab hand with a needle.”

Something akin to admiration entered Sandra's eyes. “What are you? Five-one?”

“Five-zero.” Molly tried to make it sound like a badge of honour.

“You’re in proportion, though, aren’t you?” Sandra turned to the tall shelves behind her and piled pairs of trousers and shirts into her own arms. “Neat little thing.”

“I’m at the top of my BMI.” Molly rubbed the back of her neck. “I’m not skinny.”

“And so you shouldn’t be.” Sandra appeared happy in general, despite her earlier concern about Molly’s choice in clothing. And happiness was important. “Need meat on your bones to do those long shifts.”

“You do nine-to-five?” Molly took a pair of trousers.

“Try those on, love. Yes. Monday to Friday. I don’t think I’d manage night shifts. Don’t like missing my soaps.”

Molly went behind a small, dilapidated screen to one side. “My mum’s like that.” Cold air hit her legs as she stripped off her trousers and pulled on the new ones. They came down over her feet and were thick material with large pockets. She wiggled her toes out of the end and bent to fold the trouser legs underneath. That would do for now. She’d get her sewing kit on them when she got home. “If she can’t watch *Emmerdale*, she gets cranky. I like *Cake Battle* myself.”

“Well, it’s good escapism, isn’t it?”

Molly stepped out, hands on her hips, and gave Sandra a little twirl in her thick socks. The laugh that sprang from the older woman was the desired reaction, and it made Molly grin.

“Perfect fit, dear.” Sandra passed her a shirt.

Molly disappeared behind the screen again. Once she was fully uniformed, she pulled her boots back on and went over to the full-length mirror leaning against the shelves. Sandra handed her a hat. It fit over her flat hair, the back of the rim resting above her bun. Pride surged as she stared at herself. She looked grown-up now. A proper police constable. Even if she hadn’t completed her training yet, this was the day she would look real. All the weeks of classroom learning would be worth it. From this moment on, there was nothing she couldn’t do.

\* \* \*

On return from her shift, Molly found an envelope addressed in her dad’s handwriting in the pigeonhole for her bedsit. She poked it, curious about the reason her dad would send a card when it wasn’t her birthday,

before taking it inside and leaving her rucksack on its hook. The envelope ended up under her arm as she unlaced her boots and toed them off.

The kettle made a rumbling noise as it boiled. Molly sat on her bed in her living room/sleeping area and stared at the envelope. The return address read “California.” It was definitely from her dad.

She needed tea before she opened it. Even these days, the hope that he would send her something that showed he loved her still burned hot. Her hopes would, of course, be fractured. The heat of the mug almost seared her palm, but she used it to snap her back into the present. It cleared her mind and built strength. She had it milky. Her mum always said milk was calming, especially before bed.

Molly opened the envelope and slid the card out. It was brightly coloured with a leprechaun doing some kind of high kick. “Good Luck.”

Inside, her dad had written that she was a police officer now—not quite true, but the sentiment was there—and that he was proud. She rolled her eyes. Proud didn’t mean much. She hadn’t spoken to him in a year, hadn’t seen him in nearly twenty. Not since he left her and her mother to shoot off to America to meet someone Molly was hesitant to call a stepmother. He had two other children these days. Molly didn’t consider herself part of that. Hope fizzled out.

Some kids didn’t have dads, and she reckoned that was okay. Apart from sending her a birthday card, and apparently good luck cards when she got a job, she and her father didn’t communicate. She was barely acknowledged.

She thought about sending him an email with a photo of her in her new uniform—the one she had sent to Adele and to Mum. He wouldn’t reply. She shrugged and threw the card into a pile of hairbands on her bedside table. Other things improved her life, and she’d rather pay attention to those. Like her delicious cup of tea.

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# REASONS TO HEAL

BY JENN MATTHEWS

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