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A TRIP TO THE MOON

Life can just be so... unexpected

Chapter One

NORMAL FOR THE SPIDER, CHAOS FOR THE FLY

A boy with dark, tousled hair and a navy Parka studied the ground as he walked. Grey. Everything was grey and nothing. Parka zipped up to the hood, fierce eyes cast downward, he thrust his hands in his pockets. Leaden hands so heavy they could sink through his jacket, into the pavement, disappearing to the centre of the earth. A villainous Stretch Armstrong holding ten-tonne weights.

The pavement was a patchwork of cracked greys with ink spot splodges of grey-green lichen spreading ominously from the gaps. He concentrated on the cracks as if nothing else mattered. Nothing else did matter.

The wind whipped around him, driving rain into his hood. It was still dark. He moved silently through the wet buzz of the West End coming to life. Street lamps turned off their comforting orange glow. Cars slowed optimistically, looking for last minute parking spaces. Headlamps lit the drizzle through the darkness. People dashed, disposable coffee in hand, needing to be somewhere. Everyone exuding purpose and transience.

Oliver breathed in, filling his lungs with drizzle and abandon. He moved silently, slowly, unnoticed through other people's purpose. An empty teenage shadow drifting around and through the crowds.

He brought his eyes up momentarily and caught the eyes of a middle-aged woman with frizzy hair and a soggy raincoat. She smiled the briefest of smiles. Polite, a commonality of commuters. Oliver felt the rise of panic. Like a straitjacket of nausea being pulled upwards and buckled tight, constricting his breathing. Damn the lapse. He'd perfected invisibility. He shoved his hands down into the pockets of his jacket so hard the seam left an indent on his knuckles. Oliver widened his step, cast his eyes down and strode past the intruder. Back to the shadows. The nausea began to recede.

Oliver was going to be late for school. He knew by the way the commuters were subsiding that it was past 9. School was insignificant. Walking the streets, it was easier to maintain nothingness. At school people tried to interact. They didn't understand. If he was nothing, he was in control.

Everything hinged on staying in control. When people started talking, he felt the terror rise, alternating with an anger that came from nowhere. Boiling up like a volcano from the pit of his stomach. It made him want to punch things, punch people, punch walls, punch himself, rip his skin off, bang his head off a wall until it was mashed and black and blue.

He would swallow hard, swallow again, as if he could swallow the lava back down, confine it to his feet. Let it flood out, hot and angry from the soles of his feet to consume someone else. The anger hurt. He knew he couldn't control it when it started. Punching, hitting, bruising, hurting, ripping, exposing didn't take the pain away. Feeling was awful. Not feeling took every ounce of strength and focus. Nothingness was his normality.

The sky was interminably grey as Oliver continued to walk through the drizzle. He walked past the happy warmth and sausage roll smell of a Greggs. A clock on the wall said quarter to ten. Jeez, it really was late. He'd well and truly missed the start of the school day. No point even trying. At least his little sister Emma was safely in a classroom. He'd made sure she'd got to school. He'd always make sure she was safe. She was everything to him now mum was gone. She was his only reason for living.

Last night he'd had an almighty row with his foster parents.

They'd read the social work guide to being irritatingly patient with fucked up children. They did that cocky head thing when they spoke to him. Just to give the illusion they *really* were listening. They *really* did care. He could have punched the faces off both of them.

"We understand Olly, we know it's tough. We know you miss your mum."

"My name is Oliver. Do not fucking call me Olly, ok?" Pair of self-righteous, do-gooding twats. He didn't hold back in telling them as much.

"You know nothing about me, or my sister. Not one fucking thing. You talk about my mum. You talk as if you knew her. You didn't fucking know her. Right? So don't talk about her like you do. Don't talk about her at all. You've no right." He was screaming at them.

"And stop fucking moving your head like some demented nodding dog. My mum dies and suddenly everyone wants to talk and move their fucking heads."

Oliver moved as if to grab the woman's head. Momentary panic made her jump back to safety before she composed herself. Remember the IN CONTROL training, Marion. Stay calm. Keep yourself safe.

"It's ok" The woman, Marion, his foster mum (ugh, he hated that term) tried to put her hand on his arm. That must have been page three of the social work manual on dealing with fucked up teenagers. Move the head like a demented Chihuahua, page one. Jump back to safety if they make sudden movements, page two. Empathise with the fuckwit child's pain by placing comforting hand on forearm, page three.

'Child,' that summed it up. He wasn't a child. He'd done everything. He'd looked after his sister, cooked the dinners, made sure she had breakfast, washed and ironed her clothes, kept the house neat, changed the bedsheets and duvet covers once a week. She'd never missed one day of school whilst he was in charge.

As for his mum, well. He was nurse, carer, pharmacist, confidante.... Everything. Right up to the end. He'd counted tablets, he'd given her break through when the pain got so bad the tablets and patches couldn't control it any more. He'd fed and washed and cleaned and cared. After all that, how dare they tell him he couldn't stay in his own house. That he wasn't capable of looking after his sister. Not old enough. Not legal.

They couldn't find his dad. No wonder. The useless wanker had fucked off when Emma was born, just after his mum was diagnosed with breast cancer the first time.

Life was a whole heap of shit-ily, crap-ily unfair.

In his darker moments, he actually thought life might get easier when mum died. He didn't want her to die, of course he didn't. But then it would just be him and Emma. Piss-easy, that would be. School, breakfast, dinner, homework. The last thing they both needed was a new mum (his face contorted with scorn), a white washed bungalow (a far cry from the elegant, west end town house), Bearsden (Bears Arse-End) and Mr and Mrs Twat-Face, Ridiculous, Agitated Pekingese (Chihuahua, whatever).

"I hate fucking Arse-End. I hate this stupid house."

Ok, it was childish. He knew that. He sealed the deal when he stormed out of the living room, picked up a large, mottled brown, glazed vase and crashed it to the floor. He slammed the door for added effect. It was shit not having stairs to storm up. Bungalows were shit. He slammed the bedroom door so hard he split the frame.

His new bedroom was pokey. It was always too hot and you were always too close to everyone else. He missed his old room. The high ceilings, the cornicing, the vastness, the draughty windows. When his mum had still been well, they'd painted it together. They'd painted the walls a deep ochre yellow and the ceiling midnight blue. They'd found glow in the dark stars, bought four packets and stuck them to the ceiling. He could lie on his bed and look at his dark blue, bedroom sky. The bungalow, by contrast was neutral palette nothingness.

Oliver sat on the chair next to a desk in the horrid, hot little room. He picked up a biro and touched it to his upturned forearm. It left a blue dot. It was a pleasing contrast to the hessian walled neatness. A little bit of chaos. Normality for the spider, chaos for the fly. He pressed harder. The pain was an even more welcome chaos. Harder again.

He wondered if he could pierce the skin. It became a challenge. Still harder, with a twisting, grinding motion. He felt the plastic cracking. There. He'd done it. A trickle of red began to run down the side of his arm. He wanted to smear it on the walls. Some colour to this perfectly horrid little house. With the success of having broken through the skin, came a calmness and a relief. The lava had an escape route. He dug the biro still harder, feeling the pen begin to splinter inside him. He closed his eyes and embraced it. Control was the key. As long as he was in control. He promised his mum he'd keep Emms safe.

Oliver had left the Greggs, the sausage rolls and the bustle of Byres Road a while back. Head down, he trudged through the rain. When you were 14, no-one noticed you. Not small enough to be worried about, not old enough to have purpose. A proto-student. He was back in Belhaven Terrace. Like a magnet, he was back in his old street. Walking down the road to his house.

Someone had moved in. That didn't take them long. The house sold. The money put into trustees accounts for him and Emma. It didn't matter. He knew he'd buy the house back again when he could. He could do anything. There would be a piano in the front room. Glow stars on the ceiling. Him and Emms would move back in.

"Hey Oliver."

Oliver jumped at the intrusion. It knocked him out of his reverie. Someone had noticed him. Not just noticed him, but used his name. That wasn't allowed.

It was the woman from a few doors down. The nurse woman. The nurse who stayed with her mum and dad. The nurse who had sometimes helped him with his mum. She was the only one he didn't

mind coming into the house. She'd been there when his mum died. When his mum died. He felt that surge of nausea at the flashback.

She smiled at him. He fiercely studied the ground. Go away, go away, go away, go away. He willed her disappearance. He could do anything, right?

"Got you these, didn't know if you'd had breakfast."

She put something down on the wall outside her house.

"I'll just leave them here."

She started to walk back into the house.

"You're always welcome for a cup of tea. Just tea."

Oliver shook his head.

"Remember those." She motioned to the packet she'd left on the wall.
"I'm not feeding the bloody pigeons."

Did he smile? No, but there was something that passed between them. A sense of relief almost.

The door clicked shut. She was gone.

Oliver waited a moment before going over to the wall.

Liquorice Allsorts. He looked at the packet. She knew. They were his mum's favourite.

He popped a liquorice sandwich into his mouth, folded the bag over and slipped it into the pocket of his Parka.

Hope was like a warming drink that spread through the void.

Chapter Two

A TRIP BACK TO THE MOON

Tuesday December 1st

“Yup. That one. That one. THAT ONE...” Lyndsey hopped about on one foot as she grabbed a pale blue shirt off a hanger. She screwed it up into a ball and projectile missiled it at Longlegs’ face. She was single-mindedly going through his wardrobe.

“Nope. That’s more of your wedding n christening shirt-wear, than ‘hot date, horny-boy-wants-to-get-laid,’ shirt-wear” he said as he threw it back at her.

“Crapola! You’re right. The Tartan skirt, tweed jacket thing, and the vegetable knife down the sock. That’s how to have a hypnotic effect on girls. That’s what you should wear tonight, Mr Darcy. Worked on me.” Lyndsey pretended to swoon backwards, falling onto his bed.

Longlegs looked at her scathingly.

“You English Heathen. How long have you been in Glasgow? Have I not done my best to educate you in all things Longlegs and Scottish? It’s an Argyle Kilt Suit. In fact, it’s an Argyle Kilt Suit that’s right here. Say after me.... Argyle. Kilt. Suit.” He spelled it and hauled out a green

tweed jacket arm from the back of the wardrobe. He made it wave to her.

“And not a vegetable knife. My grandad’s Skean Dhu, you English eedjit.” He squeaked and moved the arm of the jacket, as if it was talking to her. *“Skean Dhu.”*

“Think I should wear the kilt tonight?” He grinned at her. *“If I remember rightly, you liked it. In fact, did we not have matching green outfits on? Did we not both look like some chaotic scene from Brig O’Doon? I was the only redhead and the only kilt in the house.”*

The wedding they’d gone to last year seemed an age ago. The sister of Lyndsey’s ex-boyfriend, and all a little awkward. She’d gotten upset. He’d looked after her. They’d both coped by getting hammered on stolen Prosecco in a hidden gazebo in the grounds.

Sooooo much had happened since then.

Lyndsey and Longlegs had gotten together, then they’d un-gotten together.

Lyndsey finally got it together with the dark and brooding, slightly mad Mr Rochester of the Glasgow Medical World, Dr Oliver Haversham.

Then she broke all their hearts by going to Canada.

Then she came back again.

It was like a Sunday Times bestseller rewrite of Jane Eyre or Wuthering Heights.

Longlegs would never get over loving Lyndsey. From the moment she appeared as the other registrar on his ward one magical Monday morning, she'd felt like the jigsaw piece that fitted alongside him. Yin and Yang. The easiness of their friendship, the shared understanding of what each other needed. He'd always said, she was the fish to his chips, the Scooby to his Shaggy, the Chewbacca to his Hans Solo.

Now she was with someone else, and if he didn't want to lose her, he had to redefine it. Losing her didn't bear thinking about. So here he was redefining it.

She was helping him get ready for a Tinder date. Tonight, he was dating. Tonight, he was meeting the girl he'd been chatting to online for precisely three weeks.

Him – tall, geeky, red-haired, giant-legged, startling-blue-eyed, nervous as hell doctor, specialising in palliative medicine (and yes, telling people all about how you love working with people who are dying is often an unpredictable conversation starter. Which is why doctors tend to date other doctors).

Her – petite, bubbly, pretty, long-haired, brunette, primary school teacher with a cat and a horse (he assumed the cat lived in her flat and the horse didn't although he'd never asked her directly).

She liked Bruce Springsteen (so did he). They'd compared notes on Netflix's 'Mindhunter.' She liked Pedro Almodóvar films. He approved of that. There was no film director quite like Pedro – seen on the big screen. Mind-blowingly classy.

Gradually they'd lost their inhibitions and gotten a little more risqué and sexually direct with each other. She was sweetly innocent. She'd had two long term boyfriends, and as far as he could tell, she wasn't too broken, histrionic, narcissistic, emotional or high maintenance. He could go a whole shift without texting her and she didn't lose the plot.

It seemed to be going ok.

He ran through the little conversation cue cards he'd made for his mind. He had a list of safe topics, should things dry up and get a little awkward.

"Where are you taking the lovely girl?" asked Lyndsey picking up the blue shirt and handing it to him.

"GFT. There's a Pedro Almodóvar revival. On the back of Banderas and Pain and Glory, they're showing some of the old classics. Tonight, it's Volver. One of his best. The colours, the cinematography, the sensuality, Penelope Cruz. M'wah," he kissed the air dramatically. *"I tell you, if that doesn't woo the girl, there's something wrong and she's not the girl for me. Then onto the Hanoi Bike Shop in Ruthven Lane – one of her favourites she says – although mastering Vietnamese street food with chopsticks on a first date is always risky business. Then maybe a late-night brandy down Ashton Lane?"*

He looked at her cautiously.

"Meet your approval?" Damn it. Why did he always need her approval? He couldn't help himself.

“Most certainly. Just remember who swapped your on-call.” She waved her phone at him. “When you are wrapped around her feeding her noodles off a chopstick.”

“Ha! Jealousy will get you everywhere,” he replied as he flounced off to the shower.

It had a poignancy they could both feel. The memories of nights together. Times spent in front of Lyndsey’s wood burning stove, making love and holding each other. Their late-night meanderings, when Lyndsey got a notion to drag Longlegs out into the crisp dark night. The taste of her. The smell of her. At times, being around her was almost unbearable. The smell of her intoxicated him. Pavolv and The Dogs. Her smell, a look, a movement would trigger a memory. Suddenly he was flooded with a desolation and feelings of having lost something.

Longlegs knew Oliver Haversham didn’t like them spending time together. He could understand that. Thinking about Lyndsey and Oliver together didn’t do great things for his mental health either. He wondered what he’d make of Lyndsey sitting here, in his bedroom, on his bed. Helping him get ready for his date. What would Eleanor the Schoolteacher think? Would he tell her about Lyndsey? Not the extent of his feelings, surely.

When he came out of the shower, Lyndsey had moved into the lounge to let him get ready.

He put on the shirt she’d suggested he wear. Of course he did. Did he not do everything she asked? It was ironic that she was choosing the clothes for his date. The date he wished he didn’t have to go on.

As he walked into the lounge, she handed him a glass of wine.

“Yup. Looking gorgeous, luscious and lovely.” She leaned in for a smell. “Nice.”

The vixen. He almost knew what she was doing. She knew. Her closeness. Her leaning in. Her movements. The intimacy. He was bloody well turned on. And she flaming well knew what she was doing. Fuck’s sake, he had an erection. Still after all this time he couldn’t control himself around her.

Lyndsey leaned in and kissed his cheek.

“I should go,” she whispered as she brushed against him.

He closed his eyes. Oh god, it was oh-so-familiar. The blood pulsed through his body, electrical pulses of irresistible desire. What he wanted was to wrap himself around her. That feeling like she owned him. That he wanted nothing more than to be owned by her.

Lyndsey slipped out his apartment, leaving the air still heavy with her presence.

Oh Fuck.

He sank onto an old leather armchair and sipped his wine.

He didn’t think he could do it.

He picked up his phone to dial Eleanor to cancel.

You couldn’t waste Pedro Almodóvar’s most spectacular piece of art on just any Tinder date.