

ORDINEM LEGACY

Part 1: Becoming

By Maddie Caser

EXCERPT

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Chapter I

I woke up late, struggling to open my eyes and my head feeling very heavy. I have never been an early bird, but when I glanced at the clock, I was surprised to see it was 2pm. Lazily, I got up and was surprised to see I was still wearing my going-out outfit – I must have passed out on my bed when I got home. My mouth was very dry, obviously due to the amount of alcohol I drank last night. I wasn't keen to see my face in the mirror, so I went to the kitchen and got myself a large glass of cold water. Two seconds later, it was already empty and I poured another one. I finished it as fast as the first one, but still my thirst did not seem to lessen. Another glass went down. With each gulp, the echoing, banging sound in my head seemed to be more bearable. My stomach reacted to the sudden large quantity of hydrating liquid – it growled and I felt hungry. Even though it was afternoon, I started my breakfast ritual with a non-negotiable cup of Earl Grey tea and two pieces of buttered toast. While the bread was going golden in the toaster, I began to recall last night's events; however, today, it seemed to be particularly harder than usual. Slowly, flashes of last night came back to me, but I couldn't remember how I got home, although this was standard for me. For some reason, it often appeared to be the same missing part after a drunken evening out.

As I was finishing my last piece of toast, I heard the landline ringing. I considered ignoring the awful ringtone, but it annoyed

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me so much that I picked up to put an end to the noisy torture. A familiar voice spoke:

“There you are! Finally, I get you on the phone!”

“Hi Naomi!” She is my best friend.

“Louise, I have been trying to call you since noon, which I judge a reasonable hour, but your mobile seems to be off.”

“Yes, sorry, I just got up and didn’t have a chance to switch my phone on yet.”

“Did you get home OK?”

“I guess so.”

“Ah! The usual blackout! Actually, I meant to talk to you about that.”

“Oh, please Naomi, spare me, it’s just alcohol, it happens to the best of us!”

“Sure, but I feel you have been having more of these episodes recently.”

“Well, you feel wrong then!”

“No, I am not, you should get checked out by your Doctor.”

“Would that shut you up?”

“Yes! And I do hope I won’t have to lecture you with an ‘*I told you so*’.”

“Anyway, I am going to ignore you and move on to something more of interest to me, did you get that hot guy’s phone number last night?”

“Change the subject if you like but you won’t get rid of me so easily my lovely! And, of course I got his number!” Naomi didn’t like giving men her phone number, she would rather take theirs and be the first to get in touch. According to her, she was proceeding like this so that first, she could change her mind; second, to be the mistress of her own life and not to wait for things to happen and finally, so that she could show off her confidence. But this last interpretation was one of my own and also one of the many reasons I loved her so much.

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“How do you feel about debriefing over late afternoon coffees?” she added.

“Sure, definitely, I just hope this hangover is going to disappear at some point!”

“Don’t tell me! OK hun, it’s already 2.30, so shall we say 4.30 at the usual café?”

“That’s a date!”

“You wish!” she joked.

We hung up and I headed to the bathroom, still not looking forward to seeing my face! I was so pale and looked exhausted – that was not a good look! Not liking my reflection, I jumped in the shower and started a thorough cleaning mission: body and face scrubs, shampoo and conditioner. I always felt filthy after a good night out and I usually took a shower before going to bed, but that part was a failure last night! The thirst hit me again, until it got so unbearable that I drank hot water straight from the shower head. It was just a flavourless tea after all! I reluctantly switched off the tap – I have always found hot showers to be such a treat, especially since I came back from my wild traveling days, where I had to use buckets of cold water to wash.

I got out of the bathroom and went straight to my laptop to turn the music on – not too loud though, as the pounding in my head was finally quieter and I did not want to jeopardise this moment of peace. Then, it was time to initiate what I called the ‘Back to Life process’, which was going to be hard-work considering the state I was in. First, I took care of my long brown hair, neither straight nor curly but somewhere half way. I liked my hair, mostly because it did not need much maintenance! After combing it, I plugged in the hair dryer for a few minutes to help it dry faster. The next task consisted on finding myself a decent outfit. I loved clothes but not in a fanatical way, and it definitely did not amuse me to try them on for hours. I found pleasure in finding the right thing to wear in the minimum time. Today, was going to be a simple pair of tight khaki

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jeans, my favourite Batman hoodie and a pair of a limited-edition Air Force trainers. I was not a big fan of handbags, I found them annoying to carry around, so whenever I could avoid them, I did. Make up was going to be as minimal as always: a bit of blusher and mascara. In addition, I fancied some red lipstick and also found some powder to cover my pale face.

All ready, I tidied up my flat a little as I was a bit of a messy person. I grabbed my phone and turned it on while plugging in the charger. As soon as it connected to the network, a storm of messages arrived. Naomi had indeed been on my case since midday. A few more texts found their ways to my screen. I received a funny message from a guy I remembered meeting last night. He was quite handsome and had a fantastic sense of humour. We got on very well and spoke for a while. He was now asking me out for a drink, but at the thought of alcohol I felt dizzy and decided to postpone my reply. My attention went to the clock – it was 3.30 – I had forty-five minutes left to do whatever I fancied. Naomi lived only twenty minutes walk away and the café was halfway between our respective places.

The thirst came back. Bloody hell! That was annoying and really intense. I was used to drinking more water than usual after nights out, but this was different. I was so thirsty that I imagined even a fountain of water would not be sufficient to counteract the dehydration. After two glasses of water, I gave up and tried to forget the discomfort: I went through a few bits and bobs; changed my week-old bed sheets; turned on the washing machine and wandered online. Time flew by, nevertheless I managed to leave my flat on time.

The weather was not so good for the beginning of October: the sky was cloudy and a bit dark, but at least it was not raining. The temperature was decent, which allowed me not to wear a jacket on top of my hoodie. I plugged my headphones into my phone and turning on the music, I started walking to the café, determined to ignore the terrible thirst that was still drying my tongue and throat. Not surprisingly, I reached our haunt before Naomi, she was always

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five to ten minutes late, her signature if you ask me! I greeted the staff who recognised me as we were regulars and sat at a free, clean table. I ordered a large glass of water right away. As soon as Charlie, one of the waiters, brought it over and put it on the table, I took it to my mouth and drained it. He looked amused:

“Rough night?” he asked with a cheeky grin.

“Rougher than I thought!” I smiled.

I was busy checking my phone when Naomi entered the place with her distinctive natural elegance. She spotted me right away and steered herself towards me.

“Hey Louise! Pardon my bluntness, but you look tired! I didn’t realise you drank that much last night!” she said, surprised. So much for my make up efforts!

“Nice to see you too!”

“Don’t be so touchy!”

“No seriously, I am fully aware of how bad I look and I don’t really understand it, I don’t recall drinking that much either!”

“Don’t worry, you’re just paler than usual, that’s all, only I can tell, but you are still fine to the rest of the world!”

Charlie came back and took our order. We came here at least once a week, so we tried different drinks not to feel like two old biddies stuck in their habits! It was probably due to our summer jobs as waitresses, when we used to mock the rude ladies who came to the place every day, sitting at the same tables and drinking the same things! I ordered a vanilla latte and Naomi a cappuccino. We did not fancy anything else, so there would be no sweet treats today.

“So, tell me, have you texted this boy yet?” I started.

“Nope, I haven’t thought of it actually, I have been busy all day but I expect I will at some point!” She sipped some of her cappuccino.

Naomi and I were best friends – we did have disagreements sometimes, but we never argued. We had the same principles and ideas about life which made us really close. We have known each other for sixteen years, having met at school and remained insepa-

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rable friends since then. Our first encounter was very genuine and spontaneous, we were fifteen at the time: she arrived in our class as a new student and asked if she could sit next to me. There was something in the way she spoke, her tone was very confident and kind at the same time – she seemed cool. From this moment, we never parted and soon after we met, we knew each other perfectly. Some people were a bit confused by our ‘fusional’ friendship, including several of our friends who liked to joke about us and said a few times that we should get married. Originally from Brighton, her family had moved to London because of her parents work. Although the Brighton-London commute was a piece of cake, her parents fancied moving to the city and raising their daughter there. Whenever Naomi was home sick and missed the pebbles and the sound of the waves and seagulls, we would just hop on a train and travel there. However, these days, we had to find some other ways to deal with her feelings, as adulthood came with responsibilities you cannot run away from or forget about, like work for example! We still spent occasional weekends in Brighton, but much less than we used to. It was not so bad – the adult Naomi was not the sad or emotional type, but had grown into a pro-active moving forward kind of person. Plus, we both loved living in London.

Naomi was also intrigued by my story I supposed. My parents died when I was eight, so my grandparents took me in and raised me. I cannot complain, I had a good childhood considering my parents weren’t there. I remembered how happy I was whenever we went to our old family holiday home in the country. We knew everyone there and I am sure that my love for nature and animals comes from those visits. As soon as Naomi entered my life, she joined us there every time we went.

“Oh, by the way,” I said, “I got a text from the guy I was chatting with for a while last night and he’s asked me out for a drink!”

“Of course he has, Louise! Have you replied yet?”

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“No, I haven’t, unlike you I have been busy for real!” We laughed as we both very well knew that we had not been up to much so far, except for recovering! “But anyway, how did you get back home last night or should I say when and with whom?” I continued.

“Well, after I met that cute guy, I ran into Ian who was with a couple of mates, you were still there by the way.”

“Oh yes! I remember, we were about to leave.”

“Well, we were but Ian and I got to talk and dance and—”

“Shag!”

“Louise!”

“I’m joking, you know I like Ian. I just don’t get it with you two, there is obviously some serious chemistry there – he is smart and good looking, you like him and you have already tested the goods!”

“No, I don’t like him!” she lied childishly.

“Yes, you do!”

“OK maybe a little. But it’s not that easy, we are both super busy and I believe we get on so well because we keep it fun and casual!”

“To be honest, whatever rocks your boat, but he might be after something more serious, and if so, you would be a fool to push him away. You shouldn’t fear your feelings or his.”

“What makes you say that? Do you know something?”

“Why? Would you like that?”

“No ... I mean ... maybe ... whatever! What do you know?” She could not resist.

“I know he likes you! Come on, the way he looks at you all the time, it is pretty obvious! But anyway, I totally understand if you guys are good with what you have.”

“Yes, we are. I don’t want to have relationship headaches you know, my job is going super well, I enjoy my life as it is and I am free!”

“Fair enough! As long as these are the real reasons.”

Ian has been around for quite a while. We have known him for a few years now, we had some friends in common who introduced

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us at one of our house parties. He was a very nice guy – a real one, not one of those toxic imposters. Recently, he had just opened his own veterinary clinic and was quite successful. He and Naomi hit it off almost instantly. They were both crazy about animals. I cannot count how many animals she rescued or made her parents adopt when she was younger. I could really relate to that as I also went gooey whenever I saw a puppy in the street! Their relationship heated quite quickly, but they always kept it casual. Ian was working loads at his previous vet job to save enough money to open his own place and Naomi, well, she was doing crazy hours at the office. I was very fond of Ian, so naturally I was hoping she would give them a chance.

We carried on chatting and commenting on last night events until something strange got my attention: I felt a subtle chill on my spine that steered my eyes towards the window we were seated by. At first, I thought it might not be properly closed, but it was. Then, I saw a man standing outside, leaning on a lamppost in the shade. Although I did not recognise him, he looked oddly familiar. He was staring at us so intently that it felt as if he was close to us. It gave me goosebumps all over my body. Naomi realised something was up and looked through the window not quite as discreetly. The man kept staring, then smiled and walked away. I felt really weird and the searing thirst came back. I must have looked distressed because Naomi took my hand and asked me what was wrong.

“Nothing, I mean, I don’t know. I just feel weird and I am so bloody thirsty!” She looked hard at me and ordered a glass of water. Charlie came back with it in less than a minute.

“Definitely rough then!” he said, laughing. Naomi did not get it since she had missed the first part of the joke and ignored his funny comment, while I smiled at his humour.

“There is your water.” She handed the glass over and as she saw me draining it, she checked my eyes again. “Have you spent the afternoon smoking weed?”

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“Nope, but maybe I should have!” I replied with a smile.

“Do you know that guy? I think I saw him briefly last night outside the club. I remember because I noticed he was checking you out when we got in and then we met the others and I forgot to tell you!”

“I am not sure to be honest! I feel like I do, but I can’t put a name to his face or even tell you where we would have met! Maybe I was already drunk when we had a chat, therefore cannot remember it!”

“I wouldn’t forget him, he is fit! Seriously that’s strange! Either you are really hungover, or your drinks were spiked last night!”

“Frankly, I don’t know what to think, and please before you even get started, don’t try to freak me out!”

“I am only underlining the fact that in addition to recent occasional blackouts, not remembering people you just met is not reassuring.”

“They aren’t blackouts Naomi! Only unimportant little confusions!” Naomi was a bit of a hypochondriac, however I must admit she had been working hard on it and made a lot of efforts to be more reasonable. I changed the subject and we moved on.

Later that afternoon, we ended up in the middle of a car boot sale. I have always loved antiques and vintage stuff. One of my favourite activities was to find an old piece of furniture and give it new life. I love wood, the way it smells, working it and the satisfying feeling of achievement when I am done with it. I made most of my furniture at home and sometimes I did special orders for friends or even occasional clients. A few years back, my dream was to open my own shop with unique pieces of furniture. However, I got another good job instead, so I kept it as a hobby.

We were strolling around, chatting about random stories and gossiping when I started to feel very hot and uncomfortable, which did not go unnoticed by Naomi.

“What’s up Louise? You are all red all of a sudden!”

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“Yes! I feel like I am having a hot flush! Is it time for the menopause already?” I laughed.

“Louise! You’re crazy you know! Are you still thirsty? Maybe we should get you a bottle of water or something to hydrate you!”

“I suppose,” I said, kind of giving up.

Conveniently, we happened to walk past a man who was selling chilled bottles of water, so we bought two of them considering the amount of water I had been drinking since I woke up! After finishing the first bottle, I started to feel a little bit better. However, something else was also going on: it was like someone was persistently staring at me – I could feel a presence. I looked around, probably looking a bit puzzled, but saw nothing. This was going to be the strangest hangover in my whole life. Maybe that was what older people meant when they said hangovers were harder to bear with age. I decided to ignore the feeling and carried on browsing with my friend.

“By the way Louise, you never told me, how was your visit in France? We didn’t even have a chance to talk about your meeting last night!”

“It was great, my colleague Joshua was with me, you’ve met him before. The winemaker gave us a tour of his vineyard in the Loire Valley. We also had a wine tasting later in the afternoon. His white wine is a lovely Chenin Blanc, crisp and chalky but also rounded by slight quince and pear flavours, just as I like it!”

“That’s great! Sounds lovely! Are you going to make him an offer?”

“Well, we discussed prices and I think we can find some common ground. Joshua and I drew up an offer on the trip back to London, but we didn’t get a chance to have it approved by Eleanor, our boss, as you know! Anyway, the client does not expect us to get back to him before Tuesday.”

“Great! So, you landed a new client! Smooth as usual!”

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“This one is for Joshua, I just accompanied him as his manager. We struggled to find a convenient time for this meeting for quite a while, so I wanted to show the client our appreciation.”

“Yes, I see what you mean! That’s good news! I would say ‘*let’s celebrate*’ but I don’t feel like having a drink at all!”

“Don’t worry! Me neither!”

“What about you, how is work treating you?” Naomi was a public relations manager for an ethical fashion brand.

“It’s fine, nothing new. I don’t mind a bit of quiet considering how hectic it was during fashion week!”

After a while, we decided to head back home. I arrived around 7.30 and started to feel hungry. Naomi had gone home and I was by myself now. I went to the fridge but nothing seemed appealing, although there was plenty of choice. I decided to go for a pizza; I knew it was not the healthiest option, but it was definitely what one needed after a rough night out. I switched the oven on and put the junk food in. While it was cooking, I took my laptop, put some music on, checked some stuff online and wrote a few emails. My hunger pangs grew and by the time the pizza was ready, I was starving. I ate it so fast I could not believe it. My stomach hurt due to the large amount of food absorbed in such a little time, but strangely the feeling of hunger was still there. It was exactly like when I smoked weed and had the uncontrollable munchies, except this time no drugs were involved. I drank some more water, but the mixture of hunger and thirst quickly became unbearable and I started to feel dizzy. I lay down on my sofa and the room slowly stopped whirling around me, however I still felt uneasy. I closed my eyes and all of a sudden, I was somewhere else...