The Affair

by SigmaCreations

Summary

A new multi-chapter fic starting after Danny's death and continuing on from there. This is somewhat AU in that Harry's still married to Jane, but it does follow along canon lines in terms of ops etc. Kudos still own what's theirs, but I've enjoyed flushing out some of the characters that never made an appearance in canon. Dates are from Harry's diary. Reviews make my day! Best, S.C.
Chapter 1

3 July 2005 – Harry

He's drained, both physically and emotionally drained, and as he steps into the pod, he really wishes that he was not Harry Pearce tonight, but someone else, someone who has a boring, mundane job, someone who's responsibilities are no heavier than ordering office supplies or taking the dog for a walk, someone who's already at home making love to his beautiful, adoring wife. But of course, he has none of these things, least of all the latter. Jane has never been adoring.

As he steps out of the pod, he immediately notes that he's not alone. Ruth's sitting at her desk, her desk lamp on, papers and folders scattered all over the place. She looks up as he enters and gives him a small smile before lowering her head once more and returning to her work. Frowning, he glances at his watch before moving towards her, saying, “Ruth, why are you still here? It's past eleven. I thought I told everyone to go home.”

“I just wanted to finish up the report I was doing for Adam and set up these-” she replies without looking at him.

“Ruth,” he interrupts, “it's time to go home. This can all wait until the morning.”

She lifts her head then and he can see that her eyes are red-rimmed from crying. His heart constricts and he feels a surge of concern for her and such a strong desire to protect her. It's the same feeling he'd had earlier as he'd watched her standing over Danny's body, softly caressing his cheek, tears sliding down her face. The strength of his desire to pull her into his arms and shield her from the world and the pain it had inflicted on them all had surprised him. He hadn't felt like doing that in such a long time, not since his children had been little.

It's been hours since he'd left her to deal with the aftermath of the failed attempt on the lives of the PM and his guests and the death of his officer, and yet in every spare moment he's had, he's thought of little else, and eventually, he's had to reluctantly admit to himself that he's in love with her.

He's in love with Ruth.

He doesn't know when his feelings of admiration and respect changed to love, or at what point the sexual attraction he's always felt for her had ceased to be the most important force in his desire for a personal relationship with her, but right now, he knows that all he wants is to be near her, in her company, to have her by his side, and if he only ever gets to do so in their capacity as colleagues and friends, he will still be satisfied as long as she's happy. So his first priority is to help her through her grief, to help her get back her equilibrium, to help her become her normal, cheerful self once more, though he knows that she will never quite be the same again. Danny's the first member of the team, the first real friend she's lost here since she began working for his section. It had been different with Tom, Zoe, and now, perhaps Sam. They're all alive and well, but not Danny – Danny's dead.

His gaze softens as he watches her and murmurs quietly, “Come on. Grab your things, Ruth. I'm taking you home.” She begins to argue, but he's already moving away from her towards his office, calling over his shoulder, “You have five minutes, Ruth. Then I'm taking you home.”
She's silent all the way home, but when they arrive at her place and he gets out to walk her to her
door, she suddenly turns to him and says quietly, “Would you like to come in, Harry, for a cup of tea
or... or something stronger? I'd appreciate the company tonight. I-”

“Thank you, Ruth,” he murmurs his agreement, relieved that she's invited him inside. He knows she
needs to talk to someone, and he's spent most of the ride over here in the taxi trying to work out how
he can get inside her home without his intentions being misinterpreted. “I'll just pay the cab.”

Once they're inside her house, having shed their coats and located Ruth's whisky, they sit side by
side on her sofa, she staring down at the amber liquid in her glass while he looks around the room,
each wondering how to broach the subject of Danny. Eventually, Ruth says, “Thank you, Harry.”
He turns to her and raises an enquiring eyebrow, so she adds, “For staying with me a little while. I...
I didn't want to be alone... and I know you probably want to be home with your wife, so-”

“It's fine, Ruth,” he reassures her quickly, a little ashamed to find that the only place he wants to be is
here, with her. “Jane's probably asleep already, and besides, it's part of what we do, being there for
each other. I know today was particularly hard for you. You and Danny were close, especially since
Zoe left.”

She nods quietly and grips the glass tightly in her hand. They're already on their second glass of malt
and it's making it easier for them to talk, loosening their tongues a little. After a few moments of
silence, she says, “Does it get any easier, Harry?”

“No,” he sighs, shaking his head. “Never easier.”

She takes a sip of her drink and puts the glass down, hugging her arms around her middle in an effort
to keep the tears at bay. “I'm going to miss him so much,” she whispers.

He nods, watching her with concern as he murmurs, “He was a good man. He deserves to be
missed.”

She takes a deep, shaky breath and then exclaims, “Why did he have to be such a bloody hero?!?”
Her eyes fill with tears and her face crumbles as she begins to weep, dropping her head down toward
her chest and leaning forward, attempting to curl herself into a ball.

“Oh, Ruth,” he murmurs softly, and placing his glass next to hers, he turns to face her and pulls her
gently into his arms, cradling her against his chest. She doesn't return the embrace, but she turns her
head towards him, nesting her face into his neck, her right shoulder resting against his left one as she
leans into him, her arms still wrapped around her middle as he runs his hands up and down her back.

“He was a hero, Ruth, a very brave man,” he murmurs in a gruff voice, “and I think that that's the
way he'd have wanted to go if he'd had a choice. He should have had a long, full, happy life, but if
he had to die, I think he would have been glad it was like this. He was a good officer, a good man, a
good friend and he'll be missed by all of us.” His voice cracks half way through his speech, but he
continues, recognising that perhaps he needs to say these things as much as she needs to hear them.

He has no idea how long they sit like this, but soon her tears slow, her breathing quietens, and she
begins to sniff. He reaches into his pocket with his right hand and pulls out a handkerchief,
something he always carries with him and something his wife is always teasing him about. “How
very James Bond of you, Harry,” she likes to say. He doesn't point out that it's a very versatile piece
of spy equipment that can make a very effective weapon in a pinch, especially as people sometimes
overlook it, whereas a belt or tie is removed immediately.

He holds it out to her and watches as she lifts her head from his shoulder and wipes her eyes and nose before lifting her eyes to meet his once more. “Thank you,” she murmurs softly. He just nods briefly, watching her watch him, his heart aching because of Danny and because she's hurting. Then before he knows quite what's happening, her face moves close to his and he feels her lips press against his softly in a gentle caress. He responds at once before his brain has a chance to kick in and bring up all the reasons he shouldn't be doing this. Her lips press against his more firmly, her hands cupping his face, and she moans softly as he pulls her close, the arm resting across her back tightening around her, his free hand moving up to cradle her head. We shouldn't be doing this, his conscience tells him, but it feels so good that he can't quite bring himself to stop just yet.

She deepens their kiss, sucking his lower lip into her mouth and running her tongue along it, making his body being to hum with pleasure and excitement. He returns the favour, leaning into the kiss and parting his lips against hers, feeling her tongue brush against his for the first time. He's just marvelling at the wonder of finally kissing her, tasting her like this, when he feels her shift her weight towards him, pushing his head back, and next thing he knows, she's sitting on his lap, straddling him and pressing her whole body against him so that he can feel her soft breasts against his chest and her hot sex against his groin. He can hear himself groan in pleasure as his body responds, his mind flooded by love and passion, making him eagerly pull her closer, his hands pushing off her jacket and slipping under her top, seeking out the warm skin of her waist, her back, her stomach. Her hands are running through his hair, pulling at his tie, tugging his shirt open, gliding over his skin. Never has the touch of a woman felt so good, so right, so arousing.

And yet the voice in his head won't stop telling him that he shouldn't be doing this. She's vulnerable, hurting after losing Danny and possibly a little drunk, and he shouldn't be taking advantage of her like this. You need to stop, he tells himself even as he murmurs her name against her skin while he presses soft, sensual kisses along her jaw, down her neck, against her collar bone. A gentleman wouldn't be doing this, he scolds himself as his hand moves up to cup her breast, squeezing her gently through her cotton bra and making her moan into his neck. But she wants this, Ruth wants him and that knowledge sends a thrill straight through him.

It's when her hand finds its way inside his trousers, inside his trunks, that he knows he won't be able to stop now, and in any case, who's he kidding? He's not a gentleman – he's a spy – and as her hand closes around his length, he abandons himself to the sheer pleasure of making love to her and fully lets go of his self-control, his self-restraint, his self-denial.

It is a beautiful, wonderful thing to be moving inside her like this and he can't get enough of it. He wishes he could remain suspended in this moment forever. He watches her face, her lower lip caught between her teeth, her cheeks flushed, her eyes closed, a soft moan escaping her as he pushes into her again. “Ruth,” he whispers, and as her eyes slide open and she captures his gaze with her own, he feels overwhelmed by the intensity of his feelings for her. His chest tightens, a lump forming in his throat and tears springing to his eyes as he opens his mouth to tell her, but the emotions are too much and he can't get the words out. So he leans forward and captures her lips with his own, pouring all the love he feels for her into that kiss and hoping that she understands.

They come almost simultaneously, riding the wave of their pleasure together, wrapped tightly in each other's arms. His face is pressed into her neck as he quietly groans his release, whispering his love for her against her soft, fragrant skin. She's quiet too, moaning softly as she tumbles over and murmuring his name, and he knows that it's the most beautiful thing he's ever heard. He wants to capture this feeling of utter bliss, the sound of her voice moaning his name, the feel of her naked body against his, her sweet taste, the delicate, faintly coconuty smell of her skin, so that he can remember and relive it over and over again. But of course he cannot, and all too soon, he becomes aware of his
surroundings once more, of the chilly air around them, the fact that they're still partially dressed as they lie awkwardly, sprawled across the sofa.

He lifts his head and looks down at her, smiling gently at the sated, hooded look in her eyes. “Harry,” she murmurs softly, reaching her hand up and running it through his hair as he leans over her. She's smiling at him, her eyes sparkling in the half-light and it makes his heart overflow with love for her.

“Ruth,” he murmurs and reaches his hand up to cup her cheek, shifting his weight onto his left side and whispering her name again, smiling into her eyes. If only they could stay like this forever.

She shivers a little and he frowns in concern, murmuring, “Cold?” She nods, so pushing himself up and reaching for the throw from the armchair to his left, he shakes it out and climbs onto the sofa beside her. He lies next to her, sandwiching her between him and the back of the sofa, and covers them both, pulling her into his arms to keep her warm.

They lie in silence as reality catches up with them and they each process what's just happened and its implications. Eventually Ruth murmurs, “I can't believe we just did that.”

“No,” he whispers and presses a soft kiss against her forehead, “neither can I. It was... quite wonderful though.”

“Yes,” she smiles, turning her head towards his chest, “it was.”

There's silence once more for a little while and then she turns her head away and states, “You're my boss, Harry... and you're married.”

He can hear the worry, the guilt and the hurt in her voice as he nods, feeling a sudden surge of guilt and hating himself for his weakness. It shouldn't have been like this, their first time together. It should have been a wonderful experience for both of them, untainted by wrongdoing, by guilt or death. He should have listened to his conscience and stopped. But he's just found her, he's just discovered how wonderful they feel together, how much he loves her and wants her, and he can't bear the possibility that he'll lose her again so soon. “I'm not your boss right now, Ruth,” he says in an effort to reassure her. “I'm just a man. A man who-”

“You're a married man, Harry,” she interrupts, and to his dismay, she begins to sit up, pulling the covers with her as she gets off the sofa and stands, wrapping them tightly around her body and saying, “This was a mistake. You should go.”

“Ruth,” he objects, “please-”

But she won't listen to him. “Don't make this any harder than it has to be, Harry,” she says, and he can see the tears glistening in her eyes even as she tries to hide behind a mask of determination and control. “We got carried away by the moment, our shared grief. It won't happen again.” Then she turns and leaves the room, and moments later, he hears her mounting the stairs.

He sits still for a moment, holding his head in his hands as he wishes that he could turn back the clock and hold himself back, so that none of this would have happened – not now, not like this. He only allows himself a few moments to dwell on it, however, before sighing heavily and standing up. He gathers their clothes, getting dressed and carefully folding Ruth's and placing them on the armchair before switching off the lamp in the corner, carrying the whisky and glasses back into the kitchen, grabbing his coat and leaving her home.

He walks for a little while to clear his head, trying to figure out what to do, to formulate a plan of
action. He has to leave Jane – that part is obvious even if he doesn't yet know if it will be enough for Ruth. It surprises him that he feels a pang of regret at the thought of leaving his wife. He supposes that after twenty-six years of marriage it would have been rather sad if he didn't feel *something* at the prospect of ending it. The truth is, however, that he and Jane have grown apart, and if he's really honest with himself, it's only the children that have kept them together all this time. It had been for their sake that he'd sworn off affairs and tried hard to be home as much as possible, forcing himself to change and put up with all of Jane's demands and accusations, swallowing his pride for them. He'd done it because he hadn't wanted to be an absent father who only saw his children briefly every other weekend; he'd wanted to give them the same stable, family home he'd enjoyed as a child. And after a time, Jane had seen the change in him and things had improved between them, though they'd never recovered what they'd had before their marriage, before the lies had begun, before MI-5 had changed him.

Now that they've left home, however, he and Jane have been little more than room mates, living under the same roof but rarely seeing each other except in bed at night. Of course the sex is still a wonderful perk, but though he enjoys the physical pleasure and release, the emotional closeness and satisfaction has been missing from their couplings for a very long time. He still cares for his wife in the same way he cares for the members of his team because he feels responsible for them and they've shared so many experiences, so many years together, but they have little enough left to say to each other now. In the past, Jane had shared stories about people from work, their neighbours and friends, and they'd laughed at them together, but since the children had entered adolescence, they'd had little time to talk as it seemed like they were dealing with one crisis after another, both at home and at work.

Once Graham had left for university, it had been remarkably quiet at home and they'd suddenly found that they knew very little about each other and were practically strangers living under the same roof. They'd made some small attempt to rectify that initially, but after 9/11, he'd been swamped at work and hadn't really had the stamina, the energy, or the will to make time for his wife and marriage like he'd had in his youth.

A year later, he'd began to wonder if Jane was having an affair, and he'd been surprised to find that this thought no longer filled him with rage, but he'd found himself feeling quietly resigned. He'd wondered at this briefly. When he'd been younger, he'd been livid at the mere possibility of such a thing happening and he'd gone as far as to use MI-5 equipment to spy on his wife. The result had been the very near annihilation of his marriage. Of course, he'd known how hypocritical it had been for him to react like that when he'd been the one to stray first with Juliet, but his ego had been unable to accept that Jane might be cheating on him. Then, however, he'd found himself thinking that perhaps it was inevitable. At any rate, he hadn't cared enough to find out the truth and do something about it, which says it all really. But then Ruth had joined his team and Jane seemed to open up again and they'd began to have sex more often, so he'd thought nothing of it any more and assumed he'd been mistaken.

And now he's the one who's strayed again, and this time, like with Juliet, it isn't for the sake of an operation or to cultivate an asset. It's because he's in love – desperately, hopelessly in love. And unlike with Juliet, he knows it won't burn out – this is the real thing. This is stronger, all consuming, more powerful and tender than anything he's experienced before. Not Jane, not Juliet, no other woman has come close to making him feel like Ruth does. No one else has impressed him, intrigued him, surprised him, dazzled him, and captivated him like she has. No one has seemed to understand him, no one has challenged him, pushed him to be a better leader, a better person, a better man, no one has accepted him, his strengths and his weaknesses, his triumphs and mistakes quite like Ruth has – with pleasure, with pride, and with compassion and understanding. She believes in him, does Ruth, and her faith makes him strive to do better, to do more, *to be* more than he is.
He stops walking, rubbing his face with his hands before letting them drop to his sides with a deep, heartfelt sigh. He's lost. He really doesn't know what to do to fix this. It'll have to wait until the morning, he decides, pushing aside any further thoughts of Ruth as he lifts his wrist to glance at his watch, noting with surprise that it's already two in the morning. He wonders if he should just go straight into work, but then he thinks better of it. He needs to get some sleep – not least because he has to face Ruth in the morning as well as everything work related and he knows he'll need his wits about him for that. He calls a cab and almost an hour later he walks through his front door.

He goes straight upstairs to use the bathroom and have a shower before crawling into bed next to Jane. She stirs as he slips in beside her and asks sleepily, “What time is it?”

“Late,” he says. “Go back to sleep.”

But apparently that's the wrong thing to say because she turns to look at the clock before exclaiming, “It's almost three in the morning, Harry! Where have you been?”

“Work,” he replies abruptly.

“What happened?” she asks, reaching a hand over to him and rubbing it against his naked chest.

Normally he wouldn't mind this. In fact, the main perk of being married, in his opinion, is having someone on hand for sex and Jane is still an attractive woman who knows how to please him. But after what's just happened with Ruth, the last thing he wants is Jane's hands on him. He shifts onto his back, causing her hand to slide off him and states, “If you must know, I lost one of my officers. Now, please, let me sleep.”

“Oh Harry,” she whispers, her voice gentle and compassionate. He's not sure what it is about the way she says it, but it touches a nerve, the part deep inside him that's raw with grief and he begins to unravel, his whole body shaking with sobs as he drapes his arm across his face to cover his eyes. “Shhhhh...” she murmurs softly and pulls him towards her, and after resisting her for a few moments, he gives in and rolls onto his side nestling his face into her neck as she strokes his back, his neck, his shoulders. He'd been so caught up in helping Ruth through her grief earlier that he hadn't allowed himself to express his own until this moment, and he understands suddenly why he's still married to Jane despite all the difficulties they've faced over the years. He stays because he doesn't want to be alone, because he needs Jane for moments such as this when everything gets too much for him and he needs a shoulder to cry on, or a woman to make love to, someone who knows him and cares for him just a little.

When his tears stop and his breathing quietens, he feels her pull back to look at him in the light coming in from the hall. She smiles and leans forward, pressing her lips against his and he responds instantly, pulling her close and pressing himself against her, taking comfort from the familiar feel of her lips and body against his. It's when her hand reaches down to cup him that he suddenly pulls back as an image of Ruth's face as they made love swims to the forefront of his mind.

“What's wrong?” Jane asks.

“I'm just... not in the mood, Jane,” he murmurs. “I'm sorry. I'm exhausted.”

She frowns at him but seems to accept his explanation. “Go to sleep then, Harry,” she replies and lies down beside him, her hand coming to rest on his shoulder as he rolls onto his back. He wonders briefly if she suspects. After all, it's been years since his body hasn't responded to her touch, and that time too it had been because of a honey-trap, because he'd just had sex and his body hadn't recovered yet. But then he realises that it doesn't matter anyway. He's not having an affair. Ruth's already made it perfectly clear that she considers their love making to be a mistake, a moment of weakness that she
won't be repeating. His heart aches at the thought that he might have lost her already before he's had a chance to really be with her. He closes his eyes, but despite his distressed and feverish thoughts, he falls asleep almost immediately.
She'd tossed and turned for ages last night, her jumbled thoughts and feelings refusing to allow her to sleep, so that this morning she's rather sluggish and tired. She'd had to resort to a long hot shower and two cups of coffee just to make it out the door and onto the bus this morning. Now, as she makes her way towards her work station, she's grateful that Harry's in a JIC meeting for the entire morning, and if she rearranges some things, she might even manage to be out of the office, meeting an asset, for most of the afternoon. Then the rest of the time she can spend in the registry, and if she's lucky, she might manage to avoid him altogether today.

She still can't quite believe what happened between them last night, and though she can blame the alcohol and losing Danny for lowering her defences and self-control, she knows that her feelings for Harry have never been entirely platonic and the real reason she'd slept with him is because she's secretly in love with him.

In love with a man who's not only her boss, but married to boot.

*How could I be so stupid? How could I let myself act on my feelings like that?* For those few glorious minutes, it had been wonderful and she'd forgotten about everything, lost as she'd been in the satisfaction of finally having him, the connection they'd shared that had gone so much deeper than the physical, at least, in her mind. In those precious moments, she'd been convinced that her love was reciprocated, that he loved her as much as she did him, that it hadn't been just about the sex.

But after she'd floated back down from her high, the reality of their situation had hit home and she'd felt overwhelmed by feelings of guilt. Had someone asked her at any time before last night if she would ever sleep with a married man, she would have replied with an adamant and resounding no. She's always thought it despicable for any woman to consider sleeping with a man she knows to be married. And now she's the other woman and she doesn't know how she'll ever forgive herself. She'll certainly make sure it never happens again. She has to maintain her distance from him, make sure she's never tempted again. She knows she can't resist him now, knows she can't trust herself around him, so she must avoid him as much as possible. They can never be more than colleagues. *Never.*
Chapter 3

29 July 2005 - Jane

He has someone again.

She can tell.

She's always been able to tell.

Harry's a creature of habit. You wouldn't think it considering he's a spy and habit is a spy's worst enemy because it makes him predictable and, therefore, easier to target. She knows that, in his work, he's very careful to vary his routine, but at home and when it comes to his everyday existence, he very much follows the same patterns. He wakes at the same time every day, follows the same rituals of personal hygiene, dresses in the same clothes, putting them on in the same order every morning, and eats the same breakfast. It's only once he's ready for work that he begins to vary his routine as he consciously thinks about his security and hers. He'll leave the house at different times, take different routes into work and make sure she does too in an effort to keep her safe. Even their children had to put up with this when they lived at home, and it had always been a constant cause of friction between them and their father. She's noticed lately, however, when she's visited them, that it's become ingrained in them and they both do it unconsciously now whenever they go out. It had made her smile to see it, and when she'd mentioned it to Harry, she'd seen a rare glimpse of true joy and pride in his eyes. She'd wondered then how different life with him might have been if he'd stayed in the army, or changed careers altogether.

He's always had a tendency towards hiding his emotions, often under a veneer of anger and frustration, but his work for MI-5 and 6 has made it worse, and this constant mask he wears, even at home, is something she's always found irritating, frustrating, and often disconcerting. She can probably count the number of times the mask has come off for more than a few seconds on the fingers of both hands, and most of those have been when he's been utterly wasted.

When he'd first held their daughter is the most memorable such occasion. She'd watched him fall in love that day, head-over-heels in love with their tiny, baby girl, and the image of his face, his smile, his eyes, has stayed with her ever since – proof that this man she's married feels very deeply even if he chooses to hide those feelings from everyone around him, almost all the time. It's one of the main reasons that she'd stayed with him when he'd begged her for a second chance.

She wonders why she stays now. Clearly there's very little left between them and now she's convinced that he's in love with someone else. So why does she stay? She's fond of him, loves him in her own way – most of the time – but she's no longer in love with him and neither is he with her. She supposes it's because she likes routine too. Harry's safe – she knows what to expect with him. Plus if she left, she'd be on her own and she's never liked being on her own. And as far as men go, Harry's the perfect house mate. He's rarely home, fastidiously tidy, cleans up after himself to the point of even remembering to leave the loo seat down, he doesn't demand anything from her and his sexual appetite is decent for someone his age... Until recently. Harry can lie and even his own mother wouldn't be able to tell whether he's telling the truth or not, but his body doesn't lie. That's how she knows. It's how she's always known.

Harry's always liked sex and he's always wanted plenty of it. In their first few months together,
they'd been at it like rabbits, and like every other aspect of his routine, he'd wanted sex pretty much at the same time everyday, though surprisingly, he'd always manage to make it feel spontaneous. After all he'd been a master seducer and skilled lover, and that's something that's only improved with age. And if she's being honest, that's the main reason she'd married him – the man who'd always been able to make her laugh and give her such wonderful orgasms.

It was during their first years of marriage, while they lived in Belfast, that she'd noticed his interest in the pretty girl next door who'd moved in a little while after their arrival. She'd been quite jealous, of course, but she'd had enough sense not to say anything, and to her surprise and immense relief, he'd started to want her more. With the benefit of hindsight, she'd realised a long time ago that it had been his desire for the girl next door that had increased his libido during that time and, though he hadn't been able to control that, he'd at least sought relief from it in her arms and not those of the other woman. But this early lesson in reading Harry had been the main reason she'd known he'd been unfaithful with Juliet, and later, other women.

When they'd first moved to France and he'd began working under Juliet, she'd again noticed the increase in his desire, but after their month long trip to Iran, his interest in sex had dropped substantially and it had been the first time that sex with him had felt like a routine. That's how she'd known and it's been the way she's kept tabs on him ever since. When he lusts after another woman, he wants more sex, and if he's having an affair, he wants very little. The rest of the time, he's a creature of habit. Now that he's in his fifties, he still wants it at least thrice a week, which is rather good in her opinion, and if he's had a particularly stressful day, he always wants a comfort shag. That had been the first indication that something was wrong – when he'd come home at three in the morning one night, had cried in her arms over the loss of one of his officers, and hadn't wanted sex. That was almost unheard of for Harry.

The next few weeks had confirmed her suspicions.

He's having an affair again.

She was sure.

But then, last night had happened, and now she doesn't know what to think.

* * *

“Jane? Are you home?” he calls as he steps into the house, depositing his keys in the tray by the door before resetting the alarm and turning to hang up his coat.

“Yes,” she replies as she descends the stairs. “You're home early. Everything all right?”

He turns towards her at the sound of her voice and watches her descend the steps, his eyes following her like a lion stalking a gazelle. “Harry?” she asks uncertainly as she steps off the last step. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he growls and pounces, grabbing hold of her wrist and tugging her forward, making her stumble and crash into his chest. “Yes,” he murmurs again just before his lips come crushing down on hers and he begins to devour her.

It's been so long since he's done this, acted all alpha male on her, that it takes her a moment to recover from the shock and push him away, gasping, “Harry, stop! What are you doing?!”
“I would have thought that was obvious.”

“You can’t go around manhandling people, Harry,” she objects crossly. “There’s this little thing called consent that’s required before you can begin shoving your tongue down people’s throats!”

“You always used to like it when I did that, Jane,” he murmurs defensively, the wild look slowly leaving his eyes. “I apologise if I’ve hurt or offended you. I just...”

“You just what?”

“I want you,” he murmurs softly.

“Why?”

“Why? What kind of a question is that?”

“A very simple one. Why do you want me? Has she broken up with you?”

“Has she... What?!” His surprise is evident. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Don’t you dare try to deny it, Harry,” she says angrily. “I know you’re having an affair. You haven’t wanted sex in four weeks now. That must be some kind of a record for you. And when you don’t want me, Harry, I know perfectly well, it’s because you’re having someone else.”

“Jane, I’m not having an affair,” he replies and he looks sincere, but she knows she can’t trust that. He always looks sincere when he lies.

“Oh, please,” she scoffs. “Pull the other one, why don’t you?”

“I’m serious,” he objects. “I swear... I swear on our children’s lives. I’m not having an affair.”

That surprises her. She looks at him shrewdly and demands, “Define affair.”

“I’m not having sex with another woman,” he says quietly, “and I haven’t been having sex with another woman for the past four weeks.”

“Oh, so you’ve been having sex before that then?”

“What? No!” he exclaims. “Jane, listen to me. I haven’t had an affair for years. Not since I promised that I wouldn’t all those years ago. I swear it.”

“So why haven’t you wanted sex for four weeks, Harry?” she demands, not yet sure if she can believe him.

He sighs heavily. “I don’t know. I haven’t been feeling myself, not since we lost Danny. I’m sorry. I know it’s not been fair on you. I...” He raises his palms helplessly, and she suddenly finds herself giving in. The cynic inside her calls her all kinds of fool for believing him, but she can’t help it.

She steps forward and embraces him, pressing her lips softly against his in forgiveness and murmuring, “Come to bed, Harry.”

He doesn’t need asking twice and he swiftly pulls her against him, his passion of a moment ago returning as they stumble up the stairs together. On the landing, he strips her of her top and skirt, admiring her lacy, new underwear – one of her few indulgences – before he begins to worship her body with his lips, his tongue, his hands, and after they tumble into bed, with his manhood too.
He'd given her three orgasms tonight before he'd allowed himself to come – quietly as always. It had been wonderful and rather unusual, and she'd have thought that his attentiveness and generosity was an almost certain indication of his guilt, had there not also been the issue of him swearing on their children's lives that he hasn't been having an affair. Then again, perhaps he'd been honest about that. Perhaps he's just in love with someone who's not interested, or more likely, who's refused to sleep with a married man. Harry's never been one to chase after the unattainable and she doubts that he'd fall for someone who's entirely out of his league or blatantly disinterested. It's more likely that the woman has some principles.

She turns to watch him as he sleeps, the light from the hall illuminating his face. He looks peaceful in sleep and it never fails to amaze her. Ever since Bill had been killed and he'd started to have those horrid nightmares, which had given her a small insight into what his job is really like, she's always been surprised by how peaceful he looks in sleep. It's the only time when the mask he wears slips off completely.

He looks good. Not handsome in any conventional way, but he's got a good face, beautiful eyes and sexy, kissable lips. He's one of those lucky men whose looks have improved with age.

She wonders what she'll do if he decides to leave her for this other woman and she realises that, despite the fact that she's not in love with him any more, it will hurt. It won't destroy her, but it will hurt to see it all end like that after all this time. She has several friends who've divorced and they seem to fall into two groups – those who are miserable and depressed, and those who absolutely love it. She's not sure she'll fall into either of those categories. She won't miss him enough to be miserable and she's already got the freedom that all her friends who love being on their own have. What she'll really miss is the sex.

A few years ago, she'd met someone and had a brief affair with him. It had been after Graham had left home and she and Harry had discovered that they barely knew each other any more. She'd felt so lonely. Her role as a mother had effectively ended, and apparently, so had her role as a wife. It had been rather depressing and so, when several weeks later she'd met Greg, she'd began an affair with him because he made her feel beautiful, wanted, and appreciated. It had lasted a few months, until just after the new school year had started. But then Harry had begun to pay more attention to her again, coming home earlier and actually attempting to talk to her, asking about her day and, of course, wanting sex, so she'd stopped seeing Greg, mainly because of the guilt she'd felt at cheating, but also because he'd never been as good a lover as Harry and she hadn't been in love with him. The relationship had run its course. She's often wondered if Harry had suspected anything. Most likely, he had – he's a spook after all – but he's never brought it up and neither has she.

She remembers her grandmother telling her that she shouldn't marry Harry. Her parents had approved of him very much from the start. Harry was charming, intelligent, and ambitious, but her Gran had seen through all that and had simply asked her if she was one-hundred-percent certain that Harry was the one. When Jane had hesitated, she'd said, “That's the way you know, Jane dear. If you have the smallest bit of doubt, then he's not the one for you. Listen to your heart.”

But she hadn't; she'd listened to her head and her libido, so now she has no one to blame but herself. Then again she has Catherine and Graham, and she wouldn't trade them for the world. Besides, she's never really believed in soul-mates and she does really enjoy the sex.
When Adam had told her that she'll be babysitting Professor Curtis, she'd been rather worried that she wouldn't be able to get anything out of him and people might lose their lives because of her failure – she's an analyst after all, not a field agent and has little to no experience with interrogation or managing high grade assets. The last few weeks have been so unbelievably stressful, however, her efforts to avoid Harry without drawing others' attention to what she's doing so exhausting, that, in spite of her worry, her first emotion had been that of overwhelming relief that she'd be spending most of her time off the Grid. She's had to put a lot of energy into planning her movements, being aware of where Harry is and what the chances are she'll bump into him, making sure that, if she has to speak to him alone, his office door is open and she doesn't linger long.

He'd tried, initially, to smooth things over between them, taking every opportunity to talk to her a little, trying to re-establish the rapport they'd had before everything had gone so spectacularly pear-shaped. He'd even offered an apology once, a few days after it had happened, saying, “I'm sorry, Ruth, for not exercising any self-control. I didn't mean to take advantage,” his eyes looking so soft and contrite, shimmering with guilt and regret and making her heart ache.

She doesn't blame him, doesn't want him to feel guilty – at least, not guilty about his treatment of her. She's not the injured party in all this. That's his wife... Jane. She hasn't even met the woman, has no idea who she is, what she looks like, what she's like as a person... which is probably just as well. She doesn't think she'd survive the guilt if their paths ever crossed.

She'd managed to find the courage to look him in the eye and reply gently, “Don't be, Harry. It was my fault as much as yours – a moment of madness. Let's forget it ever happened, okay?” He'd stared at her for long moments, his eyes boring into hers until she'd been unable to stand it any more and had escaped the room, feeling his gaze follow her all the way to her station.

That had been the last time either of them had referred to what had happened between them, and it hadn't been until that night that she'd realised that Harry hadn't agreed to forget it any more than she had. She'd been annoyed to find that it filled her heart with hope – hope that perhaps it had meant as much to him as it had to her – though it hadn't been long before the guilt had overwhelmed her once more and she'd quickly reminded herself that it can never be. An affair is out of the question, and Harry breaking up his marriage for her, not something she could cope with. She doesn't think she could handle the pressure or the guilt that would bring.

The op is over now. Shining Dawn has been defeated, Professor Curtis has gone back to his arrogant, patronising existence – any changes in his behaviour as a result of this experience temporary, she's sure – and she'll be back on the Grid tomorrow, avoiding Harry with more determination than ever because now she's met Juliet Shaw – the same Juliet Shaw he'd had an affair with twenty-six years ago, according to his file. The thought of being anything like that woman makes her feel sick and rather proud and relieved that she's had the strength of character to stop it from going any further.

A one-night-stand is a moment of weakness and forgiveable because it happened only once. It's not at affair. And she takes comfort from that, from the knowledge that she's better than that witch, that she's accepted her mistake and done something about it, taken steps to make sure it doesn't happen again, no matter how much she might love him and want him and yearn for him, no matter if, deep
down in her heart, she feels that *he's* the one and they were meant to be together.

If losing her father so young has taught her anything, it's that love is never enough and that life has a way of screwing up things that one feels were meant to be.
Chapter 5

9 September 2005 - Ben

He hasn't seen his brother in ages, almost two and a half years now, since he's been stationed in Germany. Not that they saw each other very frequently before that. They used to be close when they were boys, but since Harry had left for Oxford, they'd each got on with their lives, seeing each other about once a year for Christmas, or sometimes at Harry's club for a drink. He'd adored his older brother as a boy, always looking up to him and wanting to follow in his footsteps. He'd even followed him into the army though he'd entered barely a year before Harry had left. He'd studied engineering and an army career had suited him to a tee. He'd always been the sensible one, the one who liked rules and following the chain of command. Harry had been the one who always got them into trouble for bending the rules and always testing the limits. He hadn't really been surprised when he'd told him he was joining MI-5. Being a spy suited his brother so much better than an army career and he still got to serve his country – that had always been important to both of them.

He steps into the room and smiles as he watches his brother rise and take a step towards him, declaring, “Well, well, well, if it isn't Sergeant Wilson.”

Ben laughs and envelops him in a hug before pulling back and saying, “You know you look more and more like George Mainwaring every time I see you, Captain. The only thing missing now is the moustache and glasses.”

Harry chuckles and claps him on the shoulder before gesturing for him to take a seat in one of the leather armchairs and taking a seat himself on the other side of the side-table, facing him. A waiter appears and takes their orders for drinks before disappearing once more and leaving them alone. “It's good to see you, Ben,” Harry smiles. “You're looking good.”

“Thanks,” Ben replies. “You don’t look so bad yourself. I think you've actually lost weight since last I saw you. And quite a bit more hair.”

Harry rolls his eyes in mock irritation as he grumbles, “Yeah, yeah, rub it in, why don't you?” making Ben smile. Harry's always been the stronger one physically, taking after their father, whereas Ben has their mother's build – tall and slim. He's actually an inch taller than Harry, but Harry's always looked bigger somehow, and he's always teased him for it. So when Harry had started losing his hair to male pattern baldness, Ben had been delighted to finally have the advantage in something, and he hasn't stopped teasing him since – he still has a full head of brown curls, darker than his brother's, though now he's starting to turn grey.

“How have you been, Harry?” he asks. “How are the children and Jane?”

“The children are no longer children,” he replies, “and Jane is Jane. Same as always. And the girls? How are they?”

“Fine. Both at university now. Maggie said something about seeing you recently.”

“Yes,” he smiles, “I saw her about two weeks ago when I was up at Oxford. My goodness, she's the spitting image of Mum, Ben. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw her.”

“I know,” he agrees. “It's just her blue eyes that give her away.”
“Yes. She seemed very happy. Glad to see she came over to my side and opted for Oxford.”

“Make up for Graham deserting you, eh?” Ben grins. “Glad the lad decided to follow in his uncle’s footsteps.”

“He’s no sense whatsoever that boy,” Harry sighs. “I think even Jane was a little appalled. Don’t flatter yourself though, Ben. He said it was because his Grandfather went there, not his uncle.”

“It evens out the camps though, doesn't it?” he smiles. “Maggie, You and Mum for Oxford and Dad, Graham and I for Cambridge. Catherine had the good sense not to get mixed up in it at all.”

“Yes,” Harry sighs, “by going to Warwick of all places... Still, I can't complain. Living expenses were much cheaper over there.”

“Yes,” Ben smiles, “unlike UCL which is costing me a small fortune in living expenses for Lizzy.”

Their conversation pauses as their waiter, William, brings in their drinks and they each take a sip while they wait for him to disappear once more.

“So what else is new, Big Brother?” Ben asks as he stretches his long legs and takes a sip of his whisky, grinning at the way Harry raises his eyebrow when he calls him that. He knows Ben's teasing him – a reference to his role in MI-5 and George Orwell. “I heard that Juliet Shaw is back in town.”

“Oh, you know,” he smiles, pleased to have got such a strong reaction out of his brother who's always had the ability to look calm and collected no matter what, “a little bird told me. I understand that she’s security coordinator or something which puts her above you in rank again. I must admit I got a kick out of that. Does Jane know about this?”

“God, no!” he replies, taking a swig of his drink. “And she'd better not find out about it from you, Ben.”

“Don't worry. My lips are sealed,” he smiles. “But I hope to God you've learnt your lesson, Harry, and aren't still dipping your pen in the company ink.” He shakes his head gently, but Ben doesn't miss the way he purses his lips just a little, a sure sign that he's lying. “You're incorrigible, dear brother,” he sighs. “I'd hoped you might have acquired some sense by now. Who is she? Surely not Juliet!”

“I'll pretend I didn't even hear that,” he growls in irritation. “Give me some credit.”

“Then who?” Ben insists, watching his brother as he takes another sip of his drink, draining the glass and motioning to the waiter, who appears just then, to refill it. Once the man has come and gone, he takes another sip, resolutely remaining silent for long minutes.

Eventually, he murmurs, “It was just once. We'd just lost a colleague and I took her home. She's my analyst and she was close to him, Danny. He was the first member of our team to be killed while she's been working for me, so I wanted to make sure she was alright. I... She... One thing lead to another and... it happened... And now she'll only speak to me about work and only in the presence of others... And it's driving me slowly insane.”

He lifts his eyes to Ben's, and to his immense surprise, Ben can clearly see the pain etched in their depths. “You've got it bad, haven't you?” he asks gently, dropping the teasing, playful tone from his voice in the face of his brother's pain.
Harry nods and murmurs, “Remember Sarah Whitman? It's like that.”

Sarah Whitman. How could he forget? He'd been head-over-heels in love with her for years, but in the end, she'd married someone else. She hadn't wanted to be an army officer's wife and then she'd got pregnant, so she'd married Jimmy Hawthorn, son of Benjamin Hawthorn, one of their father's colleagues and friends. Jimmy had followed his father into the banking business and had always been considered quite a catch.

Sarah Whitman – the love of his life. Part of him's still in love with her and he suspects he probably always will be.

Harry had been the one to encourage him to move on, and in the end he had, marrying Julie and starting a family. It hadn't worked out for them and they'd divorced ten years later, but he has two wonderful daughters as a result and he wouldn't trade them for the world.

“As bad as that?” he asks softly.

Harry nods and tips the rest of his drink down his throat before suggesting, “Let's take a walk.”

“Alright,” Ben agrees gratefully, the mention of Sarah bringing up memories and feelings that are making him restless.

“I ran into her, you know,” Harry says sometime later as they walk along the embankment together. “She's divorced, living in London. She asked after you. Said to tell you that she'd love to catch up next time you're in town.” He digs into his pocket and pulls out a business card, holding it out to him. “Her number.”

Ben takes it silently and slips it into his pocket as he fights against the conflicting emotions welling up inside him. Part of him wants to see her, but his pride is fighting against it, telling him that she made her choice years ago and he should let her go. He's not sure which little voice in his head is going to win, when he hears Harry murmur quietly, “Ring her, Ben, or you'll always wonder.” Then he turns towards the river and stops walking, leaning against the wall and looking out over the water for several moments in silence before turning to face him and adding, “And if your feelings are unchanged, don't let a stupid thing like pride get in the way of your happiness. It's not worth it in the end.”

“When did you get to be so wise, Harry?” he smiles, nudging him with his shoulder. “Someone who's been shot, stabbed, burned, punched, and kicked as many times as you should surely have very few little, grey cells still working in his head by now.”

Harry chuckles. “Must have rubbed off from someone else,” he shrugs.

“And I've a pretty good idea who,” Ben can't resist teasing. “You haven't even told me her name yet.”

“Nor am I likely to,” he growls and changes the subject. “Nice weather we're having lately, isn't it?”

Ben can't help it, he bursts out laughing, causing Harry to join in and soon they're both laughing so hard that they find themselves gasping for breath.

“Fuck, Harry, you old bugger,” Ben gasps finally, straightening up and turning to look some place else, scared that he'll start laughing again if he makes eye contact with his brother. God, he's missed this. Every time he sees Harry, he finds himself resolving to try harder to meet up with him more often, but then work and other obligations always get in the way, not to mention the fact that he's stationed abroad. One day they'll manage it, he promises himself, even if it's after they've both
His gaze falls on a woman with beautiful, blue eyes who's staring at them in surprise, no doubt finding it odd to see two middle-aged men laughing in the street – a rather rare sight in England after all. He makes an effort to pull himself together, but he notes that she doesn't move away and is still staring at Harry. *Perhaps she knows him,* he thinks suddenly and murmurs teasingly, “One of your numerous conquests, Harry?”

He turns and looks up then, still grinning as he wipes at his eyes with the back of his hand, but Ben sees him falter at the sight of her before recovering enough to murmur, “Ruth? Do you need me?”

She blushes and looks down at her feet as Harry closes his eyes for a moment and purses his lips, all traces of humour gone from his face, and it's then that Ben's suspicions are aroused and he's almost certain that this is the analyst Harry mentioned, the one he's fallen in love with. She looks as if she's hoping the earth will just swallow her up whole while he can tell Harry's kicking himself for his unfortunate choice of words. Do you need me indeed...

“Sorry, Harry,” she murmurs quickly, glancing up at him. “I didn't mean to interrupt. I should be getting back,” and she begins to turn away.

“Hello,” Ben says, not wanting her to escape, his suspicions making him curious to meet this woman who's captured his brother's heart so completely. “I'm Ben Pearce.”

“Pearce?” she stammers, turning back to face him and instinctively taking the hand he offers her.

“Yes,” he smiles. “Harry's brother. And you are?”

“Ruth Evershed,” she replies, smiling up at him and he's struck by the transformation in her as her whole face lights up. No wonder Harry's fallen for her. Who wouldn't want to be the man who makes this woman smile? “I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Pearce, and I'm sorry for intruding like this. I didn't mean to interrupt, I just...” She tails off embarrassed.

“*Ben* please, and don't mention it, Ruth,” Ben grins. “We must have made quite a spectacle, two middle-aged men laughing their heads off in the middle of the street, but I tell you, it's all Captain Mainwaring's fault, you know. It happens every time we get together.”

She giggles at that and glances at Harry who's glowering at his brother. “Captain Mainwaring?” she asks, clearly amused and yet trying to rein in her desire to laugh so as not to hurt Harry's feelings.

Ben grins. “Dad used to call him that to irk him,” he explains. “Big fan of Dad's Army was our father.”

“And I suppose you were Sergeant Wilson?” she queries with a smile.

“Ahh, *now* I know who you are;” Ben grins and doesn't fail to spot the flash of alarm in both his companions' eyes that effectively confirms his suspicions. “You're one of Harry's analysts and rather a brilliant one at that.” He watches as she smiles and blushes with pleasure before confirming, “Yes, I was Sergeant Wilson, always keeping the good Captain on the straight and narrow, or attempting to at any rate. It wasn't always easy. He was quite something when he got an idea into his head.”

“I can imagine,” she murmurs and then blushes prettily.

“Quite,” Ben grins. The feeling's mutual then, he concludes. *She's utterly in love with Harry, lucky bastard.*
“Well, Ben,” Harry interrupts, “much as I’ve enjoyed catching up, I think it’s time I got back. Not sure I’ll be able to justify more than a two hour lunch break.”

“Oh, I’m sure you'd find a way, Big Brother,” Ben grins, enjoying the way his brother's eyes darken as he looks daggers at him and the smile of amusement on Ruth's lips.

“I should get going,” Ruth says quickly, appearing to suddenly recollect herself. “It was lovely to meet you, Ben.”

“And you, Ruth,” he smiles, shaking her hand again. “I hope to have the pleasure again sometime.”

She blushed and turns away, but stops short when Harry says, “Wait a moment, Ruth. I'll walk back with you.” She glances up at him and then away, looking rather like a rabbit caught in the headlights for a moment before she nods and takes a few steps away from them, giving them some privacy to say goodbye.

“See you, Ben,” Harry murmurs, stepping close and embracing his younger brother quickly. “When do you go back?”

“Two weeks this time,” he says. “I'll ring you.”

“Yes, do. Jane'll want to have you round for a meal sometime. You should bring Sarah.”

“My brother the match-maker,” Ben teases and laughs at the glare Harry gives him. “I'm tempted to offer some advise too,” he adds with a meaningful glance at Ruth.

“Ben,” Harry warns as his eyes take on a dangerous glint.

“Just follow your own advise to me, Harry,” he shrugs. “Don’t let a stupid thing like pride get in the way. Grovel if you have to before someone else snaps her up. She's delightful.”

He grins as Harry narrows his eyes at him and growls, “Don't even think about it.”

“Controlling people's thoughts now, eh Harry?” he laughs. “How very Big Brother of you.” He soars quickly, however, and gripping Harry's elbow with his hand, he leans in and says urgently. “If you're that serious about her, Harry, you need to talk to Jane. You need to end it with her before you start anything with Ruth. She's in love with you, you lucky sod, so do the right thing by her... and by Jane.” Then he releases him, and with a wide smile on his lips, he turns and walks away, stopping to look back only once he's turned the corner and watching as Harry and Ruth walk side by side down the street to Thames House. He sees Harry lift his hand, letting it hover over the small of her back as they turn to cross the street, but he doesn't actually touch her. Ben sighs and turns away.

He doesn't envy Harry his position, having to brake up his marriage and attempt to woo a junior officer, especially one as skittish as Ruth. He got the impression that she's not overly confident with the opposite sex and doesn't want to attract undue attention to herself, which would certainly happen if she were dating the boss. No wonder Harry's fallen so hard for her – she's so different from every other woman he's been with before. Though intelligent like all Harry's women, she appears to lack the ruthlessness and ambition that has characterised most of Harry's conquests until now. She also lacks confidence in her feminine charms and looks and doesn't seem to realise that she's beautiful, which surprises Ben. Harry's always gone for strong, self-assured women and it puzzles him. Perhaps Ruth has those qualities in her work, he muses, but they don't extend into self-confidence in personal relationships with men. That probably accounts for why Harry's so deeply in love with her.

He sighs as he pulls out his phone to call his youngest daughter and confirm that they're still meeting up for tea, wishing his brother luck with his attempts to win round Ruth Evershed and ask Jane for a
divorce. He doesn't envy Harry the complexity of his personal life. Then again, Harry's never been
one for a straight-forward kind of existence. He's always enjoyed the challenge of complications. It's
what drew him away from the army to MI-5 after all.
Chapter 6

24 September 2005 - Harry

“Harry? It's Adam.”

“Where are you? What happened?” he asks quickly, heart in his mouth, sick with worry over Ruth.

“Bramsley Wood Nature Reserve,” he replies. “I need you to send a team out here and one to round up Moran's thugs. The bastard just tried to kill us and Isis-”

“I know,” he interrupts. “We found her. Are you alright? Is Ruth with you?”

“Yes. She's here. We're both fine. You should have seen her, Harry. She walloped him over the head with a tree-branch, saved my fucking life. She was brilliant!”

“Good,” he says, sinking down into his chair, the relief overpowering. “That's good. I'll send someone out there immediately.”

“Thanks, Harry.”

He puts down the phone, taking a moment to compose himself before striding out to the Grid and issuing orders, sending Zaf out with a team to round up Moran's men and Fiona to rescue Ruth and Adam. Then he makes his way back to his office and his desk, allowing his emotions free rein for a few moments, letting the panic, the fear, the worry drain out of him and allowing the relief, gratitude, and love to replace them.

Despite the strain and awkwardness of the last three months, Ruth's efforts to avoid him, and his slowly vanishing hope that they will ever move past the way they began, he finds that his love for her hasn't diminished and neither has his guilt and regret that he'd let his self-control slip and ruined everything they had and any change of more intimacy between them.

He'd been so angry with himself initially for buggering everything up so thoroughly and determined to put things straight – move out and divorce Jane, find a way to fix things with Ruth and court her properly – but when he'd apologised and, instead of accepting his apology, she'd dismissed it and asked him to forget anything had ever happened, his frustration and anger had boiled over and shifted focus onto Ruth, and for the next few weeks, he'd blamed her for not giving him the time of day, for not letting him explain, for not allowing them the opportunity to move on from what had happened and fix it. That anger had propelled him back into Jane's arms for a while, had made him try to forget his love for Ruth, the profound experience of making love to her that had touched his very soul.

It's not that he'd expected her to fall into his arms and have a torrid affair with him. He'd known her moral code wouldn't allow that. All he'd wanted was for them to start over, continue as they had before Danny died, when they'd been drawing closer, relying more on each other, trusting each other, having the occasional drink in his office at the end of the day, talking, existing in the same space. He'd loved that and it would have been enough for now. It would have been a start.

Talking to Ben had helped calm him and put everything in perspective again. He hadn't planned on saying anything, but he's glad now that it had come up in their conversation. He can trust his brother. Ben's always on his side and offers good advice, tells him when he's wrong and when he's being a
And what's more, Ben thinks that Ruth's in love with him. He's not sure if that's true yet, but if it is, it could explain why she's reacted as she has, going to such lengths to avoid him. Perhaps she doesn't trust herself around him, scared she'll succumb to the temptation again if they ever found themselves alone.

“You're grasping at straws, Harry,” he mutters to himself, shaking his head to clear it, but he can't seem to shake the hope that's grabbed hold in his heart.

She's relaxed a fraction around him again now. After he'd walked back with her from lunch with Ben, she seems to have realised that they can have a conversation without anything untoward happening, but he can feel that the ease between them has gone, can almost taste the tension in the air around them. And he has no idea how to fix that.

He knows it's not just her. He's terrified of making another mistake that will undo what little progress has been made, and that's contributing to the tension substantially. How can he expect her to relax when he's so tense himself? He's got to find a way to work on that, find his way back to the way things were before his self-control had slipped and she'd become aware of the strength of his desire for her, back when they could just enjoy each other's company and conversation without worry, or fear, or guilt.

Almost losing her today has underlined how much she truly means to him, and he can no longer kid himself that he can move on, forget her, and go back to his failed marriage and mundane existence, devoid of joy and the bliss of making love to a woman he feels for so deeply. He's determined to take action now, do all he can to make it possible for them to be together, no matter how difficult, no matter how long it takes or if, ultimately, he's unsuccessful.

He knows it won't be easy, but then most worthwhile things in life are hard, and he hasn't got where he is today by giving up. He's one stubborn bugger when he wants to be, and he very much wants to be one now. He's going to fix things between them, and if Ruth's really in love with him, he's going to convince her to give them a chance. He has to at least try.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

8 October 2005 – Ruth

She didn't think she'd miss him this much, but the last few days without Harry have been so much harder than she anticipated. Despite her efforts to avoid him, knowing that he's near, seeing him every day has brought her a quiet sense of contentment she'd not realised was there until he was suddenly gone.

Even thinking of their one-night-stand no longer fills her with guilt and regret. It's been three months already, after all, and she's able to focus more on the positive emotions now – the comfort, the joy, the contentment she'd experienced while lying in his arms afterwards, the connection between them that had felt so deep, so profound. She'd felt loved and protected for the first time in so many years, had felt understood, accepted and cherished as he'd looked at her with such fondness in his gaze.

When he'd stepped back onto the Grid this morning, the first thing he'd done was look at her and smile, and she was sure in that moment that he'd missed her too, and she'd felt herself weakening in her resolve to keep her distance. How would it hurt to allow some of the closeness between them to return? What's the harm in sharing a drink in his office occasionally, at the end of a long day, and talking about work, or books, music, and other things they have in common, before they head off home?

None, she tells herself, though deep down she's not so sure. Does it still count as a betrayal of his marriage vows if he spends so much time with another woman, even if they're not having sex? She has a feeling that it might do.

But what if he's in his office anyway? It's not as if he goes home to his wife when she doesn't have a drink with him. He just ends up having that drink alone. Surely that's worse for all of them, isn't it? And so long as they don't end up going home together, is there really any harm in having a conversation? She won't let anything physical happen between them again. She's determined on that score.

She has a feeling she's just making excuses and trying to justify the unjustifiable to herself, but... she misses him. A lot.

She sighs, then takes a deep breath. Dammit, Ruth! You only live once. Stop over-thinking everything. Let it all just... crinkle out. She nods and smiles in approval at herself, happy to be cutting herself some slack. That's better.

No lifts home, no nightcaps at my place, no sex, she promises herself, and with that resolution firmly in place, she gets up and goes to him, pausing to gather her courage before slipping onto his office without knocking.

He looks up and smiles slightly, noting the omission of the curtsey and, hopefully, understanding it for what it is – a signal that everything is back to normal between them, that she's done running and hiding from him, that she's missed him.

“How was Israel?” she asks.
“Sad,” he replies, shaking his head. “I haven't been there in years. It's changed so much.”

“How so?” she asks, intrigued. Israel is not one of the places she's ever been to.

“It used to be such a young country, full of youthful vigour.” He sighs. “Now it's battle-scarred and weary... Rather like me.”

She frowns at that. What is he saying? He's not suggesting he's thinking of leaving, is he? Just a few short months ago, he hadn't wanted to leave Section D for the DG's office. He can't have changed his mind so quickly, can he?

He seems to recollect himself, however, and changes the subject slightly. “It was good to see my daughter though.”

She smiles, a picture of the young, vibrant, passionate documentary maker who's so much like her father, coming to mind. She'd really liked her when their paths had crossed briefly during their investigation into the November committee and she'd thought the feeling was mutual, though what Catherine would think of her if she ever found out what she did with Harry... Quickly she sweeps the thought aside.

“Is she making another documentary?” she asks.

“She is,” he replies with pride. “It's still a work in progress apparently, but she took me on a tour of the occupied territories that was... illuminating, to say the least. We have it so easy over here.”

She nods. “Somehow it doesn't feel that way though.”

He smiles. “No. My good friend, Levy's been telling me this for years, but it takes a trip there to actually put everything into perspective.” He's watching her, his hazel eyes warm and gentle, a fondness in them that she hasn't seen since the night he took her home after Danny, and she can feel herself being drawn in, her resistance crumbling. She blinks, looking away quickly and taking a steadying breath.

“Anyway,” she says, “I'd better get back to some work. I just came in to give you this. It's a summary I put together last night on where we are in all current ops. I thought you might find it useful.”

“Thanks,” he murmurs, his gaze softening even more.

She nods and turns around, walking back to the door, and she can feel his eyes following her all the way back to her station, her heart beating wildly, thrilled and terrified in equal parts at the sudden certainty that Harry has feelings for her that go deeper than mere lust. Could he be in love with me too?

Christ! Don't think like that, Ruth, she orders herself crossly. She can't cope with the thought that his feelings might extend as deep as love. That would mean he might very well leave his wife and expect her to want to pursue an intimate relationship with him – her boss, a man who's more than fifteen years her senior, a man with at least two decades more experience than her at being a spy and God knows how many more years of experience in the bedroom.

It's intimidating and terrifying to think that such a man might love her. But it's also rather gratifying and thrilling too.
A/N: Harry's trip, events on said trip, and opinions that are referenced here are mentioned in Harry's diary, as are the dates used in this fic (which I'm sure I've mentioned before). Thank you all for reading and I hope you continue to enjoy. I am extremely grateful to those of you who take the time to review and leave Kudos. It makes writing and sharing fics worthwhile. Cheers, S.C.
“All right. That's it,” he says, dismissing his team from the briefing, but he doesn't get up, turning to Ruth who is sitting on his left and murmuring, “Stay a moment.”

She looks surprised as she glances up at him and then down at her papers, straightening them nervously, but she does as he asks and remains seated while everyone else leaves the room, Adam pulling the door closed behind him at a look from him.

“I need you to look into something for me,” he says as soon as they're alone.

She lifts her head to look at him and he thinks he sees relief flit quickly through her gaze, almost as if she'd expected him to say something personal. Oh Ruth, he thinks fondly.

“Of course, Harry,” she replies, blue eyes alight, making him almost forget what it is they're talking about. Good God, but she's beautiful when her eyes sparkle like that, or she smiles, or she laughs, or when– Stop it, Harry! Focus!

“I overheard something at the JIC meeting this morning that worries me and I need you to look into it... discretely.”

“Oh course, Harry,” she replies, blue eyes alight, making him almost forget what it is they're talking about. Good God, but she's beautiful when her eyes sparkle like that, or she smiles, or she laughs, or when– Stop it, Harry! Focus!

“I overheard Jools Siviter telling Mace that operation Sandstrike is going ahead, but that he needs access to the Uranium today.”

“Uranium!” She's frowning now, looking worried.

“Yes. That's why I'm worried.”

She nods. “I'll look into it, Harry.”

“Good,” he smiles. “Let me know what you find and... let's keep this between ourselves for now.”

“Okay,” she agrees though she's frowning slightly, a sure sign she's trying to puzzle something out, something that doesn't fit.

“What?”

“Isn't it... strange that they were discussing an MI-6 operation at the JIC meeting where anyone could overhear? Does it mean the op has been sanctioned by someone at the top?”

Good God, but she's brilliant! And he can't help the way his gaze softens a little and the pride and wonder he feels comes shining through. She blushes and looks down, which forces him to recollect himself and get ahold of his emotions. Now is not the time for this, Harry.

“I did wonder that myself. When Siviter mentioned Sandstrike, Mace's response was to tell him 'not here' and walk away, but Jools hesitated for a moment and caught my eye before moving off. I suspect he was deliberately trying to get me involved.”
“Oh!” she sounds surprised. “Why?”

“I don't know yet, but my gut is telling me that he doesn't like it, whatever it is, and he wants someone to put a stop to it.”

“But why couldn't he do that himself?”

He smiles sardonically. “Because Jools loves the good life and he's only recently returned from a posting to Asia. I suspect he's rather keen to remain in London for the foreseeable future.”

“So he wants you to do his dirty work?!” She sounds indignant, her eyes flashing in anger on his behalf and he can't help wanting to kiss her.

“Let's just say he wants someone to do something to stop it, and he knows I will if it's bad for the country.”

She smiles slightly at that, her gaze softening a little, and he wonders what it is she's thinking.

“Are you planning to tell the team?” she asks.

“Not at the moment. If you need help, you can draft in Malcolm, but I'd rather keep this under wraps until we know what it is we're dealing with.”

“All right,” she agrees and begins to get up, gathering her papers and standing. “I'll look into it right away.”

“Thank you, Ruth,” he replies, following her example and getting the door for her before striding away to his office, resisting the temptation to linger and watch her make her way across the Grid. He's got to be careful or everyone will know exactly how he feels about her, and that wouldn't do.

He needs to talk to Jane and soon.

Chapter End Notes

A/N I'm using some artistic licence here to squeeze in the trip Mani mentions in 8.01. In any case, I'm sure that's what the Spooks writers did in suddenly having HR together in Iraq since, if it happened before the Iraq war, it would have had to have occurred before Ruth had joined Section D, a highly unlikely scenario if Harry didn't know Ruth and, therefore, couldn't trust her, much less be in love with her yet... Hope that makes some sense and thanks for the reviews and Kudos! Happy Easter!
Chapter 9

13 October 2005 - Ruth

She can't believe she's here, in Baghdad of all places, with Harry of all people. She glances at the clock again – 9:15pm. Where is he, she asks herself for the millionth time this evening. He's been gone for over three hours now and she's getting rather worried. He hadn't expected it to take so long and she's beginning to imagine the worst. Only forty-five minutes are left until the appointed time for her to sound the alarm, but what if he's in trouble and he needs help now? What if, when she rings for help at ten, as he'd instructed, it's already too late to save him?

Stop it, Ruth, she tells herself, pacing the room, trying to distract herself with memories of the day, the time they've spent together. It had been quite wonderful really – the thrill, the adrenaline rush of being on operation, knowing that Harry's near and ready to help her get it right. It's made it so much easier this time. Normally she gets so nervous! Though, other than the fact that they're in a foreign, war-torn country, so far there hasn't been any overt danger. Unless Harry's in danger now with no backup or way to call for help. Only she knows he's here and Adam back at Thames House.

Harry had left Adam in command, charging him with hiding his real whereabouts from everyone, to stop word getting back to Mace or any others with a vested interest in the success of Sandstrike. Adam had told the team he's away at an important meeting and, if there's some delay and it becomes necessary to hide Harry's absence for longer, he's meant to invent a family emergency. Adam was also supposed to tell the team that she'd called in sick. She hopes no one tries to ring to check up on her, though if they do, she's no doubt Adam will handle it. If need be, he can always draft in one of the others to help, though Harry had insisted that the people in the know should be kept to a minimum. Besides, this is meant to be a quick, in-and-out affair. They're meant to be flying back early tomorrow morning if everything goes according to plan, but if Harry-

Don't think like that, Ruth, she orders herself, pacing the room again. This is Harry – one of the best field agents Five has ever had. He'll be fine. She tries not to think of the fact that he's out of practice, his reflexes slower than they were in his heyday, and he's not nearly fit enough to deal with the worse case scenario, should it arise.

Stop it! Do something, she orders herself, going over to her holdall and retrieving her toiletry bag before moving to the bathroom to brush her teeth, distracting herself with memories of their morning together once more.

They'd taken an overnight flight from London, which had involved travelling as husband and wife, acting like a couple – holding hands, linking arms, stopping to share a kiss as they'd tried to hide from CCTV in plain sight, in case someone was watching. It had been imperative that they maintain the element of surprise in their dealings with Stephen Hillier – the highest ranking MI-6 officer involved on the ground in Baghdad, according to her research. She'd felt so nervous and jumpy initially, but Harry had been masterful at putting her at ease, taking her hand in his as they'd walked into the terminal, turning to her and smiling in encouragement, joking to make her laugh and help her relax, reassuring her with quiet words of encouragement.

When she'd told Harry everything she'd discovered about operation Sandstrike and he'd hatched this plan to get the Uranium out of play, he'd explained what he intended, laying out for her what would be required of her were she to be the one to accompany him. He'd given her the option to say no, assuring her that while he thought her particular skill set would be the most useful to him, he
understood if he was asking too much of her, especially given their personal history. He'd hesitated and looked down at his hands as he'd said that – out of shame or regret? She's not quite sure – and it was *that* more than anything else that had decided her. So she'd said yes, watching the smile of genuine pride and pleasure spread across his lips before he'd nodded and they'd gone over their legends, hastily constructed with Colin's help – who'd been given no other information about the op and told to tell no one what he knew, not even Malcolm.

Sitting beside Harry for hours on the plane, chatting to him about all sorts of things, acting like any normal couple on holiday had been quite wonderful – although perhaps holiday isn't the right word. *Who in their right mind would take a holiday to Iraq right now?* She'd managed to sleep a bit on the flight, resting her head against Harry's shoulder after he'd talked her into it, telling her not to be stupid and just take advantage of the natural padding to be found there. She smiles as she remembers that now, jerking her head forward suddenly as the toothpaste starts to leak out the corner of her mouth, just managing to make it land in the basin rather than down the front of her shirt. *Nice save,* she thinks, spitting the rest out and rinsing her mouth with bottled water. She puts the toothbrush and paste away and gets out her floss.

They'd arrived and gone straight to their hotel – one they had chosen on the basis of it being close to the one Stephen Hillier is using – checked it for bugs, using equipment Harry had secretly borrowed, and then going for a stroll to find some breakfast. They'd eaten and found a market and Harry had insisted that they look for some clothes that will help them blend in more with the locals and cope with the heat of the day, for though it's October, the weather is still hot, reaching almost forty degrees at midday! It had been like a sauna, both of them suffering in the dry heat though she thinks she'd coped far better than Harry.

They'd taken their purchases back to their room – one they're sharing because they're still posing as a married couple, or at least, they are to the locals and any others whose unwanted attention they might attract as foreigners. Harry's plan had never been to pretend to be someone else to the MI-6 operatives they've come here to confront. It would be unlikely to work, for one, but he's also been banking on his reputation and the threat of exposure of their little scheme to sway them into giving up the Uranium to be transported back to a secure location in Britain. *But what if his confidence has been misplaced,* she finds herself thinking before shaking her head to clear it, putting away her toiletries and picking up her hairbrush, brushing vigorously as a way to allay her fears.

Ten o'clock they'd agreed, she reminds herself, glancing at the clock again to find it's only 9:28pm. *Please come back, Harry,* she silently pleads before putting her hairbrush away. Briefly she thinks about having a shower, but quickly dismisses the idea as too dangerous. She needs to be fully dressed and ready to act at a moment's notice. She straightens up and looks over at his holdall, wondering what kinds of personal items he's packed and what other spy equipment, resisting the temptation to take a peak now that he's not here.

He'd warned her in advance that they'd be sharing a room and had promised to sleep on the floor if the room didn't contain more than one bed, which it turns out it doesn't. She'd felt a momentary stab of panic at that, but had agreed to come on this mission in spite of it because, as Harry says, the job comes first and, if Harry needs her help on this op, she'll give it gladly to stop a WMD from falling into the wrong hands. She doesn't dare admit to herself that the prospect of spending time with Harry away from the Grid, just the two of them against the world, had been so alluring that she couldn't have resisted if she'd tried.

She eyes the bed now, letting her thoughts drift to sharing it with Harry tonight – she couldn't possibly condemn him to the floor – and wondering how they'll ever manage to keep their hands off each other. Holding hands at the airport, sharing a couple of gentle kisses, and sleeping against his shoulder on the plane had been only the beginning of a day filled with little moments of connection,
feelings of intimacy that have been compounded by their legends and the fact that they're away from the familiar, the roles they normally inhabit in life and the rules of engagement between them. He's still her boss, but there's no audience here. He's still married, but they're over three thousand miles from his wife.

After they'd returned from the market, they'd taken turns in the bathroom, got changed, and applied sun-cream, which she'd thankfully remembered to pack – unlike Harry. She smiles as she recalls having to remind him that they're meant to be blending in and, if he lets himself burn to a crisp, he's going to stand out like a sore thumb. As he'd lathered his arms, neck, and face with cream, she'd had visions of taking a real holiday with him, helping him apply the sun-cream to his back and shoulders, kissing him, making love to him on a deserted beach, under the stars.

She blushes as she remembers that now, thinking back to the knowing look he'd given her as he'd handed her back the cream. It's been so hard not to think of him like that all day, to keep a professional distance when he's been so close and behaved so charmingly. It's almost as if he's trying to seduce her, and as she'd predicted, she's having a very hard time remembering all the reasons she should be saying no.

He'd bought her a turquoise, silk scarf at the market, one embroidered with the most beautiful, whimsical pattern she's ever seen, insisting that she accept it and wear it to protect her head and face from the sun, as well as for the purpose of blending in more with the locals. She runs her fingers over the material now, wondering if she should give it back once the op is over. She can't possibly keep it, can she?

*You kept the birthday present he gave you in April, Ruth? This isn't that different, is it?* Except it is different because she's slept with him now... and she can't stop thinking about doing it again. She wants him so very much. She loves him so very much. If she accepts this gift-

The gentle knock at the door, startles her and brings her back into the present with a jolt. She spins on her heel to face the door, moving quickly to the wall beside it, heart hammering in her chest as she flattens her back against it, listening for his signal, just in case it isn't Harry. They'd only agreed it would be Morse code, but as she deciphers the knocks, she can't help smiling. O-V-I-D. Only Harry would know to tap that.

Quickly, she moves to unbolt and unlock the door, opening it to let him in before closing and locking it behind him. She wants to rush to him and hug him, tell him how relieved she is that he's safe, but somehow she manages to hold herself back.

“Sorry, I'm so late,” he says, smiling at her. “It took a while to come to an agreement. As you'd predicted, the Cousins are involved in this too.”

“Figures,” she replies, wondering why it is that all the worst ideas seem, in some way, connected to the Americans. “So what's the plan?”

“We're meeting Hillier and the American, Libby McCall, again at five in the morning. They're taking us to the Uranium and we're all flying back on a military transport that leaves at eight.”

“All?” she questions.

“You, Hillier and I.” he clarifies.

“And the others?”

“I couldn't care less about the others. As long as we get all the Uranium back to Britain, I'll be
satisfied."

"You think they might try to steal some of it?" she asks in alarm.

"I'm sure they will. I suspect that's why this plan was hatched in the first place. It makes no sense otherwise. Trying to justify a war two years after it was started by hiding some Uranium is absurd."

"The PM might think otherwise," she points out cynically.

"I'm sure he does," he agrees, sliding a hand down his face tiredly, "but that doesn't mean Six would jump to do his bidding if there wasn't something in it for them. I rather think there are numerous interests at play here."

"Aren't there always?"

He smiles, his gaze softening as he looks at her. "I'm going to need your help to get a handle on all of them tomorrow."

"Of course," she nods, pleased that she'll be more involved and useful. Harry had insisted on her staying back this evening to be on the safe side, not knowing what he'll encounter, and she'd understood the need for caution, but she'd hated every minute of the wait, not knowing what's going on, if he's succeeding, if he's safe.

"I'm glad you're all right," she confesses. "I was worried."

"I'm sorry," he replies, taking a small step towards her, his eyes still soft and warm. He reaches for her hand and gives it a gentle squeeze, but as he continues to hold it and she doesn't pull back, she sees his eyes darken and she's sure that he can feel her pulse racing.

"Harry," she tries to object, swallowing to moisten her throat, wondering absently why it's gone so dry when other parts of her are suddenly flooding with moisture.

He takes a step closer and she can feel the heat of his body all along her own, even though only their hands are touching. "Ruth," he murmurs huskily, the longing in his voice shattering the last threads of her self-control.

She reaches for him, hands sliding up his chest and into his hair, their lips and bodies crashing into each other, the fire engulfing them, scorching, all-consuming lust propelling them on and on and on. This is nothing like their first time. There is no grief coupled with their love and lust. There is only need, raw, naked desire, driving them on, wave after wave of pleasure breaking over them. It's hard, fast, intense and spectacular sex, so good that when they finally lie spent, diagonally across the bed, bodies still twined together, neither of them can think or move, let alone speak.

When she eventually comes back from the blissful land of non-cognition, she marvels at the wonder of it all, never having experienced anything like this, never having felt this content, this happy in her adult life before. She keeps her eyes closed, humming in pleasure as his hand glides down her body, leaving a trail of tingling delight behind it.

Jesus! Who knew fucking Harry could be this good?

Juliet Shaw – the name flits through her mind followed by the name of his wife, but somehow the guilt and regret she expects in their wake doesn't materialise. Maybe it's because it feels so very good, or maybe it's because they're so far from home or because of the adrenaline of the operation, the relief of him coming back to her unharmed when she'd began to fear the worst. She's sure it will come later though, in the morning perhaps, or when she's on the plane home, or she arrives back at
her place and it finally sinks in that she's having an affair with her married boss. And even if she manages to keep her distance again once they're back in the routine and familiarity of work on the Grid, she'll know that she's failed to stand by her convictions, and she'll feel guilty about it. She knows this, yet right now, all she feels is bliss and she cherishes that.

She opens her eyes to look at him, wanting to enjoy the moment, the freedom of loving him without guilt for a little while. He smiles, eyes like honey, his hand still caressing her skin and making her shiver. “Why me, Harry?” she asks, the feeling of total bliss and satisfaction making her bold.

“I could ask you the same question,” is his low, rumbling response.

“Don't be ridiculous,” she replies, frowning at him, knowing full well how many women she's overheard saying he's sexy as hell over the years.

“You're smart, kind, brilliant, young, beautiful... I'm old and broken. I'm a ruthless bastard and you know it, and yet...” he tails off, searching her gaze.

She hums, smiling to herself and closing her eyes in contentment, pleased to hear that he sees her in such a positive light.

“Ruth?” he murmurs, stroking her body, rekindling her desire a little more with every touch.

“Yes?” She knows he wants reassurance, but she can't help teasing him a bit by withholding it for a little while. She's never had any kind of power over him before and she wants to savour it for a moment or two.

She feels him shift his weight towards her, feels his lips press gently against hers, opens her mouth to deepen the kiss, moaning at the feel of his body covering hers, his weight pressing her into the mattress. “You know what,” he murmurs against her lips, kissing them softly again and lifting his head to look at her.

She opens her eyes, smiling. “You're a good man, Harry. In spite of what you do, you still have a soft heart. You're intelligent, tenacious, loyal, honourable. You're full of contradictions, but that just intrigues me and I feel...” She pauses gazing into his eyes that have softened again, his lips smiling softly down at her. “This may sound stupid, but I feel safe with you. I trust you.”

He kisses her, drawing her in, rekindling the fire in her, all rational thought floating out the window and into the hot, desert night as he worships her body with lips and tongue sending her into spiral after spiral of heart-stopping bliss.

When he wakes her, just a few hours after they'd finally fallen asleep, they quickly get dressed, send an update to Adam, and gather their things, sharing one, heated, final kiss before leaving the hotel and making their way to the rendezvous with Hillier and the plane back to Britain. They hadn't spoken much last night. No promises had been made, but words had felt superfluous, and she knows that, no matter what happens now or in the future, she'll always cherish this time they've had together... just as soon as she can get over the guilt that had gripped her like a vice the moment she'd stepped back on British soil.
Chapter 10

14 October 2005 - Harry

Tonight. It has to be tonight, he decides as he leans back in his seat, staring unseeingly out the window of the car, while Anthony drives him home, his thoughts full of Ruth and their lovemaking last night. He simply hadn't been able to resist her when she'd looked at him like that, her gaze open and honest, her eyes luminous, calling to him like a Siren, drawing him in until he'd lost himself in her, drowning in his love for her, in the essence of this woman who has come to mean so much to him. His self-control hasn't snapped like that on operation in a quarter of a century, and though he's ashamed of himself for taking such a risk, for potentially putting them both and the success of the operation in danger by taking his eye off the ball, he can't quite bring himself to regret it. It had been the most satisfying, spectacular sex he's ever had.

He has to talk to Jane. Now. Tonight. Before Ruth's reaction to what happened, whatever that might be, influences him and he risks falling back into inaction.

The flight home had been so different from the one to Baghdad. Ruth had sat beside him, but there had been others watching them and an increasing tension between them until, by the time they'd landed at RAF Northolt, Ruth had seemed so distant that he'd feared the worst. Adam had met them with a team who would be transporting the Uranium to a safe, non-disclosed location. Only he, Adam, Ruth and the American, Libby McCall – who'd insisted on flying home with them – will know where that is, though he secretly has plans to move it later, just in case.

This had been part of the deal they'd struck with Hillier, McCall and Mani, in return for their freedom and ability to carry on in their jobs unimpeded.

Ruth had seemed so tired and quiet once they were back on British soil, barely making eye-contact with anyone, least of all him. He'd wanted to keep her by his side as long as possible, talk to her, kiss away her fears and guilt, tell her all the things he should have told her last night, make all the promises he should have made, and reassure her that everything will turn out well for them, but he'd realised that she needed to be alone, needed to rest after their long trip and a virtually sleepless night, and the chances of him finding a moment alone with her to explain were close to nil after his two day absence from the Grid. So he'd sent her straight home – she was meant to be ill anyway – while he and Adam took care of the Uranium and went back to the Grid.

He sighs, rubbing his face to dispel the fatigue that's beginning to catch up with him. He'll just have to find another opportunity to talk to Ruth before it's too late, but right now, he needs to focus on how to break the news to Jane and prepare himself for her reaction.

She's not home when he enters the house, making him wonder where she's got to. He's rarely home before eleven, so even if Jane's out most nights, he wouldn't know it, but the fact that he's never wondered or bothered to ask before highlights just how distant they've become over the years. It really is a miracle that they've lasted this long, he muses as he removes his coat and makes his way to the kitchen in search of something to eat, a rather excited Scarlet jumping up at him as soon as he opens the kitchen door. He crouches down to stroke her, murmuring sweet nothings to her before he straightens up and moves over to the sink to wash his hands. “Where's Jane?” he asks the dog as he sets about warming up his food and grabs the half-empty bottle of white wine from the fridge. Scarlet doesn't answer but simply stares at him, her tongue hanging out of her mouth, making her look like she's laughing. She's sitting at the table already, having jumped up on the chair beside the one he
usually occupies. She always does this when Jane's not home or if she's already in bed, and he doesn't have the heart to tell her off for it. It's their little secret, and he finds himself wondering if Ruth will mind, if they ever live together.

He's just finished eating when he hears the key turn in the lock. Scarlet immediately jumps down and dashes out the room, and he hears Jane enter the house and exclaim in surprise, “Scarlet! How did you get out of the kitchen?” She must see his coat hanging in the hallway because, when she appears in the kitchen doorway, she doesn't seem surprised to find him there. “Hello. You're home early,” she says.

“Yes,” he nods. “I managed to get off early after my trip. Have you eaten?”

“Yes,” she replies, going over to the sink to wash her hands. “You?”

“Just finished,” he smiles. “Join me for a glass of wine?”

She turns to look at him speculatively then, but she nods her ascent and pulls a glass out of the cupboard before she sits down across from him. It's odd, he thinks absently, sitting across from Jane, sharing a bottle of wine. They haven't done this in... oh, years now. In fact, the only meal they share with any regularity is breakfast, and that's only usually on a Sunday and they hardly talk at all. Jane's usually busy reading, planning, or marking something for her A-level students, and Harry's lost in the paper or running over what needs to be done next in all the current ops, making mental notes of what he needs to tell whom.

Sex is usually silent too. No sweet nothings whispered in the midst of passion, no declarations of love. Just an occasional direction – faster, slow down, a bit to the left, that's good, etc. He can't remember the last time Jane had whispered his name, or he hers, in the height of passion. With Ruth it had been so... but he mustn't go there now. It's good sex with Jane, he can't really complain. A lot of men would give their right arm for what he has – a wife who doesn't nag or care where he is and what time he gets home, and yet is happy to have sex most of the time. She's remarkably self-sufficient is Jane, though that hasn't always been the case.

When the children had been small, she'd been actually rather depressed, especially after Juliet. She'd pulled through it somehow, however, and has changed over the years. She'd found a therapist she liked after she'd agreed to give him another chance, and she seems to have helped Jane a lot. She's become more like him, or perhaps she just hasn't had the time to be depressed any more while almost single-handedly raising their children on top of teaching full time. And until he'd met Ruth, he'd been content with their arrangement. Yet now he longs for more than what they have. He longs for someone who understands him, understands his work and what it demands of him, understands his thoughts and feelings, understands his guilt and loves him anyway. He longs for intimacy and passion and bliss. He longs for Ruth.

“What's the occasion, Harry?” she asks as she slides her glass across the table for him to fill, interrupting his thoughts.

He doesn't answer at first, watching the wine swirl as it falls into the glass. How does one tell one's spouse of twenty-six years that it's over?

“Not a happy one then,” she states, nodding her thanks and taking a sip of the wine.

“This isn't easy, Jane,” he murmurs eventually, twisting his glass with his fingers. “And I want you to know that I haven't come to this decision lightly...”

“But you want a divorce,” she finishes for him.
He looks up at her sharply then and stammers, “How did you...?”

She shrugs and looks away, out of the window and into the night. “I’ve been expecting it for months now.” She turns back to look at him, adding, “What we have... it's not the same any more. I can feel that your heart isn't really in it. I know that it's been years since we've had what could be described as a good marriage. I don't think we ever really recovered from Juliet, but since Graham left home, things have been even worse. I mean, we hardly speak to each other any more, Harry, and then in the last few months, I've realised, you've found someone else. To begin with I thought it was another affair, but then I realised that it's much worse than that. You're in love with her, and whether you've been sleeping with her or not makes little difference. It's always been just a matter of time.”

He's stunned by her ability to read him so effortlessly, and a little alarmed by it as well, but he's also amazed at how calmly she's taking it. He'd expected some emotion, not tears necessarily, perhaps name calling or shouting, but not this calm acceptance, and he finds that he feels rather hurt by the indifference. “I don't know what to say, Jane.”

“There's nothing to say, Harry. That's the point. There hasn't been for years.”

“That may be true, but this... It's not easy,” he murmurs, surprising himself by the sudden surge of emotion and regret. When he’d married Jane, he’d had such high hopes for himself, for her, for their life together. Admittedly he'd started to screw it up from day one by withholding from her the fact that he was a spy until after they'd signed the register, but he'd meant to give it his best shot.

“No,” she shakes her head, her gaze softening. “It's been a long time and we've had some good moments together, Harry.”

He nods, looking down at his wine glass and raising it to his lips, draining the glass. “Catherine,” he smiles as he refills his glass, remembering holding his daughter for the first time.

“And Graham,” she adds.

“And making them?” he ventures, lifting his eyes to her face to gauge her reaction, not sure if his attempt at humour was wise or not.

“Definitely making them,” she chuckles. She raises her glass to her lips, taking a sip before she lowers it and adds, “You're a good lover, Harry, and I'll miss that – the sex. If you ever need a... really good shag, give me a ring. If there's no one else in my life...” She shrugs leaving her sentence unfinished, and despite himself, he feels flattered. He can't foresee any circumstance in which he'd be tempted to take up her offer, but it feels good to receive such praise.

“Thank you, Jane,” he smiles. “I'll bear it in mind. I do hope, however, that you find someone more... compatible, less secretive and more generous and loving than I have been. You deserve that.”

“It's nice of you to say, but I'm not holding my breath,” she sighs. “It's been a quarter of a century, give or take, that I've spent looking for that, and if I'd found it, it wouldn't be you asking for the divorce right now.” She pauses, accepting the refill that he offers her, and then asking, “Who is she, Harry? Another spy?”

He hesitates for a moment but then nods, murmuring, “But not like Juliet. She's... principled and kind.”

“That figures,” she murmurs before taking another swig of her wine. Then at his questioning look, she adds, “You swore to me that you weren't having an affair, so naturally I assumed it was because of her. She didn't want a relationship with a married man.” He feels a stab of guilt at that,
remembering the lie he'd told to get her into bed, knowing full well that, while one could argue that *technically* having sex with Ruth once isn't an affair, in reality it had still been a betrayal and *now*, having had sex with Ruth twice more in Baghdad, he's *definitely* having an affair, though whether it continues remains to be seen. He's no idea how Ruth will react to the guilt this time, though he expects her to bolt again and avoid him for a while. She can't seem to stay away for long, however, and that gives him hope for their future together, hope that her feelings are as deep as his, hope that they can make it work in spite of how they began.

They're silent for some time while they finish their second, and in Harry's case, third glass of wine. “I'll move out this week,” Harry murmurs eventually, “and you can have the house.” She sighs, taking another sip of her drink. “I'm sorry, Jane,” he says, feeling a surge of guilt.

She shrugs. “I was just thinking of the hassle of selling the house and sorting everything out, going through the courts,” she explains.

“If we agree on everything beforehand, it'll make it much simpler and quicker,” he states. “I'm not bothered about the things. Anything you want, you can have. We'll have to sell the house though, and I think we should split everything fifty-fifty. I also think we should each keep our car and any difference in value can come out of the rest.”

She nods in agreement. “When do you want to tell the children?”

“I think you should decide that, Jane,” he replies. “As hard as it is to admit, you know them far better than I.” He gets up then, taking his empty glass and plate to the sink, squirting a little washing-up liquid onto a damp sponge and washing them quickly, along with Jane's glass that she places on the draining board before stepping round the other side of him to dry the dishes and put them away. Then he checks the front door and alarm while Jane makes sure Scarlet has enough water and closes her in the kitchen. “What about Scarlet?” she asks as she waits for him by the foot of the stairs.

He pauses in what he's doing, feeling a pang at the thought of losing his faithful companion, before he turns towards her and murmurs, “You can keep her if you like.”

She studies him for a moment before she declares, “No, you should have her. You need her more than I do and she'd miss you terribly. You've always been her favourite.”

“Are you sure?” he asks, stopping in front of her.

“Yes. I'd like to make a clean break of it as much as possible. I'll get another dog if I find I miss it.”

“Well, if you're sure,” he murmurs. She nods, so he reaches forward and takes her hand in his, squeezing it gently. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” she smiles, but as he turns to walk upstairs, she adds softly, “I'd like a favour in return though.”

“Anything,” he replies, turning to face her once more.

“I want to say goodbye properly... tonight. One last time, Harry.”

He knows she's talking about sex, and though part of him's not that keen on the idea now that he's started to sever ties with Jane and after what happened last night with Ruth, another part of him wants to have one last time with her tonight too.

“Are you sure?” he asks softly. “I don't want to make it harder for you tomorrow when I leave.”
“I'm sure,” she declares without hesitation. “I'll be hard anyway, but this way we'll have closure.”

So despite his misgivings, he nods his agreement and lets her take his hand as she leads him upstairs to bed.
“Happy birthday, old man,” Ben says when Harry answers the phone.

“Fifty two is hardly old, Ben,” he protests, making him grin. He loves to tease Harry.

“It's a great deal older than forty-nine,” he replies and he can hear Harry chuckle. “Where are you anyway? I don't hear any sounds of celebration. Don't tell me you're still at work!”

“Well, someone has to do this job.” He sounds a little defensive. “The terrorists don't take a break just because it happens to be my birthday, Ben.”

“Delegate, Harry. Delegate,” replies in exasperation. “No progress in the love department then?” he adds, already guessing the answer. If Harry had sorted things out with Ruth, he'd be making love to her in a bed somewhere and wouldn't be answering his phone.

“This is not a secure line,” he replies tightly, and Ben can't help suspecting that he's using that as an excuse to avoid an answer.

“Then get off your arse and come get me. I'm downstairs.”

“Downstairs, where? At Thames House?”

“Yes. Security won't let me through without your authorisation.” In reality, he hasn't even tried to get through, not being sure Harry was still in the building, but he knows he's spoken the truth – they won't let him in unless Harry tells them to.

“I'll be right down,” he says before hanging up, and Ben can hear the note of pleasure in his voice.

He smiles and makes his way inside the building, slipping his hands into his pockets while he waits for Harry, his thoughts drifting to Sarah Whitman and the prospect of seeing her again tomorrow. He'd be lying if he didn't admit to himself that he's really looking forward to seeing her again. Last time he was in London, he'd followed Harry's advise and rung her, arranging to meet her for coffee. It had gone well and they'd shared drinks a couple of times too before he'd had to return to Germany. Tomorrow night he's taking her out to dinner and it's buoying his spirits considerably. Maybe before he goes back on Friday, he'll have finally made love to her after three decades of waiting and longing. He just hopes it lives up to her expectations. He has no doubt it will live up to his own.

“Ben!” a smiling Harry calls, pulling him out of his thoughts.

He grins and steps forward, waiting for Harry to arrange a visitor’s pass for him with the security guards and signing the book they thrust at him.

Then he slips through the metal detector and embraces Harry on the other side, noting the bemused expressions on the guards' faces and guessing that they don't often see Harry looking this relaxed and happy. He's glad suddenly that he arranged this trip for the week of his brother's birthday.
“It's good to see you, Ben,” Harry confesses as he leads the way to the lifts. “I have a few things to wrap up first. Then, I suggest, we go to my club.”

“I was under the impression that you had a whole bar in your office, Captain,” he teases, making Harry chuckle.

“A whole bar might be a bit of an exaggeration. I do have whisky though.”

“Excellent.”

By the time they reach the door behind which the pods, as Harry calls them, are concealed, they've caught up on everything of import in each other's lives except, of course, the women who've captured their hearts. Neither wants to broach the subject in the open where anyone could overhear and Ben has a feeling that several drinks will be necessary before Harry opens up about Ruth.

They step through the pods, Ben looking around with interest at the Grid, taking it all in for the first time. It's not nearly as busy as he imagined it would be, but he supposes that's probably due to the lateness of the hour. It must be a slow day, as Harry likes to call them, when no immediate threats have been found. He wonders what it's like when an attack is imminent.

“Ben?”

He turns and sees a man he's met before, a while ago now, when Harry had yet to be promoted. He smiles. “Malcolm! How are you?”

They shake hands and exchange a few pleasantries before Malcolm turns to Harry, glancing uncomfortably at Ben, who takes the hint and steps away, surmising that they need to talk shop. He makes a beeline for Ruth, whom he'd spotted a moment before, when Malcolm had called out his name and her head had shot up, catching his eye for a second and smiling.

“Hello, Ruth,” he says, offering her his hand and shaking her smaller one gently. “It's lovely to see you again. How have you been?”

“Fine. Thank you. And you?” she asks, smiling softly.

“I can't complain.” He sees her glance at Harry and Malcolm, who are still conversing. “Do you know that this is the first time I've been here?” he asks, looking around again. “I did visit Harry once at the old place on Gower street, but this is new to me.”

“And how do you like it?”

“It seems so ordinary,” he confesses, smiling down at her.

She laughs. “You should see GCHQ,” she replies. “Compared to that, this place looks like a palace.”

He grins. She seems much more confident compared to when he'd met her and he wonders at that. Is it because they're already acquainted, however briefly, is it that they're in her territory, so to speak, a place where she clearly feels confident and in her element, or has she changed, is she more confident because of what is or isn't going on with Harry?

“So where's Harry's office?” he asks.

“Behind you,” she replies. He turns to look over his shoulder and spots Harry walking towards them and Malcolm’s back retreating down the hall on the other side of the pods.
“I can see why you call it a fish bowl, Harry,” he comments as Harry joins them.

“Tell me about it,” he grumbles. “Though it does have its advantages at times.” His eyes slip from him to Ruth who blushes and drops her gaze. *Interesting*, Ben thinks, noting that Ruth's desk is directly in Harry's line of sight when he sits behind his own and wondering if that's just a happy coincidence or if it was done on purpose.

“I suppose it's good to know when your employees are getting no work done,” he says, just to see their reaction.

“But not so good when they can see that their boss isn't working either,” Ruth retorts, surprising him. She blushes and drops her gaze again, while Harry smiles at her fondly.

“So where's that whisky you mentioned, Harry?” Ben asks, suddenly getting an idea. “You'll join us, Ruth, won't you? We're celebrating Harry's birthday.”

“Oh! Well, I... er... I haven't quite finished-” she stammers, but he interrupts her.

“That's no problem. Join us when you're done. Alright?” He gives her his most charming smile, watching as she stares at him for a moment before she nods. “Excellent,” he says and turns to Harry. “Shall we?”

Harry's face is impassive, giving nothing away as they turn and walk into his office. He goes straight to the drinks cabinet and pours them each a couple of fingers of scotch.

“You need to stop playing matchmaker, Ben,” he warns softly, his attention still on pouring the whisky.

“Still no progress then?” Ben replies, taking the glass Harry hands him and sitting down on the sofa.

He hesitates for a moment, taking a gulp of whisky before replying. “I wouldn't say that.”

Ben just raises an eyebrow, waiting.

“I asked Jane for a divorce,” he confesses.

“Good for you. How did she take it?”

He sees Harry smile down at his drink briefly, but when he glances up, there is pain and guilt mingled together in his gaze. “Rather well, I thought. She'd been expecting it apparently.” He falls silent and takes another gulp of whisky, draining his glass and getting up to refill it. “I'm renting a small flat now. It's closer to work, which is good, and it's got a back garden for Scarlet.”

“Jane let you keep her?” he asks in surprise. He knows how much the little dog means to Harry, how much comfort and companionship she's provided for him these past few years since the surge in threats after 9/11 and Catherine and Graham had left home, but he imagines Jane has been home more than Harry these last few years and, he'd have guessed, equally attached to Scarlet.

“Yes.” His voice sounds... odd.

“What?” Ben asks as Harry returns to his seat with a full glass and the decanter.

“Nothing.” Harry quickly dismisses his question and Ben knows that, whatever it is, he's not ready to share it yet.

“I'm seeing Sarah again tomorrow,” he says, leaning back in his seat as he changes the subject.
It was the right decision because he sees Harry relax, a genuine smile gracing his lips as he leans back too, saying, “Things are going well then?”

“Yes. Very well.”

“I'm glad.”

They talk a bit more about Sarah and then about Lizzy and Maggie before the conversation moves to Catherine and Graham. Harry tells him about his trip to Israel and Catherine's new documentary and her new, French boyfriend, whom he describes as tall, good-looking, charming, witty and utterly biased against Israel. When Harry shares the story that Fabian had worn a green t-shirt with the slogan 'Free Palestine' across the front to a football game in Tel Aviv between Israel and Ireland, he rather gets the impression that Harry approves of him. It sounds like just the kind of thing Harry would have done as a young man. He learns that Graham is working in a publishing house now and is enjoying it very much – he always did love books and history, Ben can't help but remember. Throughout their conversation, however, there is something in Harry's eyes that he can't quite put his finger on, until he eventually confesses that neither of his children have contacted him today.

“We told them last week,” he explains between gulps of whisky, “about the divorce, and I haven't really spoken to either of them since.”

He has no idea what to say to that, so he reaches over and grips his brother's shoulder in silent support. “They'll get over it eventually, Harry,” is this only thing he can think to say.

Harry nods in silence and drains his glass again. He's going through the whisky at an alarming rate, having polished off two glasses in less than thirty minutes. Ben's about to say something about it as he watches Harry refill his glass, when Ruth knocks lightly against the door-frame.

“Ruth,” he says, smiling and getting up. “Come in. Take a seat. I'll get you a glass.” And with that he moves over to the cabinet, allowing Ruth to take his spot on the sofa. He sets the glass down for Harry to fill and grabs a chair for himself.

“To Harry,” he says, raising his glass once Ruth has hers in her hand. He thinks about adding something more, teasing him a little, but he holds his tongue at the look his brother gives him. He can't remember the last time Harry seemed so raw and sensitive inside and he doesn't want to press him. He vividly remembers the bleakness and the pain of the days and months following his and Julie's separation and eventual divorce. Knowing it was the right decision for both of them hadn't stopped the pain and the guilt he'd felt for himself, for Julie, and most of all his girls. This was never going to be an easy time for Harry, and though his children are adults now, they're clearly not taking it well, and Ruth... He doesn't know what's going on with Ruth. So instead he adds, “Best brother in the world,” watching Harry smile slightly, Ruth looking between the two of them with interest.

“Harry,” Ruth murmurs as they take a sip of their drinks before Ben starts up a conversation with her, using the Pearce charm to draw her out, getting to know this woman who might well soon become his sister-in-law, discovering her fierce intellect and love of knowledge, her charm and compassion, her gentle sense of humour and wit. For the most part, Harry just watches them, his eyes mostly on Ruth, utterly captivated by her. He drinks much less while she's near, Ben notes with some relief, and though his eyes radiate the longing of his heart as he watches her, whenever Ruth glances his way, the shutters come down, hiding the depth of his feelings from the object of his affections. Why, Ben wonders. Has Harry not told her yet that he's separated from Jane? That he's getting a divorce? Or has she perhaps decided against a relationship between them? He can't imagine that's the case, otherwise why would she be here with them, sharing a drink?

She appears engaged in their conversation, laughing and smiling, talking to him with an ease that
was lacking last time, but though she tries to hide it, Ben can tell that she's hyper-aware of Harry, every sound he makes, every movement, capturing her attention. The tension between them is palpable and Ben finds himself wondering how they can possibly manage to keep their distance when the force pulling them together is clearly so strong. He knows how stubborn Harry is, but it seems he's met his match in Ruth, and part of him can't help thinking that the sparks that'll fly when they finally come together will rival the Northern Lights.

“So what kind of boss is Harry then?” he asks sometime later, after he's regaled Ruth with anecdotes of Army life and she seems more relaxed.

She smiles and glances at Harry before looking back at him and replying, “He's a fantastic boss. He's even-tempered, kind, thoughtful, positive and encouraging, never raises his voice, is always sending us home early and even letting us work from home on occasion. Everybody adores him.”

Harry smiles at that and Ben laughs, watching as her twinkling eyes flit to Harry's and back again. “Even-tempered? Ha! Either your pulling my leg, Ruth, or you're secretly in love with him.” The words are out of his mouth before he can stop them and he silently curses himself as he watches them, the smile still on his lips, hiding his troubled thoughts – he may not be as good as his brother, but he's learnt one or two things too about hiding his emotions whilst in the Army.

Harry's face is serious, giving nothing away, while Ruth blushes and drops her gaze for a moment, but she recovers quickly, lifting her eyes to his and saying, “Why does it have to be one or the other? For all you know, it could be both.”

Her words floor him, taking him completely by surprise, and judging from Harry's expression, he hadn't expected that either, and he suspects that the confidence and courage she's displaying here is exactly why Harry fell in love with her in the first place. It must be because they're on the Grid. She must be like this all the time in her work, he thinks as he chuckles and replies, “Touché.”

He opens his mouth to add something more, but Ruth doesn't give him time as she exclaims, “Oh bugger! Is that the time? I really must go,” and with that, she gets up, claiming that she needs to hurry to catch the next bus which stops at Thames House in ten minutes. She says goodnight and shakes his hand when he rises, firmly dismissing his protests and offers to see her safely home if she stays to have another drink with them before turning to face Harry.

He has a feeling that she wishes to be anywhere but here right now, clearly embarrassed by her near admission of love, and that it's taking very nearly all of her courage not to turn and flee the room without having to face his brother. Perhaps she would have done just that if he hadn't been here, or perhaps it's the fact that it's Harry's birthday that's holding her back.

Harry looks down at her, his eyes open to her for the first time tonight, but before he can say anything, she reaches up and kisses his cheek, murmuring, “Happy birthday, Harry,” and turning swiftly away.

They watch her in silence as she grabs her things and leaves through the pods, and Ben pretends not to notice Harry turn away and raise a hand to wipe the tears from the corner of his eyes. “Do you have more whisky?” he asks instead, noting the decanter's empty. He reckons they're both in need of another after that.

“In the desk drawer,” is the gruff reply he gets as Harry sits back down and reaches for his glass.

So he walks over to his brother's desk, eyeing the drawers on either side. One set is locked and he figures the top one on the other side is too narrow, so he pulls out the second drawer on the right to find a beautiful, turquoise scarf neatly folded inside. It surprises him and he stares at it for a moment,
unthinkingly reaching forward to touch it. It's silky soft, made of the real thing if he had to hazard a
guess, and delicately embroidered. He's about to close the draw again, not wanting Harry to realise
he's snooping – even if that's not what he'd intended – when a small, white card catches his eye,
tucked inside the material. Carefully, he pulls it out just a little so he can open it surreptitiously,
quickly scanning the small, neat handwriting that says, “I can't keep this. I'm sorry.” There is no
signature, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out it must be from Ruth – a present Harry gave her
that she has returned – and it suddenly makes perfect sense why Harry hasn't mentioned his
impending divorce to her. **Has she ended it already,** he wonders, feeling a stab of pain in his heart
for his brother. **But if she has, why would she say what she did tonight? Why would she agree to
have a drink with us and kiss Harry's cheek?** Nothing in her behaviour or words so far has made him
think for a moment that she could be so cruel – quite the contrary. **What the hell is she playing at?!**

Quickly, he tucks the card back inside the material, closes the drawer, and opens the one below,
discovering four bottles of single malt, each from a different distillery, varying in age from 8 to 12
years. Every bottle has a different letter on it that together spell Ruth, and now he's totally confused.
**Why would she return his gift and then get him one for his birthday,** he can't help asking himself,
especially **one as expensive as this!** He knows the price of a good whisky. **What the hell is going on?**

He shakes his head in bewilderment, wondering how best to broach the subject with Harry, too
curious, too concerned for his brother to leave well alone. He'll get to the bottom of this tonight. He
has to.

“Which one do you want me to open?” he asks, lifting his eyes to Harry's.

He hasn't been watching him, still gazing out across the Grid, lost in thought. “ Doesn't matter,” he
replies.

He chooses the R, Ledaig 10 year, and carries it over to Harry, breaking the seal and uncorking the
bottle, pouring them each a glass. He can see Harry's had one too many already despite his best
efforts to hide it. “Last one, Harry,” he says. “Then I think we'd best get you home.”

Harry's been contemplating the bottle with the R written neatly on top, but he turns to him at this
pronouncement and frowns, no doubt baulking at being told what to do by his younger brother.

“It's nice to have a woman who knows what you like, but I don't think Ruth meant for you to finish
the whole bottle in one sitting tonight.”

Harry looks down, then leans abruptly forward, his hands rising to cover his face, elbows coming to
rest on his knees, his breaths harsh as he struggles for control. Ben hasn't seen him like this, **this** close
to the edge in a very long time, and he doesn't quite know what response is best to help his brother.
He wants to reach out to him, but isn't quite sure if a comforting hand on his shoulder would help or
cause him to unravel completely. If they were in Harry's home, he'd risk it, but **here,** he knows that
Harry won't want to show any weakness at work, so Ben says and does nothing, taking a sip of his
drink instead and savouring the flavour while he waits for Harry to regain control. It doesn't take him
long.

“I need some air,” he says eventually, tipping the contents of his glass down his throat and getting
up. He walks over to his desk, where he proceeds to lock everything down, putting away any
sensitive files and turning his computer off. Once he's ready, he turns to look at Ben. “Bring the
whisky,” he says and walks to the door, grabbing his coat and exiting his office while Ben downs his
drink and grabs the bottle and his coat before following him out.

They walk along the Thames for a bit until their heads have cleared, at which point, Harry calls his
driver to take them back to his place where Scarlet greets them enthusiastically, her exuberance and
joy at her master's return doing wonders to lift Harry's mood. They've picked up some Indian on the way and quickly dish it out, grabbing a beer from the fridge each and carrying their plates into the living room, taking a seat in front of the telly where they catch the end of Mastermind. They spend an enjoyable twenty minutes calling out the answers before the contestants on the general knowledge rounds, a healthy dose of brotherly competition creeping into the mix, Scarlet barking excitedly from time to time in response to their enthusiasm.

By the time Mastermind is over, they're both feeling rather a lot better, having managed to out perform most of the contestants though their own competition didn't have a clear winner. Probably just as well, Ben thinks ruefully, knowing how irritated Harry gets when he loses. He carries their empty beer bottles and plates into the kitchen while Harry searches for something else on the telly, but there appears to be nothing on as, when he returns with the whisky, the sound of Rachmaninoff's piano concerto no. 2 – if he's not mistaken – fills the room. Harry's leaning back in his armchair, eyes closed, a look of deep appreciation on his face.

Ben puts his glass in front of him and takes a seat across from him, leaning back in the armchair, kicking his shoes off, and stretching his legs out on the table before taking a sip of his drink. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asks when the music quietens a little, his eyes on Harry's face. Their conversation since they left Harry's office has been light with a lot of friendly banter, but Ben hasn't forgotten his concern for Harry and worry that Ruth might not actually be good for him.

He watches as his brother opens his eyes, running a hand over the top of his scalp, a sigh escaping his lips. “There's nothing to talk about.”

“Mmmm,” Ben hums, not buying it for a second, watching as Harry reaches for his glass. They sip their drinks in silence for several minutes. “Why haven't you told her about the divorce?” he asks eventually, making one last attempt at drawing his brother out.

“It won't change anything, Ben,” Harry answers. “She'd feel even more guilty than she already does. It's better to wait until it's all been finalised. When I'm officially single again... then I'll tell her.”

“But that could be months away!”

“I know. I can wait,” he replies, lifting his eyes to his, steely determination in his gaze. “What we'll have will be worth it.”

He watches Harry speculatively for a moment, weighing up his options before he settles on telling him the truth. “When you told me where to find the whisky, I found a blue scarf instead,” he states, watching the frown form on Harry's face and the flash of anger in his eyes. “I didn't intend to snoop, but I'm a little concerned, Harry. Why would she return your gift and then give you four bottles of single malt? She doesn't seem the type to toy with your emotions, but-”

“She's not,” he interrupts, his voice full of steel.

“Then what the hell is going on?”

He wonders if he's pushed too far as he watches Harry's face, eyes flashing, jaw set, lips pressed together in anger. Luckily for both of them, however, drink has never turned Harry violent, but rather has a mellowing effect on him. He sighs, lifting his right hand to rub his forehead, his left cradling his drink. “It's my fault,” he says eventually. “I took her with me to Baghdad on an op. I should never have done that, knowing how things were between us, but I trust her and I needed her skills as an analyst. I thought I was strong enough to handle the temptation. I was wrong.”

“When was this?” Ben asks in surprise.
“A little over two weeks ago,” he replies, “before I'd talked to Jane.”

“I see.” And he does see now how impossible the situation is for Harry. “So you think that if you tell her, she'll think it was because of what happened... again... and she'll feel even more guilty.”

“I know she will,” he sighs, his gaze troubled as he looks at him. “I've put her in an impossible position.”

“You're not the only one to blame, Harry,” he says softly, feeling the need to point that out, knowing how hard Harry's always been on himself, expecting an almost superhuman strength to be his when others are forgiven for being mortal.

“It's my fault,” Harry replies, his voice rising slightly in frustration. “She's inexperienced in the field. She's only been out on a handful of ops and nothing as demanding as this one was. I should have been able to maintain my self-control. Twenty-five years, Ben. It's been twenty-five years since last I lost control like that and I wasn't even the senior officer at the time.” *Bloody Juliet Shaw*, Ben thinks, but doesn't seek confirmation from Harry. “And it wasn't even once. I made love to her all night long, completely losing track of our objective, of the fact that we were in a foreign country and anything could happen.”

“But it didn't,” Ben feels the need to point out.

“No. We were lucky.” Harry exhales heavily and rubs his face.

“To err is human, Harry,” he reminds him gently. “We're all tempted and make mistakes. You're no different from the rest of us. You love her and she practically admitted today that she's in love with you too. It's understandable that things got heated between you so far away from home. Don't be so hard on yourself.”

“And if she never forgives me, Ben? What then?” His eyes look so troubled as he turns to look at him.

“I'd hazard a guess that she already has, Harry. I suspect, like you, it's herself she can't forgive.” He smiles at his brother. “Give it time. It's only been a couple of weeks. Things will begin to look up soon, you'll see.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you all for continuing to read this story and for your support and encouragement. Once again, I'm using Harry's diary for details in this chapter (and throughout this fic). Fabian's green t-shirt is mentioned there.
“Hi, Mum,” Catherine says, taking a seat beside her. “You alright?”

“Mmmm,” she hums, turning to smile at her daughter. She can't quite believe how grown up she is already – an intelligent, determined, beautiful and successful woman. It feels like yesterday that she was running around in plaits, toy stethoscope around her neck as she chased after the dog to 'make it better'. ‘I'm fine. Is Fabian enjoying his Christmas?’

“I think so. He's not complaining at any rate, or asking to leave early.” They both turn to gaze across the room at Harry, Graham and Fabian who seem to be sharing a joke, a glass of whisky in each of their hands – no doubt, Harry's attempt to 'educate' the 'boys'. “I haven't seen Dad look so relaxed in a long time,” Catherine comments.

“Neither have I,” Jane replies, marvelling at it for a moment. When she'd asked Harry if he'd like to spend Christmas with her and the children, she'd expected him to say no, that he has other plans with his new lover. It had been quite a pleasant surprise when he'd said yes and offered to come over early to help with the preparations.

“You seem happier too,” Catherine observes. “To begin with I was upset, when you told us about it.” By it, Jane understands Catherine to mean their divorce. “But now I can see I was being selfish. I reckon it might be good for both of you.”

Jane smiles and reaches over to pat her knee. “It's certainly been the impetus I needed to move forward with my life, find things I've always wanted to do and never found the time. Did I tell you I'm taking dance classes?”

“No.” Catherine turns to look at her in surprise.

“Latin dancing. I've always wanted to try it. It's so much fun!”

“Wow!” Her daughter sounds impressed. “Painting, Latin dances... I don't know what to say. I feel like you're living it up and I'm...”

“You're following your dream, love,” Jane reassures her. “Off saving the world like your father.”

Catherine frowns. “What I do is nothing like what—”

“I know, Catherine. I know,” Jane says quickly. “Don't get upset now. It's Christmas. I didn't mean anything by it and I know you don't necessarily agree with what the Security Services do, especially in places like Israel. All I was saying is that I'm proud of you... for caring and for trying to make a difference. And your father's proud of you too.”

“I know,” Catherine sighs. “He told me earlier.” She pauses, then she adds, “It's weird. He's gone all soft all of a sudden. It's almost like he's a different person. I mean, look at him. He's joking! Dad!”

Jane just smiles. It's true though. Harry seems to have left his mask at work tonight for a change and it makes her wonder what life with him could have been like if he'd been like this more often. What had gone so wrong in their relationship and their lives to cause him, and her, to be so... disconnected
and distant when they're both clearly capable of so much more?

“Were you both really so unhappy all these years?” Catherine asks softly, glancing at her and swiftly away.

“No, darling,” Jane responds immediately. “It's not your fault. Or Graham's.”

“I know, Mum,” she replies indignantly. “I'm not three!” But even so, Jane can detect the relief in her posture at hearing those words.

“It's hard work – marriage. You find someone you love and you promise to spend the rest of your lives together, but there's no handbook, no instruction, no crash course on how it's done. Some people manage it somehow, but others don't. And you wake up one day, twenty, thirty years later, and realise that the love has gone and you have nothing in common any more. There's no reason to stay together. It's not that we don't care about each other, Catherine. We're still friends and we'll always be connected through you and Graham. It's just that we'd rather get on with our lives separately, maybe find love again if we're lucky.” When they'd told the children, she'd insisted that they present it as a joint decision, rather than blaming each other, and she doesn't regret that. She wouldn't have been able to forgive herself if she'd allowed her injured pride and hurt feelings to ruin her children's relationship with their father. They see little enough of him as it is.

It's not been an easy two months for her with no one to come home to. Even when Harry was working all the time and was hardly ever home, psychologically it hadn't been the same as being single. She would never have had the guts to choose this herself, but now that Harry's forced her hand, she's determined to make the best of it. She'd almost broken down and bought herself a puppy to give herself something to care for, but she'd managed to resist the temptation. Like her Latin dancing and her efforts at writing and painting, learning to be alone is part of her attempt to push through her boundaries and grow. She'll be fifty next week and this will be her gift to herself, she's decided. She thinks it's about bloody time she learnt to be more self-contained.

“Fabian says I should count myself lucky that you guys are divorcing so late,” Catherine confides. “He says at least I won't have to contend with more siblings.”

“Well, that's certainly true on my part,” she smiles, “though step-brothers and sisters can't be ruled out entirely, you know. I can't say the same for your father though. He's only fifty-two and still sexy enough to attract a much younger woman.”

“Eww!!! Mum!!” Catherine objects, giving her such an incredulous look that she can't help laughing. “I don't think I've ever heard you say Dad's sexy before. What the hell's happening? I thought you were getting divorced!”

“What? And there's some law now that says I can't admire an ex-lover?” she teases, watching Catherine put her hands over her ears and walk away with some amusement.

“La, la, la. I'm not listening!” she says, making Jane laugh.

“What's wrong, Cat?” Graham asks.

“I'm not repeating it,” Catherine replies with a quick glance at her father, which piques Harry's interest and he looks across the room at her, a question in his eyes.

Jane just shrugs, giving him a mischievous smile, which provokes an answering smile from him, full of a mischief and humour that she hasn't seen in some time, and she can't help wondering if it's his mystery lover who's responsible for the transformation she sees in him tonight and feeling a pang of
jealousy and regret. It's not that she wants him back necessarily. It's just hard on her ego to admit that someone else is succeeding where she failed.

It's some time later, after they've had tea and Christmas cake, that Catherine puts on some dance music, pulling Fabian to his feet and declaring that they all need to move to burn off all the food they've consumed. Fabian turns out to be quite a good dancer, smoothly leading her daughter in the Cha Cha – Catherine had insisted on a Latin dance CD.

Soon the pair of them have convinced a reluctant Graham to join them and are instructing him on how to do the steps, standing on either side of him and counting them for him, but he doesn't persevere for long before giving up and flopping back down on the sofa.

“Oh, go on!” Jane objects. “You were doing so well! Don't give up now!”

But Graham just shakes his head, replying, “I didn't see you or Dad trying.”

The effect of his words is immediate as Harry gets up, a gleam in his eyes, clearly having accepted the challenge. “Come on, Jane,” he says. “Let's show them how it's done.”

She smiles, standing and taking his hand as she tries to remember when was the last time they'd danced together. Ten years ago? Twenty? Maybe it had been before he'd hurt his knee, an injury that had taken a long time to heal and resulted in him being promoted and put behind a desk, something he'd hated very much at the time, she recalls, though she'd secretly been relieved.

He's actually quite good, making a few mistakes here and there, but nothing disastrous, and it makes her wonder if he's been practising like she has. “Nice, Harry! Have you been taking lessons?”

He grins and shakes his head. “Nope. Pure talent,” he replies, making her laugh. Once the Cha Cha has given way to the Argentine Tango, however, things go downhill fast and they end up almost falling over at one point.

“Where's your talent now?” she teases, laughing at the grumpy look he gives her in reply.

“It's a bit unfair, throwing me in at the deep end,” he protests, only to have Graham correct him.

“It's not Mum's fault! You asked her to dance, Dad!”

“Ganging up on me too,” he grumbles under his breath so only she can hear him and making her laugh harder.

“Skip to the next song, please, Graham,” she says. “It's the Merengue.”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” Harry asks.

“It's one of the easiest ones. You only have to sidestep and move your hips,” she explains, giving him an encouraging smile as she steps in front of him.

But it turns out that the side to side hip movement isn't as easy as she's always thought it to be and Harry finds it quite challenging.

“No, no,” she says after he struggles for a few moments. “Like this.” And she puts her hands on his hips directing him to bend one knee so that one hip goes down and the other up, and then do the opposite, but that doesn't seem to help matters much. “No. Look. Watch me,” she says and demonstrates how to do it. “Now try again.” But Harry doesn't seem to be able to get the hang of it.
“This is ridiculous,” he states eventually as Catherine starts to laugh, declaring him hopeless. “You never used to have any complaints about my hip action, Jane.”

It takes everybody a second to react, but when they do, it's one of the funniest things she's ever seen.

Graham shoots up from the sofa, exclaiming, “Dad!!” and then declaring he's taking Scarlet for a walk, calling to her as he walks to the front door without a backward glance.

Catherine covers her ears again and walks out of the room, going, “La, la, la, not listening,” while Fabian doesn't quite know where to look, avoiding everyone's gaze as he follows Catherine into the kitchen.

“Remember that time when we lost power and-” Harry calls loudly after them, as she starts to laugh.

“For the love of God, Dad, shut up!” Graham shouts back from the hall, making Harry begin to laugh too, that adorable, wheezy sound he makes when he's really tickled, and they collapse onto the sofa in hysterics.

When eventually they quieten, she turns to look at him and smiles. “That was fun,” she declares. “Thank you.” And she reaches over to kiss his cheek before getting up. “I should probably check on them and get started on the clean up.”

He groans. “I was going to do the cleaning up since you cooked, but my knee is killing me.” He shifts on the sofa, gingerly flexing and extending his left leg. “Slow death by dancing,” he grumbles. “I must remember to add it to the interrogation handbook.”

“Here. Let me help,” she says and sits back down beside him, reaching over and beginning to massage the tissue around the joint, his groan of approval making her smile. “Poor Harry. So bruised and battered. I still don't understand why you do it.”

“Someone has to,” he replies, his eyes still closed as he leans back, enjoying the massage.

“Perhaps. But that doesn't explain why that someone has to be you.” She lifts her eyes to look at him, waiting for his reply. She's never understood why he chose to join MI-5 and why he remained there so long, especially after what had happened to Bill. In the beginning, she'd thought it was an ego thing, something that made him feel manly and important, and maybe she'd been right about that, but after he'd lost Bill and the way in which it had happened... She knows that had changed everything for Harry. Why he'd stayed though is still a mystery to her. She'd have run in the opposite direction as fast as she could and never looked back.

“I'm good at it.”

She nods, wondering if perhaps he has no idea himself why he stays at MI-5. “Well, Margaret Thatcher certainly thought so,” she replies, smiling ruefully at him.

He chuckles.

“Oh! Er... Mum?” Catherine's voice comes hesitantly from the doorway, making her turn and smile at her daughter, stilling her hands and pulling them from Harry's knee, having spotted the tinge of confusion on her daughter's face. She's having so much fun today that she hasn't considered the implications for her children, of letting her hair down. She knows Harry won't misinterpret her actions, but Graham and Catherine had been so upset to hear of their decision to divorce that she doesn't want to give them false hope that a reconciliation is possible. Much as she hates being alone, going back to Harry is not the answer, she knows, even if he were free and willing, which of course he's not.
“Yes, love?”

“Graham's back with Scarlet and we've finished clearing up the kitchen—”

“Oh Catherine, how lovely of you all!” she exclaims, smiling and crossing the room to her. “See what wonderful children we have, Harry? You won't have to do the cleaning up after all!” And she embraces her and kisses her daughter's cheek. “Thank you.”

“We were thinking of leaving,” Catherine says a little hesitantly.

“What? So soon? It's only half past five.”

“Some mates have invited us round to theirs for drinks and Graham's meeting up with some friends too so...” she tails off.

“All right, Darling,” she relents, swallowing her disappointment. They've had such a lovely day today that she doesn't want it to end, even though she should be happy that it's ending on such a high note, particularly when she remembers the disaster that family holidays used to be when the children were in their teens especially.

Soon they've kissed and hugged goodbye and she's standing at the door with Harry, waving as they disappear down the road in Graham's car. She stands for long moments, looking after them before Harry's quiet voice draws her back into the present. “I should probably get going too.”

“Oh! Must you?” She knows she sounds a little needy and hates herself for it.

He studies her quietly for a moment before replying. “I suppose I could have a cup of coffee before I go.”

She smiles. “I'll put the kettle on then,” she says, gently squeezing his arm in thanks as she walks past him towards the kitchen, leaving him to call Scarlet back inside and close and lock the front door.

As they sit at the kitchen table sipping their drinks, Scarlet curled up by the radiator, their conversation veers towards the sale of the house, which they've agreed to begin in the new year. She's already found a flat to rent which is much closer to work and has booked a moving company to come and help her move. There'll be a few pieces of furniture left over that neither of them can fit into their flats and they discuss how to go about selling or donating them. Harry suggests he could ask at work to see if MI-5 is looking for furniture for any of its safe houses, so they agree he should do that and then they fall silent, both lost in thought.

“It's sad,” she says eventually. “There are so many memories in this house.”

He nods, taking a sip of his coffee. “Ten years is a long time.”

She smiles, remembering how they'd bought this house after Harry had got promoted. It's certainly not been the only place they've lived in together over the years. “Remember how upset Graham was to move here? And now he's upset to see it go.”

Harry nods again. “He always did get very attached to places. Poor kid. Probably needed more stability than I was able to offer.”

She reaches forward and pats his arm gently. “Don't beat yourself up, Harry. You did alright. We both did whatever we could for them.”
“I suppose it could have been worse,” he admits, lifting his eyes to hers, a sorrow and regret in their depths. “I’m sorry for everything I did wrong over the years.”

“Me too,” she replies, watching him. Then before she's really thought it through properly, she finds herself leaning forward, eyes dropping to his lips.

“Jane,” he whispers hesitantly, a warning in his voice, but she doesn't heed it.

She slips her hand behind his neck into his soft hair and closes the distance between them, softly pressing her lips against his. He doesn't pull back, but neither does he pull her towards him as he's always done in the past. His lips simply move softly against her own until she pulls out of the kiss to look at him.

“Harry,” she whispers, the yearning in her voice surprising her. It's been more than two months without sex and being so near him after such a wonderful day, his familiar scent and sexy lips, are tempting her, making her desperately crave him, the feeling of him pushing into her, filling her up, fingers strumming against her clit until she breaks and falls into oblivion.

“He's breathing more heavily now, but he doesn't give in. “We have to draw the line somewhere, Jane. This is familiar and nice, but we can't go back. I don't want to hurt you again. Last time... that was goodbye. I'm sorry.” His voice is gentle and kind, his hand reaching to remove hers from his groin where she can feel that he's at half-mast already. He squeezes it gently and gives her an apologetic look before he releases her hand and gets up. “I should go. Thank you for today. It was... special.”

“But not special enough,” she blurts out before she can stop herself, his rejection stinging more than she thought it would. He's never told her no before when he's been turned on too, and somehow that makes everything worse.

“I'm sorry,” she repents, quickly wiping the moisture from her eyes before lifting her head to look at him. “I shouldn't have pressed you. I know you're with... What's her name anyway?”

He hesitates.

“Oh, come on, Harry,” she objects crossly. “What am I going to do? Find her and scare her off? Please! Besides, don't you think I'm probably going to meet her one day anyway? We have two children. You're bound to introduce her to them and-”
“Ruth,” he interrupts. “Her name’s Ruth.”

“Right,” she says, feeling deflated. She's just decided that she's not going to argue with him, not going to spoil the day, yet she seems to be unable to control the impulse, her frustration boiling over at the slightest provocation. He's taken the wind out of her sails temporarily though, and she suddenly realises that, if she continues, it'll be herself she'll hurt most of all. Harry has Ruth. He'll be fine. She's the one who'll go to bed alone tonight. “I'm sorry.” She gets up, reaching for his arm and squeezing it gently. “You're right. It's been a lovely day and I don't want to spoil it either.”

“Good,” he replies. “That's good.”

“Will you take some of the left-overs with you?” she asks to change the subject. “It's too much for me to eat. I'll be having it for months.”

“That would be nice. Thank you.”

“Right. You get Scarlet sorted then, and I'll put some of the food in a tupper for you.” And with that, she turns to do just that, steering her thoughts away from sex with Harry and contemplating the bubble bath she decides to indulge in when he's gone, promising herself at least five orgasms tonight to make up for going to bed alone once more.
Chapter 13

26 December 2005 - Harry

He wakes to the sound of his alarm and groans in protest, lifting a hand blindly to silence it and then draping it over his eyes in an attempt to hide from the pain of the hangover he has this morning. He'd finished the last of the bottles of whisky Ruth had given him for his birthday last night and he can't help regretting it this morning.

Would it have been so terrible to bed Jane instead of this, he asks himself as he struggles to find the will to get up and get ready for work.

“Don't be an idiot,” he tells himself as he throws off the covers and swings his legs out of bed, resting his hands on his knees for a moment before forcing himself upright. He knows that he would have felt much worse if he'd stayed and taken up her offer – not physically, but emotionally. The guilt would have been overpowering, especially if she'd cried again like she had last time – the night before he'd left her. He still feels terrible about that.

The sex had been good, more tender and connected than it had been in a very long time, and he suspects that that's what had caused her to break down – the feeling of closeness that hadn't been there in more than a decade between them. He'd felt a lump in his throat too, moved by the experience but pleased to have done it – Jane had been right about the need for closure.

She'd kissed him and got up, as had always been her custom, to used the loo and clean herself up, and he'd dozed for a while in contentment. When he'd opened his eyes some twenty minutes later and discovered that she'd still not come back to bed, however, he'd began to wonder what was taking her so long. He'd got up and tried the bathroom door, but she'd locked it, so he'd listened, hearing nothing but the sound of water running. He'd called her name as he'd knocked on the door, and that's when he'd heard it – the tremor in her voice as she'd replied that she'll be right there.

He'd been overwhelmed by guilt, waves of it washing over him as he'd backed away from the door and staggered back to bed, pulling on his underwear before slipping back under the covers, his mind full of Jane and Ruth and all the terrible thing's he'd done to those he's loved over the years.

When she'd come back to bed, she hadn't been crying any more, turning to him and kissing his cheek, murmuring good night before cuddling into the covers and closing her eyes, her deep, even breathing filling the room as she'd slipped into sleep, leaving him alone with his guilt and his suffering.

He'd deserved it, he thinks now as he steps under the hot water. He more than anyone he loves deserves to suffer, for he has brought so much grief to them through his words and actions over the years. And he's glad now that he's waited to tell Ruth about the divorce, that he's managed to remain faithful to her despite the fact that they're not together yet and in spite of the temptation Jane had presented last night.

He hasn't gone so long without sex before, not since he'd arrived at Oxford, barely a man, fully intent on taking advantage of adulthood and the fact that he was surrounded by beautiful, intelligent women for the first time in his life. And more than anything else, this had made it particularly difficult last night to say no, especially since the devil inside him had been busy pointing out that one can't betray a woman one isn't actually dating and that, furthermore, he's not actually divorced yet
and sex with his wife hardly counts – it's what Ruth thinks he's doing anyway.

His angels had won the battle in the end, though they hadn't quite managed to keep him away from the whisky too. *Pity,* he thinks as he rubs himself dry with the towel, moving gingerly so as not to jar his aching head. Still – at least they'd won the most important battle. He's determined to change, to be worthy of someone as good, as kind as Ruth, and this is a very good start.
Chapter 14

31 December 2005 - Ruth

She slips through the door and onto the roof quietly, taking a moment to allow her eyes to adjust to the gloom and take in her surroundings. There are only three other people up here. Fiona and Adam are standing by the railing each with an arm around the other as they talk quietly, waiting for the fireworks to begin. Fiona isn't even on the roster for this evening, but she'd turned up twenty minutes ago, saying she wanted to see in the new year with her husband.

What would it be like to be able to stand like that, with your arm wrapped around the man you love, your head resting on his shoulder as you watch the fireworks together, bringing in the new year with a loving, sensual kiss, she wonders, her eyes on Adam and Fiona as he whispers something that makes her laugh.

Her gaze slips to Harry, standing a few yards from his officers, contemplating the night sky in silence as is so often the case. What is he doing here tonight, she wonders. He's not on the roster either.

Much to her dismay, her feelings for him haven't changed and she's still very much in love with him, more so in fact after what happened between them in Baghdad. And though she's tried to keep her distance emotionally, tried to tell herself that it's just not meant to be, she can feel herself weakening a little more each day and she knows that, if he approached her again, if he tried to seduce her, she'd be unable to resist him, unable to say no, now that she knows the pleasure, the sheer joy to be had in his arms as he worships her body.

And it's not just the physical either. The warm conversations they've had of an evening in his office that began months ago now, before Baghdad and before Danny, never really stopped entirely. They've continued throughout this past year or more, becoming more regular lately though she still tries to keep them from getting too frequent. No more than twice a week is her rule, which admittedly sometimes gets broken.

The more she gets to know him, the more she's impressed by the kind of man he is – his loyalty, his determination, his strength, his knowledge, his intellect, the depth of his sacrifice, the softness of his heart, and the gentleness of his soul. He's so complex, such a puzzle of contradictions, so compelling, that every other man pales by comparison, and she often finds herself wondering if his wife is aware of how remarkable he is.

Somehow, she doubts it. If she were, Harry wouldn't be escaping to Thames House to see in the new year with his officers. With me, her heart whispers. She shakes her head, unable and unwilling to contemplate that possibility. Don't think like that, she tells herself for the millionth time it seems. Harry might want her physically and their love making might have been really rather spectacular, but the thought that there might be more between them still terrifies her. So she chooses to ignore the nagging feeling that he's in love with her, telling herself that he wouldn't be a man if he didn't want to repeat something that had felt so very good.

The sound and sight of the first fireworks bring her out of her reverie and she blinks, focusing her attention back on the current occupants of the roof. Fiona and Adam are watching the display, but Harry's head is turned towards her though she can't make out his expression in the gloom. For a moment, she wants to turn around and run back down to the Grid where Jo and Malcolm are holding down the fort, escape him and the incredible pull he seems to have on her. She should have sent Jo
upstairs instead, she thinks in a panic. It's her first New Year's Eve with them and she's sure she'd have loved to spend it up here. But as she hesitates, lost in her doubts and fears, she sees Harry quietly turn around again, resting his forearms on the barrier and looking across at the fireworks, his whole body deflating and he suddenly looks so tired and defeated.

*Come on, Ruth,* she tells herself, hating to see him this way. *This is no way to see in the new year. You can't leave him there all alone. You're not cruel.* So she swallows her doubts and fears, squares her shoulders and quietly makes her way over to him, standing beside him in silent support, their eyes catching and holding for a moment, his lips curling in a soft smile before he straightens up and they both look up at the sky and the rather spectacular display. From all the cities in the world, she's always thought London has the best fireworks, and as she stands beside Harry, she can't help feeling happy to be sharing this with him. They may never have a relationship like Adam and Fiona's but, in this moment, this is enough and she cherishes it.

When Big Ben begins to strike midnight, she feels him turn towards her and can't help the way her heart skips a beat and begins to race as she hears him murmur, “Happy new year, Ruth.”

She swallows, turning to look at him. “Happy new year, Harry.”

He smiles down at her, his much larger hand – warm from his pocket – slowly reaching for hers, enveloping it and squeezing it gently, his other hand moving to cover the other side of it too, so it's entirely surrounded by Harry, warming her cold skin, her heart, her soul. She can't help the way her thoughts drift back to Baghdad, the last time when she'd felt entirely surrounded by him, his kisses hot and demanding, his body warm and solid, enveloping her, invading her, thrilling her, making her feel safe and loved and special.

They hold still, staring at each other, her hand nestled between his, the seconds ticking past, each lasting an eternity as they remain suspended in the moment, unable to move for fear of shattering it or allowing it to morph into something more. She trembles, overcome by him and all he makes her feel, wishing that they were both unattached, alone, and free to take advantage of this moment.

But they're not, and before either of them can forget that, they're thankfully interrupted by Fiona who says cheerfully, “Happy new year, Harry.”

She sees the regret in his gaze as he's forced to let her go. He smiles softly, a little apologetically, she thinks, but before he releases her, he swiftly leans down to kiss her cheek, his lips warm and tender, her breath catching at the unexpectedness of it, the impulse to turn her head to meet his lips with her own overpowering. The moment comes and goes, however, without her giving in, and he turns away from her to Fiona who embraces him and kisses his cheek with the ease of someone in love with another man.

She hugs and kisses Fiona and then Adam as they exchange best wishes for the year ahead, chatting away and making jokes while they walk back to the Grid where more hugs and happy-new-years follow with Jo and even Malcolm, and all the time she's hyper-aware of Harry – where he is, who he's talking to – her heart following him around like a love-sick puppy until she can escape back home to bed.

She closes her eyes and imagines his hands all over her body, his lips caressing her skin, her Rabbit becomes his cock, and her fingers, his. She breathes his name, her body tensing as she nears the edge, her hips bucking, hand squeezing her breast, but the illusion doesn't last as she comes, eyes filling with tears, chest heaving with pleasure and pain as she pulls the vibrator out of her and reaches for a pillow, hugging it tightly and letting the tears fall, sobbing for what can never be.

“Harry,” she whispers into the night. “Oh, Harry.”
16 April 2006 – Harry

It's been so hard, these last few months, holding himself back when all he wants is sitting across the Grid from him, chewing the end of her pen, furiously tapping away at her keyboard, laughing with Jo, indulging Zaf, chatting away with Colin and Malcolm, looking at Adam with concern and compassion, or glancing up at him, as if she can sense him watching, and smiling shyly. And in the evenings, whenever she allows herself to be near him, he knows that there is nothing better on earth than spending time with her, being in her company, and that he could face anything the world throws at him as long as he can have these quiet moments with her by his side.

He doesn't remember feeling like this before. With every other woman, it had always been about the physical pleasure first, never the joy and contentment of talking to them, existing in the same physical space, companionship and intimacy of a deeper kind. Of course, he would love the physical intimacy too, being able to touch her, hold her, kiss her, pleasure her, watch her shatter in his arms. But he knows he has to tread carefully with Ruth, be patient and hold back, lest he cross another line and send her scurrying for the hills without a backward glance.

He's thought about telling her about his impending divorce, but every time he's considered his options, he always comes down on the side of caution, of waiting it out until he can tell her that it's final, that he's single and he's free to woo her properly. And though the loss of Fiona had made him panic for a while, fearing that Ruth might be ripped from his side at any moment and they should take advantage of all the time they can get together, he'd been worried that the reminder of what happens in this job might have the opposite effect on Ruth, might make her feel it's not worth it to become involved with a colleague and risk losing them too soon. And then there's Adam to worry about and Fiona's place on the team to fill, and he'd thought it wise to wait a little while, until things had settled down again before telling Ruth how he feels.

And it's hard to not let the frustration get him down or boil over with possible disastrous consequences for his future with Ruth, but he knows that the rewards of being patient, waiting for his divorce to come through before making a move, respecting Ruth's apparent need to keep their relationship always bordering on the professional and leave no room for gossip, will be worth it in the end.

But some days are harder than others, and he is sorely tempted sometimes to throw caution to the wind and tell her that he loves her. Today is one of those days, and as he sits behind his desk and picks up the first folder that needs his attention, he can barely control the joy and elation that fills him at the realisation that, beyond a shadow of a doubt now, Ben's right – Ruth's in love with him.

The way she'd withdrawn on the bus when he'd spoken about Adam had made him suspect as much, but the look she gave him just now and her comment about taking the last bus home has confirmed it. He feels like punching the air in victory, like dancing around the room in joy, but he contains himself, the small smile that graces his lips his only indulgence along with the hope in his heart that's making his eyes shine bright.

He'd wanted to talk to her so much on that bus, wanted to sit beside her and kiss her, tell her that
everything will be all right, that he's in the process of getting a divorce and they can be together, but he'd held back, knowing how foolish such an action would have been, not least because he was on suspension and that was not the time for declarations of love. Her reaction though, her withdrawal, had given him such hope. She'd *wanted* him to do all those things, he's sure. On some level, she'd *wanted* that declaration of love, the reassurance that he'll be back on the Grid soon, and they can be together.

She misses him when he's not at work, he realises with a sense of deep satisfaction. Each time after he's been away, like during his brief trip to Israel or his suspension now, she's been ready for more – despite her believing him still married to Jane, she's been ready to throw caution to the wind, attempt to forget about her guilt to be closer to him. He smirks in satisfaction, filing that little bit of information away in the corner of his mind for later consideration. He's a spy after all and not above using a few tricks to persuade others to come round to his way of thinking. Who knows when this knowledge of Ruth could be used to his advantage? *Their* advantage, he corrects himself, feeling certain that their relationship, when it finally happens, will be good for both of them.

He turns back to his work, intent on catching up on what he's missed, grateful beyond words to be back on the Grid. It's not only Ruth he's missed while he's been on suspension. He's missed his work too, his sense of purpose, knowing what's going on in the world and having something worthwhile to do. If it hadn't been for his team keeping him in the loop and Scarlet keeping him company at home, he'd have gone quite mad!

Last time he'd been on suspension, he'd had Jane to entertain him and Graham had still been living at home. By the end of it, Graham had gone off to stay with a friend to escape him and he's sure that, had it not been for the make up sex, Jane might very well have killed him. There had been no Jane this time and no sex, but he'd survived, and to be honest, he hadn't really missed them. Not that sex would not have been nice, but he finds that the sex he craves now, after his self-enforced, six-month celibacy, is different – it's deeper, more profound, it's a meeting of hearts and bodies and souls. And there's only one woman who can give him that and his thoughts are always full of her – a woman whose stormy, blue eyes see right through him and touch his very soul.

He lifts his eyes and sees her getting ready to go home, his heart skipping several beats as he watches, longing to go to her, tell her, kiss her, love her, take her home. It's her birthday soon, he remembers, wondering what to get her. Something she'll love, something romantic, perhaps a book or a collection of poems. He could hide it, he thinks with a smile, and leave clues for her to follow – she'd love that.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Once again, Harry's diary mentions that Harry hid a series of clues in the morning intelligence briefing for Ruth to follow to the back of the water-cooler where he hid an old edition of Ovid for her birthday. Thanks for sticking with this fic and for your reviews and kudos. Cheers, S.C.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

A/N: For the following chapter I have borrowed the entire scene and dialogue from canon as I felt it was an important one to include in this fic. Thank you all for your continued support and encouragement. Reviews are very much appreciated, especially now that Spooks is getting rather old and the fan base is thinning out. I very much appreciate each and every one of you for taking the time to send me your feedback and encouragement. Reviews are, after all, the currency in which we fanfic writers get paid. Hope you enjoy. Cheers, S.C.

1 May 2006 - Ruth

She takes refuge from the others in the corridor, one of the two CCTV blinds spots on the Grid, in order to get control of herself and her emotions. She still can't believe she did that, manipulated her feelings, lied about Peter to stop Angela, and worst of all, a part of her enjoyed it, and for a moment, it sickens her and she's scared of what she has become.

The door swings open behind her and she straightens up to face whomever is intruding on her momentary sanctuary.

“Well done,” he murmurs, looking so proud of her that it makes her heart swell with pleasure for a moment before her brain kicks in and she feels the anger bubble up inside her. Anger at him for making her do it, for turning her into this person she's not sure she likes any more, but mostly anger at herself for not standing up to him and refusing to do his biding. Is there nothing I won't do for this man, she asks herself, the thought scaring her a little.

“Oh, you think so?” she replies, almost with contempt, trying to mask her thoughts and feelings.

“You broke her,” he says simply, still looking pleased.

“Maybe I broke me too,” she states, her feelings still in turmoil.

“That's adrenaline withdrawal,” he replies calmly, unfazed.

“Oh, is that what it is? Oh, good. Good. Thank you.”

“Ruth-” he murmurs softly, finally realising that she's upset.

“I lied,” she interrupts. “I told her I'd slept with my step-brother. I sold myself, my feelings to manipulate her.” She's disgusted with herself and angry at him for making her do it. How could he?

She turns away then, but he stops her, grabbing hold of her arm and turning her to face him, and he's no longer composed as he leans towards her and growls, “D'you think I'm a limited man? D'you think I don't understand the emotional side. Self-control, self-denial: these are the things that keep us together in this job.” He pauses and she sees something dark flash through his eyes and she suspects that his thoughts have also drifted to what happened between them after Danny died, and in
Baghdad, when all self-control had been lost. She turns her head away, not wanting him to read the longing in her eyes, scared of what else she might see in his. “Now you told a huge lie about your personal life,” he continues softly, drawing her attention back to him.

“And I can’t bear that I did,” she reiterates, but he keeps going, unperturbed.

“But aren’t you proud you had the nerve to tell that lie?”

She glances away again, murmuring, “It was horrible.”

“Aren’t you proud you told the lie?” He smirks now, holding her gaze, insisting. “Aren’t you proud you talked Angela out of that room?”

She looks down, so aware of his proximity, his insistence that she admit what she suspects he already knows. She struggles for a few moments before she sighs and murmurs, “God forgive me,” in defeat.

“You’re a born spook, Ruth,” he says, making her raise her eyes to look at him and seeing the pride in his and that annoying smirk on his face, and she hates herself even more for feeling pleased to have gained his approval.

He holds her gaze for a few moments before he begins to turn away, and she blurts out, “I stole the MD Reader,” wanting to wipe that smirk off his face, wanting to disappoint him somehow.

He pauses for a second before he leans forward and murmurs near her ear, sounding half-amused, “Then put it back.”

She doesn't know what possesses her to do it, but as he turns to leave, she puts out her left hand and grasps his forearm, making him stop and turn to look at her again. His eyes are dark, unfathomable, the annoying smirk still flirting with his lips. “Harry,” she whispers not sure what it is she wants or needs right now, her mind a confused mass of disjointed thoughts and emotions.

But he knows, he knows exactly what to do and she sees his gaze drop to her lips, his eyes suddenly hungry, brimming with desire. He moves so quickly, all self-denial gone, all self-control obliterated as their lips come together and his body presses her against the hard wall behind her. She can't help the moan that escapes her as she responds, their kiss growing rapidly, exponentially in intensity and passion. His left hand is in her hair, his right gripping her hip, fingertips sensually stroking her skin as they slip under her top and she pulls him towards her, her hands slipping under his jacket, grabbing fistfuls of his shirt. She wants him so badly now that she can hardly think, her body moving out of pure instinct as her right hand slips between them, pulling down his zip and slipping inside to find the opening in his underwear. Soon she's holding him in her fist, and he's so thick and hot, so hard for her that it makes her tremble with desire and she feels her insides clench with need as she begins to massage him, his groan of pleasure arousing her even further.

He releases her lips, exhaling heavily against her cheek and neck, his grip on the back of her head and hip tightening almost painfully for several seconds before he pulls back, dropping one hand to clasp her wrist and gently pull her hand out of his trousers. “Not now, Ruth. Not like this,” he murmurs in a low, deeply aroused voice. Then perhaps seeing the hurt in her gaze, he adds softly, “God knows, I want you more than my next breath, Ruth, but I'll not make the same mistake again. You'll regret this later and I couldn't bear it if you hated me.” His gaze softens, his eyes searching hers and she fears that he can read her like an open book. He moistens his lips nervously and she finds herself holding her breath as he opens his mouth so speak, somehow knowing that what he has to say is going to change everything between them forever. “I-” he murmurs softly, but he stops speaking suddenly, turning his head to listen, and sure enough, they hear voices further down the hall, behind the fire door that separates them from the Grid.
“Have you seen Harry?” Adam’s asking someone, but the response is too low to carry through the door to them.

Harry immediately releases her and steps back, quickly reaching down to zip his trousers and pulling his jacket closed to hide the evidence of his desire for her. Then before she can do or say anything at all, he leans forward and softly kisses her cheek, whispering, “I’m sorry,” before turning away and slipping through the door, going back to the Grid.

She feels the tears well up then, tears of frustration, of anger, and of pain, a result of what’s just happened with Harry as well as what occurred earlier with Angela and the lies she'd told about her step-brother. So she turns away from the Grid and quickly makes her way to the bathroom, locking herself in one of the stalls until she's managed to get ahold of herself once more and is ready to do her job.
Chapter 17

7 June 2006 – Harry

“And who the hell are you?” Harry registers Zaf's voice somewhere in the background as he and Adam heave the unconscious Collingwood into the cell, keen to lock him up so they can escape the sprinklers which have yet to be turned off, drenching them both to the skin.

“Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Arthur Pearce,” he hears Ben reply authoritatively, making him almost drop Collingwood in surprise. “I demand to see Harry Pearce. Where are you keeping him?”

“A relation of yours?” Adam asks, giving him a cheeky grin as they deposit Collingwood in the cell and straighten up.

“My brother,” Harry replies, turning towards the exit and leaving Adam to lock the cell door.

“I'm going to have to see some ID,” Zaf is saying as he approaches, catching Ben's eye and smiling.

“It's all right, Zaf. He really is my annoying, little brother,” he grins, clapping Ben on the shoulder.

“Little? I ask you. Which one of us is shorter, Zaf?”

“I'd answer,” Zaf replies, his face relaxing into a cheeky grin, “but having survived one hell of a week, it'd be a shame to die now.”

Ben laughs, extending his hand and shaking Zaf's. “Ben Pearce.”

“Zafar Younis.”

“I do love the way our officers never seem to show the slightest bit of respect for you, Harry.”

“There's a difference between respect and people parroting, 'Sir. Yes, sir,' at you all the time, Ben. Besides, them knowing that I can dispense with them at whim with no one being any the wise shows a very healthy level of respect if you ask me. Now, how did you know where to find me?”

Ben doesn't reply, asking instead, “What happened to you lot anyway?” and, as if in answer to his question, the fire-brigade arrives and Harry has to leave Ben with Zaf, to talk to the crew manager and explain the situation.

Before long, the sprinklers have been turned off, the fire-fighters are back on their way, and he's said goodbye to Collingwood, leaving him to hang himself in peace. Sometimes he hates the spook code of looking after our own. He feels Collingwood should pay a higher price for the chaos and destruction he's caused. Juliet might never walk again because of him, he thinks with a pang of deep regret. But it's a code they all sign up for when they join the service and one that they adhere to because no one quite knows if they'll be the next to snap under the pressure and go AWOL, do something crazy and need a way out that is straight-forward and dignified. He hopes to God he never reaches such a point himself.

He's swapped his jacket for his coat that had mercifully been put in a locker and hadn't got drenched, and now he's on his way back to Thames House in Ben's car, having sent Zaf home to change and return to relieve Adam. The last thing they need is everyone getting ill from the soaking.
“Where did you get the car?” he asks as they drive off, realising that Ben doesn't own a car in this country.

“Sarah.”

Harry nods, pleased that things are going so well for Ben and his first love, the only woman he's ever loved so deeply. It's only recently that he's understood the extent of the pain his brother must have felt when Sarah chose Jimmy, and he's sorry for encouraging him to move on back then. He realises now that he should have pushed him to fight for her instead, keep trying to win her round even once he'd learnt she was pregnant with Jimmy's child. He hadn't understood at the time what it meant to love a woman so completely. He'd always lived by the motto 'there are other fish in the sea' and couldn't fathom his brother's deep love for just one woman. Now he understands it only too well.

“So what exactly happened in there? Ruth sounded really worried.”

He looks sharply at Ben. “Ruth?”

“That's how I found you. I couldn't get through to you on your phone, so I rang the Grid and asked for her. After she'd made sure it was me, she explained where you were being held and told me to hurry.”

He's a little stunned by this news, by the fact that Ruth broke protocol like that, but when he's got over his initial shock, he sees that she wouldn't have done it with anyone else. She's met Ben, she's seen the bond he has with his brother, and he's rather grateful that she understands him so well and took the initiative to get help to him in any way she could, and he can't help loving her a little more because of it.

He doesn't know how he's managed to hold out so long without telling her, especially after their steamy encounter in the corridor when Angela Wells had left the Grid. He hasn't been able to shake himself free of the longing it's stirred in him and his dreams have been full of it, of her, hot and confident, magnificently aroused, touching him, begging him, writhing in his arms. If Adam hadn't been shot and the mad events since Angela's death hadn't happened, he'd have been at her door that very night, pouring his heart out and begging her to give them a chance, kissing her senseless, moving inside her with-

“Harry?” Ben's voice, interrupts his fevered thoughts, bringing him back to his surroundings with an unpleasant jolt.

*Jesus!* It's not like him to get lost in a daydream like this, though given that, just a few hours ago, he'd feared he wouldn't survive the day, it's hardly surprising that his thoughts are stuck on Ruth – she's all he'd been able to think about as he'd sat in that cell, drinking fine whisky and awaiting his fate. *Get a grip, Harry,* he tells himself, clearing his throat and rubbing his face with his hand, grateful that Ben's driving and can't take his eyes off the road for long, not to mention his thick coat that's hiding his erection.

“Sorry. Just thinking. How come you're in England anyway?” he asks quickly, hoping to hide his distraction, or more accurately, the reason behind it.

“I was worried about you and about the girls and Sarah,” he replies. “The news reaching us wasn't good and, when I talked to you two days ago, even *you* sounded worried. What the hell's happened?”

So he tells him, leaving very little out of his narrative because this is Ben and he trusts him with his life and everything important in it. Their conversation only draws to a close because they reach
Thames House, where Harry flashes his badge to get access to the car park and gets Ben through security before taking him up to the Grid, where he intends to be as quick as possible so he can go home and change into something dry, have a glass of good scotch and an evening with his brother. He needs some rest after the nightmare of the last few days and he hasn't seen Ben since last November when they'd spent his birthday together. Besides, it was Ben's 50th birthday two days ago and sharing a meal and a drink seems like a good plan right about now.

Upon entering the Grid, he finds it remarkably quiet – almost everyone seems to have gone home already, though a few brave souls are hanging in there, waiting for the relief crew to come in and take over. Malcolm is still here, so he gets an update from him and gives him some instructions before telling him to get some rest as soon as he's finished. He knows how hard the loss of Colin has hit him, and though his own experience tells him how tempting it is to keep working to keep the grief at bay, he also knows that it doesn't work and that grieving is a painful but necessary part of loss and the sooner it begins the better. Briefly he considers inviting him over to share a drink with him and Ben, but he dismisses the idea, knowing from experience that the first few days are better spent in solitude – or if one's lucky enough to have one, with one's partner – crying one's eyes out, drinking too much, and having lots of sex. Tomorrow, he tells himself – he'll invite Malcolm for a drink tomorrow.

He looks about him, remembering that Adam and Zaf are still dealing with the detention centre, Jo is still with the PM's son, keeping him in a safe house for another night, just in case, and Ruth... He frowns. He's not sure where Ruth is. Her bag and coat are gone, so presumably she's gone home.

“All set?” Ben asks, having just returned from the gents and clearly taking his inaction as a sign he's ready to go.

“I just need to lock down my office,” he replies, masking the pain and disappointment of not finding Ruth waiting for him. He'd hoped she was worried enough to want to see him before going home, and if he's honest, that had been his primary motive in coming back to the Grid tonight. He's been craving her proximity all afternoon and hasn't been able to shake his need to set eyes on her once more before he goes home tonight.

As he turns towards his office, he notes that the blinds are drawn – something he's sure he didn't do before leaving earlier – and there's a light on inside, probably his desk lamp, judging from the gentleness of the glow seeping through the blinds. Puzzled, he walks briskly over and slides open the door, Ben right on his heels, but what he sees has him stopping in his tracks, causing Ben to almost walk into him. Lying on his sofa, curled into a ball with her coat covering her body is Ruth, sleeping soundly. Ben smiles and gives him a pat on the shoulder before stepping out of the room again and drawing the door closed behind him.

He was right – the lamp on his desk is on, casting a soft glow over the scene as he moves towards her, trying not to make a sound lest he wake her, even though he knows that he can't leave her lying here all night and wake her he must eventually. Not yet though, he thinks as he lets his eyes roam over her sleeping face, his mind flooding with images of their time together in Baghdad, remembering waking up beside her and all that had come before it, longing to repeat the experience.

And as he watches her, he realises that he cannot wait any more to tell her, that he needs to do it soon whether his divorce comes through in time or not.

Not tonight though, he tells himself sternly. Friday night. That'll give him plenty of time to plan it, think how he'll do it, where, what he'll say. It has to be perfect. He couldn't bear it if it went wrong and she decided being together wasn't worth the risk. He knows enough of Ruth to know it's quite possible that she'll find a reason to continue both their suffering by denying them the chance to be together.
He smiles down at her, drinking her in for a little while longer until he's had his fill. Then he gingerly sits down beside her in the space her body has left open for him, his back brushing against her knees and thighs, his left hand coming to rest on her shoulder. “Ruth,” he murmurs, rubbing her right arm with his hand, doing his best to wake her gently.

Her eyes open slowly, taking a moment to focus on his face, recognition and relief infusing her features. “Harry,” she says, trying to sit up. He gets up briefly, allowing her to swing her feet to the floor again and gather her coat in her lap before taking a seat beside her. She's watching him, eyes over-bright, darting all over his face as if making sure he's all there. “Are you all right? Did they hurt you?”

“No,” he replies. “I'm fine, thanks to Adam and Zaf.”

“Good,” she says, smiling softly, her gaze holding his, her usual reticence having deserted her it seems, making his heart race. Before he can do or say anything, however, she frowns and sniffs, saying, “I smell petrol.”

“That would be me. Sorry. Michael Collingwood thought to put an end to my interfering ways by starting a bonfire.”

“A bon-“ She gasps, her hand flying to her mouth. “He tried to set you on fire?!“

“Yes,” he replies. “But luckily Zaf had the presence of mind to set off the fire-alarm. That's why we all got drenched.”

“Oh God, Harry,” she breathes, tears starting to slide down her cheeks as she takes deep, unsteady breaths to try to control her emotions, her hands wiping away at her cheeks. “I'm sorry,” she whispers. “It's just... what they did to Colin, what they tried to do to you... I don't understand how people can be so cruel.”

Her eyes are luminous as she lifts them to his and he can't help falling for her all over again, reaching his hand up to cup her face and draw her to him, brushing his lips against her forehead and murmuring, “I don't know, Ruth. I don't know.”

She sighs, resting her forehead against his shoulder, his cheek pressing against her hair as he inhales deeply, relishing her proximity, his left hand slipping down to her shoulder and slowly rubbing her back. He longs to pull her closer but doesn't dare at this delicate moment in time, knowing how close they both are to the edge after the events of the last twenty-four hours. He wants to get it just right when he tells her – he doesn't want to risk doing or saying the wrong thing. It has to be perfect.

A shaky breath escapes her, telling him that she's still trying valiantly not to cry, and he can't help the way his heart melts, his right hand rising to stroke her hair as his left continues its gentle motion across her back and he fights the urge to wrap his arms around her. Your clothes are wet, he reminds himself, searching for reasons to keep her at arm's length when his whole being is crying out for her.

“It's alright, Ruth,” he murmurs, the words tumbling from his lips to soothe her. “Everything's alright now. It's over. Don't cry, love.”

The endearment slips out without any thought but its effect is instantaneous. She pulls back, quickly wiping her cheeks with her hands and shaking her head. “Don't, Harry. This is how this whole, sorry mess got started.”

The sudden stab of pain at her words leaves him momentarily breathless. Sorry mess? Will they never get past how they began? Will they always be held back by this guilt and the pain of Danny
and Jane? He draws back, lifting a hand to rub his forehead, silently berating himself for the slip of the tongue that's thrown them in at the deep end. This is exactly what he did not want to happen and now... What does he do now? Does he brush it off, pretend nothing has happened? A glance at her face tells him that would not be a good move. He needs to say something to smooth things over.

“It's not,” he replies, watching her lift her eyes to his with a puzzled frown. “This started long before Danny, Ruth. It started the day we met.” Her eyes widen in shock before she drops her gaze again, her hands furiously fiddling with the buttons of her coat that's neatly gathered in her lap.

He'd meant to reassure her, but he can see that his words have only increased her agitation. He's always doing or saying the wrong thing with her, and he can't help but feel frustrated suddenly that he can never seem to get it right. All he had to do was wake her and send her home, but instead he's managed to land them straight in the middle of a minefield.

He's exhausted, not thinking straight, and he's finding it remarkably hard to keep his mind from wondering to all the beautiful moments they've shared over the years. He smiles gently, remembering their first meeting, her bright, eager eyes and shy smile, the frisson he'd felt when he'd taken her hand to shake it, the way the tone of his voice had dropped involuntarily as he'd addressed her, and the tremor that had gone through her on hearing it, the way her eyes had widened imperceptibly, her smile had slipped from her lips and her cheeks had flushed as she'd dropped his hand and her gaze, directing her response to his chest. Their attraction had been mutual from the start, though how quickly it had turned to love is anyone's guess. He suspects she had him at 'Bugger the Home Office'.

He shakes his head to clear it. Now is not the time for this, he tells himself sternly, refocusing his attention on Ruth and how to get out of his current predicament without destroying all hope of a future with her. He sees another tear roll down her cheek and hears her whisper, “Oh Harry,” in such a broken little voice that something inside him snaps and he cannot stop himself from telling her all that he's kept from her this past year and all his feelings come pouring out of him – wisely or unwisely, he can't seem to bring himself to care any more.

He reaches for her hand, clasping it between his and bringing it to his chest, gazing earnestly into her eyes as she lifts them to look at him in surprise and he says, “I love you, Ruth,” his voice almost a growl from emotion. “So much. And I know I've made mistakes, allowed myself to act on my feelings at the wrong time, in the wrong way, but I'm trying to remedy that. I'm trying to do the right thing, to fix what I've done wrong in the hope that you can forgive me and give me a chance to show you how much you mean to me.”

Her face is a picture of shock and he has a feeling that she heard and understood less than half of what he's just said. “But you're married,” she objects in a whisper, her hand trembling in his.

“I'm not married,” he replies earnestly. “Not for very much longer. The divorce will come through any day now. I haven't lived with Jane for months.”

“Oh God, Harry,” she gasps, pulling her hand from his grasp and beginning to hyperventilate, and he can't help panicking a little and berating himself for telling her like this, not preparing her better, terrified she's about to tell him that the guilt is too much for her and she cannot give them a chance. “Please tell me you didn't do this because of me. Tell me I didn't break up your home. I couldn't bear to think that.”

“It's not because of you.” The half-truth slips from his lips smoothly, effortlessly, for whilst he doubts he would have left Jane if Ruth had never entered his life, equally his marriage had been long dead before she'd even entered the picture. “You have nothing to reproach yourself for, Ruth. This is not your fault and you have done nothing wrong.”
She looks up at him, her face full of a mixture of doubt and hope, and he knows that she's yearning to believe him, to absolve herself of the guilt he knows she's been feeling, and he suddenly feels hopeful again. He can talk her out of her guilt – he's good at that kind of thing. Thank God, I waited so long to tell her, he thinks, knowing how much greater her guilt would have been if she'd linked his separation from Jane with what had happened in Baghdad and how much harder his task to convince her. He doesn't want to lie to her if he can help it, but he needs her to understand that his marriage to Jane was over long ago in every meaningful way.

“I mean it,” he insists. “This is my doing, Ruth, my doing alone. People change – you know that. I've changed so much over the last three decades. So has Jane. We're just not the same people we were and our marriage has been one of convenience for some time now. It ended a long time ago, destroyed by my actions and my choices back then. Jane and I... we never recovered what we had. We stayed together for the children, and now that they've flown the nest, we both realised it was over. You've not caused this. You're not to blame.”

“But you said,” she stammers, “you said you've felt... something for me since we met.”

“I have,” he agrees, heart pounding in his chest, dreading what she might say next, kicking himself for admitting that he's loved her for so long, so early in their conversation.

“But if we'd never met then maybe-”

“No,” he interrupts swiftly. “We're not playing that game. If we'd never met, I might be dead now, burnt to a crisp because you were not here to help figure out what Collingwood and Myers were planning. If we'd never met, I might never have known the joy of loving a woman so deeply that her comfort and happiness is more important to me than anything else. I cannot regret that, Ruth. I'll never regret meeting you, loving you. You've changed me. I am a better man for having loved you.”

She stares at him, apparently lost for words, so he smiles and gently reaches up to push a few strands of her hair back behind her ear, trailing his fingertips along her jaw and making her shiver, her eyes closing in pleasure at his touch. He wants to kiss her so desperately, but he knows he'll not be able to hold back if he does, so instead he drops his hand from her face and murmurs, “There is much to talk about, Ruth, but I fear tonight is not the night for that. We've both been put through the wringer this week, today especially, and are in need of food and rest.”

He sees her drop her gaze and nod, clasping her hands together in her lap and taking a deep breath before she lifts her gaze to his again, her body language changing, speaking of strength, determination, confidence and control. He smiles, his eyes full of admiration and love. She is magnificent.

He thinks about asking her now, trying to set a date for a drink or dinner together, but he's scared she'll say no, so he leaves the words unspoken. They'll be time another day, he tells himself, feeling happy enough to have told her how he feels about her and have her still be sitting beside him. She hasn't bolted, which he takes as a very good sign and determines to be satisfied with that for now. He'll ask her another day, maybe on Friday or next week, after everything's been sorted and things quiet down a little after the attempted coup. It's not every day that something like that happens in Britain and he knows everyone's reeling from it. It'll take a few days, weeks for things to settle down once more. “I should get home and change,” he says. “Can I offer you a lift?”

“It's fine, Harry. I'll take the bus.” She replies so quickly that he thinks it's almost like a reflex to deny them any close contact away from work.

“Please, Ruth. It's just a lift. I promise,” he murmurs, attempting to change her mind, knowing how exhausted she must be. “Ben will be driving. It's been such a long week. Let me take you home so
She hesitates then nods, saying, “Alright,” and standing, slipping on her coat and picking up her bag as he stands also, watching her. “A lift would be nice. Thank you.”

He smiles. “Let me just tidy up a little,” he says and turns, walking over to his desk to put away any sensitive material and shut down his computer before he ushers her out of his office, locking the door behind him while he listens to his brother greet Ruth and immediately strike up a conversation, making her laugh and smile almost instantly. It's a talent they share – this ability to charm women and draw them out of their shell – though Ben's always been more natural with it, doing it out of a desire to get to know them as people, whereas he's always used it as a means to an end – to recruit them as an asset, to gather intelligence, or a desire to get them into his bed. Not any more though – at least not when it comes to his personal gratification and sex. He's still a spy and still in need of assets and intel, but he's a changed man, a better man thanks to Ruth and he's rather proud of the transformation.
Chapter 18

6 July 2006 – Zaf

Colin. Somehow he still can't quite believe it. Colin of all people. He'd expected it to be Harry, or Adam, or himself, or Jo perhaps. They'd been in the thick of it from the start, and when they'd arrested Harry and carted him off to the detention centre, he'd really feared that they might be too late. They almost had been too late. Desperate men do desperate things, he remembers thinking as he'd driven like the wind after they'd got word from Adam. But Colin – quiet, dependable Colin with his weird sense of humour and his love of comic books and The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy? They'd never expected that.

Everyone's here, all looking as shocked as he feels despite the fact that they've had over four weeks now to get used to the idea, to accept that he's the one who's been taken this time. All except Harry, he realises as he glances at the faces around him. And Malcolm. There's a shroud of grief surrounding him – more so than anyone else. He's composed and dignified as he sits in a pew a few rows in front of Ruth and Harry. He'd come in last, he recalls, and deliberately seated himself apart from everyone else. Poor Malcolm. They'd been the best of friends and he can't imagine how hard this must be for him, saying goodbye to someone dearer than a brother.

He watches as Malcolm gets up and slowly makes his way to the pulpit to begin his reading. Jo's crying, he sees as he moves his eyes from Malcolm to the rest, seeking to distract himself from the raw grief in the older man's voice and face that's threatening to move him to tears too. Adam's wrapped his arm around her shoulders, his eyes looking a little vacant, and Zaf suspects he's not really here right now, escaping into his own private thoughts, or perhaps, his nightmares, perhaps reliving Fiona's memorial service or her final minutes on this earth.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Harry press his handkerchief into Ruth's hand and watches her fingers curl around it, momentarily trapping Harry's fingers in her fist before she releases him and brings the hanky to her eyes, wiping away her quiet tears. Harry's looking down at her, his face a picture of concern and something more, something much deeper, much more profound than that, more personal and intimate, and despite the pain and the grief that surrounds him, Zaf can't help but smile inwardly at the sight. Love, he finds himself thinking. Harry's in love with Ruth. Does she even know? Isn't he married anyway?

It shouldn't surprise him really. Harry has quite the reputation for seducing women, and though he's rather good at it himself, he'd hoped to get a tip or two from Harry when he'd first joined his team. Ruth though? That would be quite an achievement if he pulls it off. She's Adam's age, fifteen or more years younger than Harry. Why would she look twice at a grumpy, old sod like him? Power maybe? He knows some women are seduced by that, but somehow he doesn't think that kind of thing matters to Ruth. Perhaps romance. He might be able to woo her, seduce her by the light of the moon and the stars. He's married though. He doesn't think Ruth would go for a married man. She's too principled. He'll have to ask Adam later.

Harry looks up at him then, catching his eye and holding his gaze for several moments, his eyes hard and steely, almost as if he knows what Zaf's been thinking, as if he's daring him to say something, do something to jeopardise this for him and Ruth and suffer the consequences of unleashing Harry's
wrath. He has no doubt his punishment will be severe, unbearable even. Harry has the reputation of making people pay a very high price for doing something stupid, and crossing Harry on something as personal as this is right up there on the stupidity scale. Perhaps talking to Adam would be a bad move, he decides as he nods at Harry and turns to look forward again.

Shit! He knows what Harry's done. He's effectively recruited him to protect his secret because whichever member of the team is the one who spreads the rumour about Ruth and Harry first, he knows that the blame will fall squarely on his own shoulders now. Double shit! He's going to have to keep an eye on Jo. She's bound to be the first one to notice. She loves this kind of stuff. He just hopes he's around when she finds out because, if he's off the Grid, undercover on some operation, he's screwed.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Colin's memorial service is yet another event mentioned in Harry's diary, as is the fact that he lent Ruth his handkerchief during Malcolm's reading.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

A/N: I've borrowed some of the dialogue from Spooks once more in this chapter, mainly because it was such a lovely scene in Canon that I couldn't bear to skip it entirely for this story. Thanks for reading and reviewing. S.C.

10 July 2006 – Ruth

There's something odd in his expression but she can't quite put her finger on what it is. “Harry?” she questions. “Is... er... something wrong?”

“Wrong?” he frowns. “Nothing's wrong, Ruth. Far from it.”

“You look,” she murmurs, pausing, searching for the right word. “Strange,” she finishes.

“Well, it isn't every day that a man gets divorced.”

“Divorced?” she asks in surprise, and as she watches him nod and wave the paper he's been contemplating at her, she feels her stomach drop and her insides begin to churn, her heart-rate shooting through the roof.

“It finally came through.”

“How... how do you feel?” she asks, a tremor in her voice. She's been expecting this, trying to prepare herself for the day when he'll broach the subject of them again, knowing what he'll want, what he'll expect from her. It's come as a surprise really that he's waited so long, though the clean up after the failed coup has taken longer than any of them had anticipated and then there'd been Colin's memorial service, which hadn't helped matters at all. He'd been so sweet though, lending her his handkerchief and just being there for her. And she can understand why he's waited, given what had happened between them after Danny. He's probably been making sure that his next move is not connected in any way to loss and grief – a rather tall order, she thinks, given what they do for a living.

She still can't get over the fact that he's in love with her though. Harry Pearce in love with her! It's surreal, too good to be true, and yet, if she's honest with herself, she's known almost from the start – certainly since Baghdad – though she's refused to acknowledge it, to face it.

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“How... how do you feel?” he asks, setting the paper aside on his desk and moving closer, interrupting her fevered thoughts.

She nods, unable to find her voice. He could be mine. Harry could be mine if I'm brave enough.

And therein lies the rub – she's not at all sure that she is brave enough.

She feels so small, so inexperienced, so artless and unimportant by comparison. She can't see what he sees in her and can't help feeling like she's just a mid-life crisis. That's not to say she believes he
doesn't feel deeply for her – she's sure that he does – but she does wonder how long it can possibly last. She has absolutely nothing to offer a powerful man like him, someone who's lived in the world, has risen so high in the service, has given so much to his country. He's had a family, children, has seen them grow up and leave home already, and she... she's done nothing when she really thinks about it. She's studied hard, learnt a few languages, had a few, halting relationships, played the piano and violin, and she sings in a choir. She's just turned thirty-six and she hasn't done anything to be proud of outside of her work at MI-5. She hasn't even travelled for all her linguistic skills!

“Relieved,” he confesses, breaking into her thoughts again. “Free. Happy.”

She nods, swallowing hard before she can reply. “Good,” she says, dropping her gaze to her hands.

He's watching her – she can feel it – and when she finally finds the courage to lift her eyes to his, his gaze is soft and hopeful, but he doesn't say anything for some time and she can't make up her mind how to feel. Her emotions are jumbled together, hard to identify and impossible to unpick as they stand staring at each other. She can feel the joy and hope for them, but there are also nerves and fear, and deep down there is still that lingering guilt of knowing that, despite what Harry said, she has been the impetus that has lead to his divorce. She doesn't believe it would have happened had she not slept with him, had he not been reminded of the passion and love to be found at the beginning of any relationship.

“Would you like to have dinner sometime?” he murmurs eventually.

“Harry, I...” she begins and tails off, unsure of what to tell him. She wants to. Of course, she wants to. But she's scared too of the cost, of the consequences for them, of the prospect of it ending in a few months, leaving her broken-hearted and alone, without him, without her job that she loves so much and is so good at. She feels like perhaps she loves him too much to risk it all.

“What is it, Ruth?” he asks gently, moving his hand as if to reach for hers, but thinking better of it. His eyes are a warm honey colour and so open, shining with his love for her. It quite takes her breath away when he looks at her like that. It's the look he's always had when they've made love, his eyes softening, opening, windows into his soul. He's so beautiful inside. It never ceases to amaze her. The contradiction between who he is and what he does, intriguing, puzzling, compelling. No one else gets to see it, no one else knows. They see something of it in his loyalty and his efforts to always do the right thing against impossible odds, and they respect and value him for it, but they don't see it all like she does. He doesn't show it to anyone else.

It floors her when she thinks about it – the love, the trust he's showing her. She could wound him so deeply if she chose. She will break his heart if she says no. She'll break her own heart too, but that's different. It's easier to recover from a broken heart when it's you yourself who's caused it. It's infinitely harder to recover from it if it was someone else.

Could she do that to a man she loves so deeply?

No. No, I can't, she realises as she gazes into his eyes. She loves him too much. She always has. She probably always will. She can't break his heart. He wants her, he's offering himself to her, is trusting her with his heart, and she can't bear to hurt him.

“It's nothing,” she replies, smiling up at him. “I'd love to have dinner... together.”

He looks so happy, smiling in return, his eyes alight with joy, making her glad that she's managed to push aside her misgivings, her lingering guilt, and has said yes to dinner. It's dinner. Just dinner. Just a beginning, she tells herself to give herself courage.
“I've booked a table. It's a place I think you'll like.”

“That's very presumptuous of you,” she teases, her playfulness coming through as she realises that she's looking forward to spending time with him outside of work, to allowing herself to enjoy his company without the guilt. “I might have said no.”

“Well, I'll go anyway. Be like the Charlie Chaplin character, waiting for the girl and making the bread-rolls dance.”

She smiles. He's so adorable that she desperately wants to kiss him.

“What film was that?” he asks gently.

“Goldrush,” she replies, still overcome by him and how wonderful he is.

“Ah yes.” He's smiling at her, his eyes still soft and warm.

“You won't have to,” she murmurs, utterly lost in his gaze. “Wait, I mean. I'll be there.”

“That's good. Friday night okay?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He nods and she blinks, realising she's been staring at him like a besotted fool and they're at work where anyone could see them. She drops her gaze, blushing before waving her hand vaguely over her shoulder.

“I'd better get back,” she says, glancing up at him and turning to leave the room, heart hammering in her chest as the realisation that she's actually dating Harry Pearce sinks in, jolting every nerve ending in her body and turning her insides into warm, liquid goo. She crosses the Grid to her station, feeling his eyes on her back all the way and secretly crossing her fingers for them, sending up a prayer that they can make this work, that though she's putting all her eggs in one basket, none of them will crack, that her heart will be safe with him and that their love will stand the test of time.
14 July 2006 – Harry

“Harry,” she whispers when he pulls back, her eyes luminous in the lamplight. “Would you...” she swallows and opens her mouth to try again, but he beats her to it.

“Not tonight, Ruth,” he murmurs softly. Then seeing the disappointment and hurt briefly flicker in her gaze, he adds, “I want to do this properly. I want to court you properly.”

She smiles her shy smile and looks down for a moment before lifting sparkling, mischievous eyes to his. “All right,” she concedes, “though I'm not sure talk of Grand Tours is entirely proper on a first date.” He blushes at her words, feeling foolish and old, acutely aware of how out of practice he is when it comes to dating someone he cares for so deeply. This is so very different from a honey trap, his affair with Juliet, and his marriage to Jane.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, “I'll do better next time.”

“No need to be sorry, Harry.” She smiles, reaching her hand up to gently stroke his cheek. “I'm not sorry and besides... I'm already looking forward to next time.”

He grins, he can't help it, overcome by her gentle charm, her soft touch, her playful gaze, her honest words. “You're better at this than I am.” He voices his thoughts. “I'm rusty and out of practice.”

“You're not doing so bad, just perhaps thinking too much?” she replies, reaching up to softly kiss his lips.

He kisses her back, softly at first and then more deeply, ardently, pulling her into his arms and holding her tight, valiantly trying to remember why it is that he wanted to wait. Don't rush it, Harry, he reminds himself sternly, gently but firmly pulling back.

“Wow,” she breathes, looking a little dazed and making him smile with satisfaction. “You're certainly not rusty when it comes to that.”

“No need to think,” he replies softly, reaching his hand up to push a wayward strand of her hair behind her ear. “Can we do this again then?”

“Most definitely yes,” she replies, her gaze dropping to his lips.

He laughs – a warm, happy sound that doesn't escape him very often. “Dinner too?” he teases.

“Mmm,” she hums, smiling up at him. “Why not? I do need to eat, after all.”

He hums, leaning in to kiss her again. “I could eat you,” he murmurs, brushing his lips against hers again and again.

She giggles, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her face in his chest, warming his heart. Good God, but she's wonderful!

“That would be rather disappointing,” she mumbles into his coat.

“What would?”
“If you ate me, I wouldn’t be able to enjoy kissing you if I was in your tummy.”

He laughs again at the unexpectedness of her comment. She makes the most unusual connections with that extraordinary mind of hers. “I tell you what,” he replies, leaning down so he’s whispering in her ear, feeling suddenly daring. “How about I eat you out instead?”

The most delightful sound he’s ever heard her make escapes her then, a cross between a whimper and a giggle and maybe a moan of pleasure.

“You are a very naughty man, Harry Pearce,” she replies, pulling out of his arms to look at him, her cheeks a delightful, rose colour.

“One of my many talents.” His voice is deep and velvety soft, his body yearning for her, but he doesn’t change his mind about the right course of action here. He needs to prove himself capable of more than seducing her, show her that he’s after more than just sex, and he cannot do that if he takes her to bed tonight. “Good night, Ruth,” he adds softly, pressing a quick kiss against her cheek and drawing back again. “Sweet dreams.”

“Sweet?” she asks, eyes dark as she looks up at him, her tongue darting out to lick her lips. “I think you’ve just put an end to any chance of that, Harry. They’re pretty much guaranteed to be heated and highly erotic now.” What blood remains in his brain suddenly rushes south, leaving him a little dazed and suddenly, painfully aroused. “Stay,” she murmurs, stepping closer, her hand reaching up to rest on his chest.

“Ruth, I-” but she doesn’t let him finish, kissing his lips softly, oh so seductively.

“Please?”

“I need to prove that-” he tries again, valiantly holding onto his conviction though his body’s betraying his desperate need for her.

“You don’t need to prove anything, Harry,” she replies, pulling back a little to look at him earnestly.

He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes for a moment, letting the air escape his lungs slowly while he regains control, his forehead resting against hers. Then he opens his eyes again and lifts his head, hoping for some understanding as he tries to explain.

“I need to prove to myself that I can do this, Ruth,” he says. “All my life, I’ve sought out physical pleasure. I’ve only ever denied myself twice before now and neither of those situations have come close to how hard this is. I don’t want to hurt you, but I need to know-”

“Oh okay,” she interrupts, her gaze softening. “I understand. I’m sorry I pressed you.”

“No,” he shakes his head. “Don’t be sorry, Ruth. Never apologise for wanting me. I want you to want me. I want to satisfy you. I want to make you happy.”

“You do,” she replies, smiling into his eyes and drawing closer, hugging his body and making his heart soar. “Most of the time anyway,” she mumbles into his chest, making him chuckle. Then she squeezes him against her again and pulls back. “Good night, Harry. Thank you for a lovely dinner.”

“Thank you for coming with me,” he replies and watches her arch an eyebrow at him and give him such a mischievous look that he can’t help throwing his arms up in exasperation. “To dinner, Ruth! To dinner. Jesus! I never realised you have such a one-track mind.”

“Sometimes,” she agrees, grinning. “It’s part of what makes me good at my job.”
“Well, I'll remember that for next time,” he replies, leaning in for a quick kiss. “Now go on inside. I'll see you tomorrow.”

He watches her turn and open her front door, giving him a sweet smile over her shoulder and murmuring goodnight again before slipping into her home. He turns then and makes his way back to his car, whistling all the way. He hasn't felt this happy since... well, never.
This chapter is set in 5.3 and uses some dialogue from that episode at the beginning. Harry's attempts to contact Catherine are mentioned in his diary. Thank you all for your continued support. S.C.

15 July 2006 – Adam

“What do you mean we have to let him go?!” he demands, beyond livid at the injustice. That man almost killed Jo and Harry bloody well knows it.

“Six want him back in Africa working for them.”

“Six?! Six are partly responsible for this mess! Why didn't they know what was happening in Zahir?”

“I don't know.” Harry sounds just as disillusioned as he feels and it serves to calm him a little. “But Africa is a key battleground and Kallis can help us now.”

“You can't let this happen.”

“It's out of my hands,” Harry replies, looking resigned and it makes Adam turn away in disappointment and disgust. He doesn't understand how Harry copes with this part of his job, the compromises that bend their moral code to near breaking point, all the bloody politics involved. They have to deal with and turn some very unsavoury characters in their job, but he believes that there should be a line that's never crossed and some people should be thrown to the wolves regardless of how useful they might be as assets in the field. It's just not right for them to get away with murder like this, and if an example isn't made of them, others will just take their place, over and over again.

“I don't like it any more than you do,” Harry murmurs, “but what I don't like even more right now is that we've lost the bomb.”

He sighs, taking a seat across from Harry. “We still know where it's going to though. It all comes down to Zaf now.”

Harry just nods, rising from his seat and talking over to his drinks cabinet. “Whisky?” he offers.

“Alright,” Adam agrees – he could use a drink to take the edge off a little. There's nothing to do but wait for Zaf to get what they need and it's late – he should be getting home to Wes.

“How's Wes?” Harry asks, as if reading his mind.

“He's great,” Adam replies, taking the glass Harry hands him. “Thanks,” he adds and takes a sip. “Jenny's very good with him and he's doing much better. It's amazing really how resilient children are. He's sleeping well again and he's started to take an interest in rugby at school.”
“That's good,” Harry agrees, looking genuinely pleased to hear that. “You should bring him to the dog track again one day.”

“Yeah, he'd like that.”

He watches Harry take a sip of his drink, wondering again why he would take Ruth out when he's married. It hasn't sat well with him since Jo told him about their dinner date. He feels a kind of brotherly duty to protect Ruth, even if she's a grown woman – older than him, in fact – and very capable of making her own choices in life. Maybe it's because she sometimes comes across as being incredibly naive for someone in their profession.

Jo had said that maybe Harry's separated from his wife or is divorced or something, saying that she's sure Ruth wouldn't have an affair with him, and he has to agree with her on that point. Ruth struggles so much with the morality and ethical implications of their work, that he thinks an affair would be something she wouldn't be able to cope with or forgive herself for.

Well, this is the perfect opportunity to find out for certain and he determines suddenly to get to the bottom of it. “What about your children?” he asks, easing into the subject. “What are they up to these days?”

Adam thinks Harry seems pleased to have been asked though it's hard to be certain with Harry. “Graham's working for a publishing house now, and Catherine's still making documentaries. I talked to her just the other day, in fact, tried to convince her to leave Gaza, but I've no idea if she'll listen.”

“Christ! That must be a worry,” Adam replies, knowing that's not the safest place in the world to be, especially with Israel invading Lebanon just three days ago. Harry nods, taking another swig of his whisky and Adam sees the opening he's been looking for. “What does your wife say?”

“She's as worried as I am. She rung me last night to talk about it. She's been trying to convince Catherine to come home too apparently.”

“Oh. So you and she are not...?” he tails off, not quite sure how to finish the sentence.

“We've divorced,” Harry replies, turning his eyes on his, and Adam can't help thinking that perhaps Harry knows exactly what he's up to with this line of questioning.

“I'm sorry,” he says. “I didn't know. Since when?”

“A month or so,” Harry replies. “I moved out at the end of last year.”

“I don't know what to say. That's...” he tails off and tries again. “Are you alright?”

“I'm fine.” Harry dismisses his concern. “It's been a long time coming.” They're silent for some moments, sipping their drinks, and Adam can't help thinking how lucky he is that he and Fiona were so close and had such a wonderful marriage and life together, even if it was cut too short in the end. Then as if reading his mind again, Harry adds, “You were very lucky, Adam – you and Fiona. I'm sorry for what happened, more sorry than I can ever possibly say... but I do envy what you had. It's every man's dream to have a true partner in life.”

“Yes,” Adam agrees, smiling softly, remembering. “It was amazing... I try to focus on that, but it's hard.” He drops his gaze to his drink, his eyes filling with tears as he thinks of all he's lost. “I'm not even thirty-five yet. I've got my whole life ahead of me and I've got to spend it without her. How am I meant to do that, Harry?”

He feels Harry's hand grip his shoulder in support, and as he lifts his gaze to his, he sees a softness in
Harry's eyes that he's never glimpsed before, and a deep, deep sadness too. “One second, one minute, one hour at a time,” he murmurs gruffly. “It's the only way. You'll manage for her and for young Wesley. You'll always have a piece of her in him, Adam... And we're here for you... if you need us.”

“I know,” he nods and wipes at his eyes with the back of his hand, draining his glass and rising to his feet. Harry rises also and they shake hands as Adam murmurs, “Thanks, Harry.”

“Don't mention it,” he replies and turns back to his desk as Adam leaves the room, feeling a little lighter after their conversation and silently wishing Harry luck with Ruth. There's something between them – a connection, a bond that's different to every other interaction either of them has at work. It surprises him that no one's thought anything of it before now. They've always been able to anticipate each other's thoughts and needs, finish each other's sentences, rather like he and Fiona had always been able to do.

He smiles at Ruth as he walks past her station, feeling certain that it's a good thing for the team if Harry and Ruth are together. He and Fiona had been able to take their game to a whole new level after they'd married and that can only be good for the Section. There's a downside, however, that he can't help but acknowledge – that someone could hurt Ruth to get to Harry. They're going to have to watch for that. Perhaps he should have Malcolm review her security as a precaution. He'll have to be careful though. It's probably best to hide it in a security review of all higher level operatives in the Section. He wouldn't want to out Ruth and Harry before they're ready for it, though now he thinks about it, it's probably too late to worry about that. Undoubtedly Zaf's already running a book on when they'll announce their engagement.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

A/N: Set at the end of 5.3 and M-rated. I have included some thoughts from Harry's diary, as always, and also tweaked canon somewhat - Ruth's conversation with Malcolm about her date never happened. Instead of rewriting every scene in these episodes, I have decided to just give a few hints here and there as to how they might be different from canon, though the overall story-line hasn't changed yet. We will be deviating from canon soon. As one lovely, anonymous reviewer put it, Ruth's reaction must be different because she already has a taste of how happy Harry makes her. Hope you continue to enjoy. Cheers, S.C.

16 July 2006 – Harry

He leaves early, needing to clear his head after what happened, and gets driven home, but he can't settle, can't get his mind around how it can be over when they've barely began, how after waiting all this time, she could bolt now because people are laughing. They put up with so much in their jobs and they've waited for too many months for this. What the hell does it matter if a few people choose to laugh? And who is it who's laughing at them anyway? Why? Are they jealous of what they have? Scorning of him dating a junior officer?

He tugs on Scarlet's lead and turns towards home again, his emotions in turmoil and he doesn't know if he should laugh along with them or cry. But as he nears his flat, he realises that it was unfair of her to end it at work, a place where they couldn't talk freely, and he was wrong to let her have the last word. He needs to speak to her tonight, he decides and before long he's got Scarlet back inside and is making his way across London to Ruth's.

He rings her when he's almost there, saying simply, “I'm on my way over now. We need to talk, Ruth,” before hanging up, too upset to risk saying anything more over the phone and not wanting to give her an opening to tell him to go away. If she wants him to go, she's going to have to tell him to his face. He'll be damned if he's going to make this easy for her.

He rings the doorbell several times, before she opens the door, peering through the crack that the security chain allows.

"Hello, Ruth," he murmurs, endeavouring to sound calm and in control. He doesn't want to scare her and he knows how intimidating he can be when he's angry – Ben's told him before that he's almost as terrifying as a man-eating lion. “Can I come in? I just want to talk about this.” She hesitates, her eyes worried and uncertain. “I'm not going to hurt you, Ruth. Please. We can't leave things like this. We couldn't talk properly earlier. We were at work. I need to understand.”

“Fine,” she sighs and closes the door again to remove the chain before allowing him inside. “Tea?” she asks, turning away and leaving him to hang up his jacket and close and lock the door behind him.

“Yes, please,” he murmurs, following her through to the kitchen and taking a seat at the table,
watching her while he goes over what he wants to tell her in his head. He mustn't screw this up – it
might be his only chance to convince her.

Once they're sitting across from each other, sipping their drinks, he asks softly, “What happened,
Ruth? Who did you hear talking about us?”

But she shakes her head. “I can’t tell you that, Harry. I don’t want to get them into trouble.”

He sighs, rubbing his face with his hand, struggling to maintain his composure. How bloody typical
of Ruth to be trying to protect others, no matter what they've done. “I'm not here as your boss, Ruth.
Or theirs. I just need to understand what happened. Two days ago we had a most wonderful night
and now...” He tails off, feeling his throat tighten and knowing his voice will betray his emotions. He
takes a sip of his drink to loosen the lump in his throat. It can't be over. He refuses to accept that. He
just needs to find a way through to her, make her reconsider, change her mind.

He looks up to find her watching him. “I was walking past the water-cooler,” she says, dropping her
gaze to her mug. “They all went quiet as I passed, so I hid round the corner to listen, scared they’d be
talking about us. I was right... None of them had anything nice to say, Harry. You're a lot older than
me... I'm sure you can guess what they had to say about that. Every unkind comment they could
have made, they did and they were all laughing. They respect you less because of our... date and that
undermines your authority. That's not acceptable, Harry.” She lifts her eyes to his again, looking
determined, and he can't help wondering if this is the real reason behind her desire to run, or if there's
more, something else that she's hiding. In his office earlier, she'd said she couldn't stand to be talked
about like that. Is this really about him, or is it about her?

“I take it these were admins and junior officers?” he asks, his voice tight with suppressed fury. “I
can't imagine Adam or any of the others saying such things.”

“No,” she concedes, dropping her gaze to her drink again. “Adam wasn't there and Malcolm was the
one who broke it up, telling them to grow up and get back to work before he turns them all into tea
boys and girls for the next decade.” He sees her smile softly at that and feels relieved.

“How many people are we talking about here, Ruth?”

“Four,” she admits.

“Four? That's not a lot of people, Ruth,” he points out gently. “And it's not the people who count.
Your friends, people who know you, would never say anything like that. There will always be
people who are jealous, mean-spirited and spiteful, even in Section D. You can't let them ruin your
life.” He watches her, sensing that what's really bothering her here is not his diminished authority,
but her own position, the way people see her and how that is changing as the others realise she's
dating the boss.

It's not something they'd discussed before embarking on their relationship. Perhaps that had been a
mistake, though he can't see how talking about it beforehand would have prepared Ruth for the
reality of being snubbed by her colleagues or the viciousness of some people's remarks, the isolation
that comes with authority or the perception of being different, apart from everyone else. To be
honest, given her role as analyst on his team, he'd expected her to have already analysed all this and
decided their relationship was worth it, but perhaps he'd been wrong about that. Though he'd never
tell her this, she does sometimes strike him as being a little naïve and idealistic – though it happens to
be one of the things he loves about her. And in any case, he's sure now that talking about it
beforehand would only have scared her off before they'd had a chance to share even one date, and
he's counting on the memory of their night together to sway her back to his way of thinking, to
convince her that what they have is worth the looks and the whispers that go on behind their backs.
He knows from experience that they don't last forever. People get bored and move on to gossiping about someone else, especially if you show them that you don't care what they say about you.

“But if they're thinking that, then perhaps everyone else is too,” she whispers, confirming his suspicions. Poor Ruth. She really hates to be the centre of attention, but she's going to have to get used to it if she wants to be with him, and he desperately hopes that she does.

“Perhaps,” he agrees. “Perhaps it crossed their mind for a moment, Ruth, but that doesn't mean they believe it. It doesn't mean that they value you or me any less. And even if they do, we can prove them wrong. If they think this is a sordid affair, a quest for power or special treatment or sex or whatever else they might believe, they won't be able to think that for long if we make this work.”

She looks up at him with that hopeful look in her eyes, that yearning to believe him, and he can hold back no more. He gets up, walking round to her side of the table, taking her hands in his, and drawing her to her feet. “Please, Ruth,” he says softly, releasing her hands to cup her face. “I love you. Forget them. Think of you and me. Here. Now. That's what's important.” And he kisses her, seducing her with his hands and his lips, wrapping her in his arms as she responds to him, kissing him, moaning his name, drawing him closer, as eager for this as he.

There's no guilt this time, no loss or wrongdoing, just them – two adults loving each other, for though she's never said it, he's sure she would never have risked going out with him in the first place had she not felt something for him. He's too old for her, too bruised and broken, too set in his ways and used to being in charge. He knows he's nobody's idea of a perfect mate, and she's so good and kind and beautiful that she could have anyone she wanted. Why she's chosen him, he doesn't know, doesn't want to question it too deeply lest she realise she'd rather have someone else, someone younger, fitter, stronger, kinder, more beautiful, someone full of light like her, instead of the darkness that mars his own soul.

They make it out of the kitchen to the foot of the stairs, but negotiating those seems like too great a task, so they stagger into the living room instead and her wide sofa, falling onto it together as they continue to kiss greedily, barely stopping for breath before plunging in again for more. His hands are under her baggy jumper, caressing, squeezing her breasts that he's discovered are unencumbered by a bra – the thought that she might always be braless like this when she's home only increasing his longing for her, his desperate need to know her inside and out, build a life with her, have a future together.

Her nails scrape his back over his shirt, grabbing fistfuls of the material to pull it free of his trousers, as desperate to feel his skin as he, her moans of pleasure as she grinds her hips against him fanning the flames of his desire and he can no longer think straight, driven by instinct and the force of his sex-starved body's aching need to be inside her. He doesn't even know if he's convinced her to give them a chance, but already he's hiked up her jumper and his face is buried in her bare breasts, his hand in her knickers, his fingers stroking her wet folds and dipping inside her, her moans of pleasure spurring him on, driving him crazy with want of her – her, only her, always her.

He pulls her leggings and knickers off, scarcely sparing a moment's thought to be grateful that no zips or buttons are standing between him and the object of his most cherished desire tonight, before burying his face between her legs, lapping her up as he drives his fingers into her, her hips bucking under him, hands grasping at the cushions, her cries of pleasure filling the room as she nears her peak and tumbles over, and though part of him wants to take the time to watch her, build her up again, continue to give her pleasure, he's no longer capable of delaying, his now throbbing erection clamouring for attention, for the pleasure of sinking into her hot, wet, still quivering sex.

He stands, gazing down at her naked body as quickly he divests himself of his clothes, throwing...
them towards the nearby armchair without looking, utterly captivated by the sight of her, her face flushed with pleasure, lips that are swollen from his kisses smiling softly, knees spread wide, her sex calling to him, dark and wet and inviting, waiting for him to fill it once more, after all this time.

She opens her eyes to look at him – perhaps he's taking too long though he's moving as fast as he can, abandoning his attempt to unbutton his shirt and pulling it off over his head. “Harry,” she murmurs, her lips smiling softly, her voice infusing his name with a thousand hidden meanings all of them noble, honourable, desirable, and cherished by her. Her hands stray – one to cup and kneed her right breast, the other to the special place between her legs, her fingers caressing her sex in wide arcs that avoid the sensitive bundle of nerves he's just finished suckling with such pleasure, her flesh still over-sensitive from her climax, and he can hold back no more, abandoning his attempts to remove his socks and joining her on the sofa once more, groaning as he sees her tilt her pelvis in invitation, her eyes sated and full of emotion as they gaze up at him.

“I love you,” he murmurs, laying his body over hers and kissing her, his right hand finding her heat again, stroking her entrance, around her clit, building her pleasure so that when he finally slips inside her, she's already at the brink of her next orgasm, tumbling over with such abandon that he's completely enthralled, delaying his own release to see her come again, her gasp of 'Harry' soothing his heart and giving him the control he needs to last until he feels her heat ripple around him again and falls into oblivion with her.

When he can muster the energy to move once more, he gets off her and reaches for the throw on the armchair before joining her again, his body trapping her between him and the back of the sofa as he covers them both and closes his eyes, sighing in bliss. He's waited so bloody long for this, but it was worth it – worth the heartache and the guilt and the patience and the build up to this moment. She's his now. Ruth is his – body and soul – and he intends to care for her and support her and cherish her and love her always, perhaps even past the day he dies.

He's never really considered what comes after death. He's always figured that, as long as you die for something worthwhile, it doesn't matter. And that's always been the main reason that he does what he does for a living. Protecting millions seems like a very worthwhile cause to him and something worth dying for. Like Danny.

The thought makes him open his eyes, heart beating wildly in mild panic as he realises that he's inadvertently put them in exactly the same place as they had been on that fateful night, feeling suddenly terrified that Ruth will be thinking dark thoughts as a result of it.

Her eyes are open and she's staring at the ceiling, a frown lodged between her eyebrows, making him even more uneasy than he was a moment ago.

“Alright?” he asks softly, heart in his mouth.

“Mmmm,” she hums, her eyes glued to the ceiling for a moment more before she turns her head to look at him. “I was just thinking.”

“Good things, I hope?”

She smiles softly, perhaps sensing his worry though he's doing his best to hide it. “I was thinking about Danny,” she replies, sending his heart tumbling down to his knees.

Oh, God, no! Not Danny, Ruth. Think of us. Remember how good we feel together. Feel my love for you. Give us a chance. The thoughts crowd his mind, his arms tightening around her reflexively, desperate to hold onto her and the blissful feelings that were his a moment ago, silently kicking himself that he's done this – made love to her before he's found the words to convince her, made love
to her here of all places.

“I was remembering a conversation we had after Zoe left,” she continues, seemingly oblivious to the turmoil inside him, “before Andrew...” She tails off, looking momentarily saddened before resuming her train of thought. “I was telling him how lucky he was to have such a strong bond with her, to know that, no matter what, no matter when or where, they could rely on each other completely to be there for each other if either of them ever needed help.”

He almost sighs with relief at those words, moving his head closer to press a soft kiss against her temple. “I’ll always be there for you, Ruth. No matter what.”

“Really?” she asks, turning to look at him again, her gaze searching his. “Even if... even if things don’t work out between us?”

“Even then,” he murmurs, ignoring the sinking feeling in his stomach that she should be thinking along those lines. This is Ruth, he tries to tell himself. She likes to think of every eventuality, every scenario and plan for it.

She smiles, reaching up to kiss his lips softly before pulling back and turning, cuddling closer to him under that covers. “I believe you,” she whispers as she closes her eyes and he wraps his arms around her, sending up a prayer that he will never be tested in this way, that Ruth will always be by his side, with him, loving him and letting him love her in return.
When she wakes at five in the morning, shivering, she can't believe that they've spent the night sleeping peacefully on her sofa, sandwiched together, having barely moved at all. Her neck is a little stiff and she's freezing despite the wonderful warmth of his body beside hers, his arms wrapped around her securely as if to protect her, her heart warming at the thought.

*He cannot protect you though*, her mind warns, *not really, not from everything.* The gossip is still real, their predicament as boss and employee, as lovers with almost two decades between them, still a serious problem for both of them at work. She still believes that maintaining Harry's authority is of utmost importance for everyone because undermining it in any way will have a very real impact on operations and through them the lives of actual people. It's no laughing matter and she's not entirely convinced that the two of them have a right to put their own needs and desires first. *Regnum defende,* whatever the cost. That's what Harry's always said.

He stirs beside her and she watches as he purses his lips in his sleep, mumbles something unintelligible, and smiles softly as a deep sigh of pleasure escapes him. Her heart melts to see it, overcome by the simplicity, the pleasure of watching him sleep, dreaming pleasant dreams. *We can make this work,* she tells herself. Surely there is hope for the two of them, for finding a way to be together and retain their respectability, Harry's power and authority, isn't there? God, she hopes so. She doesn't know how she'd live without him and this is not even their second date.

He moans in his sleep and presses himself against her, his arousal suddenly very apparent as he thrusts his pelvis forward, his hardness rubbing against her stomach, eliciting an instant response from somewhere deep inside her. Her lips part in a soft gasp at the strength and unexpectedness of the heat that infuses her body, the want that's turning her insides into liquid fire, her breasts suddenly heavy, nipples hardening into peaks where they brush against his chest, the slow throbbing of her sex only getting stronger as he pushes against her again, mumbling her name.

She's never been with someone she's desired this much before. Every other relationship she's had began as something intellectual, cerebral and the physical side of it always suffered as a result. In fact, that's exactly why every single one of them had failed in the end. Not that she's never felt drawn to men physically in the past. It's just that they've been the wrong kind of men – all animal magnetism and no substance and she could never be with someone boring, stupid, or morally challenged. And though she'd assumed, on first meeting Harry all those months ago, that he was just like those men in one way or another, he'd proved her wrong. He'd surprised her and intrigued her and seduced her, and now she can't get enough of him, can't give him up, can't imagine her life without him and this raw passion and need he calls forth in her.

He doesn't appear to be lucid yet, and though it's gratifying to know that he dreams of her in this way, she needs him to be awake if things are to progress any further. Briefly she contemplates extracting herself from his embrace and going upstairs to have a long, cold shower, removing herself from the temptation, the seductive power he has over her even in his sleep, to think things through and make a decision about them. She desperately needs to analyse everything, work it all out before she can choose the best course of action, without him being near enough for his eyes and his smile, his lips and his hands, his body and his soul to sway her. Because sway her they will – she cannot resist him. They've proved that four times already.
Five times, she thinks briefly before giving in, hooking her left leg over his hip and drawing him closer as she kisses his face, stroking his neck and upper chest, murmuring, “Harry? Wake up, Harry.” She feels him nestle against her folds, nudging towards her with increasing persistence, but she pulls back from his thrusts, waiting for his eyes to open as she continues to coax him away from sleep and into the present with her.

“Wake up, Harry,” she says again, feathering kisses against his skin, and feels him finally respond, his sharp indrawn breath and the sudden rigidity of his body telling her that he's finally joined the land of the living.

“Ruth?” he murmurs, sounding a little lost and fearful.

“I'm here,” she replies, moving back to look into his eyes.

He smiles. “I was dreaming about you.”

“I know.” She gives him an impish smile and slowly slips him inside her, watching his face as his eyes close and he groans from somewhere deep inside him, a sound of pleasure that appears to be coming from the depths of his soul.

His eyes open again to gaze at her with so much emotion that she knows she'll never forget this look as long as she lives, will cherish it as her most precious memory of this wonderful man. “Ruth,” he murmurs, his voice infusing her name with the wonder, the joy, the love he's feeling.

She wants to tell him that she loves him too, wants to let him into the most vulnerable, most secret, most private chamber of her heart, but the thought of what the others are saying about them, the reminder of the decision she has yet to make, halts the impulse and she takes refuge in the physical world of her senses, kissing him, closing her eyes and tilting her pelvis, feeling him move inside her, sparking a cascade of pleasure in both of them that culminates in their climax, the sensation of his throbbing cock bumping against her cervix, gushing into her in long, thick spurts sending her into a spiral of heart-stopping bliss that leaves her feeling elated, exalted, and utterly spent.

She dozes in his arms, no longer feeling cold, or worried, or scared. It's almost as if, with this lovemaking, he's left a piece of himself deep inside her heart, has somehow managed to break into that most secret, most private chamber, and no matter what happens now, she knows that he'll always be with her, they will always be connected – two halves of the same whole.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

20 July 2006 - Harry

Two days she's been gone and not a word from her other than the text telling him she'd arrived at her mother's safely. They have been the longest two days of his life, and with just routine surveillance to occupy the team, there have been just too many hours in the day to think about her, about them and where they're going from here.

"I have to really think about this, Harry," she'd told him over breakfast that day, "and I can't do that with you near me, seducing me with your eyes and your kisses. I'm sorry. Please try to understand. I don't want to hurt you, but I need some time to consider everything." And that's when she'd said that she'd like to take a few days off to visit her mother, take a break from it all to clear her head and think things through.

He'd objected, of course, desperately tried to change her mind, their love making that morning having moved him too deeply to have any qualms about begging if he had to. Luckily, it hadn't come to that for, when it had become clear she was going to be stubborn about this, he'd managed to pull back from the brink, concede defeat and acquiesce. He knows enough of her dogged persistence to understand that trying to sway her once she's dug in her heels would have been counter-productive to the extreme and that, even if he'd won that particular battle, he'd have undoubtedly lost the war. So he'd changed tack, offering to file the paperwork for her at work so she could leave for Exeter that very morning, trying to prove to her that he respects her needs and wishes and will be supportive of them, even when he happens to disagree.

Secretly he'd also hoped that, like every other time they've been apart, she'd miss him enough to make her want to give them a chance. And truthfully, that had been the only hope he'd had left as they'd said goodbye on her doorstep and he'd kissed her in a way that he hopes had been sweet and sexy and loving and full of promise should she choose to return to him. And she had seemed a little dazed when he'd pulled back, murmuring, "Wow, Harry. Where did that come from?" He'd just smiled sadly and turned to go, walking to his car and driving away, hoping that that hadn't been the last time he'd ever get to hold her and kiss her lips.

He detests waiting. Deep down he's a man of action, who wants to be in control and hates depending on others. And maybe, that's what's actually going on here. Maybe Ruth's trying to exert her independence, her right to make decisions too where they are concerned, her entitlement to an opinion and a course of action different from his own. And he can't help but concede that he does dominate most interactions with others.

From a very young age, he'd learnt how to get what he wants, with a younger brother to boss around and friends who admired his reckless courage and were happy to follow where he led. He'd always found it easy to charm the opposite sex too, learning early on that giving a girl a flower or carrying her school bag was much more effective in getting her to like you than teasing her or pulling her hair. And after his mum had died and he'd finally sought out a purpose for his life, he'd risen quickly through the ranks of the Service and has been in a position of some authority for quite some time now – five years as Section Chief and almost twelve as Section Head, not to mention leading operations in Europe during his stint with Six.
Even in his home life, though Jane had had her own rather separate existence and independence – especially once the children had grown up a bit – in their increasingly brief interactions, he'd mostly dominated their exchanges, had usually initiated sex and was almost always in control. With Juliet too, part of the attraction had been the sparring, the mental and sometimes physical wrestling for dominance between them and the adrenaline rush this brought, the heat and the passion it generated in both of them.

So really, he can hardly blame Ruth if she's trying to assert herself when in their professional capacity they're on such an unequal footing. At the end of the day, he's the one who always gets his way on the Grid though he does listen to his officers and, he believes, does a pretty good job of changing his mind when he's presented with evidence that warrants it. Like it or not, however, he always gets the last word and he can understand how that might scare Ruth, make her feel put upon or, at the very least, worried that it'll translate to him getting his way all the time in their personal relationship too.

If she comes back from leave ready to give them a chance, he's going to have to watch for that and catch himself when he's being domineering, make sure she feels equally heard and give in and go along with what she wants at least half the time, or he may very well risk losing her forever – if the gossip hasn't done that already.

His mood darkens even more when he thinks of the three admins and one junior officer who were responsible for making Ruth feel so uncomfortable. He'd found out who they were from Malcolm first thing on Monday morning – though he'd been reluctant to comply and had only given them up when Harry'd told him he'll find out anyway from CCTV if he doesn't help, and if he wants to put in a good word for any of them, now's the time for that – and has watched them carefully since, intent on figuring out if there's a ringleader among them, or if they're all equally responsible for what happened. They're on probation as far as he's concerned, and if any of them so much as puts a toe wrong, they'll be out of his section before they can blink. One of them in particular has caught his eye, and he's keeping a close watch on him, sensing a vibe of insolence from him the couple of times their paths have crossed on the Grid since the beginning of the week. He has a feeling this one's the ringleader, but time will tell.

Yesterday, he'd had a little chat with one of the other admins, Megan Stuart, who came to them from GCHQ recently and seems like an intelligent, young woman, a little lacking in self-confidence perhaps, but rather promising according to Malcolm. He hadn't told her what he knew, but she'd seemed almost terrified to be called into his office, her whole demeanour speaking of guilt and shame. He'd praised her work so far, making it appear that the meeting was just routine, asking her how she's finding Section D and if there's anything she needs, if she's fitting in well. Having relaxed a little initially at his praise, the moment he'd mentioned fitting in, she'd tensed up again, and he could tell that she'd made the connection. No wonder Malcolm says she shows promise, he'd thought, taking the opportunity to obliquely suggest she make some new friends, and much to his satisfaction, he's seen her follow his advice and stay clear of the other three. She's kept her head down and is working hard since their little chat, but he means to make sure it's a lasting change and not something that'll wear off with time.

He sighs, rubbing his face with his hands, the sound of his office door opening proving a welcome relief from contemplating the remaining three, his failings as a man and leader, and the delicate state of his relationship with Ruth.

“This just came through from Six,” Adam says without preamble.

“What is it?”
“An intercept on a call between the US Trade Secretary and the French government. They're colluding to pull out of the Addressing Africa Summit.”

“The Foreign Secretary won't be happy,” he replies, taking the paper Adam hands him and quickly scanning its contents. “Months of negotiations went into making sure we get an agreement signed.”

“I know. I was thinking – what if we got the Foreign Secretary to give us permission to mount a full-scale operation inside Havensworth to deliver it?”

*Now there's an idea!* He smiles slyly, admiring Adam's cunning and courage. This is just what he needs to get his mind off Ruth, and getting one up on the Americans is always fun.

“All right. I’ll ring Allen and ask him to come down here for a little chat.”

“Do you think he'll go for it?” Adam asks.

“I rather think he might.” He can't help smiling in glee at the thought. *Finally something with some meat to sink our teeth into!*

“Good,” Adam replies, but doesn't leave, still watching him.

“What?” he questions.

“We're going to need Ruth on this one, Harry. Her organisational skills will be invaluable.”

He sighs inwardly at that. Of course they are, and he really doesn't want to be the one to ring her and pull her back to the Grid before she's ready. He nods and purses his lips. “You're right. Ring her and bring her in,” he says and picks up his phone to dial the Foreign Office.

Adam hesitates, looking as if he might say something more, but he thinks better of it at the steely look Harry gives him. Much as he might wish it at times, his officers are not his friends. He needs to maintain his authority and confiding in Adam about Ruth is hardly the way to go about that. If he needs someone to talk to, he'll ring Ben later. First though, it's time to set the ball rolling on Havensworth.

“All right,” Adam agrees and slips out of the room just as James Allen's PA answers the phone.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: While rewatching this episode, I discovered that Adam mentions the US mid-term elections being in one month, which would mean that the Addressing Africa Summit would be sometime in October. I've decided to ignore that little inconsistency and just go with the dates from Harry's diary.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

A/N: Havensworth! I'd miss this scene too much if I didn't include it, so again, I'm borrowing a bit of Spooks dialogue, but adapting it to the story. Thanks for reading and reviewing. Cheers, S.C.

22 July 2006 – Ruth

Being away from the Grid has done her good, and though she's missed Harry terribly, she's glad she took the time she needed to get her head on straight and figure out what she's doing, where she's going, what it is she wants. She'd talked to her mother, had listened to her advise, and decided to follow it – she's decided that a relationship with Harry will only be possible if one of them moves to a different section, at least for a while, a secondment perhaps rather than a permanent transfer. The boss-employee dynamic is just too much, both for her personally and clearly for other people in the section, and taking a break from that, at least until they find their feet in their relationship, is the only way she can think of making this work. And she desperately wants it to work. She loves him too much to let him go, loves him even more than she loves her job, and is willing to sacrifice it for something less fulfilling in another department in order to be with him.

The problem is that she knows he's not going to like it, and as such, she's failed to tell him even though it's been two days already since her return. She should have rung him last night really, but she'd been so exhausted from rushing back to London, going to the Grid straight from the station, working non-stop since her arrival – writing Sekoa's speech, helping figure out the organisation of the surveillance and operation at the conference, delegating tasks to junior officers, looking up the info needed on the various players and a million other things – that she'd barely managed to crawl into bed before falling into a deep, dreamless sleep. Besides, Harry had stayed at Havensworth last night and she hadn't known if he was free to talk, so she'd decided to leave their conversation until after the summit.

But that had been before Adam had requested her presence at the hotel, before she'd arrived to find Harry waiting for her, his eyes searching hers as he'd spoken to her and handed her her pass, before he'd become adorably flustered over sleeping arrangements – quite bizarrely, she'd thought – reiterating that she has her own room, as if he'd expected her to think he'd arranged to share one with her without her prior knowledge or consent.

And now, after another exhausting day, she can't sleep, the music coming from next door in combination with her jumbled thoughts and emotions, not to mention the strange bed and the thought that Harry's trying to sleep too somewhere in this hotel, sabotaging all her attempts to get some much needed shut eye. She sighs, wishing that she were home instead, and throws off the covers, changing back into her clothes and opening the door of her room, intent on finding out if the source of the racket is the Italian Trade Minister, as she suspects – she remembers reading about him during the initial fact gathering stage of this operation. She slips out of her room into the corridor and immediately comes face to face with Harry.
Oh God! She wasn't aware that their rooms were so close together or that would have compounded her inability to sleep tonight. He looks gorgeous, his jacket and tie gone, several shirt buttons undone revealing his smooth chest, and all she can think about is waking up beside him the other day, running her fingertips across that exact expanse of skin, his groans of pleasure at her touch, the hot kisses they'd shared, the feel of him inside her.

She blinks and looks down, hoping none of her thoughts show on her face as she indicates vaguely over her shoulder. “Um... the music woke me.” He doesn't say anything, slowly moving closer at the same steady pace, his eyes never leaving her face. “I've never really gone in for Europop.” She's babbling now and she knows it.

He comes to a halt a couple of yards from her. “It looks like you weren't sleeping at all,” he says in a husky voice. “Nor was I.”

She swallows, unable to look away from his mesmerising eyes, feeling the pull on her heart to go to him. “It's the Italian Trade Minister,” she manages to say, the knowledge flowing out of her unbidden. “He's apparently a bit of a party animal,” she continues, trying not to notice him move closer still, his eyes seductive, wanting, yearning for her. “He caused a scandal at an EU conference last year by insisting on dancing to the Macarena at the last night banquet.”

He's so close now she could touch him and his beautiful eyes have rendered her speechless, her mind going suddenly blank, gaze dropping to his chest, watching in fascination as it flushes under her scrutiny, and she knows that if she looks further down, his arousal will be even more apparent.

“Ruth,” he murmurs huskily, drawing her gaze back to his. “This is killing me.” His eyes are suddenly raw with emotion, making her insides contract, tremble with the need of him. “I can't wait any more. Tell me... Is there any hope for us?”

“Not here, Harry,” she replies, shaking her head and taking a step back, but he moves swiftly, grasping her hand to stop her retreat.

“Please,” he says urgently. “Just tell me. Yes or no?”

“It's not that simple.”

“I know,” he replies, drawing her hand up to his chest, using both hands to hold it as he gazes into her eyes, wordlessly pleading with her. “Just yes or no,” he repeats. “That's all I'm asking. The rest we can work out later.”

This isn't the time or the place for this conversation, but she cannot bear to torture him any more, even if her answer brings his hopes too high, making the disappointment harder to bear later. At least it's not a no, she tells herself. Surely he'll be able to see the bright side when I tell him that I can no longer work for him, won't he?

“Yes,” she says. His eyes close, his face relaxing in relief, his nostrils flaring with emotion as he drops his chin for a moment before lifting his head again to look at her.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, eyes soft, open, and full of love.

“There are conditions though, Harry,” she quickly points out, not wanting to have him think they're out of the woods yet.

“I understand,” he says, still gazing into her eyes with undisguised emotion.

“It's late. We should get some sleep. I'll get the management to ask the Trade Minister to turn it
down,” she whispers, desperately trying to stop herself from being seduced.

“All right,” he agrees, lifting her hand to his lips and softly kissing the inside of her wrist, making her shiver, her eyes closing involuntarily and flying back open when she feels him tug hard on her hand, sending her stumbling into his chest where he wraps his arms around her to steady her and hungrily kisses her lips.

She moans, unable to contain the sound, her head swimming at the intoxicating effect he has on her, her hands slipping over his shoulders to tangle in his hair almost reflexively, pulling him closer. She can taste the whisky on his lips, the scent of him filling her nostrils, the sound of the music fading like she's suddenly underwater, blood pounding in her ears. Christ! What is happening to me?

Not here, she tells herself, struggling to regain control and wrench herself away from him.

“Not here,” she repeats, realising only after she's spoken that it's only the first time she's said the words aloud. “There's CCTV and Diaspora. We're in the middle of an operation. We can't do this now, Harry.”

His eyes are on hers, smouldering, chest heaving with each breath. The seconds tick past, both of them rooted to the spot, both of them struggling with their desire, both of them wishing that they were somewhere else, alone, free and unshackled by duty.

“You're right,” he says, eventually. “The op comes first. We can't have any distractions.”

“No,” she agrees. “No distractions.” Her eyes stray to his lips, distracted by the shape of them, her need to kiss them again.

Jesus, Ruth! This is not good! Get a grip!

“I'm going to bed now,” she announces, more to herself than him. “I need to sleep and so do you, Harry. And stay away from the whisky,” she adds rather daringly, sensing that he's had a little too much already tonight – it's not like him to lose track of their objective here, to lose his self-control.

Her comment doesn't make him angry as she half-fears it might – it makes him smile instead, his eyes softening as he slips his hands into his pockets.

“What?” she asks.

“I like it when you worry about me.”

She smiles at that, unable to help herself, and shakes her head at him. “Goodnight, Harry,” she says and turns away, walking back to her room and getting into bed again, a smile still on her lips as she thinks of him. She's forgotten to call the management, has forgotten about the music, has forgotten about everything really, everything but him, yet it doesn't seem to matter. Thinking of Harry – his expressive eyes and soft lips, his desire and love for her – seems to be exactly what she needs because she quickly falls into a restful, dreamless sleep.
“What right do you have to make judgements on my personal life? Your own isn't exactly a shining example, is it? The fact that your own existence is a walking disaster zone does not give you the right to make judgements on other people's!”

The words echo around the room long after she's gone, piercing his heart as he watches her storm off the Grid and he slumps back onto his desk, momentarily defeated. The viciousness of Ros's attack has taken him by surprise, and her words have wounded him more deeply than he cares to admit. He'd not expected such vitriol from a member of his core team, though he knows that Ros has been with them for less than a few weeks and is still finding her feet, while, at the same time, struggling through a hugely personal upheaval and the end of almost everything she's know so far. Coming to terms with what her father did, what he has become, her mother's reaction to it all, and needing to sell her childhood home to cover all the legal fees, must be taking a huge toll on her and it's not surprising really that she's cracked a little under the pressure. He knows from personal experience how important it is to let off steam, that Ros is in need of someone to blame and he's just a convenient target, one who will understand her and most likely forgive her outburst, one who will not crumble under the weight of her accusation and unjustified attack. He can take it and he will for she's one of his officers now and under his personal care and protection.

He could kill Myers though. Not so much for what he did to the country and its institutions, or even to Juliet Shaw, but for what he did to his own daughter – using her like that, making her complicit in his actions, lying to her, manipulating her, turning her into a pawn in his quest for power. If he ever loses his mind enough to come anywhere near doing such a thing to either of his children, he hopes someone has the guts to shoot him dead on the spot.

The door slides open to reveal Ruth, the most welcome sight in the world. Ruth would never let him reach such a point of insanity. She always keeps him on an even keel.

“Hi,” she says softly.

“Hi,” he replies, voice a little gravelly with emotion.

“I... um... I just wanted to say... about Ros,” she says, moving closer, her eyes full of compassion, “that you were right. It isn't your fault, Harry.”

*Good God, but she's wonderful. What would I ever do without her?* He pushes aside that thought quickly, not even wanting to contemplate such a possibility. She said yes. There are conditions that he doesn't know about yet, but the important thing is to remember that she said yes.
“Thank you,” he says simply, his gratitude shining through in his eyes. It feels so good to have someone in his corner, always ready to offer him a kind word, maybe a kiss and a cuddle if he's lucky.

She smiles and reaches forward to gently squeeze his arm. “I'm ready to go home,” she says, watching him.

“Can I offer you a lift?” he asks.

“You can always offer, Harry, and sometimes I'll accept.” She smiles her impish smile, lifting his heart and soothing the bruises that Ros has left behind.

“Let me give you a lift home?” He tries again.

“Alright,” she agrees. “I'll let you give me a lift home tonight, Harry.”

“That's very generous of you, Ruth,” he replies, smiling.

“I thought so too.”

He chuckles and rises to his feet, drawing her gently into his arms and kissing her forehead as she rests her head on his shoulder. “You're wonderful, Ruth.”

She sighs and relaxes against him. “I've missed you.”

“Come home with me tonight?” he asks quickly, in a moment of daring.

“That would be nice,” is her quiet reply that brings a big grin to his lips.

He pulls back to look at her. “Do you need to stop at your place first?”

“No. I packed extra things for the summit and my bag is still by my desk. My neighbour's taking care of the moggies.”

His smile broadens. “I like a prepared woman.”

“And here I was thinking you only liked me!” He's sure she's teasing despite the frown on her face.

“Ah, but you're the only one I love, Ruth,” is his quiet reply, his hand reaching up to cup her cheek, drawing her to him to press a tender kiss against her lips.

“Mmmm,” she hums. “I like the sound of that,” she confesses, then pulls back. “I'll get my things ready,” she adds and turns away, leaving him wondering if she'll ever say it back to him.

Of course, she will, he tells himself crossly, turning to his desk to shut everything down. She just needs time. They've only had one date, after all, and some pretty fantastic sex on her sofa – ignoring whatever came before his divorce, of course – and she's so reticent in general, that even that's surprised him. He hadn't expected her to fall into his arms so quickly, so whole-heartedly. She let him kiss her on the Grid just now – admittedly a very empty Grid, but still! And she's going home with me tonight, he thinks as he stands by the pods, watching her cross the Grid towards him, barely able to believe his luck that such a beautiful, young, vibrant, and kind-hearted woman should want him.

But even once they're in the car and he's started driving, his mind can't seem to let go of the niggle of worry that it's all too good to be true, and he ends up asking, “So these conditions... I'm not going to like them, am I?”
She sighs and turns her head away, looking out the passenger window. “I'm too tired to do this now, Harry,” she replies. “It's been such a long week and I...” She tails off and turns to look at him.

“What?” he asks, glancing at her worriedly.

“Well, I was hoping tonight could be... a relaxing evening, a time to reconnect, take a break from reality and the complexity of our... situation.”

“You mean make love?” he asks, a smile tugging at his lips as she struggles to express herself. They've stopped at a traffic light and it's given him the opportunity to watch her while she speaks.

“That's one way of doing it,” she agrees, holding his gaze and smiling in return. “I've missed you... and I want you. In fact, I want to shag you senseless tonight, Harry Pearce.”

He chuckles as the light changes and he eases forward again. “I fear that may not be too difficult, Ruth. I've had several sleepless nights in a row now.”

There's silence for a few moments, during which he wonders if his words were too much and they've made her feel guilty. They've had so much guilt already between them that it's the last thing he wants her to feel. He's just about to apologise and take his words back when she says, “You did the right thing, you know.” He turns to look at her, puzzled by the shift in conversation, wondering what on earth she's talking about. She seems to sense his bewilderment because she adds, “Releasing Baptiste Kadala. She saved thousands with her sacrifice.”

He nods, surprised by the turn her thoughts have taken at his words, but he doesn't say anything and they remain silent for some moments after that, the mood broken by the reminder of what happened, the regret of another life lost. Then Ruth says, “It makes me so angry that self-serving, pricks like James Allen – who've been born with a silver spoon in their mouths, have never known any real hardship in life – run this country, every country in the world, and brave people who really care about others get killed because of them everyday. Sometimes I hate that our work supports these people, upholds this system that's so unjust and unfair and exploits the most vulnerable.” She sounds furious and, for a moment, he's speechless, unable to think of anything to say. She's not wrong, but he can't see an alternative to the way things are, nor can he regret the years he's spent fighting terrorists. They did a good thing in stopping Sekoa when the British government didn't want to get involved. He's proud of their work at Section D – most of the time anyway.

“Sorry,” she says quickly, turning to look at him and giving him a wan smile. “I didn't mean to kill the mood.”

He smiles softly at her and reaches for her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze before releasing it again to change gears. “It's alright, Ruth. You can talk about anything you like. I'm just happy we're getting to spend some time together.”

“It is nice,” she replies, resting her hand on his thigh, making his heart begin to race as her fingers run absently along the crease down the middle of his trouser leg, “and I don't want to think about all the negative things and spoil it.”

“I assure you, Ruth,” he murmurs, his voice a low rumble, “that when you do that, it's absolutely impossible for me to think about anything negative at all.”

Her hand stills and he sees her glance down at the distended material around his crotch, her nervous giggle making him smile, her gaze darker as she lifts her eyes to his, her hand slowly moving higher up his thigh. She's clearly intent on finding out how far she can go before he stops her.
“You can continue,” he murmurs, making a right turn with some difficulty, her hand having now almost reached his groin, “and I'll probably manage to get us home in one piece, but if I fail and cause an accident, you're going to be the one explaining to the police what exactly happened.”

She laughs and pulls her hand back, but she doesn't remove it from his leg, the fact that she leaves it on his thigh making him feel ridiculously happy. “Well, at least it wouldn't be as embarrassing as that scene in Parenthood.”

“The what in what?”

“Parenthood. It's a film. With Steve Martin?” she looks hopefully at him, but at his blank look, she sighs and explains. “It's pretty old now – the film I mean. There's this married couple and the woman wants to help her husband relax, so a friend of hers suggests she try giving him a blow-job while he's driving.”

“Christ!” he exclaims, hastily correcting the sudden jerk the car's just taken to the left as he turns sharply to look at her. “She what?!”

“You haven't seen it?!”

“No!”

“Well, they have a car accident,” she continues, smiling mischievously now. “So she apologises profusely and Steve Martin's character says it's fine, that she just took him by surprise, and then the policeman comes along and asks what happened, to which Steve Martin says, 'Show him, Honey.'”

She laughs at the look on his face, or perhaps the memory of the scene in the film.

“Well, it's safe to say that I'd never suggest you show a police officer what you were doing!”

That makes her laugh harder and earns him a quick kiss on his cheek.

“So is this something you've always wanted to try, or more a spur of the moment thing?” he asks a moment later, once they've stopped at another traffic light and he can watch her reaction.

“Definitely a spur of the moment thing,” she replies, smiling mischievously. “I only remembered the film because you said I could explain to the police what happened.” Then she leans closer, her hand rising to his cheek, her fingers feathering along his jaw, and whispers, “Besides, I'd like the first time I give you head to be somewhere more private where I can fully enjoy the experience and so can you.” He groans and wraps both arms around her as she presses her lips against his, the passion in him igniting and overflowing in an instant, his whole body suddenly starving, aching for her, and it's only the loud hoot from behind that forces him to pull back and take a deep breath before putting the car in gear and driving the last few blocks to his home with single-minded determination. He doesn't even spare her a glance, let alone make any attempt at conversation, his lust addled mind barely managing the task of driving without breaking all the speed limits.

He parks the car and gets out, walking round to her side and opening the door for her, watching her hungrily as she unfolds herself from the seat and stands before him, a sexy smile on her lips. He drops his hands to her hips, stepping closer, trapping her between him and the car as he growls, “I want you,” and kisses her.

She moans in his arms, kissing him back with equal enthusiasm, her passion rising to match his own, all rational thought deserting him as he presses his right leg between hers and pushes her up against the car. Christ, but this woman drives him wild!

When they break apart for air, however, she turns her head away, managing somehow to find the
will he's unable to muster to stop them, his lips connecting with her cheek as she pushes against his chest with her hands. “You can have me, Harry,” she says, “but only once we're inside your flat. This is terrible spy-craft, you know,” she adds for good measure, bringing him back to his senses.

He lifts his head and steps back, quickly scanning their surroundings for danger, silently kicking himself for the slip up.

“Don't worry,” she says, trailing her hand down his arm to grasp his hand and squeezing it to get his attention. “Don't worry. I'll protect you.”

“Now you're quoting from the Bodyguard,” he replies, smiling down at her.

“Oh, you've seen that one, have you?” Her eyes are alight with joy and mischief, her cheeks still flushed from their kiss.

“Mmmm,” he agrees, hoping she doesn't ask why or with whom as he doesn't want to have to mention Jane. “Let's get inside.” And with that, he leads her round the car to the boot, retrieves their bags, locks the car and takes her to his front door. “You don't mind dogs, do you?” he asks worriedly, suddenly remembering Scarlet.

“I love dogs,” she replies, smiling up at him reassuringly.

He nods and turns the key in the lock, looking over his shoulder once more for any unusual movement or activity before ushering her inside and locking the door behind them.
27 July 2006 - Ruth

She watches him toss the pancake into the air and deftly catch it in the frying pan before returning it to the ring and smiles. “You must do this often,” she comments.

“Pancakes?” he asks, turning to look at her.

“Yes.”

“Every Saturday.”

“Today's Thursday,” she points out.

“It's a special occasion.” He walks over to the table and slides the pancake onto her plate.

She has an impulse to tease him, tell him she should give him a blow-job more often if this is the reward she gets, but she thinks better of it. “I like special occasions,” she replies instead, smiling up at him. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure. Don't wait for me. Eat while it's hot.”

He turns back to the cooker, while she tucks in, spreading some strawberry jam on the pancake before rolling it up and taking her first mouthful. “Mmmm,” she hums. “Delicious.” He turns to her and smiles before turning back to flip the next one.

She watches him, her mind full of images from last night and this morning, marveling at how wonderful he is, how effortless it is to be with him, how well they fit into each other's lives, how good they feel together.

After they'd entered his flat yesterday and he'd taken and hung up her coat, she'd followed him through to the kitchen where Scarlet had been making quite a racket – whether from excitement at having him home again, or because she'd been with him and the little dog had felt the need to bark the place down in defence of her home and master, she doesn't know. But she'd been friendly enough once Harry had picked her up, stroking her and murmuring soft words to calm her. Her heart had melted at the sight of him being so gentle with his dog, so loving and affectionate. She loves soft, loving Harry, and every time he makes an appearance, she can't seem to help falling in love with him a little bit more.

She smiles now, remembering how he'd taken care to introduce her to Scarlet, how the little dog had barked and wagged her tail in greeting and come over to her to make friends when he'd placed her back on the floor, leaving them to get acquainted while he'd ascertained that she was hungry, and quite surprisingly, started cooking their dinner. He'd pulled off his tie, draped his jacket over a chair, and rolled up his sleeves before pulling the ingredients for a chicken curry out of the fridge and beginning to cook. Sexy doesn't even begin to describe the sight, and she'd spent an enjoyable twenty minutes or so, sipping her wine, watching him, and stroking Scarlet, who appeared to share her fascination with Harry, though whether she was hoping for more attention from him or a piece of chicken, she doesn't know – she'd seemed thrilled enough with both when she'd finally got them.

She smiles at him as he takes a seat across from her now, but there must be something unusual in the
way she's looking at him because he asks, “What?” before taking a sip of his coffee, his eyes on her face.

“Nothing. I was just remembering how wonderful you are.”

“Remembering?” he asks, lifting one eyebrow, his eyes twinkling and his lips curling in a suggestive smirk.

“No. I mean, yes. That too, but I was thinking more how well you've taken care of me, feeding me, making sure I have everything I need,” she explains, reaching over to squeeze his hand in gratitude.

“I like taking care of you,” he replies simply, linking their fingers together, his gaze softening. “And I'm grateful that you've decided to let me, to give us a chance.”

She drops her gaze, knowing what he's going to ask next, dreading his response to what she's going to tell him. They've had such a lovely time-out from reality that she really doesn't want to go back to it just yet, though she knows that they must eventually. She does need to tell him about her decision, however, and now is as good a time as any. They have to go into work in a little while anyway.

“We need to talk about it, Ruth,” he says, squeezing her fingers, reading her desire to escape almost effortlessly.

“I know,” she sighs, lifting her eyes to his again.

“So?” he prompts.

“I've thought about this a lot, Harry, and asked for my mum's advise too.”

“You spoke to her about me?” She thinks he looks a little worried.

“Yes,” she smiles to reassure him. “Don't worry, Harry. She was happy that I've finally...” She tails off, pulling her hand from his to pick up her mug and take a mouthful of tea, her heart beating fast as she wills herself to say something more, distract him so he doesn't think about what she was about to say, but her mind has gone completely blank.

“Finally what?” he asks softly, leaning in a little and she can feel the intensity of his gaze though she's not looking at him.

Tell him, she wills herself. He's already said it three times – more, counting the times he's said it in the heat of passion. Just tell him.

“Found someone who cares for me so deeply,” she finishes, chickening out at the last moment.

He waits in silence until she lifts her eyes to look at him, the intensity of his gaze capturing hers, making her unable to look away. “I don't just care for you, Ruth. I love you,” he says, voice deep and husky.

Four times. You have to say it now.

“I know,” she murmurs, willing herself to be as brave as him. “I know.” She drops her gaze and fiddles with her fork for a moment before confessing, “My mum... she was pleased that I've finally... fallen in love properly, deeply. She... she thought you sounded like just the person to make me happy and I confess that I agree with her. Somehow you make me feel... complete, and because of that, I don't want to let this chance pass me by. I want to keep seeing you, to see if we can make this work, though the thought of it not working out worries me, terrifies me really. But I want to try, yet at the
same time, I can't ignore work and how our seeing each other off the Grid will affect, is affecting our jobs and our ability to do them well, so,” she pauses to draw breath, the rest of her words having escaped her all at once. She often finds it easier to just keep on talking once she's started, allowing the words to just flow out of her when she's extremely nervous. “So I want to date you, Harry, but I can only do that if I leave Section D for a while.”

“Leave?! Christ, Ruth!” he exhales, and when she can bring herself to look up, he's got his elbows on the table and his head in his hands.

“A secondment or something, Harry, for a few months, maybe a year,” she explains. “It doesn't have to be very long... just long enough.”

“Long enough for what?” he asks, lifting his head to look at her, his jaw set, his whole face radiating his displeasure.

“Long enough for us to find out feet,” she replies, disappointed and hurt that he's reacting in exactly the way she'd predicted he would. “The gossip is-”

“The gossip is nothing, Ruth,” he interrupts. “It will blow over. It always does. Twelve years I've been in this position. You think this is the first time people have talked about me behind my back, tried to ridicule me, or undermine me? Some people are just small, petty and jealous, others have an ulterior motive, a parallel agenda. If it gets to be a problem, I'll get rid of them like I always do. I can deal with the people who are gossiping, Ruth. That’s no reason for you to leave! You're the best analyst we've had in years. Section D needs you.”

“No one is irreplaceable, Harry,” she counters, getting angry in response to his attitude, his complete lack of understanding. “You're always saying that. We're just cogs in a giant machine. Tom left, Adam took his place. Zoe left, then there was Fiona. They have different skills certainly, different strengths and weaknesses, but Section D still functions perfectly well. It can function without me too.”

“This is madness,” he declares, getting up and pacing the room a few times until he stops to gaze out the window into the back garden where Scarlet's busy digging up the grass, hands tucked into his pockets.

She takes a deep breath, trying to relax and approach the situation more calmly, not wanting this to explode into a full-blown argument. “It's not madness, Harry. It's something I need.”

“Why?!” he demands, spinning round to face her. “Why can't we at least try to make it work as things are first?”

“Because I can't stand to be talked about like that!” she almost shouts, rising to her feet to face him, angry that he's forcing her to spell it out, that he's being so obstinate when the situation is so difficult for her, so far out of her comfort zone. “Because this isn't just about you, Harry. I don't want to be dating my boss. I don't want to hear people whispering behind my back, or walk into a room and have everyone shut up, knowing they were talking about me, saying horrible things. You've no idea what it's like to be talked about like that, to have people call you a slut, question your merit, suggest you're trying to sleep your way to the top. Some of them don't even know you're divorced yet. They think we're having an affair. And even if they knew the truth, they'd say it's all my fault anyway, that you left your wife for me, and somehow, I'm to blame for that.” She doesn't add that she sometimes thinks that about herself too. She can see his eyes fill with pain at her words, but she barrels on, needing to have her say now that she's started. “I'm bloody good at my job and to have people forget that, dismiss it because I'm dating you... I can't work like that, Harry. It's too much. I can't cope.”
He sighs, his shoulders slumping forward, hand rising to rub his forehead before he drops it to his side again and lifts soft, loving eyes to look at her. “I'm sorry,” he says, taking a few tentative steps forward, pausing in front of her before reaching out to pull her gently into his arms. She lets him, feeling completely drained from her outburst and very close to tears, the feel of his arms around her, his lips pressing against her hair as she leans into him, nudging her closer to the edge but also bringing her comfort. It's going to be okay, she tells herself, fighting to hold in her tears.

“I'm sorry,” he repeats softly. “It's just that I need you, not just here, but at work too. I need your wisdom and your guidance. I've come to rely on your uncanny ability to read my mind and steer me right when I wander off course and, rather selfishly as it turns out, I don't want to lose that, to lose you. You're my anchor, Ruth. I'm lost without you.”

She squeezes him against her, feeling awful for deserting him, tears beginning to leak from beneath her eyelids. “I'm sorry I'm not strong enough to-” she whispers, but he interrupts her.

“No,” he says. “Don't say that, Ruth. You're one of the strongest people I know. It takes real strength to know where your limits are and what you can and cannot handle. I'm the one who's sorry. The last thing I want is for you to be miserable for months on end. I want us being together to make you happy.”

“You won't be happy though, will you?” she murmurs, “if I leave the Grid.”

“I'll be happy as long as I can hold you like this, as long as you let me love you and care for you, as long as you can forgive me and love me in return.”

“I do, Harry,” she sighs. “God help me, but I do love you.”

He pulls back to look at her, his eyes adoring, hands reaching up to cup her face, his thumbs softly caressing her cheeks, wiping away the tear-tracks as he smiles down at her, drinking her in. “It's good to hear you say that.”

“I'm sorry it took me so long,” she replies. “I was so scared this wouldn't work out.”

“I'll do anything to make this work, Ruth,” he murmurs, his honesty astounding her. She knows it doesn't come easy for him to expose himself like that, to leave himself open and vulnerable.

She smiles, feeling relieved suddenly and hopeful after the way he's accepted her decision, is supporting her even though he disagrees so strongly with her point of view. If he can do that, give into her wishes sometimes instead of steam-rolling over her and imposing his will, then they might really be able to make this work.

She reaches up and kisses his lips, feeling him respond, slowly drawing her into his arms, his lips soft and loving against hers. “I love you,” she says when they break apart, his forehead resting against hers.

He smiles. “I love you too.”

She cuddles into his embrace, sighing in contentment, her head resting against his chest, nestled under his chin now that she's not wearing her heels, as she listens to the steady beating of his heart.

“Do you have any idea where you'd like to go for this secondment?” he asks.

“No,” she replies. “I was hoping you could suggest somewhere. You know the other Section Heads and what work they do far better than I. I'd just like to say in London, though I suppose GCHQ isn't out of the question if nothing else can be found.”
“I worked in G Section for a few months just before I was offered my current job. In fact, the Head of Section is a woman, Tabitha Brown. I worked alongside her back then. She's a decent sort and takes her work seriously. I think you'd like her.”

She pulls back and cocks her head to the side, gazing up at him speculatively, wondering if Tabitha Brown has ever shared his bed because she doesn't think she'd like to work for her if she has. It had been bloody awful when Harry was suspended and she'd had to take orders from Juliet Shaw.

“I didn't sleep with her, Ruth,” he murmurs softly, proving that it's not just she who can read his mind sometimes.

She blushes, ashamed of her thoughts and of being so transparent. “G Section... Is that drugs and organised crime?”

“Yes,” he nods. “It's not that different from our work really. I think you'll like it and Tabitha can be relied upon to protect you.”

“Protect me?” she frowns, feeling her irritation rising again at the implication that she'll be getting some kind of special treatment because of him.

“You know what I mean, Ruth. She takes care of her people. She doesn't take unnecessary risks with her officers' lives, unlike some Section Heads. She won't put the success of an operation or a quest for a promotion ahead of people's safety. In fact, you might enjoy working for her so much, you won't want to come back to me.”

She smiles, finding his sudden insecurity incredibly adorable. “I think there's about a zero chance of that, Harry. I enjoy working with you very much, and I think you'll find, I'm already looking forward to returning to work with you on a much more equal footing. We need this break, Harry, to find the right balance in our relationship. It's not easy with you having the final say on everything, most of the time. I don't want to be fighting you all the time because I feel powerless.”

“I know,” he sighs. “When do you want to start?”

“The sooner the better,” she replies.

“I'll talk to Tabitha today then, before you file the necessary paperwork.”

“Thank you, Harry.” She reaches up and softly kisses his cheek before pulling out of his arms again. “We'd best get going or we'll be late for work.”
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here we go - episode 5.5! Please don't hurt me! Again, I've tweaked some scenes from canon to take into account their relationship and the info about Catherine is from Harry's Diary. Thanks for reading and please leave a review if you've got a moment.
Cheers, S.C.

3 August 2006 – Harry

Five days ago they'd had their second dinner date, four days ago he'd woken in her bed for the first time with a cat curled up on his feet and Ruth along his back, three days ago he'd signed the paperwork for her secondment to Section G, fighting the feeling that this is the beginning of the end, and this morning he'd held her in his arms to comfort her when she'd rung him to come over after witnessing Mik Maudsley's suicide.

He glances at her now as he takes her home, wondering what the chances are that she'll listen to him this time and stay home, rest, and let go of this bee she seems to have got stuck in her bonnet. She didn't listen to him this morning when he told her to take the morning off, didn't listen to him when he said the tenner wasn't a drop, didn't seem at all convinced when he'd insisted that Maudsley had been the man on the inside and that guilt had caused him to take his own life.

“What?” she asks.

“I'm wondering if I need to stay with you tonight to make sure you listen to me for a change and rest.”

“And what are the chances, do you think, that I'll get any rest with you in my bed, Harry?” she counters, giving him a look and a smile similar to the one he’d earned earlier for calling her a stubborn, old mule.

“Touché.” He smiles, marvelling at her wit, her beauty, how perfect she is. “But if you're not going to rest anyway, I know which option I'd prefer.”

She laughs. “Would you like to have dinner with me, Harry?”

“I'd love to, Ruth.”

He parks the car and they walk to the fish and chip shop down the road from her place, where they pick up their dinner and head home, greeting the moggies which come to the door, mewing pathetically until Ruth's fed them at which point they disappear once more.

“Doesn't it bother you that they couldn't seem to care less if you're here or not as long as someone feeds them?” he asks as they sit down to their meal.

“They do care,” she replies with a frown. “They just know I'm busy with you tonight and are considerate enough to stay out of our way.”
He chuckles, wondering if, in fact, she's right. Scarlet certainly doesn't give him the same consideration when he has company. She's always vying for his attention like a small child. “I guess I should be grateful then.”

“You should,” she replies. “I'd hate to think what would happen if we had three dogs between us, rather than just one.”

He watches as she drops her gaze at that and blushes, clearly embarrassed to have revealed that she's thought about their future so much, when they've only been together for less than a month. He smiles and reaches for her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze, thrilled beyond words to know that she has plans for them to stay together. In a way, it's natural when they've known each other so long, have worked so closely together, have been aware of their mutual attraction for a year now, though they've had to fight it for most of that time. They already know so much about each other even if this is just their third date, having spent countless evenings on the Grid talking when everyone else has gone home. It's not surprising how quickly things are progressing between them now that they're finally free to be together.

He's just about to say something to reassure her, when his phone rings. “Sorry,” he murmurs, pulling his hand back and fishit out of his pocket. It's Jane, he sees and for a moment considers not answering, but with Catherine still in Lebanon, he can't afford not to. “I'm going to have to take this,” he says, looking apologetic as he gets up and wanders into the hall. “Yes?”

“Harry, it's me,” she says without preamble. “Have you heard from Catherine? I tried ringing her three times today and the calls won't go through.”

“I haven't, no,” he replies, a part of him beginning to panic though his voice remains carefully controlled and calm. “I talked to her yesterday. She was still adamant she can't leave, that she's needed there. She's working with the Red Crescent she said. Have you tried Fabian?”

“Yes,” she replies, her voice wobbling a little. “Can't you do something, Harry?”

“I'm doing all I can, Jane. She's twenty-six years old – a grown woman. I can't just send someone to extract her again. She's no longer a child. I've got some contacts on the ground keeping an eye out for her and Fabian, but there's not much more I can do.”

“I suppose this is what I get for marrying a spy,” she says bitterly.

“This is what we get for having a daughter who cares about those less fortunate than her,” is his soft, measured reply, despite the pain he feels at the accusation. “She's a credit to us, Jane. Especially to you,” he adds placatingly. He understands her fear, is feeling it too.

“I have a terrible feeling about this, Harry,” she whispers.

“It'll be fine,” he murmurs, trying to reassure her. “I'll try ringing her a bit later. It's not easy to get a connection. Try not to read too much into it, alright? She'll be fine. She's resourceful and she has Fabian with her. They'll look out for each other.” He knows his words are hollow, that he has no way of knowing if he's speaking the truth or not. Anything could happen out there. It's a war-zone. His little girl could be hurt, killed even, from one moment to the next. There's no rhyme or reason in war. If only she'd listen to him and come home.

“Okay. Thanks, Harry,” Jane says. “I'd better go. I wasn't going to go to my dance class, but I think perhaps it'll do me good.”

“Yes,” he agrees. “No sense in sitting at home, worrying. I'll ring Catherine and let you know the
moment I hear anything, alright? Enjoy your class.”

“Thanks. Bye,” she says and hangs up. He sighs, staring down at the phone for a moment before pocketing it again and moving back to the kitchen where Ruth's just finished making some tea.

“Everything all right?” she asks, frowning at the look on his face. “Was it the Grid?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Just Jane,” he says before he can stop himself, then having said that much, he feels he needs to explain. “She's worried about Catherine. She's been unable to get through to her all day apparently.” He sees Ruth's face soften, her eyes full of compassion and understanding.

“She's still insisting on staying out there?” she asks gently, setting their mugs down on the table and taking a seat beside him.

“Yes.” He sighs, picking up his mug of tea, his appetite deserting him at the thought of Catherine in danger. He's hardly touched his food, though Ruth's already finished hers, and it makes him wonder how long he'd been out there, talking to Jane.

“She must be just like you,” he hears Ruth say and feels her hand come to rest on his thigh, rubbing soothingly against it.

“Jane certainly thinks so,” he finds himself confessing, still feeling the sting of her accusation. “She seems to think it's all my fault for being a spy.”

“Maybe,” she agrees. “Maybe she's doing what she's doing for exactly the same reasons you do what you do, but that doesn't mean it's a bad thing. I think it's what we're here for – taking care of others, protecting the most vulnerable, endeavouring to make the world a better place.”

He smiles, covering her hand with his where it rests on his thigh and squeezing it in gratitude. Before he can say anything though, his phone rings again. This time, he doesn't get up, but answers it at the table, his hand still holding Ruth's, drawing comfort from her presence beside him.

“Harry, it's me again,” Jane says. “Catherine just rung me. She's fine. Her phone's battery died. She still insists she's needed there and won't think of coming home, but she's safe. They're both fine – Fabian too.”

“That's good. Thanks for letting me know, Jane,” he replies, smiling in relief.

“Okay. Got to go. It's the Tango next. You should join me one day, you know. See if you can broaden your repertoire beyond the Waltz and the Cha Cha.”

“Thank you, Jane, but I'm perfectly content with my skills as they stand.”

“Does Ruth not dance either then?” she asks cheekily, clearly relieved that Catherine's safe, but making him regret that he's taken this call at the table – he should have left the room like he had earlier. He can see Ruth blush and feels her attempt to remove her hand from his, but he doesn't relinquish his grasp.

“I'm sorry, Jane,” he replies. “I'm going to have to go. We're about to have dinner. Enjoy your lesson,” and with that, he hangs up, slipping the phone back into his pocket and reaching to grasp her hand in both of his.

“Ruth,” he murmurs softly, waiting for her to give him eye-contact.

“You've told her about me?” she asks, still not looking at him.
“At Christmas,” he explains. “We had Christmas all together – Jane, the children and I. She knows that we work together and that your name is Ruth. That’s all. This is the first time she’s mentioned you since then. We only communicate about the children. It’s only in the last few weeks that we’ve had regular contact because of Catherine.”

She's silent, taking a sip of her tea, but still not looking at him. Then she asks, “And your children? Do they know about me?”

“No,” he replies and he can’t tell whether this pleases her or not. “I haven’t had a chance to tell them yet. Catherine’s in Lebanon, as you know, and I haven’t seen Graham since his birthday, which happened to be the day after you'd left me to go visit your mother – not a time I felt confident enough in our future to be discussing it with my son.”

She lifts her eyes to his at that, her gaze soft and apologetic. “I’m sorry,” she says.

“Don't be sorry, Ruth. There's no need. We're here now, we're together, my daughter's safe for the time being, and that makes me happy. One day I hope to introduce you to her and Graham. I know they’ll like you, but I suspect they still need a bit more time before they're ready to meet you.”

She nods in understanding. “You're waiting for Jane to get a new lover and introduce him to them first, aren't you?” she asks, a small smile gracing her lips again and making him almost sigh in relief.

He chuckles. “I'll admit that the thought had crossed my mind.”

She smiles. “Eat up,” she says. “I want to cuddle you and we need to be somewhere more comfortable for that.”

So he turns back to his food that's already rather colder than he'd like, but still edible, his appetite having returned now that he knows Catherine's safe, and before long, they're cuddling on her sofa, watching the news until they become distracted by each other and make their way up to bed instead.

They shower together and make love slowly, savouring the pleasure, the urgency of their first couplings having dissipated now, giving way to the joy of exploration, discovery, connection and love. Slow kisses progress to deeper ones, caresses to firm touch, lips, tongue and fingers working together to bring pleasure, their bodies joining in love, their release exquisite and joyous.

Afterwards, they hold each other close, savouring the feeling, the connection until they begin to drift off. He feels her get up then and leave the room to return dressed in her nightie, leaning over to softly kiss his lips. “Good night,” she murmurs, but he's only able to muster a hum in response, his body already relaxing into sleep.

When he wakes it's barely five am, but he's alone, the bed empty beside him save for the cats, both of whom are curled up at the foot of the bed, sleeping. He lifts his head and listens, but not a sound can be heard in the quiet stillness of the house. He frowns and gets up, pulling on his trunks and shirt before walking to the bathroom. No Ruth. He listens, but there's no sound coming from downstairs, which worries him. Perhaps she's curled up in an armchair reading a book, he tells himself, taking the opportunity to use the loo before going downstairs. A quick check reveals the rest of the house is empty too, and now he's really worried. He hurries back upstairs to retrieve his clothes, quickly pulling them on and returning downstairs where he pulls out his phone and rings her.

“Good morning,” she says and he can tell she's smiling, his relief almost overpowering. She's safe. Wherever she might be, she's safe.

“Good morning, Ruth. Where are you?”
“I woke up, wanting to make you breakfast, only to realise that I didn't have any coffee, so I thought I'd pop out to get us each a cup and a warm, buttery croissant or two. Do you want yours filled with chocolate?”

He smiles, his heart warming at the thought of her taking care of him like that. “I never say no to chocolate.”

“I'd noticed. Listen, I'll be home in fifteen minutes or so. Can you feed the cats? It's taking me longer than I thought it would.”

“Of course,” he replies. “I love you.”

“Mmmm,” she hums. “I love you too and I love what we did last night.”

“Me too,” he murmurs, wanting her all over again at the images that fill his mind.

“I'll see you in a bit. Bye,” she whispers and hangs up, leaving him to feed her cats and await her return with slowly mounting impatience.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

4 August 2006 – Adam

From the moment Oliver Mace had stepped through the pods he’d known something was seriously wrong. Harry had seemed calm enough initially, asking Mace what he wants and listening with quiet disbelief as he’d replied that there was some suspicion of misconduct on Ruth’s part with regards to Mik Maudsley. Harry had managed to hold it together, years of experience as a spook coming to his rescue, but the clenching of his jaw hadn't gone unnoticed by Adam, nor Mace, judging from the small smirk that had appeared on his lips. The thing Adam had feared most when he'd learnt about Ruth and Harry has finally come to pass – Ruth's being used as a pawn to get to Harry.

“That's bullshit,” he'd objected, deflecting Mace's attention to him in an effort to give Harry time to calm himself.

“There is evidence, Adam,” Mace had sneered, turning cold eyes on him.

“What evidence?”

“All in good time, Mr. Carter. All in good time. Let us wait for Miss Evershed first, shall we?”

And so they'd all waited until Ruth had appeared at the pods, clutching a newspaper to her chest, looking somewhat exited initially before the reality of what she was seeing had registered and her gaze had turned wary.

“Is there a problem?” she'd asked, glancing from one person to the next, her eyes lingering on Harry.

“Yes, Ruth,” Mace had said gravely, playing his part with barely disguised delight. “I think there is.”

“What's going on?” Ruth had asked, her eyes holding Mace's unflinchingly and Adam couldn't help admiring her courage.

“We need to talk to you, Ruth,” Mace had said, glancing from Ruth to Harry, barely able to mask his glee.

Harry had simply looked sad as he’d gazed at Ruth, a question in his eyes that had made Adam wonder what it was about. It seemed to him like the two of them were communicating silently, having a conversation with their eyes alone to which no one else was privy. He'd remembered doing the same with Fiona, effortlessly reading each other's minds, especially on operation where the stakes were so high and their senses heightened. Up until that point, he'd thought that whatever Ruth had been up to, had been sanctioned by Harry, discussed between them in advance, but the way Ruth had looked at him in that moment – almost apologetically – had left him wondering if perhaps he’d been mistaken.

“Do I need to sit down, Harry?” she'd asked him, taking a few steps forward, her eyes never leaving his.

“It's going to be all right,” Harry had replied, seeking to reassure her.
“Let's go into Harry's office.” It had been Mace's suggestion, but Ruth had refused.

“No, no, whatever it is, let's... let's just do it here.”

And that's how it had began, Mace laying before them the accusations, the fact that Ruth had been to the morgue and Maudsley's house without authorisation, the gun that had been found there, the doctored CCTV and coerced witnesses – because Adam is sure that Ruth is incapable of working for terrorists, especially ones intent on targeting huge numbers of civilians like Acts of Truth do. The idea, as Harry had pointed out to Mace, is insane and ridiculous.

When Ruth had produced the disk, it had suddenly made sense why she'd risked going to Maudsley's alone this morning, without telling anyone and without Harry's authorisation. He feels frustrated that he hadn't know that Ruth had witnessed Maudsley's suicide and had believed he was making a drop sooner, or he'd have helped her get to the bottom of it. Harry's clearly too close to her to make rational decisions because it makes no sense to him why he didn't trust Ruth's instincts on this, like he would have done for any of his other officers. She might be a desk spook, but she's smart and good at reading people. There's no reason not to trust her, as far as he can see. Now Harry's irrational actions and Ruth's stubbornness have landed them in a heap of trouble, given Mace an opportunity to silence Harry and this investigation by going after Ruth. She should have known they'd have Maudsley's house under surveillance. What had she been thinking?!!

“I will sort this out,” Harry murmurs as he walks beside Ruth to the pods now. “I promise, Ruth. I will sort this out.”

“Harry, I've seen it before too many times. We've done it to too many people,” she replies, correctly assessing the gravity of the situation.

Then he sees Ruth stop walking and turn to face Harry, ignoring the men trying to move her forward, looking deeply into his eyes, the love she feels for him there for all to see. “I'm sorry, Harry,” she says softly. “Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. Keep your head. Don't do anything stupid.” She reaches a hand forward to gently stroke his arm, grasping his hand briefly and smiling up at him before turning away again and stepping into the pod.

“Sir, will you move?” an officer from Section X says from behind Harry, but it's more than he can handle at that moment and he suddenly explodes.

“Do not address me!” he shouts, making the officer in question take a hasty step back, and Adam watches as Mace raises a sardonic eyebrow, clearly pleased to see his ploy working so effectively. What is his game plan, Adam wonders again. What is he trying to cover up? Could he be the one working for Acts of Truth? It's a very worrying thought that someone so high up in the service could be colluding with terrorists.

He turns back in time to see Ruth glance at Harry as she steps through the pods, a brave look of resignation on her face, masking the fear he knows she must be feeling, and for a split second, he sees Fiona's face where hers should have been and feels the catch in his breathing and the ache in his heart, and he knows exactly what Harry's feeling, knows the anguish in his heart, knows the rage at the unfairness of their world that they would hurt her to get to him.

Once Ruth's gone from sight, Harry spins round, his eyes on fire as he turns to look at Mace, all the malice he's feeling towards him plain for all to see, his breathing heavy with suppressed rage. “So, do we back off Cotterdam?” Adam asks as much to distract him as anything else before he does something stupid. He wouldn't put it past Harry to physically attack the head of the JIC in this
moment, and that would get them nowhere. They desperately need Harry to keep a level head.

“Absolutely not,” Harry replies adamantly. “Cotterdam’s the key.” And with that, he strides past him to his office.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Some dialogue was borrowed from Spooks again here, but given that Ruth and Harry are together, it seemed too childish of Jo to put a tracker on Ruth, therefore, that never happened in this fic and consequently Ros couldn’t betray her to Mace. Thanks for reading, S.C.
7 August 2006 – Ruth

“What are we doing here, Zaf?” she asks worriedly as they step into the building and mount the stairs in the growing gloom.

“Adam's orders,” he replies simply, leading the way to the entrance on the third floor. “He said it was the safest place at the moment. They're mounting a full scale manhunt.”

“Woman-hunt,” she corrects absently as she waits for him to open the door, trying to still her racing heart.

“Here we go,” he murmurs, pushing the door open and slipping into the room, quickly moving around to check the safehouse while she closes the door behind them.

“What is this place?” she asks, frowning at the mess, the mismatched furniture, broken blinds, bare metal shelving, newspaper covering the windows.

“Harry's apparently,” Zaf smiles. “Let's see if there's anything in the kitchen. I could murder a cup of tea.”

She follows him, thoughts of Harry crowding her mind, wondering how he's coping, if they've released him yet, if he's thinking of her. She can't help worrying about him. He's acting so out of character at the moment, letting them get to him like this, allowing Mace to manipulate him through his emotions. If she'd doubted it before, she now fully comprehends the depth of his love for her, and though it's been a disaster for them, for their future together, she can't help but feel pleased that he loves her so much. She loves him too, has given up her life for him, everything she's known so far, has become a fugitive to save him, yet she doesn't regret it, would do it again – always.

“No tea,” she hears Zaf sigh and then brighten as he adds, “Found some coffee though and, surprisingly, it's within its expiry date. Would you like a cup?”

“Thanks.”

“Take a seat, Ruth,” he says. “Try to relax.”

She gives him a dubious look, but follows his advice, walking over to the sofa and testing it gingerly with one hand before cautiously taking a seat. She's sure it'll catch up with her – the enormity of what she's done, of the fact that she can't go home again. Ever. But for now she feels strangely detached from it all. Except Harry. She worries about him, what he's thinking, what he'll do when he discovers what she's done. She fervently hopes Adam can stop him from doing anything even more stupid than what he's done already. Attacking Mace! What had he been thinking?!?

A mug of hot coffee appears in her line of vision, the aroma seductive and most welcome as she reaches for it, murmuring her thanks. Zaf smiles at her again and takes a seat beside her, taking a sip of his own drink.

They don't speak much and, when their cups are empty, Zaf collects them, murmuring, “There's a cot in the next room. No sheets or blankets, I'm afraid, but it looks sturdy enough. Why don't you go lie down for a bit, Ruth? Sleep if you can. It'll do you good to get some rest.”
“I can't sleep, Zaf,” she objects.

“Try,” he advises gently. “It's going to be a long night.”

She knows he's right, so with a sigh and a nod, she gets up to investigate. On the way she finds the ablutions such as they are, which she uses, and then lies down on the cot, pulling her boots off, but not bothering to remove anything else. She pulls her coat tightly around her and wonders if Harry has ever used this place in times of need. She pictures him here, his sturdy frame pressed reassuringly against her back, his gentle hands stroking her hair, his soft lips whispering in her ear, and before she knows it, she's fast asleep.

She wakes to find someone sitting in the armchair in the corner of the room. She doesn't panic, assuming it's Zaf, but as she blinks and focuses on the shape, she realises that it's not him after all.

“Harry?” she murmurs softly, wondering if she's dreaming.

“Ruth,” he says, his voice deep and gruff.

“What are you doing here?” she asks. “Where's Zaf?”

“I sent him back to the Grid,” he replies, sitting up and leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. “How are you, Ruth?”

“Fine,” she says, also sitting up and smoothing down her clothes and hair.

He's watching her, his eyes scanning her face, her body, as if to reassure himself that she's telling him the truth, or maybe in an effort to memorise her, so he can recall everything about her when she's gone. “Why did you do it?” he asks, his voice tinged with something – worry? desperation?

“You know why,” she replies, watching him get up and move towards her, taking a seat beside her on the cot.

They're silent for several moments just gazing at each other, a jumble of emotions running through each of them, but through it all, the longing in their gazes, the love, never wavers.

It's Harry who breaks the silence first. “You went behind my back. You didn't tell me...” he tails off, shaking his head. “Had you even run out of coffee that morning?” he asks, eyes searching hers, the pain in their depths all too apparent.

She drops her head, ashamed to have lied to him. It had been beneath her and unfair, cruel to deceive him like that. He'd trusted her and she'd ruined everything.

“I'm sorry,” she whispers, lifting her eyes to look at him. “You didn't believe me about the drop, but I knew I was right. You didn't trust my judgement and it bothered me that, if I had been anyone else on the team, you'd have-”

“I was trying to protect you,” he interrupts.

“I didn't want your protection, Harry, not when it interfered with me doing my job. I needed you to believe in me, to treat me in the same way you treat the others. I needed our relationship to be separate from our work. That's part of the reason why I wanted the secondment.” She sighs, rubbing her face with her hands. This is going nowhere, she thinks. “I needed to find the drop, Harry, but I am sorry. I shouldn't have done it like that. It was stupid and unfair to you, and if I could go back and change things...” she tails off.
If only we could change the past. They're silent for long moments, each thinking about what happened, each regretting their mistakes, each sorry that it has come to this because of their actions. They've played their hands, and though they've won, beaten Mace and the others at their game, the personal cost is unbearably high for both of them.

“I don't know what I'll do without you, Ruth,” he says and this time the desperation in his voice is clear. He reaches his left hand up to cup her face, gently stroking her cheek, gazing deeply into her eyes, and as he reaches down to kiss her, she knows where this is going, wants it, welcomes it with open arms. One last time, one last sweet memory to cling to.

“Can we?” he whispers against her lips.

“Yes,” she murmurs in reply.

He gets up and removes his coat, spreading it on the mattress before pulling her to her feet and slowly, reverently removing her clothes, his lips tracing each new patch of skin as it is revealed, his hands caressing her body. Neither of them speak. Words are superfluous.

“Lie down,” he murmurs and she complies, feeling the warm wool of his coat below her shoulders and back as she gazes up at him, watching as he pulls off his own clothes and climbs onto the cot beside her. “You're the most beautiful woman I have ever known,” he whispers against her skin, his lips softly caressing her cheek, her lips, her neck, her chest, the swell of her breasts, his hands following their lead. “I love you so much.”

“Harry,” she breathes as he moves lower, needing, wanting his body close to hers more than anything else. “Come here. I need you.”

“I'm here, Ruth,” he replies, lifting his eyes to hers as his fingers gently stroke her inner thighs. “I'm all yours. Always.”

“Harry,” she says, her voice breaking, tears gathering in her eyes. Why did he have to say that now, when we have such little time left together?

“Don't cry, Ruth,” he murmurs, his face close to hers again. “It's going to be okay. We'll fix this. I promise.”

“Don't, Harry,” she shakes her head. “Don't make promises you cannot keep. I can't bear it. Please, just... I need you inside me.” She pulls him to her, kissing him with all the love and passion she feels for him, pushing her worries aside as she gets lost in him, in them, savouring every moment, every touch, every kiss, every movement of their bodies against, around, inside each other.

It is beautiful and perfect and an act so full of love that she thinks her heart might burst. They come almost simultaneously, riding the wave of their passion together, clinging to each other desperately, but as she feels him spill inside her, the thought that she's taking a tiny part of him with her reassures her, calms her, and eases her fear and sense of loss, and as he lifts his head to look at her, she smiles, her courage and determination restored, her knowledge that she's doing this for him, making her brave again and ready to face the unknown.

“I love you, Ruth,” he whispers. “This isn't the end. I promise.” And in that moment, she believes him.
8 August 2006 – Harry

“Let me go, Harry,” she murmurs softly, pressing her lips against his once more before pulling back.

“I can't,” he replies desperately, reaching forward to grab her hands as she slides them down his lapels and takes a step back. “I'll fix this, Ruth. I promise. I'll find a way to get you back home soon, okay?” He steps close and slips one arm round her, pressing his lips softly against her cheek, willing her to understand that, though he has to let her go physically right now, hell will freeze over before he relinquishes her in his heart. For better or worse, she's there to stay and he wouldn't want it any other way. “I need you to know that I'll not rest until this wrong has been put right. One day, you'll be free to come home. I give you my word.” He surreptitiously presses the slip of paper with Ben's contact details into her hand and adds in a whisper, “My brother, Ben, is stationed in Germany. If you're ever in great need and you can't safely reach me, Ruth, he'll help you. And he'll know how things are going here with clearing your name. When you're safe and ready, please contact him.”

She nods then and turns her head, pressing her lips against his cheek and murmuring, “Goodbye, Harry,” and this time he lets her walk away, watching her step onto the tugboat and into the shelter of the cabin before she looks up to gaze at him as the boat floats down the Thames and out of sight. The ache in his gut, his heart, his very soul has him frozen on the spot long after the boat has disappeared from view, and it's only the promise he makes himself that he'll see her again soon that allows him to finally pull himself together and walk away.

He can't face the Grid just yet, so he goes back to the safe house first, steeling himself before he enters and sees that everything is cleaned up after them – it would not do for anyone to find any trace of Ruth here were this place ever to be discovered. After he's made a mental list of what he needs to buy in the way of food, blankets and other essentials – just in case this place comes in handy again sometime or he has to evoke Sunstrike protocol in the future – he locks up and leaves, going home to shower and change.

The sight of Scarlet is a welcome one, her exuberance and affection soothing his aching soul and even eliciting a smile from him as he sits down in his arm chair and lifts her onto his lap, stroking her and allowing her to nuzzle and lick his face.

“Hello, girl,” he says gruffly. “I'm so glad you're here.” And that's when the tears come, his grief finally overflowing as he cries for all he's lost, his little dog whining in protest, attempting to comfort
him by licking away his tears for a little while before she gives up and curls up in his lap, her head on
his left forearm as she watches his face with what looks like a mixture of worry and love.

When eventually he calms, he stays seated for long moments, his right elbow still resting on the
armrest, his hand still covering his eyes as his sobs subside and his breathing evens out, his mind
blissfully blank for several moments while he focuses on the air moving in and out of his lungs. Then
he lifts his head and wipes away at his cheeks, looking down to find Scarlet has also lifted her head
and is gazing up at him, ears pricked, tail slowly wagging from side to side.

He smiles and strokes her head gently. “Thank you,” he murmurs, feeling so grateful for his dog in
that moment. “We're going to get some new house-mates,” he adds, thinking of Ruth's cats and his
promise to adopt them. “It's very important that you get along. They have no place else to go.”

His last words make his eyes fill with tears again, but he wipes them swiftly away, taking a deep
breath and shaking his head at himself. “Pull yourself together, Pearce,” he growls crossly, and
dislodging Scarlet gently, he gets up, deciding that a hot shower is just the thing to snap him out of
his current state of self-pity and grief. “Enough now,” he adds as he slips into his bedroom. “You're
not going to get her back by wallowing.” And by the time he's stepped out of the shower and is
freshly suited and booted, he's ready to get on with bringing Ruth home and he begins by going over
to hers to rescue her cats and retrieve some of her precious books and other things he's sure she'd
want to keep before Section X is called in and they get their dirty paws all over them, or her will is
read out and everything goes to her mother to dispose of as she will.

He sighs as he thinks of her, wondering what exactly Ruth told her about him, how much she knows
about Ruth's work, what he should tell her later today when he makes that call. He's planning to do
everything he can to get Ruth back and he's determined he will succeed, no matter how long it takes
or what sacrifices he has to make. Even if he didn't love her like he does, he owes her that after
everything she's done for him and her loyal service to her country. Would it be wise then, given all
that, to tell Ruth's mother that she's dead when there's every chance they'll get to see each other again
sometime soon? Would it be wise to tell her the truth about her exile and risk inadvertent exposure
that could put Ruth in danger and throw a spanner in the works of all his plans for a reunion between
them?

He thinks about these things and many others as he methodically works his way through Ruth's
home, collecting things he knows she'll want him to save and a few he'd like to keep himself as
mementoes of her, making sure he misses nothing, pausing frequently to re-establish his self-control
when some memory or other threatens to overwhelm him.

He leaves the cupboard where she keeps the coffee for last, almost skipping it altogether, scared to
confirm his suspicions and ruin a memory that had warmed his heart so deeply just a few days ago.
He hasn't risen so quickly through the Service, however, by being a coward, so steeling himself, he
pulls open the cabinet. The moment he does, he regrets it, the full bag of coffee at the back mocking
him, his hands clutching the counter-top as he drops his gaze, the pain stabbing straight through his
heart.

She'd lied. She hadn't gone out to do something loving for him, but to visit Maudsley's house behind
his back, compounding the betrayal with her lies and making him suddenly feel sick to his stomach.
He takes a hasty step over to the sink, but though his stomach heaves, he manages to refrain from
throwing up, clutching the edge of the sink hard until his knuckles turn white, unable to stop the tears
and the single sob that escapes him.

He lifts his head to look up at the ceiling, taking several deep breaths, slowly getting himself under
control again. He's done this himself numerous times – lied, cheated, hidden his actions from those
he loves – but it's the first time he's realised the damage it can do, the first time he's experienced the magnitude of the pain when the betrayal comes from someone close, someone one trusts and loves deeply. *God, what I bastard I have been,* he thinks bitterly, thinking of Jane and his children and all the times he's hurt them over the years. It's a wonder any of them are speaking to him at all! He'll do better, he decides, taking a step back from the counter and closing the cabinet door.

He walks back into the front room and puts everything he's collected in a suitcase he's found in the loft and carries it out to the car along with all the supplies he can find for the cats and a bag of perishables from the fridge, before he goes back for the moggies, luring them into their carriers with some tinned cat food that Ruth saves for special occasions. Then he locks up the house and drives back to his, hiding the suitcase under his bed, putting a water dish and the cat litter in the bathroom and setting Fidget and Wol – named for the uncanny resemblance of the pattern on his face to an owl and Ruth's love of Winnie-the-Pooh – free in the house after he's made sure Scarlet is still safely closed in the kitchen.

When he eventually arrives on the Grid, it's to find a message from their man in Beirut that Catherine has been severely injured by an unexploded Israeli ordinance and he's no idea where to find her.
Chapter 32

13 August 2006 - Ruth

It's been five days and she hasn't cried once, focusing her mind on the task of getting herself as far away from London as possible with the resources at her disposal. She'd left for France on a fishing boat that Zaf had arranged for her, her emergency duffel bag that someone had picked up from her house her only possession other than the cash and two passports and driving licences Harry had given her, one French and one Argentinian.

She'd arrived in Le Touquet, south of Calais, and from there had used a variety of means to go south-west, avoiding Paris and other large cities, reasoning that though it would be easier to get lost in the crowd, they're also the first place people would look for her and they have more extensive CCTV coverage through which she could be found and tracked.

Outside Rouen, she'd been lucky to bump into an English couple who were on their way back from visiting family near Bristol and were happy to offer her a lift all the way to Bordeaux in exchange for the cost of petrol for the trip.

She's using her French legend at the moment, leaving the other one for an emergency, thinking that it'll be easier to get by in France as a local. Not that she can probably pull that off. She has no illusions that her French is up to scratch, for while she's fluent, she still possesses something of a foreign accent. So she's decided that Marlene Dubois is half British and grew up in England, but she's come back to France to travel a bit and get to know the French half of the family, now that both her parents have passed away.

She'd bought new clothes in Rouen and had a haircut and some highlights put in to alter her appearance, and of course, she's bought herself some sunglasses. She hasn't worn summer dresses in years and can't even remember the last time she'd used sandals. Suntan lotion has helped with the transition and she's been very careful not to burn. She's lucky in that she's always tanned easily, so after five days, she thinks her disguise is pretty convincing – she looks nothing like the pale, scared, drably dressed woman she'd arrived as.

The drive south has been interesting and her companions very engaging, the husband, Alan, being quite the chatterbox, whereas his wife, Helen, is more quiet though equally open and amiable. She thinks she may have learnt almost their entire family history on the drive, and while she's grateful for the distraction they provide from any thoughts of Harry, she can't wait until they get to their destination and she can seek out some peace.

It's a good job she spent several hours on her first morning in France creating and memorising her legend because this car trip has really put her memory and spy skills to the test as the barrage of good-natured questions have almost exhausted her patience and skill at deflecting as many as possible without arousing suspicion.

She's decided that Marlene's mother died recently from cancer – her father passed away when she was at university – and that's what's prompted her desire to get away and seek out her French roots. She figured it would be handy to have a reason to explain away the tears that sometimes glisten in her eyes, or any kind of sudden breakdown she might have, despite her best efforts at maintaining her self-control.
She mostly manages to keep thoughts of home, Harry, her cats, her mother and friends at bay, trying to convince herself that she's on holiday – it's the first time she's travelled outside Britain after all, except for her trip to Baghdad, which is the last thing she needs to be thinking about right now – and forget that she won't be returning to them any time soon, if at all. She knows Harry will do his best to clear her name, but realistically, she has to assume that it'll take quite a bit of time until perhaps the political climate is right to sweep the whole thing under the carpet. The powers that be are not going to want her back any time soon, so she's going to have to cope with her new life for six months to a year at least, closer to two or three, in fact, by her estimation.

The one thing that comforts her though is her knowledge of Harry's loyalty and the strength of his love for her. She knows he will never give up the fight to get her home, just as he has never given up hope of bringing Zoe back. He's always putting out feelers, checking if the climate's right to get a pardon issued, though Zoe's case is complicated by the fact that the police are always against any attempt at leniency because of the death of their officer. At least she doesn't have that problem.

She blinks, pulling her thoughts back from Zoe, Harry's loyalty, and all the other things she loves about him, feeling the tears gather in her eyes but refusing to let them fall. She's going to need to have a good cry at some point, but she's determined not to have an audience for that. Maybe when they get to Bordeaux, she can find a nice little room to rent for a few days on the outskirts of the city, or better yet, some small village on the way and take some long walks into the countryside where she can find some peace and a good place to cry her heart out for Harry and all that she's left behind.
20 August 2006 - Harry

A man possessed doesn't even begin to describe what he'd been like until he'd found Catherine. He'd broken every rule in the book – physically assaulted a reporter, yelled at every person getting in his way, ran into a mosque with his shoes on, causing an uproar that had almost resulted in him getting lynched – until he'd finally found her, Fabian by her bedside, her condition critical for want of a blood transfusion.

He'd given her his blood, feeling supremely grateful that they share the same blood type, and she's now in the process of making a full recovery – her limbs have been saved, and though it'll be weeks before she can walk again, she's young and determined and he's confident now that she'll make it. He's grateful to the doctors here, to Fabian for staying with her and fighting to get her the medical treatment she needed, and to Catherine for being so brave and not giving up. He doesn't think he would have survived the loss of his daughter too, on top of everything else.

He blinks a few times to clear his vision as thoughts of Ruth fill his mind and he wonders where she is, how she's coping. It's the hardest thing about this – the not knowing, not having any contact, not hearing her gentle voice, seeing her beautiful eyes every morning. He could cope with the separation if they could just talk to each other sometimes, send each other a text, write an email.

“What is it, Dad?” Catherine asks gently.

He quickly wipes his eyes with thumb and fingers. “It's nothing.”

“Don't,” she says, sounding a little cross. “You've been like this for days. Something's wrong. What is it? You can tell me, you know. I'm your daughter.”

“Actually, I'm afraid I can't.” He turns, giving her an apologetic look as he walks over to her bed and takes a seat in the plastic chair at her beside. “It's work. One of my officers.”

“Oh.” She seems at a loss as to what to say to that. “Do you need to go back because I'm fine here if-”

“I'm not leaving you,” he growls, his chest tightening at the thought of something more happening to her in his absence. “Not until I've got you safely back home, and even then-”

“Jesus, Dad!” She bristles. “Relax. I'm fine now. There's no need to... overreact.”

“Overreact?!!” he exclaims, springing up from the chair and beginning to pace the room as he tries to calm himself, all the emotions he'd experienced as he'd frantically tried to find her resurfacing at
once.

“Yes!” She's not intimidated by him. Far from it. She's just as obstinate as he is and just as
determined to win a fight. She always has been. Their rows during her teenage years had been quite
something to behold, and it's quite possible that, had be not worked so late almost everyday, thus
minimising their interaction, she'd have left home in her teens out of defiance, frustration, and a
desire to piss him off. “I know you were worried, but I'm doing fine now. The doctors say I'm out of
the woods, and in a week or so, I should be able to fly home.”

“We're in a bloody war-zone!”

“And how exactly will having you here change that?” she counters, remaining much more calm than
he. “If your officer needs you back home, then go. It's no use staying here worrying.”

He sighs, returning to his seat and slumping into it, feeling defeated. If only it were that simple.

“What?”

“I fear there is little I can do to help her right now,” is his quiet reply, feeling a lump lodge itself in
his throat as he admits the truth. It's not going to be easy to get Ruth back, to clear her name. There
are the murder charges, her supposed involvement with the extradition of the seven prisoners to
Egypt to be tortured, alleged collaboration with terrorists, acting without his authorisation, and the list
goes on. It's going to take time to disprove all the charges, and even then, he's going to need to get
the Home Secretary or PM on board to exonerate her so she can come home.

He's endeavouring to hide his emotions, but something in his voice or the way he says it catches her
attention. “She?” she questions quietly, and when he looks up, he finds her watching him with a
mixture of dread and concern in her eyes.

Christ, she would have made a fine spook, he thinks and feels a surge of gratitude that neither of his
children have followed in his footsteps. He thinks about denying it, allaying Catherine's suspicions,
but then he realises that, if he fails to bring Ruth home again, he'd like someone in his family, someone
close to him to know that she exists, that she's important to him, that they love each other
deeply.

“Yes,” he replies, saying nothing more, letting the realisation that he's in love with someone other
than her mother sink in.

“Oh.” She looks down at her hands for a moment before returning her eyes to his. “I'm sorry,” she
says.

He smiles, proud and touched by her ability to set aside her own emotions for him. “So am I,” he
sighs.
Chapter 34

5 September 2006 - Jane

The wait at the airport for the plane to land isn't easy, but nowhere near as hard as those few days before Harry had rung her to tell her he'd found Catherine, that she was alive, and that he'd stay with her until she was well enough to fly home. She doesn't think she's ever felt such joy, such relief and gratitude as she had in that moment, and she'd found herself falling to her knees, weeping and thanking God for Catherine's life, for Harry, for the joy of that moment.

She sees the board change, announcing that BA flight 148 from Beirut has landed, but it's almost another hour before she sees them walk through the sliding doors, Harry pushing Catherine's wheelchair and Fabian following behind with the luggage cart.

She rushes forward, practically throwing herself at Catherine, her eyes full of tears, holding her tightly for several moments before she pulls back to look at her.

“It's so good to see you, Catherine,” she says.

“It's good to be back home, Mum,” Catherine replies, smiling up at her.

She wipes her eyes quickly, endeavouring to compose herself and reaching across Catherine for Fabian's hand to shake it, wrapping both hands around it as she tells him she's glad to see him again and thanks him for taking such good care of her daughter before she turns to Harry.

He looks exhausted, like he hasn't been sleeping well for weeks, and she thinks he's lost some weight, but his eyes are warm as he looks at her, smiling softly. Clearly he's pleased to be back home too and just as happy as she is to be bringing their daughter with him – wonderfully, beautifully alive.

“Harry,” she says, words failing her as she takes a step forward and embraces him, pressing her lips against his cheek once and murmuring, “Thank you,” before the tears come and she begins to weep into his coat, totally overwhelmed by emotion.

He's wrapped one arm around her waist and he uses it now to draw her closer, tilting his head to rest his cheek against the side of her head as he murmurs, “It's all right, Jane. It's over now. She's home again, safe and sound.”

She takes a few breaths to calm herself and draws back, taking the clean handkerchief he offers her with a smile. “Always prepared,” she says after she's wiped her eyes as she lifts her gaze to his.

“I try,” is his reply, but his eyes suddenly look infinitely sad and she wonders what's the matter. “Shall we go?” he suggests. “We seem to be causing somewhat of a traffic jam.”

His words have the effect she presumes he wants because they all suddenly look around them and begin apologising profusely as they move out of the way and towards the exit where the van Harry has arranged to take them home is waiting. The driver greets Harry formally, she notes, but there's real warmth in his eyes as he looks at him and expresses his pleasure at seeing him safely home with his daughter. Harry, for his part, smiles softly and claps the younger man on the shoulder before taking the luggage-cart from Fabian and wheeling it round to the boot whilst he and the driver get Catherine into the back of the wheelchair accessible van.
The journey to her place passes quickly as she chats with Catherine, listening to her and Fabian as they animatedly talk about the situation on the ground in Lebanon, their work with the Red Crescent, and the attack that almost cost Catherine her life. Harry's quiet the entire time, sitting in the front next to their driver and silently staring out the window. She's not even sure he's listening to a word they're saying – he seems utterly lost in thought. She wonders at it for a moment, but quickly turns her attention back to Catherine, watching her, drinking her in, basking in the joy of having her home again, safe and on the mend.

They've agreed that Catherine and Fabian will stay with her while Catherine does her physiotherapy and until she's mobile without a wheelchair again, and Jane's pleased that her flat being on the ground floor will make things easier – she'd hated that about it when she'd first moved in, so it's nice to have it prove useful now. Harry of course will go back to his place, but she invites him and their driver, Anthony, in for a cup of tea and sandwiches that she'd prepared earlier before they set off again, and it doesn't take much cajoling to convince them – it's past lunchtime and they're both probably starving.

She shows Catherine and Fabian their room, and Anthony the bathroom before making her way into the kitchen with Harry right behind her. She washes her hands and goes to the fridge, pulling out the plates of sandwiches she's made and turning to stick the kettle on, only to find Harry's beat her to it.

"Mugs? Tea bags?" he asks, looking at her expectantly.

"I'll do it," she replies. "Rest. You look exhausted."

"I'm fine."

"All the same," she says, taking a large teapot down from the cupboard and setting it beside the kettle. "Take a seat, Harry. Rest. Let me take care of everything. You've done enough." And with that, she reaches over to gently squeeze his forearm in gratitude.

He sighs and nods his head, looking a little lost for a moment.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," he shakes his head and moves away, walking to the window to gaze out into the front garden. She's about to argue with him, tell him that there's clearly something that's troubling him, but Anthony, Catherine and Fabian appear in the kitchen just then, so she lets it slide, turning her attention to serving her guests and keeping the conversation flowing.

Harry and his driver leave soon after lunch, and she's no closer to finding out what's wrong with him until much later that night when Catherine joins her in the kitchen while Fabian Skypes his parents and she asks her if she knows what's bothering her father.

"It's someone at work," she says carefully. "One of his officers is in trouble."

"In trouble as in dead?" she asks before she can stop herself, remembering his grief and guilt every time he's lost one of them before.

"He didn't say she died," Catherine replies, looking suddenly rather worried.

"She?"

"Yes." Their eyes meet and Jane suddenly knows they're talking about Ruth and that Catherine knows her father's in love with her. "He said she's in trouble and there's nothing he can do about it. He didn't say she's dead. He'd have said if she died, wouldn't he?"
She reaches for her hand and gives it a reassuring squeeze. “I'm sure he would have, love,” she replies, once again marveling at how wonderful a person her daughter is – her caring, generous nature and her desire to make things better for everyone – and wondering what exactly has happened to Ruth to make Harry so unhappy, unhappy enough to not be able to hide it from them all. She remembers a few years back when one of his officers had been convicted of murder and given ten years in prison. He'd been devastated at the time and she fervently hopes nothing like that has happened again. She's feeling rather grateful to him right now for rescuing Catherine and she knows she doesn't want him to suffer.

“He was so sweet,” Catherine murmurs, drawing her thoughts back to the present. “He gave me a blood transfusion. I'd have probably died without it, and the doctors said, I'd have certainly lost my legs. He was always there every time I woke up, and Fabian said he wouldn't leave my side for several days after he first found me, until the doctors had to force him to go get some sleep by threatening to sedate him.”

She smiles. “Of course he did, love. He's your father and he loves you.”

“I know. I just hate to see him so unhappy, Mum. At least when you were together, he seemed content. You both did.”

She smiles and shakes her head. “There's a big difference between contentment and happiness, Catherine.”

“But contentment is better than heartbreak, isn't it?”

“I doubt your father was aiming for heartbreak when he started seeing Ruth,” she says, “and I know you understand that your father and I getting back together isn't going to make him happy or even content any more. He's moved on, Catherine. We're not going to be getting back together.” She reaches over and squeezes her daughter's hand, wondering how it is that, no matter how old they get, her son and daughter sometimes act like the little children they used to be, needing their mummy's reassurance.

“But what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Have you moved on?”

She smiles. “In a way. I haven't met anyone yet, if that's what you're asking, but I'm content being on my own and that is a big step for me. It's been holding me back for a long time.”

“So you're... happy for him? It doesn't bother you that...” She tails off, dropping her gaze.

She thinks about that for a moment, knowing that there's a part of her that misses being married to Harry, or at any rate, misses the physical part of their relationship. She still finds him attractive and would sleep with him in a heartbeat if the opportunity presented itself. She's still not found a lover and that's a big hole in her life for she's always enjoyed sex. But despite that, she doesn't begrudge Harry his happiness. He's one of her oldest friends and she's very glad that they've managed to part ways amicably, so they can continue to stay in touch, be friends, and talk about their children. He's been the rock she's needed him to be throughout this ordeal with Catherine. He's always been good in a crisis and she's very grateful for that, for his loyalty and his caring. Not many men would have done that for their ex and that warms her heart towards him.

“Yes. I'm happy for him,” she says.
When she'd had her MI-5 training, one of the instructors had suggested picking a date, like the first of every month, to perform a quick check of all emergency supplies so that they're always prepared, and thinking it a very good idea, that is what she'd done. Originally, she'd thought of choosing her birthday, but then she'd realised February doesn't always have 29 days, and it's not a very nice thing to have to do on one's birthday anyway – consider the possibility of having to flee one's home in a hurry – so she'd chosen the first of the month, Harry's birthday, though she'd not known that at the time. Since she's using the duffel bag everyday now though, she'd not thought it necessary to perform this monthly check, until she'd remembered that her wool coat and the other clothes she'd arrived in are in there, in addition to some money and extra passports tucked into the false bottom of the bag, and she should really check the batteries of her torch and little radio, as well as the state of her first aid kit. So she'd opened it up and emptied it, intent on seeing if there's anything missing and repacking it when she's done.

That had been three days ago.

She still remembers the horror, the shock of the packets of tampons and sanitary towels tumbling onto the bed, the realisation dawning as she'd sat down heavily, whispering, “No, no, no, no,” over and over again, her hand pressing against her flat stomach, willing it not to be true as she'd quickly calculated the number of days and had come to the inevitable, unalterable conclusion that it's been six weeks since her last period and that the weird sensation she's been feeling in her breasts, the bouts of nausea she's had over the last few days, first thing in the morning, all point to one tremendous, disastrous thing – she's pregnant with Harry's child.

Three days later, and though the shock has warn off somewhat, she's nowhere near knowing what she should do, how she should deal with this development, other than to hope it will take care of itself and she'll have a miscarriage.

There have been times in her life when she's really wanted a child, and others when the idea has struck her as a very bad one. She's always liked children, but it's one thing to like them and quite another to decide to have one yourself, and as she's grown older and wiser, she's really understood the level of commitment a child involves, the effort, heartache, and responsibility one has as a parent, the work and infinite love and patience one needs to put into raising a child well, being a really good parent. She's never been one to do things by half-measures, so she's always known that being a mother would take a lot out of her for many years, seeing as she'd want to excel at it.

When she'd joined the Service, she'd set aside any lingering desire she'd still had to have a baby, knowing that her busy schedule and the risk involved in her work would not be compatible with the kind of parenting style she'd want to adopt. Having had the experience of growing up with a father who was a doctor and an extremely busy man and whose death had devastated her at a young, vulnerable age, she'd decided that she couldn't risk the same happening to her child and so she wouldn't have any. And if she's honest, it hadn't even crossed her mind to have one with Harry, feeling pleased that he's already had children and is unlikely to want more, thinking it a very good thing that they most likely agree on this issue, though she'd never discussed it with him to find out for certain.

So now, she's completely lost. The thought of having a baby, the daunting task of carrying it to term,
giving birth, and taking care of an infant on her own while she's on the run is overwhelming. And yet, this is Harry's baby, perhaps the only piece of him she has left if he can't manage to clear her name and bring her home, or if – heaven forbid – something were to happen to him, some bomb or stray bullet were to end his life – a possibility she tries not to think about too much, but a possibility nonetheless.

She thinks about contacting him, telling him, asking for his advise, but she quickly dismisses the idea as madness. It's been barely a month since she left. She'd be landing herself straight in jail and everyone on the team who'd helped her escape in hot water if she was found out now, and that's not even considering what Harry might do if he knew. He's proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he's incapable of thinking and acting rationally when she's in danger, and God only knows what the knowledge that she's pregnant would prompt him to do – maybe attempt to bring her home prematurely or resign and come after her, which would completely defeat the purpose of her sacrifice in the first place and put them all in danger in the process.

Briefly she dares to contemplate what would have happened if she hadn't been forced to leave and she'd been safe and sound at home when she'd discovered her pregnancy, but she quickly dismisses the notion as she knows the only reason she became pregnant in the first place is her exile and the fact that no one had thought – herself included – to bring along the rest of her pills when they'd retrieved her bag from her house. She hadn't even missed them, so out of her sleeping and waking routine has she been since leaving home, and her mind so full of other things.

“Are you still there, little one?” she murmurs now, hand resting on her stomach as she looks down before smiling and lifting her face to the sun again. The weather's been beautiful these last few days, and she's taken advantage of it everyday by going for a walk through the fields and woods along the river in the little town of Eymet where she's been staying for ten days now. It's good for her, and if she's going to keep this baby, she's going to have to be fit and strong to carry it and give birth, not to mention produce enough milk for her son or daughter.

She smiles as she thinks of that, remembering the French woman she'd seen, just the other day, nursing her baby, the joy and love on the woman's face as her daughter had looked into her eyes, little fist clenched around her mother's bunched up blouse, her mouth working away, suckling at her breast. She'd almost melted at the sight and realised that the longer she puts off the decision about the abortion, the less likely it is that she'll want one or be able to carry through with it if she decides it's for the best.

So as she sits in the sun this morning, she takes out the notebook she's bought for just this purpose and begins making a list of the pros and cons of keeping Harry's baby on one page, and letting it go on the other.

By the end of the hour, the logic of it is clear. The problem is that her emotional response to said logic is not.
Chapter Notes

A/N Thank you all for sticking with this story. Your support through your reviews and kudos motivates me to keep going. What an epic fic this is turning out to be! I've got over 100,000 words written already! I feel that I should acknowledge that the postcard in this fic is mentioned in Spooks: the Personnel Files (another book) - though, as rahleeyah pointed out recently, Harry adding it to Ruth's personnel file makes no sense at all. But hey, that's Kudos for you. Cheers, S.C.

1 November 2006 – Harry

Another birthday, alone again, with not even Ben for company this time. He'd hoped so much, last year, that this year he'd have Ruth to celebrate with, but it seems like he's destined to never be happy in this life, to never have anything good last long.

His marriage to Jane had never really been good, had never really satisfied him in the way that a marriage should, and he knows now that it had been his own fault for marrying too quickly, for being too immature and headstrong, for destroying any chance of real intimacy and trust through his words and actions, his posturing and inability to open up and let Jane in, and his choice of profession that had only compounded all their problems. The secrets, the uncertainty, the danger and the loss that go with the territory are not conducive to a stable home life with someone special, to building intimacy and trust, and over the years, he'd found himself becoming progressively more distant from everyone, save perhaps Ben – it's hard to bullshit someone who's known you since you were three years old and who's seen you in so many unguarded moments.

The lies, the secrets, the betrayals he's suffered over the years have taken their toll on his ability to trust, to open up, to love freely, but then Ruth had entered his life, and like Ben, she'd had an innate, uncanny ability to read him, see through the bluster and bravado, the posturing and rough exterior he presents to the world, get past all his defences to the man he is inside, and make him feel worthy, valued, admired, loved in spite of everything he's done. So despite everything, despite the secrets, the danger, the uncertainty, he'd really hoped there was a chance this time, with Ruth, to break the cycle of lies, pain, betrayal, and loss. Ruth being in the Service herself, part of his world and behind a desk like him, had given him hope that they could overcome all the obstacles to intimacy and love, and make it together.

_How wrong was I_, he thinks bitterly, filling his mouth with more scotch. He's sitting in his armchair, Rachmaninov playing in the background as he stares into the electric fire, Scarlet curled up contentedly before it with Fidget between her paws, Wol preferring the comfort of the sofa beside him.

_Where are you, Ruth_, he wonders, blinking to clear the moisture from his eyes at the thought of her, the yearning for her that threatens to overwhelm him. Is she safe? Is she well? Is she thinking of him tonight? The questions are endless and without answer, so he turns his mind elsewhere, recalling his lunch with Catherine and Fabian earlier today, feeling pleased that his daughter is well on the mend.
now and able to walk short distances without support. She's made remarkable progress as he knew she would – there's not a thing that phases her and her determination is quite something to behold and fills his heart with pride. They'd told him that they'd moved out of Jane's apartment a couple of weeks ago and are now living together. Fabian has managed to get a transfer to the French Embassy here, which means that they're all set to stay in London for a while and, as far as Harry's concerned, it's the best birthday present his daughter could have given him. As it happens, she'd also given him a lovely, dark green scarf that he's planning on using when the weather gets colder. She's always had good taste in clothes, has Catherine, and always manages to get him something he'll actually wear.

Graham had rung him too to wish him a happy birthday and had promised to have lunch with him at the weekend. Jane had sent a card and rung him before he'd left the Grid, suggesting they have coffee sometime when he's not too busy, so he'd agreed to that, knowing it's unlikely to happen any time soon, but pleased she'd made the suggestion. Jane seems to be almost as busy as he is these days according to his children, which is nice for her and eases his guilt somewhat for having ended their marriage. He's no idea if she's seeing someone yet and he doesn't want to ask because he knows that'll lead to questions about Ruth and he'd rather not talk about that – the pain is still too raw, too deep, too overwhelming.

He misses her so much – every moment of every day, with every breath he takes. Memories of her are everywhere – on the Grid, in his car, in his home, in his bed – all of them still sharp, still vivid, though he knows that they will fade with time. And he dreads that. He dreads waking up one day to realise that he can't quite recall the exact colour of her eyes, the softness of her lips, the sound of her voice, the musical tinkle of her laugh, the taste of her, the feel of her skin against his, or the precise sensation of her walls contracting around him. And though at times it's near torture to remember all that he's lost with her departure, he spends much of his time recalling her, hoping that it'll help his mind hold onto her for longer and make his dreams of her more vivid and frequent.

He dreams of her almost every night, and though the dreams are often far from pleasant and sometimes downright terrifying, there are times when they're exquisite – quite conversations full of her smiles and laughter, loving cuddles and kisses that make her eyes sparkle and her cheeks flush, or love making that is breathtaking, ardent, fiery and blissful. And somehow, the happy dreams make up for all the rest and he wakes with a smile on his lips, a fullness in his heart, and often as sticky as a teen or so near the edge that all it takes is a quick rub to get there.

His phone rings, making him groan as he sits up, then frown when he realises it's not his work phone, but the burner phone he'd bought after Ruth left. He gets up quickly, retrieving it and walking into the bathroom where he turns on the shower – he sweeps his place for bugs regularly, but one can never be too careful – before he answers. “Yes?”

“Happy birthday, Captain,” Ben's voice greets him and though he knew only Ben has this number, he's momentarily disappointed. A part of him had been hoping that Ruth had got in touch with Ben and had got this number from him.

“Thanks,” he replies, lowering the loo seat and sitting down. “Any news?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. That's why I'm ringing on this number. I received a postcard this morning from someone calling themself Stubborn Mule, and seeing as you're the only stubborn mule I know and, I figured, you'd just ring me if you wanted to get in touch, I assumed it was from Celeste,” he says, using the code name they'd agreed for Ruth.

Harry smiles, his heart warming, overflowing with love for her. “What does it say?” he asks softly.

“It says, you did the right thing,” he replies. “We both did the right thing. Salus populi suprema lex. Grand tours are less fun alone, but I am well and safe. Look after yourself. I think of you often. Quos
Harry covers the microphone with his thumb, his eyes filling with tears, her words getting past all his defences, unravelling his self-control, his shoulders beginning to shake as the tears fall, a sob escaping him even as he fights for control.

“I looked up the Latin,” Ben adds, “just in case yours is as rusty as mine. Let the welfare of the people be the supreme law is the first one, and true love will hold onto those whom it has held, the second.”

Silence reins for long moments as Harry endeavours to calm himself, his thumb still over the microphone, and though he hadn't needed the translation Ben's provided, he's grateful for the extra time it's afforded him to bring his emotions under control again.

“Harry? You alright?” Ben asks after a few moments.

He takes a deep breath and murmurs, “Fine,” the roughness of his voice betraying the lie even as he covers the microphone once more lest Ben hear his rugged breathing.

“It'll be alright,” Ben replies, his voice gentle. “You'll see her again and probably a lot sooner than you think. She's well and safe. That's the important thing right now, and you're working on clearing the charges from your end. She got in touch. That's good. It means she's feeling confident and secure where she is. Maybe next time she'll try the phone, or send me her email address or something. Don't despair, Harry. It took me more than thirty years to win round Sarah. It won't take that long for you.”

“It's my fault,” he whispers, wiping his tears away.

“What is?”

“They went after her because of her connection to me,” he admits miserably. It's not something he's told Ben before.

There's a pause while Ben digests this. “That may be true, but that doesn't make it your fault. It's still someone else who did this to her, to those men. It's still their fault. Besides, either way, it sounds to me like she doesn't care anyway. She's telling you that you did the right thing. You're not responsible for everything that happens to the people you love, Harry. Next you'll be telling me it's your fault Sarah and I didn't get together sooner.”

“Well,” he begins and hears Ben laugh, making him smile as he wipes away the last of the tears from his cheeks.

“Lighten up, Harry. Cut yourself some slack and stop trying to blame yourself for everything. The guilt will kill you as sure as any bullet, and then, where would Celeste be? She sacrificed herself to stop you falling on your sword to save her because she knew you had a better chance of getting her back from exile than she had of getting you out of prison. So do it. Get her back. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and guilty about her predicament and act!”

“I am,” he replies with annoyance at the implication that he's just sitting around on his arse, wallowing. “I'm doing all I can at this end. The problem is, at some point, I'm going to need someone at that meeting to cooperate, and given that they all hate my guts for exposing them, it's not going to be easy.”

“You'll find a way. There must be something you can give them in exchange, or something you can take away. Men like that can always be bought or threatened into cooperating.”
“Yes,” he agrees. He's already thought of all this himself, but it's good to talk about it with someone else, someone he trusts completely. He doesn't normally do this because Ben doesn't have the clearance, but this is not an op, just his personal quest to get back the woman he loves and enough of the info regarding the extradition of those prisoners to Egypt has been made public for him to feel comfortable that he's sharing only a little more detail with his brother. Besides, he knows Ben would never betray him. “Where was it posted from?” he asks, his thoughts drifting back to the postcard.

“Paris. The front looks like a painting of a café with Sacré-Coeur in the background. I don't remember any café with such a clear view of it, so I guess there's a fair amount of artistic licence involved, but it's pretty.”

He smiles, remembering his first dinner date with Ruth. He's not doubt the choice of postcard is deliberate, a message to him that she remembers and misses him too.

“Do you think she's in Paris?” Ben asks.

“I doubt it,” he replies. “She wouldn't have sent the postcard herself. She'll have asked someone to post it for her.” He takes a deep breath. “Listen, Ben, I'd better go.”

“Alright. I'll be home over Christmas. Sarah wanted me to ask you if you fancy a large family gathering. She was thinking of bringing everyone together, her brothers and their families and you lot if you're interested, anyone who can and wants to join us. She's not sorted anything yet, but she asked me to ask you, so think about it, ask Catherine and Graham, Jane too if you like, and let me know.”

“Will do.”

“Take care, Harry. Talk soon.”

“Bye, Ben,” and with that he hangs up, pockets the phone and switches off the shower, leaving the room to lock up and head to bed, feeling somewhat better after talking to his brother, a new determination to make the best of everything and keep plugging away at clearing Ruth's name taking hold of him, knowing that sooner or later he'll succeed in bringing her home.

He gets ready for bed and slips under the covers, turning on his side to face the empty spot beside him, closing his eyes and imagining Ruth lying there, smiling at him. He hopes he dreams of her tonight and that the dreams are pleasant, hopes that his dream-self visits her in her dreams too. If they can't be together in real life, than they'll have to make do with the land of dreams until they're reunited.
25 December 2006 - Ruth

She misses her mother more than anything today, thinking of her spending Christmas without her for the first time in years. She hopes she's not alone like she is. Did Harry tell her what really happened to me, she wonders, or does she believe her only child is dead? She feels desperately sad at the thought of her mother grieving her death, believing that she's outlived everyone of the people closest to her – both her husbands, her step-son and her daughter, not to mention her only sister. She desperately hopes that Harry tried to spare her the heartbreak, that he told her the truth, or as near the truth as he could manage, but in this instance she cannot be certain. She rather suspects that Harry would have lied to protect her, even if that lie broke her mother's heart.

There's still time, she tells herself. I'll see Mum again. Maybe we can spend next Christmas together. Even if Harry hasn't managed to clear her name, perhaps she could find a way to contact her mother, arrange to meet her somewhere in France, or Italy, or Greece. It should be safe enough by then to risk it. The people who might still be looking for her will, hopefully, have given up by then. And her son will be eight months old – just the right age for his first trip abroad to meet his Granny.

Her son.

She still can't quite believe it. She only found out last week that it's a boy and has yet to feel him move, but she knows he's in there – she has the baby bump and ultrasound picture to prove it.

A boy.

She'd been hoping for a girl, if she's honest, because she thought it would be easier for her to identify with and parent a little girl, having been one herself once upon a time. She's not quite sure that she knows what to do with a boy. What if he's really athletic like his father, or loves trains and cars, or wants to play with guns? And though she keeps telling herself that thinking like that is sexist and that she doesn't want to put her son in a box or limit him in any way from reaching his full potential in whatever way he chooses, she can't help worrying. And then there's Harry, or more accurately, Harry's absence to deal with. She knows how important a father figure is to a little boy – though equally she recognises that a girl needs a father too; she adored her own father and was very close to him and devastated by his loss – and she worries about her son growing up without one. For though she hopes that Harry will manage to clear her name, knows that he won't rest until he's succeeded, she has to control that hope lest she become disillusioned when Harry doesn't come for her before little Jamie's born. So for now, she's set her sights on Jamie's second birthday, a rather long but, she feels, manageable length of time to cope on her own, especially since she's decided that her next move will be her last one.

She has to stop somewhere to have her baby and she feels like she's reached her limit. She can't cope with changing locations every few days or weeks any more. She needs some stability to prepare to bring this child into the world and the sooner the better as far as she's concerned. When she'd decided that an abortion was out of the question, she'd given herself four months to find a place where she could stay safely for several months and her time is almost up now.

It's funny really. When she’d told Adam, “Something. Life in a different direction,” she hadn't imagined anything like this – becoming Jamie's Mum and doing her best to care for him – but she's glad of it now. She can do this. She wants to do this. And Harry might be disappointed that she
won't be returning to Section D, but he's going to have to live with that. Jamie has to be her number one priority now and she's determined to do the best she can for him – love him, nurture him, encourage him, protect him.

“We'll be all right, Jamie,” she says, running her hand over her bump affectionately before returning to her packing. “Next Christmas will be much better than this one. You'll see.” Briefly she wonders whom she's trying to reassure, Jamie or herself, before pushing the thought aside.

She's leaving tomorrow, taking the coach down to Athens and from there the ferry to Crete. She hasn't decided if she'll stay there yet. She rather thinks she might go on to Cyprus where she can get lost more easily as a British woman in a former colony. She can't really get any further from London and still remain within Europe, and though the fact that there are British bases on the island, including a GCHQ listening post at Ayios Nikolaos worries her a little, she hopes that, if she stays on the West side of the island, she can remain undetected, hiding in plain sight right under their noses. She doubts they'll expect to find her there, and she's tried France already, Spain, Italy and now Greece – gravitating to the south of Europe that's warm and near the sea, wishing to make the experience of her exile feel more like a holiday – but none of these places have felt like somewhere she could call home for a year or two.

She'll switch passports if she decides to go to Cyprus, dye her hair again and make a clean start, leave Marlene in Crete and begin anew as Valentina Constanza Moreno, who speaks fluent Spanish but has a British accent because she was sent to boarding school in Britain from the time she was eleven. Her parents have both passed away, though she does have a sister who lives in Australia, and an ex-partner who is abusive and from whom she's hiding, hence the absence of work references. She'd thought that last idea inspired when it had come to her late at night, thinking it's likely to get her out of a difficult position easily and win her some friends at the same time, something she'll need when she reaches her final destination, wherever that might be. It'll also neatly explain the absence of Jamie's father.

She glances at the clock, noting it's almost six, which would make it five in Germany and a perfect time to ring Ben, hoping to catch him before Christmas dinner starts. She's nervous, part of her dreading this conversation, knowing how unlikely it is that Harry will have succeeded to clear her name yet, but also knowing that she needs to do this before she leaves this place. She hopes the chances of anyone listening into Ben's phone-calls is nil, but she can't be certain, so she plans to keep the call short and to the point and disappear without a trace tomorrow. There's no way they can get someone up here so fast, even if they do manage to trace the call. It's remote, she'll be using a public phone, and she's surely not that high of a priority for them to be wire-tapping Ben's phone or involve the local police.

“Come on, Ruth,” she murmurs, wiping her sweaty palms on her skirt. “You can do this.”

So she slips on her gloves and coat – Ros's coat, actually – picks up her phone card, purse and keys, and lets herself out of her flat to walk down to the public phone. It's a cold evening, but not too bad considering the time of year, and there's hardly anyone about to ask her what she's doing on her own at Christmas. Not that they would. She hasn't been here long enough to make friends and the Greeks don't really celebrate Christmas in the same way the Brits do. Easter is more their thing, she's discovered. At any rate, she doesn't encounter anyone and is soon picking up the receiver and slipping the card into the slot before she quickly dials the number she memorised weeks ago and waits.

It rings for a long time before she hangs up and tries his mobile, cursing herself for not planning this better and ending up having to ring him on a holiday when he's likely to be out or celebrating with his family. Maybe he's with Harry, she thinks suddenly, her mouth going dry, and she's about to
hang up the phone again in fear when Ben finally answers.

“Hello?”

She can hear music in the background and voices, which almost makes her change her mind, feeling like an idiot for ringing him today.

“Hello? Hello? I can't hear you.”

She licks her lips and puts her other hand on her stomach for reassurance. You're doing this for Jamie too, she tells herself. “Hello, Ben?”

“Yes?”

“Happy Christmas. It's—”

“Don't say anything. Write down this number.” Ben replies swiftly, startling her a little. “Ready?”

“No,” she murmurs, holding the receiver with her shoulder as she pulls off her gloves and searches her bag for a pen. The noise of conversation at Ben's end of the line has decreased somewhat as she finds what she's looking for, and she guesses he's moved to somewhere more quiet. “Ready,” she says, hands trembling slightly, the pen poised over her hand.

“England, seven, seven, twenty-one, four, four, six, nine, double-oh. Got that?”

“Yes.”

“Ring it now.” And with that instruction he hangs up.

She puts the receiver down and takes a deep breath before putting the pen away, pulling out the phone-card, lifting the receiver again and reinserting it. She could stand here all night, thinking everything through, or she could just do what Ben said. Harry told her to trust Ben, so that is what she's going to do. She can't handle the pressure of analysing everything right now, and it's cold out, so quickly, she punches in the number and waits for the line to connect.

“Ruth?” the voice on the other end is so achingly familiar that she forgets how to breathe for several moments, tears filling her eyes, utterly overcome by emotion.

“Harry?” she chokes out, one hand gripping the receiver hard, pressing it against her ear as the other moves to her throat, grasping the fabric of her coat closed.

“Christ, it's so good to hear your voice.”

She makes a strangled, little noise, half-laugh and half-sob, as the thought, that's the understatement of the year, flits through her mind. “And yours. I've missed you.”

“And I, you. So much, Ruth.” There's a pause, then he asks, “How are you? Are you well? Are you safe? Where are you?”

“I'm fine,” she replies, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “What about you? How's everything there?”

“Fine. The usual.”

“And you?”

“Missing you.”
She smiles. “Me too.”

Another pause, then he whispers, “I'm sorry, Ruth, it's not good news yet. I'm doing all I can and we've made progress. We've managed to disprove the murder charges, show the CCTV footage was doctored and got the supposed witness to retract her statement, but proving you're not Fox is not as easy. I've spoken to Oliver, but he's asking for too much at the moment in exchange for his testimony that Fox never existed. I'm working on him though, trying to get him to be reasonable, and looking at other avenues as well. We'll get there. I promise.”

A recorded message cuts in just then, telling her that she only has one minute left on this call.

“It's okay, Harry,” she says quickly. “I knew it was a long shot. I just wanted to check before I move on. I'm fine. Don't worry about me. We're about to get cut off and I don't have another phone card to ring you back. I'll call again soon. Alright? You take care and remember not to get shot. Okay?”

“Yes. You too, Ruth,” he murmurs, his voice suddenly thick with emotion. “Ring me again. It's a burner phone and only you and Ben have this number. I keep it at home, so it's not discovered. Ring me in the evening or at night, all right?”

“Yes.”

“And if you can't reach me, ring Ben. He didn't want to talk because he's in Britain, but if you ring him when he's at home, there shouldn't be a problem. All right?”

“Okay.”

“I love you, Ruth,” he murmurs. “Happy Christmas.”

“I love you too,” she replies just before the call is dropped, “Happy Christmas,” she finds herself whispering as she returns the phone to the hook and pulls out the empty phone-card, slipping it into her purse. Then she slides her gloves back on and turns to go back to her room, a mixture of pain and pleasure swirling inside her, the ache of missing him so much stronger than before, but the joy of hearing his voice overpowering too.

She concentrates on putting one foot in front of the other all the way to her room until she's safely locked inside it and she can collapse onto the bed, weeping her heart out for the loss of him, the disappointment of hearing him confirm her fear that she cannot go home now, heartbroken that she cannot tell him yet that he will have another child soon, a little, beautiful, bright-eyed boy named James after both their fathers. And as she thinks about that and weeps, cradling her baby-bump within her arms, she feels little Jamie move for the first time, almost as if he's trying to tell her, “It's all right, Mum. Don't cry. We'll be fine, you and I. Don't worry. Everything will turn out well in the end. You'll see.”
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

A/N: Just a short one today with more to come tomorrow. This is set during 5.10 just to link back into what is happening in canon (from which I borrow a couple of lines of dialogue). Thanks for your continuing support for this story. Cheers, S.C.

21 March 2007 - Harry

“Send in the divers,” he says into the phone. “See if there were any... survivors.” He ends the call, staring straight ahead, his mask in place as he hides the pain of another loss.

“Harry, it was a forty pound bomb,” Zaf says incredulously, and there really isn't much he can say to that. He knows the changes of either Ros or Adam having survived are slim to none, and yet he refuses to give up hope until their bodies are found and brought before him.

Hope is the only thing he has left these days.

The seconds tick past painfully slowly, everyone's eyes on him or his phone, waiting for the news. He knows they're all preparing themselves for the worst, but he's also sure there's a sliver of hope in each of their hearts. He's just glad it wasn't his call this time to send two of his finest officers to their deaths.

The phone rings just once before he snatches it up. “Pearce,” he says and listens, holding his breath.

“You didn't trust me and that almost got the pair of us killed, Harry,” Adam's voice responds angrily, and the relief is so overpowering that he slumps back in his seat, lifting a hand to cover his eyes.

He runs his hand over his forehead and through his sparse hair as his eyes alight on Malcolm's and he replies, “What did you expect me to do, Adam, when you've been lying to us all?”

At his words, he sees Malcolm's eyes light up and a smile grace his lips for a moment before he gets up and moves towards the door. Jo springs to her feet, asking, “Adam? He's alright? And Ros?” Harry nods at her and watches as she beams at him, murmuring, “Thank God!” and turning to Zaf to give him a hug. Then the pair of them slip out of the room too, leaving him alone in his office once more.

“I expect you to trust me to do my job,” Adam replies. “I'm fine.”

“You're not, Adam, and we both know it. Now is not the time to discuss this, however. Is Ros alright?”

“Yeah. She almost drowned. She should get checked out by a medic, but she's refusing.”

“You're both getting checked out by a medic. That's an order.” His voice is steely despite the relief and joy running through his veins in this moment. “Get checked out, then go home and rest. Debrief first thing tomorrow morning for both of you. Any other survivors?”
“No,” Adam replies.

“Right,” Harry says, resisting the temptation to say, good. It is so much cleaner in these cases if no one survives though he knows that Ruth wouldn't like him saying that. Ruth is not here, however, to his continuing pain and regret, nor has she got in touch since Christmas. God, please let her be all right.

The line has gone dead, so he presses the button to end the call, holding it down and taking a few, deep breaths to reign in his emotions before he lifts his finger and dials the deputy PM's office to tell her the good news. When he's done with the various phone calls he needs to make, he exits his office, allowing his eyes to sweep over the Grid, taking in each one of his officers as they turn their eyes on his.

“You did an excellent job today,” he says. “Well done. The George, I think. First round's on me.” And with many smiles and much joking and laughter from them, he follows his officers out of the pods, feeling grateful for a good ending to yet another impossible day and hoping that he and Ruth will have their happy ending too, sometime very soon.
“Jamie,” she whispers softly, gazing down at her newborn son as she cradles him in her arms, one finger softly stroking his cheek. “Hello, little one. Welcome to the world. Mummy loves you very, very much and you're the best birthday present anyone could ever wish for.”

Her son looks up at her through beautiful, hazel eyes, eyes that are the spitting image of his father’s. “Oh Harry,” she sighs, feeling such sadness all of a sudden that he's missing from this scene. He should have been here for the birth of his son and it breaks her heart that he's not.

There's a knock on the door, and when she's wiped her eyes swiftly and called, “Come in,” George appears in the doorway with Despoina, her two friends from the cardiology department of this hospital where she'd been working until recently. George is a doctor and Despoina an administrator and they're both absolutely lovely people.


“Thank you,” she replies, beaming with pride as they come closer to look at her son.

“Oh my God, he's gorgeous.”

“A very handsome, young man.”

“Hardly a man, George,” she admonishes lightly, returning her eyes to Jamie. “Let him be a baby first, then a little boy and a slightly bigger one before he turns into a man. He's got a long way to go before he's ready for that responsibility, don’t you, Jamie?” She smiles down at her son who she's sure is trying to smile back at her.

“He's precious,” Despoina says and then proceeds to make weird spitting noises that Ruth has learnt people here make to ward off the evil eye. She'd been quite alarmed when she'd heard someone do that the first time. “I'm so proud of you both.”

“Thank you.”

“This is for you and this is for Jamie,” Despoina responds, taking what looks like a beautifully embroidered shawl out of a gift bag and a cotton, newborn hat with elephants for Jamie, but it turns out it's not a shawl at all, but a gorgeous, hand-made baby-sling.

“Blimey, Despoina!” Ruth exclaims. “This is too much.”

“No, no. It is perfect. It brings out the colour of your eyes. Doesn't it, George?”

“Absolutely.”

“But-”

“No but,” Despoina objects.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, setting the sling down on the bed and reaching her hand over to squeeze her friend's – she only has one arm free as the other is still cradling Jamie. Despoina just smiles and
kisses her cheek before stepping back to allow George to give her his gifts, a picture from his son, Nico, whom Ruth has met several times, some flowers in a vase to brighten up her room, and a teddy bear for Jamie that he jiggles in front of him for a moment and then lays down on the bed.

“Thank you, George,” she smiles, letting him lean in and kiss her cheek.

“You're welcome.”

Then they take turns holding her precious boy, her eyes filling with tears as she watches George cradle him in his arms and murmur quiet words to him, wishing so much in that moment that George was Harry instead.

“What's wrong?” Despoina asks.

“Nothing,” she smiles, quickly wiping her cheeks with her hands.

“You wish his father was here, no?” she asks astutely. She's been a good friend and Ruth's found herself confiding in her about her feelings for Harry – though Despoina believes his name is James and that he's a recovering alcoholic who's fallen back off the wagon and had become abusive in the last few weeks before Ruth discovered her pregnancy and decided to leave him.

“Yes. I wish things could have been different.”

“I bet George would be his father if you asked him,” Despoina confides then, startling her. “What? You are a beautiful woman, Valentina, and he is a widower with a son of his own. He would not say no, I think.”

“You think he's... in love with me?” She's never considered the possibility before.

“No. Not yet. But he could be if you wanted him to be.”

“I don't. I don't want... that. I need friends, not-”

“Not now – you're not ready, but maybe soon,” Despoina interrupts, pats her arm reassuringly, and steps away, addressing George in Greek, demanding another turn holding little Jamie and leaving Ruth feeling rather worried and confused, especially since she's already agreed to work for George as a nanny for Nico in a month or so, when Jamie's a little bigger and she's run out of money to pay the rent. The last thing she needs is for George to be falling in love with her.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

A/N: We're skipping ahead in time rather quickly in the next few chapters, but hopefully it works. This one is set after 6.09 with Harry feeling a bit more hopeful. A big thank you to all who continue to read and support my work. You're amazing and I couldn't do it without you. Cheers, S.C.

1 June 2007 – Harry

He sits in his armchair, a glass of Scotch in his hand, thinking over the events of the day.

_Davie King._

The bastard's lucky it had been Jo who'd disarmed him. If it had been him, there's really not much chance that he'd still be breathing now. And the Home Secretary, ordering their execution and washing his hands of it, claiming it was his only choice – never mind that he'd managed to get the Iranian deal through without the need for bloodshed. It angers and disgusts him to think that after so many years of loyal service, of pain and sacrifices, his officers' lives are worth so little, are at the mercy of these people – politicians who'll stop at nothing to get what they want.

But at least now, he has Blake over a barrel, which is where he's wanted him for a very long time. He'll tighten the thumbscrews tomorrow and see what can be done for Ruth.

_Ruth._

He's thought about her more today than ever before. Walking to his possible death, his thoughts had been with her. While he'd stood unarmed in front of the cab, waiting to be shot, his thoughts had been with her. While Adam had been diffusing the bomb, his thoughts had been with her. He'd been grateful that she's no longer part of his team, no longer in danger, but at the same time, he'd have given anything for one last look in her eyes, one last touch of her skin, one last kiss, hoping against hope that he'd survive and they'd get a chance to be reunited.

He's heard from her just once since Christmas – another postcard sent to _his_ address this time and posted from Rome, letting him know that she's well and enjoying the spring weather, but missing the scarf he'd given her when the sun gets too hot and wishing he was with her. She hadn't signed it, just written the word love and an X at the bottom. It had brought a smile to his lips and an even stronger ache to his heart, but it had been so good to know she's safe, as after more than three months he'd started to get really worried. He wonders why she hasn't used the phone to get in touch yet, but maybe the disappointment of hearing she can't come home at Christmas had been too much, and she's biding her time now, drawing it out as long as she can to give him a chance to fix everything first.

Every night he's come home, taken the phone from his safe, and switched it on. Every night he's taken Scarlet for a walk with the phone in his pocket. Every night he's got himself some dinner, drank a glass of whisky in his armchair, got ready for bed with the phone by his side. Every night
he's fallen asleep waiting for it to ring, and every morning he's turned it off again with a sigh of deep
disappointment and slipped it back into his safe, telling himself that tonight is the night Ruth will ring
him once more and all he has to do is get through today to hear her voice again, telling him that she
loves him.

But despite the heartache it's caused him for so long and the daily disappointments, perhaps it's for
the best that she hasn't called until now, because now, finally he's getting somewhere. Now he has
the chance he's been waiting for with Connie back on the team, working with Malcolm, Oliver in a
corner and finally cooperating, and Blake over a barrel. He can taste the victory. He's on the brink of
success, and next time Ruth rings him, he'll be able to tell her that and bring her home. He could
have her back here with him within a few weeks, perhaps even before the first anniversary of the day
she left, leaving him standing on the docks, heartbroken and alone.

He needs her, now more than ever, for the past couple of months have nearly killed him with Adam
unravelling before his eyes, losing Zaf, and unleashing a WMD on London – ordering Jane, Lizzie
and Graham out of London and frantically trying to get hold of Catherine when she hadn't been
answering her phone – the nuclear triggers going to Iran, Adam almost killed again, the discovery of
the existence of Yalta, and the blow of Ros and Juliet's betrayal, not to mention helplessly watching
Ros die – though thankfully that hadn't happened in the end. And to top it all off, tomorrow he has to
talk to Adam about his attempt to publish everything through Ben Kaplan.

He sighs and takes another sip of this drink. His recruitment of Ben is about the only bright spot he
can think of that came out of all this chaos, and he can't help thinking how much of this could have
been avoided if Ruth had been by his side, ferreting out information, making connections, calming
him, keeping him focused on the bigger picture, on the right action, on the high moral ground. 
Would he have bombed that train in Tehran? Would he have resorted to torture to get the
vaccinations? Would she have spotted Adam's meltdown in time? Would she have figured out what
Ros was up to with Yalta? Would her love, her presence in his life, their lovemaking and her positive
influence on his psyche have changed the outcome of all these operations for the better? He will
never know for sure, but he suspects that they might have done.

He's a much better spy under her calming influence, a much better leader, a much better man. He
hates living his life without her in it and, if he's honest, he's still somewhat amazed and confounded
by that. Never before has he needed anyone. Never before has his happiness depended on another
person's presence in his everyday life. He loves his children, his nieces, Jane too, in a way, and he
loves his brother, but he can live without seeing them everyday. In fact, he could probably survive
without ever seeing them again if he knew they were safe somewhere, living their lives, being happy.
It's different with Ruth though. He needs Ruth. He needs her here, with him.

*Quos amor verus tenuit tenebit,* she'd said. Maybe that's it. Maybe that's the difference. True love.
Finally. Now all he has to do is find her and bring her home.

“Where are you, Ruth?” he murmurs out loud, hoping, praying that she's safe and will contact him
again soon, and as if he's understood every word, Fidget jumps onto the armrest and climbs onto his
lap, purring.
When his phone rings, he's got his arms around Sarah, lazily kissing her lips, humming in bliss as her hands run thought his hair, her kisses slowly getting hotter, more intense, so that he almost ignores the call. Perhaps he somehow senses that it's important, however, because he makes an exasperated noise and pulls back, kissing her lips again and murmuring, “Hold that thought,” before reaching for his phone and answering it. “Pearce,” he says, his eyes never leaving Sarah's.

“Ben?”

“Yes?”

“It's Ruth.”

That gets his attention and he suddenly sits up straighter. Sarah gives him a quizzical look, but he shakes his head as he murmurs, “Ruth. Well, this is a pleasant surprise. How are you?”

“Fine. I'm fine,” she replies, but there is something in her voice – an uncertainty, a worry.

“Everything all right?”

“Yes. I'm fine. You?” She sounds more certain this time. Maybe it's just nerves, he thinks.

“I'm good. I'm glad you called. I've got good news. Harry's managed to clear your name. You're free to come home, Ruth.”

He hears her sharp, indrawn breath and then a strange kind of strangled noise before all is silent and he suspects she's covered the microphone.

“Tea?” Sarah asks softly, taking advantage of the lull in the conversation. He nods and watches her rise and leave the room, pushing aside his disappointment that the moment between them has been broken, before turning his attention back to his phone call.

He gives her a few moments before he speaks again. “Ruth? Are you alright?”

“Yes,” she breathes. “I'm just... It's been so long. When did this happen?”

“Just recently, but we had no way to contact you. Harry's been very anxious to hear from you. I think he was a little worried.”

“I'm sorry. I'm fine. I've just stayed in one place for the last few months and I didn't want to risk being found and having to move all over again.” Another pause. “It's really true? I can come home and I won't be arrested?”

“It's true. Tell me where you are and I'll get your passport to you. In fact, I'll bring it myself or Harry will if he can get away.”

There's silence on the other end of the line again for long moments, and he thinks that perhaps the call's been dropped this time. “Ruth? Are you still there?”
She doesn't answer, but he hears a muffled sob before she eventually replies, her voice pained and unsteady. “I'm sorry, Ben. I'm so sorry, but I can't come home right now.”

“What?! Why not?”

“I don't... I've had a lot of time to think about this. It's not safe, Ben. Neither for me, nor for Harry if I come back. They'll use me again to get to him. I know they will and I can't... I can't afford to let that happen any more.”

“Jesus, Ruth!” He stands and begins to pace the room, his hand rising to rub his forehead in distress. “He'll be devastated. You know that, don't you? He's had one hell of a year. The thought of seeing you again is all that's kept him going.”

“I'm sorry. So sorry, Ben.”

“Then don't do this,” he pleads. “Come back. He'll find a way to protect you. You know, he will.”

“He can't. Not from everyone and I don't want to be in this position again, nor do I want him to blame himself any more than he already does. If someone takes me, tortures me, kills me, Ben, to get to him, it'll destroy him. You know it will. I don't want that. And I don't want...” but here she tails off before she begins again. “And last time, he wasn't thinking straight. When I'm in danger, he does stupid things. He tried to land himself in jail, Ben, claimed to be a rogue agent just to save me. I'm a liability.”

“He was unprepared. This time will be different,” Ben argues – picturing the devastation on Harry's face and knowing he has to find a way to convince her.

“Maybe and maybe not, but I'm not prepared to risk it. I'm safe here and so is Harry. The moment I come back that will be true for neither of us.”

Silence reigns for several moments as he processes this, the determination colouring her voice now making him realise she's thought about this a lot. Desperately he racks his brain to find a way to change her mind because this will surely kill Harry. “I don't know what will be worse, Ruth. At least if you came back, he'd be happy,” he says eventually. “Please don't do this to him. There's got to be a way to work this out. Tell me where you are. I won't tell him. I'll come there and we can talk about this, find a solution between us.”

“I can't. The only thing keeping me safe is no one knowing where I am.”

“Please, Ruth,” he tries again.

“I'm sorry. I can't.”

“Then at least think about it and ring me back. Give it a few more days.”

“I'm sorry,” she murmurs, sounding anguished.

He exhales heavily in frustration, suddenly understanding why she'd signed that postcard Stubborn Mule and not feeling the least bit amused by it.

“Tell him,” she begins, but suddenly it's too much for him – his anger flares and he doesn't let her finish.

“No! You want to break his heart, Ruth, that's your prerogative, but I sure as hell am not going to be part of it. He's a decent, loyal man and the best fucking brother anyone could wish for, so I'll not be
delivering this news to him. I'll not rip his heart from his chest and watch while the light dies in his eyes.”

“Ben!” she protests, a sob escaping her.

“What?! Don't pretend like you don't know what this will do to him. You, of all people, should know the sacrifices he's made, the cost.”

“And what about the sacrifices I've made?” she demands, suddenly as angry as he. “Do they count for nothing? What about me and what I want and need? This is my life too!”

He bites the inside of his cheek to stop himself telling her what he thinks of her needs right now as he paces the room to get his emotions under control again. “I don't understand you, Ruth,” he says eventually. “You seemed so in love with each other. You sent him a postcard talking about true love and Grand Tours. At Christmas, he was overjoyed to hear from you. What the hell happened? What's changed?” Then a horrible thought occurs to him. “Is it someone else? Is that it? Are you in love with someone else?”

His words are followed by a long silence that makes his heart sink. No, no, no. Oh God, no, he thinks desperately. Say it isn't so, Ruth. For the love of God, say-

“Yes,” she whispers. “There's someone else.”

“Shit!” He walks over to the sofa and collapses on it, feeling suddenly hopeless and helpless, his heart aching at the thought of the pain in store for his brother, chest heaving with distress as he rakes his right hand through his hair, his left hand falling to his side still holding the phone. Then he lifts it back to his ear and says, “Let me know when you've told him, Ruth, and I'll fly to London,” before he hangs up, drops the device on the sofa beside him, and cradles his head in his hands.
Chapter 42

3 September 2007 – Harry

The first time he reads the letter, he feels the world tilt on its axis and his heart crack. His first reaction is disbelief and his first thought that it was written under duress. He reads it again and again, looking for signs, code words that will tell him where she is and who is holding her captive, but he finds none. The postmark is from Sidney, Australia so he begins his search there, and when he fails to find anything, he drafts in Malcolm to help, but the trail proves impossible to find and the despair threatens to overwhelm him.

It isn't until Malcolm walks into his office one evening, a week after they'd been forced to concede defeat, that the alternative occurs to him and his heart finally shatters. “Harry,” Malcolm says gently after he's picked up the half empty bottle of whisky from his desk and replaced it in the drinks cabinet, “I know this must be hard for you to contemplate, but have you considered the possibility that Ruth is, in fact, fine? Safe? That she's simply telling you the truth? Perhaps she really has found a good life somewhere else and no longer wishes to return to Britain.”

Something dies inside him that day, and after that, his life feels utterly empty, like he's just going through the motions, devoid of joy and any feelings but despair and duty. And though he's devastated by her loss and the knowledge that she doesn't love him any more – because, how could she, if she's choosing to stay away? – logically, he knows that he cannot blame her. She lost everything because of him, and if he's honest with himself, she could lose everything again if she returned to his side. He cannot blame her for carving out a simple, elegant life for herself, perhaps finding someone who will love her and care for her as she deserves. He always did feel rather unworthy of her, and he's suspected since the beginning that he loves her more fiercely than she's ever loved him.

But whatever logic might say, at night when he's alone, his heart aches with the pain of her rejection and he cannot help but blame her for abandoning him, taking away all hope, and leaving him so utterly devastated and alone.

If he didn't have his job, he thinks he might have gone mad. Paradoxically, that has always been the case. The profession that has cost him so much in his life is his life-line and always has been. He has given everything for his country. Everything.

And because of this he doesn't break, because of this he doesn't give up, because of this he survives and soldiers on. Because if he lost this – his sense of duty, his sense of purpose, his desire to fight for what's right, fight in the memory of his fallen officers and friends to make their sacrifice worthwhile – he would truly have nothing left. And that is an utterly terrifying prospect.
16 September 2007 – Ben

The call comes from Malcolm, not Ruth – *treacherous, ungrateful, unfaithful bitch that she is*, he thinks angrily – and has him returning to London at the first opportunity. It's early, 5 am on a Sunday morning, so he takes a chance and grabs a cab to Harry's place, hoping he's still home, or more accurately, has spent the night there and not on the Grid as is sometimes his custom when he's endeavouring to forget his troubles. He suspects Ruth's loss is too big a wound to be dealt with by burying himself in work, however, and that a bottle of whisky a night for several weeks will have been his first choice.

He rings the doorbell a few times and gets no answer save for Scarlet's barks that seem to be coming from right behind the front door. That tells him Harry's probably home, or she'd be shut up in the kitchen, so he tries the phone.

“Yes,” Harry's gruff voice answers on the tenth ring.

“Open the door, Harry,” he replies, “or I'll have to pick the lock and Scarlet's been making such a racket that one of your neighbours is bound to be watching and will call the police.”

He hears Harry sigh heavily. “Hang on,” he says and ends the call, leaving him to wait patiently for the door to open. He must have gone to the bathroom first, Ben decides based on the length of time he has to wait for him to finally let him into the flat.

Harry doesn't say anything, simply opening the door and turning around to walk unsteadily back into the living room, leaving him to greet Scarlet and close and lock the door behind him before he follows. When he enters the dim room, he's not surprised to find the place is a far cry from its usual state of near perfect order. There are take-away containers all over the coffee table, several used plates and mugs, cutlery and a couple of empty bottles of whisky. Harry himself is busy pouring himself another glass from a half-empty bottle despite the early hour. “So you heard,” he murmurs without looking at him. “Who told you?”

“Malcolm,” Ben replies, removing his coat and draping it over an armchair. He'd never mentioned the phone call he'd received from Ruth despite Harry asking him twice if he'd heard from her. If he'd said yes, he'd have had to divulge the content of their conversation, and like he'd told Ruth, he hadn't wanted to be the one to cause *this*. It's surprised him though that it's taken so long for her to contact Harry, and it had given him some hope that perhaps she'd changed her mind. Malcolm's call had swiftly extinguished that, however, along with what little respect for her he'd had left. She hadn't even had the guts to ring Harry, speak to him, end it over the phone.

“Figures,” Harry replies, turning to face him for the first time. He looks like hell.

“You should have rung me yourself,” he admonishes lightly, watching as Harry takes an unsteady step towards him. He's clearly been up all night, drinking. It's quite impressive really – that he hasn't passed out from too much alcohol yet. Or maybe he did and then woke up in the early hours of the morning to continue.

“I'm fine.”
“Sure you are,” Ben replies sarcastically. “This is perfectly normal behaviour for you – the mess, whisky at six in the morning.”

“It’s Sunday, and besides, sobriety is overrated.” He stumbles, only just managing to keep himself upright by grabbing hold of the back of the armchair in front of him.

“What happened? What did she say?” Ben asks, masking the pain he feels at seeing his brother like this and the worry. It’s been two days since Malcolm rung him and Harry’s no longer a young man. God only knows what damage he’s managed to do to himself drinking like this. Admittedly, Malcolm had mentioned that he’d not taken time off work and had been sober whilst on the Grid all week, so clearly it hasn’t been this bad all the time, but still...

Harry waves his hand towards the side table, saying, “Read it yourself,” so Ben takes this as permission to pick up the letter he finds there and quickly skim through it. It's creased and a little smudged in places by tears – though whether these were hers or Harry's he has no way of knowing – and it is gentle and loving despite the finality of it and the heartbreak it has caused. He has to hand it to her – she knows how to write a love letter, how to gentle the blow when she stabs someone through the heart like this. She doesn’t say she doesn’t love him, doesn’t mention another man, but talks about duty and protection and doing the right thing, about elegance and simplicity, about fond memories and love, about wishing each other well and moving on.

“You know what kills me?” Harry says suddenly, and as Ben returns the letter to the table – lest he be tempted to rip it to shreds, or set it on fire, or something – and turns to look at his brother, he sees that he’s now standing behind the armchair, elbows resting on the back of it, head cradled in his hands.

“What?”

“That she doesn't even know I've cleared her name. That she doesn't know she can safely come home even if she doesn't want to see me. I don't know where she is, and maybe that's for the best, but I need to know that she's safe. I need her to know that she's free.”

He wars with himself for several moments before he finally admits, “She does know.”

“What?” Harry lifts his head, straightening up and taking a step around the armchair to face him.

“She rung me. I told her.”

“When was this?”

“A little over a month ago.”

“She... You...” He can't seem to articulate a full sentence, and as Ben watches, he sees the fury ignite in his eyes and has but a moment to brace himself before Harry snarls and launches himself at him.

“Harry!” he protests, grappling with him, fighting to stay on his feet as Harry tries to throw him to the floor, the punches landing on his sides and stomach making him grunt in pain and winding him. He's big, his brother, and he's always been able to beat him in a fight through sheer strength and tenacity, but he's also rather drunk today making him slower and less coordinated than usual, though the fact that Harry's clearly determined to cause him physical pain is something that's giving him the edge right now, given that he's trying to wrestle him into submission without resorting to violence – Harry's hurting enough already. “Harry, stop!” he demands when he's got his breath back, making a move towards him and then away, using his brother's state of intoxication to his advantage to get him off balance.
“Treacherous bastard,” Harry replies, trying to break free of him so he can hit him again, but Ben’s managed to get him in a hold and won’t release him.

“Don't be an idiot, Harry. She called to tell me what's in that letter,” he pants, realising Harry’s not going to stop to listen. “I told her she can have her name back, that she's free to come home, but even after I'd said that, she wouldn't budge. Said it was safer for both of you if she didn't come back. I tried to talk her out of it, but she wouldn't listen. Then she asked me to tell you and I refused. I said I wouldn't be part of it because... because you're my brother and I love you.” He chokes out the last few words, his emotions getting the better of him, and he feels Harry slowly stop struggling. “I didn't want any part in hurting you like this,” he finishes, still keeping Harry in a tight hold, more out of emotion than a need to protect himself. “So,” he murmurs after a moment of silence filled by their harsh breathing, “if you want to hit me, go ahead because I'd do it again.” And with that, he releases Harry and takes half a step back until he's looking into his brother's eyes, his jaw set determinedly, muscles tense, preparing himself for the blow if Harry needs to take his pain out on him.

Harry holds his gaze for a moment, eyes bloodshot, chest heaving, then he lifts his left hand to Ben's shoulder, squeezing gently before he drops his gaze and lifts his right hand to cover his face and his shoulders begin to shake. Ben's not quite sure who moves first, but they end up embracing, Harry's forehead on his right shoulder, his right hand on the back of Harry's neck as he weeps, great sobs racking his body while Ben blinks back his own tears and bites the inside of his cheek to keep from swearing and damning Ruth to hell for this, in front of his brother. He well remembers the days after Sarah had married Jimmy, when all hope had seemed lost, how despite the pain and the despair, he hadn't wanted to hear anything against her and he suspects the same is true for Harry right now. Somewhere deep inside them, the Pearce men seem to believe that they deserve to suffer and that the women who do this to them are not to be blamed for any of their pain.

When eventually Harry quietens and pulls away, Ben turns away to wipe his eyes and allow Harry time to compose himself, trying to avoid compounding any embarrassment the situation has caused them both. “I'll make some coffee,” he says before putting the whisky away and scooping up as much of the crap on the table as he can carry and making his way into the kitchen. He gets the coffee brewing before returning for the rest of the used crockery to discover Harry's disappeared to the bathroom – he can hear the shower running.

He draws the curtains in the living room and tidies up, folding Ruth's letter and slipping it inside an atlas he finds on one of Harry's bookshelves, thinking it better if Harry doesn't have the opportunity to read it again any time soon, and going back into the kitchen to do the washing up and make breakfast, Scarlet trotting happily after him and curling up in her basket. She seems remarkably subdued and he hasn't seen any sign of Ruth's cats yet, which makes him wonder if Harry's got rid of them. A quick glance at the floor, however, reveals that he hasn't as he spies their empty water and food bowls. So he goes about feeding the animals too, setting Scarlet's bowl down in one part of the kitchen and the cats' in another, and sure enough they appear as if by magic, wolfing down their food quickly before slipping away again.

He's just thinking how remarkable animals are that they can sense human emotion so effortlessly when Harry reappears, looking much better for the shower and shave he's had, not to mention the crisp shirt and trousers. Neither of them say anything as he slips into the room and sits down, serving their coffee while Ben dishes out the bacon, eggs and fried bread before taking a seat across from his brother.

Ben digs into the food with an enthusiasm born of hunger, while Harry avoids it, no doubt feeling the effects of too much whisky as he gingerly sips his coffee.

“Thanks, Ben,” he murmurs eventually, breaking the silence.
“Just returning the favour,” he smiles, thinking of the number of times Harry's picked him up off the floor over the years. They're certainly more numerous than the times he's had to help his brother.

“Sorry about the ribs,” Harry replies, flexing his right hand and giving him a rueful smile which is such a pleasure to see that it makes Ben grin.

“The ribs are fine. Better than your knuckles, I'll bet.”

Harry chuckles and looks down at his right hand which had landed most of the punches. His knuckles do look a little red, Ben notes with some satisfaction. “I must be getting old,” he says, flexing and extending his fingers again. “Next thing you know, I'll be getting arthritis.”

“Lizzie tells me it's diet.”

“What is?”

“Arthritis. Most inflammation is caused by diet. Often wheat or dairy, apparently.”

“I didn't know that.”

“Now you're prepared.” He winks at Harry who smiles.

There's silence for several moments, then Harry says, “She's right, you know.”

“Lizzie?”

“No, Ruth.”

“Right about what?” he asks, hiding the anger that flares in him at the mention of her name.

“It's difficult – the sacrifice of others. Being a spy – like a soldier – you have to give yourself completely, risk your life, and I can do that.” He pauses to take a sip of his coffee. “But the other part of it – the sacrifice of others, people I care about, people I love – that part is so much harder, and the older I get, the more difficult it becomes. I'm not sure I can do it any more, Ben. If she came back and she was in danger, or Catherine was, Graham, Lizzie, Maggie, you... I don't think I could do it.”

He's not sure what to say to that, so he takes a sip of his coffee to buy himself some time. “So you're not a perfect spy,” he settles on eventually. “I know it must pain you to not be the best at something,” he says, pausing to give him a cheeky grin, “but let's face it, Harry – I, for one, would rather have a decent man for a brother than a ruthless bastard without a heart. You've done what you can to protect those you care about and that has to be enough. And if the worst were to happen and they took Catherine or Lizzie, you'd still do your best in an impossible situation. Of that, I have no doubt. You'd do everything you could to save everyone involved, and if you put the people you love first for once, no one would blame you, Harry. So... stop worrying about it. It does no one any good.”

Harry smiles, lifting his mug and draining it before lowering it back to the table and saying, “I need a walk and so does Scarlet. Coming?”

“Alright,” he replies, “but if you're not going to eat your breakfast, I'll have that first.”
A/N: This chapter is set at the beginning of 7.02, the morning after Adam was killed and Harry shared a drink (or several) with Ros. Reviews are always very much appreciated. Cheers, S.C.

12 November 2007 – Jane

She wakes to the feel of a warm, naked body beside her own and she can't help smiling in bliss – it's such a rare occurrence these days. *Maybe this morning we'll be more successful*, she thinks, quickly pushing aside the disappointment of their failed attempt last night and rolling over to face him. He's still sleeping, so she begins to touch him, caress his skin, pepper kisses over his chest until he begins to stir. Then she ducks under the covers, continuing her journey south as he moans in pleasure, making her smile. *Maybe he'd just drunk too much last night after all*, she tells herself as her hand closes around him, stroking, feeling him thicken as she licks her lips and then the tip of him, overjoyed by the feeling of power and revenge that surges through her, the feeling that she's finally getting even.

Her joy, however, doesn't last long as she feels him begin to deflate in her hand and none of her best, time-tested moves can reverse the situation. *What the hell is wrong with him*, he silently fumes as his hands reach down to stop her and he moves his body away from hers.

“I'm sorry, Jane,” he murmurs as she emerges from under the covers, his eyes looking pained, his cheeks stained with embarrassment – the fact that this must be just as uncomfortable and unpleasant for him making her feel a little better.

“It's fine, Harry,” she says and gets up, walking across her bedroom naked and into the en-suite, determined not to let him see how this is affecting her. For all he knows, she's had a hundred lovers since they broke up and she's not about to admit that his sudden impotence affects her in any way, even if it is making her doubt herself in this moment.

She turns on the shower and brushes her teeth while she waits for the water to warm up, then she steps under it and tries to relax, starting first with each muscle, then identifying each emotion and letting it go. Only then does she allow herself to consider what just happened, attempting to be as objective as possible. He had been enjoying her caresses and his body had been responding – unlike last night – but there had been something that had stopped him and she's pretty certain now that it has nothing to do with her skills in the bedroom. She always used to be able to please Harry in bed and he'd never had any complaints, so it must be something else, a mental or emotional block of some kind that didn't used to be there, maybe his guilt over breaking up their marriage, or the loss of his officer or Ruth.

All he'd said last night, when he'd appeared at her door, looking lost and slightly drunk, and asking to come in, is that he'd lost another one of his officers and, when she'd asked if it was Ruth, he'd said, “No. She left a while ago now.” He'd looked so sad as he'd said it, that she'd felt her heart go out to him.
“I'm sorry, Harry,” she'd replied, reaching over to squeeze his hand, and next thing she'd known, he was kissing her, tentatively at first, as if asking for permission, and then more passionately when she’d responded. He'd seemed equally into their kisses, equally ready for more, equally eager to move to the bedroom, but their best efforts hadn't been enough to arouse him and, in the end, they’d given up, with him apologising and telling her it's never happened before, and her reassuring him as best she could by suggesting it might be due to grief and too much whisky.

He'd attempted to leave then, but she'd stopped him. It had been close to one in the morning at that point, they'd both been naked in her bed already, and she'd been content with just sharing a cuddle and going to sleep. She'd told him as much, and while he'd hesitated, thinking about it, she'd just switched off the light and cuddled up to him, feeling him tense a little initially and then relax in her arms. She doesn't know how soon he'd fallen asleep, but she'd been out like a light pretty quickly and had slept like a baby.

This morning though, now, he'd been responding to her touch and kisses until he'd come fully awake and presumably realised where he was and with whom. Maybe it is her after all, she thinks sadly as she turns off the shower and gets out, towelling herself dry quickly and slipping into her robe. Maybe it's the divorce, maybe it's messed with his head and he can't have sex with her any more. She sighs, then squares her shoulders, deciding that it doesn't matter. Clearly sleeping with Harry had been a bad idea to begin with, and he's probably done her a favour by showing her that, reminding her that one can never go back, that she must keep moving forward. Maybe now she can finally let him go completely and move on, and maybe next time Derek asks her for a drink after dancing, she'll say yes – even if he is rather a lot younger than her. You never know – he might surprise her. After all, what is age but a number? And with that optimistic thought, she opens the door and steps back into her bedroom to find the bed made, Harry gone, and a text message on her phone from him. “Thank you for being there,” it says. “Forgive me.”

She stares at it for a few seconds, thinking how much more painful this situation must be for him. It's not the kind of thing any man would find easy to deal with – it must be such a blow to his ego, especially since she knows he's always prided himself on his prowess in the bedroom. Poor Harry, she thinks, her heart filling with compassion as she quickly types a reply to his text.

“There's nothing to forgive. I enjoyed the nap and cuddle. x”
1 January 2008 – Harry

He walks for an hour or more, heedless of the cold and the late hour as he hears Big Ben strike two, feeling more broken than ever before, crushed under the weight of everything, this latest blow almost worse than everything that came before it.

Ros had been right. Adam had chosen to die a long time ago, would have kept going until he'd succeeded, and he's accepted that now, has made peace with it, especially after taking revenge, killing Kachimov. And getting Ros and Lucas back has brought its own kind of satisfaction, and though it hasn't erased the guilt he carries for failing to protect them, it has helped ease it considerably – seeing them working well together, Lucas coming into his own under Ros's leadership, filling out and getting stronger, reversing some of the damage that Russian prison had done to him physically, though he knows that nothing can expunge the torture he suffered there and the scars that run deep into his psyche. Adam had hidden his inner turmoil from all of them almost completely, so he has no illusions that Lucas is not hiding similar troubles – a turbulence that could unbalance him at any moment and any operation he's involved in. He's learnt his lesson though and is keeping a closer eye on his team, though he will not let it jeopardise his trust in them. If he can't trust them and their instincts, then what has he got left?

Nothing is the answer that springs to mind as he turns to lean against the barrier and looks down, contemplating the dark, swirling waters of the Thames. Over the last few months – since he'd received Ruth's letter and all hope had died with it – he's become progressively more morose and maudlin, the numbness growing inside him, prompting him to cut himself off from those he cares about most. He doesn't ring Ben any more, hasn't seen his children in months, or Jane since last November. He'd spent Christmas alone with Scarlet and the cats, which are not doing so well lately either, perhaps sensing his changing emotions towards them – that, where they once brought hope and joy to his heart, they now only bring sorrow and pain.

And as if all that hasn't been enough, it turns out now that what happened with Jane wasn't a fluke, but yet another thing to add to his growing list of failings.

Impotence.

Never has he felt more emasculated than he does right now, never has he felt so old, so past it, useless, pathetic, like such a failure. He thought he'd hit rock bottom when he'd lost Ruth and then Adam, but it turns out that there's twenty miles of shit below that and counting.

Who would miss him, he wonders, if he just leant forward a little more and let gravity and the Thames do the rest?

Ben.

The answer comes immediately and he feels tears spring to his eyes, grateful beyond words for the unquestioning loyalty of his brother, the strength of the bond they share, and his understanding. He really doesn't know what he'd do without him.

He lifts a gloved hand to wipe at his eyes, taking his phone from his pocket and pulling off his other glove with his teeth to select the number. He hesitates, finger poised over the call button, thinking
that Ben is either in bed with Sarah right now, or blissfully asleep in her arms. He doesn’t want to disturb him either way, so he types a message instead, just a simple ‘Happy New Year’ for him to read in the morning. Then he pockets the phone once more, pulls his glove on, and turns to walk back along the bridge, wondering what the chances are he’ll find a cab at this time in the morning, on new year’s day.

He hasn’t gone far when his phone rings, so he pulls it out and answers it with a gruff, “Pearce.”

“I wondered why I woke up at such an ungodly hour,” Ben’s voice greets him. “I thought it might be one of the girls, but I’m glad it’s you. Happy new year, Harry.”

Harry smiles, the first smile he’s been able to muster all week. “Happy new year, Ben. Sorry I woke you.”

“You're alright. How are things?”

“They could be better,” he confesses, making Ben chuckle.

“That bad, eh? What's happened this time? Is the world falling apart?”

“Undoubtedly,” he murmurs, “though London's rather quite at the moment.”

“I see. It's your own daemons that are keeping you awake then?”

“Something like that, yes. What about you? How are things with the lovely Sarah?”

“Just about perfect, I'd say.”

“I'm glad. After everything, I'm glad you've found a way to make it work.”

There’s silence after that for several moments, the spectre of Ruth looming large between them. He knows Ben’s no longer a fan of hers. He can sense it every time they move near the subject though Ben has never said anything against her to him. He is much more restrained that he himself had been all those years ago when Sarah had chosen someone else over his brother. Perhaps it's age that's given him the wisdom he'd lacked back then, or perhaps he's just a much more perceptive person. He's certainly much more restrained when it comes to expressing his opinion about other people's choices. And though Ruth's desertion pains him so much he can hardly breathe when he thinks of it, he still feels that he has no right to question her decision when the potential cost to her well-being and safety could be so catastrophic were she to return to his side. He would give his very life to see her happy, and if she's happy where she is, then he will be content with that. He has to be.

“You should come visit sometime this year, Harry,” Ben tactfully changes the subject. He no longer offers Harry any platitudes or encourages him not to lose hope, and sometimes, he finds that hurts more than the actual knowledge that Ruth isn't coming back to him any more. “It's been almost five years that I've been here and you've not visited me once.”

The ghost of smile flirts with his lips for a moment. “I will.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It's a promise – my new year's resolution.”

“Excellent,” Ben replies, sounding genuinely pleased.

“I'd better let you get back to sleep,” Harry murmurs, “and try to find a cab.”
“At this time of night? You'll be lucky.”

“I can always go back to the Grid if I fail.”

“You're incorrigible, Harry,” Ben replies with mild exasperation.

“Perhaps,” he agrees, thinking that the only person who’d had a chance of making him resist the pull of Thames House is gone now, part of a brief moment of true joy and happiness that shone bright and died all too quickly. “Good night, Ben. Say hello to Sarah from me.”

“Will do. Take care of yourself, Harry. Things won't always seem so bleak.” He doesn't respond to that, knowing that just talking to his brother has brought him up a notch from the pit of despair he was in before he'd rung. “See you soon.”

“Yes. See you, Ben,” he replies and ends the call. Then he turns his steps towards Thames House, telling himself that if he's meant to go home to Scarlet tonight, a cab will appear to take him there. If not, then back unto the breach it is.
29 April 2008 – Ruth

Life is good here, she reminds herself, watching Nico playing in the water while Jamie naps beside her in the shade. She could not wish for a better place to raise her beautiful, bright-eyed son, and she's grateful for that, for the peace and the sense of security that George has provided for them – she hadn't thought to find it so easily when she'd first left home. In fact, it had taken time for her to accept that her running days might be over, even after Jamie had been born and she'd left her job at the local hospital to be a full-time nanny for Nico.

In the early days, she'd constantly been looking over her shoulder, her holdall with changes of clothes, extra nappies, her and Jamie's passports and other essentials always within easy reach, but with time, she'd realised how unlikely it was that someone would find her here, especially as she hardly ever ventured any further than the beach, the local supermarket, or the market on Mondays. Her whole life is wrapped around her boys, James and Nico, whom she loves almost as dearly as her own son now, George providing some much needed adult conversation when he's home, a father figure for Jamie, and the illusion of a happy family. He has, thankfully, never suggested they move things to the next level between them, like Despoina had hinted, perhaps sensing that she wouldn't be receptive to the idea, and she's been very careful not to send him the wrong signals, remaining friendly but distant with no hint of intimacy between them. He's a good, kind man, but she's still in love with Harry and, if she can't have him, she's not interested in having anyone else.

She misses him so much, and she's sure now, she always will. Even if she could forget him, his son is so much like him, his facial expressions so reminiscent of Harry's – the adorable pout and frown when he's sulking or the way his eyes and face light up when he smiles – that he's never far from her thoughts. She wonders how he is, what he's up to, if he's safe, and often fantasizes about their reunion, what it would be like, what he would say, what he would do, how he'd react to Jamie, how much he'd love them both and keep them safe, but though she's confident he'd do his level best to protect them, she still believes she's made the right choice in staying away. Jamie's safer here, she's safer here, and she believes, so is Harry. She never wants to put him in a position where he has to choose between the good of the country, the lives of many, and her life or the life of his son.

It's been more than six months now since she'd spoken to Ben and had sent Harry her final letter through Despoina, who'd gone to Australia to visit distant relatives and enjoy a much anticipated vacation last autumn and posted it for her from there. She'd thought about ringing him, but hadn't had the courage to do that, scared to hear the heartbreak in his voice, afraid that he might manage to talk her out of her decision, and worried that Ben had warned him and Harry would somehow trace her call and come to find her. She hadn't wanted to ring Ben either as he'd asked, for the same reasons, so she'd had to just hope that Harry would do that for himself. She still feels ashamed of her cowardice in breaking up with Harry in a letter, telling him that she's choosing a simple, elegant, safe life over life with him, with all the passion, the love, and the danger that entails.

She'd told Ben there was someone else, thinking of Jamie, but the truth is that there will never be anyone else for her but Harry. It's just that she needs to put Jamie first – keep him safe, protect him – before her own desires and needs, before those of Harry. He's just a baby, only one year old today, so vulnerable and sweet, and he's her responsibility. When she'd decided to keep him, she'd known she'd have to make sacrifices for her son, would have to do, be, give her best to this tiny, little human-being, so that is what she's doing in the best way she knows how. Maybe in a few years,
she'll feel differently, but right now, she knows she's made the only decision she could have made, the only decision that feels right.

She looks down at baby James, his blonde curls long and unruly, his full lips lightly parted in sleep, and silently apologises to him, as she does almost daily, for keeping him from his father. He's a bit young yet to really notice his absence, but she's sure it won't be long now before he realises someone very important is missing from his life. He's always pleased to see George when he comes home, though he's more enamoured with Nico at the moment, and she can't help but imagine scenes of him with his father – the joy writ clearly on both their faces, though, if truth be told, she's no idea how good Harry is with babies and knows for a fact that, were they to return to London, he'd hardly be home long enough each day to really get to know his son. It's all very well to sit here in the Cyprus sun and fantasize about a reunion between them, but she knows the reality would be a far cry from her fantasies and would put them all in danger to boot. She hasn't even *lived* with Harry!

She sighs and turns her eyes back to Nico, who's calling for her to watch him jump into the pool, pushing aside these thoughts, smiling and praising him quietly so as not to wake Jamie. In any case, she thinks determinedly as Nico scrambles out of the pool for another jump, what's done is done and there's no use dwelling on it. She loves Harry, yes, but she loves Jamie just as much, and though it kills her to have to choose between them, she knows that Harry can take care of himself, but Jamie needs her to do it for him, and by keeping them apart, she feels she's doing her best to protect both of them, even if her heart aches everyday with the pain of missing Harry and the knowledge of how deeply she's hurt him.

He'd loved her so much, blamed himself for her exile, and done everything he could to clear her name as fast as possible, only to have her turn around and throw it all back in his face. He must hate her for it, must think her so fickle, disloyal, and weak. And though it pains her to think how much she must have fallen in his esteem, she's almost grateful for it too because, surely, that would mean that he'd have recovered from the heartbreak more quickly, would have been able to forget her and move on, would have found happiness again with someone else, or at least, be able to live his life without the constant, heart-wrenching pain that she lives with everyday. She hates the thought of him suffering as she does because of what she's done – worse, in fact, because he thinks that she no longer loves him, has betrayed him, and if Ben told him what she'd said, is in love with someone else. She *hopes* that he no longer loves her too, but that's only because she doesn't want him pining for her – she wants him to be happy even if it *is* without her. She's not sure her hope is a realistic one though. Knowing Harry as she does, she rather thinks he'll have found a way to blame himself for her loss and that his loyal heart will not have relinquished her so easily, so quickly.

*Oh Harry. If only things could have been different.*

She just hopes that, if Harry ever finds out what she'd done, he'll find it in his heart to understand and forgive her.
26 September 2008 – Harry

What a bloody awful year this is turning out to be, he fumes as the Russians cuff him, gag him, zip him in a body bag, and shove him in the boot of a car. It seems a miracle right now that it had been possible at all for him and Ruth to have had even a few days of happiness, given how badly things have spiralled out of control in the last year and a half – Connie a Russian spy, MI-5 doubting him, torturing him, the Russians activating Tiberius, and now the FSB abducting him from British soil, taking him God-knows-where, to do God-knows-what to him.

He doesn't for a moment believe he will survive this. He will resist. Of course, he will resist, and he hopes very much that his team find him in time, but realistically, he knows he cannot survive for long. He's no longer a young man. Even MI-5's interrogation had put a huge strain on his body, the aches and pains still lingering now though what they'd done to him had been relatively mild. He's not sure his heart is strong enough to withstand much more than what they'd subjected him to. He's sure the FSB won't play so nice – not for long, at any rate. They'll not kill him right away. They'll try to get what they can out of him, but they'll lose patience quickly too. They don't have any hope of turning him, so he'll be a liability if they hold onto him for too long. Twenty-four hours, he estimates, maybe forty-eight. Of course they could always sell him on... He wonders what they'll do. Drugs? Sleep deprivation? Sensory over-stimulation? Water-boarding? Beatings? Dogs? Electrodes?

At least Ruth isn't here to see this, he thinks, picturing her in his mind's eye, naked in his bed and smiling, eyes full of love for him. And though the memory of her has faded somewhat after two years without her and counting, he's glad he has something, a few wonderful memories of her to focus on and keep the horrors that await him at bay, for, though he's not been able to think of her for almost a year now without pain, he finds now – as he approaches the end – that her memory and the memory of what they'd had soothes him. She'd loved him – he knows that – and if Mace and his cronies hadn't gone after her as they had and she hadn't had to leave, he's sure she'd love him still. Love hadn't been enough to keep them together then, but it is enough for him now.

He hopes she's happy. He hopes she's well and safe. He hopes she lives a long, fulfilling life, and that she never learns of all the things that have happened to him recently, all the losses he's experienced and all the different ways he's suffered. He hopes she thinks of him fondly and remembers him well. And he's grateful – grateful he doesn't know where she is and cannot betray her, grateful for the love that still burns for her deep in his heart that no one can extinguish, grateful for the times he got to make love to her, to show her how much he adores her, and for the love she gave him in return. He's grateful that he will die having known her, having breathed her in, having loved her and worshipped her body, having experienced the utter joy of true love and the exquisite bliss of the way she'd set his soul on fire.

Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage. The words of Lao Tzu flit through is mind and almost make him smile. It's true – he can feel his strength and his courage rising with each breath he takes as he thinks of Ruth, of what they'd had, without sorrow or pain this time, but with a deep sense of peace and pleasure and gratitude.
When the men come for her, she's momentarily shocked and frozen in fear, but it doesn't last long, her instinct to protect the children and herself surfacing in the blink of an eye. She has trained the boys well, and they come quickly when called and are quiet as she picks Jamie up with one arm, grabbing the holdall with the other in which she's stuffed everyone's passports and ushering Nico towards the car.

“Buckle Jamie up, Nico,” she instructs, endeavouring to keep her voice calm as she starts the car and drives out of the driveway and into the road, glancing in the mirror to see if they've been followed. It doesn't take them long to catch up with George, who's surprised to see them, but quickly gets in when he sees the worry in her eyes.

They lose their pursuers in the town and make their way to the sea, seeking out George's cousin, Stephanos, who has a boat large enough to take them on to Crete. George will not hear of her going alone, arguing that he can't take Nico back home anyway until the danger has passed and these men move on, so she's forced to accept them all travelling together at least as far as Greece, and she's grateful for it, for the knowledge that she's not alone for a little while longer.

From Crete, she finds her way to Athens, having said a tearful goodbye to George and Nico, promising to stay in touch and let them know she's safe. She'd been surprised that George had seemed genuinely concerned for her even after she'd revealed that her ex is a spy and most likely responsible for the men who'd turned up looking for her and put him and Nico in danger. She'd expected him to be outraged that she hadn't shared this information before, that she'd put his son in danger, however inadvertently it had been done. But he'd proved her wrong, shown her what a good, kind man he truly is, and part of her had been sad, in that moment, that she couldn't have loved him and built a stable, happy life with him and their boys.

From Athens to Patra and from there to Brindisi, she'd dragged poor James trough the entire length of Italy up into the Alps, seeking a sense of security that she knew deep down would never be hers again. By the time she's almost reached France, exhausted, scared, and alone, she's decided that she needs to contact Harry, feeling finally ready to concede that she and Jamie will never be any safer abroad than she would be at home with him.

She used to be a spy; she fell in love with a spy; she will always be in danger, one way or another. She realises that now and accepts it, fully owns it. She chose this life, and in truth, if she were given another chance, she'd do it all again. What she'd had with Harry is worth it. Jamie is worth it. She wouldn't trade either of them for another life with anyone else, no matter how secure and idyllic. She's tired of running, of hiding, of being someone else, and she wants to go home to England, to get her name back, to give Jamie a chance to meet and get to know his father, his uncle, his cousins, maybe even his half-brother and sister, and certainly her side of the family, her mother and her cousin Beatrice and her children, Jamie's second cousins.

She makes it to Sanremo before she almost runs out of money and decides to ring Harry, but neither his work phone, nor the burner phone work. She considers calling the Grid then and giving her old call-sign, but she knows nothing about the men who came after her – they might be MI-5 for all she knows coming after her for her connection to Harry; it's unlike him to not be answering his work phone and it worries her. She's also worried that there's no one left on the Grid who knows her – the
two years since she left is a long time for a spy – so she ends up calling Ben even though she dreads talking to him again after their last conversation. Surely he must hate her guts for what she did to his brother.

He answers on the second ring. “Pearce.”

“Ben, it's me, Ruth,” she says quickly. “Please, don't hang up. I know I'm probably the last person you want to hear from, but I'm in trouble and I need help and I can't get hold of Harry.”

He hears him sign heavily before he speaks again. “Of course. Where are you?”

“I'm in Sanremo, in Italy. Some men found me where I was and came after me.”

“When was this?”

“A week ago? No, a bit more than that.”

“Can you make it to Cologne?”

“I don't think I have enough money, Ben,” she replies, feeling a surge of anxiety.

He's silent for a moment before he says, “What about France? I know someone in Nice who could hide you for a few days until I get there.”

“Yes,” she agrees in relief.

“Good. I'll give you the address. Go there and wait for me. It'll take me a day or two to arrange everything, but I'll come and get you. Alright?”

“Yes,” she chokes out, suddenly overcome by gratitude. “Thank you.”

“I'm not sure you will when you find out where I'm sending you, but you'll be well hidden there and looked after. Antoine can be somewhat... unpredictable, but his sister lives with him and she'll look after you. Only thing is... Brigitte is a prostitute.”

“Oh!” Did I hear that correctly, she wonders, flabbergasted.

“They'll take care of you and hide you. It'll only be for a night or two, I promise. I'll try to warn them to expect you. Tell them Corporal Benjamin sent you.”

“Right,” she replies, swallowing hard and trying not to panic.

“It's not what you think, Ruth,” he murmurs. “My company saved Antoine's life in the Gulf. They'll be more than glad to repay the debt now by helping you. God knows I've refused every other offer Brigitte's made.”

“Oh!” she breathes in surprise and relief. “Harry?” she asks, needing to know something, anything about him, worried sick that she hasn't been able to get hold of him.

“He's alright. I'll let him know, but I doubt he'll be able to get away and reach you before I do. You're going to have to trust me, Ruth. I'm doing this for Harry. I'll not let you down.”

“I do trust you,” she replies, realising with surprise that she means it. She's sure he has the same code of honour as his brother and that he'll keep his word, regardless of his personal feelings towards her.

“Good,” he says and proceeds to give her the address she needs. Then with another promise he'll be
there soon, he ends the call, leaving her shaking with nerves, fear, and the familiar rush of adrenaline that comes before every operation.

It's only after she's hung up that she realises she didn't tell him about Jamie and that she's now got to take her son with her to a place that, for all she knows, is a brothel and stay with him there for several days while she waits to be rescued. Do these people live in a flat, a room, or somewhere worse than that? Does Brigitte bring clients back to her place? Are there drugs? She hopes not. She can't imagine Ben would send her to such a place, but she can't be sure either. Just as long as there's somewhere to sleep, she decides, she'll be happy. It can't be that much worse than the ferry rides without a cabin that they've been on recently. It's only two or three nights, and if it gets too bad, she can always leave and ring Ben again – though where she'd sleep without any money, she's no idea.

And what about Jamie? Poor baby, she thinks, softly brushing his hair from his forehead as she looks down at him, sleeping deeply in his sling – he's almost too big for it now. She hopes this doesn't scar him for life. He's been less than happy with their mad dash across Europe, so maybe he'll just be pleased to stay in one place for a couple of nights and catch up on some much needed sleep. She hopes so anyway, and during the day, she can take him to the park or something. They don't have to be that careful, surely!

"Just a little while longer, love," she murmurs softly, "then your uncle will come and get us, and soon you'll get to meet your daddy."

Harry.

Christ, but she can't wait to see him even if part of her's dreading his reaction to Jamie and the moment when he realises she's kept him from his son all this time.
As he makes his way to his destination, he can't help but feel a mixture of emotions at the thought of seeing Ruth again. On the one hand, he's still angry and disgusted by her betrayal and the pain she's caused Harry, but on the other, he's glad to be doing this for him, knowing how much peace of mind it'll bring his brother when she's safe. He'd almost died at the hands of the bastards who'd tried to take Ruth too and is still in hospital recovering from his injuries, though he'll be discharged tomorrow.

In fact, when Ruth had rung him, he'd been standing just outside Harry's hospital room, watching his brother sleep, thinking how grateful he is that his team had found him in the nick of time. Lizzie, Maggie and Catherine had been with him, chatting away to each other in the waiting room while he'd gone off to check if Harry was awake yet, all of them animated and happy in the knowledge that their uncle and father had pulled through and was on the way to a full recovery. It could so easily have gone the other way, and Ben suspects that it had been the thought of Ruth in danger and Harry's need to protect her that had given him the will to fight and stay with them. Without that, he's sure Harry would have given up – he's been alarmingly depressed for months now thanks to Ruth's rejection and the other losses he's suffered in the past year. So in a way, Ruth had saved his life, though whether his life would have needed saving if she hadn't crushed his heart to begin with is highly debatable in his opinion.

The moment he'd ended the call with Ruth, he'd stepped into Harry's room, walking up to his bed and watching him sleep for a few moments, but it hadn't taken long for Harry to stir and open his eyes, perhaps sensing him standing there or the importance of the news he had to deliver. He'd looked so relieved when he'd told him, when he'd promised to arrange everything and bring Ruth home, telling him to just rest and focus on getting well again, and he'd been glad to have the opportunity to do this for Harry even if he still hasn't forgiven Ruth and likely never will do. In his opinion, she doesn't deserve his brother, but is seems that Harry feels differently about that and there's not much he can do to change it. All that's left for him, therefore, is to fulfil his promise to bring her home safe and sound regardless of his own thoughts and feelings on the subject, which he sets carefully aside now as he nears his destination. He can't afford to jeopardise this mission by holding onto his righteous anger. He'd never forgive himself if he let Harry down now.

When he arrives at Brigitte's, it's early morning as he's taken the overnight train from Paris and has two return tickets for the eight o'clock train tonight. He has no plans after that. He rather thinks Ruth should have a say in where they go from there. Harry might be home from the hospital by then, but he doubts it'll be good for him to see Ruth again so soon after his ordeal, no matter what he might say. He rather thinks Ruth could do with some rest too after being on the run for close to a fortnight, so he plans on offering her his guest-room for a few nights before she makes the trip back to England.

He knows Brigitte likes to sleep in late most mornings after working the night before, so he finds a café and has a good, leisurely breakfast before he makes his way to her place, a bunch of flowers in one hand, three coffees and some hot, buttery croissants in the other, as a thank you for her help. He knows better than to offer her any money as – even if she's had to take a couple of days off work because of Ruth – she'd only be offended. She really has been itching to do something to repay him for saving Antoine's life, no matter how much he insists that he didn't really do anything out of the...
ordinary when his company and Antoine's came under attack. He'd only pulled him out of harms way when he'd been injured, but that's part of what they do for each other in the army as he sees it.

He rings the doorbell and has to wait a few moments before Brigitte appears in the doorway, looking thrilled to see him, practically pulling him into the flat, taking the flowers and other offerings from him, kissing both his cheeks and inviting him to hang up his coat as she disappears next door.

“Where's Antoine?” he asks as he slips into the kitchen behind her.

“Out.”

“Bit early, isn't it?” he murmurs, watching her closely.

She sighs. “He didn't come home last night.” She shrugs her slender shoulders and gestures for him to sit as she goes about setting the small table for breakfast. “You know what he's like.”

He does know, and that's part of the reason he's stayed in touch with him and Brigitte, coming down to see them once or twice a year. Antoine has found it remarkably hard to adjust to civilian life. He'd lost his best mate in Iraq, as well as his left arm near the shoulder, which Ben has always thought was such bad luck seeing as Antoine's left-handed. His PTSD had lasted years and he's had trouble with substance abuse ever since. He's sure it doesn't help him psychologically that Brigitte does what she does for a living, but he can understand that, as someone who has no education to fall back on to find a decent paying job, she does what she has to do to make ends meet. Antoine hasn't been able to work since his return from Iraq and his retirement and disability payments are simply not enough to cover their expenses. It must be hard though for him to be unable to care, not only for himself, but also for his sister, and Ben's sure this contributes to his troubles substantially.

“Do you want me to go look for him?” he asks.

“No. He will come home when he's ready.” She smiles at him and passes him a croissant on a plate and one of the coffees, which he accepts, given that Antoine isn't here to drink it. “The little one is adorable,” she adds, changing the subject.

Ben frowns, puzzled by the phrase. Ruth is quite small, but he'd hardly call her little. Maybe it's his French, he thinks – it's never been very good. They have a somewhat unique way of communicating, with him speaking English and Brigitte and Antoine speaking French, as they all understand more of the other's language than they speak.

He's about to ask what she means when Ruth walks into the room. He's struck by how exhausted she looks, as if she hasn't slept for days, and he barely recognises her as the beautiful woman who'd smiled at him all those months ago. Compassion fills his heart at the sight of her with more ease than he'd anticipated as he realises that she must have been through a lot over the past few days.

“Ben,” she murmurs, looking relieved. “I thought I heard your voice. How are you?”

He gets up, walking over to her and impulsively leaning down to kiss her cheek. “I'm well. And you?”

She gives him a wan smile. “I've been better,” she confesses. “Brigitte has been wonderful though. I don't know how I'll ever thank her enough.”

Brigitte smiles, moving over and kissing Ruth's cheek before gesturing to the table for her to sit and bringing over another plate, saying, “Eat. You need strength. How is he this morning?”

They're sitting across from each other now as Ben frowns again in puzzlement and sees Ruth glance
at him quickly and drop her gaze before reaching for a croissant and putting it on her plate. She begins to tear it into pieces as she replies softly in fluent French, “He's better, I think. He slept well last night.”

“Good,” Brigitte replies, moving over to the cooker to heat some water. “You both needed the rest.”

The fury that ignites in him at those words is like nothing he's felt before and he has to clench his jaw and ball his hands into fists in an attempt to contain it lest he explode and hit someone or throw something across the room. She brought her boyfriend with her?! He can't believe this!

“Ruth?” he questions, barely able to speak, the anger swirling inside him almost impossible to control.

She glances up at him and he sees her eyes widen in fear before she quickly stands and hesitates, wiping her hands on her jeans as he watches her swallow and hears her say, “I need to show you something.” Then she turns and walks to the doorway where she pauses to look at him expectantly – clearly she wants him to follow.

He gets up slowly, doing his best to calm his anger as he follows her down the short hallway to the bedroom she's presumably using. He pauses in the doorway, his eyes swiftly scanning the room, alighting on the bed, and frowning when he finds it empty – he'd been so convinced he'd find a man there. What the hell is going on, he wonders briefly before he notices that Ruth has crossed the room to the corner by the window and is crouching down beside an open trunk that looks to be full of blankets. She turns to look at him expectantly, so he follows her over, his eyes slipping from her face to the large wooden box and the child lying within.

He gasps, his jaw slackening in shock as he continues to move closer, eyes glued to the little boy's face who looks angelic in sleep, his lips pouting slightly, his blond curls soft and downy, framing his face just perfectly, and he knows immediately that this is his nephew – he looks so much like his father. He crouches down and reaches a hand forward to gently stroke his hair, perhaps to convince himself that what he's seeing is real, so big is his surprise.

“He's gorgeous,” he murmurs, eyes still on his face. “What's his name?”

“James,” she whispers.

“How didn't you tell me about him, Ruth?” he asks softly as he turns to look at her.

“I didn't know how to tell you,” she confesses, gazing down at her son, her eyes filling with tears, “how to tell Harry.” She lifts troubled, imploring eyes to his, the tears sliding down her cheeks now as she adds, “I didn't lie to you, see? There is someone else I love and I didn't want to put him in danger. He's so little and precious that I had to protect him. I thought he was safer if no one knew, if I kept him a secret and away from MI-5. Turns out, I was wrong. Nowhere's safe, and if that's true, how can I deprive him of his father? How can I deprive Harry of his son?... But I'm scared, Ben, that Harry's going to hate me for breaking his heart and hiding Jamie from him. It's a terrible thing, what I have done.”

He watches her for a moment in silence before he takes her hand in his and squeezes it gently in sympathy, finally understanding everything, his opinion of her shifting once more, softening with compassion for the difficulties she must have faced on her own with a baby, even if some of them have been of her own making. He can see how she might have reached the conclusion that Jamie would be safer concealed away in a small corner of the globe, given the hardship she'd endured with her exile because of her connection to Harry and the fact that she'd gone through all that whilst pregnant. He remembers Julie's pregnancies vividly and the importance of a sense of security and
support during that time. If she'd found that somewhere, it's almost understandable that she'd been loathed to jeopardise it, especially since her relationship with Harry had been at its early stages when she'd had to leave him and she might have had her doubts about them being able to make it work, especially with the added stress of a child that hadn't been planned and, she might have feared, wasn't wanted.

His sudden understanding and compassion, however, doesn't mean he's forgiven her the pain, near torture, she's caused his brother. His first loyalty will always be to him. Now, however, is not the time to argue this point or attempt to explain how much she's hurt Harry. Now's the time for reassurance and gentleness, so he can get her and his nephew to his place where they can be safe and they can rest and recover. Besides, Harry would never forgive him if he didn't keep his promise to help her. He's still in love with her, poor bastard, whatever she might have done, and he rather thinks from his own experience with Sarah that, in the end, he'll only be happy with Ruth and no one else.

“He won't hate you, Ruth,” he says, gently. “He'll understand.” She looks doubtful, so he adds, “I'll talk to him if you like. Sergeant Wilson always wins the argument and talks Captain Mainwaring round in the end.”

She smiles at that, giving him a grateful look. “How am I ever to repay your kindness, Ben? I don't deserve it.”

“No need, Ruth,” he says as he gets up, pulling her to her feet. “I'd do anything for my nephew and his mother. You're family now and the Pearces are very loyal to family. Now let's let Jamie sleep and get you some breakfast. We still have a long journey ahead of us.”

“Okay,” she agrees, glancing at her son to make sure he's comfortable before following him out of the room and back to the kitchen.
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

A/N A nice long chapter for you today, but unfortunately my last one before I travel. I will endeavour to update about once a week while I'm away, but I can't make any promises. In the mean time, I hope you enjoy and thanks again to all you lovely people who are letting me know how much you're enjoying this fic. You make my day. Best, S.C.

1 November 2008 – Harry

He's never visited his brother in all the five years he's been stationed here and he mentally prepares himself for the jibes this will earn him from his younger sibling, but when the opportunity to attend a conference in Berlin presented itself, he'd grasped if with both hands, surprising several people, not least of all the DG, who's so used to his excuses by now that he hadn't even bothered to ask this time round. He usually has to be dragged to these things kicking and screaming, and then only when they're held in the UK. Luckily he has Ben as an excuse and he thinks Richard Dolby bought it; he's not the brightest button in the box.

He'd had to swap places with Ros at the last moment, having heard from Ben about a fortnight ago, informing him that Ruth is safe and sound, currently enjoying his and Sarah's hospitality, but that there's something important that needs to be discussed before she can return to Britain, so he'll be travelling to London in just over two weeks time to see him. His heart had sunk at his words, for having ascertained that it wasn't a health issue that prevented her return, he had quickly come to the conclusion that it must be related to him.

Initially he'd assumed that she just wants to make sure he'll stay away from her, won't demand explanations, won't ask awkward questions, or expect anything from her just because she called on Ben for help. She needn't have worried. He would never inflict himself on her again if she didn't want him. In fact, after all she'd suffered at the hands of Mace and then Mani's goons, he'd already promised himself he'd stay well away from her. He still shudders at the memory of Mani's glee when he'd told him he knew where Ruth was and had sent his men after her, and all he'd wanted, from that moment on, is to see her safely settled somewhere where no one can find her again and make her suffer just to get to him, and though he'd been bleeding profusely from multiple knife wounds by the time Lucas and Ros had found him, he'd managed to stay conscious long enough to tell them that they needed to find her. In the end, she'd done the finding, making him feel relieved and so very proud of her. She'd found Ben, who'd thankfully been able to set aside his own animosity towards her and help.

And that is exactly what he'd intended to do too, help her settle wherever she wants and stay away from her despite his very soul crying out for her with every beat of his battered, old heart. But then he'd had another thought, one that, despite his best efforts, hadn't wanted to leave him alone. What if she wants to be with him? What if the condition of her return home, that Ben had mentioned, is forgiveness and a return to the life they'd had before her exile – working together, sleeping together, perhaps even living together as had been his dream for so long? Would he be able to grant her that
after everything they'd been through, after all that she's suffered because of his love for her?

He hadn't been able to find a satisfactory answer to these questions, his mind and heart warring with each other, pulling him in opposite directions, so that after two sleepless nights, he'd been unable to wait any longer to find out the truth, and remembering the conference in Berlin, he'd immediately set about getting himself in it. By then, of course, the attendance, accommodation and tickets had already been arranged, so he'd had to do a last minute swap with Ros, leaving his Section Chief in charge while he attended the conference instead.

And now, here he is – preparing to see Ruth again after all these months as the taxi approaches his destination, his arrival unknown and unexpected by the inhabitants of his brother's home. He tries not to think about his reunion with Ruth, tries not to think that she might not be happy to see him, tries not to remember that she no longer loves him, that she hadn't wanted to return home and is probably blaming him for the danger she's in, for the loss of her simple, elegant life away from him and MI-5. He tries to tell himself that all he wants is to reassure himself that she's safe and offer her protection and a new life wherever she chooses. But in truth, he loves her and wants her to come home with him. He wants the closeness, the love, what they used to have before she'd left, and the closer he comes to seeing her again, the more clear it becomes to him that his heart has won the battle and he's incapable of denying himself the pleasure of these things if Ruth wants them too.

When the taxi finally arrives, he pays the driver, and taking a deep breath, he gets out and makes his way to the front door, holdall in hand, his eyes quickly scanning his surroundings for anything suspicious. It's a nice neighbourhood where many British officers reside, so he doesn't expect to find trouble, but you can never be too careful, so he remains alert until the door opens and his brother stands silhouetted in the doorway.

“Harry!” he exclaims, shock registering on his face before he smiles broadly and steps forward, embracing him and patting his back in greeting. “Why didn't you tell me you were coming?” he asks as he pulls back, still smiling.

“The fewer people that know, the better,” he replies, knowing Ben will understand. “How is she?” he can't help asking as he follows his brother into the house and he closes the door behind them.

“She's well,” his brother confirms, but there is something in his gaze that begins to make Harry feel uneasy. Perhaps his worst fears have come true – she hates him for destroying the new life she'd built for herself and wants nothing to do with him. Before he can ask anything more, however, he picks up movement in his peripheral vision, and as he turns towards it, he sees her scurrying past at the end of the hall, head down, clutching a small child tightly in her arms.

For a second, he's dumbfounded as he watches them disappear round the corner before he recovers enough to react, dropping his bag and moving towards her quickly as he utters her name. “Ruth.”

She pretends not to hear him as he reaches the end of the hall and turns to see her fleeing up the stairs. Her son, however, is staring at him over her shoulder with wide-eyed interest, lifting a chubby hand and pointing at him as he repeats, “Dat. Dat. Dat.”

A child!

No wonder she hadn't wanted to come home. Where is his father, he finds himself thinking, balling his hands into fists and breathing hard, sounding like he's just run a mile as the pain searing through his heart threatens to overwhelm him. Did he come with them? Ben hadn't said anything about a man. Is that why he'd wanted to meet in London next week? He needs answers and he needs them now, but before he can pursue Ruth up the stairs, Ben lays a restraining hand on his arm and murmurs his name. “Now is not the time,” he says when he turns to look at him. “You must be hungry.”
“No,” Harry interrupts forcefully. The last thing on his mind is food.

“Then come with me to the den,” he replies, “and I'll tell you everything I know. I'm sure you'll not say no to a drink?” He smiles, his gaze full of understanding, and Harry can't help nodding in agreement, knowing he's right. He doesn't quite know what he'd do without Ben. Most of the time, he's a pain in the arse and they tease each other mercilessly, but in times of personal need – and there have been a lot of those recently – there is no other human being alive that he would trust more, or on whom he can rely so completely. He would not have survived this past year without him.

“But first, say hello to Sarah,” Ben says, cutting into his thoughts as he lifts his left arm to slide it over his fiancée’s shoulders, his face softening as he looks at her.

“Hello.” Harry manages to pull himself together and smile, taking her hand in his. “It's good to see you again, Sarah. Sorry about the unexpected intrusion.”

“It's fine, Harry,” she smiles in return. “You're always welcome. Did you have a good journey over?”

“I did, thanks,” he nods, then falls silent. He's not quite sure what more to say – his mind's too distracted, too full of questions, too full of Ruth. He glances towards the stairs, longing to follow her, desperate to see her, reassure himself that she's all right, and demand an explanation for everything.

“Right,” Ben murmurs, drawing his attention back to them. “This way then,” and turning to his right, he moves past Harry in the direction of the stairs, walking past them and down a narrow hallway towards the back of the house. Harry follows mutely, flashing Sarah an apologetic look and casting one last, longing look up the stairs before he walks down the hall and enters the third room on his left after Ben.

It's a large house, he surmises and he wonders how Ben and Sarah can afford it, but he doesn't ask. Ben has never been extravagant and they'd both inherited quite a bit of money from their father, as had Sarah no doubt. Perhaps they've used some of their savings.

The room is neat, orderly, comfy looking and inviting, two leather armchairs beckoning from one corner, a set of crystal decanters twinkling in the muted light coming from the lamp on the large, oak desk that Ben's just switched on.

“Have a seat,” Ben invites, moving over to pour their drinks.

“Thanks,” he replies, sinking down in the nearest one and leaning back, closing his eyes in gratitude for a moment before opening them again to look around. “Nice place,” he offers after a moment's perusal as Ben hands him a drink and takes the seat beside him.

Ben nods, surveying his surroundings once before murmuring, “I'm very grateful for it. After so many years living in barracks, I'd quite forgotten how nice it is to have one's own space. The house is large enough for us both to have an office each and still have a few bedrooms left over for guests, for when the girls visit.” Harry nods in acknowledgement as they both take a sip of their drinks, and he feels himself immediately begin to relax at the familiar taste and feel of a good whisky in his mouth, sliding down his throat and warming his insides. “Anyway,” Ben says. “Enough about me. Ruth,” he murmurs softly, pausing for a moment before meeting Harry's gaze and adding, “I don't know everything, but what I do know, I'm happy to tell you. In fact, she asked me to talk to you about it. That's why I was planning on coming to London next week. She's been very worried you'd react badly to...” He tails off and checks himself, shaking his head and saying, “Best start at the beginning.” Harry nods and drops his gaze to his glass, taking another fortifying gulp. “I don't know where she went exactly when she first left England. All she said is that she landed in France and
moved around a lot, trying to remain under the radar and move undetected, but knowing that she only had a few months to find somewhere relatively safe to stay for at least three months after Jamie was born.”

He gasps, his eyes flying to his brother's face, his mouth open is shock as he processes the implications of this. “You mean,” he asks once he's found his voice, “the baby is-

“My nephew,” Ben smiles, “and quite a character he is too. He's got us all wrapped round his little finger already.”

He slumps back in his chair, his face crumbling, the emotions getting the better of him for a moment, and he lifts his right hand to cover his eyes, taking a deep, shaky breath to steady himself as he feels Ben's hand grip his shoulder in silent support. He's grateful for it, for the fact that Ben doesn't attempt to comfort him or make excuses for Ruth. It leaves him free to experience everything, all the emotions that engulf him simultaneously, from the joy and euphoria of knowing he has another son, with Ruth no less, to the pain and anger of her keeping it from him. He so rarely has the luxury of silence under such emotional circumstances.

Another son. He has another son. A little boy of... how old would he be now? One? No, more than that. Closer to eighteen months if he'd been conceived on the night before Ruth left. What are the odds of that, he asks himself, his mind shrewdly questioning it, wondering for a moment. Ruth wouldn't lie about that. Would she? No, she wouldn't, he tells himself determinedly, not Ruth.

Some of his thoughts must show on his face because Ben murmurs, “He looks so much like you, Harry. The moment I laid eyes on him, I knew he was yours.”

He doesn't say anything, but he's grateful for the reassurance. Instead he asks, “Where did she give birth?” his voice gruff, masking the pain that's welling up inside him now that the shock has worn off. He's missed so much. Why hadn't she told him? What right had she to keep his son away from him?

“Cyprus,” Ben replies. “Apparently she got some clerical work in a hospital and made some friends there. After she'd given birth, one of the doctors hired her to be his eight-year-old son's nanny.”

“His?” he enquires sharply before he can stop himself.

“A widower,” Ben murmurs. “That's all I know, other than the fact that when those men came for her, he and his son, Nico, accompanied her to Crete on one of George's cousin's boats.”

Irrational jealousy flares in his chest and he has to breathe deeply to get it under control, setting his jaw and dropping his gaze to the glass in his left hand, his right balling into a fist. Then he drains the glass and nods his acceptance when Ben offers him a refill. If she was with George, that would explain why she hadn't told him about Jamie – his son.

“She was scared for him, Harry,” Ben says gently as he resumes his seat, having handed him the glass which he's had to force himself not to down in one. “For Jamie,” he clarifies. “By your own admission, she'd been forced to leave England because she was too close to you. She felt Jamie would be safer if no one knew of his connection to you. So she stayed away even though, I think, she wanted nothing more than to return home to you, Harry.”

“She said that?” he asks, hope flaring in his heart.

“Not in as many words,” Ben admits. “It's there though, plain to read in the way she's been worried about how you'll take the news. She desperately wants you to forgive her.”
He nods, but remains silent, contemplating this. Before he'd got her final letter, he wouldn't have questioned her motives, wouldn't have doubted her integrity, her honesty, her love, but now... Now everything is different, and though he understands why she'd done it, why she'd stayed away, it is precisely for this reason that he cannot trust her motives just yet. He knows the fierceness of a mother's love, has seen it many times in his life, with Fiona and Wes, Jane and their children, his own mother on occasion, and he cannot help wondering what Ruth would do to protect their son. Perhaps that's why she'd moved in with the doctor, took care of his son, shared his bed perhaps. He can't blame her when he thinks of it like that, and yet he can't help thinking that, now she has no one to help and protect her but him, would she not do the same? Would she not lie, cheat, offer to warm his bed at night, all to protect her boy? How can he be certain her feelings for him are the same?

“Come on, Harry,” Ben cuts into his troubled thoughts. “You're still in your coat, man. Let's get you settled in your room and grab something to eat. You look like you could use some sustenance.”

He sighs and rubs his face with his hand before nodding his agreement, draining his glass, handing it to Ben, and getting up. He follows him back to the front door where he hangs his coat and retrieves his bag before following Ben to the stairs and mounting them, his heart beating wildly in his chest at the thought of running into Ruth. On the landing they turn left, Ben informing him that his and Sarah's room is to the right and suggesting they leave the tour for the morning. It's the second door on the left, and upon opening it, he finds himself in a largish, charming room with a double bed and a wardrobe in the corner. Someone, presumably Sarah, has put fresh flowers on the dressing table, and he's surprised by how welcome they make him feel.

“I'll leave you to freshen up,” Ben says, his hand on the door handle. “Bathroom's next door and the kitchen the first door we passed when you entered the house.”

“Right,” he nods. “Thank you, Ben.” He holds his brother's gaze for a moment, feeling the need to convey his gratitude for everything he's done to help him tonight and to bring Ruth safely home.

“Don't mention it, Big Brother,” Ben grins and turns away, closing the door behind him.

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly before setting aside his jumbled thoughts and emotions and lifting his holdall onto the bed.

A few minutes later, he's moving back towards the landing, feeling refreshed, having splashed water on his face and changed into a clean shirt. As he reaches the top of the stairs, however, he hears a whimper coming from the room at the other end of the hall. *It must be James,* he thinks and pauses to listen, waiting to hear Ruth's reassuring voice, soothing their son back to sleep. Almost without realising what he's doing, he tiptoes over to the door of the room from which Jamie's protests are coming. It's slightly ajar, and as the whimpers continue, he knocks gently on the door-frame and puts his head around the door to peer in.

The room is in shadow but for a little light coming from a night-light in the corner, and in its gentle glow, Harry sees a room a little larger than his own with a double bed, wardrobe, dressing table, and in the corner opposite the door, a crib.

No Ruth.

The realisation that she's not here to tend to Jamie's needs gives him the permission he needs to slip inside and make his way over to the crib, keen to get a closer look at his son.

He's lying on his tummy, his face turned away from him, whimpering in his sleep and shifting his body about, trying to get comfortable, or perhaps having a vivid dream or nightmare. He crouches down near the crib and reaches into it to lay a comforting hand on his son's back while he whispers
softly, “It's okay, lad. Hush. It's okay.” Jamie whimpers again and turns his head to face him, a frown creasing his brow, his face looking troubled. “Don't fret, Jamie,” he murmurs softly, his hand cupping his head, stroking his soft, unruly curls, rubbing his back in soothing circles, relishing this, his first opportunity to touch his boy. “Everything’s alright. I'm here... Daddy's here now. Everything's going to be okay. I'll protect you. I promise. There's nothing to worry about. Go back to sleep.”

This last statement is met by the rather loud sound of Jamie farting, which causes Harry to smile and then begin to chuckle softly, realising that it wasn't a nightmare after all that had disturbed his son's sleep. Jamie seems to have settled back to sleep now, so with one last gentle touch of his soft hair, Harry gets up, gazing down at his sleeping son with undisguised adoration.

“Good night, Son,” he murmurs after a few moments, recollecting himself and the fact that Ben is waiting for him downstairs. “Sweet dreams.” Then he turns and slips back out the door, almost walking straight into Ruth.

He stares at her, lost for words for a moment while he tries to recover his equilibrium, his eyes darting all over her, taking her in, his chest tightening with emotion, a lump settling in his throat as he looks into her eyes again after all this time. How could he have forgotten quite how beautiful, how brilliant, how stormy they are, he wonders, how they speak to him, unlock his heart and touch his soul? He could spend all day gazing into their depths – that hasn't changed, but he can't afford to let her see it yet. He swallows and blinks, self-preservation prompting him to break the silence first.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, suddenly remembering that he's been in her room uninvited. “He was distressed so I-”

“I know,” she smiles shyly. “I heard,” she adds, lifting the baby monitor she's holding in her right hand. She must have heard everything he said, he suddenly realises with a jolt, quickly going over his words in his mind, trying to remember his exact turn of phrase. Did he give too much away? At least I didn't try singing a lullaby, he thinks with some relief.

“He's wonderful,” he finds himself confessing.

She smiles briefly before her eyes turn sad and troubled. “I'm sorry, Harry,” she says at the exact same moment that he murmurs, “Thank you, Ruth.”

“Whatever for?” she frowns, recovering first and clearly not understanding, or perhaps so caught up in her feelings of guilt that she doesn't realises how much she's done.

“For caring for him, protecting him,” he replies, turning to look at their son through the now open doorway. “For keeping him,” he adds, very aware of how much easier it would have been for her on the run if she'd ended the pregnancy.

“I couldn't bring myself to let him go,” she confesses quietly.

“And I'm grateful,” he replies, turning back to face her, for whatever else she might have done, decisions she has made, he is grateful for the fact that Jamie is alive and well. It might not have been a choice he would have made two years ago had they discussed having children, but he already loves his youngest son and is grateful for his existence. “It can't have been easy on the run whilst pregnant.”

“No,” she agrees, looking past him at their son, “but worth it. Every bit of it.” She smiles up at him then and he finds himself getting lost in her beautiful eyes. What wouldn't he give to kiss her, hold her, love her and have her love him in return?
“I’m expected in the kitchen,” he murmurs, wrenching his gaze from hers as he reminds himself that he can’t be sure yet, he can’t let himself trust her so soon, no matter how desperately he wants to.

“Of course,” she replies, stepping aside to let him pass.

“Are you coming down?” he finds himself asking before he can stop himself.

She smiles and nods. “In a moment.”

“Good,” he says. “I’ll see you down there,” and with that, he turns and walks away, feeling rather pleased with their first encounter and conversation after so long apart and all that has happened in the interim.
“How’s your brother?” she asks as soon as Ruth’s left the room to take care of Jamie.

“As well as can be expected,” Ben shrugs. “It’s one hell of a shock.”

“I can imagine. Poor Ruth. She’s so worried he’ll never forgive her.”

“There’s little chance of that,” Ben shakes his head and sighs. “He’s still utterly in love with her, poor bastard. He just needs time to lick his wounds and give himself permission to trust her again.”

“Do you think he will?”

“Without a doubt. I don’t think he can help himself. We're very loyal, we Pearces.”

She smiles. “Are you now?”

“Yes.” He reaches for her hand and gives it a gentle squeeze.

“Then how do you explain the fact that you’re both divorced?” she teases.

“I didn’t say we were sensible or particularly wise. We married the wrong women, but we both stood by them for longer than most.”

“I can’t fault you there,” she sighs and squeezing his hand in return. “I was an idiot to marry Jimmy.”

“If only wisdom came with youth,” he smiles, gazing deeply into her eyes. They’re such a beautiful grey and full of so much love. *What a fool I've been,* she thinks as she smiles at him. The lifestyle she’d been accustomed to as a child – the large house, the comfort, beautiful clothes and things – had seemed so important once upon a time. But she’d been a fool to think they could make up for the lack of love in her marriage, that a handsome, rich, extroverted but shallow husband could make her happy in the long run.

“Speak of the devil,” Ben says, looking past her and pulling her out of her thoughts.

“I wondered why my ears were burning,” Harry's voice replies as she turns to face the doorway.

“Harry!” She smiles and releases Ben's hand to get up. “You must be starving. Have a seat and I'll get you something to eat. Ham, potatoes and green beans all right?”

“Sounds wonderful, Sarah. Thank you,” he replies and sits down beside his brother, their good-humoured banter making her smile as she goes about serving Harry his dinner. She has three brothers of her own and has ample experience of what brothers are like with each other, the continuous needling and sparring that goes on, whether physical or verbal. There’s rarely a moment of peace between them unless they’re watching sport on the telly and supporting the same team. *Thank God I had girls,* she thinks, not for the first time.

“Here you go,” she says, setting down the plate in front of Harry.

“Thank you.”
“What can I get you to drink? Beer? A glass of wine? Something stronger?”

“Don't offer him more whisky, Sarah,” Ben objects. “He's already polished off practically half the good stuff.”

“Leave off, Ben,” she replies. “We all know you save the good stuff for special occasions anyway, and what occasion is more special than your only brother visiting you for the first time in – what is it? – five years?”

“Bollocks! He's only here to see Ruth, and Jamie now. He'd never have set foot in the house otherwise, so I'll be damned if I give him any more of my whisky.”

“Well, if this is the kind of welcome I get,” Harry begins, his eyes sparkling with amusement and the delight of a good fight, but she doesn't let him finish, spying a startled and visibly upset Ruth in the doorway.

“Oh shut up, both of you,” she interrupts. “You're scaring Ruth. Don't mind them,” she adds, moving quickly to the door and taking her by the arm so she doesn't think to try to escape. “They're just being knobs. My brothers do this all the time. In fact, we're lucky they aren't pulling their knobs out to see whose is biggest.”

Beside her, she feels Ruth start and a glance at Harry leaves her wondering what he's thinking. Ben just laughs and stands up, reaching for the zip of his jeans, saying, “We haven't done this in decades, but I've nothing to hide. Come on, Captain. I dare you.”

“Oh Ben,” Sarah laughs. “Put it away. No one wants to see that now.”

“Do I get the rest of the whisky bottle with my dinner if I win?” Harry asks calmly.

“Win? Pah! Fat chance.”

“I've won every other time, Ben. The odds are stacked highly in my favour.”

“But you forget I was shorter than you back then, Captain.”

Harry narrows his eyes at Ben, and she begins to wonder if they might actually do it – pull their cocks out to compare them like little boys. She laughs, delighting in the absurdity of their conversation. Ben discovered long ago that this kind of utterly mad talk is bound to make her laugh and he never misses an opportunity. She's somewhat surprised that Harry's going along with it. She hasn't seen him in a couple of years and she never really knew him that well anyway, and with Ruth around... Could he be trying to impress her, she wonders, or is it simply that he's unable to let his younger brother beat him in anything? “Are we talking flaccid or erect?” she asks, still laughing, wanting to see how far they'll go.

“Both,” is Harry's quick reply, still looking at Ben.

“Dammit! I knew I was marrying the wrong Pearce. What do you say, Ruth? Want to swap?”

She turns to look at her companion, whom she has got to know quite well over the last couple of weeks, finding her intelligent, considerate, witty and in possession of a wicked sense of humour, and is surprised to see her blush and drop her gaze, stammering, “That... I'm... I don't...”

Shit, she thinks, belatedly realising that her teasing has put Ruth in an impossible position. Of course Ruth's struggling to reply when her situation with Harry is so far from being clear, and a quick glance at Harry shows him to be watching Ruth with an expression that gives little away, though the
frown creasing his brow is hardly likely to give Ruth the encouragement she needs. “No, thank you,” she hears Ruth whisper, but she doubts anyone else catches her words as Ben's exclamation drowns them out.

“Hey!” Ben objects, looking wounded, though she knows he's only pretending. When she'd been barely eleven years old, she'd had a brief crush on Harry, who, being around five years older than her, had seemed sexy and dashing with his long, blonde curls, rebellious streak and dare devil personality, but it hadn't lasted long. Quiet, steady, and loving Ben with his sweet, dependable, and kind-hearted nature, and his ability to make her laugh hysterically over absolutely anything, had quickly become one of her best friends and the man she had ultimately fallen in love with, even if she'd stubbornly refused to acknowledge this for many, many years. “No offence, Ruth, but I've waited forty years for you, Sarah Whitman, and I'll be damned if I'll let you fob me off now. You're mine.” And with those words, he grasps her hand and pulls her sharply into his arms, kissing her firmly on the lips.

“As if I would,” she replies a little breathlessly when he pulls back, smiling up at him. God, he's wonderful! She gets lost in his eyes for a moment – such expressive, beautiful eyes – lost in the joy and the wonder that engulfs her every time he's near.

“Would you like some wine, Ruth?” Harry's voice breaks the spell.

“Oh! Um... No thanks. I don't drink,” Ruth replies, then seeing Harry's raised eyebrows, she adds, “At the moment. Jamie,” she clarifies.

Harry frowns. “Jamie?”

“He's still nursing,” Sarah steps in to rescue her friend, when she sees Ruth blush and look away. The look of shock on Harry's face is priceless though she's rather glad Ruth doesn't see it. “I think it's admirable. He's going to be as smart as his mother.”

“Heaven help us!” Ben grins. “He's already running circles around me.”

“That's only because you let him, Ben,” Ruth smiles at him, looking grateful.

“He's adorable and my nephew. It's a fatal combination. I have no defences against him.”

“I'm starting to feel sorry for your ex,” Sarah teases. “I bet you were as useless at disciplining your daughters as you are with Jamie.”

“But the difference is that I'm allowed to spoil Jamie. I'm his uncle. Uncles are meant to be fun. It's his father's job to discipline him.” Ben grins at his brother. “I can just rile him up and then send him home for Harry to deal with.”

“If you rile him up too much, Ben,” Ruth warns. “You'll have me to deal with.”

Sarah laughs; so does Ben, and even Harry cracks a smile, his eyes sparkling with something she can't quite identify until he speaks.

“I'd listen to her, Ben,” he murmurs softly. “You're no match for Ruth.”

Pride, she realises as she watches Ruth lift her eyes to his in surprise, her cheeks glowing with pleasure while they hold each other's gaze, lost for a moment in their own private world.

“That's as may be, Harry,” Ben is quick to reply, “but I hate to break it to you, Big Brother. Neither are you.” The last is said in a lowered voice as Ben grasps Harry's shoulder and leans in, pulling
back grinning and reaching for his phone that has started ringing. “Hello,” he says into the receiver with a wink at Harry and a quiet, “Excuse me,” as he leaves the room.

“Right,” Sarah says quickly before either of her companions can feel uncomfortable. Ben really pushes things too far sometimes. “Dinner. Have a seat, Harry. Ruth, can I get you anything? A little more food? We ate ages ago.”

“I'm not sure,” Ruth begins, glancing uncertainly at Harry. “Are you eating?”

“No, I won't, but I'm sure Harry would enjoy the company.”

“Company would make a nice change,” Harry offers gently, his eyes on Ruth.

She doesn't look away, and when their silent communication is over, she nods her head. “Okay, but I'll get it.”

“Don't be silly. It's no trouble,” she replies. “Sit. You two must have a lot to catch up on.” And with that, she turns her back on the pair of them and proceeds to move about the kitchen getting Ruth some food while listening to the deafening silence behind her.

It’s Harry who breaks it first, saying, “I have something for you.” She hears the chair scrape as he rises from the table and leaves the room, returning shortly and sitting back down. “Open it,” he directs after a moment.

Silence once more, but she resists the temptation to turn around and look.

“Thank you, Harry,” comes Ruth's voice after a short pause, her voice coloured by emotion. She turns to bring Ruth's food to the table and sees that she's holding a passport, gazing down at it with glistening eyes.

“Here you go,” she says. “Tea to drink?”

Ruth just nods, so she turns away again, giving her some privacy.

“I can't believe I'm Ruth Evershed again,” she hears her whisper after a moment. “It feels so... liberating and... wonderful. Thank you, Harry.”

“You're welcome,” he replies. There is silence again for a few moments before Harry's voice breaks it once more. “When I get back, I'll get Jamie's passport sorted... I'll need his full name and everything.”

“His name is James,” Ruth replies softly.

“James. And the rest of it?”

“The rest is a legend. James is all he has.”

Another short silence before Harry says, “What would you like the rest of it to be?”

“I don't know... I thought... I thought it's something we should both decide... together.”

“Together?”

“Yes.”

There's another short silence after that and she can't help taking a peek at them. They're staring at
each other, eyes full of so much emotion that she feels like a voyeur all of a sudden and quickly turns away.

“I have something to show you too,” Ruth says eventually and leaves the room.

Silently she places the tea pot, milk, sugar and two teacups on a tray and carries it to the table, setting it down in the middle. Harry begins eating, murmuring his thanks but not meeting her eye, and she wonders if it would be best to just leave them to it. She wants to be here for Ruth, however, make sure she's all right before abandoning her to Harry, who she knows can be quite harsh and cutting sometimes, so she decides to stay a few more minutes until she's certain that Ruth doesn't need her, starting to load the dishwasher while they wait for Ruth to return.

She doesn't take long.

“Here,” she says, and Sarah watches surreptitiously as she hands Harry a leather-bound traveller's notebook which she knows contains photos of Jamie taken by Ruth on an old, polaroid camera her friend in Cyprus had given her – one for each month of his life. Besides Jamie, it's Ruth's greatest treasure.

“What's this?” Harry asks.

“It's for you,” Ruth replies softly. “For your birthday... Happy Birthday, Harry.”

“Christ! I almost forgot.”

She glances at them again and sees Ruth watching Harry with an expression that clearly says *I never forget*.

“Open it,” Ruth prompts, and when, a few moments later, Ruth moves to sit next to Harry and begins telling him about each picture, she knows it's safe to leave them together, so she slips quietly out of the room.
Chapter 52

2 November 2008 – Ruth

Jamie had woken early as usual, so she'd brought him downstairs, not wishing to disturb anyone else this early on a Sunday. He'd nursed happily and they'd read a few stories - one of his favourite things to do. Now they're sitting in front of the fire, playing with his sorting cube.

“Cylinder,” she says, naming the shape he's just picked up, watching him frown as he concentrates and stick his lower lip out, looking so very much like his father.

Oh Harry.

After finding him in her room last night and listening to him comfort their son over the baby monitor, she has no doubt that he will do everything he can to care for him and protect him, and she feels so relieved and grateful for it, for the ease with which Harry has come to care, the strength of his loyalty, the openness of his heart and the fierceness of his love for his children.

She's still not sure where she stands with him, doesn't know if he can ever forgive her for her letter, for abandoning him, for breaking his heart and for keeping Jamie a secret, or if he will ever want a relationship with her again. There's something still there between them – a spark, a connection – but whether it's strong enough to overcome the pain and betrayal of his trust, she doesn't know.

She hopes so.

She most fervently hopes so.

“Triangular prism,” she says, smiling down at Jamie as he looks up at her expectantly when she fails to name the new shape immediately.

“Isn't it a little early for geometry lessons?” Harry's voice draws both their eyes to the doorway, where he's standing, watching them, his expression inscrutable.

“Beh?” Jamie says uncertainly, standing and moving closer to her.

She places a reassuring hand on her son's waist, saying, “Good morning, Harry,” and offering him a smile.

“Beh?” Jamie repeats.

“No, it's not Uncle Ben, Jamie,” she says. “It's Uncle Ben's brother.” Gently she strokes the blond curls from his forehead. Here goes. “This is your Daddy.” She signs the word for him, knowing he'll recognise it and hoping he's not too confused.

When they were living with George and Nico, he'd understood that she wasn't Nico's mummy and that Nico's mummy had been the lady in the pictures all around the house, but Ruth hadn't had a picture of Harry to show him, and she's not sure he'd really grasped that George was only Nico's father though she'd told him often enough. In fact, perhaps that's why George had never pressed her toward an intimate relationship between them. It must have been abundantly clear to him that she was still in love with Harry when almost every time her son called him daddy, she'd gently reminded him that this is Nico's daddy, not his. He'd tried to talk to her about it once, but she'd deftly changed
the subject, and George had never brought it up again. He had always been gentle and mild
mannered, accepting, never pushing her, and she'd loved that about him. She has a feeling he missed
his wife very much – she'd only been gone two years when she'd first met him – and perhaps that's
another reason why he'd never pushed her for more. They could have had companionship, and of
course sex, but there had never been room for more than that in either of their hearts, despite what
Despoina might think.

She doesn't dare look at Harry as these thoughts quickly flit through her mind.

“Ico baba?” Jamie asks, frowning, clearly puzzled, but understanding the fundamental concept,
surprising her and delighting her in equal measures that he's grasped the idea so quickly.

“Jamie's baba,” she corrects him gently.

Her son smiles and looks at Harry again, saying, “Jamie baba,” his eyes alight as if he's just received
a precious gift, like a teddy-bear but better – a daddy all of his own. It worries her for a moment that
her need to make sure Jamie knew about Harry might have damaged her son psychologically by
depriving him of the opportunity to bond with George, feel loved and accepted by the only man he'd
known in his short life, but she quickly pushes aside that thought. Harry's here now and it's clear he
loves Jamie. Jamie will be fine.

Harry hasn't moved, but his face has softened, his eyes glowing with... something.

“Come in, Harry,” she says softly. “Come meet your son.”

She's never said that before – plainly told him that he is the father of her child. His gaze is so intense
as their eyes meet that it's a struggle for her not be the one to look away first. She wants him to know
that it's the truth, however, that despite appearances perhaps, she's been faithful to him – always.

“Jamie baba?” Jamie repeats, drawing Harry's gaze to him once more.

“Yes, darling,” she smiles at Jamie, who is frowning at her again. “Your daddy. Maybe Daddy
wants to read a book.” She signs the word book for him and Jamie immediately leaves her side to
toddle over to the basket where his five books are kept – all gifts from Ben and Sarah. They have
been spoiling him rotten despite Ruth's protests. They can't seem to help themselves and she's so
grateful for it, for their support and their love for Jamie. Being on the run after his warm, stable home
with George and Nico hadn't been easy on him, but the last couple of weeks here have been
wonderful and Jamie is back to his warm, curious, open self again. She doesn't know how she'll ever
repay Ben and Sarah's kindness.

“Come sit with us, Harry,” she says, getting up and sitting on the sofa, where Jamie joins her and
looks up at his father expectantly.

“Boo,” he says.

Harry smiles and moves closer, sitting carefully down beside Jamie, though he leaves a gap as wide
as their son's body between them, perhaps trying not to make him feel uncomfortable. He needn't
have bothered – Jamie has never been a shy child. He turns his body and holds the book out to his
father, and when he takes it from his hands, he crawls over to Harry and promptly sits down in his
lap.

“Boo,” he repeats. “Baba boo.”

Harry smiles, his face melting as he draws Jamie closer to his body with one arm and kisses the top
of his head, and she feels tears spring to her eyes and has to quickly look away and softly clear her
“Hello, Jamie,” she hears Harry murmur, his voice low and gruff. “Let's read this book then, shall we?”

“Boo,” Jamie confirms and pulls it from Harry's hand to open it.

“The Odd Egg by Emily Gravett,” Harry reads and Jamie turns the page. “All the birds had laid an egg... except for-”

“Duck!” Jamie exclaims, making them both smile.

“Except for duck,” Harry repeats as Jamie frowns in concentration while he turns another page.

“Then duck found an-”

“Egg!”

“He thought it was the most beautiful egg in the whole, wide world.” Jamie turns the page again. “But all the birds did-”

“Ot!”

“Not,” Harry smiles. “That egg is odd.”

“Hee hee. Ot Pitty.”

“Not pretty.” Harry repeats. “Ha ha. It'll never hatch.” They turn another page while Ruth watches, her heart fuller than it has been in a very long time.

“Then,” Harry murmurs. “Creak crack-”

“Teet.” Jamie makes the bird noise as Ruth gets up. Harry lifts his eyes to hers while Jamie turns the page, a question in their depths, so she smiles reassuringly at him. She's not leaving, just going over to the piano where she's left the camera.

“Creak crack,” Harry reads, continuing with the story as he reads each baby bird's sound along with Jamie, who's memorised the whole thing. “All the eggs had hatched. All except for Duck's.” Jamie turns the page again. “Duck waited for his egg to hatch. He waited... and waited... and waited... Until...”

“Keeck cack,” Jamie says, looking up at Harry and making him smile. And that is when she takes the picture and, when they both turn to look at her, she takes another one.

“Baba Jamie,” her son says, abandoning the book and signing 'picture' at her.

“In a minute, Jamie,” she smiles. “We have to leave it a minute to develop. Then you can see the picture of Jamie and Daddy. Finish the story. Daddy doesn't know how it ends.”

“Nap!” Jamie claps his hands together. “Mama.”

“That's right, Jamie,” she smiles. “Show it to Daddy.”

She watches as her boy turns the page over, hears Harry's exclamation of surprise when he sees the crocodile and Jamie shouts, “Nap!”, laughs along with them as they share the joke of everyone's surprise and the crocodile thinking Duck is his mummy, and gazes at them adoringly as she watches
them, Jamie reaching up a hand to touch his father's face, book and photographs forgotten. She'll always remember this moment, she thinks just before the flash of a camera makes them all turn sharply to find Ben grinning at them.

“Good morning, all,” he says, setting the camera aside.

“Beh!” Jamie exclaims and scrambles out of Harry's lap to run across the distance that separates him from his uncle.

“Hello, Jamie,” Ben laughs, catching him under the arms and throwing him into the air, the giggles and shrieks of delight coming from her son filling the room. It had taken her a few days to get used to this – the sight of her son sailing through the air as a result of Ben's exuberant play – without fearing for his safety. George had had such a gentle manner with him and Nico, that the sight of Ben's rough-housing had alarmed her initially. Jamie had loved it from the start.

“Come on, Captain. Get ready to catch!”

“Jamie's not a rugby ball, Ben!” Sarah protests as she walks into the room and sees what's going on.

“He's much heavier, that's for sure,” Ben grins, tossing Jamie into the air to Harry.

Harry catches him with ease, turning him over in his arms and making him squeal again in delight. Then he grasps him under the arms and lifts him up, blowing a raspberry on Jamie's exposed tummy and making him giggle uncontrollably.

The play continues for another minute or so before they quiet down once more and Harry resumes his seat on the sofa with Jamie standing on his lap.

“Baba,” Jamie says, gently patting his cheek.

“Is that another Greek word?” Sarah asks, her arm around Ben.

She fights to control her blush, but she can't seem to manage it. When she was showing Harry the photos last night, there had been one or two of George and a lot more of Nico with Jamie, and she'd felt the tension in Harry rise sharply every time they'd come across them. She's sure he's got the wrong idea about her and George, but talking about that when their own relationship is currently so undefined, mired in uncertainty, and so full of potential pitfalls had seemed impossible.

“Yes,” she says, not quite daring to meet anyone's gaze except her son's, who is currently gazing at his father's face with undisguised fascination. “It means Daddy.”

“Aww,” Sarah exclaims. “Isn't that sweet? He knows who you are, Harry. Clever boy!”

“Baba,” Jamie repeats, pulling Harry's hair.

“Ouch!”

“Gently, Jamie.” Ruth is quick to respond, reaching for his hand and rubbing the back of his little fist gently to make him release Harry's hair. “You're hurting Daddy. Be gentle,” she says, running gentle fingers over his little hand and Harry's shoulder to show her son what to do. He feels so good, as solid and strong as she remembers, his proximity and the warmth of his body under her hand overwhelming her senses, her desire for him suddenly flaring, burning with an urgency that completely takes over her mind, her eyes lifting to his, his harsh breath and intense gaze telling her that he's feeling it too – the overpowering want, the all consuming need to have, to take, to join, to be one.
“Mama,” Jamie says, turning in Harry’s arms to wrap his arms around her neck and shattering the moment between his parents. “Nummy.” He climbs into her lap and attempts to lift her top, reiterating, “Nummy.”

“Hang on, Jamie,” she objects, blushing furiously. “Wait a moment.”

“Right,” Sarah declares, turning towards the door and pulling Ben with her by the hand. “Breakfast, I think. Harry? Will you join us?” She shoots her a grateful look, so relieved to have her around, dreading to think what it would have been like without her support and friendship, alone with Ben and Harry.

Harry hesitates, and for a moment, she thinks he might refuse, but he eventually nods and gets up, following Ben and Sarah out of the room. He pauses in the doorway to look at her and Jamie, who is getting increasingly impatient and frustrated to not be getting his milk yet.

“I’ll be along in a minute,” she says, hoping to prompt him to leave.

He nods and turns away, pulling the door closed behind him and allowing her to breathe a sigh of relief and nurse her son in peace, her mind full of Harry and the intensity of the pull he still has on her, the strength of the sexual tension between them, the yearning she feels for him and the closeness they once had.
“He's nursing a lot,” Sarah comments as she watches Jamie suckle at Ruth's breast, his face obscured by her top, his little fist holding onto Ruth's fingers and his legs wiggling in rhythm to the sounds of him swallowing. When they'd first arrived, Ruth had been so shy about nursing her son in front of her, so she's rather pleased that it no longer causes her any embarrassment. She's such an odd mixture of self-confidence and shyness that Sarah finds oddly compelling.

Ruth smiles. “He'd almost weaned himself in Cyprus, but while we were on the run, he started nursing more again. Today though, I think he's just tired. Harry and Ben have been playing with him practically all morning.”

“That's true. And their play isn't exactly calm and relaxing, is it?”

Ruth chuckles. “No, it's not.” She smiles down at her son. “It's good for him though. He's missed having playmates around since we left Cyprus.”

“It can't have been easy for either of you.”

“No,” she sighs. “But it's brought us here, and for that, I'm very grateful. I was so wrong to deprive him of Harry.”

She looks so guilt-stricken that Sarah can't help smiling in understanding. She knows that feeling all too well. “Don't be so hard on yourself, Ruth. Men don't understand the importance of stability and safety for a new mother. You needed that and so did Jamie. You've done a marvellous job.”

“But I should have contacted Ben at the very least, told him... something.”

“Not if you were scared someone would use you both to manipulate Harry. You weren't being unreasonable in wanting some security to learn the ropes of motherhood and you'd worked hard to find that. You had the support you needed and the peace to bring up your son. It's natural that you wanted to maintain that while he was still a baby.”

Ruth nods, but her eyes are still troubled and full of guilt, and she wonders what more she can tell her to make her see that what she did wasn't as terrible as she thinks and fears. Before she can think of anything more to say, however, Ben and Harry walk into the room.

Ruth looks a little alarmed, she notes and she sees her quickly look down at Jamie, clearly embarrassed to be caught nursing him in front of them. She doesn't get up though or attempt to cover what she's doing, and Sarah feels a flash of pride for her. As far as she's concerned, men should have more opportunities to understand that breasts were made primarily for feeding babies, not for their own enjoyment.

“Oops, sorry,” Ben says with the flash of a grin.

“Shhhh,” Sarah warns. “He's almost asleep.”

“Sorry,” Ben whispers, moving over to her and softly kissing her lips, leaving Harry standing in the doorway, his eyes on Ruth. “What's for lunch?” he asks.
“I don’t know. What are you making?”

He grins. “I’m ordering a pizza. What would you like on yours?”

“The usual,” she smiles, stroking his cheek. “And I’d like a salad too.”

“Coming right up.” He smiles and kisses her lips again before straightening up and turning to Ruth. “Pizza okay, Ruth?”

“Yes, please,” she replies, not daring to look at him. “Whatever toppings you’re getting are fine.”

“Right. I’m going to order and make a salad. Come on, Harry. You’re helping,” he says, clapping Harry on the shoulder and walking out of the room.

Harry doesn’t react, staring at Ruth, and when she turns to follow his gaze, she can understand why. Jamie’s fallen asleep and come off her breast, her elongated nipple peaking out of her top for a moment before Ruth manages to refasten her bra and pull her top down, gently manoeuvring Jamie in her arms in preparation for getting up and carrying him up to bed.

Unconsciously, she feels herself edging forward in her seat as Ruth does the same and prepares to stand. She’s seen Ruth do this many a time now, but each time the instinct to offer help is overwhelming. She knows better than to voice it, however. Ruth has always refused her in the past and she doesn’t want to undermine her confidence by repeating the offer unnecessarily.

Harry apparently has no such misgivings, however, as he quickly crosses the room and gently helps her up, his strong hands grasping her elbow and waist securely as she rises and hauling her to her feet. She watches intrigued as Ruth lifts surprised eyes to his, curious to see her reaction.

“Thank you,” she murmurs at the exact same time as Harry releases her and takes a step back, saying, “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Ruth says quickly, exactly as Harry takes a half-step forward again and gently offers, “May I help?”

They both smile to find themselves speaking at the same time twice in quick succession.

“I’m fine,” Ruth replies, “but thank you.”

He just nods and takes a step back, clearing her path to the door and watching her closely as she walks out of the room.

What is he thinking, she finds herself wondering, his ever present frown creasing his brow. He’s so different now to what she remembers him like as a teen. So serious and thoughtful, where he used to be vibrant and reckless.

“You’re watching very closely, Sarah,” he murmurs softly, his eyes still on the door.

She blushes in spite of herself as he turns his eyes on her. “I was just thinking how much we’ve all changed over the years.”

“If you start making comments about my hair too...” he warns, his eyes full of mischief, reminiscent of his younger self.

“Now that’s more like how I remember you.” She smiles. “You were always joking, making mischief, doing something naughty and often rather dangerous.”
“We all have to grow up eventually.” He looks momentarily sad as he says it.

“Maybe,” she concedes, “but we shouldn't lose our spark, our hope, our optimism.”

He doesn't reply, just smiles enigmatically, almost wistfully, as if he's remembering something precious. She probably sounds ridiculously naive, but she doesn't care.

“I used to have a crush on you,” she confesses out of the blue, she's not quite sure why exactly, perhaps to get it out in the open now that she's marrying his brother, wanting a clean slate between them.

“I know.”

“Huh,” she exhales. “I didn't realise you'd noticed.”

“You were very young, Sarah,” he replies carefully. “It was rather hard to miss.”

“Now, I'm embarrassed.”

He chuckles. “Don't be. It was a long time ago and you were... charming. I was flattered, I assure you.”

“But not interested?” she asks, just to see what he'll reply.

He smiles. “How many sixteen-year-old boys do you know who are interested in eleven-year-old girls?” He lifts one eyebrow, and at her smile, he adds, “Besides, there was also Ben to consider.”

“You were always very good to him.”

He laughs. “Hardly. I used to beat him up.”

She dismisses that with a wave of her hand. “Nonsense. All siblings get in fights. My brothers were much worse. They used to tickle me until I couldn't breathe and my parents always thought it was just a bit of fun and we were all having a good time.” She grimaces. “It was torture.”

“Well, I can't say I tortured Ben, but who knows? Maybe he thinks differently.”

She shakes her head. “He's always thought very highly of you, Harry. Don't worry.”

He smiles. “That's good to know.” There's a pause, then he adds, “I'm glad things have worked out between you, Sarah. It's good to see him happy... and free of his regrets.” Then he turns and walks out the room, leaving her staring after him in surprise, her heart expanding with pleasure.

When she enters the kitchen, Harry's pouring the wine while Ben is making the salad dressing. The table has been set and Ruth is sitting, sipping what looks like red wine, but is probably Ribena. “Isn't this nice?” she says, glancing up at her. “They won't let me do anything.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts, Ruth,” Ben grins.

“I intend to,” she replies.

“Red or white?” Harry asks.

“White, please.” She takes a seat by Ruth, murmuring her thanks when Harry hands her a glass of chilled, white wine. “Cheers,” she says.
Ruth leans forward and clinks her glass with hers, smiling. “Cheers.”

The doorbell rings, so Ben goes off to answer it, and before long, they’re all tucking into their food with gusto. She doesn't know about anyone else, but she’s suddenly ravenous.

“So what are you naming Jamie?” Ben asks once they’ve taken the edge off their hunger. “Achilles? Socrates? Homer?”

Harry almost chokes on his drink.

“Don’t look at me like that, Harry,” Ben grins. “Ruth was saying just the other day how she wanted to name him after a Greek god or philosopher or something.”

“I was not!” Ruth exclaims indignantly. “All I said was that it was rather fun how some of the people in Cyprus had ancient names. Nico had a friend whose name was Hercules and the butcher's name was Pythagoras. I just thought it was rather... nice and unusual.”

“Oh give over, Ruth,” Ben insists. “You wanted to name him Apollo. Admit it.”

She blushes and looks away, saying, “Not Apollo, no.”

“What then?”

“I don't know.”

“Where did James come from?” Sarah asks, hoping to take the pressure off Ruth. She can see Harry gazing at her with an expression that seems half-amused and half-exasperated.

“My father,” she replies. “And Harry's.”

“Ah, yes, of course.”

“How about Alexander?” Harry suggests suddenly, his eyes still on Ruth. “If you want a Greek hero's name that one won't get him teased at school.”

“A hero?” Sarah frowns. “He was a conqueror, but that doesn't necessarily make him a hero. His army killed thousands of people, enslaved thousands more.”

“He united all the Greeks,” Harry replies, surprising everyone.

“It means defender of man,” Ruth adds softly, her eyes on Harry's. A more apt name for Harry than Jamie, Sarah thinks, suppressing a smile. Then again, who knows? Perhaps Jamie will follow in his father's footsteps. For a moment, she wonders what the meaning of Henry is. She seems to remember that Benjamin means 'son of the right hand', or in other words, of strength. He is strong, her Ben. And James? She must look it up sometime.

“James Alexander Pearce,” Ben murmurs. “It's got a nice ring to it.”

“Evershed,” says Harry.

Ben grins. “That's right. I forgot you don't want any of them to bear your name.”

“Whyever not!!” Sarah asks incredulously.

“To keep them safe,” Ben replies promptly. “Catherine and Graham are Townsends and Jamie will be an Evershed. Looks like the Pearce family name will die with us, Captain.”
“I wouldn't be so sure of that,” she objects. “Maggie or Lizzie might pass it on.”


“I like it too.” She smiles softly as she looks at him, their gazes holding for a long time. Ben looks from one to the other and then shrugs, turning his eyes on hers and grinning. She grins right back.

“I love you,” she says, hoping she's speaking for all of them.

“I love you too,” Ben replies and presses a soft kiss against her lips.

Ruth and Harry are gazing at their plates.
Chapter 54

3 November 2008 – Harry

He can't go back to sleep – the vividness of the dream he's just had, Ruth's body writhing in pleasure below his, his cock filling her, engulfed in her heat, her moans of approval and whispers of love still ringing in his ears, making it impossible. So he gets up, swearing as he slips back into his clothes and goes downstairs in need of a stiff drink.

He finds it in Ben's den, pouring himself a generous measure and downing it quickly before refilling the tumbler.

*Christ* but he wants her!

Desperately.

Yet he mustn't. He can't allow himself to succumb to his need, his weakness. How many times has he done it in the past and how much has it cost him? Juliet, Elena... He'd expected it to be easier now that he's older, now that his body isn't governed by testosterone and lust. But it's been months since the last time he's had sex – or tried to at any rate. *Christ!* He doesn't want to think about that now.

He feels restless, so he picks up the bottle and carries it and his glass through to the living room, walking over to the French windows and gazing out into the back garden. If only she'd told him about Jamie, if only she'd trusted him to protect them both. “Oh Ruth,” he murmurs out loud. “Why? *Why*?! Look what you've done!” He balls his hand into a fist, the pain and frustration suddenly overpowering, the impulse to throw something, hit someone unbelievably strong. He blinks a couple of times, the moisture gathering in his eyes irritating him even more.

“I protected him, Harry,” he imagines her arguing in his mind. “I put Jamie before my needs and yours.”

And can he really blame her for that, for putting her child first? Isn't that what he'd done himself all those years ago when he'd swallowed his pride and stayed with Jane for the sake of his children, suffered humiliation after humiliation at her hands for months, all to rescue his marriage for the good of the kids?

He takes another gulp of his drink and walks over to the electric fire, taking a seat in the high-backed armchair and setting his glass down so he can open the bottle and refill it. He's turned on no lights and the room is in total darkness, save for the moonlight and city-lights filtering through the windows. He can see well enough though and the darkness suits his mood.

But somehow any justification of her actions falls short in his mind because he would never have done this to her. He would never have kept their child away from her, would never have abandoned her, would never have broken her heart. He'd have gathered them both close and protected them. Always.

He feels like he's being torn in two – one half desperately wanting a life with her, with Jamie, and the other still fuming, unable to trust, to forgive, to move on. The sexual tension is still there – maybe the love is there too – but intertwined with that now is the pain and the betrayal, eating away at his insides and making him want to scream at the unfairness of it all. *Is this my punishment for all my*
A sound coming from the doorway has him suddenly on high alert, his muscles tensing in preparation even as he holds his breath and freezes, grasping the neck of the bottle securely with his right hand. Logically, it'll be Ben or Sarah or Ruth, but he needs to make certain before he relaxes and lowers his guard.

Whoever it is, moves quietly over to the French doors, taking up a position where he'd been standing just a few moments ago. Slowly, he turns to peer around the back of the chair.

**Ruth.**

He'd recognise her anywhere.

“Idiot,” he hears her mutter to herself. “What did you expect? You made your bed, now lie in it.” She sounds angry, but her body language is defensive, her arms wrapped tightly round her middle as if to protect herself. He waits, hoping to hear more, but there is silence for long moments until a sob escapes her and he realises she's crying.

He wants to get up, go to her and pull her into his arms, but he holds back, still unsure, still unwilling to trust her, still in too much pain. She has a power over him that he's never been comfortable with and which seems to have only grown with time whilst his has diminished – she's no longer under his command and, though he's pretty confident she still wants him physically, he can't be certain she feels anything deeper than lust and a desire to win him round to protect herself and their son.

“Oh Harry,” she whispers, his heart skipping several beats to hear her utter his name. “Forgive me. Please, forgive me.”

*Is she speaking to me? Does she know I'm here? Is this another ploy to gain my trust?* The questions come to him in quick succession, clouding his mind even as his heart urges him to get up, go to her, pull her into his arms and never let her go. He sits utterly still, his mind in turmoil, heart aching as he listens to her sobbing her heart out for what feels like hours, unwilling to go to her and unable to walk away.

Eventually, she calms, lifting her hands to wipe her cheeks, her voice firm as she tells herself, “Enough. That's enough now. This isn't solving anything. You have Jamie. That's all that matters. You've got to be strong for him. You're going to go home to England and make a life for the two of you. You're going to introduce him to his granny and his cousins, and Harry...” She pauses there and he sees her take a deep, shaky breath. “You're going to manage somehow. For Jamie. You're going to be strong and pretend you're happy when you see him. You're going to manage to hide everything you feel for him for Jamie's sake. You've done it before and you can do it again. Enough. Enough now.” And with those words, a final wiping of her cheeks and squaring of her shoulders, she opens the French doors and steps into the dark, cold night.

His heart is racing so fast, he could have run a mile and it's all he can do not to follow her and kiss her senseless under the stars. With difficulty, he checks the impulse and quietly slips out of the room instead, taking the whiskey back to the den where he polishes off the contents of his glass and slips up the back stairs to bed, his heart full of hope, his mind still in turmoil.

And as he finally drifts off to sleep, his most pressing thought is a question – *did she know I was there tonight?*
It's early in the morning as he slips out of bed and gets dressed, pausing to gaze fondly down at Sarah as she continues to sleep peacefully. *God, I'm such a lucky bastard,* he thinks, smiling with joy and pressing a gentle kiss against her hair before slipping out of their room. It took them so long to get here that he can't help cherishing each moment they have together now. He moves down the hall, having to stifle his impulse to whistle as he makes his way downstairs and into the kitchen.

“Good morning,” he says cheerfully when he spies Ruth sitting at the table next to Jamie, who's in his borrowed high chair.

“Beh!” Jamie exclaims in delight and begins to try to get up.

“Jamie!” Ruth sounds exasperated.

“Hello, young man,” Ben grins, moving over to his side and ruffling his hair, laughing as he offers Ruth an apology. “Sorry, Ruth.”

“It's not your fault,” she sighs.

“I don't know,” he grins, picking up Jamie who's holding his chubby, little arms up, demanding attention, “if I wasn't all fun and games,” he adds and lifts Jamie onto his shoulders, “he wouldn't give up on breakfast the moment I walked into the room. Would you, mate?”

“Fun and games are just as important as breakfast, Ben,” Ruth smiles, watching him pretend to be a horse as Jamie squeals in delight. “He'll miss you so much. I don't know how he'll manage without you.”

“He'll be fine.” He stops to look at her and give her a reassuring smile. “We'll visit and you'll come see us again. And we do plan to return to Britain at some point. Besides, you'll have Harry there.”

“Will I though?” She looks troubled.

“Of course you will. He's very loyal, is Harry, and fiercely protective of his children.” It pains him to see the doubt in her eyes. Harry doesn't deserve it. In all the years they've had together, Harry has never let him down. Even as children, Harry'd always been there for him, teasing him and fighting with him almost all the time, but also standing by him, ready to defend him from everyone else. “Everything will work itself out, Ruth. Don't worry.”

“That's easy for you to say. Of course, I worry.” She sighs. “It won't be the same. Harry works long hours and it'll be different for us, living on our own. I'm going to have to get a job and Jamie will have to go to nursery.”

“I'm sure he'll love it,” he smiles. “Won't you, lad? Having lots of friends to play with every day?”

“Pane!” Jamie replies.

“Plane? All right. Here we go then.” And he whisks Jamie around the room making aeroplane noises, his nephew doing his best to imitate him by blowing raspberries, drool slowly dripping down
his chin. He hears her laugh and turns to see her smiling broadly, eyes sparkling and dimples creasing her cheeks.

“That's better, Ruth. You look beautiful when you smile. Doesn't Mummy look beautiful, Jamie?”

“Mama!” Jamie exclaims, suddenly tiring of the game and squirming in his arms to get to her. He gives his nephew back to his mother, watching her hide her blush behind her son.

“Don't tell Harry I said that though,” he teases, delighting in her blushes. “He'll poke my eyes out or something.”

She laughs, shaking her head at him and saying, “What nonsense, Ben. Harry's not blind. He can see as well as I that you only have eyes for Sarah, lucky woman.”

It's his turn to laugh and wag his finger at her. “By the same token, Ruth, it's obvious you only have eyes for my brother, lucky sod that he is. He always did manage to get the best girls.”

She smiles a sweet, sad smile at that. “Touché,” she says softly before turning back to her son, who is sitting in her lap, eating a banana. He sees her gently brush the curls from his forehead, her eyes full of love, yet infinitely sad too, her whole being, in fact, radiating grief.

“Hey,” he murmurs softly, pulling out the chair next to hers and taking a seat. “It'll be all right, Ruth. He'll come round eventually.”

She twists her mouth and looks away, blinking rapidly as she fights for control. “I'm not so sure, Ben. I think... I think perhaps I broke it... what we had. I'm not sure there's any way back from this and I can't exactly blame him. If he'd done what I did... I'm not sure I'd be able to forgive him.” She looks at him, her eyes full of heartbreak and guilt and shame. “I broke his heart, Ben.”

He reaches for her hand and covers it with his own, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “Sarah did the same to me, Ruth, a long time ago. She broke my heart but we're still here now, together, and I'm the happiest man alive. Time heals all wounds. Time and patience. And if you remember, the good Captain often takes a little while to catch up to the best course of action, Ruth, but he gets there in the end. He just needs time. Don't despair. Keep busy – that's my advice. Keep busy and give him the time he needs. Besides, he has two beautiful incentives to come round quickly and give it another chance.”

She nods and lifts her head to smile at him. “Thank you, Ben. You're a good, kind man.”

“Ha!” he laughs. “Don't tell that to my troops, will you?” Then he winks and gets up to make the coffee and get started on the bacon and eggs.

A few minutes later, Harry walks into the room, murmuring, “Good morning.” There's something in his gaze as Ben turns to face him that makes him wonder if perhaps he's been spying on them, eavesdropping on their conversation, but he dismisses the thought without comment. It doesn't matter. Perhaps overhearing their conversation will do him good in the end and he doesn't want to say anything that'll likely alarm or upset Ruth.

“Morning, Harry,” he smiles instead. “Help yourself to coffee and bacon. The eggs will be ready in a tick.”

“Baba!” Jamie exclaims.

“Good morning, Jamie,” he hears Harry murmur softly. “Ruth.”
“Morning,” Ruth replies, and as Ben turns to carry the eggs to the table, he sees Harry gently lift up his son and kiss his forehead.

“Did you sleep well?” he asks.

“Boo,” Jamie replies.

“After breakfast, Jamie,” Harry says. “We'll read a story after breakfast. Daddy's hungry.” And with that, he carries his son over to the counter and pours himself some coffee before taking him and his mug back to the table and taking a seat. Ruth, Ben notes, is watching all this with misty-eyed wonder. It's a secret Harry's kept very well – how good and at home he is with babies and small children, how patient and gentle he is with them, and how his presence seems to soothe them.

“Bacon?” Harry asks Jamie, offering him a slice and watching with a smile as the little boy takes it in his fist and sniffs it before tentatively putting it in his mouth. Ben sees Ruth frown in disapproval, but she doesn't say anything, no doubt loath to break the moment between father and son.

“He likes that,” Ben chuckles before carrying the frying pan back to the cooker and proceeding to crack more eggs.

“That's my boy!” Harry replies, his voice full of pride.

Ben laughs. “I remember how disappointed you were when Graham spat it out.”

“He learnt to like it eventually.”

“Yeah, when he was thirteen, at just about the same time that Catherine became a vegetarian. I often wonder if he did it just to needle his sister.” He chuckles at the memory and hears Harry join in.

“I'm sure this little fellow will find some way to rebel too at some point,” he says, smiling down at James.

“Undoubtedly,” Ben agrees, serving the last of the food and taking a seat beside his brother. Then he looks up at Ruth and asks, “What about you, Ruth? What were you like as a child?”

“Quiet,” she says, “timid, studious and a bookworm.”

“The exact opposite of Harry then,” he grins. “Well, it'll be interesting to see who Jamie takes after more.”

“One thing's for sure,” Harry says, his eyes on Ruth's. “He's bound to be extremely stubborn.”

She smiles and nods her head, and in that moment, Ben's sure that everything will turn out well for them in the end.

“What time's your train?” he asks Harry after a few moments of silence.

“Nine.”

“I'll give you a lift to the station after breakfast.”

“Thanks.”

He takes a sip of his coffee, noting the way Ruth's looking at Harry and Harry at his son, the sorrow and longing in both their gazes. Jamie has now abandoned the bacon in favour of Harry's tie and is happily chewing on that instead.
“How soon will you be able to get his passport ready?” Ben asks.

“By the end of the week at the latest.”

He nods, turning to Ruth. “Best start looking for that job then, Ruth, and somewhere to live... Not that you're not welcome to stay here for as long as you need to,” he hastens to add.

“Thank you, Ben,” she smiles, “but as lovely as it's been, I'd like to get back home to England, start my life again. I can't live in limbo forever.”

“Do you have somewhere to stay?” Harry asks, lifting his eyes to hers.

“I thought I'd stay with my mother if...” she tails off and frowns slightly.

“I'll go see her,” Harry volunteers immediately. “I'll let her know that you're... alright.”

“Are you sure?” she asks, looking a little surprised that he's offered.

“Of course. I'd be happy to do it. It'll be a shock for her otherwise and we wouldn't want it to be... overwhelming.”

“No,” she smiles. “Thank you, Harry.”

He nods, pursing his lips and looking down at Jamie again. “How about that story then, young lad?”

“Boo,” Jamie grins, abandoning Harry's tie as Harry gets up, lifting him into his arms and turning towards the door, belatedly remembering to say over his shoulder, “Thanks for the breakfast, Ben.”

“Don't mention it,” he grins, watching them walk out of the room.

When the time comes for them to leave for the station, he almost groans at the pair of them, Ruth and Harry, glancing at each other, all reserved and proper. Harry never used to be like this in their youth, but years in the service have trained him to mask his emotions so well that there seems to be an effort of will required now for him not to!

“Bye bye, Jamie,” Harry murmurs, pressing his lips against Jamie's forehead. “Daddy has to leave now, but we'll see each other again soon. You can come and visit Daddy at home.”

Then Ben watches as he leans down to hand the boy to Ruth who takes him in her arms, trying to hold him as he squirms and leans towards Harry, not ready to let go of his father just yet.

“Goodbye, Ruth,” Harry says softly, lifting his eyes from his son to look at her. “Take care of him.”

She smiles wanly and turns sad eyes on his, saying softly, “I will. Bye, Harry. Safe journey and... we'll see you soon.”

“Yes,” he smiles and hesitates a moment, perhaps sensing his brother willing him to kiss her. *Come on, Harry! Do it! But he doesn't, turning away instead, picking up his bag and stepping out of the house and into the chilly, morning air.*

Ben smiles at her reassuringly, Jamie still squirming in her arms to be let down and demanding loudly, “Baba! Baba!”

“See you later,” he says and closes the door behind him, the glimpse of Ruth's tears pulling at his heart. *Shit! He's come to care for her far too much over the past couple of weeks, he realises. She's such a lovely person and clearly utterly in love with Harry, that he hadn't been able to stay angry*
with her long despite the fact that she's wounded his brother so deeply. It seems to him that she's hurt herself even more by staying away from Harry. Still, at least there's a good chance she'll one day be his sister-in-law and he's grateful for that, that he doesn't have to watch her and his brother suffer in vain for too much longer, he hopes. After his own and Sarah's story, he's an optimist when it comes to love.

“Come on,” he says to Harry, unlocking the car and motioning for him to get in. “The sooner we get going, the sooner we'll see them again.”

Harry nods slowly and gets in the car. “I'm too old for this,” he sighs.

“Nonsense! If you're not too old to get it up, Captain, you're not too old for the consequences.”

He expects Harry to laugh or offer some quick-witted reply to that, but instead he just shakes his head and looks out the window while he pulls out into the road. “I feel helpless,” he confesses softly in an uncharacteristic display of vulnerability, once they're safely on their way. “She could disappear again at any moment and I'll never see them again. It's what happened with Jane all over again, except it's worse. Last time I brought it on myself, but this time...” He tails of, shaking his head again before resuming. “Jane was my wife. I have no official ties to Ruth. I could lose her, lose Jamie at any moment, Ben. This is Elena all over again.”

He frowns, glancing at his brother, worried to hear him compare Ruth to Elena Gavrik. In his mind, this is nothing like that situation, especially since they learnt long ago that she was a spy and Sasha not Harry's after all.

“Ruth made a mistake, Harry,” he replies carefully, taking a moment to consider. “She didn't set out to hurt or manipulate you, and she doesn't strike me as the kind of woman to make the same mistake twice. She made the wrong choice in staying away, but she did it for Jamie. She didn't do it for herself. In fact, I suspect she's the kind of person who always puts her own needs last. She'll not want to deprive Jamie of you, Harry, not now she's seen how you are together, not when the boy is crying for you as we speak.”

Harry grunts in acknowledgement and continues to look out the window seemingly lost in thought.

“When I met up with Sarah for the first time,” he says after a moment. “I was angry, still smarting at her rejection all those years ago. It took me a while to see that she was hurting too, maybe more than I was because she'd been the one to cause us both this heartbreak.” He glances at Harry again, but he gives no indication he's listening. He'd expected nothing less. “It was your words that made me give her the benefit of the doubt and agree to see her again. On our second meeting, she confessed that she'd realised she'd made a mistake in choosing Jimmy almost from the start. She'd wanted to end it, but then she'd discovered she'd made a mistake in choosing Jimmy almost from the start. She'd wanted to end it, but then she'd discovered she was pregnant. She'd tried to reach out to me then, but I'd ignored her and hadn't returned her calls. We were best friends back then if you remember. Before Jimmy, we used to talk almost every night on the phone. But I withdrew my friendship and my anger and hurt pride made her believe that it was over, especially since she thought it unlikely I would have wanted to bring up Jimmy's child. So she married him and lived with him for years, staying in an unhappy marriage whilst I went off and started a family of my own. I've always blamed her, Harry, but it turns out that it was my fault too that we spent so many years apart. Don't make the same mistake. Don't let your pride get in the way of love. It's obvious you're both still crazy about each other, and though you need time to get reacquainted, don't leave it too long. Life's too short, and before you know it, Jamie will be all grown up and leaving home for university.”

Beside him, Harry sighs and lifts his right hand to massage his temples, sliding it down his face. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't need to. Ben's content to know he's done what he can to help his brother.
A little while later, they pull up in front of the station and get out.

“Take care, Big Brother,” he smiles, embracing Harry and clapping him on the back. “I'll see if I can arrange for some time off to bring them to Britain when the time comes, and if not, perhaps Sarah can accompany them.”

“Thank you, Ben,” he replies gruffly. “For everything. And thank Sarah for me too. It's been good to see you both looking so happy. Look after her. She's good for you.” Ben smiles. “And look after Ruth and Jamie for me. Tell them... Tell them I'll see them soon.”

“I will,” he nods, then salutes smartly and gets back into the car to drive to work.
Chapter 56

3 November 2008 – Malcolm

When Harry had walked onto the Grid, he'd looked tired and troubled, and Malcolm couldn't help worrying. He'd expected him to look calm and content for a change after his much anticipated reunion with Ruth, and it had immediately made him wonder what had happened. Did something go wrong? Is Ruth all right? Had she not been pleased to see Harry? Has she really moved on? Somehow, all this time, he's believed that that can't have happened, that there must be some other, perfectly reasonable explanation for her letter, but perhaps that had just been wishful thinking on his part.

He's been desperate to know the answer to these questions all day, but Malcolm, being Malcolm, has stayed away from Harry, studiously working away though staying later than usual, feeling the need to be here for Harry if he needs him.

His patience and natural reticence pay off in the end when Harry calls him to his office once the rest of the team has gone home for the day. He quickly gathers his thoughts and makes his way over to the inner sanctum, knocking on the door and sliding it open, pausing momentarily in surprise to see Ros there, sitting across from Harry with his desk between them.


He walks over and sits down, unbuttoning his jacket as he does so and lifting his eyes to Harry's. “How can I help?”

Harry sighs and rubs his temples with his hands before lowering them and looking from Ros to him and back again. “I saw Ruth yesterday,” he says.

“How is she?” he can't help asking.

“She's well. She...” he pauses. “Here,” he says, and pulling out his phone, he fiddles with it for a moment and then passes it to him. When he sees the picture, he feels his jaw slacken in shock – Ruth holding a toddler, her eyes shining with love as she looks at him, the little boy's face alight with curiosity and joy.

He lifts his eyes to Harry's as he passes the phone to Ros, and as their eyes meet, he sees the resemblance between Harry and the child. “He's adorable,” he says. “How old is he?”

“Eighteen months,” Harry replies, still watching him, waiting, it seems to Malcolm, for him to figure it out and say something. It's certainly possible given the age of the child.

“Congratulations, Harry,” Ros says, handing the phone back, as every, much braver than him.

“What's his name?”

“Thank you. His name is James and, Malcolm, he's going to need a passport, birth certificate, the works.” He reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulls out an envelope, handing it to him as he adds, “Ruth put this together. His birth certificate from Cyprus is, obviously, under her legend. We've decided his name will be James Alexander Evershed.”

“Not Pearce?” Ros asks, again far more bravely than Malcolm would ever dare.
“No.”

There’s a pause, during which Ros and Harry stare at each other, and eventually Harry adds, “It's safer. My other children also have their mother's surname.”

Malcolms nods. “I'll get on it right away. I should have it by the end of the day tomorrow.”

“No rush, Malcolm.”

“It won't take long, Harry. Once I put it through the system, we'll just need to wait for the passport to be issued. You must be impatient to get them home.”

“Yes, but they're safe enough at my brother's.” There's something dark in Harry's gaze as he says it and it makes him wonder once again why Harry isn't happy. Ruth's back, her name is cleared, they're free to be together, and to cap it all, they now have an adorable child. *What more could a man wish for?*

“Are you all right, Harry?” he asks tentatively. “You seem a bit...”

“I'm fine.” His tone is dismissive.

“Right. Well, I'll get on this right away.” And with that he turns and leaves the room.

A good half-hour later, he's getting ready to go home – having hacked into the system to fiddle with the birth registry and ordered Jamie's passport – when Harry walks into the room, looking tired and slightly haunted.

“Malcolm,” he murmurs as soon as he looks up, “I need to run something by you.”

“Of course, Harry,” he replies.

“Not here. Let's go for a drink.”

So they both grab their things and head out into the dark night, making their way to a pub not often frequented by spooks, where they usually have any clandestine meetings between them.

With a glass of whisky each, they sit quietly in a corner, watching the other patrons in between staring down at their drinks. Harry, normally very direct, seems unusually reluctant to talk, which tells Malcolm that the topic of conversation is likely to be Ruth and James.

“He looks very much like you, Harry,” he says softly, realising Harry's not going to say anything and deciding to take the plunge. “You must be very proud.” Harry nods and takes a sip of his drink. “It must have been quite a shock,” he continues, making Harry suddenly laugh harshly. “Did Ben give you no hint of what to expect?”

“None.”

He's looking morosely down at his drink again, but Malcolm cannot think of what more he can say without risking putting his foot in it, so he remains silent, hoping that he's said enough to prompt Harry to speak and patiently waiting for his next words.

He doesn't have to wait long.

“I'm going down to Exeter tomorrow to speak to her mother,” he says.

“It'll be a big shock. I wouldn't want her to have a heart-attack when she sees Ruth.”

“No.” He smiles crookedly. “Have you spoken to her already?”

“I rung her this afternoon.”

“Good.” He nods. “I think she's in good health. She has a dog, apparently, that a friend gave her after Ruth... went away. It keeps her going.”

Harry looks up at him at that and their gazes meet for what seems like the first time this evening.

“Ruth used to invite me and Mother round sometimes when Elizabeth came up to London. Mother keeps in touch,” he explains.

“Perhaps you are the better man for this job then, Malcolm.”

“You're James's father, Harry,” he responds gently.

He sighs and looks away, but Malcolm doesn't miss the clenching of his jaw or the way his knuckles turn white against the glass. “What's wrong, Harry?” he asks.

“Nothing,” he replies, lifting his hand to rub his face. “Everything,” he confesses softly. “This isn't how I'd pictured it in my head.”

Malcolm hesitates before asking, “Is everything all right, Harry? With James I mean.” Harry lifts his eyes to his, frowning, so he hastens to explain. “His health and development?”

“Yes. Yes, everything's fine.”

“That's good,” Malcolm replies, feeling relieved. For a moment he'd thought that there was something wrong and that's why Harry seems so unhappy.

“He's...” Harry begins then pauses, a soft smile gracing his lips. “He's a nice boy. Affectionate. Confident. He loves stories and knocking things down. And music. Ruth played the piano a few times and every time he'd stop what he was doing to listen.”

“He sounds delightful,” Malcolm smiles. Harry nods and takes another sip of his drink.

“He is,” he says. He hesitates, then adds, “But I can't help thinking... Would I ever have met him were it not for Mani and his men, Malcolm?” He shakes his head, his knuckles turning white against his glass again. “I never expected this from her. I've had my fair share of betrayals, but this...” He tails off and downs the remainder of his drink before rising suddenly, saying, “I'm going to get another. Do you want one?”

“No thanks,” Malcolm replies, his eyes full of compassion. *Poor Harry.* He's such a loyal man and he's never coped well with betrayal. He wonders why Ruth did it. It's not something he'd thought her capable of either, inflicting so much pain on anyone, let alone a man she'd loved so deeply, the man who's fathered her child.

When he returns, Malcolm murmurs, “I'm not sure what to say, Harry. This is Ruth we're talking about. I can understand how hurt you must be, but she must have had her reasons.”

He laughs a mirthless laugh.

“Have you talked to her about it?”
Harry shakes his head. “I can't. It's too... raw,” he murmurs, his eyes betraying the truth of his words. He doesn't think he's ever seen so much pain there, not even after Connie or Adam.

“Perhaps once she's home,” he suggests softly.

He sighs and looks away, rubbing his face with his hand. “What would you do, Malcolm?”

Harry's eyes return to his face, searching, probing.

“I don't know,” he replies, feeling acutely uncomfortable. “I've never had what you had with Ruth. I suppose the closest thing was Colin.” He looks suddenly alarmed, realising what Harry might think and hastily amending, “Not that it was sexual in any way.”

Harry smiles. “I know what you mean, Malcolm,” he murmurs, then adds, “Not that it would have been a problem if it had been.”

He blushes and clears his throat, saying, “Yes, well, it wasn't. But the point I was trying to make is that I'd probably be very hurt, in your place, but assuming your feelings for Ruth are what I believe them to be, I'd be willing to listen and try to understand her. It can't have been easy to give birth and raise a child alone.”

“She wasn't alone,” Harry interrupts, his gaze turning dangerously dark again.

“Right.” He's not sure what else to say to that, so he ploughs on with what he was going to say before Harry interrupted. “It still would have been hard for her, on the run, not feeling safe and having to take care of a baby. When my cousin's baby was born, I remember she was so worried she'd drop him or do something wrong that would damage him. They're so tiny when they're born – they can't even hold up their own head. I was as anxious as she was every time I held him. It didn't help, of course, that she'd be hovering right by my shoulder, ready to launch herself forward to catch him if I dropped him, correcting just about everything I tried to do with him.” He smiles and shakes his head at the memory. “What I'm trying to say is that it takes time for new mothers to learn how to parent and, if there's no support on hand from family and friends, it must be a very daunting task.”

He sees Harry nod and take a sip of his drink, so feeling encouraged, he continues. “Perhaps all she wanted at that time was some stability. She might have thought it was too early for her to try to come home anyway, and she couldn't have returned before he was born – we hadn't cleared her name yet.”

“You read her letter, Malcolm,” Harry replies, his jaw tightening again. “She wasn't planning to come home at all.”

And Malcolm has absolutely no idea what to say to that, except, “That's true... though you have no way of knowing if she would have changed her mind eventually.”

“But when?” he asks, his eyes flashing. “When Jamie was five? Ten? Fifteen? Twenty?” He downs his drink and gets up, muttering something about the gents' and striding away.

“Oh Ruth,” Malcolm murmurs softly, watching him go. “What have you done? He doesn't deserve this.”
Harry Pearce is not what she expected. When he'd spoken to her yesterday, she'd pictured a younger man, quiet and benign, milder than the man sitting before her, accepting the cup of tea she hands him with a quiet thank you. He'd told her that he has something important to tell her about Ruth, so of course she'd agreed to see him though part of her had wanted to just slam the phone down in his face. She's not at all sure she wants to hear it – whatever it is he's come to tell her. It's not going to bring Ruth back and she'd rather not know anything that might tarnish her memory of her darling girl. Her hand trembles slightly now at the thought, the cup rattling on the saucer.

He notices, of course, but to his credit he says nothing.

“How did you know my daughter, Mr Pearce?” she asks, getting directly to the point, perhaps to show him that she's not as old, as frail and past it as he might think.

“Ruth and I...” he hesitates. “We used to work together. She was my analyst.”

“You were her boss?”

“Yes.”

“I see,” she says. She remembers Ruth talking about her boss and their budding relationship. She hadn't given a lot away when she'd come down to see her, not long before her death, but it had been clear that she'd thought very highly of him and was head-over-heels in love with him. The way she'd described him had made her think he'd be good for her, but after he'd not even bothered to turn up at her funeral, she'd rather change her mind about that. Could this man be the one Ruth had loved, she wonders, eyeing him critically. Or is she jumping to conclusions? Perhaps Ruth had had more than one boss...

“So... what was it you wished to tell me,” she says quickly, impatient to get this over with.

“I believe Ruth told you that she worked for DEFRA? The Department of-”

“Food and Rural Affairs. Yes.”

“Well, that's not entirely true,” he says, dropping his gaze to his cup, fiddling with the teaspoon.

Ruth used to do that, she finds herself remembering, a small smile gracing her lips. He's nervous, she realises and frowns, dreading what he might say next.

“She worked for the Security Services, Ms Bickley.” He lifts his eyes to look at her, his gaze dark and unreadable.

“The Security Services? Ruth?!” She laughs incredulously. Ruth had never been a brave child and the idea of her being a spy is ludicrous.

“Indeed. In the Counter Terrorism department.”

Her smile fades as she realises that he's serious. “Ruth?”
“Yes. As I said, she was an analyst. One of the best I've ever had the privilege to work with.” He leans forward and places his cup on the coffee table, clasping his hands together as he rests his elbows on his knees and lifts his head to look at her.

For a moment, she entertains the notion that he is mad, deluded, or playing a trick on her. There is something in his eyes, however, when their gazes meet that gives her pause – a depth and a sorrow so vast as to leave her breathless. *Is it on account of Ruth,* she wonders and drops her gaze, lifting her cup to take a fortifying sip of tea, her hand trembling a little, her mind in turmoil. *Ruth a spy?! How could that be possible? She would have told me. Wouldn't she?* But even as she asks herself the question, she knows that answer is no. Ruth would have wanted to protect her from the constant worry that would have been hers had she known the truth. *And this man? Harry Pearce? Why tell me now? Oh God! Was Ruth murdered?!*

“Ms Bickley,” she hears him say gently, his voice full of compassion, “Ruth didn't die.”

“What?” her head shoots up, hands trembling violently, the tea spilling over the edge of the cup.

He's up and round the table in a flash, taking it from her hands and setting it aside before sitting beside her on the sofa and taking her hands in his, rubbing them gently, soothingly with his own.

“Ruth and I,” he says softly, his voice faltering for a moment as he gazes down at her hands that are so very much like her daughter's. He clears his throat and looks up. “Ruth and I were in love,” he murmurs, his gaze steady and unapologetic. And there it is again, the sorrow and pain in his eyes that betrays the depth of his feelings for her daughter, and she marvels at it, feeling suddenly sorry for thinking so ill of him all this time. It doesn't surprise her that Ruth would fall for an older man, and she realises suddenly that there is something about this man – a quality, a charisma, a chivalry – that one doesn't encounter often and which she knows would have appealed to her daughter. “Things were going well between us. I had such high hopes for us,” he confesses, dropping his gaze from hers. He squeezes her hands and releases them, moving a little further back from her as he sighs and rubs his forehead with his hand.

“What happened?” she asks, recovering somewhat from the shock and needing to know the rest, scarcely daring to hope that Ruth might still be alive somewhere.

“I have many enemies, Ms Bickley,” he confesses. “When you've been in the Service as long as I, it's inevitable, especially if you stand up to people and you're not prepared to compromise on your principles. Someone tried to get me out of the way so they could pursue their agenda and they figured out that the surest way to get to me was through Ruth.” She doesn't say anything, continuing to watch him, this man who claims to have loved her daughter, and she can see the guilt and regret written clearly in his rather expressive eyes. “I did my best to protect her,” he says, rubbing his forehead again, “but she can be very stubborn when she wants to be, and she sabotaged my plans, sacrificing herself so that I could put a stop to the scheme and make sure the men responsible were caught and punished.”

“How?” she asks, heart in her mouth.

“She framed herself for murder and faked her death. She left the country and has been living in exile ever since.”

Her face begins to crumble at this news, the relief, the joy, overwhelming. It sounds so like Ruth, standing up for her principles – though certainly she'd not expected her to sacrifice herself so bravely – that she begins to believe it's true. She lifts her hand to cover her mouth, searching his face, his gaze for any sign that he's lying.
“Ruth is alive?”

He nods.

“Where?”

Again he drops his gaze, leaning forward, clasping and unclasping his hands. “She's staying with my brother at the moment. In Germany.” She opens her mouth to speak again, but he beats her to it. “Ms Bickley,” he says, turning to face her again. “I'm sorry that this information was kept from you all this time. You have grieved for your daughter, believing her dead, and I cannot begin to express how sorry I am for that. I have two... three children of my own. To lose one of them...” he pauses and shakes his head. “My daughter was injured, severely injured in Lebanon, practically the same day that Ruth left and I had to fly out of the country to find her and bring her home. I wasn't here to speak to you and for that I am truly sorry. My colleagues did what they thought was best. They believed that telling you of her exile would have endangered her as she was on the run, with some very powerful people looking for her. They didn't know that I had every intention of bringing her back home safe and sound. It took me some months, but I have finally cleared her name and she is free to return home.”

The relief is so great that she reaches for his hands and squeezes them gently, tears sliding down her cheeks. “Thank you,” she whispers. “Thank you so much, Mr Pearce.”

He smiles and she's surprised by how much it transforms his face. “Harry,” he says gently.

She smiles and nods. “Thank you, Harry.”

His eyes though – they still look so sad. “Is she not ready to come home?” she asks, fearfully.

“She'll be home within a fortnight.”

“Forgive me,” she murmurs, peering at his face, “but you look so sorrowful. Is there something wrong?”

He looks away and pulls his hands from hers, leaning back in his seat before quickly reaching forward again to pick up his tea and taking a large gulp. He seems like such a nice man, kind and gentle, but from what he said about having enemies, she imagines that there's more to him, to his character than he's allowing her to see right now. Her first impression of him had been of a man with considerable strength and power, someone not to be trifled with, a vague threat of violence emanating from his person, apparent in the way that he carries himself. She's sure Harry Pearces has been in his fair share of fights and she's sure she wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of one of his punches. Ruth had loved him though. He can't have been a violent man, she reasons as she watches him, wondering why he seems so sad. Does Ruth no longer love him? Has she met someone else?

“I should get going,” he says softly, setting aside his tea again. “Unfortunately, I must drive back to London today. But before I go, there is one more thing you should know, Ms Bickley.”

“Elizabeth, please.”

He smiles. “Elizabeth,” he says. “Ruth and I were... very close before she left and, while she was away, she had a child.”

“A child?!”

“Yes,” he nods. “A son. Here,” and he pulls out his phone, fiddling with it a moment before turning
it towards her. The picture shows Ruth, smiling adoringly at a little boy that looks just like Harry. “His name is James. James Alexander Evershed.”

“Oh,” she breathes, reaching for the phone. “May I?”

“Of course,” he replies and relinquishes the device.

“They look so happy,” she murmurs, smiling in delight, unable to get past the fact that she's got a grandson now. “James. Like her father. He looks so much like you, Harry. How old is he?”

“Eighteen months,” he replies.

She gazes at the picture a few moments more before handing him back the phone.

“I could send you a copy,” he offers.

“Thank you. That would be wonderful.”

He smiles, watching her for a moment before he says, “Ruth looks just like you when she smiles.”

She laughs, her happiness overflowing. “I can't wait to see them. Will they be living in London with you?”

His face clouds over at that, leaving her puzzled until he speaks. “I believe, Ruth is intending to stay with you for a little while until she can find a job and somewhere to live.”

“I see,” she frowns, understanding the reason behind his sorrow now. For whatever reason, he and Ruth have had a falling out. “I'm sorry, Harry,” she says, but he just shakes his head and gets up.

“Thank you for the tea, Elizabeth. I must be getting back.”

She nods and rises also, walking with him to the front door. “Thank you for coming to see me, Harry, and for bringing me such happy news.”

He smiles and turns to face her. “Before I go,” he murmurs and she thinks he looks a little embarrassed, “I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to sign this.” He reaches into his inside pocket and brings out an envelope and a fountain pen. He removes the folded sheet of A4 from inside the envelope and hands it to her. “It's the official secrets act. I'm sorry, Elizabeth,” he apologises, “but though I'm confident of your discretion regarding my and Ruth's work for MI-5, I still need to keep a signed copy on file.”

She smiles and takes it from him, not bothering to read it before signing the bottom of the page. “Have you had to sign one of these too?” she asks.

“Yes,” he murmurs as he takes it from her with a quiet thank you. “So has Ruth and my adult children.”

Elizabeth smiles. “How old are they? You said you have three children, didn't you?”

“Yes. I have a daughter and a son from my first marriage,” he confesses. “Catherine is twenty-eight and Graham is twenty-five.” And with that he turns and walks to the front door, opening it and turning to bid her goodbye.

“Goodbye, Elizabeth.”

“Bye, Harry,” she replies and impulsively kisses his cheek. She wants to promise him that Ruth will
come round, but she knows better than to say something like that. She has only heard his side of the story – and in fact, she hasn’t even heard all of that! – but she likes him and she can see why Ruth might have fallen in love with him. He seems like a good man and it seems a shame that her grandson will grow up without his father.

Her grandson!

She has a grandson.

She can't wait to meet him.
They arrive late in the afternoon, in the end, far too late to travel down to Exeter, but it's the only flight within her budget as she doesn't know how long it'll be before she can get a job and she'd rather not dip into the funds Harry has set aside for her unnecessarily and risk having to ask him for more money, or rely on Ben and Sarah's charity any longer, already feeling in their debt for the food and lodging they've provided for her, not to mention all the things they've bought for Jamie.

Her intent had been to stay in a cheap hotel overnight and travel down to Exeter in the morning, but when Harry had heard of her plan, he'd object very strongly, suggesting either he book decent accommodation for them, or she and Jamie stay in his spare bedroom instead. The thought of staying with Harry had filled her with equal parts pleasure and dread, scared that the memories would be too much for her, yet, at the same time, hopeful that they would soften both their hearts enough for a reconciliation to become possible.

She had intended to stay away from Harry longer, give him the space and time Ben had suggested he needs to soften the blow of her actions and the pain they've caused him, while at the same time, allowing herself the opportunity to rebuild her life and stop dwelling on how much she misses him. She's been at home too long, she feels, and needs to get back out there, into the workforce, to gain some much needed independence and perspective.

But when it had come down to it, it hadn't felt right to throw away his money on an expensive hotel room – she's already feeling uncomfortable enough as it is, relying on him for financial support until she and Jamie are settled. She'd thought about changing their flight to an early morning one at the last minute to avoid the issue entirely, but it had already been too late for that, so she's stuck with spending a night under Harry's roof and hoping for the best. If it'll be good for Jamie at least, she tells herself, though how he'll react when he realises that his precious Baba is gone so soon again, she dreads to think – he's really missed his father these past days.

It amazes her how quickly he'd become attached to Harry, how many times in the days following his departure he'd asked for Baba, expecting him to turn up to read him a story and play with him every morning, looking for him in the bedroom he'd used while he was staying at Ben's, unable to understand why he wasn't there. How could I have ever contemplated keeping them apart, she asks herself day in and day out. It's unthinkable, cruel, and there is nothing she regrets more. Perhaps staying overnight with Harry will give her the opportunity to tell him that, to ask for his forgiveness.

Neither Ben nor Sarah travel with them in the end, and Ruth is secretly rather relieved, happy in the knowledge that she doesn't owe them any more favours. When they land, she half expects Harry not to be there, thinking there will surely be some crisis or other requiring his attention at work. She's wrong, however. He's there. Waiting for them at the terminal with everyone else, peeling himself away from the wall against which he's been leaning and making his way forward, his eyes swimming with pleasure though his expression remains unchanged until Jamie spies him and squeals in delight, shouting, "Dada! Dada!" and reaching his chubby little arms up as he strains forward in the pushchair.

Harry smiles, moving quickly forward to pick him up, throwing him into the air and catching him before he brings him in for a hug, his lips softly kissing his hair. "Hello, Jamie," he murmurs and pulls back to look at his son, shifting him onto his left hip as he says, "Good gracious, you've
grown!” before he turns to look at her. “Hello, Ruth.”

“Hi,” she replies, embarrassed and nervous and wishing he'd kiss her and embrace her too.

“Dada,” says Jamie. “Boo.”

Harry laughs. “You're going to have to wait till we get home, Son,” he says, taking Ruth's bag from her hand and turning to a young man who's followed him over and saying, “This is Michael Card. He's my security officer. Michael, Ruth Evershed and my son, James.” There is so much pride in his voice as he says it.

“How do you do, Ms Evershed?” Michael says formally, adding, “May I?” and relieving her of her suitcase, leaving her with just the empty pushchair.

“Thank you,” she replies, a little thrown by the fact that Harry's not come alone to meet them.

“Did you have a pleasant flight?” Michael asks, clearly feeling a little uncomfortable himself to find himself in the midst of a family reunion.

“We did,” she replies, walking along beside him, her eyes on Harry and Jamie who are ahead of them, leading the way to the lifts.

“Good.” And they fall silent after that, or at least the adults do. Jamie has a million things to tell his father, who's smiling down at him indulgently as they take the lift, most of them unintelligible. Michael, Ruth notes, is very much alert, looking around carefully for danger and it makes her nervous suddenly for Harry and herself, but most of all for Jamie.

“Don't worry, Ruth.” Harry's voice makes her turn to him. “We're perfectly safe. We're at an airport. Michael here is just taking his job too seriously as usual.”

Michael blushes at that, replying, “I mean to keep you safe, Sir Harry.”

Harry's eyes twinkle at her as he raises his eyebrows, seemingly to say, “What did I tell you?” and she has to quickly suppress a smile, feeling her spirits suddenly buoyed by their little exchange. How like Harry to try to put her at ease.

“Sir Harry?” she asks, only just realising what Michael's said.

He looks rather uncomfortable as he purses his lips before murmuring, “You know how it is, Ruth. It's just an opportunity for the government to rubber-stamp itself.” She sees Michael's eyes widen in surprise before he looks away, frowning, and apparently Harry sees that too because he hastens to add, “Though, of course, it is a great honour.”

“Of course,” she replies, catching his eye and suppressing another smile. She knows perfectly well what Harry's real thoughts are on the subject and can't help the way her heart warms at that realisation.

“Dada. Dada,” Jamie interrupts, reaching a chubby, little hand up to turn his face towards him, clearly unhappy to have Harry's attention stray from him for so long.

Harry chuckles, smiling down at Jamie as he says, “I see you've learnt to say that in English now.”

“Dada,” repeats Jamie, patting his cheek.

When they get to his Land Rover, Ruth is pleasantly surprised to find Harry's got a car-seat in the
back for Jamie, something she'd completely forgotten to remind him about. Ben and Sarah had borrowed one from friends, or she would have brought it with her.

Harry tries to hand Jamie over so she can buckle him in, but her son isn't having any of it, and in the end, Harry has to do the buckling himself. There's a huge teddy-bear in the car seat, a present from Harry that Jamie falls in love with at first sight, which is great except he won't let it go, hampering Harry's attempts to adjust the straps and buckle him so much that Ruth has to suppress a laugh, turning away to fold the pushchair in order to hide it.

She and Jamie only have one suitcase between them and Jamie's rather large changing bag which Michael safely stows in the boot along with the pushchair before taking his place in the passenger seat, apologising to Ruth for taking it from her and explaining that he needs to be in front to protect Harry. Ruth just smiles at the young man, rather impressed that he's taking his work so seriously, if she's honest, and assures him that she'd rather sit next to her son anyway.

By the time Harry gets in and starts the engine, Jamie's new bear has a name.

“Baboo Bear,” Jamie says. “Baboo Bear. Dada.” He repeats this over and over again until he falls asleep not five minutes later.

“He's asleep,” she says softly, lifting her eyes to Harry's in the mirror.

He's smiling. “I've missed him,” he replies. He doesn't say anything about missing her and it hurts more than she thought it would.

“He's missed you too,” she answers, dropping her gaze from his to look out the window. She wants to tell him how sorry she is for everything, how much she regrets hurting him and Jamie, but her throat has closed off with emotion and she wouldn't have been able to get the words out even if Michael hadn't been in the car with them, listening to every word.

They continue on in silence, the familiar sights on London flashing past her window, bringing more emotion to the surface until she feels tears gather in her eyes and begin to slide down her cheeks. Quickly she wipes them away, glancing in the mirror to see if he's noticed and finding his eyes on hers.

“Sorry,” she says softly, giving him an apologetic smile. “It's just so good to be back home.”

He doesn't say anything in reply, turning his eyes back to the road and she can't help how her heart sinks down to her knees, her eyes stinging. She just wants to curl up and cry, but she can't. She has to stay strong for Jamie. Let it go, Ruth, she tells herself, suddenly doubting everything. It's over. He's never going to forgive you. You need to let it go.

When they get to Harry's, Michael bids them goodbye and leaves to go home, allowing them some much needed privacy at last, though neither of them takes advantage of it to express what's truly on their mind. Harry carries the bags to the guest room while Ruth supervises Jamie as he gets acquainted with the animals – Ruth's two cats, Fidget and Wol, and Harry's little dog, Scarlet. He loves them at first sight, though whether the feeling's mutual is highly debatable. Scarlet doesn't seem to mind Jamie's clumsy attempts to make friends, but the cats are another matter entirely.

She's touched that Harry kept his word to care for them and pleased that they seem to remember her, rubbing themselves against her and purring when Jamie moves a safe distance away, chasing after Scarlet. Scarlet seems pleased to see her too, though whether this is because she recognises her or not is hard to tell.
She tries not to think about where she is, tries to push aside the memories that come flooding back, tries not to think about the gulf that stretches between them now when formally they’d been so close. *That way madness lies.* Instead, she focusses on the present, on Jamie and her cats.

“Did you want to eat now, Ruth, or a bit later?” Harry asks from the doorway, almost making her jump.

“A bit later, thanks,” she replies, lifting her eyes to his and watching him nod and slip into the room.

He walks over to Jamie and carefully takes a seat on the floor beside him, leaning his back against the sofa, a happy Scarlet moving close and trying to lick his face. “Feel free to go freshen up,” Harry says, fending off his dog with practised ease, cupping her head with both hands and scratching her ears. “I put clean towels on the bed. Have a bath if you like. There’s plenty of hot water. We’ll be fine.”

“Thank you,” she murmurs, but she doesn't get a chance to say anything more before Jamie interrupts.


She watches as Harry smiles at his son, telling Scarlet to sit so Jamie can reach her easily, and showing him how and where to stroke her so he doesn't hurt her. He is so good with him, that she can't help the way her eyes soften as she watches them, acutely, painfully aware of all that she's lost.

Oh Harry.

She does have a bath in the end, enjoying the opportunity to relax after the flight and gather her thoughts. They haven't really had a chance to really talk yet while staying with Ben and Sarah, and though he may never forgive her for what she's done, she decides that she still owes him an apology and an explanation, and she promises herself that she'll take care of both at the first opportunity.

When she's finished, she finds Harry and Jamie in the kitchen, stirring the mince sauce together, Harry's larger hand covering Jamie's as he chants, “Round and round we go, Jamie. Round and round we go.” Jamie giggles and Harry smiles. “Careful now. It's very hot.”

“Hot,” says Jamie, his face solemn. He knows that word very well.

“That's right. Hot. I think it's ready, Jamie. Let's set the table and call Mummy.”

“Mama,” says Jamie, releasing the spoon and turning in Harry's arms to look over his shoulder. “Mama!” he exclaims when he spies her and begins to wiggle to be let down.

“Careful, Jamie!” Harry protests, unprepared for his sudden bid for freedom. Ruth knows how unexpected Jamie's demands to be released are, so she swiftly crosses the room to help.

“I've got him,” she says, securing her son under his arms as she lifts her eyes to Harry's. He looks surprised by her sudden appearance, but he doesn't say anything as he releases Jamie and turns back to the food, turning off all the rings.

“Dinner's ready,” he says.

It is a simple affair of spag bol, but it hits the spot for all of them. Jamie enjoys making a mess, his food ending up mostly all over his body, the high-chair and the floor, though Scarlet is more than happy to help clean up the latter. In fact, once Jamie spots her wolfing down the first piece of food to
hit the linoleum, they have some trouble stopping him from upending his bowl over the floor to feed her the rest. He seems to think it's hilarious and spends much of his time, dropping spoonfuls of mince down for her to gobble up and laughing.

After dinner, Ruth declares it's bath time, so they all return to the bathroom, Jamie's demands to have Dada there making it clear that Scarlet is in charge of cleaning up the kitchen. Ruth runs the bath while Harry quickly clears the dishes and wipes down the high-chair, but by the time Jamie's in the tub and Harry joins them, she feels like a spare wheel. Jamie's only interested in his father tonight, so Harry sits on the floor by the bath, while Ruth lowers the toilet seat and sits down on it to watch them.

It's such a beautiful, domestic scene that it brings tears to her eyes. I could get used to this, she finds herself thinking. This here is everything that's been missing in her life since Jamie came along. She knows, however, that it cannot last, that even if she and Harry could work everything out between them and miraculously agree to give it another go, Harry's job would pull him away from them most days and possibly most nights, and they'd probably grow to resent it in the end, spoiling the moments that they did end up spending together. At least that's what she tells herself now, though deep down she's not convinced that's true. Deep down she suspects that even a few hours a week with Harry would satisfy her because she knows how lonely it is to live her life without him.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she says softly, watching him freeze and turn to look at her, hazel eyes guarded, giving nothing away. "I made the wrong decision for all of us," she confesses, dropping her gaze to her hands. "I was trying to protect him from growing up as a target and living his life in fear. I thought it would be awful, for all of us, if someone took him to get to you, if you had to choose between him and protecting everyone else." Her voice wobbles slightly as she says those words, thinking of the men who came looking for her in Cyprus. She still doesn't know who they were, what they were trying to achieve by kidnapping them, but she's sure it can't have been anything good, and she knows better than to ask Harry. He'd never tell her. She hasn't got the clearance. She's no longer a spy. "The irony is that it didn't make any difference. They still came looking for us and I realised, eventually, that it's better for Jamie to have you in his life than spend a lifetime without you, being safe."

She lifts her gaze to his again, pleading with him silently to understand, before turning her eyes on her son who is standing in the bath, washing his father's arm with soap, chattering away, and having the time of his life. "I mean, look at him! He's so happy to have his daddy." She smiles crookedly and wipes quickly at her eyes before dropping her gaze again and adding, "You're a good man, Harry, and I just wanted you to know that I'm sorry and that I think Jamie's very lucky to have you as his father and I hope he will grow up to be just like you. I couldn't have wished for a better man, a better role model for him."

When she dares to look at him again, he's covered his eyes with his hand and she can see that his chest is rising and falling faster than before though he's not making a sound.

"Dada," Jamie says, patting his arm. "Dada," he repeats moving over and grasping his hand, trying to pull it away from his face.

She hears Harry chuckle and watches him lower his hand, wiping at his eyes quickly before turning to Jamie, smiling. "What is it, lad?" he asks.

"Aww keen," he says, patting Harry's arm again.

"Thank you, Jamie." He smiles. "How about we wash Jamie now?"

"Jamie aww keen." He looks so solemn that they both laugh.

"Hmmm," Harry hums sceptically. "I still see some spaghetti sauce on your cheek and in your hair."
“Cheek,” says Jamie, patting Harry's cheek.

“Jamie's cheek,” Harry replies, wiping a thumb across it to remove the tomato sauce. “See? Spaghetti sauce on your cheek.”

Jamie giggles.

“Come on then,” Harry smiles. “Let's get you clean. Perhaps Mummy can help with this part. It's a very long time since Daddy’s washed anyone's hair. I think Daddy might need a reminder on how it's done.” He lifts his eyes to hers and she's sure that there's more warmth in them now than there has been every other time he's looked at her recently.

She smiles and gets up, moving close to the bathtub and kneeling on the floor beside Harry. “Come on, Jamie,” she says softly. “Let's wash your hair.”

“Mama baff,” Jamie replies.

Ruth feels her face heat up. “Not this time, Jamie. Mummy's already had a bath.”

“Mama baff!” Jamie repeats more firmly, his lower lip starting to stick out as he frowns stubbornly, his knees bending and straightening as if he's trying to stamp his foot.

Harry chuckles, making her turn to look at him.

“What?” she asks.

“He looks just like you when he does that.”

“I think he looks just like you!” she replies in surprise.

“Maybe the pout,” he agrees, his eyes twinkling at her, “but the frown and glare is all you, even if his eyes aren't the same colour.”

“Mama baff!” Jamie demands again, his lip beginning to tremble and she can tell he's gearing up for a full blown tantrum. Poor, love. He must be so tired.

“How about Daddy gets in the bath?” Harry suggests, taking her by surprise. “You can wash Daddy and Daddy can wash you.”

Jamie pauses to look at him and then grins. “Dada baff,” he says.

“All right. I'll just go get my trunks on then.” He gets up, kissing the top of Jamie's head before leaving the room to go next door, leaving her all agitated and nervous, unable to get over the thought of seeing Harry practically naked again after all this time. Part of her wants to flee, but she can't leave Jamie alone in the bath, and besides, he doesn't give her a chance, being remarkably quick to return dressed in a robe and carrying his towel, his gaze unreadable as he looks at her for a moment before turning to close the door.

“I'll... um...” she begins, standing as he turns to face her, wishing she knew what he's thinking. “Would you rather I... gave you some privacy?”

“No,” is his reply. “It really has been a long time since I've done this, so I'd appreciate some help.”

She smiles and nods, relieved that he doesn't want her to go, and she thinks she sees a similar flash of relief in his eyes as she turns to kneel by the bath again, keeping her gaze lowered and firmly on their son.
“Dada!” Jamie says happily, clapping his hands together as Harry quickly slips out of his robe and lowers himself into the water, the temptation proving too much for her as she glance in his direction, the glimpse she gets of his strong legs and firm buttocks over his form fitting swimming trunks making her heart race.

As soon as he takes a seat, Jamie turns and starts spreading soap over his chest, saying, “Dada keen?” but not bothering to wait for an answer. She smiles, but keeps her gaze resolutely away from Harry's body, focusing on Jamie instead and the joy radiating from his face. This is quite possibly the happiest she's ever seen him.

Harry's chuckle draws her eyes to his in spite of her resolution, and she can't help feeling a little jealous at the adoration radiating from his eyes as he gazes at their son. “But what about you, Jamie,” he asks. “You need to be washed too.” And with that, he picks up the soap and looks at her, asking, “Any advise?”

“Just watch out for the ticklish bits under his arms and round his neck. He tends to just collapse laughing, and in the bath, that's a bit of a problem.”

“Right,” he nods, his lips forming an adorable pout as he concentrates on washing Jamie, his hands gentle and so large compared to their boy.

While he's busy washing their son, she takes the opportunity to surreptitiously take a quick look at him, allowing her gaze to dart over his strong arms to his shoulders and neck, but the sight of the new scars there has her frowning and forgetting all about her resolution to not stare. There are at least half a dozen of them scattered over his arms and chest, some worse than others, but all looking like they were made in the same way, at the same time, recently, probably with a knife or some other kind of sharp blade. “Harry,” she says, her voice tinged with concern, “what happened to you? Where did all these new scars come from?”

He looks a little surprised that she's tackled the subject head on. “Someone wanted information,” he replies, his eyes leaving hers to return to Jamie. “Don't worry. I lost some blood, but I'm fine now.”

“Don't worry?!” she looks at him incredulously. “Harry, that's-”

“Please, Ruth,” he interrupts her, turning his eyes on hers again and holding her gaze. “I'm fine. It was painful at the time, but I'm fine now. This is not the right time for... Help me wash Jamie's hair instead.”

She hesitates, then nods, agreeing to drop the subject for now, but privately vowing to figure out what happened another time, and if he'll let her, kiss every one of those new scars on his body and love him all the more for them, feeling so grateful suddenly that he's still here to be angry with her that she never told him about Jamie.

All this time, she's known that Harry might die while she was away, but she'd always pushed aside her worry about that, knowing that there's nothing she could have done anyway to prevent it from so far away. To be confronted with it now though, the evidence of the danger he's been in, the knowledge that she could have lost him on at least one occasion while she'd been away, makes her so much more thankful for this opportunity given to her and Jamie and determined to take advantage of it.

“Ruth?” he prompts, waiting for her direction, so she pushes aside her jumbled thoughts and she suggests that he have Jamie lie on his chest so she can wet and wash his hair without risking having shampoo fall into his eyes, and though the idea is sound, the execution of it has a rather unfortunate effect on her – being close to Harry like this, her hands accidentally brushing his skin as she washes
and rinses Jamie's hair, is so familiar, thrilling, and remarkably arousing, her whole being hyper-aware of him, senses hypersensitive to everything about him, the sent of him, the way his muscles tremble when she brushes against them, the way his breathing changes, the way she's sure he's staring at her, hunger in his eyes.

*It's too soon,* she tells herself, knowing that falling into bed together now, before they've had a chance to talk properly, will only compound and confuse things further between them, so she doesn't dare lift her eyes to his, instead reaching for a towel and taking Jamie from him as he lifts him out of the bath, focusing all her attention on her son so that none is left over for his father.

“Where's my bundle?” she asks, as she carefully wraps Jamie in the big, fluffy, green towel. “Where's it gone?”

“Bungol,” Jamie replies, giggling as he disappears inside the towel.

“There's my bundle!” she smiles, pulling the towel away to reveal his laughing face and gently rubbing his hair dry. “My precious, little bundle.” And she leans over and rubs her nose with his, making him giggle again. “Come on then, bundle. Let's brush your teeth.”

“No,” says Jamie.

“But we have to show Daddy how you brush your teeth! Daddy's never seen you do it by yourself, have you, Daddy?” and she finally lifts her eyes to his. She almost misses it, the expression of deep love and longing in his gaze, for it's gone so quickly, it makes her wonder if she's imagined it.

“No, I haven't,” he replies a little gruffly. “Can you really brush your teeth all by yourself?”

“Ess,” says Jamie proudly.

So with Harry watching from the bathtub, Ruth helps Jamie brush his twelve teeth and then carries him out of the bathroom to bed, leaving Harry to finish his own bath in peace and come join them to read Jamie a story. Baboo Bear takes pride of place beside him as he sits on Harry's lap and listens to his story. Harry's bought so many things for their son that it warms her heart to see it, to see how keen he is to have their boy in his life.

There are only two bedrooms in his flat, so the guest-room is furnished with a crib in addition to a double bed and Jamie doesn't have a room of his own, but given that Jamie won't be living here full time, it doesn't really matter yet. He's too young to notice.

She kisses Jamie good night and leaves Harry to put him to bed while she spends some time with her cats. She can't believe Harry still has them after everything she put him through. She can't believe how wonderful he is. How could she have forgotten this? How could she have forgotten how much Harry makes her feel, how wonderful it is to be with him, how much joy and love and colour he brings to her life? How could the safety, the monotony, the loneliness of her life in Cyprus have ever been enough for her? She's convinced now that it wouldn't have been. She's convinced that she would have left her life there to return to Harry sooner or later, in spite of the danger.

She wants to live in London, she decides in that moment. She needs to stay close to Harry for all their sakes.
He reads the new book he's bought for Jamie, cuddling his son close, inhaling his sweet, baby smell and feeling his heart flood with love and joy. He remembers doing this with his older children. He had loved it then too, had loved the way they reciprocated the unconditional love he gave them, the joy that lit up their faces when he came home, the way they'd hug him and kiss him, squeal in delight and cuddle up to him. He'd loved how easy it was to soothe them, how simple life was for them and how effortless for him to show his love and for them to receive it. He'd loved the simplicity of the baby and toddler years. As they'd grown older, they'd needed more of him, had needed different things, things that he hadn't known how to do, how to give, how to express, how to show them, and they'd drifted away from him though the love he'd felt for them, still feels for them, had never diminished.

“I love you, Jamie,” he says softly, brushing the curls from his forehead and smiling down at him as he lies in his crib.

“Dada,” he says sleepily. “Baboo Bear,” he adds, and pats the bear's head. It's enormous, bigger than Jamie himself, and he wonders if he made a mistake in buying such a large toy. Ruth will have to take it all the way to Exeter tomorrow and she already has enough things to carry.

He feels a pang at the thought of them leaving so soon. Would she stay if he asked her to? Would she come back to London? To live with him? His heart whispers that she would, that she's only waiting for him to say the words, that she longs for another chance as much as he does. Her apology earlier had touch him deeply. She'd seemed genuinely sorry to have caused him and Jamie pain. And when she'd talked about Mani's men, he'd briefly dared to imagine what it would have been like for him in that warehouse if Mani had been able to carry out his threat of bringing her there, bringing Jamie too, a son he had not known he had. What would he have done, had Mani threatened to kill Jamie? If he'd hurt him, tortured his precious son who is sleeping so peacefully now, his face angelic, lips smiling softly in repose?

His mind had shied away from such a thought, but he knows it is one he will have to face sooner or later. Because now he knows about them, now that they're back in Britain, now that Ruth's name has been cleared and she will resume her life here, there is a much higher probability that it will happen again. More people will know about them both soon. Anyone watching him will find them.

His other children had grown up in a different time, a safer time for children he believes, a time when the innocence of childhood was protected, at least for those fortunate enough to have parents looking out for them. Jamie though is not so lucky, maybe because of the times or maybe because both his parents have worked for MI-5. Ruth isn't a civilian in many people's eyes. Mani had had no qualms about going after her for the information he'd believed she'd had, for the spy she had been. Fiona and Adam had suffered in the same way. And Wes. Ruth will always be considered a legitimate target, a combatant, a non-civilian. And Jamie... It doesn't even bear thinking about.

He shakes his head to clear it and reaches down to touch Jamie's hair once more before switching off the light and leaving the room, his heart heavy. He must protect them. They have to come to some arrangement so that he can keep Ruth and Jamie safe.

He finds her curled up on the sofa with her cats, staring thoughtfully at the electric fire, her phone
clasped in her hand. “Everything alright?” he asks softly.

She turns to look at him and smiles. “Sorry. Yes. Everything’s fine. I was just ringing Mum to let her know we’ve arrived safely. She said to tell you hello.”

He nods. “Thanks,” he murmurs, then seeing Ruth's speculative look, he changes the subject. “A glass of wine?” he offers.

She sighs and shakes her head, looking a little wistful as she replies, “I wish I could, Harry, but I daren’t with him still nursing so often.”

“Right. Sorry. I forgot.”

“That's all right. You go ahead though. Don't let me keep you from enjoying a drink.”

“How about some hot cocoa?” he offers, struck by sudden inspiration. “Or a cup of tea?”

“Cocoa sounds wonderful.” And she gives him such a warm smile.

He nods, turning away and going into the kitchen to make it, his heart expanding with pleasure to have made her happy despite his mind's irritation at himself for being so easily bought.

He should have known better, should never have put Ruth up so high. It's his own fault as much as hers. He's been married. He knows that people don't see eye to eye on everything, knows that they make choices that hurt others, whether deliberately or by mistake. And as far as reasons go, protecting their son is a pretty damn good one. The question is, can he forgive her? Can he let it go?

Talking to Ben, talking to Malcolm, the two weeks he's had to think, and her apology just now have softened his heart somewhat. Forgiveness might be possible, but he cannot quite bring himself to trust her again just yet. He cannot bring himself to risk his heart again, open himself to the possibility of another betrayal, share his thoughts and feelings and make himself vulnerable. Yet in order for them to move on and have any chance of rebuilding what they had – as is his heart's most cherished desire – he's going to have to do just that – talk to her, explain, listen, understand, and heal. He needs more time, but he also needs to keep them safe, so he carries their mugs of hot cocoa into the sitting room, handing one to Ruth and taking a seat in his armchair before turning to her and asking, “What are your plans, Ruth?”

She sighs. “At the moment, they consist of taking the train down to Exeter tomorrow morning to see my mother. I thought we'd stay with her for a week or so, maybe a bit longer, during which time I hope to find a job.”

“Where?”

“Originally, I thought I’d stay in Exeter, but now I’m thinking London,” she lifts her eyes to his and smiles. “I want Jamie to be able to see you as much as possible.”

He nods, the relief palpable. “Thank you,” he says.

She smiles and takes a sip of her cocoa, silence reigning between them for several moments before he plucks up the courage to speak.

“I want to make a suggestion,” he murmurs, “but I want to make it clear that it's just a suggestion and you are free to take it or leave it as you will.”

“Alright,” she replies carefully, looking like she's bracing herself for something terrible.
“I'm in desperate need of a good analyst, and you're one of the very best I have ever worked with,” he says. “Your record speaks for itself. My current analyst is bright and has potential, but he's also very inexperienced and would really benefit from having a mentor. I've discussed it with the DG and he's agreed to the possibility of opening a part time position for you to assist my team and help Martin.” She's watching him through cold, distant eyes, her jaw clenched, and he feels his heart sink. “As I said,” he finishes. “It's merely a suggestion, a job offer if you like, and you are free to accept or reject it, now or at any time in the future. I just wanted you to know that it's an option.”

“And what about Jamie, Harry?” she asks now, as forcefully as he'd anticipated from the look on her face. “Do you want him to end up like Wes? Did you not learn anything from what happened to Fiona and Adam?”

“That was different, Ruth,” he replies, his anger flaring at being accused of not caring for his son. “Fiona and Adam were both active field agents. Fiona took a calculated risk, went off on a personal mission, without informing anyone of what she was doing, without adequate backup to deal with her first husband, who was a Syrian spy. That's hardly likely to happen to either of us, and as far as Adam goes, he never recovered from her loss. He unravelled instead of taking a step back and caring for his son as he should have done.”

“And would you be able to take that step back, Harry? Would you be able to quit your job to care for Jamie if something happened to me?” she challenges, eyes on fire.

“Yes,” he replies, equally riled. “Yes, I would. I would do anything for Jamie.”

That seems to deflate her a little as she considers him for a moment in silence, taking another sip of her drink. “That's good to know,” she says eventually.

“You don't have to return to work if you don't want to,” he reiterates.

“I do, Harry. I need to rebuild my life and work is an essential part of that.”

“I wasn't suggesting you stay at home,” he protests. “Not that there's anything wrong with that. But you were made for more than menial tasks, Ruth. So much more. There will always be a place for you at MI-5.”

“Is that why you wanted me back?” she asks quietly.

“Wanted you back?” he frowns. “You mean here? In Britain?” She nods. “Jesus Christ, Ruth!” He puts down his mug with a heavy thunk and stands, turning away from her, pacing to the window and staring out into the cold night, his feelings in turmoil, the thought that she would think that of him making him want to scream with rage. “Do you really think that little of me?!” he demands, spinning around to face her, hands clenched into fists. “Is this all you believe me capable of? Do you not remember...” he tails off, turning away again in disgust and leaving the room and the house, calling to Scarlet as he grabs his coat, his keys and her lead, and slams the front door behind them.
Chapter 60

16 November 2008 – Ruth

Shit! She thinks as she hears the door slam shut.

*Double shit,* she thinks when Jamie wakes at the noise and begins to cry. She gets up and heads to their room, berating herself the entire way, overwhelmed by feelings of guilt. What the hell had she been *thinking*?! How could she have been so selfish? So cruel?

Jamie's standing up in his cot, crying, lifting his arms up the moment he sees her, and it surprises her that he's reacting so strongly and violently to being woken. Normally, he'd be whimpering a little, still lying in his cot, ready to be soothed back to sleep.

“What is it, Jamie?” she asks gently, having settled him in her arms. “It's all right. It's just the door banging. Nothing to worry about,” but she knows that her own feelings contradict her words and that Jamie's distress has more to do with those, than the sound of the door slamming.

“Dada,” he says, almost breaking her heart. *Oh Harry.*

She tries distracting him with his new bear, tries singing him a lullaby, walking with him around the room, but Jamie stubbornly continues asking for his father in between his sobs. Eventually, she settles on the bed with both pillows behind her back, offering him her breast which he accepts, his beautiful, hazel eyes wide as he gazes up at her, eyelashes damp from his tears, his gaze troubled, and she fancies she can hear him silently asking, “What did I do wrong, Mum? Why did Daddy leave again?”

It breaks her heart and she feels tears begin to form in her own eyes, and she has to blink rapidly to clear them away. “I'm sorry, darling,” she murmurs. “It's my fault Daddy got cross and went away. It's not your fault. He'll be back soon. I promise.” She lifts her hand to stroke the blonde curls from his forehead when she has a sudden powerful impulse to look up.

It's Harry, standing in the doorway watching them, his hair mused and a little damp as are the front of his trousers. It must be raining, she thinks fleetingly, her eyes drawn back to his, his gaze intense and compelling. She sees him look down at their son, who's still nursing, unaware of his father's presence, but she doesn't attempt to hide from him, cover up what she's doing. In this moment, she doesn't feel the least bit embarrassed, having him watch her feed and comfort their son.

“I'm sorry,” she whispers, drawing his eyes back to hers. “I didn't mean it, Harry. Not really. It was a moment of... insecurity on my part, not a criticism of you.” She swallows, feeling the tears well up again and begin to slide down her cheeks. Quickly, she lifts her free hand to wipe them away, tilting her head down to find Jamie staring at her too with eyes the exact colour of Harry's. She smiles, a breathy laugh escaping her to find herself thus scrutinised by both of them. Then she lifts her eyes to Harry's again. “Forgive me?”

He nods, taking a step into the room and murmuring, “Did I wake him?” his eyes looking contrite.

Jamie immediately lets go of her breast and throws himself backwards as he tries to turn towards Harry's voice, demanding, “Dada? Dada?” She has no time to worry about modesty as she uses both hands to secure him, gently guiding him while he turns and rolls onto the bed, her breast on full
display, a droplet of milk forming on the tip of her nipple.

To his credit, Harry doesn't stare, smiling instead down at their son as he moves towards the bed, reaching it in two, long strides and scooping Jamie up before he can walk off the end of it.

Jamie is ecstatic, babbling away and laughing, jiggling his feet as Harry kisses his forehead. “Dada,” he repeats over and over again, patting Harry's shoulder.

“You're meant to be asleep, young James,” Harry says, frowning in mock seriousness. “What time do you call this to be awake?”

“Boo,” says Jamie, making Harry chuckle.

“We had stories already. Bedtime now,” he replies, drawing him close so his head is resting on his shoulder. “That's right, lad. That's the way. Time to say goodnight.” And he walks over to switch off the light, leaving the faint glow from the night-light in the corner as the only illumination in the room. He begins to hum Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, swaying from side to side, pacing gently around the room as she watches, amazed at this side of Harry that she might never have known had Jamie not been born, had she never returned home with him, had she not spent tonight here, in Harry's home.

It doesn't take long for Jamie to nod off, but the moment Harry attempts to move him from his shoulder to the crib, Jamie whimpers and clings tighter to him, so he gives up, saying softly, “Why don't you get ready for bed, Ruth? It's getting late and you've had a long journey.” And with that, he leaves the room, their son still clinging to him, head resting on his father's shoulder, eyes closed.

When she comes out of the bathroom and slips back into Harry's guest room, she finds them lying on her bed, Jamie settled on Harry's chest, Harry's big hand on his lower back, Jamie's little one on his shoulder. She thinks they're both sleeping, but as she stands, wondering what to do now, Harry opens his eyes. “Ready?” he asks softly.

“Yes. Thanks.” She watches as he carefully tries to roll onto his side, and swiftly moves forward to help him settle Jamie without waking him. It almost works, but their son is as stubborn as both of them combined and seems to sense Harry's attempt to escape, his little fist grasping Harry's shirt as he whimpers in protest.

Harry smiles. “Shhhh,” he murmurs. “Go to sleep, Jamie. Daddy's not going anywhere. I'll be right here when you wake up in the morning.” He softly kisses Jamie's hair, gently cupping his head in his large hand and stroking his soft curls.

“You're so good with him,” she murmurs, a little in awe of the effortlessness with which Harry's soothing him, remembering how long it had taken her to feel this confident caring for their son.

“I love this age,” he confesses, reaching for one of the pillows and placing it under his head, seemingly settling in for the night, their son lying between them, snuggling against Harry's broad chest. “If only they were always this easy to please.”

She's sitting on the bed, but she suddenly feels tired, and if Harry's staying here, she figures she might as well get comfortable, so drawing back the covers from her side, she slips under them, settling her head on the other pillow, facing Harry and Jamie. Jamie's face is buried in Harry's chest, but Harry's watching her.

“Have you told them about Jamie?” she asks, picking up the thread of their conversation.

He sighs and she sees the pain flit through his gaze before he answers. “Not yet. I should though, at
some point.”

She nods, not sure what to say. His other children are in their twenties, so she’s not surprised Harry’s reluctant to tell them. She doesn’t know how they’ll take the news, or how his ex-wife will, for that matter. She doesn’t really know much about them at all – Harry didn’t use to talk about them often. She wonders if that’s because he hadn’t wanted to, or if it had been because he’d thought she’d not want to hear about them. She’d felt so guilty back then about her role in precipitating his divorce from Jane, yet now it seems so silly, as does her concern over what people would say about her dating the boss. She couldn’t care less what anyone thinks of her now as long as she can have Harry. If only she knew how to make things right between them. Would it help to tell him about her exile, about George? Reassure him that she never even considered sleeping with anyone else while she was away? That her heart had always belonged to him and only the thought of what might happen to Jamie had kept her away?

But the thought of telling him these things makes her realise suddenly that she doesn't know if Harry has someone else in his life, another woman who shares his bed sometimes. After all, it's been more than a year since she sent him that letter, ending what had been between them. Ben says he still loves her, but that doesn't mean he hasn't attempted to move on. It would be logical for him to attempt to move on, and though she used to wish for just that, while she was away and wanting him not to suffer because of her, she suddenly feels sick at the thought of it now.

“You alright?” he asks softly, bringing her back to the present.

“Yes.” She pauses, then continues, determined to be brave. “I’ve just realised, I never asked if it would be... convenient for us to drop in on you like this.”

“You didn't need to,” he replies. “I invited you, remember?”

“Yes. Right.” She drops her gaze to Jamie's sleeping form, her courage suddenly deserting her, and changes the subject. “He's so happy to have you back. He's been asking for you every day since you left.”

She sees him smile as she lifts her eyes to his again, watching his face melt as he gazes down at their son. “I've missed him too.” He pauses, then adds softly, “I can't bear that you're taking him away again so soon.”

“I can't bear it either,” she confesses, watching his eyes rise to hers again, full of guarded hope.

“Then don’t,” he whispers. “Stay. Stay a little while longer. Stay here with me.”

*Do you mean that*, she wants to ask, *do you want me? Do you forgive me? Do you love me still?* But she can't seem to find the courage. She can imagine, however, how much courage it's taken for him to request such a thing, so she nods, making a quick decision. “I'll change our tickets tomorrow morning and ring Mum again. He needs some stability. He needs to be with you for a little while longer before we go visit his Granny.”

He smiles, a look of relief and pure joy crossing his face.

“You can always invite her here,” he offers.

“Where would she sleep?”

“In this room,” is his reply. “You and Jamie can have my bed and I'll sleep on the sofa.”

She watches him, longing to suggest that he share the bed with them, but not feeling brave enough to
do that either. Instead she murmurs, “Thank you, Harry. That's very generous of you.”

“I like your mother,” he replies, surprising her. “I'm sure she's impatient to see you and to meet her grandson.”

“She is,” Ruth smiles. “I'll suggest it. It need only be for a day or two, then at the end of the month, we can go down to see her.”

He smiles, his face suddenly looking more relaxed, and they spend long moments just staring at each other, a truce, a gentle peace settling between them. Eventually, her eyes begin to droop with fatigue and she hears him murmur softly, “Sleep, Ruth. Don't fight it. Rest.” He lifts his hand from his hip and reaches for her face, his fingers gently pushing her hair back, caressing her cheek and jaw, his thumb rubbing the frown lines between her eyebrows away. “Sleep,” he repeats. “You're safe now. Jamie's safe. Relax. Go to sleep.”

“Harry,” she sighs softly as her eyes finally close and she begins to drift off, wrapping her hand around his wrist and pulling his hand towards her, pressing her lips against the heel of it. “I've missed you,” she murmurs before she drifts into a deep, restful sleep.
Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

17 November 2008 – Harry

He wakes to find her watching him, Jamie still asleep between them, her clear, blue eyes gentle, gazing across at him with deep fondness.

“Sleep well?” she asks softly, a small smile tugging at her lips.

He sighs, rolling onto his back and almost falling off the bed, his arms flying out to catch himself. Jamie sleeps on, oblivious, but Ruth reacts immediately, grasping his right arm to steady him and leaning over to help pull him back onto the bed, grabbing his belt and tugging hard, shifting his momentum back towards her.

“Thanks,” he says once he's safely lying on his side again, wide awake from the experience.

Jamie's rolled away from him a little, lying on his back between them, his lips pursed in an adorable pout and it makes him wonder if this is what he looked like as a small child. The fact that his youngest son looks so remarkably like him, brings him much comfort. Neither Graham nor Catherine have ever resembled him quite this closely.

His eyes move to Ruth's once more, her gaze still warm and inviting, and before he knows what he's doing, he's shifted towards her, his eyes straying to her lips, his mind full of the wonder of waking up beside her. Everything else has faded away, the memories of all the ways they've hurt each other gone, only the present moment existing in his heart and mind.

She mirrors his movement, drawing closer, their son sandwiched between their bodies as their lips come together and they kiss, his left hand reaching for her face, fingers slipping into her soft hair, drawing her closer, her hand moving to his waist and sliding up his side as she deepens the kiss, all the longing he's felt for months now pouring into it, and he knows that the feeling is mutual – she's missed him as much as he has her.

They part for a moment, greedily gulping down air before plunging in again more passionately, the presence of their still sleeping son between them, the only thing keeping them apart. Maybe, he thinks desperately as he continues to kiss her ardently, maybe this will fix everything. Maybe all we need to do is make love. She moans as, without conscious thought, his hand has slipped down to cup her breast, now swollen and heavy with his son's breakfast – a realisation that stirs in him a mixture of tenderness and passion, a possessiveness and ardour that has him growling and drawing her closer, his fingers deftly unbuttoning her pyjama top and reaching within to the satin feel of her skin, cupping, squeezing her bare breast, his thumb circling her nipple and making her whimper with want. He's still kissing her lips, devouring them, his whole body taught with arousal, Jamie almost forgotten, though his presence is most definitely the only thing that's stopping him from taking her right now. She's panting now, barely able to continue kissing him, and he feels a slickness on her nipple that must surely be milk leaking with her growing arousal, and he has a sudden desire to look, see her beautiful breasts again as they are now, larger, firmer, her nipples darker than before, stretched by the many feedings of his son.
He lifts his head, his gaze raking over her face, over her closed eyelids and flushed cheeks to her swollen lips that are gasping his name, along her slender neck to her chest and her right breast where his hand has pushed her top aside to reveal it in all its glory. He cups her flesh, hears her moan again, watches with fascination as a droplet of milk forms on her nipple and reaches down to lick it, the sweetness of it surprising him, her whimpers of pleasure prompting him to lick her again, then close his mouth around her nipple and suck hard. She mewls and trembles, her hips lifting off the bed, and he can't help groaning with longing and his desperate need to bury himself inside her, to make her his again.

“Mama,” Jamie says suddenly, making them spring apart. “Dada,” he says, patting his father's chest with his little hand and grinning up at him when he looks down.

“Good morning, Jamie,” he murmurs, his voice a deep rumble as he struggles to calm himself and re-establish his self-control. “Did you sleep well?”

“Nummy,” says Jamie, rolling onto his stomach and crawling up the bed to his mother.

Her face is beautifully flushed, her pupils still dilated with arousal, and he doesn't think he's ever seen anything as exquisite as she is in this moment, lying on her side, a pillow under her head, their son stretched out before her, suckling at her left breast, her eyes alight with love as she gazes down at him.

“You're breathtaking,” he says, caught up in the moment and the love that surges within him.

She smiles bashfully and lifts her gaze to his, the love and joy still radiating from her eyes though she's looking at him now, not their son. “This is the happiest I've ever been, Harry,” she confesses softly. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asks in a daze.

“For Jamie, for keeping your promise to always be there for me no matter what,” she replies. “For being such a wonderful man. For still... wanting me despite everything.” She blushes as she says that, but doesn't drop her gaze from his, even when his own heats up again at the recollection of what just happened between them.

“If Jamie had never been,” he asks gruffly before his courage can desert him, “would you-”

“I'd have come back to you the day you cleared my name,” she replies without hesitation. “I'd have rung you every night from Christmas onward until we were reunited... in Paris.”

Paris. He smiles, his gaze softening with love and hope, eyes bright, a lump lodging in his throat, the emotions overwhelming. They'd talked about Paris on their first, proper date – Paris and New York – and he'd promised to take her, one day, to see both of them.

“I love you, Harry,” she says gently, her own eyes swimming with tears now. “I've wanted nothing more than to come home to you all this time, but I couldn't put my needs before those of our son. I was convinced that he'd be safe where we were, that no one would find us. I'm so sorry, Harry. I never wanted to hurt you.”

He reaches for her hand and squeezes it gently with his own, the last of his resentment, anger, and feelings of betrayal draining away with her words. “I'm sorry too, Ruth,” he says.

“You've nothing to be sorry for, Harry,” she protests, tears rolling down her cheeks. “None of this is your fault. You've been nothing but supportive, generous, and chivalrous, and I really don't deserve any of it.”
“That's not true, Ruth,” he murmurs, moving closer and reaching a hand up to wipe away her tears. “At the very least, I am responsible for burdening you with a child. I can't believe I didn't think to—”

“Don't, Harry,” she interrupts, shaking her head. “I don't regret it. He was the only thing that kept me going, my one real, tangible connection to you.”

“He kept you away from me,” he can't help pointing out.

“No. No, Harry. That wasn't his fault. It's my fault. If I'd—” but he doesn't let her finish, seeing the anxiety in her eyes at the thought that he might blame their son.

“It's all right, Ruth,” he says quickly. “I know it's not his fault. Don't worry. I don't blame him... or you. Not any more, I do understand.”

“Really?” She looks so hopeful that he can't help smiling at her.

“Really. You wanted him to be safe,” he says. “I understand that and, who knows, perhaps you were right. There were... things... events that happened while you were away, people with grudges, betrayals, people wanting information.” He pauses to look at her, swallowing past the lump in his throat that's appeared there at the thought of what might have happened. “The people who came after you already had me. The scars you asked about...” he tails off when he feels her tighten her grip on his hand and sees the tears begin to slide down her face again. “I dread to think what they'd have done to you and Jamie.”

“Who were they?” she asks.

He shakes his head. “I can't tell you that, Ruth.”

“But they knew about me? Was it Mace?”

“Ruth—”

“Or Baghdad?” His eyes widen in surprise, giving the game away. “That's it, isn't it? They wanted the Uranium, just as you said they would.”

He smiles, awed by her, feeling himself fall for her all over again.

“Nummy?” says Jamie, drawing both their gazes to him. “Dada nummy?”

“Christ!” he exclaims, lifting his hand to his forehead and sliding it down his face. Apparently, his son's as bright as his mother – nothing gets past him. Beside him, he hears Ruth begin to laugh.

“Dada nummy?” Jamie insists.

“No, thank you, Jamie,” Harry's forced to reply. “I'm alright, but thanks for asking.”

Ruth is now in hysterics, lying on her back next to them and laughing so hard, she's having trouble breathing. It warms his heart – the sight of her laughing so freely – and he can't help smiling at her indulgently.

“Mama?” Jamie asks worriedly, sitting up and staring at his mother.

“It's all right, Jamie,” Harry smiles, drawing his son towards him. “Mummy's just happy. See? She's laughing.” Jamie frowns, still watching Ruth, but he seems reassured by his words, especially when Ruth makes the effort to calm herself, turn to him, and smile.
“Good morning, Jamie,” she says, eyes sparkling at both of them.

“Dada,” Jamie says, turning to him, clearly reassured that there's nothing the matter with his mother. “Boo.”

“Hmmm,” he hums. “If you can say nummy so beautifully, Master James, why won't you say Daddy, eh?”

“Nummy,” Jamie replies, patting Ruth's chest.

“That's right. Now say Daddy.”

“Dada,” says Jamie. “Boo.”

“All right. Say Daddy and I'll read you a story.”

“Boo.” He's frowning now and pouting, sounding a little cross.

“Daddy,” Harry repeats, sticking his lower lip out in imitation of his son and making Ruth chuckle.

“Boo!” Jamie's lower lip begins to tremble, his eyes beginning to fill with tears, and Harry gives in.

“All right then, you stubborn, little mule. Don't say daddy then. Let's read a story instead.” And he sits up with his back against the headboard, taking the book a smiling Ruth hands him as Jamie climbs into his lap while Ruth watches them fondly.

“Boo,” he says happily, then adds as an afterthought, “Daddy,” making them both laugh.

“You're as stubborn as your mother,” he chuckles, “and just as clever too, heaven help me.”

“You'll be all right,” Ruth replies, her eyes full of love, “just as long as you always keep at least one of us onside.”

He chuckles as he lifts his eyes to hers. “And how do you suggest I do that?”

“You need no tips from me, Harry. You're doing it already.” Her voice is soft, her face radiant as she looks at him. She moves close to his side, leaning against him as she reaches for his hand and wraps it in both her own, squeezing it for a moment before relaxing her grip and turning to press a quick kiss against his shoulder. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” is his gruff reply.

Chapter End Notes

A/N I'm wrapping up this fic now, so they'll be just a few more chapters, but likely not as frequently posted, as RL seems to have got rather busy again! I'll be aiming for once-a-week updates - fingers crossed. Thank you all for reading and reviewing. Your encouragement and support keeps me motivated to write and to keep coming up with new stories. Cheers, S.C.
A trip to the park down the road with Scarlet had been just the thing to soothe a crying Jamie when his father had left to go to work. He hadn't taken it any better than the time when Harry had left to return home when they'd been staying with Ben. She supposes he'll get used to it eventually and begin to trust that Harry will return at the end of the day. She's convinced that only a Red Flash will keep him at Thames House after hours now – he'd seemed so reluctant to leave them this morning.

Not just Jamie, but both of them.

She hadn't dared hope that a reconciliation would happen so quickly, that Harry would allow himself to get so close to her again so soon. Harry falling asleep beside them last night had been such a stroke of luck. So had Jamie sleeping in this morning when normally he's up at the crack of dawn. Briefly she wonders if their son had planned the whole thing in an effort to get his parents back together. She smiles at the thought, dropping her gaze from the window to the laptop that's open on the table in front of her.

Jamie's having a nap and she's trying to use the time to do some job hunting, though somehow it's hard to pinpoint where to start and she keeps getting lost in daydreams. It's not like she has a particular idea of what career she'd like to pursue now. She knows she doesn't want to be a nanny again. Malcolm, bless him, has flushed out her CV a little, so it doesn't look like she dropped off the face of the earth for two years. He's put some travel in there with some freelance translating work while she was away, and there's the standard few years work at DEFRA before that, with a few references and contact numbers, which she suspects all lead back to Malcolm in one way or another. She supposes that she could do some translating work. The hours would be flexible, she could work from home, and it generally pays well. The thing is – she doesn't really want to work from home any more. She's a little tired of it. She needs to get out of the house, have some adult conversation and some moments to be herself each day, rather than just Jamie's mother.

She sighs, rubbing her face with her hands and getting up to make some tea. While she waits for the kettle to boil, her thoughts drift back to Harry and the wonder of their new found closeness. She's missed him. Good God but she's missed him. Maybe tonight Jamie will consent to sleep in his crib and the two of them can have a little more time together to talk, or just snog each other senseless. Maybe they can leave Jamie in his room and she can sleep in Harry's bed tonight. Maybe she can seduce him, or he her, and they can finally make love again after all this time. Will it be the same, she wonders, or perhaps even better after their long separation?

Probably not, she reluctantly concedes, thinking that part of what had made it so good before had been the trust they'd had. And though it appears that they've forgiven each other, she's not quite sure if Harry trusts her in the same way just yet. She knows they've only scratched the surface of what lies buried between them, so she tries not to get her hopes up too high. She knows Harry is a man who feels things deeply and his loyalty is so strong that her betrayal of his trust and love must have wounded him that much more. His love for her is still unshaken though, as is her own for him, and that gives her hope that they can make it, open up to each other again and reclaim what they once had. After all, they've done it before, moved past her betrayal of the team when she'd first joined and was a mole for Amanda Roke, and more recently, found their way through the emotional quagmire.
their affair had created onto solid enough ground to build a committed, intimate relationship.

She shakes her head to clear it and makes the tea, turning back to the computer, determinedly pulling a sheet of paper towards her and picking up a pen, intent on making a list of jobs she could and would like to do. Maybe she could work for a good cause. Maybe something like Oxfam, or the Red Cross, or something, though she's not convinced they'd pay enough to cover her food and lodging. Perhaps she should just go back to Oxford and finish her PhD, give academia another go... Christ! This is going to take forever.

When Jamie wakes, she's relieved to be able to set aside her task for now and play with him instead. She thinks about taking him for a walk again, but it's raining and she has yet to buy Jamie a raincoat and wellies, so they play with the animals instead and read some stories until it's time to make supper. Ruth sets him up in the kitchen with some blocks then, while she makes a cheese sauce to pour over the fish she'd found in the freezer this morning and had taken out to defrost. It's not completely defrosted yet, but she figures it can do the rest while it's in the oven.

Once it's cooking merrily away and she's washed the various things she's used to cook, it's already almost six o'clock. Jamie's still happily stacking and knocking down blocks – it never ceases to amaze her, the level of concentration he can achieve at his age – so she goes over to the laptop she's left open on the table to put it away. She wonders what time Harry will be home tonight. She could ring him, but she doesn't want to disturb him at work, so she settles for a text instead.

Her phone chirps almost immediately after she's sent the message, which surprises her and makes her smile, but when she looks, it's not a reply from Harry, but a text from George instead, asking if she's free to talk now or in the next half hour.

She'd contacted Despoina and George practically the same day she'd first arrived at Ben's to let them know that she and Jamie were safe, and then again a week ago to give them her new mobile number that Harry had arranged for her. She'd suggested a video call then and both of them had promised to let her know when they are free to connect, but though she's the one who'd suggested it, she still feels somewhat stunned now and it takes her a moment to recover enough to quickly type 'yes, in 5 mins' and press send before turning to Harry's laptop, saying, “Jamie, would you like to see Nico and George?”

“Iko!” Jamie exclaims and gets up, toddling over to her.

“Just a minute, love. I have to find the right program. Let's see...” But Harry doesn't have the program installed on his computer, so she has to download it first and then install it, a task that is not made at all easier by a rather impatient Jamie.

Finally they're settled on the chair together, have logged in, found George, and are ready to talk to their friends again after all this time. Jamie's impatience doesn't allow her any time to dwell on the thought of seeing them again, and before she knows it, they're there and she has tears in her eyes at the sight of them, looking so well. Jamie is ecstatic too, clapping his hand together and yelling “Iko!” over and over again.

“Hi, Jamie,” Nico smiles.

“It's so good to see you both,” Ruth says. “We've missed you so much.”

“It's good to see you too,” George replies.

She smiles and asks, “How are you? Nico, how's your swimming?”
“Good,” he answers, a little shyly, she thinks.

“And how's Mrs Stamataki working out?” she asks, referring to Nico's teacher whom he hadn't liked that much when he'd first met her in September. “Do you like her any better now?”

“She's alright, but she gives us too much homework.”

“But you liked the history project she set,” George points out gently.

“Yeah. I guess.”

Ruth smiles, so moved by the sight and sound of them. She hadn't realised how much she's missed them. “It's so good to see you,” she says again.

“It's good to see you too, Ruth,” George murmurs softly, hesitating just a little before saying her name. While she was at Ben's, she'd sent him and Despoina a letter that explained everything – well, not everything exactly, just her real name and the fact that she'd lied about Harry being an abusive, alcoholic, with a brief, almost truthful, explanation why. “We've been worried about you, but you look well. So does Jamie. He's grown so much.”

“Baba,” Jamie says.

“Hello, Jamie,” George smiles.

“Dog,” Jamie replies.

“You have a dog?” Nico asks.

“Adet,” Jamie answers, surprising all of them.

“That's right, Jamie. Scarlet. That's her name.”

“Where is she?” Nico asks.

As if in answer, Scarlet barks from the other room.

“She must have slipped out of the kitchen,” Ruth replies, frowning in surprise, convinced that Scarlet had been in the kitchen with them earlier and the door had been closed. She doesn't remember opening it, but she supposes she must have. “Scarlet,” she calls, but she doesn't come. “She's not coming. I'll go get her.”

“Never mind, Ruth,” George says. “You can show us next time. We're happy just to see you both.”

She smiles. “It's good to see you too, George. You look well. Not working too hard, I hope?”

He shrugs. “I try not to. I've decided to cut back on my hours, spend more time with Nico. Since you left...” He tails off and tries again. “I decided not to get another nanny. Nico's getting older now, so he walks to my sister's after school with his cousins and I pick him up from there, so I try to be done by six at the latest.”

While he speaks, Jamie begins to press the buttons on the keyboard, so she has to move her chair further back and hand him a toy to distract him. It's one of his favourites, with a ring that slides over wooden cylinders held together by elastic, so he doesn't fuss too much and happily sits down in her lap to play with it.

“That's good. I bet you like that, Nico.”
“Yeah,” he says, shrugging his shoulders, and she has a feeling that Nico misses them both more than he's willing to admit right now.

“Does Thia Tasia make the koulouria you like so much?” she asks, trying to cheer him up.

“Yeah, she does.” He smiles this time.

“Lucky you! Next time we visit, you'll have to give one to Jamie to try. And then you're going to have to convince your aunt to give me the recipe or he'll never want to return home with me.”

George laughs and Nico's smile broadens. “When will you visit?” he asks.

“I don't know yet, but soon, I hope. I still need to get a job and sort out where we're going to live.”

“You can live here,” Nico says and then quickly looks away, embarrassed.

“Thanks, Nico,” she replies, her heart breaking, “but as much as we would love to be with you, Jamie needs his dad, just like you do.”

“Yeah,” he replies, then turns to ask his father if he can go play.

“Of course,” George replies. “Say bye to Ruth first, though.”

“Bye,” Nico says, glancing at her and then away.

“Bye, Nico. Love you. Talk to you again soon,” she replies, but he's gone.

“He really misses you,” George says.

“I know. I really miss him too.” She sighs, lifting her hand to quickly wipe her eyes.

“What about you, Ruth? How are you? Have you had a chance to see family or friends?”

“Just Harry really. We're staying in London a bit longer in the end, but Mum's coming up to visit tomorrow.”

“That's nice. I bet you're looking forward to seeing her again.”

She laughs. “That's the understatement of the year!”

“Nummy,” Jamie interrupts, dropping his toy and trying to lift her top.

“Oh, Jamie. It's almost dinner time,” she protests, feeling rather embarrassed. She's never nursed Jamie in front of George, and though she doubts he'll see anything with the current camera angle, she somehow doesn't feel comfortable doing it.

“I should let you go,” George says, perceptive as always. “You need to nurse your son.”

“I don't know,” she sighs, looking down at Jamie who's wiggled his way into a horizontal position in her arms and is already worming his way under her top. “I thought he'd be doing less of this now, but it seems like it's only getting more frequent. What's he going to do when I start work?”

“He's had a lot of change to contend with. He probably needs the comfort, or maybe he's coming down with something. Don't discourage it unless you have to, Ruth. Any doctor worth his salt will tell you that.”
She lifts her eyes to smile at him, having moved closer to the table again to raise the camera angle a little more, just in case, and helped Jamie latch on. “I've missed having a doctor around to reassure me.”

George laughs. “You're doing just fine, Ruth, and besides, you hated it when I played doctor.”

“That's true,” she concedes, remembering how annoying it had been the couple of times she'd had a cold. “I did appreciate it where Jamie was concerned though.”

George just smiles back at her and a companionable silence settles between them for a moment. She opens her mouth to say something, but a noise from the hall has her turning her head to the doorway and calling, “Harry? Is that you?”

There's no answer except for a bark from Scarlet, which worries her a little. She listens intently for a moment more.

“Is everything all right?” George asks.

“I think so,” she replies, “Harry?” Still no answer and all is quiet now, so she shrugs. “It's probably one of the animals. I'll...” but she tails off when her mobile chirps. She reaches for it awkwardly, trying not to disturb Jamie, and opens the message.

It's from Harry and it says, “I don't know exactly. Late. Sorry.”

“Everything all right?” George asks again, forcing her to push aside her disappointment and look up.

“Yes. Fine. Sorry.” She smiles. “It's just Harry letting me know he'll be late home. Anyway, I'd better get myself some dinner then. It was good to talk to you, George.”

“And you, Ruth. Take care of yourself and your beautiful son.”

“I will. And you take care of yours. We'll visit sometime, or if you come to London, let me know.”

“I will. Bye, Ruth.”

“Bye,” she says and clicks the mouse to end the call. She sighs. “What am I going to do with you now, Jamie, eh? You've filled your tummy with milk and I bet you're not going to want any supper, are you?” Jamie just gazes up at her. “Do you want the other side?”

“Side,” says Jamie, releasing her breast.

“All right,” Ruth replies, “but let's go sit somewhere more comfortable, shall we? You're getting very heavy.” And she goes over to turn off the oven before walking through to the living room and taking a seat on the sofa, surprised to find Scarlet lying on the floor in front of the front door, head on her paws, staring at it.

“What you doing, Scarlet?” she asks. “Harry's going to be late. Come sit with us.” Scarlet lifts her head to look at her, then gets up and trots after them, jumping onto the sofa and curling up against her side as she nurses Jamie and strokes her with her free hand, smiling fondly down at both of them. It feels so good to be home.
17 November 2008 – Harry

It's very late when he gets home and the house is utterly still. Scarlet is there to greet him as usual, as are the cats – hoping for a little more food, no doubt – but he can't help feeling a stab of disappointment that Ruth isn't there too, ready to welcome him home with a smile and a kiss, which is ridiculous really, seeing as he'd deliberately stayed out so long to avoid her.

_You hated it when I played doctor._

He shakes his head to clear it as he locks the door, hangs up his coat, and walks into the kitchen. How he wishes he'd never overheard that conversation. He'd been so happy all day, impatient to get home to Ruth and Jamie, imagining himself stealthily entering the house to surprise them, the smile Ruth would give him, the squeal of joy from Jamie, and instead he'd come home to hear Ruth telling another man – a man she'd lived with for over a year – that she misses him.

The pain and doubts had been so strong that he'd been unable to breathe for several moments. And just as he'd talked himself into not jumping to conclusions, into walking into the room anyway to say hello, George had said those words and it had all been too much for him. He'd left the flat as quietly as he could, motioning to Scarlet to stay, and closing the door quietly behind him before walking briskly away, his feet carrying him to the pub down the road of their own accord. In the weeks and months after Ruth had left him, he'd become a regular here, and though he's not stepped foot in it for over a month, the barkeep had taken one look at him and reached for his best whisky.

He closes the kitchen door behind him before turning on the light, his eyes alighting on the table and the single place-setting there with a note beside it. “I stayed up as long as I could, but I'm going to bed now. Hope everything's all right. There's fish pie in the oven if you're hungry. If not, please put it in the fridge. I missed you tonight. Sleep well. See you in the morning. R x”

He swallows hard as the emotions come welling up again.

_Oh Ruth._

_This is so stupid_, he thinks angrily as he goes to the cupboard and pulls out a glass, walking over to the sink and filling it to the brim before drinking its entire contents. He's torturing himself for no reason. He needs to talk to her, ask her about her exile, about George. For even if his worst fears are confirmed and she had an intimate relationship with him, she's here now. She chose _him_ in the end. _That's what matters._

He drinks one more glass of water, intent on avoiding a hangover in the morning – he's definitely drunk more whisky than is wise tonight. Then he fills the glass again and carries it to the table, setting it down and grabbing the plate to serve himself. The pie is delicious and he experiences yet another emotion filled moment when he realises that it's the first time anyone's cooked for him in a very long time.

He clears up after himself, tucking Ruth's note safely into his pocket, saying goodnight to Scarlet and closing her in the kitchen before trudging off to his room. Once there, he strips, hanging up his suit and discarding the rest of his clothes in the laundry basket, slipping on his robe, and walking into the bathroom, his mind flooding with memories of his bath yesterday with Jamie, the joy of being with
his son, of Ruth's concern for him and his newest injuries, of the sexual tension arching between
them as her hands had brushed his skin while she'd washed Jamie's hair. He's missed Jamie's bath-
time tonight, he realises with a pang and silently vows to never do so again, if he can help it.

He sighs and soaps his hands, washing his hair and body, trying hard not to imagine Ruth
performing this daily ritual for him. It had felt so good to kiss her this morning. So good. And he'd
wanted more. So much more. For a few blissful moments he'd forgotten everything else and they'd
been one happy family in his mind, their desire and passion for each other overwhelming, the
product of their love sleeping peacefully between them. He takes great comfort from the fact that
Jamie had been made in love – heart-wrenching, desperate love, but love nonetheless. We can have
that again, he thinks determinedly. Their love is still strong and they can rebuild the rest. It might
take time, but he's certain they can do it, almost certain that they both want to. He must talk to Ruth.

As he steps out of the bathroom again, he hesitates for a moment, gazing at the door to his left behind
which Jamie and Ruth are sleeping. It's ajar and he finds he can't resist the temptation to take a peek
at them before going to bed himself.

They're both in bed together, Jamie cuddled close against Ruth, his lips slightly parted as he sleeps
peacefully, Ruth's right arm across his waist, her left folded under her pillow. They paint such a
beautiful picture that he can't help longing to join them, slip in beside Jamie and gaze at them all
night, or even better, curl himself along Ruth's back, hold her and their son, bury his face in her hair
and whisper his love for her. Maybe I could have done that tonight if I hadn't been so stupid.

He shakes his head at himself and leaves the room, walking back to his own, hanging up his robe
and slipping into his pyjama bottoms and an old, faded t-shirt. He gets in bed and lies there, thinking,
wondering if Ruth had heard him earlier and if she'd realised what had happened, hoping that she
hadn't and that no damage has been done by him distancing himself from her again tonight. Thank
goodness Scarlet is such a good spook, he thinks, smiling softly to himself.

She's always had a natural aptitude for stealth – it's the reason he'd chosen her all those years ago
when she'd been but a two-month-old puppy. She'd been quiet, even then – unless she got
overexcited and felt the need to express her joy with a single bark, as she had when he'd picked her
up and announced, “We're taking this one,” to his family and the dog-breeder – and a watcher,
oberving everything and everyone first before committing to action. She's smart too and training her
to respond to silent signals as well as spoken commands had been a piece of cake and he'd enjoyed it
immensely. He's always felt a special bond with her, and he's often wondered if it's he who'd chosen
Scarlet or the other way around. For many years, Scarlet had seemed like the only creature alive
who'd really understood him. Until Ruth...

Oh Ruth.

It takes him a long time to fall asleep and it seems but a moment later that he's rudely awoken by his
son's cries. He groans and drapes his arm over his face, listening to Ruth's soothing voice that's
mingled with Jamie's wailing, trying to go back to sleep. When it becomes clear that Jamie's protests
are only getting louder, however, he sighs and sits up, swinging his legs out of bed and rubbing his
face to wake himself fully before getting up and making his way to them after a short detour to the
bathroom – the water he'd drunk before bed suddenly making its presence felt.

Ruth's pacing back and forth across the room, singing softly and swaying from side to side, Jamie in
her arms, crying his heart out. He's not sure what's wrong. Is Jamie missing him again tonight, he
wonders as he takes a step into the room and asks softly, “Anything I can do to help?”

She turns to face him and gives him a wan smile, and he can plainly see the exhaustion on her face.
“I don't know. He's teething, I think. He's been like this all evening. He sleeps for a bit and then
wakes up again. He has a bit of a temperature too.”

“Do we need to call a doctor?” he asks, worriedly.

“I don't think so,” she replies. “It's happened before – a night like this and then he's fine. He'll be
talking in full sentences by tomorrow.”

He frowns, puzzled. “How d'you mean?”

“The healing crisis. When he has one, he's always able to do something new the next day – walk,
talk, run. It's weird, but apparently normal.”

He smiles. “Here,” he says, stepping closer. “Let me take him for a bit.”

“Thanks,” she murmurs as she hands Jamie over, reaching a hand back to rub her lower back once
he's relieved her of her burden.

“Why don't you have a hot shower, or try and get some sleep?” he suggests. “I'll take care of him for
a bit.”

She smiles, reaching up to gently squeeze his left bicep and making his heart race. “Thank you,
Harry. A shower would be lovely.” She kisses his cheek softly, brushes her fingers over Jamie's hair,
and slips out of the room.

He clears his throat and turns to his son. “What's the matter, lad?” he asks softly, drawing Jamie
closer. “What's all the fuss about, eh? Are those new teeth hurting?” Jamie doesn't respond except to
grasp his shirt in his little hand and continue crying. “It's all right, lad. It'll pass. I promise,” and he
begins to pace, trying out different rhythms, different ways of holding Jamie, until he finds something
that works better than the rest – nestling Jamie's head under his chin and supporting him against his
chest and stomach with Jamie's legs bent up towards his tummy as Harry hums softly. The effect isn't
immediate, but after several minutes, he stops crying, and after a few more, he finally falls asleep.

He's not quite sure what to do now, so he settles on lying on Ruth's bed again, as he had last night,
and waiting for her to come out of the shower. He doesn't bank on her taking so long though, nor on
the fact that he's so tired, because, next thing he knows, he's being woken rudely by his son again,
the room is dark, and Ruth's lying in bed beside them.

“Give him to me,” she says, her voice thick from sleep. “Maybe he'll nurse and fall asleep again
quickly this time.”

He rolls onto his side, guiding Jamie to the bed between them, and that's when he realises that Ruth
must have covered them when she came to bed because there's a blanket over him and Jamie, but
Ruth is under the duvet that he's lying on.

“You're going to have to get up, Harry. I can't get him under the covers with me,” she says, just as he
comes to the same conclusion.

He sits up, gathering the blanket in his arms as he stands, allowing Ruth to lift the covers and settle
Jamie beside her, coaxing him to suckle and hopefully go back to sleep. He stands, watching them
for several moments in wonder before shaking himself free and turning away, only to be brought up

He smiles and nods, feeling his heart expand with relief and turning back towards the bed, folding
the blanket as he goes and setting it aside before he lifts the covers and slides below them, carefully
shifting his body closer to them, but not far enough to be touching either of them.
“I missed you earlier,” she confesses softly, reaching for his hand under the covers. “Was it a tough day? Did everything... work out all right?”

“Yes, it was...” he begins, but he tails off, not wanting to lie. They can't build a relationship, the life he wants, on lies. “The truth is,” he begins again, gently squeezing her hand, “that I came home earlier, around six or so, but you were busy...” She starts and grips his hand more tightly.

“Talking to George,” she finishes for him. “Oh, Harry,” she sighs. “You've got entirely the wrong idea about him, you know. He's a good, kind man and my friend. Just my friend. You should have come in. I'd have liked to introduce you.”

“I almost did,” he confesses, “but then he said...”

“What did he say?”

“Something about you never liking it when he played doctor.”

“And you assumed he meant during sex?” Her eyes are luminous in the light coming from the night-light in the corner, but she's masking her emotions well and he can't tell what she's thinking.

“The phrase he used...” He tails off. “Yes,” he whispers, dreading her reaction, terrified he'll lose her over this.

“English isn't his first language, Harry,” she points out calmly, “and I didn't sleep with him. I didn't want to. He's a good friend – that's all. He and Despoina were my support group while I was pregnant and after Jamie was born, and he, very kindly, offered me a job caring for his son, so I wouldn't have to go back to work at the hospital straight away and leave Jamie with someone else when he was so little. I've missed him, yes, like I've missed Zaf, Adam, Malcolm, and Jo.” She squeezes his hand gently and smiles, and he can't help desperately hoping that she doesn't ask him about Adam and Zaf now. “What he meant was that, when I had a cold a couple of times, he fussed so much that I got a bit short tempered with him. He's a doctor, you see, a cardiologist, but his wife died from complications of pneumonia around three years ago now. He loved her very deeply and, I think, he feels terribly guilty that he couldn't save her, feels that he should have been able to help her, should have spotted the signs and admitted her to hospital sooner, should have insisted she take things easy when she stubbornly refused. He misses her very much, and I suppose, if circumstances had been different, if you had died too, we could have comforted each other and decided to share our lives for the support and companionship, but I wasn't even tempted, Harry. You were here. You were very much alive and I loved you. I didn't want George. I wanted – I want – you. Always.” She squeezes his hand and moves her feet close to him, twining her legs with his own under the covers.

“I'm sorry,” he murmurs, feeling like an idiot, yet at the same time, exceedingly relieved and elated.

She just smiles softly at him and squeezes his hand again.

They lie in silence, enjoying the proximity between them, the touch of their bodies, the warmth.

Then she says, “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Was there... anyone else?”

He tenses, his heart rate shooting up at her question, and he begins to panic at the way her eyes cloud over and slip away from his face, her gaze dropping to their son, her hand releasing his as she distances herself from him, drawing her nipple from Jamie's mouth as he sleeps on oblivious, and
buttoning her pyjama top.

“He's asleep,” she murmurs. “We should sleep too.”

“Ruth, wait,” he says, but she doesn't lift her eyes to his again, turning to lie on her stomach, crossing her arms under her pillow and facing away from him.

“Goodnight, Harry,” she whispers.

“There wasn't anyone else, Ruth,” he says, desperately. “Not in the way you mean. The truth is I... I fell to pieces after I got your letter. Ask anyone. Ask Ben. I didn't believe it at first, what you'd said. I thought someone had kidnapped you and forced you to write it, but we couldn't find any trace of you and Malcolm...” he pauses to swallow past the lump in his throat, his voice getting progressively more gravelly as he speaks, the emotions overwhelming, but he forces himself to continue, to tell her of the heartbreak he'd lived through because he needs her to understand if they are to ever put it behind them. “Malcolm suggested that what you wrote might have been the truth – that you didn't want to come back, that you'd found a better life, that you no longer...” but he can't bring himself to finish the sentence. She's turned to face him again, her eyes swimming with tears, but she doesn't speak, waiting for him to continue.

“We'd cleared your name and I'd been waiting impatiently to tell you. My hopes were so high...” His voice cracks and he has to take a moment to breathe deeply before he can continue. “It was like someone had suddenly taken the bottom out of my world. Malcolm rung Ben who came to see me and confirmed it all...” He pauses here, getting lost in the memory of that pain for a moment, his eyes over-bright with unshed tears. He blinks and refocuses his eyes on her again. “I don't think he liked you very much after that,” he murmurs, giving her a crooked smile. She doesn't smile back. Tears are sliding down her face into the pillow.

“Harry,” she whispers brokenly.

“But I didn't blame you,” he interrupts quickly. “How could I when my love had put you in so much danger? You had every right to stay away, to protect yourself... It was hard though – knowing you were never coming back. Work wasn't easy either, so... there were a couple of times when I tried to... take comfort...” he tails off and swallows, his pride making it all but impossible to confess what had happened, how he's still not sure if he can perform in bed even now. Just this evening, in the shower, he hadn't had a problem achieving an erection at the memory of the night Jamie was conceived. He knows his problem is all in his head because he never has trouble when he's on his own. It's when he's with a woman that it doesn't seem to work any more, though admittedly he's only tried twice, and on one of those occasions, with Jane, it had been going quite well until he'd realised that it wasn't Ruth who was touching and kissing him. Maybe with Ruth it would be okay. Maybe his cock is far more sensible than he, rejecting the idea of sex for the sake of release, wanting the feeling of connection and love they'd had when they'd made Jamie and every time before that between them.

He looks at her to find she's turned her body to face his again, her eyes full of tears still and guilt, but behind that he can see compassion too and love – so much love. “It's okay, Harry,” she murmurs softly, reaching for his hand and gripping it in both her own. “You thought I didn't love you any more. Whatever happened...” she pauses to take a breath, but he doesn't let her finish.

“Nothing happened,” he interrupts softly, opening up his heart to her though his instinct of self-preservation is screaming at him to shut up. “I couldn't... perform. I still don't know if I can.”

“Oh, Harry,” she breathes, gripping his hand more tightly. “What have I done?! I'm so sorry. So, so sorry, Harry.”
Before he can say anything more, however, she pulls her hands away and slips out of bed, walking around to his side and lifting the covers to climb in beside him, practically on top of him, wrapping her arms and one of her legs around him, her lips planting a myriad kisses against his cheeks and neck in between murmured apologies. “I'll make it up to you,” she whispers between kisses. “I promise, I'll make it up to you. Anything you want. Anything you need. God, I'm such an idiot. I'm so sorry, Harry. I love you. I never stopped. I never will. I'll never leave your side again.” And he can't help the way his whole body seems to sigh with relief as she continues to kiss him and apologise and tell him that she loves him, his heart warming, expanding with love for this daft, remarkable woman.

He wraps his arms around her, holding her close and chuckling with joy. “Oh Ruth,” he murmurs into her hair. “You're wonderful. And I love you. So much.”

She lifts her head, resting her forearms on either side of his face as she gazes down at him, eyes dancing with love and joy. “Harry,” she murmurs, “I don't deserve you, but I'm ever so grateful for you, for your loyalty and your love. I'll never take it for granted again. I promise.” And she leans down and kisses him, her lips soft at first and then passionate as he trails his fingers down her spine and makes her shiver, her moan of pleasure getting lost in his mouth as she parts her lips and plunges in. He groans, excitement coursing through his blood, and spreads his hands wide, fingertips still tracing her spine as his palms slide down her back to her buttocks, firmly pressing her against him and his growing arousal.

She wiggles her bum and he has to stifle a deep groan of pleasure, lest he wake Jamie, and lift her pelvis off him to allow his penis to spring free from the awkward angle it's trapped in.

“Doesn't seem to me like there's a problem at all, Sir Harry,” she murmurs, eyes twinkling as she gazes down at him, wiggling her bum once more.

“Mmmm,” he moans, his eyes closing in pleasure and opening again to find her grinning down at him in satisfaction. “He's in love with you too,” he mumbles softly, “and clearly far more sensible than me. He doesn't want anyone else.”

She smiles, her face a picture of joy, tears gathering in her eyes. She leans down and tenderly kisses his lips, pulling back to look at him, her hands softly stroking his face, her eyes shining. He doesn't think he's ever seen her look at him like this before – with complete and utter adoration.

Beside them, Jamie begins to stir.

“He has terrible timing,” Harry grumbles, reluctantly releasing her.

She giggles and kisses his lips again before replying, “Actually, he's a pretty good sleeper. He's just in pain tonight, poor love, but it won't last forever.” Then much to his surprise, she slides off him towards Jamie and wiggles her way between them.

“What are you doing?” he asks, turning his body onto his side to give her more room.

“He needs the other side,” she explains as she settles down beside him, shifting Jamie over a little, but not too much, lest he end up too near the edge of the bed and roll off it in the night.

He's about to protest about having no space to sleep when she shifts again to get comfortable and her bottom comes to nestle against his groin, her back against his stomach and chest, her head on his pillow, his right arm trapped under her neck, her left hand on his hip, drawing him closer. He exhales heavily in pleasure, wrapping his free arm round her stomach, burying his face in her hair and inhaling deeply. She's so perfect, her scent so intoxicating, the way her body fits against his
wondrous, sublime. “Christ, Ruth,” he mumbles. “You're perfect... I've missed you... I want you... I can't sleep like this.” He expresses the thoughts as they occur to him, editing nothing out.

“Mmmm,” she hums, “but we could...” and she wiggles her hips against him, causing him to groan loudly.

“But Jamie,” he objects, remembering all too clearly what happened this morning when Jamie had seen them. He lives in terror now of Jamie saying, “Daddy nummy?” in front of Ben or one of his older children. He doesn't think he'd survive the humiliation, especially with Ben, who he knows would never let him live it down – ever.

“He's almost asleep again. He won't notice. He's exhausted.”

“So are you,” he counters. “You need sleep.”

“If memory serves, I'll sleep like a baby afterwards.”

He groans, feeling himself begin to give in. “But our first time again... it should be-

“Memorable,” she finishes for him. “And I'm sure this will be, Harry. We're both tired, and after so long, it'll be very quick no matter when it happens. You can save the elaborate, all-night-long love making for our second time. Right now, I want you and it's clear you want me. We need this, Harry, and besides...” She pauses and lifts her hips, wiggling about a little, and he realises she's pulling down her pyjama bottoms and underwear. “We've never done it like this before,” she adds, pressing herself against him again, “from behind.”

He valiantly tries to resist the temptation, but when she reaches for his hand and places it on her hip, the warmth of her against his palm and the feel of the delicate skin of her abdomen against his fingertips is irresistible. She sighs and reaches back to pull his head towards her neck and shoulder, threading her fingers through his hair and whispering his name as his fingertips trail lower, towards her inner thighs and the thatch of dark hair nestled where they meet. He's holding himself back, keeping the passion in check for now, not wanting to rush this – the feel of her responding so exquisitely to his touch, the sight, the scent, the taste of her growing arousal. He kisses and licks her neck and shoulder, her mewls of approval music to his ears, lifts his right hand across her body to caress her left breast, careful not to disturb Jamie. She gasps, panting his name as she presses herself against him, her left hand covering his right one and squeezing, letting him know she wants a firmer touch. He obliges, enjoying the sweet torture of her growing excitement while desperately holding himself back from his rising need to slip into her heat, join their bodies, love her in the most primal, most tender and intimate way he can.

His fingers drift up the cleft between her legs, brushing the sensitive nub there and making her whimper and push her hips towards his touch. He drifts away again and back, teasing her until she's begging him, “Please, Harry.” He smiles, reaching for her earlobe and taking it in his teeth, in his mouth as his fingers find her clit again, drawing circles over it, gradually increasing the pressure and speed, the way he remembers she likes it, until it's just right and she begins to tremble in his arms.

“Oh God,” she breathes. “Harry. Oh fuck!” and she comes, shuddering in his arms, whimpers of pleasure escaping her lips as he cups her mons and draws her closer, murmuring words of love in her ear, profoundly moved by the experience, surprised and extremely gratified to find she'd wanted him so much that she's finished so quickly.

He hears Jamie swallow and begin to nurse again, the surge of milk released by her climax drawing him out of sleep, and he can't help smiling, lifting his head to look over Ruth's shoulder at their son as he softly presses his lips against her skin. His eyes are still closed and already the rhythm of his
suckling is slowing down once more. *Ruth was right. He hasn't really woken. He's utterly oblivious.* He supposes it makes sense. He's a baby. What does he know or understand about sex?

“I want to feel you inside me,” she murmurs, turning her head to look at him, her gaze lazy and adoring.

“Ruth, I think—”

“Don't think. Just do it. Do me.” She smiles her impish smile, then reaches for his pyjama bottoms and begins to tug them down.

Wordlessly he lifts his hips, helping lower them to his knees, and though his anxiety at the thought of possibly failing her has caused his cock to soften somewhat, the brush of her buttocks against him gives him new life and he takes advantage of it, drawing back and slipping himself between her legs, gliding over her wet folds a few times, his confidence returning as he feels himself harden again, his rising passion and euphoria in anticipation of what is to come almost overpowering. Her fingers reach between her legs to caress him, making him moan, the sensation of slipping into her as she directs him overwhelming. He closes his mouth over her shoulder, sucking hard to keep himself quiet as she sheaths himself within her soft, wet, welcoming heat, her muscles rippling around him, the sensation more exquisite than ever.

“Fuck me, Harry,” she murmurs in his ear and he can hold back no more.

He grips her hip with his left hand, squeezes her breast with his right, holding her against him, and begins to move, slowly at first, then faster, deeper, stronger, unrelenting. He manages to hold his release off until he feels her walls clench around him and hears her moan into the pillow as her orgasm overtakes her, then he clamps his own mouth down on her shoulder again and pulls out, sucking her skin and thrusting between her back and his stomach, spilling with a muffled groan for, as much as he loves Jamie, they *really* don't need another child.

Ecstasy.

Bliss.

Delerium.

Delight.

He only just manages to muster the energy to kiss her shoulder, murmur his love, and lower his head to the pillow again, before he draws her close, closes his eyes, and succumbs to oblivion with her.
Chapter 64

18 November 2008 – Ruth

Jamie doesn't let her rest long, or at any rate, it doesn't feel like it was very long when she wakes up again to his plaintive cries. Even in her semi-awake state, she can tell he'll not settle easily this time, so she rubs her eyes wearily and lifts herself over him, away from Harry so as not to disturb him. She slips out of bed, pulling up her knickers and pyjamas, grimacing slightly at the uncomfortable tightness of her skin where his semen has dried. She'd like to have a warm relaxing shower, or better yet, a bath, but that'll have to wait.

She reaches for Jamie, picking him up and cooing to him softly as she brings him to her chest and kisses his forehead, which still feels warmer than it should. “Poor love,” she murmurs to him, her gaze alighting on Harry for a moment, her eyes softening with love to see him sleeping so peacefully despite the racket. He must be exhausted, she thinks, shaking her head at him before turning away, grabbing some wipes and a clean nappy, and carrying Jamie out of the room, closing the door behind them. Silly man, she thinks fondly, staying up so late, worrying about George. How can he not know how much I love him?

She crosses the hall to Harry's room, needing something soft to lay Jamie on to change him, and proceeds to do just that before she lifts him in her arms again and goes through to the kitchen. She throws the nappy in the bin and sets Jamie down on the floor for a moment to wash her hands. He doesn't like this one bit, standing by her and clinging to her legs, crying to be picked up again.

“It's all right, Jamie, love,” she murmurs, reaching for him again and lifting him in her arms. “I know, love. I know.”

She used to make ice-lollies in Cyprus from fruit and veg that Jamie loved to chew and suck on when he was teething. She'll have to see if she can find some moulds tomorrow and a blender – it doesn't look like Harry has one of those. In the meantime, she goes to the freezer and pulls out a freezer bag containing what used to be damp face-towels, that are now frozen, taking one out and replacing the rest before taking a seat at the table and holding it out for Jamie. He lifts his hands to pull hers closer, opening his mouth to chew on the edge of the frozen cloth, the cold providing some much needed relief from the pain in his gums and the sound of his crying.

Scarlet hasn't stirred from her basket this time, clearly now familiar with the routine – it's the third time tonight that the frozen towels have become necessary – but she's watching them through half-lidded eyes. Fidget and Wol are probably curled up on top of the radiator in the living room, she thinks with an inward smile. It's what they always used to do at home, if she closed her bedroom door so they couldn't slip onto her bed. It's so nice to have them around again and she looks forward to the day they don't mind Jamie as much and will come closer to both of them.

“Is that a bit better now, Jamie?” she asks, stroking his blonde curls from his forehead. “Are you ready to go back to bed?”

“Nummy,” Jamie replies.

“Okay, love,” she says. “Let's go nurse.” She lifts him up, drops the towel in the sink to be dealt with in the morning, and slips back out of the kitchen and into bed with Harry once more.
He hasn't stirred at all, and she spends quite a few pleasant moments watching him breathe while Jamie nurses until he falls asleep. Then she extracts herself from bed again and goes off to the bathroom to use the loo and have a quick shower, the heat of it relaxing, the tension draining away.

When she returns, Jamie and Harry are just as she'd left them, and as she stands there watching, she has a sudden desire to leave them be and escape to the other room, sleep with the whole bed to herself for a little while, stretch out without having to worry about anyone else. She could do it, she realises. There's no reason not to. Except she's not sure Harry would wake up if Jamie started to cry again, and he might end up rolling off the other side of the bed in his agitation.

She frowns. If she put Jamie in the crib though, that would take care of the problem. So that is what she does, gently lifting her sleeping son and placing him in his crib, tucking the blankets around him before turning back to the bed, her eyes alighting on Harry. The sight of him makes her pause and reconsider her options, suddenly questioning her desire to sleep alone, something she's done every night since she left England – not counting those times when Jamie was very little or he's been poorly and she's let him share her bed to save herself the trouble of getting up every time he wakes. Is that really what she wants, or is it simply what's familiar? And if she left Harry alone after what they'd shared earlier, what would he think and feel when he awoke to find her gone, sleeping in another bed, away from him? *Rejection, pain, hurt – all the things I never want him to feel again on my account.*

So she slips into bed beside him, shuffling closer until she can reach his chest, stroking one hand down the front of him, delighting in the solid feel of him, his warmth, the fact that he's here, real and lying beside her. She feels him stir and mumble something before he sighs and shifts towards her. “Ruth,” he murmurs, drawing her closer, straightening his legs and pausing to pull up his pyjama bottoms before wrapping his arms around her. She lifts her head and nestles it on his right shoulder, placing her left palm on his chest, her right resting on his hip. “I love you,” he says, his voice gruff from sleep or emotion – she cannot tell. His lips find her forehead, pressing against it before he sighs in contentment. “It's so good to have you back.”

“She's good to be back,” she replies, heart overflowing with love and gratitude as they lie contentedly in each other's arms.

“Where's Jamie?” he asks suddenly, lifting his head to look around.

“In his crib. I moved him there after he fell asleep. I wanted you all to myself for a bit,” she replies, pressing a kiss against his neck.

“Mmmm,” he hums, shifting back a little, his left hand reaching for her face to tilt it up so he can see her. His gaze is warm and sleepy, eyes hooded and gentle, love radiating from his features, his beautiful eyes and his soft smile. “I'm all yours,” he says huskily.

“I know,” she smiles. “I've missed your warmth and your softness,” she confesses.

“Softness?” he asks, raising one eyebrow, bedevilment in his gaze.

“Yes,” she says, refusing to take the bait. “You're a wonderful sleep partner. You're all soft and cuddly and you give off lovely, sleepy vibes.”

“Sleepy vibes?!” He looks incredulous now.

“Mmmm. I sleep so well beside you. So does Jamie. It's a gift.”

He chuckles. “If only it worked on myself.”
She smiles. “Well, you have me for that.”

“Are you saying you give off sleepy vibes too?”

“No, but the sex certainly puts you to sleep very nicely. A herd of elephants could stampede through the room and you'd be oblivious.”

He chuckles, drawing her closer again, tucking her head under his chin. “What time is it?” he asks after a moment.

“Almost four,” she replies sleepily, stifling a yawn and closing her eyes again, sighing in contentment.

“Have dinner with me tonight,” he murmurs after a beat, seemingly out of the blue.

“Dinner?” she asks, opening her eyes again in surprise.

“Mmmm,” he hums.

“Have you booked a table?” she asks mischievously, tilting her head back to look at him.

“I wouldn't want you to think me presumptuous.”

She laughs softly. “I rather liked it when you were,” she confesses.

“Really?”

“Yes. I don't like that I... seem to have undermined your confidence where we are concerned. It doesn't suit you – being so uncertain and hesitant.”

He presses his lips against her forehead again. “I shall endeavour to remember that.”

“You really have nothing to worry about, you know. I didn't leave you because I wanted to, Harry. Leaving you behind was the last thing I wanted. It was necessary, but it's not something I will do again. Next time, we go together, all right? The three of us. Someone else will have to stand on the wall for a change, protecting queen and country.”

She feels him smile. “I take it, that's a yes to dinner then?”

“Tonight?”

“Mmmm.”

“My mother will be here.”

“I know. She's the baby-sitter.”

“Harry!” she protests. “You can't just use her to babysit just because-”

“She's your mother and wants to spend time with her grandson?” he interrupts softly.

“Well, yes. I mean, I'm sure she'd love to spend time with Jamie, but-”

“You think I should ask her first.”

“Yes.”
“I did. She said she'd be delighted.”

“You..? She..? What?!” she asks, flabbergasted.

“I asked if she'd mind babysitting Jamie while I took you out to dinner tonight, and she said she'd be delighted.”

She's stunned into silence.

“What?” he asks, pulling back to look at her. “I thought you liked it when I was presumptuous.”

That makes her smile. “You've already booked a table, haven't you?”

“It's a place I think you'll like.” His eyes are twinkling at her.

“I love you,” she murmurs, drawing him closer and sensually kissing his lips.

“Mmmm. How much?” he asks, trailing his hand down her back to her bum and pulling her flush against him.

“Enough to want you despite the fact that I'm knackered,” she replies, kissing him again.

He chuckles. “Sleep,” he says and presses his lips to her forehead. “I can wait till tonight.”

“And if Jamie's not better?”

“We'll postpone it.”

She sighs in contentment and cuddles closer to him, closing her eyes. She's almost asleep again when she hears him murmur, “The dinner, not the love making. We have a lot of that to catch up on.”

Miraculously, Jamie sleeps through the rest of the night, though when she wakes again, Harry's no longer beside her. She sighs in disappointment, stretches and gets up, rubbing her eyes as she makes her way to the loo, thinking he must have left for work already.

When she comes out, she's about to return to bed when she hears Harry humming. She smiles fondly and follows the sound through to his bedroom. Peeking round the door into the room reveals a freshly suited and booted Harry, standing in front of the mirror, holding first one tie and then another in front of his chest, clearly trying to decide which one to wear today.

“Do you still have the gold one?” she asks from the doorway, causing him to turn and smile at her.

“Good morning,” he murmurs, leaning down to kiss her when she's made her way to his side. “I didn't wake you, did I?”

“No.”

“Jamie?”

“Asleep.” She turns to look at him in the mirror, her arm wrapped around his waist, smiling in satisfaction, thinking he looks remarkably good this morning. There's something different about him that she can't quite put her finger on. “You look very handsome today. Good enough to eat,” she says, eyes lingering on his groin for a moment before rising to meet his in the mirror.

Her words cause his gaze to instantly smoulder, his hands dropping both ties and quickly drawing
her to him, passion radiating off him as he pulls her into his arms, his lips hungrily coming down on hers, the ardour of his kisses, the firmness, the sureness, the skill of his touch turning her into putty in his arms. She moans, rising on her tiptoes as her arms slip over his shoulders, fingers threading through his hair and pulling his head down, kissing him back with equal passion, overcome by the joy of finally – finally – being able to do this again whenever she pleases.

“I want you,” she murmurs when they come up for air, his growl sending a shiver running up and down her spine. They kiss some more, hungrily, snogging with all the enthusiasm and longing of two lovers kept apart for too long.

“Later,” he promises when they eventually draw back, his hands running down her back and pulling her close, head tilting to trail kisses down the side of her neck to her shoulder. “I'm afraid, I have to get to work.”

She sighs, pressing herself against him, humming in pleasure as his lips continue to caress her skin.

He hums, lifting his head, eyes lingering on her shoulder, a smug smile flirting with his lips, his hand rising to her shoulder, thumb softly stroking over the spot he's been kissing. “I've marked you,” he murmurs. “Sorry.”

“No, you're not,” she counters, suppressing a smile.

He chuckles, lifting his eyes to hers. “You're right. I'm not. I'm feeling oddly pleased with myself, though I hadn't planned it.”

“You hadn't planned to feel pleased with yourself, or you hadn't planned to give me a love-bite?”

“Both,” he murmurs, his smile softening and eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Then I suppose I'd better forgive you. After all, you should feel pleased with yourself for shagging me so thoroughly last night, and no love-bite can compete with the mark you've already left on my heart.”

He raises his eyebrows at that, grinning down at her, so she smiles mischievously back. “Too much?”

“Very poetic, certainly.”

“Mmmm. I think I'd best leave the poetry to someone else. How about I help you pick a tie out instead?”

“How about I show you what thoroughly means tonight?” he counters, reaching down to kiss her again and taking her breath away.

“Tie,” he murmurs distractedly when they resurface, trying to remind herself what she should be doing and stepping out of his arms to give herself some space to breathe.

He grins, looking rather pleased with himself.

“You never answered my question – do you still have the gold one?”

“I do. Why?”

“It was always my favourite.”

“Then I'll wear it tonight, to dinner.” He smiles softly down at her.
“I think I prefer you tie-less for dinner,” she replies, stepping closer again and tracing the skin in the V his shirt makes with her fingertips.

He hums, his voice dropping an octave as he whispers, “I'm afraid you'll have to be satisfied with removing it afterwards. A tie will be necessary at the place I'm taking you tonight.”

She pauses and lifts her eyes to his. “Harry,” she protests, “I don't have a thing to wear to a classy restaurant.”

He tilts his head to the side. “Actually, you do.” He lifts his hand to grasp hers and leads her over to his wardrobe, pulling open the right side and sliding his suits over to reveal the clothes hanging beside them.

She gasps, looking up at him incredulously before returning her gaze to the dresses, skirts, and tops – her dresses, skirts and tops – hanging in his cupboard. “Harry?!” she breathes, releasing his hand to touch them, scarcely daring to believe that they're real.

“I went round to yours to collect your cats and gathered everything else I thought you'd miss, things I knew were your favourites, things I remembered you wearing. I hope I got everything.”

“My books?” she asks, lifting her eyes to his, floored by this – a gesture that speaks of his love and his hope that she'd return to him almost more than any other thing he's done.

He smiles fondly down at her. “Some of those too. Not everything though. I wasn't sure about most of it and I had just a few hours to get things out before Section X went in. I...” He hesitates then murmurs, “I had some things out, in the living room and in here,” he gestures to the bedside table, “but after your letter... it became too painful to look at them. I put them back in the suitcase under the bed. Feel free to look through what's in there. It's all yours.”

“Harry,” she whispers, her heart aching again at the reminder of how much she's hurt him.

He smiles, lifting his hand to her face, stroking her cheek, then drawing her into his arms. “It's alright, Ruth,” he murmurs, pressing his lips to her forehead. “You're here now... and, thanks to my foresight, you have a selection of things to wear tonight.” He pulls back to smile down at her.

“Assuming they still fit,” she replies, acutely aware of the changes in her figure wrought by Jamie.

His gaze softens. “If they don't, give me a ring and I'll take you shopping later,” he replies. “You're beautiful, Ruth, more beautiful than ever, and I can't wait till this evening when I can take you out, wine you and dine you, listen to you telling me all sorts of clever things that I never knew, bask in your company, in your wit and your beauty, and bring you home again to my bed where I can show you how much you mean to me, how much I love you, how beautiful I think you are.”

She smiles, overcome by how wonderful he is. “Just as long as you realise that I won't look the same.”

“I don't look the same either, Ruth.”

She nods, then smiles up at him. “In that case, I think the blue tie would be best for today.”

“Alright,” he replies as she turns and picks it up from the floor.

He reaches for it, but she shakes her head, saying, “Let me?”

He nods, lifting his hands to button the top button of his shirt and raise his collar before allowing her
to pass the tie around his neck and tie the knot, pushing it gently up and turning his collar down again before she murmurs, “There.”

“Thanks,” he replies, lifting his chin up and to the left, making sure it's comfortable.

“Harry,” she says sharply, her hand reaching for the soft flesh under his chin, running her thumb across the small mark she finds there, her blood running cold as she recognises another scar that she'd not noticed before, one that's so very close to his artery. “What happened here?”

“Mani,” he replies, reaching for her hand and taking it gently away.

“Does it hurt?”

“Not any more.” Then seeing the worry in her eyes, he adds, “It was hell to shave for a while.”

“That's not funny, Harry,” she replies, fighting back tears all of a sudden, his attempt at humour missing the mark by a long shot.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, looking contrite, squeezing her hand gently.

“That's right by your carotid artery,” she whispers, suddenly feeling sick.

He nods, eyes sad and worried as he gazes at her. “He was trying to get me to give up the Uranium and, by that point, he was getting rather desperate. It wasn't long after that that Lucas shot him.”

A sob escapes her, hand rising to her mouth, and he pulls her into his arms, drawing her against him and swaying gently from side to side to soothe her. “It's all right, Ruth. It's over now.”

“You must have been terrified,” she whispers, wrapping her own arms around him, clinging to him tightly as she imagines the scene. She'd never liked Amish Mani despite his veneer of civility. She'd always thought it was barely skin deep and inside there was nothing but cruel self-interest. Hillier had had a conscience of sorts, and McCall none, but neither of them had pretended to be something they were not. Mani though – he'd been a wolf in sheep's clothing if ever she saw one.

“Not really, not for myself,” he answers. “The truth is I hadn't expected to survive. I went into it thinking I would die and I was prepared for that. But when he said he knew where you were, that he'd sent his men after you – that was when I was truly terrified, Ruth.”

Her eyes fill with tears at his words, her heart aching with the knowledge that she'd almost lost him, with the pride she feels at his bravery, and with the pain of knowing that it's partly her fault that, in that moment, he hadn't cared if he lived or died. “How many times?” she asks.

“How many times what?”

“How many times did I come close to losing you since I left?”

He kisses her forehead and murmurs, “None.”

“Harry, that's-”

“I've loved only you, Ruth. You couldn't lose me if you tried.”

She smiles in spite of herself, lifting her head from his shoulder to look at him. “You know what I mean.”

“A few,” he replies, lifting his hands up to wipe the tears from her cheeks, “not all of them lethal, but
I'm still here, Ruth. It does no good to dwell on such things. What's done, is done. We survived and we're together. That's what matters.”

She nods, her hands holding onto his lapels, her mind transported back to the day they'd said goodbye, for a moment, before she yanks it back into the present. “Okay,” she says, “but I'll hold onto you a little more tightly tonight anyway.”

He smiles, but his phone chirping has his face falling and his hand reaching for the device. “My driver's here. I've got to go.”

“But you haven't had breakfast,” she objects.

He smiles and takes her hand in his, walking out of the room to the front door as he replies, “It's not the first time, nor, I'm sure, the last I've had to skip a meal. I'll stop on the way and get something.”

“A pastry and some coffee is not really breakfast, Harry,” she objects as she watches him slip into his coat.

He chuckles and steps close again, kissing her lips and murmuring, “You know me too well.”

She smiles, thinking how good it feels to know him and how much she's looking forward to knowing him better still in the months and years to come.

“I've got to go,” he says, releasing her and opening the front door, his gaze carefully scanning the street before he turns back to her. “Give Jamie a kiss from me.”

“I will.”

He smiles and steps out of the house, turning towards her and adding, “Oh, I forgot to tell you. I've arranged a protection detail for you and Jamie. They're parked across the street.” He gives her a sheepish smile and turns away, but then turns back to add, “And I'll send Michael, my security officer, to meet your mother at the station, all right? Since Jamie's not better yet? Ten o'clock, wasn't it?”

She stares at him for a moment, unable to make up her mind if she should slap him or kiss him for being so high-handed, and eventually settling on just smiling at him fondly.

“What?” he asks, frowning at her.

“Nothing,” she replies. “I've missed Grid Harry,” she confesses. She sees his eyes soften and they share a moment before she confirms, “Her train gets in at ten. Will you let her know, or should I?”

“Probably best if you do,” he replies. “I've got a meeting with the Home Secretary first thing.”

“Good luck.” She smiles and blows him a kiss, watching him smile before he turns away, feeling impatient for the day to end so she can see him, hold him, kiss him, be with him, and fall asleep in his arms again. *Come back to me in one piece tonight,* she silently implores him as she watches him get into the car and be driven away.
Chapter 65

18 November 2008 – Elizabeth

A nice, young man meets her at the station, just as Ruth said he would, and drives her through London to a rather upmarket looking neighbourhood. They stop in front of number forty-two, but before she's even made it out the car, the door opens and Ruth sprints to the gate and flings it open.

“Mum,” she exclaims as she throws her arms around her and holds her tight, tears of joy filling both their eyes.

“Ruth, darling,” she sighs, holding her daughter for long moments, overcome by happiness.

“Oh, Mum. It's so good to see you.” She pulls back, smiling.

“And you, Ruth. I never thought...” she tails off, unable to finish, her eyes filling with tears. “Look at you! Your dad would have been so proud.”

Her daughter smiles, then turns to the young man who's hovering beside them, holding her small suitcase and carefully scanning their surroundings. “Thank you, Michael,” she says warmly.

“You're welcome, Ms Evershed.” He smiles.

“Ruth, please,” she replies. “Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?”

“No, thank you, Ms. I'd better be getting back. Sir Harry might be needing me.”

She sees Ruth smile at that and nod her head, turning to lead them up the path to the front door and saying goodbye to Michael, after he's deposited her suitcase inside, before closing and locking the door behind him.

“Is he a knight then? Your Harry?” she asks, pulling off her coat.

“He's not my Harry, Mum,” Ruth replies, taking her coat and hanging it up.

“Maybe not yet, but he'd like to be, I'm sure.”

“Honestly,” Ruth objects, picking up her bag and setting it aside. “I haven't seen you in years, you've thought me dead, and the first thing you want to talk about after so long, is my love life?! Some things never change, Mum.” She smiles and Elizabeth can't help feeling rather relieved. She and Ruth have always argued about Ruth's inability to find someone to settle down with. It's not that she believes that that's what a woman should do. It's wanting her daughter to enjoy the companionship, the support, the love and passion to be had from a long-term, committed relationship. She's always thought Ruth too independent and stubborn for her own good.

“I'll just put the kettle on,” Ruth adds now, turning towards the kitchen, “then we can go through to see Jamie.”

“I'd love that,” Elizabeth confesses.

Soon, she's gazing down at the sleeping form of her grandson, overwhelmed by emotion. She doesn't speak, not wanting to wake him, and just smiles at her daughter before turning to follow her into the
“How’s he doing? Any better?” she asks with concern. She’s been worrying all morning, even since Ruth told her that Michael would pick her up because Jamie had a bit of a temperature.

“Well, he’s sleeping now, which is more than he did last night,” Ruth replies, turning towards her and smiling. “He’ll be fine, Mum. Don’t worry. It’s most likely just teething. It’s happened before and I’m sure it’ll happen again.”

“Did you take him to the doctor?”

“No, I’ll take him if he’s not better by tomorrow,” she reassures her. “It doesn’t usually last more than a day.”

Elizabeth nods and smiles, rather proud of her daughter and the confidence she’s displaying in caring for her son. She’s always been more like her father in that respect. She’d have made a fine doctor too if she’d wanted to follow in his footsteps. Come to think of it, there’s not a lot Ruth wouldn’t have excelled at had she chosen to pursue it, and she seems even more confident now, more sure of herself than she used to be. Motherhood suits her.

“I never thought I’d live to see the day, Ruth,” she confesses softly. “You were always so immersed in your job, so dedicated, that I hadn’t expected you to choose to have a child.” She sees Ruth blush and drop her gaze. “What?” she asks.

Ruth sighs and confesses, “Jamie wasn’t really a choice I made. He... happened. But I love him. So much.”

“And Harry?” She’s never been one for avoiding the obvious question.

“He loves him too. He wants to be a part of his life.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s been two and a half years almost since we were... involved, Mum. It’s complicated, but we’re making good progress.”

“Complicated?” she frowns. “How complicated can it be? Either you love him, or you don’t.”

She sees Ruth smile at that. “I’ve missed you, Mum. I’ve missed the... directness with which you approach everything.” She pauses, fishing out the teabags from their mugs and throwing them away before eventually answering her question. “I do love him. He’s a good man and a loyal one, a bit rough round the edges sometimes, often stubborn and inflexible, but he and I have been through a lot together and I wouldn’t swap him for anyone else in the world.”

Elizabeth smiles. “That’s good. I was worried that you’d changed your mind about him,” she confesses as Ruth adds milk and sugar to their tea. “When he came to see me, he seemed heartbroken that you wouldn’t be staying with him.”

“You were worried about Harry?” Rush asks incredulously.

“A bit,” she says and, at the look Ruth gives her, adds defensively, “I liked him. But mostly, I was worried about Jamie growing up without his father.”

Ruth sighs. “I know. I was too,” she says before picking up the tray she’s set the tea and biscuits on and carrying it through to the living room. They take a seat on the sofa together and she takes the
mug Ruth hands her with a quiet thank you before Ruth changes the subject and they begin to catch up on each other's lives after so long apart. She answers Ruth's questions about family and friends, her dog, Sandy, and what's new in her life, and Ruth tells her about her travels and all the places she's seen. They talk about her time in Cyprus, her pregnancy, Jamie's birth and development, milestones he'd reached and the friends she'd made there, and she learns about Ben and Sarah, until she feels that the only subject they haven't really explored enough yet is Harry and Ruth's relationship with him.

“So tell me, Ruth – if you love Harry and he loves you, you have a child together and you have no place of your own to live, what's the problem? Why do you say it's complicated and that he's not your Harry? I just want to understand so I don't put my foot in it this evening when he comes home.” She feels rather pleased with herself for framing the question in this way, knowing that this argument is a sound one though not the real reason she'd like to know the history behind her daughter's relationship with Harry. She'd liked Harry, when she'd met him – he has kind eyes – and it had been obvious he was still in love with Ruth, so she'd assumed that Ruth had fallen out of love with him and that's why they weren't planning on living together. Now she knows that's not true, so she's on a mission to find out what the problem is and fix it because she happens to believe that people should stay together if they have a child and there's no obvious reason why they would be better off apart.

Ruth sighs. “All right,” she agrees. “I'll tell you.” She pauses and Elizabeth watches her face as she gathers her thoughts, hiding a smile behind her mug – Ruth's pensive look is so similar to her father's. Look at her, Jimmy, she thinks with pride and love. Our girl. You left us too soon and we missed you terribly, but we did all right – I did all right raising her.

“I had to do it,” Ruth murmurs, lifting her eyes to hers imploringly, asking for understanding or perhaps forgiveness, and Elizabeth can't help the niggle of worry that worms its way into her heart. “I had to leave to protect Harry because he was needed here to stand up for what's right and because he'd tried to sacrifice himself to save me. He'd have gone to prison without much chance of being released again – once they'd finished levelling God knows what accusations at him to get him out of their way – and I couldn't bear that. So I left and he promised me he'd do his best to clear my name.” She pauses for a moment, then adds softly, “I'm sorry, Mum, that no one told you the truth. I'd hoped Harry would, that-” but Elizabeth doesn't allow her to finish.

“Ruth,” she says gently, “it's all right. I understand. I told you – Harry explained. There's no need for further apologies. I was heartbroken, yes, but the joy of having you back, of having a grandson, more than makes up for all the heartache.” She reaches for her hand and squeezes it, offering her a warm smile.

“I know. Thank you,” Ruth smiles, leaning over to kiss her cheek.

They're silent for a moment until Elizabeth prompts, “So then what happened?”

“I discovered I was pregnant,” Ruth confesses. “Harry and I stayed in touch through Ben. Not frequently, but enough to make sure we were both okay. But I didn't tell him, Mum. He never knew I was pregnant because it didn't serve any purpose for him to know – I knew he'd either feel guilty about burdening me with a child, or he'd come after me and put us all in danger. I thought it better to wait until my name was cleared first.”

She pauses, so Elizabeth squeezes her hand again. “That makes some sense – no sense in worrying him if there was nothing to be gained from him knowing.”

Ruth smiles gratefully before releasing her hand to pick up her mug and take a sip of tea. “But then Jamie was born,” she continues, dropping her gaze, “and I realised that he was my responsibility now and I had to do everything I could to protect him. So…” She pauses and her voice drops to a
whisper. “I... I decided not to come back. Harry had cleared my name by then, you see, but I thought that, if I returned, people would know he was Harry's and might try to use him to manipulate him, like they had with me. I didn't tell him he had another son. He only found out a few weeks ago, so... it's taking some time for us to... move past all that.”

“I see,” she says, a little shocked by Ruth's actions. “No wonder... Poor man,” she murmurs, remembering the heartbreak in Harry's eyes.

Ruth nods and takes another sip of her tea. “I feel... very guilty about it. I'm not sure I'd be able to forgive him if our roles were reversed, but he has. He's forgiven me, Mum, and I... I'm blown away by how wonderful he is. I'm not at all sure I deserve him.” She lifts her eyes to look at her and there is such a mixture of emotions there that Elizabeth feels her heart go out to her daughter. How very like Ruth to get her priorities mixed up, determinedly go after one course of action, and then feel guilty about the consequences.

She smiles at her daughter and gives her a hug.

“Is that why you refuse to acknowledge that he's yours?” she asks when Ruth pulls back. “Because he is, Ruth. He's head-over-heels in love with you.”

“I know,” Ruth blushes. “I've no idea why. He needs his head examined.”

“Because you're kind, and loving, and smart, and loyal, and fiercely protective of his child. You're a wonderful person, Ruth.”

“Thanks, Mum, but you're biased.”

“So is Harry,” she smiles, watching with pleasure when her daughter smiles too.

“You're probably right,” she concedes. “I just hope I can make it up to him.”

Elizabeth understands where she's coming from, but it worries her a little to hear Ruth say that. “Just promise me you won't compromise on things that are important to you, Ruth, because it'll catch up with you in the end and ruin everything. Take care of yourself first. You'll not be any use to Harry or Jamie if you're unhappy.”

“I know,” she replies. “That's why I'm looking for a job... and considering getting my own place for a while.”

“Your own place?” She doesn't like the sound of that either.

“Just for a bit. Just until I re-establish my independence. I need to know I can do it, you know?”

“And what does Harry say about that?” she asks with concern.

“He doesn't know. I haven't discussed it with him yet.” She looks down at her mug, swirling the tea around for a moment in silence. “It'll upset him and I don't want to do that. Is it crazy, Mum? Wanting to live by myself with an eighteen-month-old?”

“It does sound a little mad. I suppose it depends on why you want to do it.”

“I just feel... bad, living off Harry. I mean, I know I lived with George, but he paid me for taking care of Nico and the nature of my job made it necessary that I live there. Harry-”

“Just wants to take care of you and his son,” she points out gently. “He must have a pretty decent
salary, I should think, and nothing to spend it on but food and lodging, you and his children. He
doesn't strike me as the kind of man who spends it on himself. And you said he's a workaholic when
you first told me about him.”

“He is,” Ruth concedes. “He leaves for work at six and isn't back till late. He used to work really
long hours. Now I don't know what he'll do.”

A silence settles between them as they each finish their tea and set their mugs aside.

“You said that Jamie was your responsibility, that you needed to protect him,” she says carefully
after a moment, watching Ruth nod, “but whereas that might have been the case while you were
away, if you think about it, Ruth, I think you'll find that he's only half your responsibility now. Harry
is equally responsible for his son and, hopefully, just as conscientious as you are, just as willing and
determined to care for him and love him. Don't you think it's a bit unfair to deprive him of the
opportunity to do that? There's nothing wrong with letting him pay for your son's food and lodging,
for the nursery he goes to, for his piano lessons, or his schooling later. And depriving Jamie of seeing
his father every night?... I know I wouldn't do it. Not unless there was a very good reason for it.”

“God, you're right,” Ruth admits, suddenly sitting back and rubbing her face with her hands. “You're
right. I can't do this to either of them. I don't know what I was thinking!”

She reaches for Ruth's knee and gives it a gentle squeeze. “Don't be hard on yourself, Ruth. You're
just finding your feet again, still have a very young child to care for. It's not surprising you're feeling
restless, and we both know how much you value your independence. Don't worry. You'll find a way
to exert it that doesn't hurt those you love. And you're right – getting a job would be a very good
start.”

Ruth smiles, but before she can say anything, Jamie's little voice interrupts. “Mummy! Mummy!
Out!”

“My grandson's awake,” she says with delight.
Chapter 66

18 November 2008 – Ruth

It's pure delight to watch her son bond with her mother and she can't help berating herself again for keeping Jamie away from his family. He's loved every bit of attention he's got so far, from the exuberant play of his uncle, to the sometimes teasing and playful, sometimes gentle and soothing love of his father, to the quiet, calming games and stories with his granny, and this is only the beginning. He has yet to meet his cousins or his older siblings, though how the latter will go is anyone's guess. She hopes they're old enough to understand, to be able to set aside their own feelings and not punish their little brother for her sins and the sins of their father.

She blinks, pushing her worry away and focusing on Jamie and her mum once more, who are reading yet another story together. He seems to be completely better now, full of energy and, as she'd predicted, speaking more clearly and using a wider vocabulary already. His favourite new word today seems to be 'ganny', with 'ball' coming in at a close second.

Her mum has fallen in love with him and become his favourite person, as the word 'no' doesn't seem to exist in her vocabulary where he is concerned. There's nothing she's refused to do and has spent all day playing with him. And to be honest, Ruth's rather relieved that Jamie's taken to her so, as this evening will be the first time she's left Jamie with someone else to go out on her own. She knows it's important to begin to build a life of her own that doesn't revolve around him at all times, but she's torn doing it, the instinct to stay close and protect him remarkably strong. She needs this, however, needs a break, needs some adult time, needs some time with Harry, some time to be Ruth Evershed again – an independent entity, an interesting, intelligent person, a beautiful, desirable woman. And besides, if she's going to be working soon, Jamie needs to get used to her not being at his beck and call all the time.

Not that he's noticed the difference yet. She had a nap earlier, as she'd been falling asleep on the sofa and her mum had sent her to bed, insisting that she and her grandson will be fine and that Ruth should get some rest while she can before her date with Harry tonight. She'd said it with glee, laughing at the blush that had spread across her cheeks. She hadn't thought of it as a date until that moment, which was really rather silly considering all that Harry had said this morning, and she'd suddenly realised that she really didn't want to be falling asleep at the table tonight and had meekly agreed that a nap would probably be a very good idea and left Jamie and her mother to it. She doubts he even noticed she wasn't there, and she feels much better now, having had a good, restful sleep.

They'd gone to the park after she'd woken and then she'd cooked dinner for Jamie and her mum while the two of them had played and read more stories, taking the opportunity to do something about childproofing the living room while they were busy and the risotto she was making was cooking merrily away. She knows that there's only so many times Jamie will allow himself to be distracted with his own toys and books before the novelty of the objects he can reach around the room wins over his attention completely. Thank God for music! Jamie's attention can always be diverted by that and Harry's piano has proved very useful on a number of occasions already and they've only been here two days! Thank goodness Harry's taste is for a simple, frugal décor with very few ornaments and clutter. It's only his record collection that had really needed to be rescued from an inquisitive Jamie, a few older looking books, and a couple of ornaments, as well as a cabinet that needed to be locked and its key put on a higher shelf.
In amongst her perusal of the lower shelves, she'd spied an atlas and had felt compelled to look at it, find a map of Europe and trace the route she'd taken during her exile. As she'd opened it up, however, a nasty surprise had been waiting for her in amongst its pages – the letter she'd sent to Harry. Her hands had trembled as she unfolded it and, against her better judgement, had begun to read, but she'd only managed to get through the first paragraph before impulsively ripping it in half and then again and again until it had become a pile of large, white confetti.

“Everything all right, Ruth?” her mum had asked her, looking concerned.

“Fine,” she'd replied, quickly wiping her eyes and giving her a reassuring smile. Then she'd collected the bits of paper and carried them through to the kitchen, throwing them in the bin, grabbing the notepad and pen she'd found earlier in one of the drawers, and sitting down to write a note to Harry. It had started out as an apology for tearing up the letter, followed by an explanation that she didn't want him to ever read it again, and it had eventually turned into a love letter, outlining all the reasons she loves him and how she believes that she'd not have been able to stay away from him much longer even if she hadn't had to flee Mani's men. When she'd finished, she'd slipped it back into the atlas and put it away again, feeling a whole lot lighter as a result.

She smiles now at the recollection, wondering how often Harry uses that atlas and when he's likely to discover the note, picturing his face as he finds it and reads it. She hopes it's a pleasant surprise that makes up for the unpleasantness of her original letter just a little bit. She knows it won't make up for everything she's put him through, but she intends to try to even the score over time, starting with their date tonight.

“I think I'll go get ready, Mum,” she says, glancing at the clock to find it's half past five already. Harry had said their reservation is for eight, so she imagines he'll be home by seven, wanting to shower and change before they leave.

“All right, love,” she replies, looking up from the book she's reading to Jamie.

Her son looks up too at the sound of her voice and suddenly decides that he's had enough stories. “Nummy,” he says, squirming in his granny's lap to get down.

She sighs, but doesn't object as he toddles over to her, knowing that he needs a few moments with her to reconnect before going off again to explore his ever expanding world.

“I'll just nip to the loo then,” her mother says and sets the book aside before she gets up.

“Alright,” she replies, lifting Jamie onto her lap and turning him round, checking quickly which breast feels fuller before offering it to him. He latches on quickly, his eyes alight as he gazes at her, his little hand reaching up to touch her face. She smiles and kisses his palm, causing him to make a funny sound at the back of his throat and smile while simultaneously trying hard not to lose his grip on her nipple. He's so perfect and she loves him so very much. How are they going to find a place safe enough for him, she worries as she continues their game, kissing his palm again and watching him smile while simultaneously trying hard not to lose his grip on her nipple. She's so glad to be back here with Harry and her mother, but her fear for Jamie is still very real and not at all exaggerated, she believes. We'll figure it out, she tells herself. She knows Harry's just as concerned and she just has to trust that they will find a solution. Wes was safe despite the danger Adam and Fiona faced. The children of politicians and millionaires, the Royal family, they're kept safe. They'll figure something out – the two of them together. There isn't a lot we can't solve when we work together.

She smiles at the thought as she gazes down at Jamie who's given up on their game now that her milk has let down, his eyes drooping as he suckles. She doesn't really want him to fall asleep now. It
would be nice to give her mother a fighting chance of getting him to settle tonight and it's certainly not going to happen if he has a nap at this hour. Then again, perhaps it'll work out better if he stays awake until she comes home again after her date with Harry. She could nurse him to sleep then though she's not at all sure Harry would approve of that plan. She rather thinks he's hoping for a Jamie free evening in which he can ravish her to his heart's content. She feels warm all over at that thought and, at the same time, somewhat anxious, worried that her mother will be in the next room tonight and quite possibly able to hear things all three of them would rather she didn't. But on the other hand, she wants Harry, so very, very much. She really can't wait to have him to herself, just the two of them, alone together. And though she worries about her mother now, she has no doubt that once Harry's near, kissing and touching her, making love to her with all the passion she knows he's capable of, she won't be sparing anyone else a thought – she can barely think at all under those circumstances.

“Come on, Jamie,” she says, deciding that the best course of action is a Jamie tired enough to fall asleep while she's out – fingers crossed. “Let's get you some supper.”
Chapter 67

18 November 2008 – Jane

She rings the doorbell, preparing herself for the worst. She hasn't seen him in person since their encounter last year, but he's always answered the phone when she's rung him before and they've had a number of brief conversations over it since then. She still thinks of him as a good friend despite everything, or perhaps because of it. There are few people she knows as well as Harry and fewer still who know her as well as he does. Given that, when she'd rung him last week and then again last night and he hadn't answered or returned her calls, she'd been concerned and finding herself on his side of town this evening, she'd determined to drop by and make sure he's all right. It's about time anyway that they met face to face again and put what happened between them last time behind them. She certainly has. It's been ten months now that she's been dating Derek and having a fabulous time of it. There is not a single part of her that wants Harry any more.

She's not sure what to expect as she stands waiting for him to answer the door – though she does wonder if he'll even be home this early on a weekday – but the older woman who answers it with a baby in her arms is certainly not it.

"Yes?" she says.

"Oh!.. Er... I'm sorry. I'm looking for Harry?"

"He's not back from work yet," the mysterious woman replies, surprising her even more. She'd half expected her to deny knowing him or tell her he's moved away. It would be just like Harry to move without telling her.

"Hayo," the baby in her arms says, drawing her attention to it for the first time. It's a boy, she realises, older than she'd thought, not really a baby any more and he looks remarkably like... Christ on a bike! It can't be!

"Mum?" a voice calls from further in the house as she continues to stare at the toddler in disbelief. "Is that Harry?"

"No, love," the older woman replies. "It's..." but here she frowns and looks expectantly at her.

"Jane," she supplies, shaking herself free of the shock and smiling at her before her eyes are drawn to the woman walking down the hall towards them. She looks young and really quite beautiful, all dressed up and ready to go out, she guesses and she can't help the myriad of questions that suddenly flood her mind. "I'm his ex-wife."

She watches with interest as both women's eyes widen in surprise and they exchange a look, the younger woman taking the little boy from her mother's arms.

"Mummy!" the little boy says, wrapping his arms around his mother's neck and leaning close to her before turning to look at her and smiling. "Hayo," he says again.

"Hello," she replies this time, engaging him as she waits for the two women to recover from their shock. He giggles and buries his face in his mother's neck.

The younger woman shifts her son over to her left hip and holds out her hand. "Pleased to meet you,
Jane. I'm Ruth. Harry's not home yet but he shouldn't be long now. Would you like to come in and wait?"

*Ruth*! She hadn't expected *that*. She'd just assumed Harry had done what Harry does and got this woman pregnant. Ruth isn't such a common name, however, that Harry should know – and sleep with – more than one woman called that. Plus the baby's quite old already, over a year certainly, which would fit. *Why had she left Harry*, she can't help but wonder, remembering the heartbroken look in his eyes. *Where had she gone? Why did she come back and is she back for good?* Then she remembers that this woman is a spy and wonders at that too. She looks nothing like her idea of a spy and nothing like as glamorous as she'd expected, having met several of Harry's female colleagues over the years, most notably Juliet Shaw and Amanda Bennett.

She should probably make her excuses right about now, leave a message for Harry and leave, but her curiosity has been piqued and she can't bring herself to go before its satisfied. She can't believe Harry didn't mention he's had another child! *Bloody spook!* Oh, she's going to give him a hard time about this one.

She takes Ruth's hand and shakes it. "The pleasure is mine."

"This is my mother, Elizabeth," Ruth says, stepping back to allow her into the flat and close the door behind them after she's shaken Elizabeth's hand and they've murmured their pleased-to-meet-yous.

"And who's this?" Jane asks once they've moved into the living room, turning to stroke the little boy's arm.

He grins at her, saying, "Book."

"This is Jamie," Ruth replies, "and he loves his books."

"Hello, Jamie," Jane smiles. "I love books too," but before she can continue, an overexcited Scarlet comes barrelling over to her, jumping up and barking in delight. "Hello, Scarlet," she says, crouching down to stroke her, feeling incredibly pleased with such a warm welcome.

"Tajet," she hears Jamie exclaim and is momentarily joined by him as his mother sets him on the floor beside Scarlet.

"Getol," Jamie says solemnly as he reaches forward to stroke the dog, his mother crouching beside him.

"That's right, Jamie. Gentle," she murmurs encouragingly, and as she lifts her eyes their gazes meet. She sees wariness in Ruth's eyes, uncertainty, and maybe a little fear, but there's also something else there that she can't quite put her finger on. One thing's for sure though – she's got quite an expressive face for a spy, rather striking eyes too. In fact, Jane suspects, that's what Harry fell for first – he's always been a sucker for a pair of beautiful eyes. She wonders how long they knew each other before Harry decided to make a move.

"He's adorable," she says. "How old is he?"

"Thank you. He's eighteen months," she replies, dropping her gaze to her son. Then she asks, "Can I get you anything? Some tea or something?"

"Something would be good." She watches as Ruth lift her eyes to hers in surprise. "I can't abide tea," she confesses.

That makes Ruth smile and she's surprised by how much it transforms her face. Her eyes light up and
dimples appear in her cheeks. Poor Harry never really stood a chance. It surprises her a little that she doesn't resent Ruth for the role she played in dissolving her marriage – however unwitting it might have been – but it's been three years now since Harry left her, and if she's honest, she's better off as a result. She's loving her new found independence, the hobbies she's discovered, and being with a man who's in love with her and goes out of his way to please her – taking her dancing, going for walks hand in hand, buying her beautiful things, talking to her, and making love to her as thoroughly and frequently as she needs.

“A glass of wine?” Ruth asks, interrupting her train of thought.

“Perfect!”

They share another smile as they both stand. “Have a seat,” Ruth invites. “Mum? A glass of wine?”

“Maybe a small one,” her mother replies, “to keep Jane company. I'm babysitting tonight,” she adds as Ruth leaves the room and Jane moves to the sofa. She takes a seat, a happy Scarlet following her over with Jamie hot on her heels, Elizabeth sitting beside her to be near her grandson and probably to keep an eye on him – she well remembers how quickly mischief and mishaps happen at this age.

“I'm sorry to intrude like this,” Jane says. “I tried ringing Harry a few times and he didn't answer, so I thought I'd drop by, make sure he's alright.”

“Oh, it's fine,” Elizabeth replies. “He's a tough man to get hold of, I imagine. Ruth says he works practically twenty-four seven.”

“He certainly did when we were married.”

Elizabeth nods. “My first husband was like that – Ruth's father. He was a GP and some days it felt like I never saw him at all. I still missed him though when he passed away.”

“I'm sorry.”

“It was a long time ago. Ruth was only eleven at the time,” Elizabeth says. “It wasn't easy but we managed.”

She's not quite sure what to say to that, so there's a moment of silence before she asks, “Is Ruth your only child then?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth smiles. “And what about you? You have two children?”

“I do. A boy and a girl. They're all grown up now.”

“Harry said,” she replies. “Catherine and Graham, right?”

“That's right,” she smiles, feeling oddly pleased that Elizabeth knows their names.

“What is it they do?”

“Catherine makes documentaries,” she replies with pride. “She was nominated for quite a prestigious award last year.”

“Oh, how wonderful! Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” she beams. “And Graham works in a publishing house.”

“That sounds interesting,” Elizabeth smiles.
“He certainly thinks so. They're both lucky to have found something they love to do.”

“That is so true. If only we were all that lucky,” Elizabeth says wistfully.

“Here we go,” Ruth interrupts, walking into the room baring a tray with three glasses and a plastic cup for Jamie. She sets it on the coffee table and hands them their wine, saying, “I hope red's okay. Harry only seemed to have the one bottle in the cupboard, or else I don't know where to look.”

“Harry's always been more of a whisky fan,” she replies, then realising that comment might not be well received, adds quickly, “Red's fine. Thank you. Cheers.”

“Cheers,” they both reply and take a sip of their drinks, the atmosphere suddenly a little charged and awkward.

Luckily, Jamie chooses that moment to stand and reach for his cup, mumbling something that sounds like, “Chijis,” which is clearly his best attempt at a toast.

“Cheers, Jamie,” Ruth replies with a broad smile and the pride of a mother shining in her eyes.

“Chijis,” Jamie grins and drinks from his cup, imitating his mother.

“He's so adorable,” she can't help but observe, memories of Catherine and Graham at that age flooding back – Catherine's obsession with little pebbles that they were constantly having to fish out of her mouth, and Graham's tendency to gnaw at everything when he was teething to the point where they'd had to remove all his books to stop him destroying them and ingesting the cardboard.

She mentions these things, realising that talking about their children is something that most mothers love and a relatively neutral topic of conversation. They chat away for a good ten minutes while Jamie reads a book with his granny, managing to avoid any pitfalls despite Harry's name coming up a couple of times in anecdotes. In spite of their best efforts to keep the atmosphere friendly and relaxed, however, there's an underlying current of tension in the room that doesn't want to go away – not surprising really when the only thing they have in common is a man they've both loved and slept with at different times. Does Ruth know, she wonders, about the night Harry spent in her bed last November?

She's just made up her mind to give up on waiting for Harry tonight, finish her wine, and make her excuses when Scarlet pricks up her ears, gets up, and quickly trots out of the room as they hear the key in the lock and they both fall silent.

“That'll be Harry,” Ruth murmurs and quickly follows Scarlet into the hall.

She watches her go, then turns to smile at Elizabeth and little Jamie. He really is adorable and she can't help feeling a pang as she watches him before she pushes is quickly aside. Feeling nostalgic is all very well, but she really wouldn't want to go through it all again and give up the life she has now, the freedom and enjoyment of living for herself. She'll just have to be patient until Catherine or Graham give her a grandchild instead.

Having waited a couple of minutes to give Ruth plenty of time to tell Harry she's here, she takes the last mouthful of wine and gets up, saying quietly, “Would it be alright if I just used your loo?”

“Of course,” Elizabeth replies. “It's just at the end of the hall.”

“Thank you,” she murmurs and walks to the doorway, senses trained on the space beyond, unable to decide if a stealthy approach is best, or one that'll alert Ruth and Harry to her presence and spare them all any embarrassment that might ensue from her walking in on them talking about her. They've
probably moved into the kitchen anyway, she thinks, remembering that the doorway to it is immediately to the right as one enters the flat, so she might as well slip to the bathroom and empty her full bladder before her tête-à-tête with Harry.

As she steps into the hall, however, it becomes apparent that her presence in Harry's home is not the most pressing matter on Harry and Ruth's minds. They're locked in a passionate embrace and she can barely see Ruth at all, pressed as she is between Harry and the front door, only her left leg visible – wrapped around Harry's thigh as his hand glides up it under her dress – and her hand on Harry's right shoulder. She well remembers this Harry and she's sure he barely gave Ruth time to say hello before he pounced and began to devour her.

A whimper from Ruth and a familiar growl of arousal from Harry makes her turn abruptly away and disappear into the bathroom, hoping neither of them noticed her slip past and that the sound of the toilet flushing will alert them to her impending presence before she has to face them again. As much as she no longer wants Harry in that way and the display she's just witness fills her with more amusement than anything else, she really has no need to know what noises Ruth makes when she gets really excited.

Luckily for everyone involved, Jamie comes to the rescue once more as she hears him squeal, “Daddy! Daddy!” and then laugh as, presumably, Harry picks him up and throws him in the air, something he always used to do when Catherine and Graham were little. He'd been a good father to them in the beginning, whenever he was home, and she doesn't regret staying with him in spite of everything that came later because she knows he'd not have had the time or the will to maintain contact with Catherine and Graham if he'd lived apart from them all. She hates to think how her children would have suffered without Harry in their lives.

She flushes the loo and washes her hands before slipping back into the hall only to find it empty. She walks soundlessly down it and pauses in the doorway to the living room, where she's greeted by the sight of Harry holding a giggling Jamie upside down while Elizabeth looks on with concern and Ruth tries and fails to get his attention. “Harry!” Ruth says again and she watches as Harry rights his son and turns to smile at her.

“What?”

“I suspect Ruth's trying to warn you that I'm here,” she says, unable to resist the temptation, the way Harry freezes and turns slowly to face her making her grin in delight.

“Jane,” he murmurs, his face a carefully controlled mask, but she's known him too long to miss the signs of his discomfort.

“Hello, Harry,” she replies. “I was in the neighbourhood and thought I'd drop in, see if you're alright since you haven't returned my calls.”

“Ah,” he says then drops his gaze to Ruth as she reaches to take Jamie from him. She watches as their eyes meet and hold, a silent communication passing between them. Jamie, however, doesn't want to relinquish his father now he's got him back and begins to protest.

“No! Daddy. Daddy!!”

“It's all right, Ruth,” Harry murmurs, shifting Jamie in his arms and smiling at his son. “Don't fret, lad,” he murmurs. “You can stay with Daddy.”

“Daddy,” Jamie says happily, patting his cheek with his hand.
“I should get going,” she interrupts the lovely, domestic scene, feeling out of place and ready to head home. Maybe she'll run herself a nice, relaxing bath when she gets there, or maybe Derek would like to come over. Maybe she can have both. “Thanks for the wine, Ruth, and it was lovely to meet you. You too, Elizabeth.”

“And you,” Ruth and Elizabeth reply almost simultaneously. They smile and then Ruth adds, “Thanks for stopping by.”

“I'll walk you to the door,” Harry says and follows her out of the room.

Once by the front door, she reaches for her coat and slips it on before turning to face him again.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, “my hands are full.” He nods at Jamie who's watching her with bright, inquisitive eyes as his father cradles him with one arm, his hand securely grasping his leg.

She smiles. How like Harry to apologise for failing to help her on with her coat. “That's all right. He's an adorable excuse. Congratulations, Harry.”

“Thank you,” he murmurs, eyes dropping to his son and melting as he looks at him before he lifts them back to her own.

“I can't believe you didn't tell me,” she says, shaking her head at him in disbelief.

“Jane,” he murmurs in a warning tone.

“I thought we were friends, Harry.” She knows she sounds a little wounded now, and if truth be told, she feels it. She had thought that, after everything, they had at least managed to salvage that – the friendship they'd had before it had all turned sour.

He sighs and lifts his free hand to rub his forehead. “We are,” he says, raising his eyes to hers. “It's just...” He pauses and glances over his shoulder before turning back to her. “It would have been hard to tell you when I didn't know myself until a couple of weeks ago.”

She stares at him, dumbfounded, lifting a hand to cover her mouth in shock. Jesus! Poor Harry!

“Blimey,” she whispers, lowering her hand to his arm and giving it a gentle squeeze. Then mindful of the two women next door, she says, “I should go. Ring me sometime. Let me know if there's anything I can do, won't you?”

He smiles, a look of gratitude and affection spreading across his face. “Thank you.”

She returns his smile, looking at him fondly for a moment before she adds, “I'm glad, Harry. I'm glad you got one of them back at least,” feeling suddenly sure that whatever the reason behind Ruth's actions – and her curiosity is killing her as to what it might have been – Harry's much happier for having her back. He looks years younger than the last time she saw him. He looks happy.

He nods and moves past her to open the door, holding it for her as she squeezes through, saying, “Bye-bye, Jamie,” to the little boy and, “Bye, Harry,” to her ex-husband.

“Bye-bye,” Jamie replies, making her and Harry smile. Then she reaches up and kisses Harry's cheek before stepping out of the house.

“Take care of yourself, Jane,” he murmurs.

“You too,” she replies. “When are you going to tell our children?” she asks, nodding at Jamie.
“Soon,” he replies. “They’ve only been here a couple of days. We have a lot to sort out but...”

“Tell them before Christmas,” she advises.

“I will.” They stand in silence for a moment and she wonders what he's thinking.

“Take him inside, Harry. It's cold out.” And with that she turns and walks back to her car.
A/N: Hi, folks. Apologies for the delay in posting this chapter. Life suddenly got busy and my muse was not cooperating. I anticipate there being a couple more chapters to this story before we leave Harry, Ruth and Jamie to get on with their lives. Thank you all for sticking with this fic and for your wonderful, encouraging reviews. Cheers, S.C.

18 November 2008 – Harry

He sighs, dropping his gaze to his wineglass and raising it to his lips, wishing for a moment that he could transfigure it into a glass of whisky instead. Why today of all days? He's been so looking forward to this evening. No matter how hard he tries, it seems he's constantly blind-sided by events outside of his control. Though to be fair, if he'd answered Jane's call last night, he could have prevented this, and if he hadn't overreacted to what George had said, he wouldn't have felt unable to face a conversation with Jane. Maybe outside of his control isn't quite the right way of looking at things. Lacking in courage is perhaps more accurate.

Across the table, Ruth frowns, lifting stormy blue eyes to look at him, their gazes meeting and holding as he takes a drink and lowers the glass back to the table. As much as he hadn't planned for their evening to go like this, he realises that he's going to have to adapt to the changing circumstances. A romantic dinner might no longer be on the cards, but he can still salvage this night and make something of it, stop being a coward and bring them closer together in other, perhaps more meaningful and important, ways.

“I'm sorry about Jane, Ruth,” he murmurs, determined to make a start by address the elephant in the room. “I'm sorry you had to meet her so soon after your return, and I'm sorry I wasn't with you to support you.”

She drops her gaze, fiddling with her napkin some more, and he sees her swallow uncomfortably, reminding him so much of their first date that a lump rises in his throat. He clears it and leans forward, pressing gently. “Talk to me, Ruth. I can't read your mind. My psychic powers are at a low ebb at this time of day.”

He sees her lips twitch briefly, though her eyes remain downcast, and watches her take a deep breath and a fortifying sip of her wine – the one glass he'd convinced her to drink tonight – clearly trying to savour it and make it last. “I felt... so guilty, Harry, knowing what I'd done. She lost so much because of me and she was being so nice. I liked her... and that made me feel so much worse.”

“Ruth, you didn't-”

“I did,” she interrupts, eyes flashing, her gaze steely as she lifts it to his. “I knew you were married. I knew exactly what I was doing. I knew it was wrong, but I did it anyway.”

He nods, conceding the point, dropping his gaze to gather his thoughts. She's changed, his Ruth. She's much stronger than before, more sure of herself, less easily swayed and placated, and he finds,
he loves her all the more for it.

“You're right,” he admits. “We were both in the wrong and what we did was... unfair to her and... weak. I can't tell you the number of times I've wished I could go back and change it, wished I'd had the strength to pull back after Danny, the sense to have taken someone else with me to Baghdad so our relationship, and love, would not be tainted by those actions now.” He lifts his eyes to hers and reaches for her hand across the table, relieved that she lets him link their fingers together. “But I'm telling you now, Ruth, it wouldn't have made any difference to the outcome for my marriage to Jane. It was over between us long before you came along. Had I loved her, I wouldn't have fallen in love with you, and I assure you, that was just as true for Jane as it was for me. I know for a fact that she doesn't regret the divorce – far from it. She's happy now. I haven't seen her this happy since we were young and just embarking on our relationship together. She has a lover who's treating her far better than I ever did, even at the beginning. She paints and goes dancing. She's created a life for herself full of things that give her pleasure. She might not have wanted the divorce at the time, but she's better off because of it and there's no one who'd agree with that more than she... Sometimes things beyond our control turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to us.”

She nods and gives his hand a squeeze. “That's true,” she concedes with a gentle smile and he's sure she's thinking of Jamie. “And it's good to know that she's... made the best of it, but... I still feel terrible about it.”

“Then don't, Ruth,” he urges her gently. “Let it go. We've already paid such a high price... Two years, Ruth. All this time, I couldn't stop asking myself if maybe things would have been different had I waiting for you, had I done the right thing and divorced Jane first. I'd have been able to ask you out sooner then, right after I'd moved out. We could have had more time together – time to cement our relationship, time to prepare for an attack against us, time to love.” She gazes at him steadily, a wistful look in her eyes. “And I can't help thinking,” he adds softly, his voice becoming more gruff as the emotions rise and churn inside him, “that if I'd done that, if we'd had all that time together, maybe you wouldn't have stayed away so long if you'd had to leave.”

Her face crumbles, gaze filling with sorrow and regret as she grips his fingers more tightly and her mouth twists with emotion. Before she can speak or break down in tears, however, he presses swiftly on, “It's done, Ruth. We've both made choices – some good, some bad. We need to draw a line under it all and move on, move forward with our lives... hopefully together.”

He watches her nod her head slowly several times, her left hand rising to quickly wipe at her eyes, her right squeezing his again. “You're right,” she murmurs.

He feels his chest expand with relief and can't help a soft smile from gracing his lips. “Will you stay with me, Ruth? You and Jamie?”

“We will.”

“At my place? For good?”

“Yes.”

He smiles broadly, his thumb caressing the back of her hand. “Thank you,” he murmurs, heart overflowing with gratitude and love.

“He needs you, Harry,” she replies, gazing deeply into his eyes. “I need you too,” she adds softly, her gaze softening, brimming with love. And just like that, the possibility of a romantic evening is back on the table, making his heart soar and beat that much faster.
“Did I tell you, you look breathtaking tonight?”

She smiles. “Not in so many words, but the message was clear in the way you kissed me when you came home earlier,” she teases.

He chuckles and leans across the table, murmuring in a seductive whisper, “That's good. I'd hate to think the message got lost in translation.”

“Fortunately, kissing is a language I happen to be fluent in,” she replies, equally quietly, equally seductive, and had their waitress not arrived at that moment with their meals, he's not quite sure what he might have done. As it is, he's forced to reign in his desire and turn to his wine and food, taking several mouthfuls in silence as he watches her, the heightened colour of her cheeks doing nothing to quell his desire. “Stop it, Harry,” she says, not looking at him, her lips twitching as she fights to hold in her smile.

“Stop what?” he asks, dropping his voice into a low rumble.

“Watching me. Undressing me with your eyes.”

“I'd be more than happy to undress you with my hands, Ruth, but unfortunately we're not in private and I fear the plods might be called in if I attempted such a thing here.”

The colour in her cheeks rises further, but her gaze is mischievous and playful when she lifts her eyes to his. “I suppose I'll have to be a good girl then and be patient,” she replies and almost makes him jump out of his skin when he feels her foot slide up the inside of his right leg towards his groin.

“Jesus!” he breathes from the shock and his rising passion.

She laughs, curling her toes to grip his trousers, pressing more firmly against his thigh. “Sadly, I can't reach any higher, Harry. The table's too wide.”

“Just as well,” he manages to say, his desire to flip the table out of the way, reach across, and pull her onto his lap overpowering. “This is you being a good girl, is it?”

She laughs again and pulls her foot away, shrugging her slender shoulders and taking a sip of her wine. “Fine. I'll behave. Maybe you can satisfy my curiosity instead for now.”

“Curiosity?” He takes a gulp of his wine.

“What did Jane mean when she said she's happy you got one of us back?” she asks, watching him closely. “Who's the other one?”

He sighs, lowering his glass back to the table and rubbing his forehead, his desire draining away in a flash, his cock quickly deflating. Christ! What now?

“Ruth,” he murmurs, lifting his eyes to hers, “please, don't ask me that now. I promise I'll tell you... but not tonight.”

“Why not?”

“Because...” he tails off and sighs. What the hell, he thinks with resignation, glumly admitting to himself that it's probably too late already. This is Ruth. Ruth who is always analysing, always thinking, always looking for answers. She's not going to be able to let it go now. “Because,” he repeats, giving it his best shot anyway though he's almost certain it's pointless, “it will cause you pain and I have no desire to do that tonight. It's not what you're thinking,” he hastens to add, seeing the
wariness in her eyes and the distance.

“Then tell me,” she insists, her gaze direct and determined, and he knows there is no escaping it now.

“Fine,” he murmurs and takes a deep breath. “It's Adam.”

“Adam?” she asks, fearfully. “What..? How?”

“A car-bomb,” he says softly, reaching for her hand across the table again and taking it in his own as he sees the tears gather in her eyes. “There was no time to defuse it and it was in a crowded area. Remembrance Sunday, last year. It was full of people paying their respects – women, children. He got in the car and drove it to a deserted square... He didn't make it out before it detonated.”

“Oh Harry,” she breathes, fighting to get hold of her emotions.

He releases her hand and lifts his chair, bringing it round to her side of the table, ignoring the other people in the restaurant who turn to look at them. Then he sits down and gently draws her into his arms, allowing her to rest her head on his shoulder as he runs comforting hands across her back and presses his lips against her hair. She begins to shake in his arms as the tears fall, his lips pressing against her hair again as he murmurs words of comfort, but it doesn't take her long to calm, taking the handkerchief he hands her and wiping her eyes and nose, but still leaning against him. “Wes?” she whispers.

“He's alright. He lives with Adam's sister, Olivia, but he's still at the same school. I go to his rugby matches sometimes, less frequently lately,” he admits, “but I plan on correcting that.”

She nods, than leans back, lifting her eyes to his, his heart constricting at the sight of her sorrow, her smudged make-up making his heart swell with love and a desperate need to protect her. He'll protect her. He has to protect her and Jamie.

“Who else, Harry?” she pleads softly.

“Zaf,” he admits softly.

“Oh no.” Her face crumbles again. “Not Zaf. Oh Harry.”

“I'm sorry,” he murmurs, feeling helpless as he draws her into his arms again, praying that she doesn't ask him how. She cries harder this time and he wonders at that until he remembers that it had been Zaf who'd spent several hours with her, right before her exile.

“I looked for him everyday while I was away,” she whispers brokenly when she finally manages to stem her tears. “He promised to smile at me if we ever saw each other again.”

_How like Zaf_, he can't help thinking, smiling briefly at the recollection of his bright, young agent before the memory of what they did to him wipes the smile from his lips and he turns away from her, lest she read the pain and anger in his gaze and ask him about it.

He motions to the waitress, who comes over immediately and quickly walks off to do his bidding and bring Ruth a glass of water. Then he turns back to face her, smiling reassuringly as she lifts her eyes to his again. “Any others?” she asks timidly, preparing herself for the worst.

He shakes his head. “Malcolm's planning to retire in the new year. He's training up a new recruit now to replace him.” He shouldn't be telling her this – she doesn't have the clearance for it – but she knows Malcolm and he desperately wants to dispel the sorrow in her eyes.
She smiles. “And Jo? She’s alright?”

“Jo’s fine,” he replies, relieved that saying that doesn't feel like a lie after the last few months, during which Jo seems to have pulled through her ordeal and come out the other side. He's happy with his team of agents. God knows they're all damaged in one way or another, but they're good spooks and that's all he can ask of them. He's proud of them all – Ros, Jo, and Lucas.

The waitress brings Ruth her glass of water and they both thank her before Ruth takes a few fortifying sips and promptly gets up, leaving him to return his chair to his side of the table and eat alone for a few minutes while she goes to freshen up and fix her make-up.

*This is worse than an op,* he can't help thinking as he takes another sip of his wine. Nothing about this evening has gone according to plan and the unpredictability of it is draining him more than an entire day on the Grid. He closes his eyes and takes a steadying breath, relaxing his mind and body for a moment, focusing on his breathing until he's calm again and in control. He's been so focused on how he wants things to go tonight, that he's finding it hard to adapt to the shifting emotional landscape between them. He should have known it wouldn't be so easy with Ruth – it never has been. *No more,* he tells himself. He's going to relinquish control and let things crinkle out as Adam was always so fond of saying. There will be other nights to romance and seduce Ruth. Tonight, he'll allow himself to just be, here, with Ruth – that is precious enough already.

“I've been thinking,” he murmurs once she's returned and they've eaten a few mouthfuls in companionable silence, “that my flat isn't really big enough for the three of us. I thought maybe we should consider moving to a more child-friendly part of London.”

“Like where?” she asks, her eyes alight with interest.

“I don't know. Dulwich maybe? Or Hampstead? It'll be nice to be near a big park for Jamie and we need to consider which schools we want him to attend. The best ones have a waiting list and we'll need to put his name down as soon as possible. Plus, if you work, we'll need to find a nursery for him or hire a nanny. I was thinking we should maybe do both, so he has contact with other children, but enough time at home too. There's security to consider too, of course. I've been toying with the idea of hiring someone from Norland. What do you think?” he asks, belatedly realising that he's not giving her a chance to get a word in edgeways.

“You came up with all this today?” She looks like she can't make up her mind if she should feel amused, impressed, or overwhelmed.

“Well, no,” he confesses, feeling his ears turn pink. “I've had two weeks to think about it.”

“But you were still angry with me. You didn't know if I'd be living in London, much less with you!”

“I knew that I loved you and I wanted to live with you, Ruth. The anger was bound to go away eventually, and besides, Jamie's my son – it's my job to keep him safe and give him the best start in life within my power.”

She smiles, her gaze softening with love. “He's so lucky to have you as his father.”

“I don't know about that, Ruth. The poor lad looks just like me. With your eyes and smile, he could have been a heart-breaker.”

“If he has your charm and charisma, it won't matter one bit what he looks like,” she replies. “Besides, your eyes and lips are gorgeous.”

He pushes his empty plate aside and leans forward, sending her a smouldering look. “Gorgeous,
“The people here must think us mad,” she says, her brain going off on a tangent in typical Ruth fashion.

“That's a very impressive trick,” she whispers. “I wondered how I didn't hear you come home yesterday.”

He smiles. “She's a clever dog,” he replies, crouching down to make a fuss of her. “Aren't you, girl?” Scarlet's tail wags violently in pleasure, but she still doesn't make a sound.
needing to make sure that his son is alright. He eases the door open and peers into the room, the night-light in the corner casting a soft glow over his surroundings. Both Jamie and Elizabeth are fast asleep, so he quietly slips out of the room again, closing the door behind him and smiling happily to know that things seem to be finally going his way.

Back in the kitchen, Ruth is sitting at the table, sipping her tea with Fidget curled up on her lap, purring as she strokes him. She smiles as he sits across from her, saying, “This is the first time one of them's sat on my lap. They used to do this all the time before.”

He smiles at her, thinking she looks absolutely beautiful and feeling his heart overflow with quiet contentment.

“Jamie?” she asks.

“Fast asleep... as is your mother.”

“We should have moved his crib into your room,” she murmurs worriedly.

“Our room,” he corrects, “and no we shouldn't have. He doesn't need to see or hear anything we're going to do tonight.” He sends her a smouldering look, watching with satisfaction as her neck and face flush.

“My mother-” she begins hesitantly, but he interrupts her.

“Your mother has earplugs.”

“What?!!”

“That's what she told me,” he shrugs, watching with some amusement as the horror plays across her face. “She pulled me aside, told me not to worry about Jamie and that she hopes we enjoy ourselves tonight before adding not to worry about her either because she remembered to pack her earplugs.”

“Oh dear God!” she whispers, burying her face in her hands.

He chuckles, then takes another sip of his tea. “That about sums up my reaction too, but of course I didn't let her see that.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. She didn't seem to expect a response. Not that I'm not grateful. I think I must be the luckiest man alive to have the prospect of a mother-in-law who encourages me to ravish her daughter.”

She quickly lifts her head to stare at him.

“What?”

“Mother-in-law?” she asks.

He smiles. “Prospective mother-in-law,” he corrects. “We're not married yet, Ruth. I'd have remembered something as wonderful as that.”

She blushes again and lowers her gaze, taking a fortifying sip of her tea. “But you're thinking about it?”

“I have thought about it, yes.” He smiles at her fondly. “Haven't you?”
“Yes,” she admits, lifting her eyes to look at him. “It's a bit soon though, isn't it?”

“Probably,” he concedes. “We've lived together for all of two days. I didn't intend to ask you just yet.” Then seeing her relax and smile at him, he adds, “I do intend to take you to bed though, with your mother's blessing and your permission, and make love to you very thoroughly, as promised. Shall we?”

She nods and takes another sip of her tea before getting up, saying, “I'll must nip to the loo.” Then she trails her hand across his shoulders as she walks past and disappears from the room.

He sighs in contentment, savouring the moment and feeling suddenly on top of the world. He will give her a few moments before he follows, taking the time to freshen up too before he joins her in their room. He will turn on the music he has ready, draw her into his arms – perhaps they will dance a little, perhaps they'll just kiss. He plans to kiss her a lot tonight, kiss every part of her, rediscover the joys of her body, the sensuality of it, the magic. He will undress her slowly, reverently, tracing each curve with his hands, his fingers, his lips and tongue, mapping every crevice, every mole, every freckle. He will reacquaint himself, relearn, rediscover her, see and feel all the changes that time and their child have wrought. He will love her and please her, pleasure her and thrill her. He will bring her to the pinnacle and watch her tumble again and again. He will satisfy her like never before. And then... then he will join her, bind her to him forever as they shatter in each other's arms and lie together in the aftermath, replete and utterly contented.

It occurs to him, as he rises and clears the table, that Ruth might have other plans, plans to seduce him on this night, plans to make amends for failing to return last year. He smiles at the thought and decides that that's alright with him. It's a partnership – what they're trying to build – and that means he needs to let go of being in charge all the time. He's known that since the beginning, all those months ago, he understands that it's the only way for them to stay together long-term. And he wants it – this relationship, this partnership, this love. And besides, this evening had become so much more gratifying from the moment he'd decided to just enjoy and stop managing the situation. So, if she wants to pleasure him too, take control, straddle him or take his cock in her mouth, he'll not fight her. If anything, he'll fall in love with her that little bit more.
He's never felt particularly close to his father. He has some good memories, mostly from when he was quite little – riding on his shoulders, playing cricket in the park or hide-and-seek at home – but overall, Harry Pearce had rarely been there for his children. Being a reserved and quiet child, he'd just accepted it and buried himself in books and the fascination that history had always held for him. Catherine had been different. She'd demanded their father's attention and had consequently received more of it, charming him as a little girl and rubbing him up the wrong way as a teen. He'd resented it of course, and looking back, hadn't handled it that well, annoying his sister and becoming more sullen, pushing his father away whenever he attempted to draw closer. He'd even chosen football over cricket as his main sport at school, just to annoy him, though he'd loved cricket more and had been a decent player.

He'd been too young then to be self-aware enough to realise what had been going on inside him. During his last two years at school, he'd made some very poor choices and had been lucky that they hadn't affected his chances of going to any university, let alone Cambridge – which he'd chosen over Oxford to annoy his father, of course. But once he'd left home, things had changed for the better. He'd made some good friends, loved his courses, got himself a girlfriend, lost his virginity, and played cricket again. He'd missed his mum, but had been glad to get away from his father, or rather, the constant reminder of the lack of a meaningful relationship between them, the constant feeling of inadequacy and yearning to be loved. And he'd thought that he'd moved on, until his parents' divorce had brought up feelings he hadn't even known he'd had until that moment.

When his parents had talked to them about their decision to divorce, it hadn't surprised him that his mum had wanted to leave his dad – he hadn't been there for any of them really in so long, if ever. It had surprised him how strong his own emotions had been, though he'd done his best to hide them. In that, he'd always been very much like his father.

He'd spent months working through those emotions, recognising the importance of finally letting them go, bringing himself to a point where he could accept his father's limitations and just enjoy whatever time they spent together at Christmas, birthdays, or the occasional coffee or meal out, instead of wishing for something that could never be. And that had been working well until a couple of weeks ago when his dad had taken him and Catherine out to dinner and announced that he's had another child – not a baby mind, but a one-and-a-half-year-old boy.

He'd felt like his father had punched him, winding him, a vice gripping his heart, the pain so strong that he'd felt tears spring to his eyes. For years, the only consolation he'd had was that he was the only boy in the family, special because of his sex if nothing else, but even that had been taken away from him in that moment. When he'd been little, he remembers wishing that Uncle Ben could have been his father instead, that somehow the Pearce brothers would get together and decide to swap children – and spouses, for he'd had no wish to leave his mother. If he'd been Uncle Ben's son, he'd have born his name, he'd have been a Pearce too and that would have meant the world to him back then. Now, he doesn't want to be a Pearce any more. Far better to be a Townsend.

Catherine had told him a while ago about this woman, Ruth, Dad's officer whom he'd loved and hadn't been able to save from whatever had befallen her, and his father had filled in the rest, explaining the necessity of her going into exile, that she'd not been able to tell him about his new son,
and how she'd only got back a couple of weeks ago. It had been abundantly clear during his explanation how much their father loves this Ruth – so much more than either of them remember him ever loving their mother. It would be logical then that he would love her son more too, especially as he'd missed so much of the boy's life already.

Catherine had taken the news of Ruth's return really well, expressing her relief and joy to their father, but talk of a one-and-a-half-year-old half-brother that their father had never mentioned before had made her rather indignant and irate – for which he'd been supremely grateful at the time as it had given him some time to get his own emotions under control again. It wouldn't do to have his father know just how much this news had upset him and brought back all those feelings of failure and inadequacy that he'd thought he'd put to rest three years ago with the divorce.

After Catherine's outburst of righteous indignation, their father had seemed rather hesitant and uncertain as he'd said, “I know this is somewhat of a shock. It was for me too. And I understand if you need... some time and space. But if you'd like to meet Jamie...”

He'd tailed off, but Catherine had jumped at the chance, still fuming a little as she'd replied somewhat forcefully, “Of course we want to meet him, Dad! He's our brother!” And after that, how could he say that he'd rather French-kiss his own mother?

So that's why he's here today with Catherine and Fabian, sipping a cup of coffee on this overcast, chilly day, wondering why he's agreed to this at all when there are so many other things he'd rather be doing on a Saturday.

“It's going to rain again,” he says glumly, glancing up at the sky and draining the cup before scrunching it up and turning to look for a bin.

“Optimistic as always,” Catherine replies. “What's the matter with you this morning anyway? And where's Emma?”

Graham shrugs, not wanting to admit that he didn't invite his girlfriend. They've been together more than a year and are talking about moving in together, but he has yet to mention her to his father, let alone introduce her to him. Catherine keeps telling him he's being ridiculous, but he rather thinks he's not. If Harry Pearce had wanted to meet his least-favourite son's girlfriend, he would have made more of an effort to see him, take an interest in his life. He's seen his father all of four times in the last three years.

“Is that them?” Fabian asks, nodding towards a couple with a small child coming down the walk towards them, a small dog trotting along behind them. They're still too far to make identification easy, but after watching them for a few moments, they're all sure it is.

“Optimistic as always,” Catherine replies. “What's the matter with you this morning anyway? And where's Emma?”

Graham shrugs, not wanting to admit that he didn't invite his girlfriend. They've been together more than a year and are talking about moving in together, but he has yet to mention her to his father, let alone introduce her to him. Catherine keeps telling him he's being ridiculous, but he rather thinks he's not. If Harry Pearce had wanted to meet his least-favourite son's girlfriend, he would have made more of an effort to see him, take an interest in his life. He's seen his father all of four times in the last three years.

“Is that them?” Fabian asks, nodding towards a couple with a small child coming down the walk towards them, a small dog trotting along behind them. They're still too far to make identification easy, but after watching them for a few moments, they're all sure it is.

“I think it is,” Catherine replies. “Come on,” and she sets off with Fabian at her side. Reluctantly, Graham follows, watching his father and Ruth swinging their little boy between them as they make their way towards them. They look remarkably content, he can't help noticing. His father has put on weight, but also looks much fitter, more healthy than he'd looked last year. He supposes he should be grateful that he and Catherine won't have to step in to care for him any time soon.

Ruth is not what he'd expected. She's younger than he thought she'd be for one, but she's also much more mild mannered, less glamorous, more kind than he'd pictured her in his mind. She doesn't fit his idea of a spy at all. Mum could take her, he thinks with a small, satisfied smile. Jamie, he notes, looks just like his father, which would make it five-nil to Jamie.

They've spotted them now and everyone smiles, apart from him of course and Jamie who's too busy laughing. Six-nil to Jamie. He wonders why he even bothers, why he's here at all. But of course, he
knows why – Catherine hadn't taken no for an answer, threatening to tell their dad the truth about why he didn't join them.

"Hello," Harry says, once they're close enough to hear each other. Everyone else says hello back, but he merely nods his greeting. "This is Ruth," he murmurs once they've reached each other and stopped walking. "Ruth, my daughter, Catherine, her partner, Fabian, and my son, Graham."

They each shake hands with her and murmur pleased-to-meet-yous, Ruth adding, "I've heard so much about you all," and beaming at them, her whole face alight with pleasure. He wonders how true that is even as he reluctantly admits to himself that she seems lovely.

"And this is Jamie," Harry adds, dropping his gaze to his other son, caressing his blonde hair with his hand.

"Spash," Jamie replies, and ignoring all of them, he rushes over to the nearest puddle and begins jumping and running through it. Everyone else begins to laugh, and he has to concede that Jamie is rather adorable. At least Scarlet still prefers me, he thinks as he turns his attention to her, crouching down to stroke her and getting a lot of doggie kisses for his effort.

"I'll take her if you like," he says to his father, who smiles and murmurs his thanks as he hands over her lead.

"Come on, Scarlet," he says to her and turns away from the rest of them, running away with the little dog barking once in delight as she sprints after him. He stops when he feels Scarlet flagging, crouching down again to stroke her, smiling down at her as he murmurs, "You're getting slow, Scarlet. Haven't they been walking you enough since I left home?" He feels a stab of anger at the thought, until he realises that it might be just age that's slowing her down. She must be getting quite old now. They'd got her just before Catherine had left home for university, so she must be at least ten already.

Scarlet just stares at him, panting, tail wagging slowly from side to side. "Come on," he says, "let's find you some water."

Luckily it's rained so finding water is easy, and as they walk back towards the others, Scarlet has a good drink from each puddle – like a wine connoisseur at a wine tasting, he can't help thinking. He doesn't really want to rejoin them, but he knows he must and the run has made him feel much better.

He spies them near a bench, his sister and Fabian playing ball with Jamie while Ruth and his father sit together watching them. They look contented and he sees Ruth turn and says something to his father that makes him chuckle and lift his left arm to wrap it around her shoulders and draw her close, pressing a kiss against her temple. He doesn't recall ever seeing him this happy.

He's still struggling through his own emotions when Ruth turns her head and their eyes meet. She smiles, but he can't hold her gaze, dropping his own to Scarlet who's tugging on her lead, urging him to join them. Reluctantly, he obeys her and takes a few slow steps forward only to stop short when he sees his father enter his peripheral vision and crouch down to stroke Scarlet before standing again and moving closer.

"Alright?" he asks, slipping his hands into his coat pockets.

"Yeah," he replies, meeting his gaze and looking away again.

They stand in silence for some moments, Scarlet pulling on her lead again.

"Let her go," Harry says, then instructs his dog, "Go to Ruth, Scarlet."

"Alright?" he asks, slipping his hands into his coat pockets.

"Yeah," he replies, meeting his gaze and looking away again.

They stand in silence for some moments, Scarlet pulling on her lead again.

"Let her go," Harry says, then instructs his dog, "Go to Ruth, Scarlet."
Graham releases her lead and it bounces along behind her as she runs over to Ruth, who leans over to scratch her ears before picking up the end of the lead and joining Catherine, Jamie and Fabian.

“Tajet!” Jamie yells, clearly delighted to have her back as he walks over to her and gives her a hug.

Beside him, his father chuckles then turns away from them, murmuring, “Let's take a walk.” He's surprised by this and it must show on his face because Harry adds, “I could use the exercise.”

“What about them?” he asks, nodding over his shoulder.

“They're well looked after.”

“You have spooks watching them?”

“Of course,” Harry replies, glancing at him to see how he takes this news. “Times have changed since you were Jamie's age, Graham, and I am much higher up in the Service now. There is much more to be gained by kidnapping one of my children.”

“Do you have me watched too then?” he asks, wondering which response he's hoping for.

“No,” he replies, “though your address is on a list with the police. Any disturbance there – I will be notified.”

He nods once, stunned not so much that such a list exists and that his – and presumably Catherine's and his mum's addresses are on it – but that his father is sharing this information with him. He's never been this open about his work before.

They walk on in silence until his father says, “I feel I owe you an apology, Graham.”

“For what?”

“For being such a terrible father to you.”

Christ! He has no idea what to say to that, so he says nothing.

“This is the part where you say, 'You weren't terrible, Dad,’” he adds turning to look at him, a twinkle in his eyes that makes him smile in spite of himself. “They say that with age comes wisdom,” he continues. “I don't know if that's true, but I can tell you that, being with Jamie, having to work so hard to adapt my work schedule to be home more, I've realised how little effort I made when you were his age, how skewed my priorities were back then. I should have tried harder, but as a younger man, I put too much emphasis on my career to the detriment of everything else, including you two and my relationship with your mother.”

He stops walking and turns to face him, so Graham slows to a stop too. “I'm sorry, Son,” he says, reaching up to squeeze his left shoulder, “and I wanted to say that I hope it's not too late to begin to try to make amends. I love you, Graham, and I'm so proud of you.”

“Dad,” he protests, shaking his head as he feels the emotions threatening to overwhelm him, tears springing to his eyes as he tries to turn away, but for once, his father won't let him go so easily, stepping closer instead and wrapping his arms around him, drawing his head down to his shoulder with his hand, cradling him against him as he's always needed him to do.

“I love you and I'm proud of you, Graham,” he repeats gruffly, clearing his throat before continuing, “You are kind-hearted, honest, intelligent, loyal, tenacious, and capable. You are everything a man could wish for in a son and I'm so proud to call you mine.”
And now he's crying, unable to hold in the tears any longer as his father finally says all the things he's been longing to hear. “Dad,” he whispers brokenly, wrapping his arms around him.

For long moments, they stand like this – in the middle of Regent's Park, arms wrapped around each other, his forehead resting on his father's shoulder, his father's head tilted toward his own. Eventually his tears stop and he begins to pull himself together, feeling rather embarrassed as he draws out of his father's embrace, wiping his eyes with the heel of his hands and looking away, acutely uncomfortable as a result of his moment of weakness.

When he finally finds the courage to look at his father again, he finds him watching him with soft, gentle eyes and a small smile on his lips. “Last year,” he volunteers, turning and starting to walk back towards the others, “when I thought Ruth wasn't ever coming back, I was in a pretty dark place. Your Uncle Ben helped pull me through the worst of it. He held me while I... fell apart.” He glances at him, and Graham understands why he's sharing this story and feels grateful for the reassurance and the trust he's showing in him. “You're a man now, Graham, and I would like it if we could get to know each other better, man-to-man as it were. You're much more like your mother than me. You're wiser than I was at your age and I value and admire that.”

“Thanks, Dad,” he replies, when his father falls silent. “That'd be good.”

“Maybe we could go to the dog track one afternoon?”

“You still go to that place?” he asks in disbelief. “You do know that those poor dogs' lives are wretched, Dad, don't you?”

He frowns, which makes Graham think that he probably doesn't. “Injuries from racing are common and are often severe – broken backs and shattered limbs. Some die on the track, and between races, they spend their lives in kennels, deprived of affection and contact with humans and other dogs alike. They're often given drugs to improve their performance, and even once they're retired, very few are adopted out. Most are likely killed as thousands are unaccounted for every year, and don't even get me started on the number of puppies killed just because they don't make the grade. It's sick, Dad,” he adds, his voice filled with passion. “I wish you wouldn't support such cruelty by giving them your money.”

They seem to have stopped walking again without him realising, and he can feel himself blush now under the scrutiny of his father, shrinking back into himself in self-defence as he realises that he's not spoken to him this boldly before. His father is looking at him curiously, and as he waits for him to say something, he realises that there's pride shining in his father's eyes.

“Alright,” Harry says, surprising him. “I won't.”

“What? Just like that?” he can't help asking.

“Yes. If you feel so strongly about it, you must have looked into it. If you say those dogs are treated badly, I believe you. And like you, I can't abide cruelty towards and exploitation of the innocent. So, yes, I'll stop going to the dog track as of right now.”

He's stunned. If he hadn't believed his father's words earlier, he knows he meant every one of them now. He smiles. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Daddy!” a little voice, draws their attention away, and they both smile as Jamie comes running towards them. He doesn't appear very stable in his wellies though, and just as Graham's concluding that he's likely to fall if they don't reach him soon, he trips and falls on his face, a stunned moment of silence preceding his wail of pain and shock.
Their father reaches him first, lifting his son into his arms, ignoring the mud and water soiling his coat as he soothes him with his voice, his eyes carefully scanning his little body for injuries, as Graham stands watching, unsure of what to do. Despite his determination earlier to keep a distance from his new brother, the last few minutes with his father, Jamie's openness and charm, and the sight of him now in tears are all drawing him in, tugging at his heart until he can't help feeling sorry for him and wanting to do something to help.

Ruth reaches them quickly, taking Jamie from his father as he tells her, “He's alright. Just a bit of a shock I think.”

She nods. “Oh dear, Jamie,” she says in a gentle voice. “Did you go 'whoosh bonk’?”

“Whoosh bonk,” Jamie confirms, quieting a little in his mother's arms.

“Where does it hurt?” Ruth asks. “Mummy'll kiss it better.”

“Kissit better,” Jamie agrees, lifting his hand and pressing his palm against Ruth's mouth. She kisses it, then the other one, then draws Jamie into her arms again where he cuddles against her, resting his head on her shoulder.

“Poor Jamie,” Catherine coos, peering over Ruth's shoulder at him, but he clearly doesn't want attention from anyone but his mother because he turns his head and buries his face in her neck.

“Give him a moment,” Harry advises, stroking Jamie's hair with his hand and catching Ruth's eye, exchanging a look with her that clearly says, “Thank you and I love you.” Then he steps away from her and draws Catherine with him.

Fabian has somehow ended up with Scarlet, who follows Harry as he and Catherine move back towards the bench where they've left their things, Fabian tagging along behind them, looking uncertain as to whether he should join them or let them have a father-daughter moment together.

He's just about to follow them when Jamie turns his head again and catches his eye, studying him quietly as he continues to rest his head on Ruth's shoulder. He makes a face and Jamie giggles, so he does it again, making Jamie giggle again and causing Ruth to turn around to see what's going on. This means that Jamie now has to lift his head from her shoulder so see him. He feels a little self-conscious making faces with Ruth watching, but Jamie's eager expression gives him the courage to continue, making a new face that has Jamie squealing with joy and Ruth chuckling.

“Harry never mentioned this talent,” he observes, smiling at him.

“It's more of a superpower than a talent,” he replies, making another face for Jamie who laughs so hard he gives himself hiccups.

“Hic!” he says, pretending to have hiccups too and making Jamie laugh again.

“Well, you're enjoying your big brother, Jamie, aren't you?” Ruth observes as she watches her son laugh.

“Nico?” Jamie asks, looking around him.

“Graham,” Ruth corrects. “This is your big brother, Graham.”

“Gaygum?” Jamie says. “Jamie buvvvv.”

“That's right,” Ruth replies, trying not to laugh. “Jamie's brother, Graham.”
“Gaygum,” Jamie repeats, delighted.

Ruth smiles and turns to him. “Would you like a different nickname?”

“It's fine,” he replies and means it. “Apparently, Catherine used to call me Gay-Gay when she was three. I'm used to it.”

Ruth laughs and puts Jamie on the ground as he squirms to be set down. “It's nice to see someone so young secure in his masculinity,” she says as she straightens up and he can tell that she means it.

“You don't think I'm gay then?” He knows he probably shouldn't be doing this. He's only just met Ruth and he rather likes her.

“Are you?” she counters, deflecting the question back at him with an ease that surprises him. Maybe she's more like a spook than he thought.

“No,” he admits sheepishly, aware of the unfairness of his original question. “In fact,” he begins, then tails off, realising that he should be having this conversation with his father first. He clears his throat, focusing his eyes on Jamie who's making a bee-line for his ball.

“Harry was going to suggest we go somewhere for tea after this,” she says, walking beside him as they follow Jamie. “Maybe your girlfriend would like to join us?”

His head whips round to stare at her. “Did Catherine say something about Emma?” he demands.

“Emma,” she smiles. “What a lovely name. I thought about Emma for Jamie... if he'd been a girl, of course.” Then she lifts her eyes to his and adds, “She didn't. It was just a good guess on my part, based on the beginning of your sentence.”

“You figured out I have a long-term girlfriend from me saying, 'in fact’?”

“Mmmm,” she hums, smiling. “It's a talent I have.”

“Wow,” he murmurs, stunned. Then he clears his throat, thinking about her suggestion. In truth, Emma has already meet his mum and has asked him a few times now why he won't introduce her to his father. Perhaps this would be the perfect opportunity. She might be busy, but equally, she might be available and happy to come along. “I'll see if she's free,” he says, pulling his phone out and turning away to make the call.
Here it is, folks! The final chapter of The Affair! I'm a little sad to see it end, but I'm looking forward to writing something new too. Thank you all so much for reading and keeping up the encouraging reviews. I would love a final one if you have a moment to spare. Cheers, S.C.

29 April 2009 - Ben

“Uncle Harry, you totally need to buy this place,” an enthusiastic Maggie proclaims as she walks into the drawing room where he and Harry have taken temporary refuge from the crowd outside.

“Excuse me?” Harry responds, an incredulous look on his face.

“You're a knight. This would be perfect!”

Ben laughs. “You know what? You're absolutely right, Maggie. I don't know why I didn't think of this before. You're a knight without a castle, Harry. It's disgraceful!”

“You're right,” Harry replies, a serious look on his face. “This is exactly what I need – a tall tower with walls around it that costs a fortune on the upkeep.”

“Exactly!” Ben says, smiling at Sarah who slips into the room, followed by Scarlet, Jamie, and Ruth. “Catherine, Graham, and Jamie wouldn't mind inheriting all your debts. They'd be thrilled to have a money-guzzling castle instead, wouldn't you, Catherine?” he asks his niece, spotting her walking past the doorway.

She stops and turns towards him, entering the room to stand beside her cousin, her mother right behind her. “Sorry?”

“Nothing,” Maggie replies. “They're just teasing.”

“Teasing?!” Sarah says, having crossed the room to perch on the arm of the sofa beside him. “Your father?! Never!”

He laughs and Harry chuckles beside him.

Jamie has followed Scarlet as she trots over to Harry and lies down at his feet, panting. “Stay,” he says, holding out his hand in imitation of the way his father does it and making them smile. Then he sits on the floor beside her and begins to stroke her, telling her something unintelligible, while they all watch him fondly. He really is adorable.

“Seriously,” Catherine says, bringing them back to their conversation. “What are you talking about?”

“Maggie thinks I should buy this castle,” Harry explains, “and Ben agrees with her.”
“It's a disgrace – a knight without a castle. I ask you!”

“I think it's a grand idea,” Jane chimes in, winking at them from behind Catherine and Maggie's shoulders.

“You do?” Catherine frowns, looking suspiciously at her mother.

“Absolutely,” Jane replies, somehow managing to keep a straight face.

“You'd better be careful though, Harry,” Sarah teases. “People might think you're trying to compensate for something.”

The look on Harry's face is priceless.

“Oh believe me, he doesn't need to,” Ruth replies from her place beside Harry on the opposite armrest of the sofa, from where she's watching her son. No sooner are the words out of her mouth, when her eyes widen in alarm and dart up to Harry's – she clearly hadn't intended to speak that thought aloud.

There's a moment of stunned silence before they begin to laugh, Harry's warm chuckles matching the fondness of the look in his eyes as he gazes up at her, bringing her hand, that he's holding with his own, to his lips as Ruth raises her other one to hide her face that is turning crimson.

Maggie and Catherine look somewhat stunned, but it's not until Jane speaks that the two of them lose their composure and flee.

“Oh, he absolutely doesn't,” she says, her eyes alight with mischief.

“Mum!” Catherine exclaims, glaring at her mother and quickly marching away.

“I'll... um...” Maggie adds and rapidly follows suit.

The rest of them dissolve into gales of laughter, little Jamie looking a little bemused, standing up and resting his hand on his father's knee, staring at his father and mother before joining in with his own giggles.

“What's going on?” Lizzie asks as she walks into the room, glancing at each of them in surprise.

“Believe me, you don't want to know,” Ben replies, wiping at his eyes with his hands and fighting to contain his mirth.

“I do.”

“Ask Catherine or Maggie,” Harry chuckles, setting them all off again.

“Well, that was fun,” Jane declares, affectionately squeezing Lizzie's arm and slipping back out of the room. She's really quite different now that she's no longer married to his brother. She seems to have embraced life and let go of her inhibitions, giving herself permission to be happy and free. He'd worried initially that it might bother Harry that she's so much happier away from him, but instead he seems rather pleased. They're much more friendly with each other than he ever remembers them being, and Harry confessed to him recently that their relationship is like it used to be when they'd first become friends at uni, only better. Ruth seems to be handling it well too, which is great and rather admirable, he thinks. It would be so easy for her to be jealous given the history that lies between them, but she's clearly feeling secure in Harry's love and the level of intimacy between them. It must reassure her too that there are things she knows about Harry through their work together at MI-5 that
Jane has never been privy too.

Lizzie frowns and turns to Jamie, saying, “Do you know what they’re laughing about, Jamie?”

“Yes,” he replies.

“What?”

“Dunno.” Jamie shrugs his shoulders and lifts his palms up, making them all laugh again. “Gonna haff cake now?” he asks hopefully.

“Cake sounds like a good plan,” she agrees. “Let's go get some,” and she takes his hand, moving purposefully towards the door.

“Hang on,” Harry objects. “We can't cut the cake yet. We're still waiting for Graham.”

“That's what I came in to tell you if you'd all stop laughing for a minute to listen. Graham, Emma, and Kate have arrived. Everyone's here now and waiting to cut the cake outside.”

“Cake time!” Jamie yells and runs out of the room.

“Wait up!” Lizzie calls and follows.

“Come on then,” Sarah says, getting up and offering him her hand, pulling him to his feet.

“I can't believe I said that,” Ruth murmurs as they make their way to the door. Harry slips his arm around her waist and presses a kiss to her temple.

“Don't worry, Ruth,” Ben grins. “It's our job to embarrass them now that they've grown up. I think it's the best part of having children yet!”

“It’s true,” Sarah smiles. “Revenge for every sleepless night, every whiny Mumpneyyyyyy, and every battle with a sulky teenager or three.”

“Aren't you worried they'll get you back by not letting you see your grandchildren?” Ruth asks with a smile.

“Not a chance!” he replies. “They need us. We're the only free baby-sitters they're likely to get.”

They laugh and step out of the house and into the sunshine.

It's a large gathering with most of the extended family here for their wedding on Saturday. The dream of marrying Sarah in a castle has been one he's harboured for decades, ever since she'd expressed her desire to get married in one as a twelve-year-old girl. This one is a relatively small one that comprises of a central tower that is surrounded by a ring of smaller ones connected by the castle walls. There is no moat, but one can't have everything! There are ten bedrooms, a small, indoor pool, a few sitting rooms and two kitchens, a library and a large dinning room, and they often host weddings here. Harry's his best-man of course, but when he'd heard his plan for the venue, he'd decided to chip in so they could rent it for a full week to celebrate Ruth and Jamie's birthdays here too.

Catherine and Graham are here, as are Lizzie and Maggie, as well as all three of Sarah's daughters, with all their various partners, none of them wanting to pass up an opportunity to stay in a castle, even if some of them are going to have to camp out in the living rooms! Ruth's mother has come to stay for two nights, but will leave before their wedding, and she's brought Ruth's cousin, Beatrice,
with her and her two boys, seven and nine years old. He has absolutely no idea why Jane is here for Jamie's birthday, though he's invited her to the wedding, and of course Julie will be joining them for the latter and probably bring her partner, Jason. There'll be others too, not staying in the castle, but here for the ceremony and reception, Sarah's brothers with their wives and children, and all their various friends and relations, though thankfully not Sarah's ex-husband, who'd thanked them for the invitation but said he couldn't attend. Malcolm is here for Jamie's birthday and Ruth's two friends from Cyprus, Despoina and George, and of course, Nico.

It's a lovely, sunny day, and he hopes the weather lasts for his wedding. The tables for the celebration have been set up in the shade and his youngest daughter is holding the very excited birthday boy who seems to be over the moon with so much attention and extremely impatient to get to the cake, or rather the trains arranged so temptingly on top of it. He's been so good so far and patient, but it doesn't look like it will last much longer, so Ben steps forward and barks loudly in his best, Drill Sergeant's voice, “Attention!”

Everybody stops and turns to look at him – even the three boys, Nico, Roger, and Alan, who are in the middle of a scuffle for possession of a football. “Gather round, please. Time to cut the cake.”

“Thanks,” Ruth says, smiling up at him before moving forward to help Lizzie with Jamie. Harry lights the two candles and Sarah leads everyone in the singing, a delighted Jamie clapping his hands along to the song, eyes as bright as buttons, overjoyed with so much attention. It's just as well really, as he might have easily felt overwhelmed by it all.

“Blow out the candles and make a wish, Jamie,” Ruth encourages, lowering him to the low stool set out for him behind the table.

“Thomas 'n James,” Jamie replies, clapping his hands and looking up at his mother for permission to take the two trains off the cake. It's shaped like a giant 2 and has railway tracks on it for the trains.

“Blow out the candles, then you can have the trains.” And without hesitation this time, Jamie blows out the two candles and reaches quickly for his prizes, the two wooden trains sitting on top, ignoring everyone clapping and cheering him, a triumphant look on his face as he turns to Lizzie.

“Trains!” he grins.

“Oh my God! You are sooooo adorable!” Lizzie exclaims. “I could just eat you!”

“Not me! Eat cake,” Jamie replies with a frown, making everyone laugh.

“But first,” Harry interrupts, raising his voice a little to be heard over the chatter that's breaking out all around them. “We have someone else with a birthday today,” And he turns to smile at Ruth, who's blushing and looking down at the ground. “So without further ado... Harry birthday to you,” he begins to sing, everyone else joining in, including Jamie, as Ben watches his brother move closer to Ruth and slip his arm around her waist, his face alight with joy and love – it's so good to see him looking so happy.

After Ruth has blown out her candles and everyone's received a slice from each of the cakes – one chocolate and one vanilla – he and Sarah move to stand with her and Harry.

“Happy birthday, Ruth,” he murmurs.

“Thank you,” she replies, beaming. “I can't believe I'm celebrating my birthday in a castle! And it's not even a special one.”

“Of course it's a special one,” Harry frowns.
“I meant it’s not a round number,” she says, turning to him and looking apologetic, “a milestone. It's next year I'm turning forty.” She slips her arm through his and kisses his cheek, adding, “But of course it's special because you're here.”

“Well, clearly we're not needed, Sarah,” he teases, pretending to take offence.

“All of you,” she clarifies, quickly. “I love that you're all here to celebrate with me.”

“Yeah, it's obvious you're enjoying all this attention as much as Jamie is,” Sarah says sarcastically, smiling mischievously at her. He loves how well Ruth and Sarah get along.

“Maybe not as much as that,” Ruth concedes with a smile. “But, I guess, I'll have to get used to it, what with us sharing a birthday.”

“Hell of a birthday present that, you must admit,” he grins, “going through labour. Highly memorable, I'd say. I bet you wanted to kill Harry.”

His brother glares at him, but Ruth just smiles. “It was mostly over by then. He was born at four in the morning and he's the best birthday present I've ever had.” Her eyes stray to her son who is playing with his cousins, her gaze soft and adoring, before she turns to look at Harry and softly kisses his lips.

“And you wonder why Harry felt the need to celebrate in a castle this year,” he observes. “What'll it be next year, Harry? A palace?”

“Jamie would love that!” Sarah grins, making them all laugh.

“Harry knows I don't need much,” Ruth replies, smiling into Harry's eyes. “In fact, I already have everything I need.”

“Except perhaps a trip to Paris,” Harry replies, smiling.

“Except that,” Ruth concedes.

“There's still time, Harry,” Sarah says with a wink. Harry just makes a non-committal noise and purses his lips, not looking very pleased at all, and he has a feeling the ploy is working – Ruth will be expecting tickets for a romantic getaway to Paris tonight and have no suspicion of the truth.

“What did he get you today anyway?” Ben asks, knowing full well what his brother's plans are for this evening, since Harry had had to ask for his help with arranging it all. Unbeknownst to Ruth, he and Sarah are babysitting tonight and staying in Harry and Ruth's room, leaving the bridal suite for Harry and Ruth to use for their romantic, candlelit dinner and more. Assuming everything goes according to plan – and he has no doubt that it will, seeing as Harry's treating it as one of his operations at work – Jamie will be in bed and fast asleep in less than two hours, Sarah will make sure the indoor pool is empty and keep it that way until Ruth and Harry are done with it, dinner for two will be served by a member of the catering staff in the bridal suite at nine, followed by whatever other shenanigans Harry has planned that he didn't share with him – maybe some dancing, maybe a soak in the tub, and almost certainly sex. There's one thing he's certain about though – Harry plans to propose tonight.

“You mean other than a castle, a cake, all my friends and relations together in one place?” she teases, making Harry smile. “So far, he only gave me back this shawl.” She fingers the beautiful, turquoise wrap on her shoulders that he'd seen a lifetime ago, it seems, tucked away in Harry's office drawer.

“Gave it back?” Sarah asks.
“I sort of keep ending up returning it to him, one way or another,” she confesses. “But third time's the charm! I promise to always keep it close now.” She smiles up at Harry. “I do love it and all the history it represents.”

“It's beautiful,” Sarah agrees. “Where did you get it, Harry?”

Harry shakes his head. “I'd rather not say, but it wasn't in Britain.” He looks at Ruth, their gazes holding as they smile a secret smile, clearly remembering the first time Harry gave Ruth that shawl, and Ben has no doubt that Ruth will say yes to his brother later tonight.

“No!!” Jamie's voice interrupts their conversation. “Mummyyyyyyyyy!” a crying Jamie calls, and Ruth immediately turns away.

“Sorry,” she says. “I'd better see what's wrong. He's probably getting a bit tired.” She hurries away, leaving the three of them standing together, watching her go.

“Everything ready for tonight?” Harry asks quietly.

“Yes. Don't worry,” Ben reassures him. “If we need help, I'll pull Lizzie into the op.”

He frowns. “Why Lizzie?”

“The only problem I foresee is Jamie waking up and she absolutely adores him.”

“Right. Good,” Harry replies. “If that fails, try Elizabeth. She has ample experience babysitting Jamie.”

“Mum!” Kate calls from the door to the kitchen, so Sarah turns to kiss his cheek and hurries over to her eldest daughter, leaving them alone.

“You nervous?” Ben asks.

“No,” Harry replies. “Not about her answer, just that things won't go according to plan.”

“It doesn't have to be perfect.”

“Yes, it does. Just this once, I would like it to be perfect.”

“Then it will be,” Ben replies. “It's the perfect setting, perfect day. Too many people around maybe, but once we send the youngsters to the pool, you'll have nothing to worry about. I'm sure the rest of our guests are sensible enough to have brought earplugs with them,” adds with a grin that makes Harry chuckle.

“I'm sure my future mother-in-law has,” Harry murmurs, making him laugh out loud.

A contented, companionable silence settles between them as they watch the people around them, and Ben can't help feeling peaceful and happy to be here, surrounded by family and with his own and Harry's hearts full to bursting with love and joy to finally be sharing their lives with the women they adore.

“Whoever thought we'd live to see the day when the Pearce men were happy?” he says.

Harry smiles. “Don't jinx it,” he warns.

Ben laughs. “Not a chance, Harry,” he replies. “I think Graham joining our ranks has brought us luck.”
“Maybe,” Harry agrees, his eyes alighting on his oldest son for a moment and filling with pride and affection.

“Did it bother Jane when he made the switch?”

“She said not.”

“And Catherine?”

“I don’t think she understands it,” Harry admits. “She did tell me not to get my hopes up because she’s not planning to follow suit. Said she’s perfectly content with her name and won’t change it for any man.”

He laughs. “That sounds just like Catherine.”

“I thought it was good news – she won’t end up with a French name if she marries Fabian.”

He chuckles, then asks, “What about Jamie? Are you worried you’ve made the wrong choice for him?”

Harry frowns. “I don’t know. Maybe. But there’s still time enough to change it.”

“What does Ruth say?”

“She suggested a double-barrelled name or making Evershed a middle name, but I don’t know. I still worry about his safety. I don’t want someone to be able to link him to me through his name alone.”

“Maybe the solution is to just talk to him about it when he’s old enough to understand, and maybe give him the choice - say when he's fifteen,” he suggests. “You might even have retired by then.”

Harry gives him a dark look that makes him grin. It's so much fun teasing his brother.

“We'll certainly be talking about it. I'm not making that mistake again,” Harry replies, then changes the subject. “I'm going to check everything's ready for tonight.”

“Good plan,” he agrees. “Good luck.” he adds, holding out his hand and leaning in to give him a hug when he takes it. “Not that you're going to need it. As long as you have the ring, you'll be fine.”

Harry smiles and turns away, going into the main tower and disappearing upstairs. Ben smiles to himself and turns to join Graham who seems to be trying to set up a football game with the three boys and some of the other youngsters around. He's going to be the oldest person in the game, he realises as he approaches, wishing that at least one of Sarah's brothers were here to join in, but quickly shrugging it off. So what. Age is but a number, he thinks and, though he sometimes misses the strength he had in his youth and the ease with which his body recovered from any kind of overindulgence, he knows that experience, skill, and stamina more than make up for their loss, and not just in football either.

He grins. “Count me in, Graham,” he calls.

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