You Look Like a Movie

by LateStarter58

Summary

Who was Jonathan Pine before he decided to hide behind the desk of the Nefertiti? What made him want to? And what happened to him after the events of The Night Manager...?

Notes

This story began life as a one shot, inspired by Adele's song, "When We Were Young'. As I was writing it, I realised it was about Jonathan Pine, and an idea began to form in my head... That original one shot is now the Prologue.
Her coffee was cold; she must have been sitting there longer than she realised, looking at the clouds that scudded across the patch of blue sky that was visible through the fresh green leaves on the tree outside. She roused herself to leave the chair, walked into the kitchen area and poured the remains of her drink down the drain, watching the dark liquid swirling away into oblivion. Her camera was on the console table by the door, still waiting patiently where she had left it last night when she got back. It was just visible from the corner of her eye, but she refused to turn her head, not wanting to acknowledge its contents. Instead, she ran herself a glass of water, walked back across the room and sat down at her desk, booting up the Mac. After a moment’s hesitation, she opened that folder, and there he was, filling her screen again. Not the older, distant stranger she encountered last night, but the young, beautiful Jonathan she fell in love with.

The one who broke her.

Geri didn’t really know why she went to that damn party last night. She thought it would be nice to help Will and Annie celebrate their engagement, and to get out of the house for once, for something other than work. But as she had no other existence, she took her camera along, of course. It was her constant companion, her right arm; it went everywhere she did; her protector, a useful barrier between her and the world. But last night she had needed a bigger bodyguard. How could she have known he’d be there? She’d moved across England; he’d left the country altogether. Somebody told her a few years ago that he was working at a hotel in Egypt. A very fancy place, judging from the website. She had to look it up when she heard, she had to picture where he was, how he lived.

Now, in the cold light of day, she was looking at him again, but this was the ‘him’ she had known back in those days. In the Upper Sixth, with his silly head of curls, before he finally settled on his military future; in his dress uniform at his passing-out parade, looking so handsome and proud; in her bed, still asleep on a summer’s morning, his blond hair tousled in the sunlight and shouting sex; in a photo-booth shot, his stubbly cheek pressed against hers as he whispered how he loved her. Yes, she remembered why she had buried that folder so deep. She couldn’t delete them; they were too telling, too precious. But she couldn’t risk the temptation to look at them frequently. Too painful. Too risky to stay attached to a past that had no future. If she did, she would see his retreating back, and hear those final words in her head, the ones that were so painful. So cruel in their cold indifference.

She thought she heard his voice as soon as she walked in last night, so smooth and dark, so seductive. She’d scanned the room quickly, knowing she couldn’t possibly find him, and there he was. Taller than most of the others by an inch or two, and his perfectly groomed head was unmistakable, even in a crowd. How was this possible? In a trance, she walked closer to where he was. He looked different and yet it was, unequivocally him.
She was ashamed of herself. After all these years, it still hurt her heart to see him. He was always so beautiful, like a film star. She smiled a little wistfully: he had kept his military short-back-and-sides, and as she got closer, the muscles of that perfect body became visible through his tight white shirt. He hadn’t changed that much, then. A lump began to form in her throat; she veered off, found a good stiff drink and a place to hide. His new presence, that old voice, they must work well for him in his chosen career, she thought. She could imagine that charm of his beguiling guests, along with his unflappability; that cool detachment, which so infuriated her when they argued, must be ideal in the hotel business.

Why was he there? She wasn’t ready. Maybe it was silly, but she had not even considered the possibility. Why had nobody warned her? But then, why would they? Nobody could have, because not one other person there knew what had gone before; how their lives had been linked in another place, at another time. She had observed from her vantage point, through the lens; it was good cover: the photographer taking candid party pictures. He was drawing people in, just as he always had - when he wanted to. He could turn it on and off, that charisma. When he didn’t want to stand out, he could be so blank and anonymous you’d think he was a different person.

Her screen filled with images from the past, and, eyes closed, she let the years fall away. She never wanted them to break up, she had begged him to keep trying to make it work… but he was too restless. He told her he didn’t care, but she could see he was lying. It was as if he didn’t know how to open up, he didn’t know how to love someone, how to really be there for them. She would have accepted it, that inability; carried on, just to be with him, tried to help… but he was right, in a way. It was harming them both.

They were both too young, and he wasn’t ready. Wasn’t able. Definitely wasn’t willing…

Geri did know how to love, then and now, and she’d never stopped loving Jonathan. She fell for him that first day, while she sat with her friends on the grass behind the Art Block. And he had made her his, with his sweet smile, his sad eyes; his obvious desire for her. They were happy then, in those early days, but the Army, and then Iraq had changed him, made him more difficult to get to, as it had so many others. His scars were invisible ones: he saw things: terrible, cruel, vile things no one should have to see. Being a soldier wasn’t what he had believed it would be. And when he came home, there was a hard, impenetrable shell encasing him. She could see her Jonathan in there, but the distance between them there had always been had become so great she couldn’t reach him any more.

Who was this Jonathan? How much more had he changed? When at last, she could no longer avoid the moment and they were face to face, he had seemed pleased to see her for a split-second, then she had seen a flash of fear. He had blanked her, acting as if he didn’t know who she was, when Will introduced him as - what was it?– ‘James’ something or other. He had been friendly enough, with his old charm turned on full blast, but she was confused. What was he up to? Why so enigmatic? And what was with the name change? She’d played along, sensing it was for the best, but now she felt a flicker of irritation.

Because none of that mystery had interfered with the rush of emotion seeing him again had brought in its wake. It had made her hesitate to respond when he asked, in a crafted & natural way, for her contact information. But only for a minute.

It was Jonathan. At the very least, he owed her an explanation.
Chapter One

THEN

“Then it reminds me of when we were young…”

“I swear to god, the weather does this every bloody year! Weeks of rain, and the minute term starts…”

Geraldine parked her omnipresent camera bag carefully, then flopped dramatically down on the grass next to her best friends. Maxine and Trish watched as she lay on her back, scowling at the cloudless sky. The sun was beating down mercilessly as scattered groups of students spread out in the grounds of Westonfield Community College, all of them desperate for fresh air after the first morning of the new term. The three girls shared the slightly dazed look of students embarking on new courses: a mix of fear, trepidation and excitement.

Trish suddenly spun around on her not insubstantial backside and whispered loudly. “That’s them! Coming out of the Science Block!”

Her two companions squinted in the bright light and saw a trio of gangly youths drifting in their general direction. All three were tall, and each had shouldered the obligatory Eastpack, and the tallest and gangliest also had an additional book bag on his other shoulder.

“Who are they again?” Maxine asked, earning a scolding glare from Trish.

“The dark-haired one is that boy I told you about, in my form, Justin Roberts. He’s dreamy, don’t you think?”

“He’s okay, I s’pose… I like the curly one.” Maxine missed the grunt of annoyance from the other member of the Pink Ladies (a name they had started calling themselves the year before; ironically, since they all tended to the emo/goth and never, EVER, wore anything pink). Geraldine was disconcerted to find herself transfixed by the boy with two bags, as she had already christened him in her head. Was it those long legs, or the way he moved? Or his face and mad hair that had captivated her instantly? Something about him, she would never be able to rationalise it, meant that she was his, from that very first glimpse. Not that she ever admitted that to anyone, least of all her friends. At that age, in that time, it was terminally uncool to fall for someone that way. Later in her life, it became irrational, but she could not change her heart.

As the group neared them, the girls turned away and began talking loudly about their plans for the coming weekend, studiously disregarding the males as they passed. That was the form; that was what you did if you were a sixteen-year-old girl with more than a passing interest in a boy: you ignored him. A moment later, unable to resist a glimpse, Trish looked around quickly, and was dismayed to see Justin looking back at her. She acknowledged him with a brief wave and an almost-smile before she whipped her head back, hoping he hadn’t seen the traffic-light redness of her cheeks.

Justin had not seen it. He was pretty clueless about girls, and had no idea what Carl meant when he jabbed him hard in the upper arm and said, “You’re in there, mate!” His confusion must have shown, because his friend started to bray with laughter and collapsed theatrically on the grass, rolling around, clutching his stomach, his freckled face creased with smiles. The third member of the group joined in the jollity, not really understanding either, just happy to be included. Jonathan hardly knew the other two, but as the only three boys from their year at Alderman Greenacre to opt to stay on and do A-
Levels, they had been thrown together and seemed to get along, as far as he could tell. He was still feeling his way with them.

Jonathan Pine had lived in a succession of children’s and foster homes around the town and elsewhere in the county, ever since his mother died when he was seven. He had chosen to learn much from that experience: how to keep his room tidy and help when asked or expected to; how to keep his nose and everything else clean and hope for the best; how to disappear and not be noticed. He had learned how to fit into a pre-existing group, or at least, how to appear to do so, and that was the skill he was employing now. Tagging along, happy to join in even if not quite getting the full picture, and doing what he needed to survive this stage, and get to the next one.

He was not aware, as none of us are at sixteen, of what he had not learned.

“What’s in the bag, Pine?” Justin was changing the subject from whatever it was Carl was on about.

Jonathan shrugged and ran his fingers through his messy blond curls. “My French and German stuff. Dictionaries ‘n’ that. I didn’t know what I’d need on the first day.” He smiled in an apologetic way, feeling that slight discomfort in his gut that comes from knowing you’ve transgressed some unwritten rule or other. He was very familiar with that sensation.

“Got a locker? Shove ’em in there!” Carl was looking at him, not unkindly. It occurred to Jonathan that he could have done worse than fall in with these two.

“Yes, I have… but I haven’t found it yet…” He laughed, and happily, the others joined in. All three were still getting lost - it was a big campus, and this was their first day at a new school.

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Geraldine Muir (Geri to her friends) was sitting at the kitchen table when her Mum arrived home. She had put the chicken pies in the oven and the rice was bubbling on the stove while she painstakingly copied her new timetable out for the second time since she got home an hour ago. One for her bedroom, and one for the fridge.

“Good day, Mum?” Elaine Muir nodded. She worked for Marks and Spencer, as a bra-fitter at the large store in the High Street. It wasn’t a job that stretched her or used her undeniable intellect, but it paid reasonably well, and it did play to her excellent people-skills. Not to mention M&S were still a good company to work for, especially for a widow.

“Not bad, thanks, Jellybean. You?” She ruffled her daughter’s dyed-black hair. She gave silent thanks it was only a semi-permanent colour. “What’s it like, ruling the school?”

Geri rolled her eyes, at both the use of her childhood nickname and the unsubtle Greaser reference. It was all part of their usual repartee. She was well aware that she was fortunate in having such a cool mother; Maxine’s parents were very religious and never allowed her to go to Indie Night, or to ever leave the house in the evenings without them, in fact. And Trish’s Dad was a right-

“New teachers? Or same old faces?”

“A few new ones. The photography staff seems lovely. We met Andy – that’s the teacher, it’s all first names in the Sixth – and the technician, Izzy. She’s great, and she’s there every afternoon to help us with our developing and printing.”

Elaine was taking off her coat and easing her swollen feet out of her shoes, but she caught the sparkle in her only child’s eyes, and it warmed her heart.
Geri was still talking. “I’ve got Mrs Holt again – that’s Jude, now – for French, and Mr Pierce, that’s Roger, plus a new person…” she looked down to consult her timetable quickly, “Ummm… Denise something for Eng Lit. Haven’t met her yet. She’s just started at WCC.”

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The next weeks were a blur for all the students in the Lower Sixth. Even those just moving up after GCSEs within the College had been put into different tutor groups, not necessarily with their friends. For all of them there were some new teachers to get to know, and for those joining from elsewhere (WCC was the only place in Weston that did A-Levels, apart from the FE College), a new campus to navigate, and the work… They had all been warned that the move to A-Level study would be a bit of a step-change, but nevertheless, the arrogance of youth had convinced the high-achievers that they’d continue to succeed effortlessly. For most it was a struggle, and nearly all of them were floundering at least a little by the time their first assignments were returned. The carefree jollity of the first days soon disappeared as the more conscientious settled into upping their games. Lunchtimes in the canteen became a valuable safety valve for Geri and her friends, and the usual talk of boys and pop stars a blessed change from Jane Austen and Jean Anouilh.

“That Jonathan, in your French group…?”

Geri set her face into a neutral expression; Trish never asked an idle question. “What about him?” She hoped she’d delivered that with enough insouciance. The truth was, he fascinated her. He seemed sweet, friendly, but he was very quiet and reticent. One of the girls who was in the same German set as well said he was more or less fluent, and his French was effortless, or appeared so to the less able. Geraldine found her eyes drawn to him: his fine-boned face, his long arms, his large and graceful hands. And his voice.

“What’s he like?” Trish winked at Maxine, who was grinning.

Their friend shrugged. “He’s a boy, and he’s no Leo,” she offered, as if that answered everything; all males were judged on the DiCaprio Scale. “So, Trish,” she countered, anxious to deflect attention before she betrayed herself, “Justin ask you out yet?”

To her amazement, Trish started to blush, and then nodded, making both the others squeal in delight. “Shhhh!”

“Come on,” Maxine demanded, “Spill!”

Trish responded with a stage whisper of “Not here!” and they tidied their trays and left the hall sharpish. The College radio was playing Millenium and they had to push past a gaggle of Year Ten girls who were singing along loudly and swooning over a copy of Smash Hits. The Pink Ladies, nowadays ‘too cool for school’, rolled their eyes and continued on their way. After a few minutes of roaming the corridors they found a deserted classroom and sat around a table, Trish leaning back as the other two leaned forward eagerly.

“We-ell…” She smiled, then crumbled, unable to keep up the cool indifference. “He asked me to the pictures on Friday. We’re seeing Armageddon.”

Maxine was peeved, and she showed it; she and Trish were supposed to be going to see it together, on Saturday afternoon. She grimaced, but said nothing. She knew how much Trish fancied Justin. Boys were always trouble. Geraldine saw all this, and turned to Maxine. “Fancy seeing that with me, Maxine? Saturday afternoon would be OK with your olds, right? I mean, dreamy Ben Affleck… Mmmmmmm!”
Her friend’s big brown eyes widened and she grinned again. “Yeah, OK. I’ve got nothing else on.” Trish winced, knowing she had committed the cardinal sin of dumping a friend for a boy, but then she recalled Justin’s handsome face, and his shiny brown hair, and his lovely manners, and how he had tried to act all casual when he asked her out. He was The One, she was sure, and she thought she and Max would be OK. Probably.

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Later that day, as she stood peeling and chopping carrots by the sink, Geri considered her own love life, or rather, her lack of one. There had been William Dobbs in Year Seven, but that relationship mainly consisted of them telling everyone they were boy- and girlfriend, and his carrying her bag home from school once or twice. A bit later, when she knew what was what and, more importantly, what wasn’t, she’d had few dates with Jeremy Phillips from 9H, and then there was that David from the Grammar School. He was a year older, exotic and handsome (his father was from Madagascar or Mauritius or something), but boy, had he known it. When she refused to let him in her knickers, he quickly moved on. One or two blokes had asked her out at Indie Night, shouting embarrassingly over the deafening music, but she didn’t fancy any of them.

Scooping the pile of orange discs into a colander, she washed them under a running tap, humming softly. Her thoughts drifted to the mystery that was Jonathan Pine. He was Teacher’s Pet in the French group, and top of the class in German, too, apparently. But he wasn’t arrogant, just eager to please, as far as she could tell. She’d been alarmed, in the second week of the term, when she saw him three times in one day outside the Photography Area, fearing he was stalking her or something. Not that he’d shown any particular interest in her beyond the usual greetings, but then all became clear when she saw him at the end of the corridor, stuffing that extra bag of his into one of the dark green lockers there.

According to the gossip, he was a ‘Care Kid’. There were a good few of them in Weston; garrison towns always had more than their share. Not that Geri necessarily believed all she heard, but it fitted his reserved, rather awkward manner. She felt some sympathy: her Dad was long gone, dead at thirty thanks to a drunk-driver, and, Geri thought, there but for the grace...Whatever his story, there was a little tingle in her belly whenever she thought of Jonathan, with his soft blond curls and handsome face. His voice in class made her stomach feel weird, too. She had to avoid looking at him lest she feel that heat on her cheeks. Because he was not interested in her, not in that way, she could tell, and besides, she had much too much schoolwork to bother with him, or any other boys, come to that. Except perhaps as a model...?The night before, pondering the assignment they had been given that afternoon, it had occurred to her that she could ask him to pose. They were supposed to ask someone they didn’t know well, and he fit that requirement. And she really, really wanted to photograph his face.

“I’m going to ask that new boy from my French group to pose for me.” Geri announced this momentous decision as she and her mother were clearing up after dinner.

“Oh yes?” Elaine kept her face neutral, but the little patches of colour on her daughter’s cheeks suggested there was more to this than the simple search for a model. “Do you think he’ll agree? Some people don’t like being photographed much.”

Geri shrugged. “I dunno, but I think that’s partly the point of the assignment. You know, to teach us to approach people to take pictures of them. And he has an interesting face.” She turned and walked rapidly into the kitchen with the plates.

“Interesting face...I see.” Her mother smiled and shook her head.

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French was his last lesson before lunch on Fridays, and Jonathan was in no hurry to leave the room. He didn’t want to sit through another session of Justin going on about what he was going to do with whatever-her-name-was that evening in the back row of the UGC. So he was taking his time packing up his stuff, carefully straightening his papers, putting them into the file, and stacking his books before he slid everything into his backpack. Suddenly he became aware of a presence beside him, and he smelt something floral. He knew, even without turning his head, that it was Geri.

“Excuse me, er, um… Jonathan?”

Blood seemed to be rushing all around his body, making him light-headed and hot, and he could hear his pulse drumming in his head. He cleared his suddenly clogged throat. “Yes?” His voice sounded like a squeak to him. He forced his eyes to look at her face. She was blushing.

“I wondered if I could ask you something…?”

“Yes?” Say something else, you prat!

“Um… not here.” She looked at the teacher still at her desk, then at the door and he nodded, grabbing his things and following her, watching how the light reflected off her long dark hair, and taking another deep draught of her flowery fragrance. He was shaking a little, so he pulled his jacket tighter and shouldered his bag. When they had reached the relative quiet of the end of the next corridor, Geri turned and stopped, holding her own backpack low in front of her with both hands. Jonathan felt self-conscious, towering over her, his too-long arms and legs making him feel like one of those inflatable men-things that flap around in the wind. Nervousness was making Geri fidget, twisting back and forth so that her bag swung dangerously close to his crotch. He took a precautionary half-step back.

“You see, the thing is… I wanted to ask… see, I’m doing Photography, and we have to take a portrait of someone we don’t know well… I wondered if…maybe, could…?”

He looked at her, puzzled. What did she want, exactly? He stopped his mental tape, rewound and played it back. Oh! “You want to…” his hand had come up to his chest of its own accord. “Me?”

“Yes please! Can I?”
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

The morning after the unexpected meeting...

NOW

*It's hard to admit that/ Everything just takes me back*

*This water isn’t really hot enough*, Jonathan thought to himself as he rinsed his wet razor and repeated the careful, slow, rasping stroke down his cheek. Making a mental note to check the thermostat on the boiler, he paused, inadvertently catching his own eye in the mirror. He looked balefully back. He didn’t generally dwell on his reflection. Even after the events of the last year, he felt unsatisfied with what he saw. He looked down quickly, suddenly fascinated by the miniscule lengths of hair that floated and clumped, forming tiny, fleeting islands in the soap-scum seas of the basin.

How many thousands of times had he shaved, like this? In a bare bathroom, in a bare flat, in a bare life? He rubbed his chin, checking for errant whiskers, and then, satisfied, he pulled out the plug to release the water, tidied away his razor and dried his face. “Nothing to stop me growing a beard now, I suppose,” he muttered to himself, “they’re quite trendy.” Geri never liked them, though.

The thought made him pause in his short journey from bathroom to bedroom. Geri. His Geri. Jellybean. She hadn’t been in his mind often over the years, or more precisely, he had made a conscious effort not to think about her at all. He remembered why that was last night, when she suddenly shimmered back into his life, appearing in front of him at his new colleague’s party like someone beaming down in *Star Trek*: his guts were pulled apart by the sight of her.

Jonathan pushed those thoughts and their accompanying discomfort away, focussing instead on dressing, making his bed and then deciding whether or not to make breakfast with just the meagre supplies his fridge and cupboards offered. Settling on an early trip to the corner-shop, he pulled on his *Hi-Tec* trainers and lifted a *Craghopper* jacket off the hook by the door. *Nothing ostentatious*, Angela had said, *stick to the sort of things a charity worker would choose and could afford.* A watery sun was doing its best to warm the pavement as he walked the short distance from his flat to the bustling hive of commerce known as Queens Road. The morning was cool, but there was the promise of warmth in the air. Sundays were different in England now, he noted. Even this early, the pavements were busy as he turned the corner onto the street where all the neighbourhood shops and cafes were to be found. And the people passing did not appear to be heading for church: everything seemed to him like a repeat of Saturday. His team of debriefers had warned him that the England he was coming back to had changed somewhat in the ten or so years he had been away. Every day since he had arrived here something would prove that truth of that to him.

His destination was not, technically, a *corner* shop, since it nestled in between a branch of *Coral Bookmakers* and the *Clean ’n’ Dry* launderette. The sound of the bell over the door ringing as he entered struck Jonathan as quintessentially English, a sound of home, although the contents of the
shop appeared to be much more cosmopolitan than he remembered from the days he last spent any length of time using such an establishment. There was the scent of incense, American and European brands seemed more prevalent, and he didn’t think he could have bought bagels and croissants, freshly baked, from a Sikh shopkeeper back in the Surrey of the noughties.

And… wham! There Geri was, back at the front of his mind again, instantly, making his intestines twist. How, he had wondered as he had lain awake in his narrow bed in the night, could she be so much more lovely than he remembered? She seemed to have grown into her beauty, or perhaps, with age, she allowed it to show more. There was no residual anger or resentment in his part, not towards her. Rather, the pain that seeing, or even just thinking of her brought was entirely self-inflicted. Whatever had been the root cause of what had gone wrong between them, he blamed himself entirely, as was his instinct. He felt that way because Geri had been the first. The preliminary item on the list of condemnation he carried in his head; the opening section in his personal catalogue of failures; the first betrayal.

Dragging his consciousness back to the present time and place, Jonathan noted that, as seemed to be the pattern at evenings and weekends, the sons of the owner were serving in the shop, although Mr Singh was pottering around behind them, speaking rapidly in Punjabi. He smiled as the younger men in their vivid turbans switched effortlessly between that and the broad East Midlands-accented English they spoke to the majority of customers. He heard snatches of Polish and Spanish, and perhaps Gujarati around him, as well as some Arabic in a slightly raised female voice, coming from an adjoining aisle in the crowded store. He picked out some words – the language was fresh in his mind again – and moved towards the sound, eager to help.

Ten minutes later, after assisting a befuddled North African (he thought perhaps Libyan, by the accent) lady of a certain age and her daughter to find the washing powder, and subsequently dissolve into a mess of giggles thanks to his charming intervention, he was queuing in Costa. He ordered a cappuccino to complete his breakfast with the pastries he had bought in the Handy Store and set off homewards, a little bit of a spring in his step. He clung to this lightened mood fiercely, right up until he saw his phone on the table where he had left it. Like a punch, the memory came at him in a rush. He had done something exceptionally stupid last night, while still off-balance after seeing a lovely face from the past.

He had asked Geri for her number and, after only a moment’s hesitation, she had given it to him.

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After her early-morning trip down memory lane, Geri had set about her usual Sunday routine: ironing the clothes she had washed the day before, the remaining housework and then her weekly shop. After a light lunch, she started on the pile of assignments she needed to mark. She was running GCSE and A-Level groups at two different establishments, and the stress of keeping on top of that on a daily basis was beginning to wear her down. And don’t mention the adult evening classes she taught on Mondays and Thursdays… She strove to keep her own modest photography business operating as well, so Saturdays were taken up with appointments with clients, or with weddings, and the day before had been no different. Except for the evening: that had been very much outside the norm.

Much as she hated to admit it, Geri knew that most of the activity she indulged in on that warm, late spring Sunday was designed to put off one painful moment. There was no choice, however: she had to look at the pictures she had taken at the party. Eventually, with her marking done, the outstanding emails answered, a stack of work clothes folded and put away, and dinner bubbling on the stove, she caved in. With a familiarity that meant she barely needed to look at what she was doing, Geri picked up her camera, opened the slot and removed the memory-card, then slipped it into the reader.
The screen on her Mac filled with a hundred or more thumbnail images. Gritting her teeth, she began to work her way through them, steadily, methodically, knowing the ones she dreaded most were those she had taken last, just before she lost the ability to endure more and had left. She opened each picture in turn, deleted or edited, saved and moved on to the next. When the first image with Jonathan in it appeared, a tiny sound emerged from her mouth unbidden. Geri swallowed and stiffened her resolve; she had to make an album to send to Will and Annie as promised. She gathered the best shots from the night, lovely ones she edited lightly to soften the focus or dim the surroundings, emphasising the happiness of a young couple so clearly in love; a few atmospheric ones of guests enjoying the party. She put the pictures together, uploaded them to Dropbox and emailed both Will and Annie the link.

Duty done, she took a deep, calming breath.

“It’s no good, I need a drink for this,” she said aloud to the empty room, and rose from her chair to mix herself a Screwdriver. For a few minutes she stayed where she was, leaning on the worktop in the kitchen area, trying not to look at her desk. Then she realised how ridiculously she was behaving. “Oh for fuck’s sake, Geraldine, woman-up. It’s only Jonathan, after all! He’s just a man.”

Only Jonathan. Yeah, that’s it. ONLY Jonathan. Only the first, the only Jonathan. Just a man…just Jonathan…

She tried to harness the vague anger she was sensing in her gut. She was annoyed with herself. As if going to the party wasn’t stupid enough, she had stayed, even after she saw he was there. Still a bit of masochism in there somewhere, Geraldine? Still punishing yourself after all these years, for not reaching him? Or maybe for not getting on with your life afterwards? But then, as if staying were not the most monumentally idiotic thing to do, she had compounded it by asking him, once they were alone in the garden, if she could photograph him.

Because that’s what I do: I photograph people.

She clicked on the first of the pictures, to enlarge it. Her breath stopped in her throat. She had felt compelled to ask him from the minute they had stepped through the patio doors and onto the decking, because of the light. They had barely spoken: Will had introduced the man she knew damn well was Jonathan Pine as ‘James Something-or-other’ and her puzzled look and been answered with such a stern expression she just smiled awkwardly at him and shook his hand. Then Annie had whisked Will away and, alone in her company, Jonathan had guided her to the open doors and that incredible evening light.

It was golden yellow, with a hint of orange, the setting sun falling into the trees and his hair, his face…no, all of him had glowed. And thus the camera had to come up, to hide how much she wanted to cry, to touch his cheek, to kiss his eyelids the way she used to. He was still so incredibly beautiful, but there was something more in his eyes now, a sadness that seemed deeper and more defined than before, and when she had whispered “Jonathan?” he had shaken his head and asked for her number.

“The lens still loves you, Jonathan,” she murmured, fighting the sudden urge to turn away, as if all this beauty burned her. A choking tightness in her throat made her reach for her drink and she took a gulp. Reluctantly, she let her gaze return to the screen as the tears began to flow in earnest. “And, you bastard, fuck it, so do I.”

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Said bastard was, at that moment, sitting in a chair in his basement flat in a nearby part of town, nursing a scotch. The shadows were lengthening outside, throwing patches of darkness onto the brick-lined flight of steps that led up to the garden from the glass doors in front of him. He was pleasantly weary after running around Victoria Park for a good part of the afternoon, and cleaning the flat before dinner. Now he was wrestling with the impulse to open his laptop and see what the net
had to say about Geri. Did he really want to go there? There were a dozen reasons not to - the most glaring one was Angela’s strict prohibition of any contact with friends or family (not that he had any of the latter excluding his aged aunt in Germany). Any association with him could potentially endanger them and, of course, reveal Jonathan himself to interested parties. Parties best kept ignorant of his current whereabouts. But there were other reasons, more personal ones that suggested he should perhaps let sleeping dogs lie.

When he drove away from the flat in Guildford that day, all his worldly goods stuffed into his elderly Ford Escort, he had been awful to Geri. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he recognised that he had treated her really unfairly for months, even years before he had summoned the strength to leave. And yet she had remained steadfast. As time passed, he began to glance back and remember the pain in her eyes: how it had made him hesitate, not least because even then, she was still begging him to stay. Her tearful face swam before his eyes, mixed in his personal misery-montage *(See what Jonathan Pine can do to a woman! He is quite the expert!)* with the bloodied and bruised visages of Sophie and Jed, and those of Isabelle and all the other women he had hurt, on purpose, or, more usually, by acts of omission. He drained the glass he was holding. “Fuck it,” he said under his breath, and reached for the laptop.

*Geri Muir Photography* had a very professional-looking website. “All the images here are the work of Geraldine Muir,” was the proud boast, and Jonathan couldn’t suppress a smile when he saw the typically self-deprecating, artily out-of-focus self-portrait she had put next to the tiny ‘About Me’ section of the homepage. Her work was impressive; brides and grooms in beautiful images that seemed to express the joy of a day in one perfect moment; parents and children in delightful, informal poses; even some interiors she had photographed for commercial clients. But the ones that moved him were on what she had titled the ‘Arty’ page. Trees, flowers, buildings: she seemed to specialise in images taken from unorthodox angles, with the focus on the less obvious. The same was true of her portraits, which were better than he recalled. He felt warmth blooming in his chest. She’d always been at her best taking pictures of people. She loved it, she was brilliant at it, and it was the thing that had brought them together, all those years ago.
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

The teenagers have made a connection, but Jonathan is focused on his future in the Army. However, Geri is a determined young lady...

THEN

And a part of me keeps holding on/ Just in case it hasn't gone

Geri was floundering. Instead of the anticipated flat-out refusal or immediate acceptance, Jonathan didn’t seem to be responding to her request at all. He just stood there, in the middle of the corridor by the Modern Languages notice board, staring at her, his mouth slightly open. She did the only thing she could think of, and blundered on.

“So, er… Are you free now?” He continued to look doubtful, or more accurately, stunned. “Only I thought, er… we could go over to the Rec, do it there...?” She smiled hopefully at him. When he nodded mutely, Geri turned, leading him out of the Art Block and towards the narrow side gate that connected the school to the Maxwell Road Recreation Ground.

She had come up with a plan overnight, should he accept the role of her model: she liked the idea of contrasting his youth and freshness with the crumbling, rusty play equipment and tatty buildings in the old neighbourhood park. Not that there was much left now; several of the more dangerous pieces had already been removed, and the little roundabout she had adored as a child was partly dismantled and taped-off, but the old swings were still there, even if their days were numbered. The pale autumnal sun was no more than a silver disc in the white sky, but as Geri was using black and white film, she did not worry. The light was even and that was perfect: she could make use of her own chosen shadows.

The Rec was a long, narrow, mostly green space that occupied the strip of land between the school campus and the Victorian splendour of Maxwell Road. It was still well used, with a football pitch, and four weedy tarmac tennis courts surrounded with rotting wire fencing at the opposite end from the play area. The two teenagers had the place almost to themselves this weekday lunchtime. Their only companions were a couple of middle-aged women walking small terriers together along the far fence line, and a young mother who was wearily followed her toddler as the little one kicked a ball with great gusto near the centre spot.

As they crossed the worn and lumpy pitch towards the play area, where a couple of shelters and a deserted snack kiosk also stood, Geri was lost in thought, planning her shots. Maybe he could sit in that shelter for some...? When he spoke she was startled by the sudden sound.

“Do you have to do this a lot?”

She took a moment to process his question. No, she wasn’t sure what he meant. “This?”
“Ask random people if you can take their picture, I mean.”

The corners of her mouth turned up a little at his implication; he wasn’t ‘random’. “No… I don’t think so, anyway. This is the first portrait assignment we’ve had, so far. Last time it was,” she held up her free hand to make air quotation marks, “‘Geometric Shapes in the Landscape’.”

Jonathan’s eyebrows rose comically. She found it unbearably endearing. “What did you do for that?”

“I got loads of great shots.” She was grinning at the memory and Jonathan was entranced by her expression.

They reached the swings and she asked him to put his stuff to one side and sit on one of the faded red plastic seats. “Don’t swing, though!” He laughed, beginning to relax a little, then she got her camera out and, remembering why they were there, he tensed up again. “OK, right… I think to begin with, don’t look at me. Look over there, at the road, maybe? No need to smile… Yes, perfect!” The click of the shutter, the whirr of the motor drive, the little noises of satisfaction she was making as she crouched beside him… Jonathan tried to take himself away from the moment, from the terrible self-consciousness that was making him feel mildly nauseous.

After a few moments, Geri stood, stretching her legs and looked around. “D’you mind moving to that shelter?” He shrugged, shook his head, and, pausing to pick up his backpack, followed her once again, this time to sit rather gingerly on the woodworm-ridden and distinctly dodgy bench in the rotting shelter. As she worked, Geri looked to him like a proper photographer already, with her light meter and her SLR camera. She changed lenses and checked the light, holding a meter up beside his head. Jonathan had to close his eyes and will himself not to blush; being so close to her again had restarted the alarming heart rate and clammy feelings he’d experienced in the French room. To divert his thoughts, he asked her the question that was uppermost in his mind.

“D’you mind me asking why you picked me?”

Geri swallowed and lifted the camera back up to her eye swiftly, hoping he would not have seen the blush she felt boiling under her cheeks and neck. “Oh, er…I dunno,” she lied, “I think, well…er, you have an interesting face, I s’pose.”

His reaction was immediate, a reflex laugh. She captured the smile, the sweet bewilderment and utter disbelief with her camera. It was one of only two shots she took that day where he was looking directly into the lens. The sight of that smile squeezed her heart when she developed the film and made her prints the following Monday after lessons were done. Izzy the photography technician was helping, and she was standing by Geri when the image began to appear on the paper. She whistled softly.

“He’s a looker, girl! Yours?”

Geri shook her head. “Just a…” What was he? Izzy finished the sentence for her anyway.

“…friend? Better get in there sharpish, love.” She nudged Geri in the ribs playfully, smiling wickedly before, with a wink, the technician moved on to help the next person. Izzy’s impish demeanour and youthful face belied her grey cropped hair. She was very popular with staff and students alike, and despite being her late fifties, seemed to be able to communicate with the teenagers very well.

Pegging her prints up to dry, Geri thought ruefully about last Friday lunchtime. Photography completed, the two of them had left the Rec and walked along Maxwell Road, to the end of the High
They had talked a bit, about school, and about their plans for the future. Jonathan had spoken matter-of-factly about his hopes of becoming a soldier like his father. Knowing the gossip, she didn’t pry, but instead answered his question about her own plans, for uni and beyond. It was, more than anything, fun being in his company. He made her feel comfortable, even though she found her heart racing a little if they brushed against each other accidentally, or if she looked for too long into those mysterious eyes.

Jonathan got home on the day of his modelling debut to find he was walking in on a stand-up row between his foster mother Nicky and her son, Matthew. This was not unusual, but he had yet to become accustomed to the shouting, even though he knew they would end up hugging – eventually. She had told him it was healthier than bottling things up, but he remained unconvinced. Rather than get caught in the middle of what was clearly the worst phase, he slinked along the hallway wall towards the kitchen, freezing like a rabbit in the headlights when Nicky spotted him and spoke. “Oh, hello Jonathan. Everything OK?” She said this in her normal tone of voice, in complete contrast to the near-scream she had been using on Matt. He nodded and continued on his way, pouring himself a glass of coke from the bottle in the fridge and going up to his room.

He dropped his bags on the bed and sat down beside them to take his trainers off. After changing into some exercise gear he picked up his older, comfier running shoes from where he had left them the day before, neatly arranged against the skirting board. His room was small but clean, and he kept it tidy. He had a view out onto the large garden, and the bathroom was just across the landing. This was a good place to be. He felt OK here and he hoped it would last until he left school. It was one of the longest and best placements he’d had. Nicky and her partner Richard were pretty laid back. They were experienced foster parents, and seemed adept at blending the kids with each other and their own teenagers. Currently, Jonathan was the only incomer, as Patrick had left that summer to join the Air Force, and Sidebe had gone back to her mother last week, if somewhat unexpectedly.

He stood and did a few stretches before he bounced down the stairs and headed out of the back door, through the garden gate and along the alley between the houses. Jonathan liked to run; it was one thing he was always good at, and he knew he needed to be fit to get into the Officer Cadet programme next year. It was free, as well. And when he ran, nobody hassled him; nobody expected him to be or do anything. It was just him, and the ground beneath his feet, his muscles and the air in his lungs. Usually, he let his mind go blank, but that afternoon he found it impossible not to think about Geri, her smile, and her beautiful hair.

His foster home was close to WCC, closer than it was to Alderman Greenacre. Moving around Weston as he had, he knew many good running routes and varied them to keep it fresh. So Jonathan saw nothing strange when he found himself running past the gates of the Maxwell Road Rec. He turned and went through them, skirted the play area, and when not checking the ground ahead for dog shit, he glanced wistfully at the swings as he ran. Some young kids were playing an improvised football game; there was a great deal of falling down theatrically and shouting of phrases they had heard on TV but not really understood. When the ball was miss-hit and came bouncing towards him, Jonathan paused to kick it back, gaining a cheery “Thanks, mate!” for his trouble.

He passed the gate that connected the Rec to the Westonfield CC grounds and looked over at the sprawling buildings beyond the lawns and outdoor sports area. He was enjoying his time there more than he had anticipated he would. Going to yet another new school, with only two others he knew at
(unless you counted his foster brothers, but they were in years 7 and 9) had felt like the latest in a long line of mountains to climb. But he was loving it; he was gifted at languages – and having a German mother, he had been completely bi-lingual by the time she died when he was seven. Being allowed to focus on the subjects he excelled at had boosted his confidence, and he felt more included than he ever had, part of the little ‘gang’ with Carl and Justin… but the idea of girls, one girl in particular, troubled him.

Jonathan had known plenty, naturally, over the course of his life until then: fellow-residents of children’s homes, foster siblings, schoolmates, but he was not a boy who had ‘girlfriends’. Being alone in the way he was – and had been, for nearly ten years now - had made him develop a degree of distance from others. The all-too frequent changes of location (during one particularly bad year, he had seven different addresses) had made him wary of forming attachments. People – adults and children – came and went in his life without warning, and were not to be relied upon. But he was aware of a strengthening urge to get to know Geri Muir better. It was more than just the obvious physical attraction, although there was plenty of that to propel him forward. There was something about her, about how she was when she took the photos, the way her face took on a serious concentration that made him want to kiss her so badly it hurt. But he didn’t really know what to do about it.

Leaving the Rec, Jonathan took the main road, dodging along the crowded pavements on his way up the hill towards the Garrison. It loomed over the town like a scowling man, its grey facades stern in the fading autumn evening. As he neared it, he pictured himself going through the gate - *a quick salute from the guard, and the smart young officer is on his way* – to fulfil his purpose, his role in whatever exciting, important things went on in there, out of sight of the civilian population. He ran along the side, parallel with the fence and up, over the open ground beyond the boundary to the hilltop, where he could pause, catch his breath and look down on the manicured grass and flower beds, the ranks of buildings and the parade ground with its flag poles. Above all, Jonathan wanted to be part of the bustle and activity he could see; the coming and going of green trucks; the groups of men and women in fatigues or training gear; the business of protecting the nation.

*****

If Geri had known, back in the cooling, ever-shortening days of autumn, that it would take until almost Easter for anything to change between her and the enigmatic, infuriating Jonathan Pine, she might have given up and looked elsewhere. Or maybe not. She was a patient girl, and although not exactly experienced, she knew that boys of her age could be a bit slow when it came to romance… So she waited, and hoped. She wasn’t one to push, especially not this time, when she really felt something in a way she never had before, but this was becoming RIDICULOUS. Jonathan had seemed pleased with the photos when she showed him some of them the following week (she had printed nearly all of her shots from that day and she picked out a handful of the best ones she didn’t put in her assignment for him). Yet again, despite being enthusiastic and friendly, he made no apparent attempt to get any closer to her.

There was one saving grace, however: the blossoming romance between Trish and Justin led to a sort of loose alliance, whereby Carl and Jonathan, too, were liable, in free time during the school day, to be on the same patch of ground, or at the same table in the canteen, or huddled against the wall in the same indoor area as the Pink Ladies. Geri feigned disinterest in the object of her obsession, as much to support Maxine as anything (she *loathed* Carl with a fiery passion), and he rarely spoke to her when they were all together. But often, in these awkward sessions, with Justin and Trish snogging or whispering some cheesy stuff to each other while the others tried to ignore them, Geri would glance at Jonathan and see his eyes on her.

Christmas came and went, and the academic year ploughed on towards the spring, carrying the
reluctant student body with it. Trish dumped Justin for a week in the depths of dark and freezing
February, because she saw him talking to Vanessa (“Flirting, Geri, HE WAS FLIRTING with that
slag!”) from his Geography group. She forgave him when he managed to convince her it was
completely innocent, something to do with the up-coming field trip. Things soon went back to how
they had been, and still Geri looked, and he looked, but there was no movement between Jonathan
and her.

“I assume you’ll be inviting Jonathan to your party.” Elaine had taken to saying his name in such a
way that Geri could almost see the italics. She blushed a little, despite trying very hard not to.

“I expect so, Mum. He’s part of the crowd.” Suddenly, that week’s Radio Timesseemed fascinating.
Her mother had always been very open with her about sex and relationship matters – a bit too open,
sometimes, for Geri’s comfort. But it did mean that she had grown up knowing there was always a
sympathetic and, importantly, non-judgemental adult on hand for her to talk things through with.
Geri knew she could share her worries and excitements with Elaine – up to a point, that is. Talking
about Jonathan was hard. She was embarrassed and confused about how she felt, so she had hardly
mentioned him recently. It had not gone unnoticed.

Elaine Muir smiled and picked up her Joanne Harris paperback. The Saturday after next, just at the
end of the Spring Term, was two days before Geri’s seventeenth, and her mother had agreed to host
a party at their home. There wasn’t a huge amount of room, so she had insisted that only real friends
were invited. And, she said no booze – not that she believed for a moment that particular stipulation
would be adhered to; she had been seventeen herself once, and it didn’t feel thatlong ago. She
looked over her reading glasses at her little girl, her beautiful baby, face lit by the flickering of the
TV screen, her long hair shining in the lamplight. She was almost a woman, and not for the first time,
Elaine wished hard that Peter could have seen how his little Jellybean had turned out.

“Well,” she said so quietly Geri could hardly hear, “it will be nice to see what he looks like, at last.”

*******

“Do you likeme, Jonathan?”

The kitchen was full of shadows, because only the subtler cupboard lights were left on. Most of the
chilli con carne and pizza had been eaten, as evidenced by the pile of dirty paper plates and the sink
full of cutlery, and all that remained of Geri’s birthday cake was a mess of blue and white icing
fragments and a few heaps of crumbs. The party had reached the mellow stage now, with twenty or
so teenagers, in couples or small groups, dotted around the place, talking, dancing, drinking or
snogging. Left to their own devices, and trusted (up to a point), they were mostly behaving well.
Even Maxine had been allowed to attend, on the strict understanding that Elaine would be
supervising at all times. Geri’s mother had assured Mr and Mrs Williams that she would be there. She
did so with her fingers crossed, because she had planned all along to make a discreet withdrawal to
next-door, once she was happy that the amount of alcohol (not-so clandestinely brought in) being
consumed was not excessive, and that Geri could ensure everyone behaved sensibly.

Geri had reached her breaking point. The last straw, the thing that had made her snap, was the sight
of Maxine and Carl – yes, the Carl she professed to hate – in a clinch at the bottom of the stairs. For
fuck’s sake, if those two can… Jonathan had been around earlier, but now he seemed to have
disappeared. The time had come for at least one of them to do some straight talking.

The loud music from the living room was muffled, because Geri had pushed the door almost shut
when she saw she had been correct on the subject of his whereabouts. “Well?” The vodka that Trish
had ‘smuggled’ into the punch was emboldening her, and now they were alone together for the first
time since the photo-shoot on the Rec, irritation was overcoming caution. Jonathan stood
apologetically by the sink, head down, clutching an empty glass. He looked up as she spoke again, his eyes wide with shock.

“Yes!” he replied, louder than he might have wanted. He took a deep breath and repeated it more steadily and quietly. “Yes, yes… I do.” I like you a lot. Carefully, he lifted his gaze up to her face, and he was filled with elation to see a smile had replaced the anger. She crossed the room to stand in front of him, comfortably inside his personal space, looking up into his serious face. She reached up to touch the front of his Green Day t-shirt, with a hand that only shook a little.

“Then do something about it, you idiot…”

A thousand thoughts filled his mind: how she smelled now she was so close – sweet and flowery, as she always did, but with herby and fruit tones tonight; how dark her hazel eyes were in the low light of the room, but somehow managed to remain fixed steadily on his; how hot and sweaty he felt, moist-palmed and shaky; how all of that seemed to melt away as he looked down at her pink lips, and discovered they were even softer than he had imagined.

Geri’s impression of it later, as she lay in bed and reflected on the event, was of warmth and smiles and thrills of excitement. His hair was soft; his eyes were even deeper when you looked into them from only an inch away; his muscle and bone were hard against the softness of her breasts; his lips searching, his breath, mingling with hers. At last. Their kisses had been tentative at first – she wondered if he had ever kissed a girl before – but felt natural and improved rapidly. They had made a date to meet the next afternoon in the Rec, and she had to suppress a giggle of sheer joy at the thought, and at the memory of their parting. He had held her gently and whispered, only the third thing he had said since she entered the kitchen.

“Of course I like you, Geri.”
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

After no contact from the mysteriously re-named love of her life, Geri has decided she has to get on with her life when she gets a text message from an unknown number...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

NOW

I was so scared to face my fears/ Nobody told me that you'd be here

His texts had reached her when she was teaching her advanced class at the Adult Learning Centre, so it was only now, sitting in her car in the half-empty car park, nearly two hours later, that she was able to answer. She hesitated, again uncertain of the wisdom of opening her oldest, deepest wound. His brevity was unchanged from the old days:

<It's me. Can we talk, in private?>

<Do you know Beacon Hill Park?>

Well, she thought, as an opening after ten years, that's pretty cool. Her thumb hovered over the screen. It was nearly a week since the party, and, in the absence of any contact, Geri had begun carefully repacking her memories of Jonathan, wrapping each one meticulously in tissue paper and tucking it away. During the first couple of days, when the pain of seeing him again was still stinging-fresh, she had searched for an explanation: he was just passing through, not stopping, he’d asked out of politeness, with no intention of calling… It had been a relief, despite the hard lump of sadness that she couldn’t quite shift from her chest. Because if he didn’t get in touch, she wouldn’t have to revisit the worst days of her life.

And now this. This curt, business-like pair of messages. It hit her that she had no choice. She opted to mirror his tone.

<I know it. When?>

To a friend, or even to an acquaintance, she might have excused her slow response. But she was too angry in that moment, sitting in the near-dark of a Thursday night, with the smell of fried chicken from the parade of shops over the way transporting her back to St Botolph’s and that first, quiet connection they had made on an eighteenth-century tombstone. Angry mostly with herself, at the way he could still get to her, cut her to the quick, just by being there. And angry at the way her heart had leapt when she realised who was texting from that unknown number. But she did let out a little grunt of satisfaction when his reply was instant; he must have been waiting.

<Tomorrow 19.30 OK? Up the hill by the rocks.>
Less than a mile away, Geri’s one word affirmative response prompted a muted whistle of relief. The Landsdowne was noisily crowded, so his companion didn’t hear him, but Stefan noticed the change of expression. “You have some good news, James?” Jonathan nodded, and put his phone away quickly, wanting to change the subject.

“Any plans for the weekend, Stefan? What do you do with yourself, now the football season’s over?”

“Ah, but it will soon be Euro 2016, my friend. The Czech Republic will win!” He roared with laughter at his own joke. Jonathan joined in, out of politeness. He knew next to nothing about football, and really had no idea whether or not his colleague’s home country were contenders. He liked Stefan. With Will in charge, after only a few short weeks together they made a good team. Everyone had their role at the Gateway Centre. Jonathan, ever the diplomat, worked well with the more distressed clients, and his language skills were fast making him indispensable. Stefan – short, round, fair - was the network person. He seemed to know every landlord in the city, or the perfect contact at the council offices for whatever need arose, or where they might arrange ESOL classes, or where a particular refugee might find the ideal work placement.

Will returned from the bar with a round of drinks. Dark, almost as tall as Jonathan but wider, with a rugby-player’s physique, he had navigated the packed bar with three pints gripped between his hands. Once he had put them down with a surgeon’s precision, he produced three packets of Walker’s Cheese and Onion from his jacket pockets with a flourish, as if he were a conjuror pulling rabbits out of a hat. Jonathan picked a shiny blue bag up and looked at it dubiously. “They still make these up the road?” he asked, opening it and wincing at the slightly rank odour that emerged.

“Oh yes. You must have missed this sort of gourmet food, in the jungle.” Will was winking at Stefan, who had already begun stuffing crisps into his mouth.

Jonathan feigned his now customary irritation at Will’s recurring joke – his legend, working in Sierra Leone with MSF for five years, hardly amounted to a claim of being ‘in the jungle’. “Not really.” Nevertheless, Jonathan ate them, steadily crunching, the familiar, unique taste and sharp mouth feel transporting him back. Back to the days before Cairo before Mallorca, to before he left England to hide (he had thought forever), to before Iraq, before the many betrayals, large and small, that had led him to become this new person sitting here with his colleagues: James Rowan, refugee resettlement advisor.

He swallowed the lump of starch in his mouth convulsively, doubting the wisdom of contacting Geri for the thousandth time since Saturday. But even as he did, the steel core of certainty took hold again. He had wrestled with it for days, but in the end he had known that he had to see her. It was that simple. He had been reckless, selfish, wasted opportunities time and again over the years; he had careered into and out of women’s lives, and it had to stop sometime. He didn’t know why now, but he had a hint of why Geri... she deserved better from him.

It was not a long walk to his flat in Avenue Road, so when they left the pub he declined Stefan’s offer of a lift, preferring to stretch his legs in the cool night air. He crossed Victoria Park, keeping away from the darker, more shadowy areas. The city was not a dangerous place, but there was no point in seeking out trouble. As he strode along the path, moving swiftly between the pools of light cast by the regularly placed lampposts, he heard Angela Burr’s voice in his head.

“You’re a bloody idiot, Jonathan! You can’t do that – it’s much too risky.”

“If I’m going to do anything, then it has to be something useful, something that uses the few skills I have to offer, and-“
“Few skills?” She looked at him sceptically, the eyebrows over her round brown eyes comically arched. They were in the spartan sitting room of a safe house in south London, the same one he had been trained in before he went to the West Country, what felt like a lifetime before. “For fuck’s sake, Jonathan, you know we’d take you on, drop of a hat, but River House aren’t exactly your biggest fans… or mine, come to that.” She laughed mirthlessly.

He shook his head. He had already made clear his desire to put his adventures in espionage behind him, but at the same time, he had become determined to find a real purpose in the new life they were offering him. He had settled on this, but he wasn’t so naïve he couldn’t see it might make him a bit more visible than was ideal. He leaned forward in his chair, narrowing the gap between him and the woman who had become much more than just a handler to him. He saw her fidget in her seat, trying to get comfortable; she was due to give birth any day now, and yet here she was, still caring for his welfare. Rob had called her in, a last-ditch attempt to dissuade him from the new life he had chosen.

“I get it, Angela. I understand, but I have to do something that, in however small, probably insignificant a way, offsets what the Ropers of this world have done, and are doing.” His jaw set, and she saw a flash of the righteous anger that had made her recruit him to take down the arms dealer. “I can’t just go somewhere and cultivate my garden, purely because it would be the safer option.” He met her gaze. “And let’s face it, there’s no such thing as a risk-free life. It’s often easier to hide in a crowd. A stranger stands out more in a small community.”

Jonathan was still smiling at the memory of Angela as he reached the far side of the park, crossed the junction and headed along the largely deserted pavements of Queens Road. A few smokers were gathered outside Barceloneta, and some last-minute patrons were leaving the Chinese take-away, but otherwise he was alone with his thoughts. She had persisted in her attempt to steer him along another path, but eventually she had accepted that in this, as in the other choices she had seen him make since they met in Switzerland, he must have the final word.

Well, Anj, I think you’d be screaming at me if you knew what I am up to now…

*****

The sign was unequivocal: “This car park will be locked at 9pm today.” Geri checked her watch. It was seventeen minutes past seven. There were half a dozen cars already parked, as well as an oldish but clean blue Yamaha motorbike. She scanned them all as she passed, heading towards the path that led up the hill. They all looked as if they could be Jonathan’s, but she thought, he might not be here yet, or maybe he parked at the other place down on Breakback Road. Fixing her eyes on the sky above the rising ground ahead, she marched onwards.

Beacon Hill Park was quiet, despite the pleasantness of the weather that evening. There was an abundance of green, shades from the palest fresh lime to deep emerald, and she cursed the fact that for once, she had left her camera behind. The sky was streaked with clouds dyed orange and yellow by the falling sun, and the trees to the east of her glowed like copperleaf in the strange light. This abundance of natural beauty did nothing to calm her nerves.

On she climbed, toiling up the rain eroded path worn to a narrow sandy staircase by thousands of feet, wondering if this was all a waste of time. It was Friday night, part of her precious ‘me’ time. Fleetingly, she imagined herself on a stool in Timo, with Charlotte and Annie, giggling and sipping her cosmo. She dismissed the image with a swift headshake; there were no other options for her this night - she was where she had to be. The slope steepened rapidly and she found herself becoming pink-faced, puffing as assorted dog walkers and then a family, the youngest boy carrying a kite, passed her going the other way. The children looked at her oddly, no doubt wondering what a grown-up was doing going up the hill this late.
“What am I doing?” she muttered to herself, reaching into her jeans pocket for a tissue to wipe her nose; the wind was making it run. And yet her heart had quickened at the thought of seeing him, even before the forced exercise, and she felt that old familiar fluttering in her middle. She rounded the side of the slope, and there he was, sitting in the waning sunlight, watching solemnly over the green and pleasant land. She should have known he’d be there first – he was never late for anything, not once in all the years she knew him. You’d be on time for your own funeral, you would. Beside him, placed neatly on the rabbit-scraped grass, were motorcycle gloves and a helmet. He turned his head at the sound of her step on the gritty path, coming to his feet so rapidly she barely saw him move. Suddenly he was upright and straightening his jacket as if ready for inspection.

“Geri.”

“Jonath… Sorry, should I call you, er…?”

“James. James Rowan.” His face was stiff, his thin lips pressed together.

She smiled, but her eyes remained cautious. “James, yes, that’s it.”

They stood silently for a long moment, surveying one another. Jonathan was dressed correctly for the bike, she was pleased to note; proper boots, worn but good; armoured trousers as black as the jacket he had unzipped to offset the persisting warmth of the day. Beneath the latter was a plain grey t-shirt, and her eyes followed the rise of his neck, longer even than she remembered, to find the sharp line of his severe haircut and the noble curve of his jaw. Still fine, she thought, still so deliciously fine.

Jonathan watched her face as she looked him over, still debating what to tell her. He knew she would have a thousand questions, none of which he could answer, but it felt vital not to lie to her. He had told one giant, cruel untruth to her that day, and he could not, would not do it again. Not ever. She was keeping her distance, but even then he could see her cheeks were flushed from the climb, rose pink against the dark brown shimmer of her hair. She had gathered it into a loose knot at her nape, but he was happy that she still kept it long, as she always had. The light evening breeze was carrying her fragrance to him: softly floral, Chanel, he thought, or perhaps Miss Dior. A sudden, shocking instant of grief hit him and he felt tears gathering behind his eyes.

“Shall we walk a little?” He hated to be furtive, but the further they were from others, the better. Geri nodded and followed him as he picked up his bike gear then took the path that led down the far side of the hill. Approaching a steeper and more treacherous-looking section, he paused and in the habit of a gentleman, turned and reached out to take her hand. She stopped sharp, thrown off-balance by his gesture. They stood still for a few seconds, a silent tableau against the green backdrop. Both of them were looking at his outstretched arm; Jonathan fearing he had fallen at the first hurdle, and Geri remembering the tender touches of their youth. He flicked his eyes up and saw the marks of her sadness, the lines of which he knew he had drawn, and the familiar heaviness of guilt pressed on his chest. Then she seemed to recognise the practicality and took his hand, releasing it the moment she was on safer ground.

A bench squatted, alone and hard up against the woods on that face of the hill; perfectly placed for any weary walker to catch the last rays of the setting sun. The dedication said it was in memory of someone who loved nature, and there was certainly plenty to admire from that spot. Geri sat, and Jonathan, politely putting his things down between them, joined her. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, his hands clasped as if in prayer. He stared silently at the ground as she turned her head to look at him. Moved by his obvious struggling, she spoke first.

“What’s going on, James?”

He took a breath - half gasp, half laugh - and sat upright again. He tried to compose himself, because
it had hit him suddenly that this might be the most important speech he had made since he left Egypt. He made a herculean effort to keep his voice even, and not to loud. “It’s not exactly easy to explain, Geri.” He swallowed, his throat dry with nerves, and it clicked audibly. “You see, my life has got a bit, well… it’s been pretty… sort of complicated, recently.” He dared a glance to his left, to see her watching him, her expression neutral. He could not guess at the turmoil below that apparent tranquility. “Have you googled me at all? Since Saturday, I mean?”

Geri shook her head. She had been tempted, and if she had been able to recall his new name, she might have done it. But if he was going under that alias, for who knew how long… She had decided to wait and see what, if anything, happened next.

A sigh of relief. “Good, because if you do, you will probably read some things about me that you won’t like. None of them will be true, that’s all I can say.”

“Jonath-.” She stopped abruptly, frustrated. Deep frown lines furrowed her brow. What was all this about? He turned his whole body towards her.

“Look, I know this must sound ludicrous, or evasive, at least, but... I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you anything much. I have been serving Her Majesty again.” A moment’s hesitation. “But not in a uniform.”

She let this sink in. “OK. And now, here?” Her heart was racing. His scent reached her, and it came unchanged from her memory: soap, shampoo, that Dior cologne he always liked, a hint of sweat and leather. Jonathan shrugged.

“Exactly what Will told you at the party. I’m working with him at the Gateway. Helping resettle refugees.”

“Right. So this other stuff, this… government stuff. That’s all done with, is it?” He nodded, keeping his eyes firmly on hers. She thought she believed him. Feeling overwhelmed again, Geri moved her gaze away, letting it sweep over to the smoky blue horizon. She scanned the fields that led to it, finally moving her eyes back to the grass and stone hillside they had just descended. She still didn’t fully understand what had brought her there; why had she come, but more importantly, why had he asked her? She turned back. “What do you want from me, Jonathan? To keep my mouth shut? Keep your secret?”

Her implication hit him hard, an almost palpable gut-punch. Well, I suppose I deserved that. He stood up, suddenly, wrestling with what to say, because now the moment had come and he had no script. No training for this mission. No backup, no legend; no handler to assist him. He looked out over the very English countryside and searched for the words he needed, but he knew it was a pointless pursuit. He didn’t know exactly what he wanted to say. He heard her shift on the bench and made a half-turn to face her.

“Well, no, er… I mean, yes, of course, I’d rather you didn’t tell anyone my former name, but that’s not why I wanted to speak to you, Geri.” Her expectant expression threw him. He had imagined speaking to her a hundred times in the last twenty-four hours, and in most scenarios she had walked away, refusing to hear him out. But here was the real, flesh-and-blood Geri, and she was listening. He ran his hand over the side of his head, a nervous tic she knew so well it brought an unconscious smile to the corners of her mouth. A tiny flower bud of pain opened its petals behind her sternum. All the years, all the loneliness, it all went back to that morning.

Jonathan missed seeing all this in her face because he was staring at the ground, trying to think what to say. He had concluded that he knew what he wanted, but not how to ask for it. It was too much, he realised that, and he had no right. “Look, this is probably, no, definitely completely unreasonable
of me, and you have every right to tell me to fuck off. I ought never…why should you? I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have expected you to—”

Geri got to her feet and reached out to touch his arm gently, desperate to stem the flow. Her own feelings were overwhelming her but her voice was quiet and even.

“Whatever it is you need to tell me, let’s start heading back before we get locked in, shall we?” Jonathan looked at her uncomprehendingly for several seconds, his head still full of a million painful memories, some very fresh. Then he recalled the sign on the gate and looked at his watch. They had been there an hour already. He gathered up his gear and followed Geri around the lower path. He could not avoid noticing that she looked as good from behind as ever. She had dressed simply for their meeting, in jeans and an oversize white cotton shirt, her feet in navy canvas slip-ons. Classy, beautiful. His heart lurched.

Theirs were the only two vehicles still waiting in the dusk, his bike some distance from her small Citroen. They stood roughly halfway between, shuffling awkwardly.

“Look—”

“Can I—”

They had spoken simultaneously, and both stopped instantly. The clash made their eyes meet. Something passed between them and instantly the idea of parting made Geri want to cry. She didn’t want this to be it, and she felt Jonathan needed more, too.

“Look, do you want to go somewhere else? Talk some more?”

He nodded gratefully. “Do you have—?”

“There’s a nice pull-in, with a view, down the hill towards Loughborough… Doesn’t get doggers or anything, it’s too open.”

“Sounds ideal.”

“Follow me, then.”

Geri got in her car and waited for Jonathan to put his helmet on and start the bike. It was the first time since she woke that morning that she had felt in control. Very shortly they were on the road, and she took the few minutes she would have alone to try to gather her thoughts. What was he hiding? Was it for his protection, or hers? She quickly realised that those were not the important questions. The one she needed to be answered was the one she had been asking herself since she saw him at the party: dare I let him back into my life?

The lay-by was, as Geri had told him, totally without cover, although it was down a steep slope, clinging to the side of the hill. That meant that they would not be readily visible from the road, which comforted Jonathan a little. His indecision about what to say hadn’t eased much on the ride, although the process of gearing-up, getting on the bike and the pleasing physical sensations of riding had soothed his anxiety a little. He pulled in and stopped a few feet in front of the pale blue C3 Citroen.

Geri was leaning on the bonnet of her car, her legs crossed at the ankle. She watched him put the Yam on the side stand, swing his leg over and take off his gloves and helmet. He’d had a Honda Fireblade for a while, she recalled, back when… He looked so good the lump she had swallowed earlier was there again, as were the barrel-load of butterflies in her stomach. She fixed her gaze on his eyes, because whatever clever ways he’d learned to hide – himself, his feelings – she thought she’d still be able to read him through those.
Jonathan stood still and silent for a while, his palms rubbing on the sides of his bike trousers, looking at the town below them in the distance. He felt the weight of her gaze on him, but he couldn’t seem to find any words that sounded right. He was still fighting the battle with his conscience that had been raging all week: could he ask, should he ask her to give him a chance to explain, and to apologise? Was that really what he wanted? As soon as he began to form a sentence, all the mistakes, all the damage he had done to people who had trusted him with their love came rushing into his head, crowding out all rational thought.

Then suddenly, as was frequently the case, Sophie spoke to him, quiet and calm, that brave smile that hurt him so much in her voice: “You accuse yourself too much… you are a good man, Jonathan.” He found the words at last.

“I’m sorry, Geri, you must think I’m a complete idiot as well as a total arsehole. It’s just that…” Her face was pale but not fearful or angry as he had anticipated, and it derailed him for a second. “Sorry. It’s just that it’s not simple for me, and even possibly not entirely safe, to talk to anyone who knew me from before.”

“I see.” She tried to think what he had been doing. He’d been in some kind of special unit in Iraq, was he…? “Are you an agent of some sort? A spy, Jonathan?” That came out louder than she meant it, and he paled visibly and stepped forward, reaching to put his hand on her arm, shaking his head. “Not really, no.” He swallowed. “And I know it seems a bit cloak-and-dagger, but please, never call me that in front of anyone.”

“Okay…” Her strategy of watching his eyes told her that he was sincere, because he seemed a bit scared, something she hadn’t seen in him since before the army.

He withdrew to his position outside her comfort zone. “Like I was saying, it might be risky – for you, I mean, as well as me. But the thing is, when I saw it was you, standing there, with your camera…” He had to stop again, because tightness was compressing his neck. All the years, all the others he had hurt since, they all went away in that moment; this was his Jellybean. Tears pressed against his eyes and he had to look down at his boots, hoping they wouldn’t show while he got a grip on himself.

*My god,* Geri thought, *is that what he wants… just like that?* Anger tugged at her sleeve. She watched him as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers and took several deep breaths. She looked at his face. The lines of his cheekbones were more prominent than when she had fallen in love with him, and his hair shorter and more ordered, But his eyes were the same: stormy and lost, searching for who knew what. She saw them, grey-blue, desperate, as they chased hers in the gathering gloom.

“I need to talk to you. If you’d give me the chance, I’d like to try to explain about… I know I don’t deserve it, and you’d be completely within-“

She had already decided that he did deserve at least that, and so did she. “Yes, alright.” She returned to the softer tone. “Yes, James.”

He let out a long breath, unzipped his jacket completely and took a couple of steps closer. He didn’t push his luck, but instead stayed a few feet away, keen to maintain the détente. “There is a lot in need to say to you, Geri, more than we can cover here,” He waved a hand vaguely at the darkening sky, “but I want you to know a few things tonight, before you go home and google me, as I’m sure you will, now.”

She observed his body language. He was standing very still, and she saw his fingers twitching by his sides – he had given up smoking, she guessed, but really needed a fag right at that moment. His jaw
was clenched and his posture was very upright; not quite at attention, but near enough. This conversation was costing him considerably, she saw that. Good.

“OK, so... After I left you, I was transferred up to Catterick. I met someone, we got married.” He had kept his eyes on Geri’s face, and he saw fleeting emotion. “It was all too fast and a disaster, all my fault, we barely stayed together a month. We separated legally after six, and divorced as soon as we could.”

“What was her name?” Her hand tried to come up to cover her mouth. She shook her head instead. Why on earth do I need to know? “Sorry, none of my business.”

“No, no, it’s... her name is Isabelle. She was the Colonel’s daughter. Yeah, cliché, I know.” He shrugged, looking down again to hide the shame in his eyes. She saw it, nonetheless. “I put in for my discharge papers when we split up. Once I got out, I did a catering course, then I applied for a job with Accor. You know, the hotel chain—“

“Right.”

“I started as a sous-chef, but soon I applied to their management training scheme and got in. I worked in a few places, then I saw a job advertised, at the Nefertiti in Cairo.”

She nodded. That was the posh place she’d heard about. “What ever made you choose hotel work? I know you love cooking, but I’d have thought you’d prefer something more active.” She had no idea why she was making polite conversation with him, but she felt on autopilot. A strange sort of calm had settled over her once he had told her about his abortive marriage, as if nothing he could say could possibly wound her more.

“I’m not sure, to be honest. Something about it appealed, and it seemed to suit me. I mostly worked as a night manager, anyway. I liked it a lot, until…”

Geri saw his eyes change. Pain filled them and she felt tears well in her own; how could she feel compassion for him, after the way he had treated her?

Because you still care, you idiot. Even now, even listening to this story with no apparent point or relevance, except to explain his name-change and all this secrecy...

Jonathan swallowed hard, his mouth bunched into a narrow line as he struggled to keep his composure. He glanced at Geri and saw her watching him. She still seemed wary, but her eyes were glistening. “I did something in Cairo, the wrong thing for the right reasons, you could say. But it was reckless and someone... someone else paid the price. So I left Egypt and worked in Italy, a couple of other places, then I went to Switzerland.” He paused, considering his next words carefully. “It was while I was there that things changed.”

“Changed, exactly?” Geri had registered that Iraq had not been the last trauma in his life, but she was still not quite following his narrative.

“I got the chance to, well... to do some good, to set things right with Soph... To make amends, if you like.”

“And to serve your country again?” Geri had always teased him with that phrase, when they were together. Hearing it from her again made him smile.

“I suppose you could call it that, yes.”

A minute or more passed, and Geri realised he was not going to elaborate. Jonathan stayed standing where he was, but his posture loosened a little as the weight of his story slipped off his shoulders.
One question was burning in her chest. “Did you love her?”

He frowned, looking down in shame again, as the memory of Sophie walking away from him for the last time filled his head, suffused with the vanilla-scented air that always surrounded her. He managed a nod. \textit{I did love her, but I never admitted it to her, or myself.} He sidestepped his last memory, of her lying bloody and still on the floor of her suite, and looked up and into Geri’s eyes once again.

A ripple of cold air blew dust and dead leaves around the layby and she rubbed her arms, chilled by his story and the impending night.

“You’re cold.” She shook her head, but he was already taking off his jacket. He placed it over her shoulders and she shuddered at the feel of it: heavy, smelling of him. He stayed close and there was another instant of connection between them. Geri broke the tension.

“Look, it’s pretty much dark. I think we should-“

“Yes, of course. But I’d really like-“

“…to what? Tell me tales of derring-do? List your conquests?” She saw the grimace. “Sorry, that was unfair. But what is it you want to explain, exactly? More than what you’ve been up to, or how many women you’ve had since me?”

Jonathan felt it all again, as the wave of Geri’s anger hit him; all the shame and self-loathing, all the inadequacy. What was the point? Except that he had this chance to tell her what he felt, why he had left, why he had lied. That imperative was still there, in spite of her anger; maybe because of it.

“I said that I have no right to ask, and I don’t. But I would like a chance to explain. About you and me, and what happened. I regret that so much, Geri, how I hurt you, and-“

She nodded quickly before her anger took over again. “OK.”

His face was serious, and slightly shocked-looking. “You mean-“

“Yes, we can talk some more. Somewhere private.” Her hands squeezed her own elbows briefly. “Somewhere \textit{indoors}.”

Jonathan fought against the smile that was tugging at his mouth.

“And I will call you James, all the time, if that’s what it takes to stop you worrying so much.”

“Thank you.” On impulse, he reached out and took her hand lightly in his. The smooth touch of his fingers jolted her, making her entire nervous system jangle. “Shall I call you, then?”

“Please.” She squeezed his hand in reply, for a split second, and then released it, standing upright, passing him his jacket and walking around to the side of her car quickly before she gave in to the sudden, overwhelming urge that had gripped her. She unlocked the door, got in and grasped the steering wheel hard, fighting to stop the tremors that were threatening to unhinge her. She glanced through the windscreen: he was still standing by his bike, waiting for her to leave. Getting hold of herself, she started the engine, raised a hand in farewell and drove out onto the road.

Only after her second large glass of Argentinian Cabernet did she allow herself to mutter the thought, hidden in a sigh, but nonetheless aloud, to her empty flat: “I wanted to kiss him so badly I could taste it. Fuck .”
Chapter End Notes

Beacon Hill, outside Leicester, is a real beauty spot and worth a visit on a nice day. Can't guarantee you'll bump into Jonathan Pine, sadly...
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

At last, young Jonathan has overcome his fears. And it's not too long before the young sweethearts are ready to move to the next stage in their relationship.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

THEN

‘Cause you feel like home/ You’re like a dream come true

Holding hands. She loved how they were always doing it; the way he sought out the slightest contact, when walking or sitting. She adored the touch of his fingers on her palm, his thumb brushing over her knuckles, smoothing and soothing her. She appreciated beyond measure the fact that he never shied away from it, whether they were alone, out and about with the rest of the gang, leaving French class or even in the crowded canteen. A hundred, no, a thousand cheesy images: photographs, posters, movie clips… None of them had prepared her for the intense feeling of... Geri searched her vocabulary, but was unable to find the precise word she needed.

“Intimacy,” her mother announced when she had yielded at last to the inevitable and asked for a maternal opinion. Elaine smiled wistfully. “Your Dad always held my hand, always made sure he was on the outside of the pavement; opened doors.” She looked at her daughter. “You’ve got a gentleman, there, Jellybean.” She laughed. “I didn’t think there were any left, let alone at his age.”

“D’you think so?” She pondered the concept, chewing on her toast. “He wants to be an officer in the army…” Her mind had already wandered back to Jonathan’s fingers. Because it wasn’t just the way he touched her so much and so sweetly, but the sheer beauty of his hands that moved her. She had begun to photograph them, surreptitiously mostly, when he believed she was just setting up her camera.

“Geri!” Her Mum had raised her voice, because she hadn’t got an answer. “I asked you a question.”

Geri swallowed quickly. “Sor-reee!” She shrugged. “I was miles away.”

“I guessed.” Elaine’s face was serious. “Did you just say Jonathan wants to join the army?” He daughter nodded. “Oh.”

“Yeah. His Dad was a soldier. Got killed in Northern Ireland, in the Troubles, you know. He says he’s always wanted to follow in his footsteps.”

Her mother’s shaking head puzzled her, and then she realised what she had just said.

******

Things did not start out quite so smoothly. Jonathan went home from the party with one foot on Cloud Nine; the other was stuck, trapped in something from his childhood, and it was holding back
the unbridled exhilaration he had expected to feel. Richard was waiting up for him to come home, and he was able to say, quite sincerely, that yes, he had had a fantastic time, thanks. But as he climbed the stairs, made his way to the back of the house, opened his bedroom door and flopped down on his bed, he felt overwhelmed.

He didn’t have a word for the sensation that was gripping him and squeezing him like a toothpaste tube. He knew only that it was making everything hurt. He undressed quickly, although not without pausing to savour the hint of Geri’s perfume that he could still detect on his t-shirt. He crawled under the covers in just his boxers, switched off the light and lay on his back, trying to understand what was happening. He had dreamed of kissing her so many times, imagined her in his arms, gazing at him just the way she had tonight. He had woken, sticky and embarrassed, from a dozen wet dreams about her; why, now she had shown him she felt the same way, did he feel so terrible?

Jonathan had an impulse to scream out the pain, and with it his frustration that the happiness he was feeling was being crushed out of him by this inexplicable agony. But he did not. He made no noise at all. The seven-year-old orphan had learned early on that crying needed to be a solitary, soundless pursuit, unless you wanted to be mocked mercilessly. Silent tears trickled down his pale cheeks and into his ears as he stared at the ceiling.

Nicky noticed her foster-son was more subdued than usual the next morning. She watched him pushing a piece of sausage around his plate for a few minutes, and saw him gaze blankly out of the kitchen window. When Richard had herded Matt and Simon upstairs to collect their football kit, leaving her and Jonathan alone, she began clearing the table.

“Everything OK, Jonathan?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“You feeling alright? Bit hungover?” He shook his head. “Something happen at the party, then? You seem a bit quiet this morning, even for you.”

He lifted his curly head to see her smiling kindly at him. He knew she must be worried, because normally she was very respectful of his privacy, and never teased or tried to get him to talk about personal stuff. He hesitated, as it was not his habit to share. Then he remembered that he knew from experience that he could trust Nicky, and Richard, come to that. Their sons? Maybe not so much. His eyes flicked to the open door to the hall. His foster-mother saw the look and casually walked past, shoving it closed with her backside on her way to the sink.

Steeling himself, he spoke, trying to keep his voice even. “Something did happen, actually. Something quite, er…something good, I mean.” He couldn’t suppress the smile that split his face.

Nicky, who had nearly twenty years’ worth of experience as a foster-parent, felt a thrill of pleasure up her back. “Oh yes?” She turned back towards the table and eyed him carefully. “Must be a girl. Only a girl can make a boy like you grin like that. What’s her name?” She winked at him, and was gratified to see a blush rise over his handsome face. But almost immediately she saw the happiness start to slip. The pain was back, and it was sucking away his joy.

“What’s worrying you, dear?” She sat down opposite him and but didn’t reach for his hand, knowing he was frugal with his physical contact. In the almost two years that he had been with them, it had become clear that he liked to choose when to hug. Most of the time, he chose not to.

Jonathan’s jaw tightened as he wrestled with the conflicting emotions. He was pretty sure he knew what he felt for Geri. It was the normal thing boys his age are supposed to feel, he was certain: quite a bit of lust, a lot of affection. It was clear to him that he wanted them to be together. But this other
thing? He had the vague feeling that he’d felt like this before, but so much had happened to him, and he had got into the habit of suppressing bad memories. They didn’t help; they just made you feel awful. And they made you cry.

“I dunno. Nerves, I s’pose.”

“Are you seeing her again soon?”

“Yeah. Later on today, actually.” Talking seemed to exacerbate the discomfort, and he needed to get out of there. He stood up quickly and picked up his plate. He refused politely to let Nicky take it from him, pushing past her and scraping his largely uneaten fry-up into the bin, rinsing it and putting it in the dishwasher. Then he left the kitchen as fast as he could.

His foster-mum finished the dishes in a leisurely fashion, and dawdled. She wished the rest of the family a good time at football training when they clattered through. She took her time washing the frying pan, staring at her own reflection in the partly steamed up window. A handsome woman in her forties stared back, her unruly greying brown hair framing a still attractive face. She fretted for Jonathan. She had come to love her serious, lonely foster-son: he had a good heart, despite his difficult history, and she had been gratified to see him begin to blossom once he began his A-level studies. And now there was this girl. She had suspected there was someone he was keen on: the occasional dreaminess, the meticulous grooming; the barely-hidden anticipation of the party last night. Now it seemed that there had been some kind of meeting of the ways. So what was the problem?

Jonathan left the house an hour later, without more than a shouted “Bye!” Sunday was a loose day in the Jones household; he was not expected before dinner, which was always at seven. This was one reason why he loved living there. A rigid framework made him feel safe, but within that, he was allowed as much freedom as was appropriate. He knew, for example, that Nicky and Richard did not approve of his plans to join the British Army, but they offered nothing but support. Richard had talked to him about it, quietly, reasonably, but accepted his right to self-determination.

So focussed was he on the inexplicable anguish he was feeling, Jonathan didn’t give much thought to what he was wearing until he turned off Newton Lane and onto Maxwell Road. He passed the house on the corner, a jarring new addition just a few years old. It perched to one side of the row of elegant Victorian semis like a brassy young model on the end of a bench of elderly matrons. He had never really looked at it before, but now he spotted his own reflection in the glazed porch. He had dressed in his normal, default way, from the stack on the chair in his room: t-shirt (a Nirvana one, this time) and baggy camouflage shorts. He’d put on his old running shoes, too.

He stopped, mortified. He lifted one foot, tried to tell if it stank. He looked at his Dad’s watch: there was not enough time to go back and change, even if he ran flat out. He dithered for a minute or so, then decided to continue. It’s not as if she doesn’t know me, he thought. And better to arrive like this than have her think I stood her up. But the horrific realisation that he looked a mess was made worse when he entered the Rec and saw Geri. He could see her from the gate. She was sitting, looking a little uncomfortable, in the shelter where he had been photographed, nearly six months ago; she dazzled him. He took one last quick look down at himself, but it was too late. Reluctantly, but unavoidably, he walked over to her.

“Hi.”

Geri had watched him arrive. He looked as handsome as ever, but he seemed distracted and anxious. A horrible thought came to mind: What if he wants to say thanks, but no thanks? Fear and grief gripped her, but then he sat down close beside her and let his head lean until it touched hers. She turned to face him and he kissed her sweetly. They both sighed, each relieved of their individual
worry.

“So.”

“So?”

“Are we, er, me and you, are we…?”

She grinned. “…going out?” Nodding, she continued. “If that’s what you want too, yes.”

“I do want that, yes, but…”

“But?”

He shifted on the narrow wooden plank uncomfortably. It was cold, and he could feel the holes that time and the weather had left in its pitted surface. “You know I live in a foster-home, right?” Geri nodded and put her hand on his forearm. She squeezed it gently and he glanced down at it, moved by the kindness of that simple gesture. He swallowed the tears that threatened, and cleared his throat. “Well, it means I don’t get a lot of pocket-money, and my job at the Co-op finished last month. They’re cutting back on Saturday staff.” He shrugged. He had some money saved, but he wanted to keep that if he could.

“What difference does that make? I’m not going out with you for your money, Jonathan.”

He thought about what Justin did with Trish: the cinema, McDonalds, going to see bands at the Red Room. “But I can’t take you out to places, not much anyway.”

“I don’t want that, though. I like this. I like just, you know, hanging out.” She smiled at him, and once more he concluded she was the most beautiful girl in the world. “And I like this, too.” She reached up with her right hand, took him by the back of the neck and pulled him down to her lips once more.

Jonathan found himself wishing they could just kiss, all the time. Because when they did he felt nothing else; there was only the touch of her lips on his, the feel of the soft skin of her face against his nose, the burning heat under his palms wherever they touched her back or arms. The squeezing around his heart went away, and with each kiss they shared, perched on the bench on the crumbling old 1930s shelter, it returned a little weaker. By the time they parted that afternoon, the agonising discomfort was mostly gone.

*******

Monday morning break was the first time since the party that the ‘gang’ were all assembled. The only Pink Lady with a mobile was Trish, so there had not been any chatter about Geri and Jonathan. There was no eyewitness to report their tryst by the kitchen sink, nor any to let on about the canoodling in Maxwell Road Rec. That didn’t mean that the new proximity and blushing looks that passed between them came as a shock to the others, except perhaps Justin.

“Is something going on between Geri and Pine?” he whispered to Trish, who rolled her eyes and punched him on the bicep, not particularly gently.

“Where the hell have you been all year, dopey? Of course. Looks like they’ve finally got their acts together.” Her reply was not whispered, and Jonathan blushed violently, especially when Carl gave him the thumbs-up. But he stayed where he was, sitting on the low wall that marked the border between the playground tarmac and the grassy bank that led down to the fence and the Rec. He was next to Geri, and she shuffled just a few millimetres closer, making his pulse increase. To ground
himself as much as anything, he reached for her hand and took it in his much larger one. When she
turned her head he pecked her lips, the sight of which made Maxine let out a noisy sigh.

“When did this happen?” asked a still bewildered Justin. All heads turned to the happy couple. Geri
shrugged.

“Saturday night?” Maxine was glowing a little herself, recalling her own activities. She was already
regretting it, and had been careful to distance herself from Carl, lest he get the wrong idea. Geri and
Jonathan nodded, and their confirmation seemed to satisfy the group. It was the penultimate day of
term, and there was much to be discussed.

Trish was soon bemoaning her situation: her parents were taking her and her sister to Greece for the
Easter hols, and then, as if that weren’t bad enough, as soon as the Summer Term started, Justin was
going to be away for a week on his Geography field trip, to some place in the middle of nowhere
with only one phone. She turned on her tragic face and looked longingly at the object of her love,
who seemed annoying unperturbed. “Ow! What was that for?” He rubbed the inside of his arm
where Trish had pinched, hard.

“Don’t you care? I mean, we can only see each other for about five minutes in nearly four weeks!”

He looked at her for a moment too long before speaking. Geri watched, her heart in her mouth. Trish
had a temper, and she was rather too used to getting her way. Her heart was a good one, but she
seemed to have a blind spot when it came to Justin. Finally he spoke. “Of course I care, babe… but it
can’t be helped, cannit?”

Geri squeezed Jonathan’s hand and he smiled awkwardly. This was all very new to him, he wasn't
sure of the rules of this particular game. But he was an expert at watching people and trying to work
them out. He had got to know Justin quite well over the last few months, and he shared his new
love’s concern: something wasn't quite right there.

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The great rift came in the second week of the last term of the Lower Sixth. It was not entirely
unexpected, at least, not by the others. Jonathan had shared his unease more explicitly with Geri
during the Easter break, and she agreed: Justin was, more than likely, about to dump Trish - or at
least, to two-time her, probably with the infamous Vanessa-from-his-geography-group. They had
spent the rather damp and cool holiday watching the uncut episodes of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
the BBC showed late on Fridays (Geri recorded them all and had kept the videos). And kissing.
Sometimes both at once. They sat on the sofa, usually holding hands - especially in the scary or sad
bits - and Jonathan felt a little closer to Geri with every passing hour. The pain still lingered, and
often flared briefly but brightly when he looked at the tiny picture of his parents he had by his bed.
But most of the time, it was little more than a background drone, and he was pretty adept at ignoring
things that bothered him.

Elaine watched the burgeoning romance with pleasure. The boys Geri had brought home before
weren’t a patch on this one, especially not the appalling *Dave*. Jonathan seemed charming, polite, if a
bit quiet, and obviously smitten by her daughter. She trusted Geri to be sensible, so she didn’t
supervise them too closely (not that she could have done when at work). By the time the holidays
were over, Jonathan was a fixture at the Muir house. Elaine was pretty certain that things hadn’t,
well, *developed*. *Not yet, anyway*. All things considered, this chappie seemed like a good ‘un; Geri
could definitely have done worse.

Term began quietly enough. The whole year was starting to get a bit nervous, with the end-of-year
exams looming; those would be the first real test of what they had learned since September. Trish
was tanned after her Mediterranean sojourn, giggly and desperate to spend time with Justin. But he was in Yorkshire, and despite promises made, not communicating. Black clouds were gathering and only Trish seemed oblivious. Carl had been dropping hints, trying to cushion the blow, because he was kind-hearted and a pretty upright kind of a chap. He and Maxine never became a ‘thing’, but they did end up being good friends, which was just as well, because when the romance between Trish and Justin exploded, it could have taken the whole budding alliance between the Pink Ladies and the other two guys with it.

It turned out that whatever Justin had been talking to Vanessa about, that day back in February, it was definitely not completely innocent. He airily announced on his return that he was seeing Vanessa Polkovski now. Trish went into a sort of self-imposed purdah, only emerging after two weeks with a new haircut and an apparent disdain for anyone with a Y-chromosome.

Jonathan found it all completely baffling. He couldn’t understand how, if Justin cared about Trish as he had always seemed to, he could casually go off with someone else. He had been afraid of the strength of his own feelings at first, but he had never doubted them. Geri was the one. The first, the only. He had made peace with his fears, and the pain which had racked his body at first was now just a bad memory to add to his collection. He felt something when he was with Geri that he had long feared he would never know again. She made him feel at home.

The summer half-term holiday had traditionally been the time for Geri and her Mum to visit her grandparents in Wales. But with her schoolwork becoming more intense, and her Grandad’s health faltering, plans had been altered this year. Elaine decided to visit her parents alone, leaving her daughter behind. It wasn’t the first time: she had made the trip to Newtown without Geri before, and knew she could trust her to look after herself for a couple of days. Two weeks before her departure, they had a heart-to-heart.

“I know I don’t have to tell you to be sensible while I’m at Gran’s, Jellybean.”

“Mu-um!”

Her mother looked steadily at Geri. “I know you and Jonathan are very fond of each other. I’m not going to tell you not to do anything. “ Her daughter blushed and looked away, her discomfort obvious.

“Please, Mum, don’t-”

“Just listen for a minute. I’ve made you an appointment with Dr Bahti for tomorrow at 5.30. Talk to her about contraception. Please. He’s a lovely boy, you are both normal, healthy and I trust you. OK?” Her hand went to her daughter’s forearm briefly. This kind of conversation wasn’t easy, but it was necessary.

Geri would have liked the floor to open up, but she knew her mother meant well, so she stood up, walked around the dining table and hugged her. And she kept the appointment.

********

Geri was always a studious girl - a boff, the boys at Cliff Lane Primary had called her. She was never one to go airily into something new totally unprepared, and sex was no different. Like the rest of the form, she had suffered through the excruciating sessions in PSHE class. From what she could gather, Mrs Hopkins was miles better than some teachers, but the bit with the condom… NOPE. So, instead, she had educated herself, with the tacit assistance of her mother who left a few useful books and magazine articles around. And they’d had a couple of chats about the subject too, but back when it was all purely theoretical.
Things had been moving along at a manageable pace with Jonathan. It was clear that he had never had a girlfriend before, but Geri never mentioned it, just gently nudged him when he seemed to be floundering. And he was, behind the nerves, a natural: he was kind and thoughtful, and given to romantic gestures of the non-clichéd kind. He always noticed if she wore something new, he regularly complimented her on her hair; he would put himself between her and any boisterousness or rowdy behaviour, at school or elsewhere. And best of all, when he looked at her she felt as if they were the only two people on the planet.

And when they were really alone, well, that was progressing, too. His kissing, always good, was getting better and more adventurous. His hands had started to wander a bit, and at times they would brush shakily against her breasts or along the outsides of her thighs. And Geri, in her turn, had started to squeeze his backside and occasionally put her hand inside his t-shirt. Several times she had felt him getting hard when they were close, especially that time he persuaded her to sit on his lap. Geri had seen the rather unsettling obvious evidence when he got up. Just once there had been some dry-humping, but that had been interrupted by her Mum coming in the room, leaving them both breathless, not to mention mortified and frustrated. Now there was the prospect of something more, come Spring Bank Holiday Weekend.

Her stomach felt all strange and tingly, just at the thought of it.

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The worst part was over, it had to be. Nothing could be more humiliating than buying condoms in Boots on a busy Saturday morning, with the middle-aged woman on the till smirking and those girls staring. But now it was late Sunday morning, and for some reason, he had got stuck here, on the corner of Geri’s road. He put his bag of goodies down, because the sweat on his palms meant it was in danger of falling, and he didn’t want to break the bottle of Cava, or crush the flowers. He wiped his hands on his jeans, remembering with a rueful smile how the bloke on the Co-op checkout - someone he knew from when he worked there - had leered and asked if he was on a promise.

I’m going to make a mess of this, I know, he thought, at once terrified, excited and desperate. He looked up the avenue, locating Geri’s front gate by the lilac in the next garden, and tried to get a grip. Everybody has to have a first time, he told himself, recalling the manly ‘chat’ he and Richard had last weekend, alone together in the shed. Jonathan had a strong suspicion Nicky had put him up to it, but the conversation had flowed fairly naturally, and he had found himself reassured by the wise words of a man he had come to respect and admire greatly.

“You’re getting good at this, Jonny-boy!” Richard had held up the wooden yacht Jonathan had just finished sanding. It and its twin were to be birthday gifts for Matt and Simon, both of whom were born in June. The hand-made craft were typical of the kind of present the Joneses gave - thoughtful, special and unique. “Hard to believe you’d never worked with tools before you came to us.” These shed sessions had become a regular fixture and a chance for some male bonding. “Well, as they say, ‘practice makes perfect’.” The immediate, somewhat clumsy segue onto the subject of his girlfriend made Jonathan think that Richard had been trying to bolster his confidence.

“Geraldine - have I got her name right? Yes? Good, well, she seems like a lovely girl. Treating her well, are you?”

“I think so, sir.” Jonathan grimaced. He still tended to call every man ‘sir’, having been taught to do so at a very young age by his father, He knew Richard didn't like it, but it was a hard habit to break.

“Sorry, Richard. Yes, I hope I am.” He wanted to get off this topic, afraid that Richard might start talking more openly about things he’d rather not discuss.

“Good. Well, er...” Richard paused, making Jonathan look up into his kind, bearded face, “keep it
up. Let her tell you if she’s upset, listen, and above all, put her feelings at the top of your priorities. The mark of a good man, a real man is how he treats others. Nothing else really matters.” Then the business of choosing colours for the boats had taken over their attention, much to Jonathan’s relief.

Nothing else, he thought as he picked up his shopping and set off again, his whole body alive with anticipation, nothing else really matters.

******

Geri made them both some lunch in the kitchen, attempting to keep things light with chatter about unimportant things. Neither of them was hungry. She told him about her grandparents’ house, and what she used to do when she stayed there. Although she could feel the heat of his gaze, she calmly continued with her sandwich making, slicing them into triangles with a trembling hand, before putting a plate in front of him and pouring drinks.

Jonathan made no pretence of eating. He couldn’t cope with anything beyond the stream of sensory overload that was pouring over him. He had been there many times before, but the house felt different that day; the floors were harder, the carpets softer, the rooms seemed larger or smaller, he couldn’t decide. Every move he made seemed to cause an echo, as if he were in some vast cathedral, and the sunlight that was streaming in hurt his eyes. And Geri was more, too. She was more beautiful, softer, warmer; her voice was sexier, her eyes were deeper and kinder.

Geri watched him watching her as she picked at her own food. After half an hour, she stood up and walked around the small table to stand in front of him. His hands settled easily onto her hips as she stooped to kiss him. She pulled back after a moment and spoke the words that made him faint with excitement:

“Shall we go up to my room?”

Everything was still too much. The room was too hot, there was too much clothing to remove, too many things to remember (treat her well, listen, look after her first, don’t fuck it up), too much… Desire was making his body heavy and his fingers shook so much he heard them drumming. Or was that his own pulse? Nothing felt normal or right, even breathing felt unnatural and awkward.

Geri was scared, too. She knew it would be bad - everyone said so, in all the things she had read. So she had no expectation of ecstasy, but she did have a plan.

“Jonathan?” His eyes were dark, and they seemed unfocused. “Jonathan, listen, do you have something?”

“Fuck.” He bent down to clutch at his jeans, discarded on the carpet, and scrabbled at his back pocket until his fingers made contact with the corner of the packet. “Yes, I do.” Geri was pleased. The nurse at the Medical Centre had given her some condoms, but they seemed a bit, well, utilitarian. The one he was holding looked a bit nicer. Jonathan was staring at it too, apparently fixated.

“I think, maybe… shall we just, OH!” He had reached over and pulled her against him. They were both down to their underwear by then, and he had been overtaken by the need to hold her tight, to fix him to the earth. He kissed her neck as she ran her hands through his unruly curls. His erection was almost painful, pressing against her. He was certain that if she touched it he would come on the spot. Richard’s words were still ricocheting around his skull. With a supreme effort, Jonathan took a half-step back and looked into Geri’s face.

“May I touch you?” His eyes flicked down her body. He was consumed with curiosity. She nodded,
and then moaned as his fingers brushed uncertainly across her mound. He felt the hair beneath the cotton of her panties, the heat, the dampness. He sought out her lips, overwhelmed by his need for her. As they kissed, he pulled her into him again and they both groaned as his hardness pressed into the soft flesh of her belly. “Geri,” he murmured, and she let her own hand drift down between them, to the front of his boxers. She found him sooner than expected and he gasped at the contact, even through the thin fabric.

“Oh, sorry, sorry…”

It had hurt, but still he felt his hips move, the urge to thrust into her hand almost irresistible. Then she moved, suddenly her hand was inside and she was holding him firmly and he was thrusting. She watched his face, carefully observing as she urged him on. He kissed her again as the feeling of her soft hand on him, and the desire that had been building, surged, carrying him to this moment, culminated in the most exquisite fleeting pleasure. He felt it happening, felt joy and shame and loss; and then she was pressing his head against her shoulder as he cried.

“It’s OK, darling, Jon… It’s fine, It’s all fine.”

He looked into her eyes. “I made a mess.”

She shook her head. “No. I did. I think it will help.” She took a step aside, got the box of tissues from her shelf and wiped her hand, then her belly, then passed it to Jonathan. “I’ll just go and wash my hands.”

Her face in the bathroom mirror was flushed. Was she ready for this? He seemed enormous - bigger than the damn banana in Mrs Hopkins’ PSHE class, anyway - but she had to find out for herself, she supposed. She heard him moving in her room and quickly dried her hands. Resolute, she tossed her bra and knickers in the laundry basket. When she got back, Jonathan had turned down the bed and was standing nervously by it. He was naked now, too, and she took a moment to admire him from the doorway: his long legs with their covering of blond down; his arms, lithe and muscled, similarly adorned; his chest, with the little patch of curls, and there, below, a line of dark hair leading to…

God, am I supposed to be able to…?

Jonathan couldn’t breathe. There she was. His Geri. In all her beauty; in the room, with him, alone. His eyes wouldn’t rest, desperate as they were to take her all in, to commit the sight of her body to memory. His anxiety returned a thousand-fold as he felt what tenuous control he had begun to gain slipping through his fingers. She was right there, for HIM. She trusted him. His mind began to spin; she was so much more lovely than he had dreamed, standing there framed in the doorway, offering all her vulnerability to him. To Jonathan: the lost boy, the lonely, the forgotten; the unloved, the unloveable. Then he saw her face, and the wide-eyed look; he heard Richard’s words above his own thoughts...nothing else really matters. He walked over, gathered her into his chest, speaking into her ear with a tremulous voice. “Geri, it’s OK, really, we don’t have to, of course.” He felt her head shake.

“No, no, I do, I want... it’s just, well, you know.” He kissed the top of her head.

“I do.” He took a juddering breath. “At least, let me do for you what you… you know…”

“Maybe, in a while.” She leaned back a little to look at him. “Could we just sort of cuddle for a bit, please?” He nodded and stepped to one side so she could lie down, walking around to the other side to join her in the bed. Geri reached and pulled up just the sheet, high enough so that it covered her to the waist. Jonathan lay on his back, not knowing where to put his hands, where to put himself in general. It felt strange, stiff and awkward, but after a few moments he remembered she had asked for a cuddle. He shuffled a little closer and she turned to lean her body against his. He put his arms
around her and they both began to relax.

“Thank you.”

“What for?” Her words blew across his chest, making his nipples tingle. He felt the blood flowing back into his cock. *Not yet, slow down.* “For what you did. What made-”

“I read it somewhere-” she felt his silent laugh, “yeah, yeah, I know, but that’s how you learn stuff-”

“But where do you get the things to read? I mean, I could find *porn* if I want, but nothing helpful.”

She raised her upper body a little so she could see his face. “You watch porn?”

He blushed. “I have, yes, not recently. I don’t like it much. It’s so fake.”

She settled against him again, and he allowed his fingertips to tease the skin on her back. She pressed a little more firmly into his side, then one leg came up, over his and her hips moved. No porno had prepared him for the sensual reality of Geri. For her scent, sweetly floral but with something different today, or for the heat of her body where its weight was against his. He was getting hard again, and he needed to touch her. He felt her breathing faster and so he brought his right hand up to her neck, then allowed it to trace the line of her collarbone and drift down to her breast. The hardness of her nipple shocked him - he’d expected it to be softer than his - and he loved the way it felt under his fingers. She gasped as he held her in his hand, whimpering as she again pressed her mound against him.

*Take care of her*

Gently, he pushed Geri onto her back, watching how the roundness of her breasts altered with the position. Tentatively, glancing at her as he moved, he leaned in and kissed the nipple he had touched, then sucked it gently, running the tip of his tongue over it. He marvelled at its texture, at the way it hardened even as he sucked, and he smiled at the way Geri moaned and writhed in response. A hand found its way to the other breast and her whimpering became louder. He stroked both, he kissed and suckled on both, and he felt the effect he was having on her. He lifted himself up so he could kiss her mouth again, his weight unsteady on his quivering arms. Geri held him tightly by his neck, desperate, needy. He paused, looked into her eyes, She nodded her consent.

Jonathan shuffled down the bed a little so he was comfortable, and allowed his hand to drift down from her shoulder until his fingers were teasing her upper thigh. Geri’s whimpers got louder. She took hold of his hand suddenly, and when he looked her eyes captured his in an intense stare. “Jonathan,” she whispered as she guided his fingers to her sex. It was the most indescribable thing he had ever experienced. Soft and wet, and so hot he thought she would scald him. Her hips came up to meet his fingers and she gasped as he grazed over her folds. “Yessss,” she hissed, still steering him, taking him on a tour. He watched, carefully noting. The little firm button, which made her jerk and moan, that must be her clit. He resisted her pull and gently massaged around it, seeing how her face became dreamy as he did. He saw the moisture, feeling pleased he had provoked that, and his cock twitched as his fingers delved between, around and finally into her. *So that’s how it feels: all wet heat, spongy and enveloping.*

“Tell me, Geri, tell me what you like.”

“You, Jonathan, you, but that, oh god, yes, that..”

He had a fleeting desire to taste her, but he pushed it away, resolving that it was better to walk before running. They had the rest of their lives to try everything. He looked at her face again. Her eyes were
squeezed shut, her neck bowed as she pressed into the pillow. Her fingers were still around his wrist, but just resting there now; he was moving as he wished, watching for her reaction as he pressed and explored. At first gently, then more firmly as she urged him on wordlessly. Suddenly he felt her hot velvety softness tighten around him and she lifted off the bed, back arched as a great sigh of pleasure left her. *I did that. Me, Jonathan Pine. I made her come.*

His own needs seemed distant and unimportant as he lay back and pulled Geri onto him, kissing her softly as he felt her settle into his embrace. They stayed that way, just listening to each other’s breathing and thinking about what had just happened, and what was to come. The sounds of a suburban Sunday drifted in through the open window. The afternoon sun moved on regardless.

Chapter End Notes

Just for clarification for non-British readers, the age of sexual consent in the UK is 16. Jonathan did, however, break the law by buying a bottle of wine at 17. He managed this by knowing the person selling it to him and thus not getting ID’d. Naughty, but hey, we’ve all done it (or something like it), right?
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Jonathan still doubts the wisdom of contacting Geri, but he can't seem to turn away from her again. But there is pain ahead for both of them.

NOW

'Cause I've been by myself all night long/Hoping you're someone I used to know

It was dark. Inky, matte blackness. So dark he couldn’t see what or who was hitting him. In his dream, he felt no pain, but the terror was acute. He was crouched against a mud brick wall under the blanketing heat of the Arab night, staring through the rifle sight - but this time the boy was staring back. He was climbing the narrow staircase from the secret office, time running out. He was sprinting through endless hotel corridors, running as fast as he could but never reaching her. He was abruptly, horrifyingly certain that, if only he could go that bit faster, his mother would be there to greet him.

He felt more blows, boot on rib, something harder crunching against his cheek. This time, they wouldn’t stop before he was dead. This time, he would be the one in the dusty shallow grave on a Turkish hillside. This time, it was Jed on the floor, bloody and lifeless.

No. This time it was Geri.

It took a panting and panicky Jonathan a full minute to orientate himself. Where was he? Which country, what place? Where was the window, the door, the bathroom? The fog of the dream cleared slowly, and he settled back into the bed, recognising the bland bedroom of James Rowan’s flat in Avenue Road, Leicester. Outside on the forecourt was his six-year-old Yamaha Super Tenere. In the wardrobe next to him were the simple, unflashy clothes he had chosen with the help of his new handlers. In the top draw over there were his passport – not brand new, a little well worn - and his driving license in a battered leather wallet. All his credentials for this brand new, fresh, meaningful life.

This was not his first nightmare since the grey morning on the Embankment. He had begun to take an almost academic pleasure in analysing the way they had evolved over time. He had dreamed of Sophie often, even before Angela Burr and the IEA, but once Roper and his court had touched down in Zermatt, his days had been marked by insomnia, interspersed with sweaty visions that brought him gasping, sometimes screaming back to wakefulness. His heart rate slowed as he reflected, letting his mind explore all the corners of his new existence. He was finding a role, and acceptance within it. He had made a few friends. He didn't expect a normal life, certainly not happiness, but he had felt a growing sense of satisfaction, with the faint promise of future contentment. He was beginning to feel comfortable here, until this totally unpredictable turn of events.

Was it remotely sensible to embark on this rapprochement with Geri? Sense didn’t come into it: he had felt compelled to contact her. His subconscious, on the other hand, appeared to be trying to warn
him off. He turned his head; the digital read-out on the bedside table informed him it was four minutes past three. Will I ever get used to sleeping at night again? Jonathan turned on his side and reached for his phone. He slid it into the dock and started the next chapter of his audiobook.

*******

The classroom was hot, because the only way to exclude the bright sun was to lower the thick blackout blinds, which only served to make the air thicker. The quiet murmur of young voices hung in the stodgy atmosphere. Geri had stationed herself on a stool at one end of the large composing table and was calling members of the group to her, one at a time. As each student sat beside her, she examined their sketchbook or portfolio and they discussed its contents, style and possible future directions. Outside of photography itself, working with young people was the great joy of her life. She loved to watch how an individual’s creativity developed, from the first tentative ideas to the sometimes puzzling, occasionally magical riffing on themes or great leaps of imagination captured in the black folders in front of her.

She saw her role, on the creative side of the course, mainly as a mentor, an editor, because this kind of thing cannot really be taught. She could present classes on technique, on the history of the art, and on the practicalities of using film or digital technology. She could talk them through the specifications of the courses, and show them examples of previous students’ work. But that spark of something special, or that eye that sees the world a little differently, that was not to be found in a textbook.

“OK, then, so, next week? And don’t forget that assignment. I can’t give you another extension.” Marina slipped off the stool next to her and sashayed off across the room to rejoin her little group. Geri watched her go, admiring the purple dip-dye as she went. She liked the girl. Sadly, Marina had no great talent, but she worked hard - usually - and had good ideas, if somewhat unoriginal. Looking around for her next victim she saw Shivani trying to avoid her eye.

“Shivani? You next, please.” Geri smiled winningly, but the tiny teenager always seemed shy. She mostly avoided eye contact, and today she fixed her gaze on the stool she was heading for as she walked over. With apparent reluctance, she placed her A-level sketchbook on the table for Geri’s perusal. Her teacher was much more enthusiastic; in fact she was tingling with anticipation. From the outset of the course, Shivani had chosen to see all the themes through her own cultural lens, reinterpreted for today’s generation. The sketchbook was full of the vibrant colours of the sub-continent, with beautiful drawings among the contact sheets, Polaroids and prints. Its eclectic mix of imagery, historical references and contemporary energy could only come from a British Asian consciousness. Geri had begun to run out of superlatives, but Shivani herself was never satisfied with her work - a sign of a true artist. The session was a fruitful one; Shivani tried to dwell on the areas she was unhappy with, but she also asked insightful questions and mined her teacher’s experience for guidance. Small in stature she might have been, and quiet, but there was a steely core of determination inside the beautiful, delicate exterior.

And though I be but little, Geri thought, I am fierce.

Although they were utterly different in every obvious way, Shivani had reminded her of Jonathan from the start. Why a petite, sloe-eyed sixteen-year-old girl of Gujarati descent should make her think of that, tall, male, blond Anglo-Saxon, she couldn’t make out at first. But she had suddenly seen it last term: the subdued, unassuming manner, the frequent desire to be invisible; the hard centre of determination. As Shivani walked away, Geri thought of him again, but not the sweet boy she had pledged herself to one hot May a million years ago. She thought of the puzzling, troubled, unsure man she was with a few days earlier.

He hadn’t been in touch since Friday, of course. It was now Wednesday, and she had continued with
her normal existence in the meantime: a Saturday morning appointment at a new wedding venue, to check out the place; a commission in the afternoon, to take shots of a horse; her regular domestic Sunday; then the usual fourteen-hour working day on Monday. Not that much time to dwell on the nuclear event that being in Jonathan’s presence again had felt like; except, that is, for every single moment she didn’t make the effort to steer her mind elsewhere. What was he waiting for? Had he changed his mind, or was he just trying to decide? Patience was a quality Geri had been born with, but it was wearing thin these days.

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The Gateway Refugee Centre was quiet at last. The day had been a normal one - that is, fairly hectic, with a crowded waiting area from the moment they opened the doors until they persuaded the last few desperate people that nothing could be achieved after six in the evening. The cramped, rather scruffy space was finally free of crying babies and the babble of a dozen languages. Almost everyone else had left, volunteers and staff; only Will was still tapping away on his computer in the office in the corner (barely more than an alcove, to be fair). A cleaner was emptying waste bins by the door. And there was Jonathan, sitting at his desk, relishing the silence.

He had come upon many forks in the road in his life. He had rarely hesitated, because, as he now acknowledged, he had always felt as if he were on rails. There was a constant imperative, from his earliest memories, always a clear objective that meant he never really doubted which way he had to go. Do the right thing. Join the army, leave the army, cook, be a night manager, pass on the papers, save Sophie, retreat to the shadows… Then came the chance to avenge, to help Angela bring down Roper… No room for doubt, the right thing was the only thing to do. Even if, from time to time, he got it wrong. He had never felt as if he had any real choices. Even the risky, possibly foolhardy act of contacting Geri again had been a compulsion.

But there his internal narrative broke down, because Geri was the exception to his rule. When everything went to shit - when everything inside him went to shit - he was lost. For the first time in his life up until then, he didn't know what path to take. There was no clear choice, because he could not see what the ‘right’ thing to do was. He had come to think that leaving Geri when and how he did had been a mistake, but who knew, really? He was very sure he had handled it appallingly. That was what he needed to put right - if he could after all this time. He looked longingly at his phone, on the desk by his elbow. His current quandary might be easier if he could discuss this with Rob Singhal, or better still Angela. But even if he had thought he could do that, he would not. He had to cut the cord now. He had to be able to get on, to make his own decisions, to live without having his every move prescribed for him. Even by people he trusted. If he had any chance of making a life, he had to accept he was alone again.

He had to tell her why; that much he owed her, and himself. This might be all there is to it. He needed to decide when and where they should meet again, this time for long enough to say his full piece. To get it off his chest, lay it all out and, if she was still listening after that, to ask for her forgiveness. Once that was done, more than likely, that would be the end and whatever danger he was dancing with would be over. She had asked for an indoor venue, but he could not come up with a secure option beyond their homes, and neither was a good idea. Some advice from a tradecraft professional would be a boon, but he was sailing solo on this one.

And boom! There it was - the perfect option. A quick surf of the net and he had made a booking, checked the route and begun composing a text message.

*****

“What the…?”
Charlotte looked round rapidly, to see Geri staring at her phone. They were sitting in the Art workroom at the QE, one of the two sixth forms she worked in. It was late, after six. On Wednesdays, they both taught what were known as ‘twilight classes’, after normal hours; it was the only way to fit all the teaching needed into the timetable. They had been chatting to the Head of Department, Marco, and he had just left when Geri’s phone had buzzed on the low table in front of the couch.

“What’s going on?” Geri said. Indoors, I said. It doesn’t get much more outdoors than sailing…

Charlotte waited for an answer, finally poking her friend in the arm. Geri flinched. “What?”

“Well?”

“Oh, nothing.” She put her phone in her bag swiftly, trying to calm the bubbling irritation she felt.

“Geri, what’s going on?”

“Nothing.” She didn't even convince herself. She smiled weakly. “Honestly, I’m fine.”

Charlotte looked at her for a long minute, but she had learned early on in their friendship that her colleague was a very private person. “Drinkypoos still on for Friday? At Timo?”

“Where else? Of course.” The bar was equidistant between her flat and Charlotte’s.

Geri waited until she had packed her bag and made the long walk to the car park before she replied to Jonathan. She had calmed down by then and thought she could follow his reasoning. It’s hard to imagine being more away from prying eyes and ears than in the middle of England’s largest reservoir.

<OK. Where exactly? It's huge, you know. ”

As he had suspected she would, Geri had googled both Jonathan Pine and James Rowan when she got home on Friday. There was very little about James - a Linkedin profile, a mention in a few MSF posts, his name on the GatewayCentre website as an advisor, and not one photograph, not of the ‘right’ James Rowan, anyway. Jonathan’s name, however, generated a lot more, including some rather alarming Crimestoppers links. His name was everywhere, along with aliases he seemed to have used, all connected with crimes, including murder. None of it will be true, he had said. Presumably all part of some fake profile for his mission, she had assumed. Upsetting though it was to see him described as a thief and a killer, Geri was oddly comforted by it. She saw immediately that this all gave support to his story, in that the first crime listed was at a hotel in Switzerland.

She agreed to the meeting. She had already, why quibble about the venue? The tension in her stomach ratcheted up a few notches. A sailing trip, though? Messing about in boats? Like some kind of date, or something? Anger, irritation and nerves all swirled around inside her as she looked through her windscreen at the playing fields sloping away in front of her. Jackdaws and pigeons went about their business on the grass, searching for grubs and packed-lunch remains as she sat, grim-faced and wrestling with her memories.

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“This will be perfect.” Jonathan eased the little dinghy into the shallows along the bank. The white
sail was tightly bound to the boom, a task he had performed with surprising speed while Geri had watched helplessly. He was a keen sailor, once the Army gave him a taste of it. She had been a nervous passenger, and hadn’t been on the water since the last time he took her out. Long ago; before his first tour.

Jonathan had chosen the spot carefully. There was a thickly planted row of trees, and no footpaths visible nearby. It was peaceful, with just the occasional excited squeal from a novice sailor, or barked order from an instructor carrying over to them across the water. With practiced skill, he used the oars to wedge the little craft against the reeds. Geri felt the hull scrape on the mud and settle. Hambleton peninsula protruded out into the reservoir, providing plenty of secluded little inlets like this one. The ideal spot for a private talk.

“I nearly forgot about getting RYA certificates in my new name. Glad it crossed my mind.” Jonathan stowed the oars and turned towards her, gathering himself. It was sunny, but as usual, the wide expanse of water provoked a light breeze that was blowing the stray strands of her hair around. He had an urge to lean forward and tuck one behind her ear. She was watching him, just a couple of feet away, her eyes still wary. The bulky red life jacket gave her face a ruddy hue, and despite the warmth of the day, she seemed cold, as if about to shiver. It occurred to him that it must be quite an ordeal for her, too, being with him after all this time, after what he did. He took a deep breath and tried to summon up a bit of extra strength from somewhere. He thought of Angela, seeing through him at their first meeting, and how she had briefly reminded him of Geri.

“I want you to know one thing, before I start. I offer none of this as an excuse. What I did to you, the way I treated you after I came back from my first tour…” he paused, trying to remember precisely when he had begun to withdraw from her. It had been before that, after Basic Training. “For a long, a very long time I convinced myself I had done the right thing, that there was no other way than for me to leave. I was struggling to work out who I was, really, what I wanted to be… and I could see that I was hurting you. That was one thing I knew I didn't want to do.”

“But you wouldn’t talk to me, I could have-”

“I know, I know…” He looked down, but not before she saw the pain in his eyes. “I was so confused, angry…” he raised his head, and the stormy darkness she had seen then was back, “and I was frightened, too. Lost, so lost I couldn't even see you properly.”

Geri wanted to hold him, the way she had tried to back then, to give him comfort. So often she had lain awake in that grotty flat in Guildford, unable to sleep with worry, hearing him pacing the floor. Sometimes he cried, alone in the dark. Helplessness had overwhelmed her, and she felt its bitter taste again. But she was still angry, and that held her back. “Jonathan, why did you say those things? Those horrible things?” She felt a sob rise up from her chest and it took all her self-control to stifle it.

“I can’t tell you, Geri, because honestly, I don't really remember what I was thinking that last week. I just know I felt I had to get away, had to make you let me go.” He was breathing heavily, his shoulders heaving. It occurred to her he was struggling not to cry, like she was.

“What happened? What happened to you out there? You would never talk about it but it took over your life. How could you not tell me, Jonathan?” She watched him deciding to tell her: she saw the wave of resolve travel up his body, stiffening his back, straightening his shoulders.

“I was one of the lucky ones, you know. I was never blown up; I didn't see my best mate shot right next me, nothing like that. I did see some pretty f*cked up shit, but there isn’t one big thing. I’ve spent a great deal of time thinking about this. Ever since Sophie told me I had many voices…” He took a juddering breath. “I’d spent so much of my life wanting to be a soldier, like most of us in my class at Sandhurst. We’d trained and fantasised, and read T.E. Lawrence, the whole shebang… But I
don’t think I had ever really faced up to the reality of what that meant. The sheer cold-bloodedness of it, Geri. You know those guys that pilot the drones, the ones that bomb ISIS and Al-Qaeda? They still get PTSD, even though they’re hundreds of miles away, thousands, even though they never see the faces of the people they kill…” The boy, a green ghost in the night sight. He shook his head to clear it.

“Do you have PTSD, Jo-”

“Probably.” He shrugged. “Not bad. I don’t have flashbacks or anything like that. What I’m trying to tell you is that I realised very early, during basic training, that being a soldier wasn’t going to be like my dream. But, I assumed, as you do when you are 18 and stupid, that I would be OK, that I would adjust, grow a pair, whatever it took.”

Geri saw, in her mind’s eye, the awkward, uncomfortable Jonathan who had knocked on the door of her shared University of Surrey flat. He had changed; basic training was turning him from her sweetheart into someone else, and she hated it already. When, years later, he finally left, she had recognised that he had taken his first steps away from her then. “I saw it. I wanted to help, but-”

“I wouldn’t let you. I know. Loving you…it made me ‘soft’, that was my perception. When we met, I wasn’t used to loving, or to being loved. You had shown me a taste of a life I thought I…” He swallowed. “I felt I had to choose between being 100% yours and being 100% the Army’s. And since soldiering had been my life’s aim, I made that call.”

Because I had to, had to follow Dad.

“I see.”

Then why did you wait another four years to go?

“But I couldn’t make myself give you up, Geri, not then.” The pain in her chest was reaching epic proportions, and his face then made it unbearable. She felt hot tears falling in an uncontrolled way down her cheeks. “I loved you so much. I just didn't know how to reconcile that part of my life with what I was being asked to do.” Memories of long nights, of fear and anguish, of nausea and terrible pain filled his head. He had played the role of Officer Cadet, then Second Lieutenant Pine, but only by leaving Jonathan behind. Just the same way he had learned to cope in the first foster placements and children’s homes: by being someone else, someone not suffering, not grieving, not scared, not lonely…

Geri cried silently - Jonathan-style- but she felt the pain inside easing, albeit by almost imperceptible amounts. She sat still, watching him, feeling the breeze blowing over her arms and face. The sun was hot on her back, and there was the smell of blackthorn blossom in the air. And she listened to him, as he had asked.

“However bad I had thought it was at Sandhurst, this dissonance, Iraq was exponentially worse. Because that was real. Not training, not exercises, but real people bleeding, being blown to pieces, dying…” He stopped abruptly, and Geri saw his face change again. To get through this part of his story, he would have to don the mental uniform, to become Lieutenant Pine, 7th Platoon, 1st Battalion, Royal Anglians for a moment again. “I saw stuff, had to do stuff… Not all of it went against my instinct. We came under fire, we shot back, to protect each other. I saw a man with a gun heading our way, or aiming at us, or wearing a suicide vest, or burying an IED, I had no compunction about shooting him. But that’s the trouble; not everything is that morally unambiguous. And when it wasn’t clear-cut, I felt as if…”

“As if a bit of you died every time?” Geri was still crying, still watching as the guard changed again. Jonathan - James Rowan/Jonathan - was back. “I get it, Jon-, sorry, James. I just wish you’d talked to me like this, back then.”

He stared blindly at her for a long time. He felt Corky’s sternum crack under his hand again. It was
him or me. Him or Jed. Him or Roper being allowed to carry on dealing death... Somewhere off to the west of them, an osprey cried to its mate. The wind ruffled the leaves of the poplars on the bank, and a sailing instructor blew a whistle. Suddenly, a much louder, much closer sound made them both jump.

“You alright there? Run aground? Need a tow?”

One of the sailing teachers was approaching in his RIB, loudhailer to his mouth.

“No,” Jonathan called back, “we’re fine, thanks. Just taking a few minutes out. Not stuck!” He brandished an oar to demonstrate his ability to escape their current location.

“Righty-ho!” bellowed the man, now near enough not to need amplification. Geri covered her ears and sighed with relief when the inflatable executed a tight turn and headed back out to open water. The dinghy rocked a few times as his wake reached them. Jonathan looked at Geri with softer eyes. She was so calm, so composed, despite her tears. It hit him how incredibly blind he had been, not to confide in her then. He couldn’t have had a better person to talk to, and she loved him, too.

“I see that I should have told you all this at the time, Geri, I see that now. But back then, I was too confused, too ashamed, too lost. All I could see then was that my life’s dream was a nightmare and it was hurting both of us. That I was hurting you.”

“But why did you lie, if it was a lie? Why say those things?”

His hands, the hands she had always loved so much, were clenched tightly and she saw white knuckles where he was gripping his knees. She looked up, into his face. His cheeks were wet, his eyes red-rimmed. His voice was a hiss through a clenched jaw. “I wanted you to hate me, god help me. I wanted you to get a life, away from me, from the hurt and the pain I was to you. I wanted to make you go and find someone better than me.” He took a series of gasping breaths, fighting to regain control.

“But I didn’t. I couldn’t. I couldn’t hate you.” She leaned forward, reaching out to him with her right hand, “I don’t.”
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

It's still that hot Holiday Sunday afternoon...

THEN

It was just like a movie/It was just like a song

“Geri?”

“Mmmm?” She was still snuggled against his chest. It felt good to be there. Her head was resting on his shoulder, and she loved the feel of his skin against hers. She was still tingling with the pleasure her orgasm and its tiny aftershocks had brought. It hadn’t been her first, but it was the best. So far. The fingers of her left hand were tracing shapes around his nipple as his chest hitched before he spoke.

“Do you still...you know, want to?”

She looked down his body, at all the soft shapes and sharp angles, at the hairs and the freckles she wanted to count, all the way down to the object of all her present fears and excitements. It was a dusky red, not the pink or white of medical illustrations or fine art depictions she had seen. It was, she decided, strangely beautiful as it curved over his flat belly. It pulsed visibly. Clearly you do, my love. Despite the afterglow, she was still afraid. He seemed so huge; she couldn't imagine how that was going to fit inside her, when even a regular tampax was too large.

Geri swallowed hard, calling on all she had read, especially that bit about this very subject. She couldn’t remember which, but one of the three books, all aimed at pre- and pubescent girls, that Elaine had given her, covered the matter specifically. They were written in an approachable, chatty style. “Your vagina can stretch to pass a baby, so there will be plenty of room for a bigger-than-average penis - if you WANT it in there, that is. Just make sure you are completely ready.”

“Yes, of course, I want to, but...” she turned away from the mesmerising sight of his erection and looked into his face, seeing her own fear and embarrassment reflected there, “...can we go, you know, sort of...slowly?” Jonathan nodded vigorously. He wasn't sure how long he could hold on, but he saw her anxiety and he was holding hard to Richard’s philosophy. He scooted down a little, so his mouth could reach hers.

Geri felt his desperation through the kiss. She understood it; regardless of her worries, she wanted to make love with him very much. That imperative was stronger than any reservations she might have about anything. Little thrills of pleasure were sparking in her again, and as the kiss deepened, she opened her legs. Jonathan moaned as he moved his hand down her body, and she felt his hips buck, making the end of his cock run up her thigh. It left a trail of cooling dampness there. She remembered the condom.
“Jonathan, you need to put this on first.” She felt for it on her bedside table, picked it up and passed it to him. The pause was welcome. He had sensed the helter-skelter of desire tugging at him, urging him to rush, and this enforced stop helped. He turned away to sit on the edge of the bed, tore open the packet and, after a moment’s hesitation, slid the condom on. “Have you done that before?” Geri’s was slightly shocked by his alacrity.

He shook his head, and she saw the blush on the back of his neck. “Not really. Well, yes...ish.” He shrugged, and one his funny, breathy laughs emerged. “I sort of, well... I tried one out. Last night. In my room. So I wouldn’t, you know… make a total arse of it.” He had once heard a classmate tell a story of a ‘friend’ who put one on inside out. The thought of possibly doing that, or something even more stupid...

Geri smiled. A gentleman, indeed, Mum. He made sure the thing was properly seated around his base, then he turned and moved across, feeling this was all rather unromantic as he manoeuvred himself over her. Geri was tensing up, afraid of kicking him - what if I catch it with my knee, or my foot? - and not sure where to put her limbs. Jonathan moved carefully, and, watching where he placed his hands, he knelt between her legs and leaned over to kiss her again, then sat back on his heels. He realised he didn’t really know what to do next.

“Heard you OK, I mean...?”” his voice was strained. He glanced down at himself, looking so odd under the cloudy covering of the condom. “…are you... oh god, Geri, I’m sorry, I’m being an id—”

“Jonathan, shush. Stop talking.” A sudden calm came over her and she sat up enough to reach for his hands. “Touch me again.” He nodded mutely and did as she asked, one hand going to her breast, the other, lower. Her legs opened wider as he caressed her, and when he dipped a finger inside, she gasped and he felt how wet she still was. “Please, love, please…” Once again, she took control, and as he moved to cover her again, she reached down.

“Oh, Geri,” he whimpered as he felt her small, soft hand holding him. He lowered himself as she guided him to her entrance. Their mouths met again, and as they did he felt her push up against him. Her gasp of pain made him freeze. He opened his eyes and looked directly into hers. “Does it hurt?”

She nodded. “A little.” Her voice was a whisper. She made an effort to relax, but it was difficult. Everything felt strange, foreign, uncomfortable and terrifying.

Jonathan had a thought. “Maybe...let me just.” Taking his weight on one wobbly arm, he pulled back a few inches and delved into her folds. He was so aroused he groaned at the feel of her, at the scent of her. His jaw tightened and lowering his pelvis again, he looked at Geri’s face. Her eyes were tight, but their warmth was undeniable.

“Yesss...” she breathed and he tried again. She moaned quietly this time, and he was able to go a short way in, stopping more out of his own caution than because of her reaction. Geri felt unfamiliar pressure in her pelvis. It was so new, so strange, but still it felt necessary. She moved her hands down from his shoulders to his waist. “More.” If her eyes had been open, she would have seen his roll back as he gradually, gently but implacably slid the rest of the way, feeling only a split-second of resistance. Her cry at the momentary pain cut him.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry…” he began to retreat but she held him tight, squeezing his narrow hips with her thighs.

“No, no...I’m OK, it’s OK…” she allowed herself to absorb all the sensations: the weight of him over her, his breath, rushing over her cheek and neck; the closeness of their bodies, nothing closer possible. “It’s good, it’s nice.” Some muscle inside her flexed, and pleasure tingled its way up and down. Jonathan moaned loudly. The incredible, hot, velvety tunnel that enveloped him had tightened
even more and his body was screaming at him to move. He battled against it, holding onto his self-control by his fingertips. Then Geri tilted her pelvis and kissed his temple, trying to let him know she wanted the same as he did. He withdrew slowly and thrust, as gently as he could manage. He felt his orgasm coming, and he also knew that he could not stop it. The intoxicating heat of her, the sight and sound and smell of her, the reality of Geri, it was all too much and now the tiniest friction was enough.

She knew it would be fast, this first time, and she was right. His thrusting had barely started when he stiffened and a loud groan left him. He pushed into her hard and she felt another moment of pain.

“Oh god.” His voice was muffled by the pillow and her hair. “God, Geri, that was…”

“...lovely.” She meant it.

“But I came… so fast...and I hurt you...I’m so sorry Geri, so very sorry.”

“Stop it, silly. It was lovely.” She kissed him again, brushed the curls back from his forehead and felt a rush of love. “I was... it was fine, love. And now we aren’t vir-” She clapped her hand over her mouth, grinning behind her fingers. “Oh my GOD! I’m not a virgin anymore!” She started to giggle, which sent ripples of pleasure through them both.

“I’d better…” Jonathan began to pull out of her, but found himself prevented by her renewed vice-like grip around his hips. He looked into her face, smiled and kissed her sweetly. “I should, Geri, in case the condom, you know…”

We need to talk about sex more. It needs to be less awkward.

She pouted; she had begun to enjoy the feeling of fullness, although she could feel him softening. “I know.” The loss she felt as he left her body was devastating. She knew immediately they would have to try again soon. She needed him there. She watched him clamber off the bed and hurry to the bathroom, holding the condom on. The flush went and he returned moments later, pink and embarrassed once again.

“Are you OK, Geri?”

She frowned momentarily. “Yes, why wouldn’t I-” Then she saw his expression.

He stood still at the end of the bed. He looked distressed. “You said it hurt, and there was some blood...on the condom.”

“Oh, well, I think that’s...you know...normal?” She considered how everything felt; it did seem a tiny bit sore, now she was coming back to herself. She patted the bed next to her and he smiled that sweet, slightly surprised smile of his and sat down on the edge. Geri wrapped her arms around his waist and nuzzled his back, sighing contentedly. “I’ll go check in a mo, but I’m fine.” She tugged gently, to get him to lie down. She needed him to hold her; she needed him to stop worrying about the mechanics of it all and just be. He seemed to understand, or maybe he felt the same, because he gathered her into his embrace and kissed her mouth. A real, grown-up kiss; a kiss between a man and a woman. They both sighed and settled against one another; Geri had never felt more alive.

She finally managed to get up for her turn to use the bathroom. Sure enough, there was just the tiniest smear on the toilet paper. When she got back to her room, she paused for a moment, admiring the beautiful figure in her bed. In MY bed... She felt that giggle bubbling up again, and she bounced on her toes, then ran across the carpet and hopped in beside him again. Jonathan’s face was still serious, and he cupped hers in his hands and looked deeply into her eyes.
“Are you OK? Really?”

“Yes. You didn’t hurt me. I know you would never do that.” Suddenly, her elated mood had changed to something more profound, and she found she had to bite back tears. He was still looking at her in that unsettling way, as if he were searching for something in her face.

“I wouldn’t, no.”

Geri was unable to speak. She wanted to tell him she loved him, that she’d loved him from the first moment, when he was ambling across the tarmac towards her, his bags on his shoulders, all gawky and beautiful. But her jaw was tightly clenched to hold in the sobs that threatened to burst out, and she feared her crying would derail Jonathan. Finally she was able to regain control, and she began by kissing him softly on the lips. “I feel wonderful. I feel... amazing. I want to run up Langham Hill and shout it at the top of my lungs…”

She couldn't continue, because he caught her mouth with his, kissing her long and deep until neither could breathe. Then he held her tight, against his chest, one hand on her back, the other buried in the silky strands of her hair. He wanted to say something like that to her, but he didn't have words for how he felt. Not in any of the three languages he spoke. He just knew that when he looked at Geri, he didn’t need anyone or anything else. And when he had…he hardly believed it, but yes, when he had made love to her, nothing could be better.

Except to do it again. And better. Then he became shockingly aware of a deficit. “Geri, would you like me to... oh, this is so hard!”

“What, love?”

He set his jaw and said it. “It’s not fair, you didn’t come. This time.”

She snuggled in even closer, her head tucked into his neck. “I’m fine. Maybe later…?” She drew back and smiled expectantly up at his worried face.

“If you’re sure.”

She nodded, and craned her neck to kiss him chastely on the lips. “Certain.” She looked at him for a moment, bit her lip, and lowered her eyes, suddenly self-conscious. “Was that, was I, you know…”

“Amazing? Yes.” He pulled her close again, kissing her hair. “It was, Geri. You were, you are beautiful. I can’t wait to-”

“Do it again? Me neither.” She wasn’t completely sure when, though. Things definitely did feel a bit uncomfortable down there.

They lay down again in a tangle of limbs and continued to cuddle, Jonathan dozing slightly in the heat of the room, as the afternoon waned. An hour, maybe more, passed in comfortable idleness.

“You hungry? I could cook us something,” Geri began to get up, “or do you have to get back for dinner?”

Jonathan looked at the alarm beside him. It was almost six. He sat up abruptly, looking a bit confused. “I don’t have to, no. But I am supposed to check in.”

“Did you tell Nicky my Mum’s away?” Geri felt herself blushing at the mere thought that his foster
parents might have guessed at what they had been doing today. Her head spun when he nodded. “Oh god, well, maybe you’d better go…”

“Do you want me to?”

“No, no…not really, but… Won’t they…I mean, I don’t know how…”

Frown lines furrowed his handsome, high forehead. “Didn’t your Mum tell you she rang them last week?”

Geri had a sinking feeling. What had her Mum done now? “No… she didn’t. Oh god!”

Jonathan reached over and squeezed her arm. “She just rang and spoke to Nicky. Apparently she told them she’d be away, and asked them to allow me to visit, to keep you company. That’s all.” She sighed with relief. Elaine had a tendency to overshare occasionally. “I should have said, when I got here, but I assumed she’d have told you.” Geri shook her head. She still felt the churning embarrassment that her love life might have been discussed by two adults, one of whom she had only met a handful of times. “Anyway. I’d better ring, just to let them know we haven’t burnt the house down, or run away or anything.”

He picked up his boxers and jeans, put them on and slipped his t-shirt back over his head. Geri watched the process, admiring the grace of him and the way the muscles moved under his skin. She felt the prickle of fresh arousal. I’m getting greedy. I want more, NOW. But she kept the flare of desire to herself, and allowed him to bounce down the stairs to find the phone and ring home. Half-listening to the rumble of his voice from the hallway, she dressed herself, slipping into clean knickers and a t-shirt and shorts. She got downstairs just as he was saying “See you tomorrow, then. Bye.”

“Tomorrow? You mean…?”

He nodded, grinning broadly. “Yep. Nicky said I could stay, to, you know…look after you. And she’s…” They had both started to laugh, Geri feeling the slightly hysterical giggle rising again, when the phone rang.

“That’ll be Mum.” She picked up the receiver, and she was correct. Elaine was just letting her know she’d arrived at her parents’ house, and checking all was well at home. “We’re fine… Yes, he’s here. You knew he would be. You spoke to his foster-mum about it, Mother.” Jonathan smiled as he saw her eyebrow raised sceptically. “OK, well, I wish you’d told me first… Yeah, I will… OK, give them both a big hug from me… Me too. Bye, Mum.”

He had listened to Geri’s side of the exchange, his heart aching. He liked Nicky and Richard, but he would never have the easy warmth with them that he heard in her voice, even though there had been a minor beef between her and her mother. He snapped out of it when Geri suggested she cook them ‘Spag Bol.’ “Oh yes please! That’s one of my favourites!”

“Oh, I’ll go and get started,” She started to walk to the back of the house, towards the kitchen, then paused. “Wanna help?” He nodded and she started to run ahead, teasingly. He gave chase, catching up just inside the kitchen. He grabbed her waist and began to tickle, which made her squeal and wriggle, which in turn made the encounter transform into a passionate embrace. Breathless and panting, they parted when Jonathan’s stomach rumbled loudly. “You didn’t eat your lunch.” Geri pointed accusingly at the rapidly drying sandwich still on the table. “You must be starving!”

Soon the room was a hive of activity. He chopped an onion, she assembled the other ingredients; they both relished the domesticity of it. Jonathan liked cooking. He hadn’t been able to do much, not since the days he used to lick the bowl after his mother made cakes, but he had enjoyed the Food
Technology lessons, and his GCSE course. He endured some mockery for choosing that option, and it turned out to be less exciting than he’d hoped (baking and tasting endless carrot cakes as he refined his recipe), but he was hooked nonetheless. The Joneses encouraged him to help in the kitchen, and he was teaching himself to make a few dishes.

“Can you grate some parmesan for us? It’s in the fridge.”

“Wow, Fresh, not that powdered-dried-sick stuff? Cool.” He walked over to get it, but as he went to grasp the handle he noticed the collection of things carpeting the door: postcards, notes, pictures, all held on by magnets. Among it was a faded Polaroid of a toddler and a man cuddling on a sofa, obviously Geri and her Dad. The handwritten caption below the image was ‘Jellybean and her Daddy’. Jonathan smiled, and turned to look at her. She was facing away from him, stirring the minced beef as it browned in the pan. “Jellybean?”

She groaned and her head dropped. “Not you too! That’s what Mum and Dad called me when I was a baby. It sort of stuck.” She turned to look into his face, and was floored by his expression. She smiled shyly at him, hoping to make him do the same. “Normally, I would absolutely forbid anyone but Mum from calling me that, even her, actually, but…”

“MyJellybean.” He had tears in his eyes. There was something so intimate about calling her that, he felt overwhelmed.

She nodded. “Yes. Yours.”

After dinner, they sat on the sofa, and at Jonathan’s request, she showed him the family photo album. She talked simply about her father, her rapidly fading memories of him and how important it was to her to keep him alive in her thoughts. “I am so happy I have the videos they made, because I can hear his voice. That’s one of the hardest things to keep in your head… Mostly I remember silly stuff, like the feel of his trousers when I sat on his knee, or the smell of his aftershave…” She looked up into Jonathan’s face. He was nodding, because he, too, was losing his parents’ voices. He recalled their words, or some at least, but the sound was going, fading from his memory. “Do you have any pictures, Jonathan? Of your Mum and Dad?”

“A few. Some of me and Mutti, one wedding pic, and one of me and Dad.”

“I can’t imagine, oh Jon-” The full tragedy of it, of such a little boy being left all alone had suddenly struck her and she wanted to soothe him, to make him feel better. Her tears flowed freely, and when she lifted her head from his chest where she had buried it, she saw his face was wet, too. “I wish I could…oh darling, I love you.”

A sob broke from Jonathan: painful, heart wrenching. He cupped Geri’s face and their salty tears mingled as he kissed her. He couldn’t say it back, because he didn’t know if he loved her. He thought he might. He knew that he wanted to be with her all the time, even before this day and all it had brought. He knew that when he was in her company, he felt more alive, more attached to the world; more like a real person, less like the ghost he had felt himself to be for years. He was both thrilled and frightened by the strength of his emotions, but he hoped that he would be able to say those words to her, sometime.

Sometime soon.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Jonathan and Geri are still on Rutland Water, out, away from the crowds, baring their souls to each other. It becomes rather more than one of them can stand.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

NOW

And a part of me keeps holding on/Just in case it hasn't gone

Crickets whirred in the midday heat of an English summer’s day. Birds tweeted, bees buzzed in the reed bed and, somewhere a million miles away, an outboard motor growled. In the dinghy, all was quiet, except for the sound of Jonathan gulping back sobs. They sat still, unable to move much in the small space. They were close, less than a foot apart, but his head was down as he struggled, Geri’s hand resting on his as it gripped his own knee. She wondered at the irony that she was the one comforting him: Jonathan, the source of so much of her pain. Of all of her pain.

Geri withdrew her hand and pushed her fingers into the pocket of her cropped jeans to fish out a packet of tissues. All the time she kept a tight grip on the side of the boat, conscious of her vulnerability, both physical and psychological. She longed for solid ground; this craft had taken away from the safety of her quiet, plain life and thrown her into this maelstrom of emotion.

“Jonathan? Here.”

He took the proffered tissue and wiped his face, gradually beginning to regain some control.

“Thanks.” He looked at her, and she thought she had never seen such sadness - except when he talked about his parents. “I’m sorry, I’ve managed to make this all about me.” Geri began to shake her head. “No, I have and I am sorry. That was not my intention at all. I just wanted to make sure you…”

“I know, and of course it’s hard to talk about that stuff. I know. I’ve never told anyone about…”

He straightened up in his seat suddenly. “About me? About what happened between us?”

She nodded. He kept his eyes on her, waiting for her to speak. It was her turn now. The silence descended over them again. Geri’s photographer’s eye scanned the river bank behind Jonathan, framing shots, noticing beautiful shapes and shifting colours as the breeze wafted through the reeds and yellow flag iris. Snapshots of warm summer days on playing fields and in parks, of ‘messing about in boats’ on the river back in Weston, of young bodies in the sea together all passed before her. She had avoided thoughts of him, and of their time together, for so long it had become second nature. But you cannot close the doors on such a massive part of your life without losing something. Now she felt she had to tell him what she had been through.

“After you said those things, when you left me, ” she glanced up to see his face set in a frown, “I didn't know what to do at first. I was in shock, I suppose. It was only a few weeks ‘til the end of my
PGSE, so I carried on, somehow. I hardly ate, I know that, but I can’t remember much of that period. I know Mum turned up one weekend, took one look at me and took me straight to the Uni med centre.” She turned her face away from his, needing to clear her head again. Thinking about those weeks meant reliving all the pain, the anger, the emptiness. She had never shared the details with Elaine; her mother knew only that Jonathan was gone, probably forever. “After a while, I began to see that it had been coming for ages...years, even.” Jonathan nodded, but she didn't see; her eyes were fixed on a distant bank of the reservoir. “It had been like some horrible slow-motion car crash, where you can see what’s going to happen but you are powerless to change anything. I suppose I had been in denial - I loved you, that should have been enough, I thought. But it clearly wasn’t.”

Jonathan kept quiet; he had said his piece. He watched her. Her face was pale but calm, chin slightly raised as she looked out across the water to his right. He wanted to kiss the soft skin beside her eyes, the beautiful hazel eyes he had dreamed of last night. Her hands were clasped in her lap now. She had forgotten where they were; all her consciousness was absorbed in recalling the terrible summer of 2004. She had already completed all the assessments required to get her teaching qualification, and even managed to secure her first job. Fortunately, it was at a school she had worked at while training, so the interview was pretty much a formality. The head teacher had accepted her explanation of the flu to excuse her unhealthy appearance and distraction.

“I got a position in Woking, at that school I did my long placement at... but first, once the course was over, I went home. Mum insisted.” She sighed sadly. “It was worse there. I couldn’t look at anything, or go anywhere that didn’t remind me of you. So after three weeks I went back to Guildford and started looking for a new flat, one nearer the job. A clean slate.” She barked out a bitter laugh. It hadn’t helped much, so after six months she began looking for jobs away from the southeast altogether. “After a year, I moved up here. I had a full-time post at the FE College at first. Found I could afford this flat on my own, and started my business.” Suddenly, she seemed to remember he was there, and turned back towards him. “I tried to get on with living. It wasn’t the life I had planned, let alone the one I had dreamed of, but it was the only option I had.”

Geri saw he had tears in his eyes again. She wasn’t trying to hurt him; revenge was not in her nature. But nevertheless, after ten years, she needed to tell someone. He was the only person who could possibly understand. “I went on with things, I found some joy in teaching, I tried to find it in my art, too, but that was harder. Mum tried to get me to ask for a referral, for therapy. She even saved some cash up, sent it to me, told me to go private...” She shook her head. “I sent it back. I couldn't see what good it would do. How could anyone help me come to terms with the loss of those years?” With the loss of my future, too… “Then, as life does, it kicked me when I was down. Funding was cut and my hours were reduced. I managed to find some additional work teaching to GCSE at a comprehensive, scraped by for two years by not eating much and selling my car... My business was still going, but barely, because I couldn't afford to advertise. Then I got lucky: a part-time post came up at the Sixth Form College in the city, the Queen Elizabeth, and the school decided to offer Photography to A-level too...”

Her dignity, in the face of all this, moved him. It was all, all of it, his fault. He added images of her struggling to pay the bills to his ledger. “It was good...it is good. I work a lot of hours over three, well, four jobs - probably more than the Working Time Directive allows, when you factor in the unpaid stuff - but it stops me, you know, dwelling. And I have friends, so I'm not miserable all the time.” She knew as soon as she said it that last statement was a lie. She looked at him; he was facing the bottom of the boat again. The sun was making his hair blonder than ever, and what she could see of his beautiful face made her heart ache. He was still in there, her lovely, sweet boy. Anguish made her throat tighten but she had to ask him. “It wasn't true, was it? What you said to me that day?”

Her words cut him; he had spent ten years wishing he could take the lies back, but feeling he should not. Now he saw the destruction he had wrought, here, in front of him. Of all the bad things he had...
done in his life, this was the worst. No one had ordered him to do it, it had no higher moral purpose, it was not a case of unavoidable collateral damage... He had chosen to break her heart that day. He shook his head. "No, Geri, it wasn't."

And there it was. Geri sat, eyes closed, listening to the sounds of nature and feeling the sun on her face. She sat and she waited for the tectonic plates of her life to stop moving. She had always felt that he had lied, that the words he had said in that cold, matter-of-fact way on that drizzly morning in Guildford weren’t true. She could see him now, standing there in the middle of the rug, his bags at his feet, his fists clenched, as he destroyed her life with such apparently cold indifference. But despite her disbelief, those words had planted a seed of doubt, and that doubt had gone on to poison all her memories of him, and of their life together. And with those had gone the whole of her; her identity, her heart, her life.

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes onto a new world. Or was it the old one, restored? Jonathan was watching her. "I know it’s pathetically inadequate, but Geri," he leaned forward and took one of her hands in both of his, "I am so very sorry." Sorry for what I did to you, for what I did to Isabelle, to Sophie...

She looked at his hands enclosing hers, and felt a fresh rush of emotion. It was a feeling she hadn’t had for a very long time. "I can see that." She looked into his face. "And you’ve told me why. I understand, I always did, I think. But you…” Should she say it? Was it fair? Was any of this fair to anyone? “You broke me, Jonathan. I’m broken.” His hands tightened around hers.

"God, Geri…"

“I know you thought I would recover, but how could I? I’d loved you for five years. Five of the most important years of our lives. And then it was gone, just like that. Not just you and me, but everything we had been to each other. Wiped out on a wet Wednesday by a few carefully chosen words.” No, not the old world restored. The old one, poorly reassembled, with spaces and ugly cracks.

“Jellyb-”

“Don’t call me that.”

So it was done. He had told her his story, she had told him hers, and it lay there in the open, occupying the space between them. It hurt more than ever, like an infected wound exposed to the air. “I think I’d like to go home now.”

Jonathan nodded curtly and reached for the oars. He eased the dinghy back out of the shallows, and once they were in open water he unfurled the sail. The wind was favouring their direction, so it was only a matter of minutes before they were pulling into the little marina. The instant they were tied up, Geri hopped up onto the jetty and made for the car park. She didn’t wait for him to sign off at the yacht hire shop, she didn’t even look back. She wasn’t sure what she was feeling anymore, she knew only that she had to get home, get away from him. But her legs didn’t seem to want to work properly. Her entire body was trembling as she walked along the steep path through the woods that would take her back to her car. Spotting a bench to one side, she made for it and sat there, waiting for the fit to pass. But it did not. It mutated into an inability to move at all.

“Geri? Are you..?”

He had completed the paperwork and collected his crash helmet and boots, resigned to the fact that she had left. He didn’t blame her; he felt sick himself: lost, not sure what to do or where to go. But then, as he trudged up through the trees he saw her, sitting, as pale and as still as a statue on the narrow wooden seat next to the path. Cautiously, he sat down next to her and put a hand on her arm.
“Geri? What is it?”

She turned her head, looking confused as if she hadn’t noticed him before. “I don’t know. I can’t seem to move. I don’t know why.”

Saturday visitors passed, some going down the trail to the water ready to start their fun, others like them, heading home. They sat there in silence for a while, Jonathan’s hand still resting on Geri’s forearm. He wondered if it was appropriate, but after a few minutes she rested her other hand over it. After a while she seemed to be less tense, so he spoke softly. “Do you feel any better now? Do you think you might be able to walk?” She nodded and made to get up, taking his hand to help her get to her feet. There was some light-headedness, but she was at least able to put one foot in front of the other. Slowly, they began to make their way up the slope towards the car park. Jonathan tentatively put his arm around her shoulder, still concerned that she might topple, and Geri did not object. When they reached the car park, she began to shake again.

“I don’t think I can-”

He didn't hesitate. “I can drive you home if you’d like. I can pick the bike up later, get a cab or something.”

Geri stood unsteadily, unsure. The truth was, she wasn’t entirely certain who she was at that moment. Ten years of something approximating life had been washed away by a couple of hours on Rutland Water. Now she felt naked and lost. It was as if she were an abductee suddenly released back into a world subtly changed in her absence. “OK, yes. Thanks.”

Having a practical way to help, something positive to do, galvanised Jonathan. He took her keys, opened the passenger seat and settled her in. On his way round he threw his bike gear on the back seat and got in behind the wheel. In what seemed like no time at all they were heading west, back to Leicester. They were passing through Houghton-on-the-Hill, almost at the edge of the city, before Geri spoke: “You don't know where I live. I’ve got a flat just off Stoughton Road.”

Her voice, so abrupt in the quiet of the car, had startled him. “Right. I know it.” His mind had been wandering, trying to decide what to do now. He had done the thing he had wanted, had needed to do. He had told her, he had put it as right as such a thing ever could be. And now she was in this strange, almost catatonic state, because of it. He felt the old, familiar urge to move on, to escape from the pain that emotional entanglements inevitably meant, to start again somewhere else. But that day there was a deeper current running inside him, threatening to drag him in the opposite direction. This was Geri. *His* Geri, His *Jellybean*. He could not just leave. Not again.

They reached her part of town, just a little south and across London Road from his own neighbourhood, he steered the car into the turning and parked below the sixties block. He stopped the engine and turned to her. She was sitting, still mostly mute and unmoving beside him. “I’ll see you to your door.”

“No, there’s no-.”

“I can’t let you go up alone. You look as if you could pass out any minute.” His voice was calm but authoritative. She looked round and he was so close she felt his breath on her cheek. Tears welled up, and she felt helpless, because there was her Jonathan. His face was kind and calm and she nodded, unable to speak. She watched him circle the front of the car and open her door, taking her hand. They journeyed up in the lift without saying any more; he opened her door and guided her into the sitting room, making sure she was safe on the sofa before putting the kettle on.

“Here.” He placed a cup of tea in front of Geri. She looked up, still with a ghostly pallor.
“Jonathan,” she murmured, and reached for his hand. She grasped it and pressed it to her cheek, making a lump rise in his throat. Her lips pressed into his palm and his knees gave way so that he collapsed onto the seat beside her.

“Geri, Geri, my Geri.” She still held his hand against her face, leaning into it, and when he took hers and did the same, their eyes locked.

‘Jonathan, my love,” she whispered, and he closed the remaining space between them. His lips pressed gently, almost politely on hers, but she took hold of the back of his neck. Desperation, years of loneliness, a deep need, all drove her on as she kissed him. It felt wrong; not to be kissing her, but to be doing it now, when she was so vulnerable. She would not let it stop. After a few moments, during which he battled with his own emotions, he pulled back and caught her gaze with his.

“I should go.”

“No, please…”

“I should, Geri. You’re not… neither of us is in a state to think straight right now. Let’s just take a few hours.” Her hand was still on his neck, and he had to reach up and unpeel her fingers from his skin so he could stand up and move away to a more respectable distance. Her eyes were wild and unfocused and he was alarmed by the sight. “Is there someone I could call? A friend, your Mum?” She shook her head, finally seeming to be coming round.

“No, nobody.” She looked down, embarrassed by her need for his touch, confused and disorientated. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that—”

“It’s fine. I think we’re both a bit, well… all over the place.” He remembered his bike gear in her car. “Look, er… I just need to run down to the car, get my stuff. I’ll be back in a few with your keys.” He left, and Geri heard the bang of the fire door that led to the stairwell. She got off the sofa and walked to the window in time to see him jogging over to her little blue car four floors below. It really is him. He still tastes the same. Fresh tears began to course down her cheeks. What was it all for? What should she do now? What could she do?

Jonathan was trying to get a grip as he ran back up the stairs. Movement always helped him to think, but this time reasoning was eluding him. When they kissed…when her hand touched his neck he had felt all the years fading. He was back in her bedroom in Weston. Life was simpler, no dreams had been trampled. He was conscious they were not the same people they had been then; so much had happened to them both. Nevertheless, he felt her gravity pulling on him and he wanted to let it take him.

“Geri?” He was back, slightly breathless, his cheeks pink the way they always used to get when he ran. She turned away from the big window to look towards the doorway to the hall, smiling weakly.

“Thanks for bringing me home. It was good of you.” Her voice sounded strange to her, as if from a distance. Jonathan walked closer and took her hand.

“It was nothing.” He guided her back to her seat. “Can I call you later? See how you are?”

She nodded again. He bent down and kissed the top of her head, turning to leave before he was tempted to do more.

“Jonathan?” He spun back around on his heel. Her face was calm, almost serene, as it had been in the boat. “I always knew it was lies.”
Rutland Water is a man-made reservoir, but widely used for leisure purposes. It is beautiful, and has several breeding pairs of ospreys (fish eagles). Another spot worth visiting. And here endeth the advertisement for the East Midlands Tourist Board...
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

Geri and Jonathan's summer of love continues, but the Army is about to stick its big old boot in...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THEN

*In case it is the last time/That we might be exactly like we were/Before we realised*

Getting ready for bed that night was unlike anything Geri had experienced before. During Elaine’s previous absences she had found this part to be the most nerve-wracking; locking up an empty house emphasised the fact that she was on her own. Once, when she realised the shed was unlocked, she had run up the garden and back as if axe-murderers were hiding in every shadow. This time, by contrast, she almost wanted to draw it out, simply because she was not doing it alone. She and Jonathan went around the ground floor closing windows and checking doors were locked, together. He wouldn’t allow her to get much beyond his reach; most of the time he had a hand resting on her shoulder or waist. Every now and then he pulled her into his arms for a quick kiss. Sometimes for a slow one. As they drifted from room to room, savouring each other’s presence, Geri wondered. Was this is what it would be like one day, when they were in their own house, living together...Her stomach tingled. *Married, even?* These thoughts were so new. She thought the next couple of days would give her a taste of that life; the life of what she thought was a real woman...

After the back door was locked and bolted, she stopped by the fridge to check what was available for the next day’s meals, pulling out the meat drawer and tapping her chin while she mused.

“Fuck! I forgot to tell you!” He ran his hand over the side of his hair in a reflex and futile attempt to tame his wild curls. “Nicky invited you round for a barbecue tomorrow.”

“Oh, er…”

“It’s OK, it’ll just be the family. Richard’s sister and her husband - they live round the corner - but otherwise, just the Joneses.” He looked at her hopefully. “I said yes, sorry. I should have asked you fir-” She pressed a finger to his lips.

“I want to go. It’ll be nice.”

“Good. And it will.” *As long as Matt and Simon behave*

Geri closed the fridge and they left the kitchen, switching off all the lights except the external one and heading down the hall towards the stairs.

It was not a long journey, but they made three stops along it. The first just outside the kitchen, when
Jonathan pressed Geri against the door to the cupboard under the stairs. He caught her head in his hands and kissed her mouth, making her melt into him. Just as her heart began to race, he broke the kiss and they took three steps towards the front of the house. Geri stopped their progress next, shoving him unceremoniously into the gap on the wall between her mother’s graduation picture and the collage of baby photos. She took handfuls of his t-shirt and tugged him down so she could kiss him as ardently as she had her. Quiet moans came from them both and Geri felt her arousal growing; his, too. They finally reached the bottom of the stairs, and she managed to get one foot on the first step before she was captured by two long arms and pulled into a hard, lean body. Soft lips pressed into her neck and when he began to suck she whimpered.

“Jonathan… now, now is good.” Her hand sought his and she dragged him up to the first floor. His hands seemed to know where to go automatically, now, and when he touched her she pressed into him without hesitation. All the parts of him that had appeared strange and dangerous were now familiar and inviting for her. Geri cupped his firm bottom and pulled him closer, so his erection was trapped between them. He groaned and leaned down to kiss her once more as he tried to edge them nearer to the bed.

“You have got another condom, right?” Her words were breathless, with a hint of desperation. He nodded firmly, breaking the embrace to step over to his bag. He stood and began to open the packet, his back still turned when he felt her breath on his shoulder.

“Can I watch?” He gasped involuntarily, turned his head and looked at her, eyes wide. He wasn’t sure if he would manage to do it with an audience. “I just mean, so next time, I can, you know, have a go myself.” Jonathan stopped breathing all together; Geri’s face looked different. He’d never seen that adult, sexy expression there before. He was instantly much harder. Unable to speak due to lack of air, he nodded sharply. Gulping in some oxygen at last, he looked down again, pulled the condom out carefully and with shaking hands, pinched the top and simultaneously began to pull his foreskin back. “What’s that you’re doing?” She was peering around his arm.

Oh fuck… she wants a commentary?

“The foreskin, you know…” he nodded down at himself, “it has to be pulled back a bit first…” His breathing was tight and he didn’t recognise his own voice. Geri, by contrast, was fascinated.

“Does that hurt? When you do that?” He appeared to be in some pain.

“No, no… Not at...oh god…” He tried to take some deep breaths. He could feel himself softening now, so he closed his eyes for a split-second and tried to think about what was to come. Then he felt Geri’s hand close over his. “Geri!?” he squeaked.

Her voice, several octaves lower, came from very close to his ear. “Let me help, love.” Jonathan felt faint as blood rushed back to his cock; all the awkwardness suddenly transformed into the sexiest moment imaginable.

“It would be easier with an extra hand.” He was relieved to hear his normal speaking voice coming out this time. He released his foreskin and guided Geri’s hand as she repeated the movement. He stifled a moan the feel of her soft palm and fingers caused and began to slide the condom down.

“OK, let it go back up now… oh god, yes, that’sss…” He had to pause again, just so he didn't start to thrust into her hand again like he had earlier. “OK, you can let go now. Now I just- AH!” Geri had taken over, rolling the rest down, stroking firmly to remove any air bubbles, just like Mrs Hopkins had taught them. She gave him a few extra strokes, just to be safe, all the while moving round from behind his back until she stood directly in front. Her hand was still holding him around
The incredible look was back on her face.

There was no doubt, no fear or even mild concern. Just pure, unadulterated desire; for him, for his body, for what his body could do for hers. She stepped back until her legs touched the bed, then she pulled him down by his arms, with her as she fell. This time there was almost no hesitation. Geri lay back and Jonathan covered her body with his. She guided him gently into her and they both moaned loudly as they were joined.

He was still fighting the urge to pound into her, but Jonathan was determined to give Geri the same indescribably fabulous feeling he got from being inside of her. He forced his eyes to open and look at her face. When he said her name softly, her eyes opened and he saw that her pupils were blown. “I want you to come, Geri. I want to make you.” She smiled and nodded, and he felt her hand move between them. He followed it with his own, and began to rub gently around her clitoris, making little thrusting movements in time with his fingers. He had to; he was so turned on his own touch was making him crazy.

Geri pulled her hand away and reached with it to stroke his back and his bottom. The feel of the muscles, so hard under the silky softness of his skin, was unbearably erotic. “Harder.” She could hardly believe her own courage. “Both. Both harder please.”

“Oh god, Geri, oh god, you feel so…” he didn't know how to tell her. She felt hot and safe and perfect and like everything he needed, then or forever. Her muscles began to tighten around him as her moans became whimpers, then they were just his name, chanted lowly in time with his rhythmic movements. Her hips came up to meet his, but they were out of synch. Suddenly he was outside her, the cool air of the room feeling odd. “Oh shit...sorry, sorry!”

He felt the heat of her fingers enclosing him. “It’s OK, love. My fault… here.” Again he was in her, back in the warm enclosing wetness of her. She kissed his temple, and when he turned his head, his lips. “I’m so close, my love, so close… Sorry, I got a bit carried away.” Her whispers made him harder yet, and he felt his own orgasm building. But he stayed still for a moment. Then he began to press and rub, slowly at first but then more firmly and faster, and then to thrust into her as well. Her whimpers became cries and her body lifted, this time in rhythm with his, and then he saw it: she came apart around him. Her mouth was a perfect ‘o’, her eyes were wide and as her entire body jerked, she was silenced. He felt it, too; her body clutched at him, squeezing him so tightly he held his breath. It seemed to go on for a long time, just soft grunts coming from her with each twitch of her hips and the muscles inside. Jonathan had never seen anything more beautiful. He watched as she came back to him, and smiled as she smoothed her hands down his back and over his backside. “Oh my GOD, Jonathan…that was… I don’t know how to… I now know why people go on about it so much… bloody hell!” Geri’s fingers tightened until they were digging into the flesh of his arse. “Come on, babe. More… more… your turn now… god, Jon, please, god…”

Her voice, her words were too much for him. He let his body loose, pummelling into her with all the pent up lust he had been feeling. He gripped her shoulders and it was only a minute or two later that he felt his balls tighten and the rush of his release. He pushed into her, as far as he could, again and again until he had no more.

It was still not quite dark as they cuddled close a little later. It was a good thing to have read those books Mum gave me, she reflected as she felt her man nuzzling the top of her head. I knew what to expect, what to do. What the earnest authors had not told her, because they could not know, was how she would feel now. As she lay there, breathing in Jonathan’s scent (salty, woody, sweaty, but in a good way) with her cheek resting on his breast, she felt complete. Her heart squeezed as she...
recalled a long-ago conversation about love and sex, in which Elaine had said to her that she would know when it was right, because it wouldn't feel wrong. “It might feel a bit awkward and even uncomfortable and embarrassing, but not wrong.” As so often, her Mum had been right.

“Jonathan?”

“Yes, love?” His voice was heavy with sleepiness.

“I’m really glad you can stay. I want to sleep with you. I want to wake up with you.”

He squeezed her a little more tightly. “Me too.”

*********

The barbecue was lovely. They had walked over to the Joneses’, holding hands of course. Although Geri had tried to save his blushes by pulling hers away as they walked around the house to the back garden, Jonathan had held on tight, not releasing her. As he had expected, his younger foster brothers teased him, but Nicky and Richard had scolded them for it, and it soon stopped. Mostly. They still made gagging noises or pretended to put their fingers down their throats whenever Jonathan looked at Geri or vice versa. A peck on the cheek caused an outbreak of nauseated groans.

Nicky was kind and treated Geri exactly as she always had: like an equal. After eating, they were clearing up in the kitchen while Richard’s sister Hilary and the male members of the family played a game of football on the lawn. “All well at your place, Geri? Your mum get to Wales OK?”

“Yes, fine thanks. She rang last night.”

“Jonathan looking after you, is he? I’m sure he’s helping about the place. He’s a good lad.”

Geri was glad of the steam from the washing-up water; it covered her reddening cheeks. “Yes, he is.” Please stop.

“Good. Well...er, don't forget, if you’re at all worried about anything, just ring. Richard or I can pop round, anytime.” Nicky smiled. That blush and the way Jonathan was carrying himself told her all she needed to know; more than she needed, in fact.

******

The final half term of the Lower Sixth was a dizzying mixture of stress and relaxation. The internal end of year exams meant some heavy revision action, but that’s much more fun when you have a boyfriend to share it with. A lover, Geri kept reminding herself. That their relationship had gone to the next level was no secret to the rest of the gang when they all returned after the week off. Carl kept high-fiving a fake-smiling-actually-mortified Jonathan, whereas Maxine pummelled Geri for information, and Trish began talking to her as if they were both old hands at this sex lark.

Trish was buoyant. “Did you hear? Apparently Vanessa’s been up to her usual...I swear, that girl always starts on the next one before she bothers to dump the last …” she raised her voice so Justin, sitting as far away as he could while remaining on the edge of the group, could hear, “And he’d better not think I’m having him back, just because he’s finally worked out what a SLAG SHE IS!” Geri did not miss the look in her friend’s eye: a hint of wild desperation that suggested her words were not entirely honest. She felt sorry for Trish; she knew she cared for Justin. Was this what
happened when love ended? Would she ever feel that way about Jonathan?

It didn’t take long for study to dominate their lives again, with Geri furiously working to complete her portfolio and Jonathan hard at it, practicing his spoken French and German before the oral exams. The year-end tests only lasted two weeks in total, and once that hot June was over, a degree of calm settled over the group. The six-week break beckoned, and the long warm days meant plenty of lying on the grass and making daisy chains. Beneath the veneer of relaxation, there was some recognition that this was probably the last tranquil summer of their young lives, however. They watched the Upper Sixth students coming and going for their A-level exams and pondered the chilling fact that they would be doing the same in twelve months’ time. After that, it would be university, jobs and the big, bad world.

“I got my confirmation for the summer exercises in the post this morning.” Jonathan was lying on his back next to Geri, on the grassy slope that led to the Rec. She rolled on her side to look at him. She knew he was going off with the TA in August, as part of his application to Sandhurst.

“Where exactly are you going?”

“Norfolk. There’s a training ground there. We will be camping, doing survival stuff, swimming, digging holes… all that fun.” He was smiling at the sky, while the fingers of his left hand drummed on his flat stomach; the right one was holding Geri’s left.

“Any, you know…shooting or any of, er… that?” She had tried to be enthusiastic, but ever since she had told her mother about his career plans, she had been getting more and more unhappy about it all.

He nodded. “I think so. But not at each other, of course.” Jonathan was eager to get up there, although he was not looking forward to being apart from Geri for three weeks. But the Army had been his ultimate goal for as long as he could remember, and doing well in these summer trials was vital if he was to get into the officer training course next year. He rolled over to face Geri. Her face was neutral; he had begun to detect her less-than-ecstatic feelings about the military. “I’m going to miss you...loads.” His hand stroked her hair gently as he kissed her forehead.

“I should bloody well hope so!” She managed a laugh, but she couldn't really hide her feelings. Geri had summer plans of her own, also related to her future career. With the help of her teacher, she had secured a summer placement at a busy local photographic studio. It was unpaid, but she was promised plenty of opportunities to get some hands-on experience doing the job she hoped to make her living at, one day. In addition, Elaine had secured her a few Saturday’s work as summer relief in the stockroom at Marksie’s, so her time would be well occupied. And she’d make a little pocket money. *I won’t have time to miss him.*

********

“I’ll be able to ring you next weekend. Sunday.”

Geri was looking at his face, trying to memorise every part of it. They were in bed; a spear of sunlight was shining through the tiny gap in the curtains and it was making his curls glow. All week they had been making love every day, in the almost two hour interval between Geri getting home from the photographers’ and Elaine’s return from work. This time seemed more precious than any she had known - these hours of closeness made more vital by his impending departure. “Can I take a photo of you? Right now, how you look this moment?” She needed to capture it - he was sleepy from sex, tousled, and unbearably beautiful. Jonathan was startled, but he saw something in her face that made him consent immediately, if not entirely willingly.

“OK.”
She leapt out of bed and grabbed her camera, never far away. He watched her moving, how the light made the pale skin on her back shimmer, and realised just how much he was going to miss looking at her body, but most of all, her face. “Just stay like you are...maybe lift your arm up to rest… Yes, that’s it….perfect.” She paused, looking through the lens at his perfection. His hair, a golden halo around his summer-honeyed face; the straightness of his nose; bones just emerging from youth-plumped cheeks under sky blue eyes; the flat planes of his chest; the long fingers of his perfect hand resting by the dark pink accent of his nipple. She sighed. “Leonardo would have loved to draw you, my love. Loved it.”

He was blushing now, but the black and white film in her favourite old Pentax wouldn’t show that too much. When she developed the shots, and pinned them by her bed, they would show her the man waiting to emerge from the boy. Years later, she would be unable to look at them. She got back into bed and as she lay down beside him, he turned on his side and rested a hand companionably on her breast. “I wish I could ring more, but we’ll be in the middle of nowhere, and even when we’re back at the barracks, we’re only allowed two calls each per week. Part of the discipline of it all, I s’pose.” Geri pulled a face.

“Is this what it’s gonna be like, when you’re in the Army?”

He shrugged. “At Sandhurst, yes, I think so. But I will get to come home, every so often. And once I pass out… Well, I suppose it depends where I’m posted…” He had read about the possibilities: Germany, UN peacekeeping… Even Weston Garrison.

Geri closed her eyes. She had already decided to put the University of Surrey as the first choice on her UCAS form. She could do her degree there in Guildford and not be too far away him over at Camberley. That would work for the first year, at least. What would happen after that couldn’t be predicted, but the course was a good one. However, the thought of this first, now imminent separation was so awful she felt mildly sick. Her stomach tightened, even more so when she thought about what he’d be doing; the prospect of this being the future norm for them was hard to bear.

Three days later they were standing, leaning against one another, outside the bus station in town. Early commuters were rushing past them as they huddled in their bubble of misery. The morning was heartlessly bright; the smell of fried food and diesel filled the air. Geri was trying to keep it together, but now the moment was imminent and she was sobbing silently, her face in his chest. He said nothing, simply rubbed his hand in a circle on her back. A bus approached and he saw the sign - it was his ride.

“It’s here. I have to go, Jellybean.” Her arms around his waist became tighter for a second, then she released him. He bent down, his eyes glistening, kissed her quickly and then grabbed his bag and ran inside to get on the bus. Geri stayed where she was, watching his retreating back. He joined a small group of other lads, all teasing, mock punching each other and laughing as the driver stowed their bags in the luggage compartment, then they climbed aboard. Jonathan looked for her as he went up the steps and gave her a subtle wave. The bus left by the far exit of the station, and she watched it go until it was out of sight, then turned and set off to the studio for her day’s work.

Chapter End Notes

A word or two about the locations in this story: Weston is fictional, but it is basically an amalgamation of Colchester in Essex (where I worked for some years) and Ipswich in Suffolk (my home town). Later in the 'then' part of the story, we will be in Guildford,
which is real, and Sandhurst College, Camberley, also real.

All of the locations in the 'now' chapters are real, including the road where Jonathan lives and the shopping streets, where his workplace is and so on. Geri's teaching is mostly in real establishments, too, and her flat is basically the exact one my daughter lived in, in Leicester, a few years ago. The only exception is the property at the very end of the story, which is an invention of mine but sort-of based on a variety of places around about where I live now.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Geri has been thinking over what she has been told, but meanwhile, Jonathan's activities have not gone unnoticed, and he is about to hear from an old friend.

NOW

*I guess I still care/Do you still care?*

“What’s our Woody been up to, then?” Angela’s voice on the phone sounded weary to Rob Singhal.

“We’re not sure yet. Something that looks a bit… How are you, Angela? Is Mr Burr pulling his weight?”

“Oh shut up, you cheeky bastard. I’m fine. We’re fine, ta.” The phone was on speaker and he could hear the grunts and squeaks of an infant, and the sounds of a disposable nappy being fastened. “Now then, what’s he done that’s made you ring me on a Friday night?”

Rob ran his hand over his head. He was finding acting-up quite stressful, more than he had anticipated, now that the IEA was properly funded and staffed. They were busy, and he was pleased about that, but he didn’t need extra work. While not nominally in charge of the witness-protection programme, it was normal practice in the Service for the HoD previously responsible to monitor and, if needed, speak to the former asset. “The first alarm bell was last weekend, when he googled an ex-girlfriend. His first girlfriend, in fact.”

Angela sighed. “I’m assuming there’s more to it than him getting nostalgic over an old flame…?”

“Grace ran some checks: it seems she lives in Leicester as well, now. Quite close to him, as it happens. We think their paths must have crossed. We are still trying to track down exactly how, but…”

“And…?”

“They’ve been in touch by phone, agreeing to meet. Should be together just about now, as it happens. We haven’t put a tail on him, yet, but we assume…”

Angela gathered her daughter up into her arms and crossed the nursery. Settling the baby into her cot, she hummed softly, but Daphne was dozing already. Angela stepped away quietly, picked up her phone, and switching speaker-mode off, went downstairs. “Does she pose a risk? Remind me about her, how long were they…?”

“Five years.”

“That one...yes...” She walked down the hall, into her bright, sunlit kitchen, switched the kettle and the baby monitor on and eased herself onto a stool at the breakfast bar. Her back ached, her boobs
were sore and she needed a drink, badly. “Right. Well, it makes sense. He’d hardly be able to ignore her…” Her mind began to click into professional gear. “First of all, um…what’s her name again?”

“Geraldine Muir. She’s a teacher now. And she has a small business as a photographer - portraits, weddings, you know.”

“Right. Good. We need more teachers… I remember now, she came up in the vetting… yes… childhood sweethearts.” No wonder. In the few minutes since her phone had rung, she had donned the mantle of agent handler again. “Listen Rob, if do I have to go and tell him off, I want a full dossier on the woman, and most important, an updated risk assessment. How much, if any danger, is he in currently? Is anyone actively looking for him, or likely to be?”

“Will do. I’ll email you?”

“Good lad.” Angela smiled; she’d missed this. “Well? Go on, get on with it!”

Rob grinned. “Give my regards to Mr Burr. Bye.”

*********

It felt good to be back on the Yam. The throb of the twelve hundred cc engine between his legs, the wind on his body, the way the machine responded to the slightest shift of his bodyweight. He felt in control.

Stefan was a good friend; he hadn’t hesitated when Jonathan had messaged him to ask for a lift to collect his bike from the car park at Rutland Water: “This friend of yours is OK, James? Did you take her home?”

“I never said it was a woman, Stefan.” He couldn't help dropping his eyes and smiling.

“You didn’t need to.” He was winking and Jonathan had blushed. Heading back home, he was trying to lose himself in the joy of riding, but it wasn't really working. As he rode, he was reliving the earlier journey with Geri sitting in stunned silence beside him. Not for the first time recently, he had been made to face the consequences of his actions for someone else.

All too often over the years he had blithely condemned a woman to suffer, walking away from the wreckage without a backward glance. They were always better off without him. Geri was the first, and until Sophie (maybe you killed her), the worst. He’d tried to convince himself that she would have recovered, made a life, forgotten him… but his words had been meant to devastate, and it seemed this was one task he had succeeded in all too well. Her world had been shattered and now his sudden return had pulled the rug from under her, yet again.

When his phone buzzed against his chest, he ignored it. It’s probably just Stefan checking I’m home OK. Green hedges whizzed past and the anger he felt, the fresh, bitter bloom of self-hatred, spurred him on. He was riding too fast, passing lorries and ambling cars with less than ideal care, and he would have continued, except he saw a speed camera flash. Deliberately calming his ragged nerves, he reduced his speed and on impulse pulled into a pub car park in a pretty village. His helmet and gloves off, he fished out his phone.

<How are things? Ax>
Oh shit, Angela. His shoulders hitched as he took a deep breath, rubbed his face and looked around distractedly. Going to get my arse kicked...

<Good. You OK? Baby?>

<She’s fine. Smelly, noisy. Could be a bloke.>

He laughed aloud, alone in the dusty sunshine,

<I’d like us to meet.>

Jonathan pondered this. She had said that he would be checked up on, from time to time. He had assumed that meant every few years, not less than ten months after he set out on this new life.

<OK. My place?>

<No. I know a nice pub up your way. I’ll send you the address. Monday eve>

Ten minutes later, sitting with a pint at a quiet table in the mostly deserted bar - more or less everyone else was in the garden enjoying the sunshine - he pondered what Angela wanted. His electronic communications were being monitored; he didn’t doubt that. In the first few weeks of his new life he had toyed with the idea of buying a phone under another name, and with setting up separate online accounts. After reflection he decided not to do that: Rob and his team were simply trying to protect him, and among them were people who could keep watch for any sinister activity on his behalf. Going rogue was a risk not worth taking, not even for a bit of privacy.

This had to be about Geri. The question was, would he have anything to tell Angela by Monday, anything she didn’t - presumably - already know?

*******

Geri surprised herself. She did not actually lie awake all night despite her expectation. But neither was it a restful sleep. She was wracked with nightmares of being alone in strange and yet somehow familiar-feeling places. There was a constant striving to get to an unknown and unseen goal she could never quite seem to find. She woke up to a Sunday morning that was grey and overcast, like her mind. It was an odd dichotomy: her fundamental belief about what had happened between her and Jonathan had been confirmed, but at the same time, that confirmation had invalidated all of her life since. She was adrift in time, like an untethered balloon.

After lying there, staring alternately at the ceiling and the curtains for an hour, unable to think straight, she got up and shuffled to the bathroom. It was hard to concentrate, even to do something as normal as taking a shower; her head was so filled with thoughts of Jonathan. She might have downed a few cups of coffee and brushed her teeth twice, but she could still taste him. His flavour was the same; he felt the same, he smelled the same. He was her Jonathan, still; or again, perhaps. Immediately, she remembered he was ‘James’ now: stormier eyes, a voice with a catch in it she only heard a few times in their five years, and a body, although lithe, showing underlying stiffness. It hurt her heart to think of the pain he had been in. She had seen it, or at least sensed it, from the beginning of his army career. I tried so hard to reach you, my love, so very hard.

After she had stood under the water for several minutes, unable to recall if she had washed all of her body or not, she finally gave up and turned off the flow. She dried herself, staring at her reflection in
the harsh overhead light. Her bathroom had no window, and she resembled a ghost. She was permanently altered too. Could she go back? Dare I risk it?

A muffled buzzing in the silence of the flat drew her attention to the fact that her phone was still in her bag.

<Are you OK?>

<Sort of>

<Up to eating anything later?>

She stared at the screen for a moment, incredulous.

<You think we should out to dinner?>

<Let me cook you something here. We can talk.>

Jonathan stood by the window in his tiny kitchen, holding his breath. His eyes were glassy, unfocused and unseeing. He had no certainty as to what her reaction would be, but he needed to see her again, for validation, for his own good. There was more to be said. He needed to know that she understood all of it.

Geri hesitated, her head a swirl of emotion. It was a maelstrom of confusion, fear and grief, and in the centre, a tiny pearl of hope. How much worse could it be? He’s explained, I understand… Now what?

<OK. Where?>

The grey morning morphed into a drizzly, cool day. Geri dressed accordingly, in jeans and a white shirt, loafers and a showerproof jacket. Her trusty umbrella kept her dry on the twenty-minute walk to Avenue Road - mostly. The pavements were gritty with damp summer dust and slippery with piles of fallen blossom soaked by the summer rain. The Victorian architecture and leafy greenness transported her; she was walking to Jonathan’s foster home, along the damp streets of old Weston. Soon she would be going up the black and white tiled path of the Joneses’ house, ringing the bell and climbing the stairs to his austere little room at the back of that chaotic, happy house.

Does he still have his old things? His father’s books, his mother’s pictures? A flash of metallic royal blue ahead caught her eye and she registered it was his motorbike, glistening in the rain on a paved forecourt. You should cover it, Jon… She turned towards the house and followed the arrow to Flat B, down the steps to the front door of the basement. She paused, recognising that going in would mean crossing a threshold in more ways than one.

All night, all day, all the way there; she had been fighting, trying to get hold of her thoughts. What did she want? What did he want? Was this a good idea, or a massive mistake? What did she have to lose that he hadn’t taken away that day in Guildford? That last thought settled it; there could be nothing worse than that. Any semblance of ‘peace of mind’ was gone now, anyway. It had flown out the door the moment she heard his voice at Will and Annie’s party. She tapped on the white door in front of her.

Her first thought when it opened was “He looks so young.” He was in jeans and a pale blue t-shirt, his feet bare on the laminate floor. His head was a fluffy mess of helmet-hair, and he was pink from the heat of his tiny kitchen. He smiled tentatively at her.

“Geri. You walked? Come in, come in.” He resisted the temptation to check the street; if he was
being watched by...whoever, they’d have clocked Geri by now. He took her coat and brolly, all the while trying to gauge her mood. She looked pale and tired, but calm. “Can I get you a drink? Coffee, or tea? Wine, perhaps?”

She shook her head. “No thanks, I’m OK for now.” She smiled, because she could smell baking. Cinnamon and sweetness - he’d made a carrot cake. He pointed to the couch and she sat, looking around. The flat was small, with low ceilings - his hair almost touched them, and she saw he had to duck to go through the doorway to the little kitchen. The walls were magnolia; his furniture was plain and utilitarian. A few books on a shelf, no pictures in sight. Once more she was reminded of his room at the Joneses’. He came back with a glass of scotch - Dutch courage he’d poured himself just a few minutes before her arrival. He sat at the other end of the sofa, rolling the drink in his hand nervously.

“Are you hungry?”

Geri shrugged. She hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast the day before, just managed a few cups of coffee and some water. The smell of the cake had piqued her interest, however. “I could probably eat, well, something…” His cooking was always good.

“I have some salmon...or I could make you an omelette…?”

“Whatever you want, you decide”

“OK, let’s try the fish then. Sure you don’t…?” He held up his glass. This time, Geri smiled and nodded. “You want a scotch? Or I have vodka, and cranberry. I could make you a cosmo.” He remembered. He hadn’t forgotten a thing about her, including how she could never eat much, if at all, when she was upset, and how she adored his carrot cake; and her favourite drink.

“A cosmo. Thanks.” On an empty stomach? She called after him. “Do you have any peanuts or anything?”

“I think so. Hold on.” She could see him, working swiftly and gracefully in the cramped space. He mixed her drink in a shaker, poured it into a highball glass, added a wedge of lime, then he opened a cupboard door by his head, reaching in for a packet. He opened the foil bag, tipped some nuts into a ramekin, put that and her drink on a small wooden tray and carried them through to the living room. All the time, he moved with the smooth economy of a professional, and not a drop of her red reviver was spilt en route.

“Do you miss it? Hotel work, I mean?”

It was Jonathan’s turn to shrug. “Some days. I liked it. It wasn’t so different from the army, really. It’s all service: looking after people, keeping things running smoothly.” He sat down again and leaned back. Geri sipped her drink; it was strong, so she nibbled on some peanuts. The warmth of the vodka settled into her stomach and she felt herself feeling less anxious. Jonathan was quiet, just the clink of ice and the sound of his breathing.

“How are you, really? It was a lot to take in, yesterday.”

“I’m OK. I knew, two weeks ago, at the party, I mean. I knew that things were going to...I dunno, change, I s’pose.” She turned her head to look directly at him. His face was serious, but again he looked young, as if ten years had been taken back. His eyes were wide and soft. “I think I’d been waiting. For you, or for someone…” She shook her head. “No, for you. I’d been on hold. For all this time… buffering, you could call it.”
He leaned forward, put his glass down next to hers and reached for her hands. “Geri, there are so many…” His lips pressed together. He didn't know where to start. She looked at him, expectant but patient, just as she had been for all those months when they first met, waiting for him to get up the nerve to kiss her. “I want to tell you a bit more, about why I have a new name, and what the risks are, but I won’t do that unless…” He looked down, ashamed. He had to ask her and it felt so wrong, so unfair.

“Unless what?”

She watched as he summoned up the courage he needed. This was not a life and death struggle - he could cope with those. This was far more important and dangerous. “You know I lied that day,” she nodded, “then you know what that means, Geri.” His eyebrows rose as he caught her eyes with his once again. “Do you still…?”

Her voice was very quiet, but to him it was as if all the bells in the city rang at once. “Yes.”

Jonathan did not move, but his grip on Geri’s hands tightened. She felt a tremor in him. He’s as scared as I am.

“I need to tell you about what happened in Cairo, then, what I did and didn’t do. I need to tell you about Sophie.” He looked at her and smiled nervously. “I should really make you sign the Official Secrets Act, but…” He stood up, put his phone in a dock on the mantelpiece and set some music playing. He replied to her quizzical look with a shrug - it was a precaution he’d been trained to take.

He returned to sit beside her, took a few deep breaths and started again. He told his tale. He spared himself none of the guilt, simply stating his motives for passing on the papers, his horror at the outcome, and how he had done his best to protect Sophie from the repercussions. He spoke quietly and evenly, only breaking down when he described finding her body on the floor of the suite, and what the corrupt police commander had said. “Maybe you kill her, he said to me. He was right, Geri. I did kill her.”

“No. You did what you could to save her.”

He turned his anguished face to hers. “But if I hadn’t-” Half his head was back in the little house with Sophie. Samira. Her real name was Samira.

“You couldn’t have known what would happen. And that man, that sale...you had to try to stop that, Jonath-…” He was pale, his eyes so distant that it made pain clutch at her insides. He loved her. He told me he loved her.

“So that’s why you come up on the Crimestoppers site? It was all a subterfuge?”

He nodded. “I needed to be a credible fugitive. Someone on the run, with proven criminal tendencies
but some moral core - someone who abhorred disloyalty, like Roper himself.”

“You haven't said much about the danger. There must have been some. Did you get hurt? You did…”

“Well, yes. The fake kidnap...I got a bit over-zealous. The agents beat me pretty badly.” He rubbed his mended cheekbone unconsciously.

“And after that. You say you were suspected. How did you cope? You must have been terrified!”

He shrugged. “I was in the army. It was like an op. I did what I had to.” He had not told her about Corky, about having to decide in a split second to kill him, rather than be found out. About the nightmares that he had where he was the one with the shards of sternum through his heart.

“But the little boy…”

“I liked Danny. He’s a good lad. Roper loves him, for all his other faults. I hope he’ll be alright.”

“And Jed?” Geri felt a twinge. Sophie was… Well, she was not here. But Jed…

Jonathan sighed, and he did that hair-smoothing thing that Geri always loved. “I was very attracted to her, and her to me, it’s true. But I think we both knew, once she was free of Roper, out of all that, and going back home to try to make... “ Whenever he thought of Jed, he did not feel that sick, guilty sensation. What they had burned brightly, but not for long. Each had seen in the other what they needed at that moment, but even as they said goodbye, outside the Nefertiti, he had known he would never see her again. And so had Jed.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand.”

“What’s that?”

“Where is the danger coming from now? You say the Worst Man in the World and his band of thugs were all arrested. Who is left to come after you?”

“Ah, well, there were others, his investors, not all of them the nicest people. And his buyers - not just the ones in that deal, but all of them. And those of his private army that got away… they caught a few in Egypt, some were apprehended in Turkey. Interpol are looking for the rest, but… I am assured the precautions are necessary.”

“You cost some powerful people, some bad people, a lot of money?” He nodded, and despite the seriousness, he couldn't help smiling when Geri said, “Good boy.”

They had finished the dishes, and returned to the sofa. Jonathan, feeling much lighter after unburdening himself, took her hand again. “I have already asked too much of you, I know that. You let me apologise, when you should have sent me packing on the end of your boot, probably. You’ve let me tell you my tale, including my... relationships with two other women, and you have been very… You’ve listened, and I thank you for…” He stopped, examining her face again. She looked better than she had when she arrived; the food and the glass of wine with dinner had put colour in her cheeks. “Why Geri? Why are you listening to me?”

Geri looked at him steadily. Patience was a quality she had in abundance - she had waited for him before. She recognised now that the last ten years had been about her waiting for him again, albeit unconsciously. She had not, could not move on because she knew he had lied and she was waiting for him to come back and say so. Now he had, and she had to decide what to do next.
“I don’t know.” She watched him deflate a little before her eyes. “I’m just saying I don’t know.”

He was as emotionally exhausted as she was. She saw his jaw tighten. “I’m being unreasonable, again. Trying to rush you, I-”

Geri watched the self-flagellation. “Stop it, James.” She paused, half-smiling. “Doing well on that, aren’t I? Really, stop. I wish I could tell you how I feel about… what I want. I don’t… I think I need some time just to, well, to take it all in. You’ve told me a lot of things, in the last two days.” He nodded, accepting. She reached for her bag, and looked towards where her coat was hanging by the door.

“Do you want to go home now?”

“I should. I have a long day tomorrow.”

“I’ll walk you.”

The rain had stopped, and it wasn’t quite dark by the time they reached Lyndwood Court. He insisted on accompanying her all the way to her door. Throughout the journey he had been telling himself not to try to kiss her goodnight, but when she turned to say it, he lost it. He lost his self-control. He leaned down quickly and pecked her lightly on the lips. And then all at once he heard her handbag hit the floor, felt her hands on his neck, and suddenly she was kissing him back, hot and wet and desperate. She stopped, far too soon, and then her palms came to rest on the front of his leather jacket.

“I said I don’t know. I meant I don’t know what I should…” Her eyes were fixed on the top of his zip; she daren’t look into his beautiful face. “…I know all too well what I want to do.”

They were both panting hard. He swallowed and steadied himself. “I have to meet someone tomorrow. Someone from…”

“Got it. Get told off, will you, for seeing me?”

“I expect so. That’s why I, er…”

“You needed to know how I felt? I see, yes.”

He smiled ruefully, that sweet lopsided smile that never failed to melt her heart. “If there is hope, then-”

“There is. There is definitely hope.” She kissed him sweetly and stepped back into her flat. Trying very hard not to cry, she managed “Goodnight, James.”

His voice as he replied was soft, almost breaking: “Good night, Jellybean.”
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

The final year of school, and great change is on the horizon for all the young people.

THEN

It made us restless

It was only many years later, when time and events had changed her irrevocably, that Geri was able to look back and see how clearly the summer that divided their two Sixth Form years had been a watershed for them both. From that too long, too hot and occasionally miserable August onwards, things had begun to change incrementally. At the time, it was imperceptible, even to them, let alone any onlookers, but undeniable in retrospect.

She had spent the time he was away with the TA throwing herself into her work experience, making herself indispensable and learning everything she possibly could from the staff at the studio. The remaining hours she filled with work, her mother and her girlfriends: shopping and going to the cinema, sleepovers and facials. She was happy, anticipating the last year of school, and beyond it the prospect of life as an adult, with Jonathan by her side. Not that she didn’t miss him while he was away, of course. They had become so inseparable by then that she was bound to find any absence a loss. In the occasional dark moments when she ached for him, she told herself she had to learn to harden up. This was how it was going to be, so she might as well get used to it.

Jonathan returned from the summer trials an attractive shade of golden brown and even fitter than before; he was happy and very proud, full of stories of adventure and coming top in marksmanship. His eyes sparkled when he related how he had been made platoon leader and how it was his platoon that had won the final war games. He kept the tiny trickle of uncertainty that had begun to flow inside secret from others and, most of the time, from himself, too. Geri did her best to be pleased for him in her turn, and it wasn’t hard for her to be swept along by his apparent joyful enthusiasm. Naturally, he listened attentively while she shared what she had been doing, and their afternoons in bed resumed, even better, sexier and more loving than before.

The new school year - their last - began with the usual reunions. The group had been in touch during the break, Maxine and Geri in particular; Trish had been in France for some weeks with her family, as usual. The rift caused by Justin’s foray into VanessaWorld remained. On the study side, things were more intense from the outset this time; as Carl kept saying, Shit just got real. There was one change Geri noted at the time, and it was a positive one: Jonathan had emerged from the summer break more confident, and displaying a natural authority which transformed him into the leader of the group, albeit in his quiet, unobtrusive way. She saw the officer to come in his gentle interventions to solve minor disagreements, and in the way the gang as a whole, and especially the boys, looked to him for guidance. She said nothing, to him or any of the others, but it made her proud.

******
“You know, Jellybean… I mean, you know Jonathan can stay over when I’m here, too, right? Anytime.”

Geri froze for a split-second; she was washing the dishes while behind her, her mother did some paperwork at the kitchen table. *God, Mum, there’s such as thing as being TOO COOL.* “Mu-um! Please…”

“I just mean, well, your bedroom is well away from mine, and it’s not as if I don’t know you’re sleeping together…” She looked at her daughter’s back. “I don’t want either of you to feel you have to sneak around.” Geri loosened her death grip on the edge of the sink and turned around. Elaine had a slight smile on her face. “He’s a lovely boy, and this year will be the last time you’ll be… you know, *carefree*, with someone else paying the bills…” Her expression became wistful. Geri saw the shadow of her father’s loss cross her mother’s face, bringing a lump to her own throat. Elaine seemed to snap out of it, briskly continuing. “All I mean is, I don’t want you to waste a moment, that’s all, love.”

Geri dried her hands and sat down at the table, reaching over to take her mother’s hand. “I know…it’s just...well, you know…” She looked down. Even with her mum, whom she knew she could talk to about *anything*, the idea of her in the same house when they… it felt awkward, at best.

“I get it, love,” Elaine laughed softly, “but there will come a time when you have to make love with other people in the building!”

“Oh GOD, MOTHER!! Please stop!” Geri was giggling too, now, and the closeness of the shared moment became more intense.

******

Geri told Jonathan about the conversation the next day. They were cuddling on a bench by the Art Block entrance in a shared free period. It was raining, but the facade of the ugly sixties building gave some shelter, and apart from the odd gust blowing a flurry of drizzle in their faces, they kept pretty dry.

“Oh shit! *Really*?”

“Yep. She means well… In fact, knowing her, I reckon she’ll be disappointed if we don’t…” Geri felt the giggles bubbling up again. She’d been laughing on and off all night and again this morning.

“You think it’s funny?” Jonathan was still processing the concept. He could never imagine having sex with Geri in his room with the Joneses in the house. *Although there was that time…but we didn’t actually...* When Geri’s sparkling eyes caught his, however, he felt her drawing him into the humour of the situation. He had come to admire Elaine greatly, and the relationship she and her daughter shared was a wonder and a delight to him. He smiled, then he began to chuckle, his shoulders shaking as he fought to control it. Soon they were both rocking back and forth until their eyes met again and Jonathan caught her face in his hands and their giggles became kisses.

They were stopped only by a quiet, amused voice. “Now then, you two, take it somewhere else.” It was Izzy, the photography tech. Jonathan leapt to his feet, his face glowing beetroot red. Izzy leaned over towards him conspiratorially. “I only meant, it’s a teeny bit *public*, love. Don’t stop kissing your girl.” She winked at him. “*Ever.*” She grinned broadly at Geri, tipped her head at Jonathan, mouthed the words *He’s gorgeous* at her and continued on her way.

“That’s not funny either,” a mortified Jonathan sat down again and looked pleadingly at Geri, who was grinning, “God, that was so embarrassing!”
“Izzy? She’s fine. She just likes to tease us.” She leaned against his shoulder; he had his head in his hands. Not confident about everything yet, then. She looked at her watch. “I’d better get moving. Come over later, after your run?”

He sat upright and smiled back at her. “Yes... if that’s OK…?”

“I think we just established that it’s more than OK.” Geri looked at him as he processed what she meant, blushed, but then seemed to settle on a position.

“Yes!” She bit her lip at the thought. “Yes please.”

********

The hill by the Garrison was little more than a pimple to him now. He ran every day, whatever the weather, because he would have to pass a tough fitness assessment to get into Sandhurst. He had begun to add weight to his backpack, a little more every week, and he was more careful about what he ate. He swam when he could, climbed the faux rock wall at school, did press-ups and pull-ups until he was sick; but running was his favourite. It cleared his mind as well as working his body. Jogging on the spot once he reached the flat top of Langham Hill, he scanned the horizon. Things were lining up nicely: he still had to pass his A-levels in the summer, but his predicted grades were at the right level and his teachers were encouraging; he had done well in the summer TA trials, getting a special commendation from the CO; he was pretty sure he could pass the physical and the fitness tests, by some margin, tomorrow if need be. He would be eighteen in a few weeks; then he could sign his papers and be sure that at minimum he would get his application in.

He turned and began to run northwards, away from the grey sprawl of the Army base and towards the autumn-coloured leafy suburbs and the countryside beyond Weston. His mind ranged even further. There was a whole world out there, waiting to be explored, and he and Geri could do it together. He just needed to get into Sandhurst, complete his commissioning course and then he’d be set. They’d both be doing their degrees, he’d be earning money... they could have whatever life they wanted. He felt his chest swell with a pride tinged with sadness. If only his parents could see him, meet Geri... In his mind’s eye, he saw his own future children, then he had a momentary flash. A cloudy memory, of going to the Palace, collecting a medal from a tall man in a shiny uniform. I won’t leave them... I will not leave her alone.

*******

“You still awake?”

“No. Well, yes, I- Ow!”

She had pinched his nipple punitively hard. “Git. I wanted to ask you something.” She adjusted position so she could see his face. The bedside lamp was still on, its soft light bathing the lovers in an amber glow.

“Okay...” Geri’s questions were usually probing. He loved her intelligence, but she could be too perceptive; it made him feel inadequate sometimes.

“I’ve wanted to ask you, for a while… Why do you want to be a soldier so much, Jonathan?”

He looked at her for a long moment, then turned his head to stare at the ceiling, sighing deeply. This
was a question he had asked himself occasionally, more often of late. “I can’t remember ever wanting to do anything else, really. It’s always seemed like the only thing. Like you with your camera, you could say.” Moments from his childhood swam before his eyes, splintered memories of a deep voice, a kit bag, a uniform. The smell of damp serge, a box of photographs, his father’s books, his shiny, seemingly massive boots by the wall; his medal, awarded posthumously, in a box in Jonathan’s wardrobe. “I just know that when I got old enough to understand what that meant - to be a soldier I mean, to be what Dad had been and died doing… I knew I had to follow him, I s’pose.” Geri lay still, digesting his words; Jonathan turned his head to look at her again. “Why d’you want to know? I mean, is anything, are you-”

“I just, I dunno…” She ran her eyes over his beautiful, almost angelic face. He still had his sweet curls, and his blue eyes were round as they watched her. “It’s just… You’re brave and strong, of course you are,” her fingers ran along his arm and she squeezed his bicep, smiling, “but honestly, I can’t imagine you actually fighting anyone.”

He let his gaze rest on her pretty face. The trials in Norfolk had been a success, but he had left there with a tiny kernel of doubt in his heart. Besides the swaggering by some of the others, the general atmosphere of macho posturing and the overall attitudes shown to him, he had begun to see a principle of this new life, one where behaviour and actions were determined by authority and force, not reason. Was this the world he was about to join? Did he want that? And yet, the camaraderie, the sense of belonging… Aren’t doubts part of any decision? He knew he did not have to like all of it. He took a deep breath.

“Oh, I don’t think there’s actually much fighting now, not these days. Let’s hope not.” He smiled winningly, as much to reassure himself as to appease Geri’s fears. “And I think, well…for me, it’s more about honouring my father’s memory, what he stood for, you know?”

“To finish what he started, you mean?”

He laughed, a wheezy chuckle of denial. “More to, I dunno, it sounds cheesy, but to serve my country, I guess.”

“You could do that at McDonald’s…” She was teasing, but when she saw his face she was immediately contrite. “Sorry, bad joke. I didn’t mean…not to diminish… I don’t mean to mock or anyth-”

“I know.” He pulled her closer, kissed her hair, and held her tightly. They lay in silence for a while, each thinking carefully about what the other had said. There was an intimacy in the quiet of the dark room, a closeness they both relished. Geri still felt bad about her poor joke, and eventually she decided she could not let it lie there.

“I’m sorry, Jonathan. I shouldn’t have teased you. I know you will be a great soldier. You know I love you, so much.”

“I do know that. And I love you too, Jellybean.” He nuzzled the top of head, inhaling deeply.

Geri couldn’t speak, in fact for a few moments she could not even breathe. *He said it. He actually said it.* She did her best to keep her cool, but it fast became impossibly hard to hold her feelings in. She made no sound, but he noticed nonetheless. Her tears were hot on his skin, and soon he felt the silent sobs as they shook her body where it lay against his. “Hey, that’s a good thing!” His chiding was gentle, and soon her crying was reduced to a gulping sniffle. Geri lifted herself up to peck at his mouth.

“I know. But that’s the first time you’ve said it to me.”
He was shocked. “Is it?” She nodded. His eyebrows rose even higher. “But I’ve… I mean I knew I loved you ages ago… well, then, I’ve told you at last.”

********

That last year of school went by horribly fast. One minute, it seemed to Geri, it was August, then just days later it was October, with leaves falling, Jonathan’s eighteenth birthday and Halloween. Before she knew what had happened, the day was there. She accompanied him to the Army Recruitment Office in town when he went to sign and submit his formal application to Sandhurst. All four of the Joneses and Elaine went along too. The captain and his sergeant-major who ran the office had got to know Jonathan well over the year, advising him and helping with his preparation, and it was a very happy and proud occasion for Jonathan. The party then went on to a pub, and after a couple of drinks it was decided to make an evening of it and they shared a banquet at The Golden Carp, by way of a belated celebration for his birthday a few days earlier. As they left the restaurant, it struck him that he had a sort of family at last. Just in time to leave them all.

The Saturday after, with Geri still doing her best to be pleased for him, which she was in so many ways, Elaine suddenly announced she’d be out all night.

“Yeah, I’m going to stay over at Roz’s. You’ll be fine, right?” She smiled brightly at her daughter who was sitting at the dining table, choosing prints for her personal portfolio.

Geri looked up cautiously. “What are you up to, Mother?”

Eyebrows raised, with a deliberately faux-innocent expression, Elaine sauntered closer. “Just a girls’ night out, you know, the usual. Nothing much.”

“You’re not going to see the bloody Chippendales, are you?” Geri had seen the posters.

“Ummm…” Her red face betrayed her.

“Mother! Really!”

“Oh, go on, give me a break. I’m still human, you know. It’s all right for you, with—”

Geri’s hand shot out, palm first. “Stop right there, Mum.”

When he arrived to find Geri still in high dudgeon, Jonathan was amused by her squeamishness, considering how relaxed she usually was talking to her mother about sex. “It’s just a show, it’s not lap-dancing or anything.”

“How would you know? And anyway, it’s my Mum…”

Changing the subject seemed like the best course. “So, we’ve got the house to ourselves, then?” He smiled. He had some plans for her.

“What are you up to, naughty boy?” An enigmatic smile was all she got in reply.

She discovered what later, when she climbed the stairs after locking up. Candlelight flickered, and she smelt something aromatic. “Jonathan? Where are you?” She entered her room to find it softly-lit and scented with incense. The bed was arranged oddly, with a pillow near the centre, and draped with a shawl she’d never seen before. What the..?

Strong hands caught the top of her arms from behind. “I had a lovely birthday. Now it’s your turn for a present.” He stood close and began to remove her clothes gently, kissing as he went. “Now, sit
down, on the edge...that’s it…” Geri watched as he knelt down by her knees and stroked the outsides of her thighs. She trusted him, and she guessed what he had in mind. When his hands reached her ankles, he oh-so-gently spread her legs and began to kiss his way up one side. “Lie back, love.”

“Jonathan?” She knew what was coming but she felt unprepared. “Are you sure? I mean-”

He moaned his assent into the flesh of her thigh. He had wanted to try this for a while, but things had been so perfect between them, he’d been reluctant to push her. Now, at the end of this week, feeling so happy and confident, it felt like the right moment. Geri seemed to agree, because she leaned back, allowing her head to rest on the pillow, as he intended. He lifted her legs up so he could rest them on his shoulders. He was very aroused now; every nerve ending on his body was tingling. Her skin tasted salty, floral, fragrant, and he could smell her sex. She wanted this, he was certain, and he needed it so much.

He was inches away now. He licked, kissed, sucked and then his nose brushed her pubic hair. Geri moaned and wriggled a little. “Jonathaaan…oh god…” He took a deep draft of her scent, and felt yet more blood rushing into his cock. Then he tried a little flick of the tongue. Geri squeaked and jerked.

“Did I hurt-?”

“No! Sorry…just so sensitive…oh god, oh god…”

He licked a little harder, taking a firmer grip on her thighs and this time she moaned loudly and tilted her hips up, forcing herself into his mouth as much as the position would allow. He tasted her, musky, sweet and savoury. He grinned and chuckled as he felt her fingers grasping his curls, holding him against her. Revelling in her obvious pleasure, he did with his tongue and lips what he knew she liked his fingers to do, and soon her cries were louder and he had to hold on tight to stop her rising off the bed. Then she was coming, shouting and jerking and crying, tugging on his hair before releasing him. He watched her face: tears and grimaces and then whimpers as she came back to him.

“Oh my GOD, Jonathan..oh, bloody hell…”

“Did you like that? Did I, was it...you know...OK?” He was smiling, his lips swollen and wet with her orgasm, but he still needed her validation. Geri raised her eyebrow, then reached and grabbed him by the arm.

“C’mere, you.” She pulled him onto the bed beside her. “Like it? No. Loved it! Jesus Christ, man!” She kissed him, tasting herself, the scent she had become so familiar with now on his lips. “Thank you. I love you.” Jonathan lay there, looking at her as a few peaceful minutes passed. They touched each other tenderly, eyes locked; she was the love of his life, he was sure. Geri was destined to be part of all his tomorrows, he knew that. Suddenly he realised she was sliding off the bed. Her voice was firm. “Sit up.”

“What? Why?”

“Your turn.”

Alarmed, he scooted backwards towards the head of the bed, his hand held up to ward her off. “No, Geri, no...no! I didn't do that so you’d feel you had to-”

“Shut up, idiot. I’ve been waiting to do this. I was gonna try it on your birthday, but then, well, you know, what with Mum…”

Jonathan swallowed convulsively. His erection was painfully hard. He imagined what it would be
like, then, before he had a chance to focus on Geri, she was crawling over the covers to reach him, licking her lips.

It was better than his dreams. Her mouth was hot, soft, her tongue teased and when she sucked on the head he almost came on the spot. He made noises he’d never heard from his own throat before, he hadn’t ever felt so out of control. It was a battle to stop his hips bucking because he was afraid to hurt her, to choke her. He looked at Geri’s face. It was red, and her eyes were wide and watery as she took as much of him in as she could manage. Her hand held the rest of his length and she locked gazes with him. She was determined to please him; he was clearly finding it as incredible as she had found his mouth earlier.

When she began to fondle his balls and then press on his perineum (Geri was still studying, the keenest of students, always), he felt he would lose it and gently withdrew, panting hard. She pouted at him, wiping her mouth. “Was I doing it wrong? I covered my teeth, didn’t I?”

He shook his head, his jaw tight. “It was too good, it was...god Geri, it was...I need to, please…” He was pulling her up onto the bed, and she grinned and complied. “I want to, I have to be inside you, please.” He reached for the drawer where they kept the condoms, but she caught his hand, shaking her head.

“I’ve been on the pill plenty long enough now. Let’s try without tonight.”

Jonathan’s eyes rolled back, and he felt faint. Quickly gathering himself, he entered her. Once fully seated, he had to pause, desperate though he was for release, because the sensation was heart stopping. Her mouth had felt so wet and hot and alive, but this was something beyond imagination. He buried his head in her hair, nuzzled her, moaned and eventually was able to form words. “I love you, god, how I love you, my Jellybean.” His breath was hot on her shoulder and neck.

“I love you too, Jonathan. So much.” Her inner muscles gripped him and he moaned loudly.

“God, Geri, you feel so… incredible.”

“Then fuck me, Jon. Please.” Her voice was barely a whisper, but it unleashed him. He was close, and it didn’t take long, but he never forgot that first time he came inside her, properly.

*********

All of a sudden it was Christmas, New Year passed and then preparation for mock exams took over their lives. Fun seemed like a thing of the past as getting the grades became the only thing that mattered - apart from each other. Jonathan got confirmation of a provisional place on the September Commissioning Course, and Geri was given a generous offer by the University of Surrey, on the basis of her portfolio and application. She could undercut her predicted grades by quite a margin and still get in, but being Geri, she continued to work hard. Jonathan was called to the Garrison for an interview. He was so anxious about it he was sick in a hedge on the way there, but once in the room, he was fine. The officers, a colonel and a captain, were full of praise for his preparation and he soon began to feel he was pushing at an open door. They did mention he’d need a haircut, though. He knew Geri wouldn't like that.

For them both, for all the Upper Sixth students, study became either a compulsion or a hated duty; whichever, it mattered, if the last seven years were not to have been wasted. They read, they practiced, honed the skills they needed, and looked gloomily at the calendar. The year ground on, moving towards the exams, results and inevitable change...
“Can I take just a couple more shots, just to complete my portfolio?”

Uncharacteristically warm spring sunshine was roasting them both as they lay on a grassy bank by the river, taking a rare break from the books during the Easter holidays. Jonathan was stretched out on his back, dozing, luxuriating in the feel of the heat on his skin. Geri was beside him on her tummy, fiddling with her camera. “You need more? Of me?”

She grinned. He really had no idea how beautiful his face was. “Yes please. I’ve done a series of you, I’d like just a few more. To give it the right, you know…sort of, balance, I s’pose.”

Wearily, he sat up. “Now?” He looked around. “Here?”

She nodded. The dappled shade of the weeping willow above them gave an effect unlike any of her previous studies of him. “Can you turn a bit? Yes…that’s it. Look at the lock gates… that’s perfect.” He wrapped his arms around his raised knees and gazed into the distance, trying to press down the self-consciousness that usually gripped him when she did this. Her work was so good, she even made him look half-decent. And if she needed it for her A-Level, he was happy to do anything to help. “Look at me now, just… Ye-e-e-sss, oh Jon…”

He was looking at her through the lens with such love that the sight of it made her hands shake. She managed a couple of shots, then put the camera down and allowed him to gather her in his long arms. He kissed her face softly and she realised she was crying. “Shhhh. It’s OK, it’s OK, love.”

“I know. I don’t know what made me cry, except…”

“What?” He looked into her eyes.

“You. You’re so… you’re you, Jonathan. So…” her hand stroked his cheek, “so beautiful.”

He shook his head and snorted with laughter, but a blush rose up his neck and face. Then, to stop her saying anything else, he kissed her.

********

Jonathan and Geri were luckier than some: they were finished with all their exams, practicals and orals included, by the first of July. The last exam for them both was the final French written paper, and when the horde emerged from the exam room, a stream of sweaty but relieved teenagers, Geri felt the weight of it all fly up and away into the cloudless sky. The die was cast; she had done her best, was pretty happy with her answers and now all she had to do was wait. Her boyfriend was less confident, partly because he needed good passes to get where he wanted to be, and he still lacked some of her confidence in his own academic ability. Geri was as sure as his teachers that he would have no trouble, but he took some convincing.

The official Leavers’ Day was later in the month, and a strangely stilted affair. It was the occasion to hand in all your textbooks, collect any remaining belongings and work, and say goodbye to teachers and friends. Some people came in in their old uniform shirts and got people to sign them, others brought in books for the same purpose. It felt false to Geri, because in her head she had already left, before the exams started. Even the classrooms she had spent so many hours in seemed subtly changed, and despite her expectations, she was not at all upset at bidding farewell to a place she had inhabited for nearly seven years. She was too occupied looking ahead to look back.

After a busy morning queuing to hand in books and equipment, and get their official pieces of paper signed, the gang of friends congregated in their usual summer spot and contemplated the future. The
six near-adults sat in a subdued huddle on the grass bank above the Rec. Justin had offers from three universities, and had opted for Imperial College London, as his ambitions lay in the area of organic chemistry. Carl had a job lined up with John Lewis, on their management trainee scheme. He’d been working at the local Waitrose in the holidays and at weekends for a couple of years, and he liked it. Maxine and Trish were both heading north, to Leeds, to study Geography and English respectively. And of course, all being well, Geri and Jonathan were Surrey-bound; her to Guildford to study, he to Camberley and the welcoming arms - he hoped - of the British Army.

They all made the usual promises to keep in touch - even Justin and Trish, between whom there had been a slight thaw in recent weeks. Geri had learned through Jonathan that Justin wanted them to get back together, but if she felt the same, his ex was hiding it very well. And they were all on the thresholds of their adult lives; striking out, learning to be independent, finding their own niches in the wider world.
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

Jonathan gets his wrist slapped by Angela. But then something happens which makes Geri realise how much he still means to her.

NOW

Everybody loves the things you do

A muffled but unmistakable noise made Jonathan’s head snap up; there were raised voices just outside, by the front entrance onto London Road. He assessed the situation in a split-second. A young woman in a hijab was trying to open the door while juggling several large bags and a pushchair with a child in it. Two men were standing very close, one behind, the other to one side of her. The man on her left was holding a little girl by her shoulders; the child was crying. By the time the close observer had taken this all in he had excused himself from the client he was dealing with and reached the door.

“’ahlaan bik,” he said quickly to the woman, as the men took a step back, “’udkhul.”

“Shukraan, shukraan…” she murmured gratefully as she allowed him to guide the pushchair in and take her bags for her. He glared at the men, who sneered and walked off while he settled the woman and her children in the waiting area near the door, sent the receptionist to take her information and fetched her some water from the cooler.

This was not the first incident of this type in recent days, but the staff and volunteers had hoped that Friday was a blip; it seemed that the current climate had made the racists feel it was open season. Abusive notes through the door, the occasional bit of graffiti, those were normal for the Gateway Refugee Centre at the best of times. Even Leicester, the first city in the UK to have a minority of white British inhabitants, had its share of bigots. Before he returned to his desk, Jonathan looked over towards Will, who had watched the whole thing unfold. His supervisor beckoned to him.

“I’ve just been speaking to the police, James. I think we need to think about some kind of increased security. We can keep an eye on things, as can the beat bobbies, but I fear that even you with your military experience can't manage the whole threat.”

Jonathan grinned ruefully and bowed his head. “You’re right there. But can we afford it?”

“The woman I spoke to on the phone, she’s head of community policing, Chief Superintendent something-or-other… Anyway, she said there’s a fund for this sort of thing, for emergencies. Gave me a number.” He held up a post-it. “I’m calling them now. I don’t think it’d hurt to have a visible presence on the door.”

“As long as it doesn’t frighten off the clients.”
Will pulled a frustrated face. They both looked over at the woman who had been harassed; her face was pale, and Nisha was still comforting her. Jonathan sighed and went back to his desk, where an elderly Syrian man was waiting patiently for him. “\textit{innaasif}.”

The man glanced at the street, raised his hands and shrugged. Such sights were not new to someone fleeing from war and persecution.

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For most of the population, June epitomised what was best of the fleeting, elusive English summer. Not too hot usually, with long days, barbecues and pleasant evenings in the garden. For Geri, however, for so many years she couldn't remember any different, it was exam season. That was the one thing that had made her hesitate before choosing her career; she knew it meant a lifetime of this subtle torture. But she had no other choice: teaching was her vocation. Much to her chagrin, she had accepted years ago that she could not make a living with her camera alone, and she had been drawn to this work.

The one advantage of this time of year for her was little or no marking in the evenings, although her working days were still full. Some classroom teaching continued at the High School, there was invigilating and portfolio marking to be done there and at the Queen Liz. Her evening classes were winding down, but that meant end of course assessments to be collected, marked and moderated. The relief from eighteen-hour days and busy weekends was welcome, because she had a few weddings in her diary. That Monday morning, as she waited for the QE staffroom clock to tick around and her session in the exam hall to draw closer, she emailed one of her brides. She needed final confirmation of the timings that coming Saturday. How nice it would be to be doing one job without my mind on another… Geri clicked on ‘send’, closed her laptop and stretched her limbs. The truth was, she was glad of the temporary distraction. In the silence of the hall, walking the rows of desks with their hunched students, her thoughts would return to Jonathan.

Sleep had been more restful overnight, after the dinner at his place. Some things were clearer to her; others less so. He did want… well, perhaps he wanted at least some of what she now felt she did, after all. Just as she had thought before the meeting at Beacon Hill: a chance to talk about what happened, to spend time, to get to know each other again. To see if, maybe, there was anything left of what they had. To see if there might be something new that they could share. But not, as she had feared and as she had angered her as they stood in that windy layby, \textit{not} just like that, not without accepting and facing the consequences of his own actions in the past. She closed her eyes and thought of the kiss they had shared on her doorstep, and how she had fought with her desire for him. It was more than just the need for physical affection; it was a hunger for a connection she had thought was lost forever. And she had seen it in his eyes, too. He felt the same.

“Are you fit, Geri?” Her colleague Edie from Modern Languages was standing by the door. They were sharing this shift, relieving those who had started the exam room off first thing that morning. Along with another specialist invigilator, they would supervise the rest of the time and collect the papers.

“Coming!” She stuffed her MacBook in her bag, shouldered it and collected her bottle of water and banana from the table. “I’m all set. Let’s go, then.”
Jonathan spotted Angela Burr as soon as he walked into The Cow and Plough. She was at a table in a corner, with what looked like a glass of lemonade in front of her, next to what was presumably his pint of bitter. There were two agents in the bar too, as protection, perhaps. Or maybe they’ve come to take me away. He shuddered briefly at the thought, recalling the crowded back seats of luxury cars and dusty Land Rovers, in Egypt and points east. The nondescript man by the bar was sipping a coffee, and the young athletic woman was reading a copy of the Mercury at a table by the door. He registered them and strode over to his old handler, ducking to avoid the low beams in the ceiling. He’d been to this pub before, once, with Stefan; it was in a series of converted farm buildings in Oadby, just southeast of the city. He liked it, and the food was good. He grinned as he reached the corner. “Lovely to see you.”

“Come here, James.” Angela stood up and Jonathan walked into her outstretched arms, bending down to return the hug; she was a good foot shorter than him. After a moment, she leaned back. “Let me have a proper look at you.” Her critical gaze scanned his face, and she ran her hands down his upper arms. She was half-smiling, but he could tell he was not in her good books, despite the obvious affection she had for him. “You look well. I’ve ordered us some food already. Didn’t think you’d mind.” Her round brown eyes looked tired to him, but they still had in them the twinkle of mischief he had always loved; it was one of the things that made her remind him of Geri when they first met. “Come on then, sit down, you’re too tall. You make the place look untidy! Now, tell me what you’ve been up to.”

He chuckled and took his bike jacket off, hung it on a hook in the alcove and slid onto the bench opposite her. He lowered his voice. “I think you already know the answer to that, which is why you’re here.” She smiled, properly this time, glancing down at her hands on the table. One of the things he had loved about her from the very start of their relationship was her straightforwardness. Angela never allowed him to dissemble, and he responded in kind.

“This woman, she’s important to you.”

It was a statement, not a question. He maintained eye contact. He knew all too well that he had transgressed in ignoring one of his most fundamental instructions, but he hoped he had proved his trustworthiness in the past. “Look, Anj...I didn’t seek Geri out. I had no idea she lived around here. I went to my boss’s engagement party, and she was just there. And when I saw her, I...” He swallowed, remembering how he had felt when she was there, suddenly in front of him, after all these years; so beautiful, so reasonable in the face of his unreasonableness...so Geri, still. I had to make it right. “I hurt her, I’m sure you know that as well,” Angela nodded. There weren’t many details in the file but the bare facts said enough: he had walked out after Iraq, leaving her. “The fact is, she loved me, she was...I treated her shittily, lied to her. I wanted to make her hate me, so she could move on. It was cruel, and I’ve never...” Never forgiven myself for it, even though I thought it was the only way.

Angela sighed. After Rob sent her the dossier on Geri, and she looked at the reports from the surveillance he’d set up, it was clear to her there was something happening, and she had no wish to stamp on that. Jonathan had that look on his face, the one he’d had the day they met in Zermatt. He was determined to continue on his course, believing he was doing the right thing. “Right. Well, I’d tell you to stop, but that wouldn’t make any difference, would it?” She smiled as one corner of his mouth went up. He had ignored her express instructions before, and he’d been right to do so. “I can see you’re not going to change your mind.” As I expected. Plan B it is, then. “Does she know about...?” She waved her hand vaguely. “What have you told her?”

This time he was ashamed, because he had crossed a line with Geri, he knew that. He looked down.
“Enough.” He looked up cautiously and was relieved to see no anger in Angela’s face; not even disappointment. “I had to explain. I owed it to her, and she needed to know what she was getting into, if she-”

A raised hand and a stern look stopped him. A waiter was at his elbow with the first part of their food order, a platter of antipasti. He placed it and a basket of bread between them, stepping away as his female colleague gave them a plate each.

“Thanks.” Angela rubbed her hands. “You have no idea how much I’m looking forward to this. I can’t remember the last time I ate something I didn’t cook or have to wash up after.”

“Mr Burr not doing his share?”

“Oh he is, he’s been great, of course he has. But you know how it is.” She looked up, and Jonathan shrugged, smiling a little wistfully; his experience in the area was non-existent. “Or maybe not, sorry. Well, he works all day, and by the evening we’re both too knackered to go out, even if we could get a babysitter. So we get a takeaway or one of us burns something on the cooker, we eat it on the sofa and take turns cooing over Daphne.” She sighed and laughed. “Then we pass out in front of the TV. Trouble is, we’re both a bit old for this parenting lark.” Jonathan shook his head, but she waved away his denial, emitting a moan of ecstasy as she bit into a deep-fried stuffed courgette flower. “Bloody hell, that’s fabulous. You’d better dig in before I clear the whole fucking plate!”

An hour later, after a main course of lamb’s liver with bacon and mash (for the iron, James), Angela rubbed her stomach and put her napkin on the table. “Let’s go for a walk, shall we? I need to move or I’ll conk out.” It was still light, so the pair left the pub (I’ve already paid, love. Put that away) and set off for an amble around the complex of low buildings which now housed a variety of enterprises. The whitewashed brick exteriors retained an agricultural look, but a glance through any window might reveal an upmarket beauty salon, a fancy interiors showroom or an accountancy office. Jonathan kept pace with her, patiently waiting for the verdict. He was only too aware that in his situation, she was the judge, jury and - if it came to that - executioner. She would be completely within her rights to uproot him again, and force him move on to somewhere new, if she felt his current behaviour was too risky. He hoped she would not do that. In fact, he didn't think he could bear it. They reached a corner and Angela leaned her arms on a large farm gate, her left foot resting on the bottom bar as she stared straight ahead.

“I’m not going to tell you to stop seeing Geri - not that you’d listen anyway, I bet - well, I’m not going to, because we’ve done a pretty comprehensive sweep… I say we, by which I mean Grace, and Rob and the whizz-kids… there I go, rambling again… anyway, there’s no traffic, not a whisper relating to you. None of the people we feared would want your blood seem to be looking for you, not right now, anyway.” She turned to look at him, standing straight, almost to attention, beside her. His eyes were fixed on the hedge across the field from them, but she had heard the whoosh of air from his relieved lungs. “Jonathan,” she whispered, and his head rotated in her direction, “this Geri…”

“He nodded.

“She is.” He took a breath, wanting to say more, but he decided against it. Those words were for Geri alone. “Thank you, Angela. And for what it’s worth, I don’t believe there’s any security risk. One thing I know about Geri is she can be trusted. She’s the most loyal person I know.” He felt a lump in his throat, which he swallowed quickly, and turned away again before he made a fool of himself.

Angela took it all in; everything he had said, and the thousand things he hadn’t but she’d learned anyway. “There’s one thing I must say to you, James.” He stiffened his back again. “There is always some risk, for a person on your position, from getting involved with someone. Even someone
you’ve known a long time, and who you trust. My advice would be, for her sake and yours, to tell her the bare minimum. She doesn’t need to know everything."

He nodded again, more curtly this time. “Agreed.”

They said goodbye in the car park, Jonathan clutching his helmet and gloves, Angela twiddling her car keys. The two agents were monitoring from their anonymous Toyota nearer the gate. She was reluctant to leave, as she had the strongest sensation they would not meet again, and it pained her. “Off home now?”

He shook his head. “No, I think I’ll just pop into the office for a while, finish off a bit of paperwork.”

She smiled. Typical. Never off duty. “Geri works Monday evenings, doesn’t she?”

He smiled back. Mrs Burr rarely asked a question she didn’t already know the answer to. “Yes, I think she does. But I really do have some work to finish. I want to submit an application for a client, first thing in the morning.” They hugged before they parted, a warm embrace that they both took strength from.

As he rode back into the city, Jonathan felt freer than he had in years. It wasn’t the ‘nothing left to lose’ kind of freedom; that kind he had known plenty of times since he left the service. That was an empty, meaningless sensation; a loss, not a gain. An absence. No, this was something more profound, less anarchic; more there.

He felt he was free to be happy.

********

The Adult Learning Centre in De Montfort Street was largely in darkness as Geri made her way out. Her last evening class had finished twenty minutes earlier, and she had spent fifteen of those persuading one of her students that she still had no wish to go for drink with him. Tony, a middle-aged, charming and quite good-looking divorced chap, had been pursuing her since Christmas, and despite her polite but firm rebuffs, he was still trying. This was not new; it had happened several times since she had begin to teach adults, and on occasion with younger students. Every so often she would discover she had an admirer. She was realistic about it; Geri knew she was not unattractive, and it happens, especially in adult education, and especially to women.

She turned the last corner and saw the caretaker hovering by the entrance. “Sorry! On my way now, Rachid!”

“That’s quite alright, me dook. No problem.”

Geri couldn’t help but be amused. Everyone called everyone else ‘me dook’ in Leicester, regardless of skin colour or cultural origin. It had taken some getting used to, as had her friends, colleagues and pupils saying they were mardy, but after ten years, even she was using it as an adjective. She bid Rachid a good night and walked around the corner to where she had parked. It wasn’t too late, and she felt a little peckish, so instead of heading directly for home, she drove to London Road to see if she might pick up a bite to eat. As had become her habit when passing, she made sure she looked at the frontage of the Gateway, and was surprised to see a light on inside, and the unmistakable silhouette of Jonathan at his desk. On impulse, she pulled into the first available spot and walked back to the door of the refugee centre.

A light tap on the glass made Jonathan stop writing, and he prepared his usual speech about the opening hours. Looking up, however, his heart leapt. **Geri.** He picked up his keys from the desk and
hurried to let her in. They stood just inside the door, close but not too close. Geri felt her pulse quicken at his proximity.

“Just finished your evening class?”

She nodded. “What are you doing here so late?”

“Just finishing something off.” He inhaled deeply. “I was out earlier. I saw my… What is she to me now, what should I call her? “Umm... I saw that person I mentioned.”

“And?”

“Well, I’m still here. Unscathed.” He glanced at his feet and chuckled softly, then looked up, his face serious. “It seems I’m safe for now, but we still need to be careful.” His hand came up automatically to touch her arm, and she felt a thrill of electricity pass down her body.

“Better get away from the windows then.”

Jonathan laughed again, nodded and led her over to his workstation, pulling out the client chair for her to sit on. “Good day at work?”

“Patchy. Invigilation at the Queen Liz all morning, which was a bit boring. Teaching at the High this afternoon, then a staff meeting with a grim buffet. No time to eat something better before the evening class, so I’m actually starving, now I think about it.”

“If you want—” A movement caught his eye, and he had just enough time to grab Geri, pull her onto the carpet and cover her with his body before the sound of breaking glass and the whump of a soft explosion of flame filled the air. His hands tightened on her arms. “Come on!” His strong arms hauled her to her feet and she was shoved quite roughly, ahead of him towards the back of the centre. Jonathan quickly unlocked the back entrance and pushed Geri out into the narrow alley behind the row of shops.

“Jonath—” He’d gone, back inside. She went to the door and called to him frantically. Scary noises, crashes and pops could be heard, but finally he answered her.

“I’m OK! I’ve got an extinguisher! Stay out there! Call 999!”

Miraculously, Geri still had her bag over her shoulder, so she called the emergency services and then returned to the doorway. What seemed like a long time but was only three minutes passed before she heard sirens. She ran to the end of the alley and back towards London Road to meet them. A firefighter in a white helmet and full gear jumped down from the cab of the fire engine and spoke to her briefly while the rest of the crew set up. All Geri could see in the shop front was flames and black smoke. “My friend works here. He’s still in there! Please hurry!” The fire officer spoke gently to her.

“We’ll get him, I’m sure he’s fine. It doesn’t look too bad. What’s his name, madam?”

“Jo-, umm, James. James Rowan.”

At that moment, Jonathan emerged through the front door of the centre with a firefighter. His face was soot-stained, and he was coughing, but otherwise he looked unharmed. Geri ran over and flung herself at him. He held her tight as she spoke into his chest. “Why did you do that? You could have been… I couldn’t have borne it if…” No more words would come, only tears.

The police arrived soon after, and took brief statements from them both. Will appeared, running down the street, summoned by the silent alarm as a keyholder. The incident commander filled him in:
there was considerable damage to the seating area by the windows, and smoke damage to the whole space, but overall they had got off lightly. “It was a lucky break that your colleague was here, and such a quick thinker. He stopped it spreading.”

Will walked over to Jonathan, and did a double take when he saw who was beside him. She was still trembling. “Geri? What are you-”

“She was passing, saw me working and popped in for a chat. Just before it happened.”

“Right… wow, are you guys OK?”

Geri nodded. “I’m alright. A bit shaken up. James scared me, because he went back in after he’d got me out. I’d only just grasped what was happening, and he was already handling it.” She looked up at Jonathan’s grubby face. His eyes were still blazing, and she sensed the adrenaline in him.

“Military training, it sticks.” He smiled grimly down at her. Geri returned his gaze, and clenched her jaw tight as tears threatened again. She had been so afraid for him. Will watched and something registered.

“Hey, I didn't know you two were…”

“We’re n-

“It’s not-”

Will laughed at them, shaking his head. “Get your story straight.” Suddenly he became serious. “Did you see who…?”

“No, just the bottle flying.”

“Thanks, though, mate. You saved the place.”

Jonathan shook his head briskly. “It was just a tiny petrol bomb. A coke bottle or something. Not much fuel.”

“Even so…”

“The sooner we up security, the better, though.”

It was past midnight by the time Jonathan parked Geri’s car and walked with her to her flat. A paramedic had wiped his face mostly clean, checked him over in the ambulance but had been unable to persuade him to go to A&E. His clothes and hair still smelled strongly of petrol and smoke. Geri was still trembling, because she kept hearing the breaking glass and the low thump of the petrol igniting. He held her against his side, the strong arm around her shoulder and his firm presence a comfort. Until she remembered how it might have ended differently – what if we hadn’t moved away from the windows, what if he’d been hurt? - and began to shiver more violently. His face pressed against her head.

“Shhhh. It’s OK, love. We’re safe. It wasn’t us they were after.” His voice was low and soft.

“I know, but, Jon-, I mean James…oh god, I can’t bear the thought of it.” Her weight fell against him as he gathered her into his arms properly outside her door. She sobbed softly, and he stroked her hair and then her cheek as she fought to control it.

“I’m OK, I knew what I was doing. I wouldn't have risked my life, Geri.”
She looked up into his face, so close now. He was the same, different in so many ways, yet still the same. *And I still love you. I can’t lose you again. I just can’t.* “Come in. Please.” Her hands went around his waist, pulling him against her. She felt him gasp.

“I shouldn’t, you—”

“Please.” Her voice was steady now. Her gaze, too.

“Geri, I’m not sure this is a good idea.” Even as he spoke, one of her hands was making its way up his chest and around his neck, ready to pull his mouth down to hers. He allowed it, and when their lips met he gave up his resistance. They had kissed passionately the night before, but this was more. Their bodies remembered. His hands knew where to go, her hips canted into his, and when he lifted her, her legs wrapped around his waist. He unlocked her door and they crossed the threshold together.
Jonathan is leaving to become a soldier, Geri is about to go to University, and it's all too hard...

THEN

It was just like a song

The last thing on Jonathan’s to do list before he went to take up his place at Sandhurst was get his hair cut. The instructions that had come with his official acceptance on the Commissioning Course (which arrived just after his excellent A-Level results - three As) included an appointment to attend the College for medical examinations and a fitness test. That was scheduled for tomorrow - ten days after the results were issued, and just three weeks before the start of the course. He wanted to look the part when he actually rocked up to the gates. There was no way of avoiding the chop, and better to get it done in town than wait and have some NCO with electric clippers make a mess of it.

But Geri was not going to be happy, he knew that. He was walking into town, towards the High Street and the barber’s shop Richard had recommended. He’d not had his hair cut professionally in a long time. Ever since he’d lived with the Joneses, Nicky had trimmed his curls for him. She did it every so often, whenever he felt it was veering too close to the edge of seventies afro; otherwise, he didn’t much care. His locks seemed to have a mind of their own, whatever the length. Geri was the first person he’d known to express a liking for the unruly mess, and she certainly liked to grab handfuls of it when he… Better stop thinking about that, these shorts don’t hide much.

Jonathan perched awkwardly on the sticky vinyl-covered foam cushion on the hard bench along the wall, waiting for his turn in the chair. Rather than try to make small talk with the rest of the clientele, he leafed through venerably ancient and dog-eared copies of Bike and Angling Times. Meanwhile, a few streets away, his girlfriend was having a minor meltdown.

“I can’t do it, Mum! It’s too hard!”

Elaine rolled her eyes as she dusted the shelves in her own bedroom. For some reason, possibly related to nerves about the impending upheavals, her normally mature and capable daughter appeared paralysed by indecision. For days now she had been unable to decide what she wanted to pack to take to her self-catering accommodation. Biting back the sarcastic remark that came automatically to mind, she popped her head into Geri’s doorway and smiled indulgently. “What is, dear?”

“Choosing.” She looked imploringly at her mother. “How do I know what books to leave behind? How can I leave any? And clothes…” Geri looked desperately at the scattered piles of t-shirts, jeans and underwear, and then at her cases. She couldn't take it all.

“Geri, you’re not moving to the moon. It’s only a couple of hours or so away, for goodness’ sake! I can bring anything over when you need it. Or you can buy new things. You're always buying new
Her daughter pulled a disgusted face. “Damn you and your logic.” She flopped down on her bed beside a half-packed suitcase. “Until I see my room... I suppose you’re right. I can always get things, if I need them.” She kept trying to be upbeat, but the truth was she was a bit scared. The campus had seemed enormous when she visited, and until she met some fellow students and her teachers, terrifying. She would be leaving home for the first time, sharing with strangers... And she was losing Jonathan. Not forever, but he was leaving before her, diving into his career and becoming a strange new creature: Homo militarius, as her mother had joked. She looked at her walls, three covered in favourite posters and the one by her bed with the gallery of her own prints, the lion’s share being shots of a certain curly-haired blond. “OK, I’ll pack for the first couple of weeks...?” Elaine nodded and turned to leave. “Mum?”

“Yes, love?”

“Thanks.”

Twenty minutes later Geri heard the side gate click shut, just below her window, and smiled. He’s back. Jonathan was more or less living at hers now. Once he left school, and as a legal adult, his official status had changed. The Joneses were no longer obliged (or paid) to house him, but they were continuing to do so until he went to Sandhurst. He was grateful, especially when Nicky and Richard took him aside after the final meeting with his social worker and told him he’d always have a home with them. That day had been one he had waited for, but when the moment came, when he was officially no longer ‘in Care’, it felt less like the release that he had always expected. His life had changed so much over the past year or so; he was no longer adrift, alone in the world. The Jones’ kind gesture visibly moved him when he recounted it to Geri, but the dawning of his official independence made him feel that it was time to strike off into his own life. Being with Geri represented even more than the family he had longed for; she had showed him the possibility of a future, of an adult life to come.

It was an unspoken truth that they both wanted to make the most of these final weeks together. Thus, during the summer, he had moved most of his belongings into her room, prior to his final departure for Camberley. It added to the clutter - but not the mess. He was pathologically tidy - but she would never have complained. The sound of Elaine’s raised voice coming up the stairs broke through her daydream.

“Oh, Jonathan! Oh, bloody hell!” Geri ran for the landing. What the...?

The cause of her mother’s distress was obvious the minute she reached the kitchen. His beautiful Renaissance-angel curls were gone. He stood, his back straight and his face red under the close scrutiny of the Muir women. His blue eyes looked warily at Geri. He had feared her reaction, and Elaine’s shocked response to his changed appearance seemed to confirm that she’d be angry with him. But what he saw in her face was not fury, just resignation. He shrugged at her. “I had to. I couldn’t go tomorrow looking like a circus clown.”

She smiled sadly. “I know. But I’ll miss your lovely hair, that’s all. And it wasn’t at all clownish.” Her face changed as, with a quick glance to check her mother was distracted, she mouthed ‘You look really sexy’.

Jonathan blushed a bit more, then cleared his throat. “Um, right...I’d better check I’m all set for tomorrow.” He brushed past her on his way to the hall, and she stroked his backside as he did. He reached back and caught her hand and they hurried upstairs together.

*********
The house was midnight, midweek quiet. The occasional distant shout or siren, footsteps along the street, giggles. The calls of owls and the screams of urban foxes broke through, but largely it was peaceful. In the room, in the bed still ruffled from their lovemaking, silence had descended too, but there was no peace. Not for Jonathan, whose stomach was already tightening into knots again, at the thought of the coming dawn. Not for Geri, who was stiff with the effort of not crying. So they lay there, each in their own private purgatory, dreading the day that would surely follow this last night together.

“Jellybean?” His voice was just above a whisper. He need not speak loudly; his mouth was by her ear as they spooned.

“What?” Her response was louder, jagged with pain. She bit it back too late. “Sorry… what, love?” She ran her hand over his arm where it circled her waist, ending with a slow caress of the back of his hand. Jonathan sighed into her hair, pressed his hips against the soft roundness of her bottom and moaned almost inaudibly.

“How can I live without her? How will I sleep?”

“It won’t be so long till my first weekend leave. And you’ll be busy, you’ll be so occupied at uni you’ll hardly think of me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll think of nothing else!” Geri knew he was trying to soothe her, but she would not be placated. She twisted in his arms so she could see his face in the moonlight. She pulled one hand out to touch his cheek. “Eight weeks, Jon. Eight. Weeks.” A fat tear overflowed and began to roll down the downy skin of her face. She shook her head, gulping back the sobs in her throat. It wasn’t just this impending longest-ever separation; it was the great black darkness that seemed to rise up beyond it. She was about to lose him, the love of her life, to the army, to a strange, unknown universe that seemed so alien to her she could not grasp its meaning. Simply, she felt afraid.

He kissed her lips tenderly, tasting the salt of her crying, lost for words. He could not admit, even to himself, that he shared the fear he sensed in her. He was about to do the thing he had planned for, aimed at all his life. He could not turn away now. “Shhhh, shhhh. C’mere.” He enveloped his love in his arms and kissed her again.

Unconsciously, Jonathan mapped the shape of Geri’s body with his palms and fingertips, relishing every millimetre, making memories to store, to see him through the unpredictability of the coming weeks. His lips took her measure too, surveying the soft sweetness of her skin, the spicy wetness of her mouth and vulva.

The scent of Geri. He sucked on her nipples; he traced the shapes of her ribs and collarbones, relishing every millimetre. When he reached her lips he mixed her whimpers with his own, and as he slid inside her one more time, their tears were combined in joyful grief.

Neither could sleep. They made love again, one final time, as the sun rose over the granite blocks of the Garrison. Wordlessly, he rose, showered and returned to dress in the half-light of the crushing silence. He could feel her eyes on him but he did not know what to say, except to repeat the same things. Ready at last, he sat on the bed and held her tightly. “I have to go. I promised Richard I’d be there by seven.”

He felt her nod against his shoulder. “I know.” A shared, shuddering sigh rocked them. Jonathan took her face in his hands, kissed her sweetly on the lips and stood up.

“I’ll ring whenever I can, email too.” She nodded, pale-faced and taut with distress. She dare not speak for fear of breaking down, and she was determined to be brave. “Send me your address, right away? And your new number?”

Again, a silent affirmation. He reached to touch her one final time and she caught his hand and held...
it to her cheek, kissing the palm before releasing him. She waited until she heard the front door close before muffling a wail of anguish in her pillow.

******

Jonathan was right, at least up to a point. The first two weeks after his dawn departure were hectic, with the final preparations for Geri’s own adventure in full swing. Elaine scoured the information about the flats, trying to glean what would be needed for a civilised existence. Eventually she gave in and assembled a capsule kit, with everything she wished she’d had in her first flat, knowing she could always bring anything back that wasn’t needed and use it herself, or donate it to charity. Geri summoned up some enthusiasm from somewhere, and after the first few days, she no longer needed to fake it, as Freshers’ Week loomed and the excitement of her own future grabbed her. Only at night, when she was alone in what now felt like an enormous bed, did she allow herself to miss him.

He rang every few days. The calls were always the same: several minutes of stories of what he had learned, where he had been, what his barrack-mates were like. Then longer and longer silences between sentences, as they both struggled to open up and to hold their emotions in check. Geri would always sign off with “I love you’, and Jonathan would always say, ‘Me too’. She knew why: he was not alone. She could hear the rumble of other voices, but it hurt a little.

Then, all of a sudden, it was her turn to cut the cord. Her university-provided flat, on the first floor of a plain eighties block, was bland but functional. Blutack-marked magnolia walls, non-descript carpets, basic amenities; everything she’d expected. Her flatmates were all fellow first-years, studying a variety of subjects, and all were strangers. Three young men and three women, they regarded each other hopefully on moving-in day, knowing that they would be together for three terms and hoping none would go single white female. Emma, who had the room next to Geri’s, was a biologist from Bath. She seemed endlessly chirpy, and her happy, smiling, freckled face and her curly brown hair always gave Geri’s mood a boost. Ben was a skinny, serious computer scientist. He was quiet, unless you mentioned sci-fi, whereupon he became loquacious to a fault. Thrilled to find a fellow geek, he and Geri planned to pool their video box sets at the first opportunity. The remaining three sharers, Yasmin, James and Zach, were all business students and kept different hours to the others. This was in part due to their jobs in pubs and clubs in Guildford, but to Geri, Ben and Emma, in those early weeks of term, it seemed as if those guys had far fewer lectures and tutorials to attend.

Jonathan was also correct about how busy she would be. Geri was soon fully absorbed in her course, loving the opportunities it afforded her and excitedly planning her work. They still spoke on the phone regularly, but it was almost a shock when she realised the date of his first weekend leave was just a few days away.

“I should be able to get to yours by eleven or half-past on Saturday. I’m getting a lift from a guy. He can drop me in Guildford.” Geri heard loud laughter in the background, and shouting. She imagined a crowded corridor, male bodies jostling and horseplay. Jonathan’s voice became quieter. “I can't wait to see you, Jellybean.”

“Me neither.” She chuckled. “The bed’s a bit shit, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, I don’t think that matters. We won’t be doing much sleeping, ehehehe.”

Geri felt warmth tingle through her; just a matter of hours now.

Her anticipation was at fever pitch by the time she heard the intercom buzz that rainy late October morning. “It’s for me!” she yelled, throwing herself at the panel. “Jonathan?”

“Officer Cadet Pine, J. 54936271, Ma’am.” His voice sounded odd through the crackle of the
“First floor, on the right.” Geri pressed the lock-release and opened the flat door, listening to his progress up the stairs, watching eagerly for the first sight of him.

The clothes were familiar enough; his black jeans and her favourite dark blue Aran sweater, and the quilted jacket she’d bought him for Christmas… But, she thought, he filled them differently. He was wider and taller than she remembered, and he seemed more of a man as he strode towards her, his walking boots thumping on the hard floor of the landing. And his face… He’s changed already.

“Geri! Come here, let me-” She ran at him, jumping into his outstretched arms. She hid her puzzlement, just holding on tight and kissing his neck, then his mouth as hard as she could, clinging to him with all her strength. She needed to recognize him, fully.

When she dared lean back to look into his face closely, she whispered, “Are you real?”

He set her gently down on her feet, bent and kissed her sweetly. “Yes, I am, Jellybean. Are you?”

The entire weekend was not spent in bed, although Geri got the impression Jonathan would have preferred it that way. But she had talked so much about him to her new friends that she wanted to show him off, so reluctantly he agreed to go out on the town with Emma, Ben and the small number of photography and art students that had begin to coalesce around Geri into a friendship group. He was his usual shy self, speaking only occasionally; ever the gentleman with the female members of the party, and respectfully polite to the men. But he could not hide his desire to be alone with Geri.

There was indeed, as he had predicted, very little sleeping. His body was not so different as she had first thought, Geri soon discovered. It was harder and stronger, and there were bruises and marks here and there, souvenirs of the rough and tumble of basic training that had filled these past weeks for him. He felt the same under her hands, his scent was the same, and he tasted as he always had. When they made love, it was as if the weeks they had spent apart were nothing, just a bad dream. There was her beautiful lover again. She gazed adoringly at him, as they lay tangled in sleepy knots in her narrow, lumpy bed. She revelled in his presence, unwilling to be parted, even for the necessities of nature.

But the truth was that he was not the same. She felt it, and the tiny ribbon of unease she had been sensing inside grew a little wider, no matter how hard she tried to ignore it. His desperation for contact, for that physical connection with her was part of it. She had expected that, but there was a near-madness about it that disturbed her. And worse, she felt something she thought was long gone, something she hoped had been banished by the intimacy that had grown between them. For all their bodies were joined, emotionally he seemed less there, as if he had pulled away, just a little. As if he were, once again, holding her at arm’s length. Put simply, he was less hers, more the army’s now. Years later she would look back and see how clearly it had begun to show in those early days.

“Are you OK, Jonath-”

“Yes, of course! Why wouldn't I be?” His reply had been sudden, loud and harsh. He saw Geri’s eyes widen. “Sorry… sorry, love.” He reached for her hands. “I shouldn’t have snapped. I’m just a bit… I dunno, tired?” That wasn’t it, of course. He was a little weary, but not that much. It was being back on the outside, after these first few intense weeks; everything felt altered, as if someone had subtly reset the world while he’d been gone. He was seeing it with new eyes. He looked at Geri; she seemed changed too. She was forging a new life in a new place, without him… and perhaps she was different. But she still loved him, she made that clear.

The uneasiness he felt was near the surface. He chased it around his head as he lay listening to her
steady breathing that Saturday night. He had found the training challenging, physically exhausting and mentally draining, but he’d expected that. It was the mind-set he was struggling with - the blind obedience, even if that was tempered with some encouragement of initiative. He had tried to face down an NCO during the last week, when he believed a fellow cadet was in danger. He was correct, and there had been repercussions, which made him unpopular with the trainers. He knew he was right, and that made it worse, because he sensed such injustices were not uncommon. He turned carefully in the bed to look at Geri’s face, beautifully lit by the full moon outside. He wondered if he should talk to her, about all of that, about how he felt, but a lump came up in his throat.

As he set off back to Camberley on that Sunday evening, Jonathan felt a terrible emptiness. The parting was tearful again, but once more, Geri had been stoically accepting and did her best to hide her distress. He did not fully understand it then, but he had already begun to harden his heart, as a way of coping with the realities of military life. He was beginning to believe that he would not survive as an officer unless he shed himself of all weaknesses.

Elaine drove over for a visit the following Sunday. She had been mildly alarmed by Geri’s tone in their telephone conversations since Jonathan’s weekend leave. She was afraid for them, knowing what separation can do for young love, and fearing what the effects of a place like Sandhurst might be on a person like him. She soon realised she had been right to worry.

“He was fine, Mum. A bit quiet, but fine.” Geri didn’t even convince herself.

“If you say so. How long is it till his next leave?”

Geri sighed. “Twelve weeks.” Elaine’s eyes popped. “But that will be ten days…and I can visit him before that. There’s a family open day or something… Anyway, I can go over on a Sunday. He’s going to send me the date.”

“Can I come too? I could drive you.”

“Would you mind? That would be great.” Geri smiled weakly, feeling a little better. She hadn’t been certain how she would cope on her own. “I’ll get him to add you; I’m sure he’ll do it. He’s allowed two guests and he told me he didn’t want the Joneses to come.” She did not tell her mother that she had been wondering about all of it, her life, their life together, her own course, and whether she could sustain it without Jonathan. They were as close to each other as was practically possible at that stage of his career. Rationally she knew it made little difference where she was, as he would not be allowed out of the College outside of the official leave periods, regardless; that was the way the Commissioning Course worked. But her mind was racing ahead to the spring, to when he graduated and was assigned to his Regiment. She would be stuck in Surrey, he might be sent anywhere… Perhaps she should think about transferring, or maybe leaving her degree until they had a home together…? More importantly, what did Jonathan want? Was he really changing? Was he still thinking of a life with her?

On the long drive back home to Weston, Elaine did a calculation. Twelve weeks meant late January. She could see the distress in Geri, but she was putting on a front, determined to survive the months. A wave of helplessness washed through her as she turned into her own street and parked. Not for the first time, she lectured herself on the subject of not trying to live her child’s life for her. But it was hard, very hard.
Chapter Summary

The morning after the shocking events that brought them that bit closer, Geri has another bit of devastating news for Jonathan.

**NOW**

*My God, this reminds me/of when we were young*

“Geri…” It was more of a sigh than a word. He kissed her neck, inhaling her, needing more. “My Geri…” He felt it, the powerful tide pulling him to her again, just as it had when they first knew each other. His weight pressed her against the back of her front door, and she shifted sinuously, her thighs on his hips. “Bedroom…?”

Her head tipped to the left, and she released his waist. Reluctantly he let her regain her feet, smoothing his hands over her back and bottom as he guided her down. She pulled him unhurriedly around the corner and along the narrow corridor towards her room, both of them shedding jackets and other clothes as they went. By the time they stood by her bed, she was in her bra and trousers, and Jonathan was shoeless, in jeans and t-shirt. Geri noted there was a line of soot around his neckline, and some still on his scalp, under his hair. He smelt faintly of petrol and smoke, like a mechanic or a racer, she thought, as her fingertips danced under the cotton and over the hot skin of his flank. She was aware of this, of all the sights and sounds and smells of him, but it was as if she were in a dream. It was familiar but strange; she might have been with him in her bedroom at home again, except they were changed people, in so many important ways. Nevertheless, she felt it. *He feels the same. He sounds the same as he did.*

Heavy breathing was turning into gasps and whimpering moans, while their movements remained slow and deliberate. They kissed, softly, gently, tongue sliding against tongue and lips sucking, tasting and testing. Carefully their hands caressed, neither willing to rush this special moment. Suddenly, Jonathan stepped back half a pace to take her in fully, his eyes glistening. *God, Geri, how could I forget, how could I…? My god, you’re so beautiful.* He caught the back of her head in one large hand, tipped it back and brought his lips to the soft skin of her neck, letting his nose brush her earlobe. He let out a breathy chuckle “My hands are shaking.”

Geri pulled Jonathan’s t-shirt up, over his head and threw it away, grinning shyly. “So are mine.” Before she could touch him again he was pulling at her waistband, and she let him help her out of her trousers. She reached for his belt and soon he was in just his boxers.

She stepped back into his arms, and once again they kissed. Since childhood, Jonathan had been cursed or blessed, he could never decide which. Either way he was inevitably forced to think concurrently. He was at once here, with her, in her flat in Leicester and at the same time in her bedroom in Weston. What was happening felt as momentous as that first time in her bed, as precious and overwhelming. And yet another small part of his mind dallied in that little house in the desert with Sophie, too; she would always be there inside him. He held Geri tight, feeling her heat, his own
hardness and their pulses synchronising. She sighed, tugged at his boxers and he yielded to her will.

It was as it had always been between them. He was strong but gentle, and when he lifted and laid her down on her bed, their movements seemed so assured and unhesitating that they might have been choreographed. “Jonathan…” she sighed, as his lips traced the pattern of freckles and moles on her collarbones and made their way inexorably to her breasts. Geri’s body reacted to him as it always had, swiftly and unequivocally. Her back arched as he sucked on her nipples, and she felt his cock, hot and hard and damp, against her thigh. He had not asked, and she had not been driven to tell him, not yet, but there had been nobody else. She had remained alone, without his love and not searching elsewhere. She ran her hands down, down, over the back of his head as he suckled, moving lower to feel the powerful muscles of his long back, to his backside. She needed to believe it was real, that he was there, not just a more than usually vivid example of her habitual dream.

Suddenly, she could wait no longer. She was aware of him progressing, moving lower, and she did not want that; not now, not this night. She grasped his head and lifted his chin to look up at her in the soft light of her bedroom. She took in the sight of his eyes, almost glowing, his eyebrows raised in an unspoken query. *He is real, he is here and he is my Jonathan.* His face was serious. “Is something...is everything OK, Geri? I can-” He was lifting his weight away from her, depriving her of his warmth.

“Please, don’t stop.” A gushing sigh of relief, a softening of his features, less than a smile. “I just need... Now, please, Jonathan. I need you.” At the sound of her voice, he moved like a cat; fast and silent, up her body, to kiss her mouth again, and she felt it then, for sure. His love. The same love he had denied and taken away with him in his car that terrible wet morning. Her hand found him, gently guiding and he moaned, a deep, guttural sound that seemed to come from the depths of his soul.

After so long, after all the years and the miles and the words that had divided them, they were one again.

Jonathan stayed still and quiet. He was minutely aware of every tiny sensation, from the scent of her neck by his nose to the slippery softness of the bedclothes under his knees and elbows. Her skin, hot under the palms of his hands; her body, quivering and wet beneath and around him, clutching at his. He wanted to make this last, because he wasn't sure at that moment if this was a new beginning or the end of it all. He thought of the times, the many times when, over the years since he left her, he had remembered being with Geri like this. He had always dismissed it in the morning as unnecessary romanticism, a meaningless distraction; a pointless artefact of nostalgia. He had hurt her too well, too thoroughly, too efficiently for her to forgive him.

As before all those years ago in her room, when Jonathan hesitated, Geri took charge. She tightened her legs around him; her muscles gripped him inside and he moaned at the feel of her. He bowed his head, kissed and sucked softly on the skin where her neck met her shoulder. Geri flexed her body and her hands sought his backside, urging him to move inside her. He could not resist any longer, and nature took over, compelling him to thrust. They floated in time and space. Back in her childhood bedroom, young lovers learning their way, exploring each other; on the lumpy, narrow mattress of her first uni flat, trying to be quiet, surrounded by card-thin walls and near-strangers; in their last home together, above the shoe shop, drifting inexorably apart. Geri focussed all her thoughts on the physical, on his power, his lips, the delicious friction of skin on skin. It had been so long. She had no concept of how much she had needed this, and she felt the spiralling pleasure grabbing, pulling her into its vortex. A keening sound filled the room and she knew it was her own voice, but could not stop it.

Jonathan had thought himself exhausted earlier, after a long day at work, the tense emotions of his meeting with Angela and then the attack on the Centre. But he had always had something left, something extra and separate for Geri. He gave her all of what there was, took what she offered him.
without stint or hesitation, and when he felt the final rush of his completion, he held her tenderly and kissed her deeply. “My Geri, my darling Jellybean,” he breathed into her hair even as his tears were wetting it. “I’m so sorry, sorry for it all, for everything.”

“Shhhh. I know, I know, shhhh.”

The room was cool and quiet. Their breathing was returning to normal, but he was reluctant to move, and Geri made no attempt to shift his weight from her. Moving would mean talking, and neither was ready for that. But, after a few more minutes, there was no other option. Jonathan carefully pulled out and lifted away, lying beside her on the bedclothes, staring at the ceiling. He had stopped crying, but his throat hurt and a headache was grinding behind his eyes.

“Jonathan?”

He rolled on his side and put his hand on her arm. “Are you cold? Should we-?”

“I’m fine.” She took a sharp breath, as if ready to speak, but hesitated. She spoke to the room, not daring to look at him. “I still don't know how I feel.”

He sighed, a deep sigh of resignation. “I get it.”

“I did my work too well, back then. Do you want me to leave?”

“No. I never did. Please stay.”

She found him a toothbrush, a flannel and an old, outsize t-shirt to wear. He washed the remaining traces of the fire off his body, balefully regarding his reflection in her bathroom mirror. He saw the anxiety in his battle-bright eyes; the next day or so would be crucial to his future. He was familiar with the feeling: events beyond his control, only so much he could manage, but the adrenaline flowed regardless. Considering his options as he dried his face, Jonathan accepted that he had no choice but to let Geri come to her own decision. Tracing her to the kitchen, he paused in the doorway. She was standing, looking out through the trees that stretched up to her window, over the nightscape of the city, absentmindedly stirring her tea. He tried to read her thoughts, but she gave no clues. She was dressed in a dark blue silk robe, loosely tied just above her hips. Her brown hair shimmered in the light and he wanted to touch it, and stroke the soft curves of her arm and back. He felt his love for her pushing and pulling at him, and he was dizzy with the contradictions of it.

*Leave now, before you do more harm. Tell her you love her. Say it, shout it. Run away, because you loved her then and still you hurt her. She told you: you broke her.*

*Make it right. Hold her and never let go.*

Suddenly, Geri seemed to sense his presence. Her head turned and she smiled. “Here.” A steaming mug was lifted and held out for him. He took it and followed her thought the other door, into the living room, which ran the full width of the flat. Sitting on her battered old sofa, she patted the seat beside her and he settled down. He sat, back straight, as if waiting for orders. The tension in him was palpable to her; it was as if he were ready to move, in a split second. Whether to fetch her a vodka-tonic or fight an enemy...well, that was the question. She put her tea down and turned to him.

“What do you want, Jonathan?” He frowned. “From me, I mean.”

He took a deep breath. He had been so focused on her, on her choice that he had not really thought it all through. “I suppose...” He looked at her face. She had the serenity he remembered from the old days, from before Sandhurst, from the time when it was just him and her, before he allowed himself to retreat. “I know it’s unfair of me, but I want another chance. I hope you can give me another
chance…” He saw tears in her eyes. *She’s going to say no, and I don’t think I can bear that…* “It was a lie, Geri. A horrible, stupid, cruel lie. I did the wrong thing, a wicked, awful thing to you, but I did it because I loved you.” He took a deep breath, his whole body trembling, “I always have.” He lifted his hand to her face and she took it, as she had the morning over a decade before, when he left to start his course. She closed her eyes and kissed the palm.

“I know.” *I love you too.* “I just don’t know if I can. Not yet.”

“What can I do? Is there anything I can say, or-?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. I think I just need time, to work it out in my head.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to leave, beca-

“No. Please don’t. Please stay with me tonight.” The flash of light, the smell of petrol. *I might have lost him again, forever.* “Please, let’s go back to bed.”

Exhaustion took them both into dreamless sleeps, and when Jonathan woke he found Geri was spooning him, her right hand tucked into his waist. He could see the glowing figures of her clock, and it confirmed what the darkness told him - it was still very early. He wanted so much to stay here, like this; in her embrace, safe from the world, sure of what he wanted. He was afraid of what the day would bring. The world, the dangers of life in 2016, those he could cope with. He relished the challenges of his job, he was loving it, not just because he was doing good, but because it was not easy, and it used a little of everything he had learned over the thirty-four years of his existence.

He felt Geri breathe, her body rippling against his as she sighed and tightened her grip on him. He marvelled at her. She was fragile and strong; she was powerful and vulnerable; she was gentle and yet still harsh enough to make him want to beat himself up…

She was what he was afraid of, in the silence of that June dawn. Her verdict, her judgement of him, because he did not know if he could survive another loss. He lifted his right arm carefully and stroked her bottom and thigh, just behind his own. She sighed again.

Geri was awake; she had been for some time. Seeing his back in the faint glow of her alarm clock, she had shuffled closer and wrapped herself around him, wanting to extract the maximum contact before they had to part. Whatever decision, whichever way her heart and her brain guided her, they both had jobs and responsibilities, and today was just another day to the rest of the universe. When she felt his hand on her skin she whispered, “Good morning.”

He turned in the bed and pressed his lips to her forehead. “Good morning, Jellybean.” She snuggled against his chest, still unwilling to lose the connection, nor the comfort his presence had brought with it. “You know, last night…I noticed.” He paused, letting her decide.

“Noticed what?” Her question was disingenuous; she was perfectly aware of what he meant. In all the years they were together, he always ensured her pleasure, ahead of his own.

“Geri…”

She looked into his eyes; they were stormy, wary and anxious. *He really doesn’t realise.* “It was fine. I didn’t… You see, I’m a bit… rusty.” Her eyes dropped, and she felt embarrassed. “There hasn’t been anyone, not since…”

His grey-blue eyes seemed to darken, as the full meaning of her words hit him. “Oh god, Geri...oh god, my love…” His whole body was made of lead, sinking into the mattress, weighed down with
self-hatred and shame. She was so perfect, so beautiful, and she still was. But he had broken her. *She told me, I didn't hear it until now.* Again, he was on the sticky carpet in Guildford, hearing the rain on the slate roof, the ticking of the clock, the muffled traffic noise from the A3. “*I can’t. I won’t.*”

He had tried to forget her words; they were small, quiet, and very few, compared to his cold destruction of their life together. But they had been the only truth uttered in that place on that day.

He wanted to run. It was too much to face, this terrible thing he had done. She could never forgive that, why would she? He looked away, began to turn to get up, but a soft hand on his cheek stopped him. “Jonathan.” His head moved back to face her and she saw his tears. “It’s OK. I don’t blame you. It was my choice to be alone.”

He shook his head. “No, it wasn’t. God, Geri. I told you about Sophie, and… and all the time… CHRIST, what a cunt I am!”

Geri caught him firmly by the shoulders before he could turn again, and spoke quietly but firmly, as she would to a distressed student. “Stop it. If we are going to move on, then we both have to stop with the recriminations, OK?” Flopping back onto the pillow, Jonathan allowed his eyes to run over her face. “Listen. I have to get ready for work. I’m going to have a shower. Please stay and have some breakfast. Please?” She didn’t want him leaving while she was in the bathroom, and he looked ready to flee at that moment.

He nodded. “Yes, OK, thanks. I’ll be here.”

********

Jonathan walked home after sharing coffee and cereal with Geri. His mind was in turmoil, and as he often had, he wondered how she could be so composed. She was right, of course. And as he walked through the waking streets, passing milkmen and paperboys, the city’s early-starters and hearing exasperated parents shout through open windows, he digested her words. *She is thinking about it… about giving me that chance.*

An hour later he was almost to the Gateway, on foot as his bike was still parked in London Road where he left it. He could see it ahead of him by the kerb, and gave thanks for the alarm and expensive locks he had fitted. Then a movement by the door of the Centre caught his eye. What at first glance had appeared to be a bag of rubbish was sitting up. It was a boy, hardly more than a child. Last night’s events had made Jonathan a bit punchy, but he calmed his suddenly racing pulse and walked at his normal pace, up to the door and the young man. “You OK there?”

“Sir, yes. Thank you, sir. I am waiting.”

The lad nodded vigorously. As he got to his feet, Jonathan could see he had no coat, just a t-shirt and a pair of tatty cargo trousers that looked too big for him by several magnitudes. “I work here, as a matter of fact. If you’ll excuse me…” He nodded to the door behind the boy, who gathered up his belongings - two bin liners which he had apparently been using as a makeshift sleeping-bag, and a couple of carrier bags, faded and tatty from use. He stepped to one side as Jonathan opened the slightly smoke-stained door.

“My name is James. Please come in. You can put your things down over there.” Once he had settled the boy into a chair away from the fire damage and fetched him a drink, Jonathan sat next to him and asked a few careful questions, starting with his origin and his age. How a fifteen-year-old Syrian boy came to be sleeping rough, and all alone, was a mystery, but the first thing to be done was to contact
Social Services. The lad seemed totally unfazed by the mess, but then after Aleppo, a tiny petrol fire can hardly make much impact. Once a couple of volunteers had arrived, Jonathan was able to set Haasan up with some breakfast and make the necessary calls to County Hall.

Molotov cocktail attack or not, work went on at the Gateway. The police came and went, Will called an emergency staff meeting at lunch, glaziers arrived to measure for new windows, clients walked in off the street in their usual high numbers. And Jonathan had little time to dwell on what Geri was thinking, or even to self-flagellate again, not for many hours.

Geri was busy too, but with more space for reflection. However, reasoned thoughts were hard to muster, because her head was full of Jonathan: his body, his mouth on hers, the way he had made her feel. And how happy she had been to wake up and know he was there, in her bed. She thought of his devastation when he finally realised that she had been alone since he left her. Now he knew everything. No more secrets, no more lies…? Was that an impossible dream? But the thought of anything less than that was too horrible to contemplate.

It’s more than the need to get past what happened; to get beyond what he said. I have to be able to trust him again.
Chapter Summary

Jonathan passes out at Sandhurst, a great success, it appears. But all is not well, and not so long afterwards, the cracks begin to show.

Then

Let me photograph you in this light

It was very late Sunday night when Elaine got back from the Sandhurst Open Day. She squeezed her little car into a free slot on the narrow street and hurried indoors, poured herself a large glass of wine and sat down on the sofa. She was tired, and she had to get up early for work in the morning, but her nerves still jangled; some chilling time was necessary before attempting to sleep. She sighed and stretched her legs and arms, rolled out the tension from her shoulders and carefully eased herself against the cushions, letting her head fall back. Opposite her, the photograph on the shelves in the alcove caught her eye: her and Peter on their wedding day, shining, happy. “I never thought I’d go to The Royal Military Academy, love. Except perhaps on a CND march... Let alone with our little JB, to see her boyfriend passing out!” It had been a long, exhausting day, driving to Guildford to collect Geri, then on to Camberley. But the travelling was the least of it.

It started at the gate. Security was tight and Geri had been very anxious. The wait to be allowed in, first to the public car park and then for the full check-in before being admitted to the College grounds seemed to exacerbate it. Elaine had consoled herself with the knowledge that they’d be with Jonathan shortly. Finally, after following all procedures, he was there. Officer Cadet Jonathan Pine: camouflage uniform, beret, boots and all. He gave them what she thought was warm and friendly welcome, but was oddly distant. Something was different, or wrong. He introduced his friends, all members of the same platoon, young women as well as young men. Geri was excited, tense and she held her mother’s hand very tight. Elaine could not help feeling slightly irritated when Jonathan seemed to be keener on talking to his new friends than spending this precious time with his girl.

Geri covered her distress well at first, hiding it behind her lens, a habit she was nurturing. She wandered on the periphery of his boisterous group, taking a few photographs when she could; of the grounds, and the cadets, mainly of Jonathan, of course. She had been lectured on what she could not photograph, and she was warned sternly at the entrance that she would have to hand in her camera to be inspected upon leaving; she had brought only her new one, a digital SLR, as instructed. Both women felt out of place, but the upsetting thing was Jonathan did not attempt to ease their discomfort, regularly disappearing with his new comrades, leaving Geri and Elaine to join one of the worthy but dull guided tours or simply sitting on a bench in the admittedly beautiful grounds. He had been tense, restless, awkward: all to be expected, given the circumstances. But it was his apparent indifference to Geri that was frightening Elaine.

There had been gallons of tea, mountains of sandwiches and cakes, but it was all cold comfort. The lifetime pacifist felt like an interloper in the manicured formality of the place, and Jonathan’s
behaviour did not ease her mind. By the time they left, after a tearful goodbye on her part at least, Geri was so quiet Elaine nearly took her straight home instead of back to her uni accommodation.

“He’s had a lot to deal with, Mum. I know how hard it is for me, and I don’t have half the pressure here that he does over there.” On Thursday of the following week, Geri was sitting on the floor on the landing, below the shared payphone (one per floor), twiddling the coil of wire between her fingers, trying to be brave.

“I know dear, I know.” Elaine sighed at her kitchen table. “I’m sure you’re right.” She wasn’t sure at all, but that conversation could wait. “All packed for tomorrow?” The next day was the end of Geri’s first term at Surrey, and her mother was driving over to fetch her.

A hundred miles south, her daughter thought of the muddle in her room. Since they returned from the Open Day, she’d been unable to focus on anything. Christmas was a strange concept to her, without form or meaning. She was not packed, she had not completed her latest assignments and she had barely slept. Jonathan had telephoned, apologised for his behaviour, sounding like himself again, and he had written her a sweet letter. She had told him she was fine. But she was not.

******

“Pine? What do you think?”

“Sorry, what?” Jonathan had not been listening to the conversation in the Mess at all. He had been going over and over what Geri had said the night before, dissecting her words, trying to recall the precise tone of her voice. He’d fucked up, big time. He had to find a way to make it up to her.

Frankie laughed - Pine’s head was always somewhere else since the Open Day. “We were planning our Christmas blow-out. You in?”

He shook his head. “Nah. I’ve got to put in some more time at the range. And I have to hand in an essay I haven’t even started yet.” He did not add that he avoided these boozy occasions for other reasons, not wanting to seem like even more of a boring twat.

“Christ, what a swot! You’re top of every fucking class as it is…” Frankie dismissed him with a wave of her hand. Jonathan was too serious, too earnest for his own good, most of the time.

None of the cadets in this intake were being allowed home for Christmas or New Year because they would have a long leave at the end of January. It was a test of discipline, a trial for them and thus all part of the training in a way. Jonathan surveyed the little group gathered around the table. He was the youngest, by some margin. Most of his fellow cadets were post-grads, with the remainder made up of overseas entrants, some NCOs and a handful of school leavers, like him. He felt a swell of pride at the thought he was among such a group of excellent individuals, the future leadership of the British Army. This was the dream, to be here, with these people, learning to lead. In this company he could forget his doubts for long periods.

Because he was combining starting a degree in International Relations with the course, he had extra academic work to complete, but there was an unanticipated additional pressure: he was determined he would win the Queen’s Medal. He had been aware of the honour, awarded to the cadet who achieves the highest marks throughout the 44-week course, but it was only when one of the instructors took him aside for a talk that he had considered himself to be a candidate. He recalled the conversation: he had been startled, then bemused, but it soon became clear that this was not something to be dodged. He was expected to do his best to succeed - for his platoon, for the company. Once the idea took hold, it became something of an obsession. 

How proud would Mutti and Dad be…? Just the week before the Academy Sergeant Major had told him that although it was
still early days, he was on target.

Jonathan looked ahead in his mind, over all that he had yet to learn. Another month and they would be at the end of the first phase of the course, the Junior Division. After the leave, they would enter the Intermediate, and begin to be proper officers. There had been a great deal of physical training and endurance in the first five weeks, followed by an intense grounding in everything that underpins an officer in the British Army: Queen’s Regulations, techniques for warfare, man-management… But none of this was all that important to him that late December evening. He could only think about how his behaviour had hurt Geri. He couldn’t see her for four more weeks, so he had been trying to find ways to make it better from here. He tried to remember what he had been thinking, why he had behaved so stupidly. *I was showing off, being macho, whatever.* Deep down, he knew there was more to it than that.

There had been no malice aforethought, no evil plan. He had left the barracks that Sunday morning with every intention of being his normal self. But when he saw Geri and Elaine standing among the crowd of family and friends, looking so anxious and uncomfortable, some secret and mysterious switch in his brain turned. Geri was holding her mother’s hand so tightly and she seemed so nervous, it made him want to step back. In part, to avoid making it worse, in part to avoid getting involved in a moment that was so clearly emotionally charged. *Act as if nothing matters, like it’s just another day…* Except that had the opposite effect, and by the time he saw it he was stuck in this new personality, unable to think straight, positively unable to snap out of it. The strangely detached *devil-may-care-young-cadet* Jonathan (his default these days) hid the desperation to succeed, the doubts, the fear that he was in the wrong place, heading for the wrong career.

He felt dreadful; he knew he should not have done that to Geri. Not to the person who loved him, and whom he loved the most. He thought of the Christmas card he had posted to her, and the long letter he had tucked inside it. He tried to say everything he hadn’t managed on the phone, and all the things he ought to have told her when she was there with him. He hoped she’d understand, even if he had still been less than totally honest with her. He’d make it up to her properly come his leave in a few weeks.

**************************

The room was cold and it was still dark as Jonathan sat on the bed next to a pale and weeping Geri. He’d been with her for ten days and now it was over. He had to get the bus back to Sandhurst. Another fourteen-week stint had to be endured before she would be able to see him for more than a brief, overnight stay. Her vice-like grip on his arm made him suspect he was going to have a bruise to show for it.

This leave had been blissful. Geri had her old boyfriend back, as if he had never been gone. Only the larger muscles and weather beaten face gave away the fact that this Jonathan was a soldier in training. He had been sweet, tender and loving, just like the old days. They had passed the time as young lovers do. When not in bed, they had been to the cinema, joined Geri’s now considerable coterie of pals in the Union bar or local pubs, had a rowdy but enjoyable evening at a local curry house and gone on several walks in the winter sunshine, during which Geri took interminable photographs, as usual.

She was happy. During his stay, she became convinced everything was going to be fine, after all. She was loving uni, she’d made lots of new friends and now she had her darling man back. What she could not have known then, because he hid it so well, was that this return to the old Jonathan was as much of an act as the character he had donned at the Open Day. When, years later, in a very different place, someone else he loved would chide him for his many different voices, it was to this time in his life he looked. This was the real start of it, of the splintering, the divisions. It was a survival tactic,
and a successful one, to a large degree.

He had pretended before, of course: when he was small, but this time the pretence had to be more convincing: he had to believe it himself. He steeled himself to leave, and Geri felt the change in him. He shifted into Officer Cadet Pine as he sat by her on the bed. She clung even tighter, desperate to keep her lovely boy, but he had gone long before Jonathan kissed her, stood and headed for the door.

**********

The sun was piercing, and the glare from the sandy parade ground surface made Geri’s eyes hurt. Shoulde...
“No, I mean at the front. He’s won an award.”

Geri lowered her camera and looked aghast at Elaine. “What?” She opened the copy on her own knee and sure enough, there it was: “The Queen’s Medal is awarded to Officer Cadet J Pine, who has been commissioned into the Royal Anglian Regiment. This medal is awarded to the cadet who achieves the highest scores in military, practical and academic subjects.” He hadn’t told her. Tears overflowed. “Oh my GOD! He never...bloody hell!” People in the surrounding seats were staring, but Geri didn’t care. She didn’t think she could be prouder.

She filled three memory cards with images that day: of the parade, Jonathan’s medal presentation, the Trooping of the Colour and the Sovereign’s Platoon marching behind the Adjutant on his white horse as the new Second Lieutenants all left the ground to a brisk rendition of The British Grenadiers. When the audience was allowed to leave their seats and find the particular new officer they had come to see, Geri ran and jumped into Jonathan’s waiting embrace. “You clever, wonderful, lying git!”

He feigned innocence. “Lying...what about?”

“You never said you’d won this!” She was cupping the medal the Duke had pinned to his chest. “You never even said you were up for it!”

“Well...” He blushed. He’d been afraid to say anything, to Geri or even to any of his platoon-mates, for fear of jinxing it. There was also the suspicion that it was hubris of the worst kind even to think he might win such an award. Him, Jonathan, the lost boy. Again, he felt forced to push himself to succeed while not wanting to stand out from the crowd. The confidence of the NCO trainers had spurred him on, but his natural reticence had made him keep it quiet.

Geri looked him over. She had thought her heart would burst when he had taken the salute, his sword held upright as he led the winning platoon behind the mounted officer. He had marched, his handsome face glowing with pride, his tall physique filling the uniform to perfection. He had the pips on his shoulders now, that medal on his chest... “You look incredible, Jon. Gorgeous.”

More blushing. “Shhhh!” He was grinning.

Geri looked around them, at the other huddles of proud parents, besotted girl- and boyfriends and wives and husbands. Several couples were snogging. “Everyone is saying it, to all of you, nitwit. It’s the uniforms and the flags and the band. It has that effect.” She shoved at him, making him laugh and her Jonathan was back.

He grabbed her, held her tight and whispered into her ear, “You look pretty incredible yourself, love.”

In the years to come, Geri would often look back to that day and to the following week’s pre-commission leave they spent in Paris as the high point of their relationship. Jonathan was everything he had been before Sandhurst, but with the added maturity that a year of study and experience had given him. It was not until she sat in the little boat with him on Rutland Water that she saw how that, too, had been a fiction. Those were the halcyon days; the last few weeks before fanatics flew planes into buildings and soldiers were called upon to fight a nebulous and indefinable enemy in the sands.

******

“I’ve always hated this bathroom,” she muttered. The morning was bleak, with a pale even light thanks to the watery sun. Geri sat on the toilet seat, gazing to her left, out of the clear pane at the top of the window, at the pattern of bricks on next-door’s wall. They had been renting this flat for over
two years now, since the beginning of her second year at Surrey. It was small, but large enough, not too far from campus, and handy for her part-time job in the town centre Lush. Geri hated the decor, which was plain and characterless, and the carpets that were ugly and worn threadbare by the feet of a thousand previous tenants. But it was affordable, and the shoe shop downstairs made a quiet neighbour. Not that Jonathan was there much anyway, just snatched weekends and leave since he had hopped aboard the express train to war and destruction…

She sighed, dropped the tiny object she was holding in the waste bin and stood up. Washing her hands meant looking in the mirror above the basin. She didn’t want to, but caught her own eye. Shrugging, she turned on the taps and rubbed soap into her palms and between her fingers in an absent-minded way. A confused face gazed back at her - she felt lonely and lost. Jonathan’s absence extended to his periods of physical presence. He had returned from his first tour in Iraq the year before, and the change in him had been marked. Whereas before, during his time at Sandhurst and after his first posting in Germany, the cold and distant behaviour had taken over for short periods, now it was exponentially worse and, it seemed, permanent. She had tried, repeatedly, to get him to talk about the war, about what had happened and what he had seen. But he refused, leaving the flat sometimes for hours on end if she ignored his requests for her to stop asking. They still had a physical relationship, but the expanding emotional distance between them was undeniable. Even to Geri, who had done so much to ignore it. She loved him, and he still said he loved her; less often, now.

Now he was back there, again; far away and in daily, even hourly danger and she had to push the thought of it away just to be able to get out of bed in the morning. She was helpless to do anything except carry on with her life here, provide a safe place for him to come home to and hope. Her degree was almost finished and, ever the practical thinker, she had opted to take her PGCE next academic year. Teaching appealed to her, and would provide stability as well as transferable skills for their future life together. In the meantime, she called the helpline for military wives and partners sometimes. The people she had spoken to had been reassuring: he could get help; what was happening was normal, understandable in time of war. There was hope her Jonathan would return.

Having dried her hands, she went into the living room, collected her bag and the folder she needed, picked up her laptop case and headed out. A day of lectures and a tutorial lay ahead, and any other matters had to be shelved until the scheduled Skype call from Basra that evening. She descended the stairs, locked the street door behind her and walked the ten yards to where she had parked the day before. Her car looked as depressed as she felt that morning: grubby and silvery-grey, the elderly Ford Fiesta was her Mum’s cast-off. Patting it gently on the roof as she stowed her stuff in the hatch, she whispered, “Good morning, Fiona. Let’s go, shall we?”

You’re spending too much time alone, Ger. You might be a teeny bit crazy.

Thirteen hours later, Geri sat at her unusually tidy desk, waiting. He was late, and so she had been straightening, filing and throwing papers away in an attempt to use the time productively and not panic. She wrote a couple more revision cards, shuffled some prints and made coffee. He’d been overdue for calls before, and sometimes she’d had texts from his friends saying he was still on patrol or there had been some kind of emergency. Once, in a turn of events that had sent her into a turmoil of terror, his CO had called. Her imagination had him dead or mutilated before she registered the words telling her he had been sent to another base for a week and Sorry, Ms Muir, I hope you can forgive the Army for it… Jonathan had not been shot or blown up to date; the worst he’d suffered on active duty was a sprained ankle from running over rubble, and despite her best attempts to stifle her fears, Geri was certain he was overdue for something…

Not now, please, NOT. NOW.
And suddenly, there he was. Dimly lit, khaki-clad, looking dusty and tired, but there.

“Hi, love.”

“You OK?”

“I am. Bit knackered, you know. Sorry I’m late. Shit happened… can’t talk about it, but we’re all good. And it’s too fucking hot. You?”

He had become more monosyllabic, especially when as exhausted as he obviously was that night.

“I am. Ummm… Jonathan?”

A smile, and a split-second flash of the man she loved. “Yes, Jellybean?”

“I’ve got something to tell you.” Her voice was choking, and all at once she didn’t know if she’d manage to get the words out, now it came to it. She gritted her teeth as he watched her, his face guarded as usual. “I’m pregnant.”
Sixteen

Chapter Summary

Geri’s friends and her mother begin to notice that something is happening. Jonathan is horrified when he realises his thoughtlessness has hurt her again.

NOW

...I still care/ Do you still care?

“Elaine, fitting customer for you!” Hearing her name, she ceased the mindless task of tidying boxes of bras on the display and hurried over to the changing rooms. She was happy to be busy, because she was fretting about Geri again. They had spent a few days together in Norfolk, just the other week during the half-term break, and everything had seemed normal. Normal, that is, for the past god knew how many years, since her daughter and Jonathan separated. It had been so hard to see the slow decline of the relationship; she loved Jonathan like a son, which made it harder to watch Geri fight to hold onto the man she loved.

The last three weeks had been somewhat unusual, now she really thought about it. It was worrying, because this was the time of year she normally heard more from her daughter, not less. Hour-long FaceTime chats or phone calls, funny and sarcastic text exchanges, live watching of TV together. Instead, she had hardly heard a thing from Leicester. Something was happening, she was sure, but Geri had been as tight-lipped as usual, on the few occasions she had managed to speak to her at all.

It was not in Elaine Muir’s nature to stand idly by while someone she cared about was in pain, least of all when that someone was Geri. But these past few years she had been given no other option. In the immediate aftermath of the split from Jonathan, Geri had refused to say exactly what had happened, only that it was over. Her mother suspected it was connected to the pregnancy, but again, even the gentlest of probing was rebuffed. It was agonising to watch. She had hoped that time would heal even this wound, but it still hadn’t. Geri would not even consider professional therapy, despite all pleas, and as far as Elaine could tell, she remained lonely and heartbroken.

As she made her way across the shop floor, she wondered if it was all the news coverage about the enquiry report into the Iraq War that had caused this dip in Geri’s mood. Bad old memories stirred up, maybe? She tapped on the wooden pillar at the side of the cubicle. “How can I help...” Elaine was so focussed on her thoughts that when the customer pulled back the curtain to speak to her she was sure for a split second that a young Geri was standing there. The hair, the height; it all matched.

The girl in her late teens blushed and spoke quickly and quietly, without eye contact. “Could you possibly measure me? I’m not sure what size... You see, I’ve lost a bit of...”
“Of course, dear.” Elaine snapped out of it, swallowed the lump in her throat and set to work. “What size is the bra you’re wearing at the moment?”

“34D, but it’s too small, I think. In places… That’s the trouble, it seems to be too small and too big.” She pulled a face. “It’s uncomfortable.”

“Ah, right. Let’s measure you properly and then see what we can find, shall we?”

Half-an-hour later the girl had left the store with two comfortable and pretty 34E bras and a broad smile, and Elaine felt a bit better. She couldn’t do much for her own daughter, but she could do something for someone. It was almost time for her break, so she decided that once she was in the staff lounge she would text Geri and try to set up a proper talk for that evening or later in the week.

“I’m taking you out for lunch.” Charlotte always announced these things; there was never any suggestion of choice. Nevertheless, Geri smiled and made a token attempt, not wanting to risk any possible cross-examination.

“I’m not sure-”

“Oh shush! You need a break, and by the look of you, you need some nourishment, too.”

Resistance is futile.

Geri hadn’t fancied going to a noisy pub or café, but it turned out that Charlotte had other plans. The QE was quiet, with most students on study leave or sitting exams, and half the teachers were out that particular day, at a conference. The Art & Photography Department was largely deserted, and so, when she returned from her short computer training session, Geri found her friend had laid out a picnic in a shady spot on the grass, just outside the rear doors of the block. She stood in the open doorway, smiling. “I’ve just got to make a quick call. Be right there!” Charlotte waved and continued unpacking her cool bag.

Geri ducked into the empty workroom and pulled up her GP’s number. She asked for an emergency appointment. “I’m sorry, we don’t do those anymore, but we do have a drop-in clinic this evening. Or do you need a home visit, madam?”

“The drop-in will be fine. What time?”

“It starts at five-thirty, finishes at seven.”

“Thanks.” Geri broke the connection and let out her breath. She hadn't realised how tense she had been until that moment. *I'll feel better, once I get the prescription.* She straightened her back, fixed a happy expression on her face and headed out to join her friend.

Charlotte was ready for her, in more ways than one. She and Geri had been pals for several years. They were about the same age, and both currently single, although Charlotte had been through a few relationships in the time they’d been friends. They met when both women were still quite new to the city, and bonded, as fellow outsiders often do. They shared a sense of humour, too, but there had always been no-go areas in the friendship which persisted, even after all this time. The way Geri had been behaving in the past couple of weeks had made Charlotte more sure than ever that she needed to step up, as a friend. She decided to be upfront, in keeping with her instincts. She allowed Geri to start eating, waiting until she had a mouthful of sandwich. “I know you never talk to me about this stuff, but I’m not blind, Geri. I care about you and something is wrong. Please, tell me. If only to talk it through. It might help, you never know.”
Geri chewed, swallowed and thought carefully. There was so much she couldn’t tell her, so much she didn’t talk about to anyone, that it was hard to know where to start. She was about to speak when Charlotte continued.

“Is it something to do with that bloke at the party?” Geri looked up sharply, questioning. “Annie texted me this morning. Said Will had seen you-”

“It’s none of his business.” How dare he?

“Geri, he’s your friend. We all are. You’ve been alone for as long as I’ve known you. We worry.” She paused, surprised at Geri’s uncharacteristically hostile tone. “I mean, you haven’t even said anything about the attack, at the Centre. Will says you were there, for fuck’s sake. Are you alright? It must have been-”

“I’m fine, I was miles away from it. James dealt with it, shoved me outside. He’s OK too. It was scary, but… It looked worse than it was.”

Charlotte wasn’t convinced, and anyway, she was worried before last night. “Good, well, that’s not what I wanted to...You’ve seemed rather…unhappy, I suppose, unsettled, recently…? Is that something to do with you and er, James?”

What harm could it do? Geri nodded. “We used to… I knew him before. A long time ago. We were…” It was so hard for her to say the words; physically impossible.

“Together?” Another nod.

“It’s difficult. Complicated.” She took a deep breath. “Painful.” She looked into Charlotte’s beautiful face. Kind brown eyes looked back. “I really don’t think I can talk about it right now, sorry.” She was genuinely sad about that; it might help, to share, but for now she had to get through the next twenty-four hours, then she could think a bit straighter.

“OK, fair enough. But I’m here, OK? And I hope you know you can trust me, Ger…?”

Her friend nodded gratefully. “Yes, yes, I do. Thanks.” They squeezed each other’s hands and got back to the food. A few minutes later, Geri’s phone buzzed as her mother’s message reached her:

<Can we FT later?>

Not you as well, Ma.

<Perhaps. I have to go somewhere after work. I’ll message you.>

She didn’t want another inquisition, not today. She needed space to think, once she had made sure of this one thing, I can’t go there again. The thought brought her up short. If she did decide to give Jonathan the chance he had asked for, she had to go ‘there’ again. Not completely, of course, but she did have to think about what had happened, and they had to talk about it. Frankly, freely.

“Everything OK, Geri? Bad news?”

Smiling weakly, Geri shook her head. “Just Mum. She’s worrying about me too, by the look of it.”

*******

On impulse, and feeling a sudden need simply to see her, Jonathan rode home that evening by a different route, one that took him past the sixth form college where Geri worked, on the off chance
he might catch a glimpse. It was too late, of course; the gates to the empty car park were locked, so he continued along to the end of the road and waited to turn left at the traffic lights. As he did, he saw Geri coming out of the health centre opposite. He watched her as she hurried away from him, down the hill towards the pharmacy. He was alarmed, but then the sound of a car horn alerted him to the fact that the light was green, so he pulled away. He saw her enter the shop and considered stopping, but decided she’d think he was stalking her, so continued on his homeward route.

All night and all day he’d been feeling it, the excited prickle of combat in his entire body. It had started with the attack, then things had got 100% more complicated and frightening. His heart quickened at the thought of last night and he was back in battle-mode again. Memories flooded his mind: sitting in a helicopter, his helmet beneath him to protect his balls from bullets or shrapnel; eerie green ghosts glimpsed through his night-sight; lying on his bunk, more afraid than when on patrol, overwhelmed by the buried knowledge that he didn’t belong in this world. He could almost sense the smells of Iraq, of that terrible time. The familiar sensations gripped him: goose pimples and nausea. He had hurt her again, he should go now, step, no, run away before it got worse.

Indoors and unable to settle, he texted her, trying to keep it light and natural.

<III. How R U?>

She did not reply immediately, and he started to worry. Was she ill? Upset or traumatised by the attack? By him? Then it hit him: we had unprotected sex. Oh god, Geri. Oh god.

He stood in the middle of his cramped living room, fists balled, struggling to think. Then his phone buzzed:

<Im OK. Just on my way home.>

She pulled him back, grounded him, her whisper in his ear enough. Geri. My Jellybean. He thought of Sophie, of her smile, and the way she had seen the best in the empty shell he had become. He owed it to Sophie (Samira. Her real name was Samira) to try to find happiness, and he thought that if he and Geri could

<I had to get something after last night. U know.>

<Yes.>

<I’m sorry, Geri. I should have thought. I’m sorry>

<So should I. It’s OK.>

He thought of her, of the pain it must have caused her to go to the health centre. He couldn’t bear it; he wanted to punch something, or someone. He changed into running gear and took off towards Victoria Park, weaving through the crowd on Queens Road, then stretching his legs across the grass. He ran, blind and deaf to his surroundings, feeling the breeze drying the sweat as soon as it appeared on his skin. Why can’t I get it right? Are we just wrong for each other? I still love her. I love her. Could I make it work? Would she ever let me?

He didn’t have his phone or he would have seen the text Geri sent just after she took the pill she had picked up from the pharmacy:

<Its not yr fault, J>

**********
Geri sat in the chair by the window of her flat. The view wasn’t spectacular: a few very tall eucalyptus trees, the car park that served the residents and the gardens of the houses which backed onto it. These included a small residential home for people with disabilities, and she liked to wave to a particular lady who always seemed to be out there in her electric wheelchair. The little paved area around a raised pond was deserted now, however, because it was almost dark. Geri sighed and let her eyes wander up, above the roofline and northwest, towards the city centre. She was looking, but not really seeing.

She had sidestepped her mother’s request, postponing it for twenty-four hours, by which time she hoped to be feeling better. The tasty picnic with Charlotte had kick-started her appetite again, and she had managed a dinner, albeit a frozen pizza she found lurking at the back of the freezer. It wasn’t great, but it was just about edible. She needed to think, and you can’t do that without a reasonable blood-sugar level. But she was finding it hard to focus; the events of the day before were still fresh and vivid in her mind. The attack, the terror and grief that had flooded her at the thought she might lose him. Again. That constant in her life with Jonathan, always afraid of him gone. She smiled at the irony, after everything, all the dangers of war and the mission he had undertaken, not to mention all those years apart, and he might have died in an old shop in London Road, Leicester. Geri shuddered again, hugged herself and then reached for the wineglass on the windowsill.

She still loved him. She had never stopped, in spite of it all. She hated herself for it. It was infuriating, pathetic and hopeless, but undeniable. She had not forgotten the excruciating heartbreak and the loneliness and she still loved him. Despite everything telling her to move on, forget him, get a life beyond him, she still loved him. So she had merely survived, living this half-life. Moving forward in time but without making progress.

She stood up and moved over to the desk in the corner, sat on the office chair and clicked on the old folder she had moved to the desktop. His beautiful face filled the screen, her Jonathan, blond curls a lovely mess above those mysterious eyes. Her heart lurched at the sight of him, and of the love in his expression. He loved her then, she knew it. He had told her last night that he still did, as if that had ever been enough. Was it enough for another try? Why not, Geri? Why not surrender, do what you know you want to? She scrolled on, through the folder, found the Sovereign’s parade shots. Second-Lieutenant Pine in his dress blues, so proud, but she saw the sadness, even then.

“Can I trust him not to hurt me like that again?”

Her scrolling had reached the most recent additions to the file: the shots she had taken in the golden light of Annie’s garden. His face was harder, thinner and older. His eyes looked tired. But now she looked again, she could see it: they were looking at her the way they used to.

“Jonathan…”

***********

“Did he, now…?” Angela grinned as she read Rob’s report. The attack on the Gateway Centre was a red flag incident, but discreet enquiries through their contact at Leicestershire Police had confirmed it was a racist incident, part of a pattern, and not aimed at ‘Woody’. However, the tail she had asked for had yielded the information that he had subsequently stayed the night at the flats in Stoneygate where Ms Muir lived. She closed her laptop, swivelled her chair and looked out at her husband who was dancing in the sunshine with Daphne in his arms. She could hear his bass-baritone singing and the baby’s giggle. “Best sound in the world,” she said aloud and stood up.

I should get Resettlement to look into options for them, because if this is a thing and they do end up back together, they might need to move on. And if they don’t, he might need to, at least. She sighed, her eyes drawn inexorably to her family outside. She wished she could arrange that happiness for
Jonathan; he had endured such loneliness, and he had willingly given up what little he had in the way of friends and companionship to take on the task she gave him. Resolving to ring Rob the next day to discuss it, she took a few steps closer to the window, her head still full of the charming, secretive, determined Mr Pine.

She thought about their conversations; how guarded he was early on, how tightly he clung to what remained of his parents in his life. As they grew closer, she saw glimpses of the real man, sides of him he kept largely hidden. She had never met anyone with more moral or physical courage. And yet, there was such a deep longing in him, one she saw but suspected he never acknowledged. She glanced over at her laptop; perhaps he could find that missing element in Geri. She whispered an exhortation to someone eighty miles away.

“If that’s so, go on, Jonathan. Go for it!”

******

He couldn’t sleep. He still struggled with it, after years of working at night. He had read somewhere that it shortens your life; the way he felt at 2am seemed to back that up. But it was more than just habit that was keeping him awake that night. He had gone for that run, he had drunk the best part of half a bottle of scotch, but still he remained alert, not dozing in the slightest. He could not get the events of his last tour in Iraq out of his mind. What he had done, what had happened back at home, and how it all seem to crystallise into the idea in his head at the time. Looking back on it now, with the benefit of over ten years’ hindsight and more perspective on his own behaviour, he could see why he did what he did.

Self-knowledge is good, but in Jonathan’s case it did not translate into self-forgiveness. He lay staring at the ceiling, his stomach churning with anger and self-hatred. Hot tears fell freely from his eyes, burning his face. I hurt her. She tried to make it work, then I came home and broke her. Finally, not very long before dawn, he fell into a restless sleep and dreamed of green lights and hot, sandy nights. And of a sticky carpet and the sound of rain.

*********

Geri woke refreshed on Wednesday. She had a less demanding day ahead, with just a few lessons to teach at the High, because she had no invigilation and no in-service training arranged. Enjoying a relaxed shower for once, she remembered she still needed to prepare for the wedding on Saturday, so she decided to head over to the venue at Atherstone after her last teaching duty that afternoon. It was a forty-minute drive, and this was the only gap in her schedule long enough to do it in.

As soon as her breakfast was on the table she picked up her phone.

<I really AM OK.>

Instead of replying, he rang, needing to hear her voice to be sure. “Are you?”

She smiled to herself. “Yes, I am. You sound tired. Did you sleep at all?”

“I’m alright. Look, I can’t believe I was so-”

“Stop it. I am as much to blame. Please, no more about it, OK?”

Jonathan sat perched on the edge of his small sofa, jaw clenched, imagining her beautiful face in the morning light. “OK.” He took a breath. “Can I see you tonight?”

It’s too soon. At least let the pill work. “Sorry, no. I have plans. With a friend. And I’m facetiming
with Mum later.” It was all true; Charlotte had suggested dinner out when they were packing up the picnic the day before. Perhaps because she would have said no anyway, it sounded like an excuse. “I have to work tomorrow night, but I’m free Friday…?”

“Friday it is then.” He felt the relief washing through him.

“Why don’t you come here? I can order in.” God, I’m asking him over. For a date. Jonathan, for fuck’s sake…

“Do you still like Indian food?”

He couldn’t keep the grin out of his voice. “You know me, Jellybean. I like all food.”

They laughed together. It was the first light-hearted moment they had shared in many years. Geri felt her heart swelling, and she had to clear her throat. “Of course, silly me. Right then. Seven-thirty OK for you?”

“Perfect. Do you still drink beer? Or maybe you’d prefer wi-”

“Beer would be great. Thanks.”

He paused, not sure how to end the conversation. It felt as if they were teenagers again, awkward but eager with each other. “See you Friday night then. Bye, Geri.”

“Bye, Jo… er, James.” She realised she was crying. She looked at her phone as she tapped the red button, and scolded herself. “Pull yourself together, woman. You’re not seventeen anymore!” But it was hard not to hold the phone to her breast. Her heart was light as she picked up her spoon to eat.
Seventeen

Chapter Summary

Geri, and her relationship with Jonathan, become casualties of war.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THEN

I was mad at getting old/It made me reckless

It was black, but not silent. Dogs howled, ruminants lowed and wailed, and he could hear muffled music and talking somewhere way off behind him. He shuffled minutely in a futile attempt to avoid the hard rocks that dug into his hip and elbows. Absolute focus was needed; complete concentration on what he was doing. A sudden, momentary crackle of static filled his ear, making every nerve come alive. Radio silence, you cunt! Jonathan took a few breaths and settled down into his body again, visualising a cool wave sweeping up from his feet and clearing his mind. But he could not ignore the blazing beacon of light that coloured his every waking thought.

There was too much of this quiet, too many hours of watching and waiting. He watched for the target, waited for the signal, lying unmoving in the dirt. But the dark vacuum soon became filled. His thoughts bubbled up and his mind soon boiled with them. The Skype call had been terrible. He’d lost control; he had reacted without thinking. He hadn’t considered her feelings, not even his own. Richard would have been so disappointed in him at that moment; he had broken the golden rule. “WHAT?! How did...? How the FUCK did that happen, Geri? You’re on the fucking pill!” She was crying, but he couldn’t seem to stop his raging. He wasn’t even angry with her.

He was afraid. How could they possibly have a kid, in the middle of all this? He didn’t know where the fuck he was going or who the hell he was... or should be... how could he be a father? He could be killed - or worse - at any minute. It was the wrong time for her, too; there would never be a right time for him. How can I be a father? I don’t know how, or who... It might have been easier if he hadn’t been tasked with these special missions. His orders to join this unit on secondment had come from a long way up the chain of command. It was an honour to be selected; it was important but difficult and stressful.

Another sharp click in his ear, and the magic word: Farmer. Freshly reborn as Captain Pine, special ops, Jonathan flexed his fingers as he simultaneously moved his eye closer to the sight. His view was ridiculously restricted; all he could see was a narrow strip about six inches wide, through part of a window of a small house, some fifty feet away down a sloping village street. The close observer took in the powdery mud-brick wall and the crumbling wood of the frame; inside, a patch of red fabric, and the flat white arm of the ubiquitous moulded plastic chair. He was lying prone in the dirt, hard up against what smelled and sounded like a goat hut, in deep shade and covered by a camouflage sheet that made him more or less invisible in the dark, unless he moved. His spotter hid in an adjoining street, in a place with a better view of the front door of the house. Colonel Fitzalan was leading the operation from a command vehicle two miles away. There was no need for closer scrutiny. The whole thing had been meticulously planned and the protocol was straightforward: if the target
showed up, he was to be shot. If he didn’t, they would slink away before dawn and try again tomorrow night.

Should anything go wrong, none of the participants was in uniform or had any means of identification on them. *Plausible deniability.* And information about the missions was handed out on a ‘need to know’ basis, which raised red flags for him, too. He’d been told this target - *this man* - was a major threat to the base, and behind many attacks. But he had to take that as gospel. Something about the looks that were exchanged, the wording of the orders and the general mood in the room continued to bother him. This was not his first mission of this type, not even on this tour, but it was the most unsettling to date.

He switched to sight to night vision, and at the same instant a man appeared in the strip of light Jonathan could see. He was young, bearded, laughing and smiling, like a thousand Iraqi men he had seen. Pine’s earpiece barked again: *Farmer!* Moral muscle memory took over, circumventing the conscience, squeezing the trigger for him. The young man’s head exploded, a cloud of black in his rifle sight that was gone in an instant. But not before the rest of the image had time to take form in his eye: a small child, a baby, in the man’s arms, falling, bloodied… Jonathan jumped up to his feet, his stiff limbs complaining, and ran swiftly and as silently as he could; back up the alley, away from the house. Meeting and gathering up his sergeant as they headed away from the shouts and running feet, making for the edge of the village and the safe blackness of the night.

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Elaine reached for the remote and hit the mute button. Those were footsteps on the front path… who could it possibly…? Then the sound of the key in the lock - it had to be Geri. She was up and out of her chair in an instant, reaching the hall as her daughter closed the front door and stood on the mat. Geri’s face was as white as a sheet and she was rigid, holding her backpack and a small overnight case.

“Darling, what on earth’s happened?”

Geri shook her head. She had used every drop of what she had left on the drive, and she could not manage to tell her mother anything. She found that, now she was finally there, she could not even speak. Not yet. Grasping that much, Elaine prised her fingers off the bags and led her into the sitting room. They sat on the couch and mother hugged daughter tightly. After a minute or two, Geri began to cry; it went on for a long time. It was a deep, heart-rending, earth-shattering sound that seemed to come from her very bones. When at last her sobs were little more than hiccups and gulps, her mother led her upstairs to her room, fetched her bags for her and put her to bed.

Waking up in her old room the next morning felt like a mixed blessing. It was comforting to be there, surrounded by familiar sights, sounds and smells, but naturally there were reminders of Jonathan everywhere. A lump began to form in her throat; she knew she should be angry with him, but she could not seem to summon that up. Instead there was only a terrible sadness, which seemed to be the only thing there was to feel a great emptiness that had opened up inside her. The day before, still in shock from the Skype call, she had suddenly decided to come home. It had seemed like the only thing to do. Now she realised she’d have to tell her Mum what had happened. Steeling herself for the unavoidable conversation, Geri showered and dressed. She was already pretty sure what had to be done.

“Do you *want* to talk about it, love?”

They were sitting opposite each other at the little table in the kitchen. Geri was fiddling with but not eating a piece of toast. She looked up and into her mother’s face. She knew she could tell her anything, but this time…
“Is Jonathan OK?” It had just occurred to her that he might have been hurt, and Geri was too traumatised to tell her.

Geri nodded. “He’s… I mean, he’s not been shot or anything, but…” *I have to tell her. She’ll be so disappointed in me, but… “It’s me. I’m pregnant, Mum.”*

“Oh darling. Oh, Jellybean.” Elaine wrestled with the emotions the news set off in her. Clearly her daughter was not happy about it. *Or was it…*

“What does Jonathan…have you told him?”

“Yes. They tell us not to give them bad news, while they’re over there, I mean, but this is too big. And he’s only been gone ten weeks. They won’t be back for over seven months… Anyway, he’s furious with me.”

“What? Why? I mean, he can’t think-”

“No. It was just… I had a tummy bug around the time he left. It must have been enough to stop the pill working.” She tried not to cry. He had been so horrible; so cold. Sex was the only thing that still seemed to connect them. That it should have led to this…

Elaine was horrified, then furious. She had been patient and understanding with Jonathan, but ever since the debacle at the Open Day she had become more and more concerned about him. She had talked to Geri about it, and she had kept saying that it was going to be fine, and that once he was settled in the Army, or back home from Iraq, he would get back to being his old self. But this was too much for her mother.

“What right does he have to blame you? He knows you’re not the kind to try to trap him! He was always such a… *Jesus Christ, Geri, what the hell* has happened to him?”

“I don’t know, Mum. He seems so different. I don’t know if it’s being in the Army, or the war, but…I think he’s scared, for one thing.” She tried to think. She’d been struggling to understand what he would not talk about, for so long; she was exhausted by it. “Some of what he said is right, though: this is the worst possible time, for both of us. I need to do my PGCE, and anything might happen to hi-”

“Don’t!” The tears were flowing now, from them both. Elaine looked at her hands, which were clasping both of Geri’s. “So…?”

Geri took in a deep, juddering breath. “Yeah. I think I’ll go see the uni medical service. I’m sure they’re used to this sort of thing.”

Not for the first time, her mother felt the perennial maternal agony: *let me bear my baby’s pain for her.* “Oh Jellybean, I’m so sorry.” She scanned her daughter’s face. “You know, whatever you decide, I’ll be there for you, love. I could move, get a transfer to somewhere closer. Whatever you need, whatever support, practical help…” She wanted to say ‘babysitting’ but didn’t think she could get the word out. “You know that.”

Geri nodded. “I do, Mum, I do.” Fat tears sat briefly on her lower lashes then slid downwards. “I’ve thought about it, a lot, but… I can’t, not without him. It was just an accident; one of those things that… I’m not ready; Jonathan’s *definitely* not…” Elaine watched her summoning up all her remaining strength before she spoke again. “I’m going to have a termination. It’s the only sensible thing to do.” She looked up. “Will you come down, be with me when…”

“Of course.”
A month later, Geri went into the clinic for the abortion. Elaine accompanied her. She had emailed Jonathan to tell him what she was doing; they hadn't spoken directly since the night they had argued, just exchanged a few texts. His reply was heartlessly brief: “Good.”

In fact, he had been in a complete turmoil about the baby, a struggle that was made worse by the thought that he might have killed, or, at the very best, traumatised the child he had glimpsed after he fired at the target in that village. He wanted to fly home, to hold Geri and tell her he loved her, and that everything would be alright; simultaneously, he wanted to push her away, to distance her from this person he had become: this stranger. The news that she was terminating the pregnancy seemed to crystallise his thoughts about the relationship. *I've been tormenting her for too long already. I'm nothing but poison. I hurt her every day.* In six more months he’d be home. He should break it off, before it was too late.

In such an intense and claustrophobic environment, his preoccupation did not pass unnoticed.

“Something amiss with you, Pine?”

The base gym was as busy as usual. Major West was stealing glances at his best captain, who seemed to be running himself into a jelly on the next treadmill. Jeremy West was a good officer, and he had started to have some reservations about Pine. He was a first-rate soldier, but...This was a good place for informal chats; everyone was more relaxed and all on a level in their exercise gear. They spoke breathlessly and kept their sentences short as they pounded on, going nowhere on the machines.

“No sir, not really. Bit of news from home.”

“Family troubles?” He knew Pine’s background, but thought there was a girlfriend.

“Just my girl, sir. It’s nothing I can’t sort out, sir.” Geri’s face on the screen as he ranted at her. The child falling in a cloud of black/red.

“Good chap. Right, well, Jonathan, you know you can talk to me, or to the chaplain, as you wish. If something’s er... *bothering* you, um... er, you know?”

“Yes, sir, of course. Thank you sir.”

West decided to speak to Fitzalan. Pine had been seconded to the Colonel’s special unit and even his own chain of command had been cut out of the picture to some extent. He was pretty sure what they had been doing was part of Pine’s problem; he’d come back from the last mission looking like a zombie. *Fitzalan might know what’s bothering him. It’s his mess - let him deal with it.*

Geri’s finals began the week after the termination, so she had little time to wallow in whatever this was she was feeling. The day of the procedure had been awful, but that was not the fault of the staff at the Royal Surrey Hospital. As her mother commented, they could not have been kinder or more discreet. No, it was just the greater meaning of what was happening that made it such an ordeal, despite having her Mum with her for almost every stage. There was a long wait in a plain but pleasant room, between the pessary and the abortion itself. They sat, looking at but not really seeing their magazines and books, not knowing what to talk about. Finally Elaine broke the uncomfortable silence from her armchair by the window.

“You know, darling, you could always ask to re-sit, at a later date. I’m sure they’d let you.” Geri was
already shaking her head. “Just think about it. Nobody could possibly blame you if—”

“No, Mum.” Her voice was quiet but steady as she sat up in bed. She was anxious but pretty calm, considering the situation. She’d had a few weeks to think about things and was adamant she would continue on her career path as planned. After all, that was partly why she was in this bed. Except that it wasn’t, not really. She could have taken her finals pregnant. She could have deferred her PGCE place for a year; people did it all the time, for whatever reason. No. She was doing this because Jonathan had made it clear he did not want this baby, and she was so in love with him, she feared that doing what her instincts were shouting at her to do would drive him even further away.

“But love, you can hardly expect to perform to your full potential just a few days after this.” Her mother could not keep the exasperation out of her voice, but she had taught her baby too well. Once she felt she was on the right track, little could divert her Jellybean.

“I’ll be fine, Mum. The exams are just formalities, anyway. Most of the marks have been earned already.” If I could do OK these past couple of years, AND I HAVE, then finals should be a doddle.

Elaine returned home that evening, reluctantly leaving Geri in the flat with a big supply of sanitary towels and a stack of ready-meals. As she waved her mother off, Geri was struck by a sudden horrific sensation that she had done the wrong thing, after all. He might have changed his mind. He’s in a war zone, he’d feel differently if he was back here…

The guttural sobs returned and she curled up in a foetal position on the wafer-thin rug in the middle of the room.

It was dark by the time she was able to get up, and she went straight to her laptop and emailed him.

“You’ll be pleased to know it’s all over and done with.”

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February winds were blowing and Geri was well on her way to becoming a qualified teacher by the time the shell of a man known as Jonathan Pine returned from his second tour in Iraq. He did not tell her exactly when he would be back, and in fact he didn’t travel to see her for three weeks; instead he spent the time being debriefed and then in barracks with his regiment. When at last he showed up, unlocking the door and dropping his bags on the floor one dark evening, he was not someone she recognised. He was tanned yet somehow pale, fit and strong but broken-seeming; it hurt her heart to look at him.

Geri found herself overcompensating as a result; being more and more hyper, the cooler he was; mindlessly jollier, the more serious he became; talking too much to fill the void of his sullen silences. If she tried to get him to open up to her, he would react with an anger she had never seen before, then leave. Two months after his return from the Middle East, he was posted to a base in Norfolk, and she never knew from week to week when she would see him.

Under the veneer of cold calm, Jonathan was a mass of indecision and self-doubt. After seeing her again, he wanted to hang on to Geri, to cling tightly to her love, because it felt like the best thing that had ever happened to him. But by this time he did not believe he could make a life with anyone without harming them. He believed he had already done so much damage to Geri that he lay awake at night beating himself with the memory of his own words. You can’t do this to me! How could you be so stupid? So clueless, can’t you see what’s happening around you? Can’t you see what the world is like? Probably not, over there in safe, sensible Surrey. No, Geri! I can’t have a family now! Nor can you, you idiot! Why are you doing this? He had travelled so far from the young man who had been so intent on not hurting his girl; who had done everything he could to make her happy.

And none of it was her fault. None. It was all his; his determination to emulate his father, to follow him into the military life, to make him proud. His refusal to see how wrong it was for his peace of
mind, however much it suited his natural abilities in other ways. His fear, which had led him to lie and pretend and play the brave soldier, the efficient officer, the hero-like-his-Dad…

No. I must leave, and she must want me to.

His withdrawal from himself, and thus from Geri, was more or less complete.

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It was May, wet and cool as it sometimes is in England. He got to the flat in the early afternoon, knowing she would be out doing her teaching practice, up in Woking. He wanted to be able to pack the few belongings he still kept there unmolested. As he carefully stowed his father’s books and the few precious things he had of his mother’s (her wedding ring, her German recipes and children’s books, a few photographs), he tried to prepare his speech for Geri. He would be cold and cruel; he would break her heart so she would hate him. If she doesn’t already. He swallowed the tears that threatened at the thought that he would never see her again. I have to do this. For her. For me, too. But mostly for her.

“Oh, hello.” The questioning tone in her voice pierced him. I’ll never hear that again.

“Oh, er…Geri.” He watched as her eyes flicked over him and the pile of bags and boxes by the door.

“What are you doing…?” Her voice began to climb, in both pitch and volume, “Are you...Jonathan...what’s-”

“I’m leaving. I’d have thought you’d be expecting it.” He kept his voice steady, matter-of-fact, wanting to convey indifference to the situation and especially to her obvious distress. “I mean, things haven’t exactly been, well, great, have they, not for a long time.”

“Please, wait, I...Can’t we at least...you never...please, Jonathan, please don’t do this. At least give me a chance-”

“To do what, Geri? To talk me out of it? To take me to bed? To get pregnant again?” His words cut through her, slicing, burning. It was harshly deliberate and he was almost enjoying it; it was so easy. He saw the pain in her eyes. “Why would I want to stay with you? If I’d wanted to marry you, I would have asked you by now, don’t you think? And if I’d wanted a family with you, I would have said so before.” She had begun crying silently, standing a few feet from him, her fists balled and her chest heaving. She was still pleading, but just with her eyes now. A large part of him wanted to respond, to take the two steps across the rug and gather her up, hold her tight and kiss her with all the love that was coursing through his veins. But he had to finish the job now. He heard the rain on the roof, took in the drops in her hair, barely wetting it until she smoothed it with one shaking hand.

“You should find someone, easily enough. A nice, safe, boring man, someone who’ll-”

“No. I can’t, Jonathan…I won’t.”

“The fact is, Geri, it’s been over for me for a while. I don’t love you anymore. I’m not sure I ever really did, to tell you the truth. I certainly don’t now. Please, don’t pretend you don’t know this is how it’s going to end. Stop pretending Geri, grow the fuck up. Getting pregnant was ridiculous. At least you had the sense to have an abortion, that was actually fucking brilliant- Christ on a bike, what a disaster a kid would have been in all this!” His laugh was a cold and mirthless travesty of his true one, and to Geri it sounded like the clanging death knell of them.

“Please stay, Jonathan, please...don’t…”
“What the merry fuck for, Geri? More of... this?” He gestured around him. “More days of sitting around with nothing to say to each other, then going to bed for a distinctly average fuck?” He rolled his eyes and finally took that step towards her, but only so he could stoop and speak slowly into her face. “No. Thank. You,darling.” He made the endearment sound like an insult. A low sob broke from her, and he stepped back, feeling it like a physical blow. He reset, squared his shoulders and, picking up the first of his boxes, Captain Pine,J. 54936271, headed for the stairs, the pale drizzle of the street and his car.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last of the 'Then' chapters. From now on, we are strictly in the 'present'.
Chapter Summary

Jonathan and Geri have their first proper date in many years

NOW

_Cause you feel like home_

There was a pleasant end-of-the-week bustle in Avenue Road as he walked to Geri’s. The evening was warm and pleasant, and people of all ages were going home or heading out for their Friday festivities. The smell of charcoal floated in the still air. The sounds of the evening were as colourful as its visuals, with snatches of Drake or Bhangra coming from car windows, passing joggers with tinny rock beats emerging from their earphones, and the occasional few bars of something classical floating over from a house as he strode along.

It was Jonathan Pine who was making his way to see Geri. There was no transformation into Thomas Quince, or Andrew Birch, as there had been whenever he walked along the beach and up the endless steps to Fortress Roper. There was not even the subtle change he’d always made on the Zermatt funicular, after leaving his monk’s cell of a room to head down to Meister’s: from Jonathan to _Herr Pine, the Night Manager_. Tonight he had chosen to leave behind even the good guy James Rowan. For the first time in so very long, he felt no need to put on another personality.

He had always done it to survive. Many times he had created the person that was needed to get him through, to make it to the next place, to the next foster home, to the next operation, the next job; to the next woman. But not tonight. He knew that Geri needed to see Jonathan. The ‘real’ Jonathan Pine, the one she had saved with her love, in Weston. The one who had always loved her back. The one he believed (hoped) was still in there, somewhere, deep under the layers, beneath the patchwork quilt of characters he had created since. Among the many voices Sophie had heard. _She saw through me. Is that what happens when you love someone? Do they see your true face?_ He had been trying to show Geri that face. He wanted to; he needed to.

He turned right onto the busier London Road, crossed at the pelican and continued south, towards the traffic lights and Stoughton Road. Men and women heading into the city for food, drink or a film, on buses or in their cars, saw a handsome, tall, athletic man marching. He had an unmistakable military bearing: a short, almost severe haircut, a straight back, his bag of beers swinging smartly at his side as he strode along, his eyes fixed on the way ahead. His clothes were casual but nonetheless neat and tidy. Brown suede boots, charcoal jeans, a black MSF-t-shirt under his worn but clean dark tan leather jacket, he resembled any eager young man out for fun on a Friday evening.

The closer he got to the turning, the faster his heartbeat. He could feel her tugging him, her gravity pulling as it had from the first time he saw her on the grass at school. He restrained himself from breaking into a trot, and began to count time in his head, as he had when drilling at Sandhurst. _One-two, one-two...Staying alive, staying alive. Like the CPR... don’t rush this, let her lead...she’s got to be the one in charge._ Even so, his strides had lengthened and he quickly reached the junction and
turned left down the hill, towards Lyndwood Court and his hopes for the future.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Geri had just stopped herself running to the bathroom to check her reflection for the eighth time since she left it ten minutes before. She knew perfectly well she looked alright; a little tired, true, and a decade older than when they last spent time together but not too bad, considering. Her long brown hair was glossy, her hazel eyes still pretty clear, her skin soft and mostly unwrinkled. There was a line between her brows, the result of too much frowning, the woman on the Bobbi Brown counter in John Lewis had joked. *If you only knew…*  

She scanned the room. It looked tidy enough. Just outside, in the entrance hall opposite the front door, was her photography gear, all ready for tomorrow’s job. She had put most of the other equipment in her car earlier, everything except the bag containing her cameras and lenses. Weddings were a nice little earner, and she had built up a reasonable clientele through word of mouth over the years. But watching happy people in love, white lace and promises, pageboys and flower girls, was hard. Pretending to be happy for them was emotionally draining.  

The table was laid for dinner, although she was waiting for his arrival before ordering. Cutlery, bowls, cheerful yellow paper napkins, serving spoons, beer glasses. A few tea lights in holders, for decorative purposes. *They don’t count as candles, right? They’re here all the time.* Her bookshelves stretched the length of the room, crowded with large-format art and photography books, classic and modern novels, not to mention the volumes of poetry she hadn’t dared to open for years. Framed prints were dotted here and there between the books: little Jellybean, her parents, a collage of her with Elaine over time, from childhood until graduation, her female friends old and new. None of him. Jonathan had been edited out of her visible past, Stalin-style. No photoshopping required, just the careful selection of the right prints.  

*You can’t press ‘delete all’ in your brain. Or your heart.*  

Unable to settle, Geri walked back into the kitchen and pulled the Satkar menu out from under her Jean-Paul Sartre fridge magnet. She thought of the old bulldog clip of takeaway leaflets they kept on the noticeboard in Guildford, and was instantly back in the chill of that May morning. Shivering unconsciously, she rubbed her arms. The discomfort of the thought made her recall the conversation with her Mum on Wednesday. It had started normally enough, with the usual exchange of news about work and friends. But Elaine was an astute person, and she wasn’t about to let her daughter finish the call without asking the question.  

“*Darling, something’s going on. What is it, love? Please, you know you can tell me.*”  

“No, not really. Nothing to tell…”  

“Geri…” Shrugging from daughter, deeper frowns from mother.  

“*Even if… I’m sorry, but I can’t, Mum. If it… I can’t, I just….no. I’m OK. It’ll be OK.*”  

Had she shared the whole story of Jonathan’s departure with her, perhaps, but not like this. Not yet. There was too much to tell, some things too confidential, all of it too traumatic for a FaceTime session.  

Geri put the menu down and continued to wander the flat, going out of the door at the other end of the kitchen, into the hallway where the two bedrooms and bathroom were. She opened the airing cupboard and straightened the linen, trying to occupy her twitching hands, but she could not stop her mind from drifting backwards to the darkest time in her life. She had never quite climbed out of the
pit of loneliness she had fallen into during the first months after he left. None of the friendships she had made at Surrey was very close, and she and Maxine and Trish had drifted apart. Since moving to Leicester she had become good friends with both Charlotte and Annie, but she seemed to have lost the ability to connect fully with anyone. So she had carried the weight of Jonathan’s words alone, unfiltered, and they had pressed down on her. Her mother had supported her through the abortion, but only Geri and Jonathan knew what had happened between them. As time passed, it seemed less likely she would ever tell Elaine. It was so massive; so painful and humiliating. The thought that she had done what she had for someone who could subsequently treat her that way was agonising. And to tell anyone, even the therapist her mother had tried to persuade her to seek out, would have meant admitting that despite that, she could not stop loving him, even then.

This is a terrible idea. Terrible.

A soft tap on the door told her it was too late to change her mind, at least about tonight. Wiping her suddenly sweaty palms on her jeans, she walked past the bathroom, round the corner to the door. One last look at herself in the small hall mirror - dark blue print silk shirt, small gold hoops and minimal makeup - and Geri inhaled deeply and opened the door.

She was utterly beautiful. She was Sophie, vulnerable and terrified under her courage, her bruises fading from red and blue to green and yellow; she was Isabelle, crying and desperate; she was Jed, her pale face regarding him affectionately and sadly from the airport taxi. She was none of these and all: she was the woman he had always loved and ran away from, only to spend the next years searching unconsciously for her.

“Jo...er...” her eyes widened and darted around the empty hallway behind him. Jonathan stepped inside the flat quickly, the movement bringing him into her personal space. She stayed where she was, enjoying the heat of his body and the smell of his breath as it washed over her. Between them they closed the door behind him, and Geri looked up into his face. She smiled as he stared speechlessly at her, apparently struck dumb. “Are you OK?”

His funny little wheezy laugh. “Sorry. Silly. It’s just...seeing you, looking so beautiful...” There it is, the half-smile of doom. “Sorry. I don’t mean to, you know, put any more pressure on.”

“I know.” Take the compliment, girl. “Thank you.” She stroked his cheek and neck softly, and his eyes closed at her touch, his hand covering hers.

“Geri...”

Stop. Breathe. Take it slowly. We need to talk.

“Come in and sit down, Jo... James. Sorry, I can’t...”

He smiled sadly. “It’s OK.” He looked into her eyes. “I’m just Jonathan.”

She returned his gaze for a long moment before she took his jacket and he followed her into the living room with the beers he’d brought. Now he was there, his appetite had evaporated, but the choosing and ordering of their dinner helped ease the prickling tension that had flared up when he arrived. Waiting for the delivery, they sipped their drinks and talked of the day-to-day, of work and the life around them.

“How are things at the Centre now? I saw the new windows last night in my way past.”

“Yes. All back to normal, thanks, except that we have a security guard there most of the time now. They just stand around in a uniform, but it seems to be keeping the troublemakers away. And the
A chill went through her, then a thought occurred. “I had a call yesterday. They want me to give a formal statement on Monday. I assume…Is that going to be alright for you, you know, with your crime history still on the-?”

“I hope so. The people looking after me say it will be, but, well…” He had been trying not to worry, but the fact was he hadn’t changed his appearance and it would only take one eagle-eyed keen young copper to blow his new life out of the water. “I did mine yesterday. They came to the Gateway. They’re investigating, but there’s not much evidence. I doubt they’ll catch them.” He searched her face for clues. They were dancing around each other, but he knew he had to be patient. “How’s your work? This is exam time, right?”

“Yes. It’s nice and quiet for now. Good thing, because I’ve got a wedding to shoot tomorrow.”

A flash-memory of a register office, his dress uniform, her father’s. The smell of flowers; they’d hardly had time to die before he was leaving. Isabelle’s tearful, silent face. His nausea.

The doorbell rang, breaking into his unpleasant reverie: their food had arrived. Jonathan tried to pay, but Geri waved him away. “I invited you, remember. And anyway, it’s all paid for already, on my account.” She couldn’t resist a little teasing. “Don’t you know about these apps?”

It was oddly normal, sharing the curry and sipping their beers. Geri discovered it was manageable, as long as she looked at the food or the picture window straight ahead. If she allowed her gaze to float onto Jonathan, her heart began to flutter and her hands shook. But it was hard to resist. The flicker of the candles made his eyes glow and highlighted the shape of his cheekbones, and his hands, still so expressive and beautiful, caught her attention. She couldn’t help but watch whenever he would scratch his own neck or smooth his hair in a familiar gesture. They spoke more, about their lives now, and Geri asked polite but genuine questions about the places he had worked in. His life had ranged further than hers, geographically speaking, but despite his expansive scenographies it soon became clear that he had been as stuck in a rut as she had, in his own way.

As the evening wound on, and the sun sank down towards the city skyline, the conversation began to peter out. Geri stood and began clearing the table. Jonathan helped and they quickly had everything stowed in the dishwasher and the considerable leftovers in the fridge. She made coffee and they returned to the room and sat on the sofa. From the corner of her eye, she saw him settling at a polite distance from her, but anxious and watchful as she filled his mug. They both saw her hand was shaking; the moment had come. She poured her own coffee, carefully put the pot down on the table and sat back in her seat. They were side by side, both facing her beautifully arranged bookshelves, but eighteen inches apart, at either end of her three-seater.

Geri took a deep breath. “I’m sure you know this hasn’t been easy for me.” He nodded, still staring ahead. “I’ve had to think about things I have been avoiding for years…” She heard him inhale sharply and continued before he could interrupt. “…but that’s not necessarily all bad, Jonathan. Not at all.” She dared to turn her head. He was still facing front, his hands tightly clasped over his lap. His jaw was clenched tight.

“Geri…”

“Please, I need to ask you a couple more questions, if that’s OK?” He looked at her, nodding vigorously.

“Of course, anything.”
“I know I said no more recriminations, but... There’s one thing I don’t really understand.” She paused. It was so hard, but she needed to know. “Why did you marry, um... Isabelle, is that right?”

“Yes, that’s her name, yes...” He wanted to reach for Geri’s hand, but decided not to. Instead, he gave in to the other impulse he felt, and turned his body towards her, half smiling in the way that always melted her heart. “Can’t you guess?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Not really.”

“Because I wanted to prove to myself that I could live without you. That I hadn’t lied. I had, though... and poor Isabelle - I lied all the time to her.” He swallowed some coffee. Its bitterness matched his memories. “It’s no excuse, but everyone I knew seemed to be getting married at the time, and it was a way of, I dunno, fitting in, getting on with things, I s’pose.” He sighed. “I knew it was wrong, even as I was doing it. But once I had asked, I didn't know how to take it back.”

It had become a pattern in his life, misusing women. He hated himself for it, but could not seem to stop, not until Sophie. Not until the ultimate betrayal.

“Did you love her?”

It took him a moment to realise she meant Isabelle. He shook his head. “No. I was attracted to her, I think. I must have been, but it’s hard to remember feelings from that time. I was in a bad place.”

Geri considered his answers. They made sense, but it was hard to get past the pain she had felt when he told her about the marriage, so soon after leaving her. She was quiet for a while, and Jonathan followed her lead. He stayed with his body towards her, but silent and waiting. He watched her thinking, just hoping. They drank their coffees. Geri let her eyes move over his hands, either gripping his mug or each other over his knees. She took in the curve of his thighs, the sound of his breathing and the faint scent of his cologne she could detect. She wanted to touch him very badly, but the interrogation was not over yet.

“You said you lied.”

“I did.”

“And I think I understand why, now.”

He let out a breath.

“But I need you to say it properly.”

He frowned a little, unsure of her meaning. “Okay...”

“Do you remember exactly what you said?”

He nodded quickly, understanding now. “Those are the only things that I do recall precisely from that time: every conversation with you.”

She felt a lump in her throat again as she risked a look into his eyes.

He cleared his throat, then began to speak as steadily as he could manage. “I did love you then. I’ve always loved you, Geri.” She nodded and tried to smile. “I should have asked you to marry me. I wanted to, after Sandhurst, but I was so... I was a mess. I didn’t know who I was or where I should be going... I wish...” He reached for her hand, and she allowed him to take it. “I’ve done some things...things I regret bitterly. Things I was ordered to do, things I had to do to save lives - my own,
other people’s… but if I could take one back, of all the terrible crimes…” Geri was crying now, shaking her head. His voice was faltering a little but he kept going, somehow. “...I would take back those words. What I said to you, the way I treated you. Not just that day, but the whole of those last two or three years. It was so wrong, Geri. I loved you, and it scared me. You loved me, and that scared me even more. I wasn’t worthy of it.”

“You were! You just…” She had to ask him one last thing. He felt the tension ratchet up in her, just through the small contact of her hand in his. “Did you… would you have wanted the baby, if things had been…?”

Tears poured down his face as their eyes met. “God, Geri, I was such a bastard! Yes, yes, of course, if I’d been thinking straight, yes… what I put you through…” He broke down, sobbing in the silent way of his childhood.

Geri inched closer and put her free hand on his arm. “Shhhh.” She wanted to comfort him. It was bizarre, this reversal, but nevertheless it felt right, and she felt free. She squeezed his forearm gently. “I know, I know, my love…” Suddenly his arms were around her, holding her fiercely, tight against his body. She felt his sobs, the juddering breaths; the sadness and regret that was gripping him. There was no doubt in her mind it was genuine. She pressed her head against his, smoothed her hands down his back and waited for him to compose himself.

“Jonathan?” Some time had passed. The room was almost dark now, with just the light from the kitchen casting shadows across the rug in front of them. There were muffled sounds from other flats, TVs and music, but within the room there was just the sound of their respirations. His body was leaning against hers, his arms still around her as he rested his head on her shoulder. He was still breathing a little jaggedly, and the sound of his name made him gasp. “Jonathan?”

Her voice was soft, and he remembered the sofa in her mother’s house, and the moment she first told him she loved him. The sound had been the same then, as had the feeling: warm, enveloping, safe. He lifted his head and allowed his cheek to brush over hers. So much was raging in him. Love for her love, pain at her pain, desperation to show her how he felt; fear of rejection. He sighed deeply, his stubble hovering over the silky softness of her skin. He inhaled her, and his hands began moving slowly in small circles over the silk of her blouse.

“Geri.” So soft, it was barely a whisper. “My Jellybean.” She rested her cheek in the crook of his neck now, a smile tugging at her lips. She snuggled a little. “I’ve been so empty, since I pushed you away. I searched for ways to change that, not knowing what it was. But I can see now. There was always an empty space inside me, since my... Mutti and Dad, you know…” She nodded against the swell of his shoulder. “You filled it, Geri.”

He held his breath, waiting for her to respond. He had expected words, but instead he felt her shifting and suddenly her lips were moving over his face, seeking his mouth, finding it. She kissed him ardently, needing to show him she loved him, swept away by the undeniable necessity of expressing it. He could say he was sorry a thousand times, but that would not prove anything. She thought she believed him now. If he could see himself clearly, there was a chance she could learn to trust him. But for tonight, there was just this. The two of them and the connection they first made all those years ago.

Their kisses lasted a long time. They nibbled and teased, sucked and grazed their teeth, nuzzled and breathed each other in. She stroked his head and neck; he moved his hands over her back and arms, occasionally catching the back of her head in one palm. It was romantic and sexy in an adult way, recalling the old times, but different. Tiny whimpers came from her throat, while deep moans that
seemed to emanate from Jonathan’s belly filled her ears. But he was patient, letting her set the pace. Eventually she needed more, and slid onto his lap, the delicious friction giving them both a little relief. His hands slipped inside her blouse, teasing at the skin on her back, relishing its soft smoothness. She rolled her hips against him and he moaned loudly.

Her mouth brushed his ear. “Did you bring-?”

“Yeah.” He nodded and swallowed convulsively. “I, er... If you’re sure you-”

“I’m sure.”

“Geri, the more I think about Monday... To have been so stupid and thoughtless. I’m so sorry!” His gaze was intense, and she sensed the deep emotions in him. She shook her head, and was about to say something, but he could not pause. He had to make her see that he understood. “The last time...before my second tour… we never made love again, not after I came back, did we?” Another shake of the head. “Oh God, Geri, I’m so very sorry... How could I have been such a cunt, again?”

Geri had already accepted these facts, but clearly it had only later dawned on him that Monday was their first time since the night she had become pregnant. She hugged him closer, touched by his obvious remorse, but wanting them to get past it. He turned to her and her eyes fixed on his, meaning he had to kiss her to release the tsunami of love he felt overwhelming him. Trembling, he held her tight again as she tugged lightly on what remained of the curls she had enjoyed so much.

Despite the slow build-up, Jonathan was unsure and nervous again; wanting everything, needing to hold back. This was the real deal. It was not the first fumblings of two virgins, nor the mindless desperation of Monday night, when life had seemed so transient and precious. Tonight he was a man proving he knew this woman was the one for him. Geri felt his anxiety, and took the initiative. To erase any doubt, she pulled his t-shirt up and over his head. The smell of him, the feel of his muscles under her, the enticing pattern of freckles on his arms and neck; she had missed these things so much. Now she luxuriated in their return. Once again, she wondered at how it could all seem so familiar, yet at the same time, so new and strange. It’s been so long, so long. Then his lips began to trace the shape of her neck and downward, and thinking became altogether a more difficult prospect. She needed him, even more than she had on Monday. It was not a choice; it was an imperative.

Jonathan’s shaky fingers fumbled with her buttons, but eventually he was able to unfasten them and her bra was gone soon after. Skin to skin, they both felt it. They wanted to be one, in every way. To absorb one another, the way that they had in those perfect early months. Geri was overwhelmed with the sensual reality of it all, of his hands on her, squeezing and stroking her breasts, his stubble rubbing her neck and nipples as he kissed and licked her. Words were not needed. She knew what he wanted, and responded, standing and to finish undressing while he did the same.

Naked, pale in the near dark, he caught her in his arms again, kissed her deeply then guided her gently down onto the cushions he’d piled at one end of the sofa. She tensed up, unsure and anxious. “It’s OK, Geri. I want this. Please, let me do this for you.” She nodded.

“It’s just... it’s been so long, I don’t know if-” He stopped her with a lingering kiss, which he prolonged as his hands carefully parted her legs, then he kissed a path downwards until he reached his goal. It was better than she remembered. It was as if she had stepped onto a fast-moving fairground ride of sensation. He was gentle and teasing, slow to begin with. Then, as she began to respond and her arousal grew, Jonathan did the things he knew she enjoyed, working her clit with his tongue and lips, his fingers pressing and probing inside her. He watched her face, and when her moans and whimpers became cries, he was unrelenting. She shouted his name as her orgasm rose up and lifted her, making every part of her body tingle with pleasure. When it hit, she could not breathe
as the waves broke over her.

When she opened her eyes Jonathan was beside her on the outside of the couch, holding her close against his chest. He was watching her carefully as she came down. He was proud of being able to give her that gift again, after so long. Geri looked into his eyes and smiled. “Darling.” He tightened his hold a little more, needing the closeness that had eluded him. He kissed her hair, breathing in the fragrance of it, relishing the feel of its silkiness against his face. Elation and something he suspected might be happiness swirled in his head. If I could stay here, like this, forever, that would be enough for me. Geri sighed and gave herself up to the cuddle, loving every sensation of it. She still felt the aftershocks of her orgasm, and wriggled a little to provoke more. She shifted her leg and heard his gasp as it brushed against the side of his cock. Her smile tickled the skin over his collarbone.

“Got that condom handy, love?”

“Yes. Hold on.” He slid out from under her, turned carefully to avoid falling off, and sat up, reaching for his jeans among the pile of clothes on the rug. He opened the packet but before he could put the condom on he felt her hand on his and she took it from him.

“This is my job, I seem to recall.” Geri kissed him softly, then focussed on the task. Jonathan held his breath, releasing it in a moan as she seated it around his base. Her hands were warm, and she gripped him firmly. “Ready?”

He couldn't speak. He was awash with feelings of love and regret, with memories of their early lovemaking, and with such desire for her now that he could barely think. Geri, too, needed that connection again, this time not rushed or desperate, but steady and unambiguously loving. Monday night had been wonderful, unexpected, but this was on a different plane. They were communicating, after these few weeks of too many words, and looks and confused emotional moments. As he buried himself in her, and they were as close as two humans can be, she knew she had decided.

Jonathan went slowly at first, aware she would still be sensitive, and of the need to resist his own surging desire driving him on. Then, as her moans and responses became more urgent, he increased his tempo and soon she was begging him for another release with her eyes and her movements. He shifted the angle of his hips and slipped a hand between them. Geri’s cries got louder and soon she was coming again, his name the only word she could articulate. He felt his own orgasm thundering towards him, and as her muscles squeezed tightly around him, he surrendered to it.

The room was quiet again as they lay, Jonathan still covering her as their pulses returned to normal and the sweat dried on their hot skin. Knowing he must, he reluctantly withdrew from her, and he moved away enough to sit on the edge of the sofa. “Jonathan?” He turned and smiled, stroking her hair. She was looking at him calmly. “I’ve decided.”

“About...?”

She nodded. He fell onto her, not able to do more than kiss her face softly, barely able to breathe through the pressure crushing his chest. “But...” He lifted his head away a little, looked into her eyes expectantly and nodded. “I need to trust you, Jonathan. I need to know that this time you will fight for us. I don’t know how or when I’ll be able to do so. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to.”

Jonathan returned her steady gaze, a few errant tears still trickling down his face. He understood. He had been lying to her long before that last day: about his feelings; lying to himself, too. He’d spent so long being someone else; he needed to learn to trust himself as well. Geri was as calm as she looked. Once she knew what she wanted to do, another thing fell into place in her mind.

“And Jonathan? I know that I had a choice. About the baby. I could… but I-”
Shaking his head, he managed to speak through his closing throat. “No Geri, you didn’t have a choice. I made… I didn’t leave you any other options.”

“But if…I could have-“

“No, you couldn’t. I didn’t let you. I made it clear what I thought, backed you into a corner. I didn’t think about what you might want, or need. I didn’t really think about your…” She saw his jaw clenching, and the tension in his neck and back as he fought for control. “I’m so sorry, Geri, about that most of all.”

She sighed, and squeezed his upper arms with her hands. “Neither of us was ready. It would have been…It was the best thing to do, under the circumstances.” Jonathan’s eyes were full of pain. She reached up and rested her hand on his cheek, brushing his tears away with her thumb. He covered her hand with his own, then kissed her palm. He steadied his breathing before he spoke.

“I love you, Geri.”

“I know.”
Nineteen

Chapter Summary

Jonathan gets carried away and makes a mistake.

NOW

You're like a dream come true

Geri opened her eyes, having been startled awake by something. It was still dark in her bedroom, but she could feel Jonathan’s arms around her and the brush of his breath on the back of her neck. She smiled to herself, and a warm flush of love filled her chest. Then she was aware of his grip tightening and she heard a strange sound: a plaintive wail, which began as an almost inaudible whine and built into a heart-rending cry.

“No, no, no, NO, NO, NOOOOO!”

Carefully, she prised her way out of the death-grip he had on her, turned and stroked his heaving chest. “Shhh, love. You’re safe, it’s OK, shhhhh.” She craned her neck and kissed his cheek. His legs moved, knees bashing against hers, not quite thrashing.

“Soph-, no, please, fu... NO!” Tears squeezed from his tightly shut eyes and he moaned again, a sound filled with anguish and despair. He seemed to calm momentarily, then the agitation returned. “Ger... no...p-p-p... n-n-n-N-NOOOOOO!!!!” His own shout woke him and he sat abruptly upright, eyes staring and hands clutching at the sheets.

“Jonathan,” she spoke softly, her hand on his arm, feeling the cold sweat, “I’m here. It’s OK love, look.” Gently, she turned his pale face towards her and recognition dawned in his eyes at last. “It was just a bad dream.” He pulled her against him, kissed her face and then buried himself in her hair. She could feel his heart racing against her breast. “It was only a nightmare, Jon. You’re here, with me, in my flat. We’re safe.” She rubbed his back and he relaxed noticeably. She persuaded him to lie back down and she snuggled up into him. She lifted her head and kissed the swell of his shoulder.

“You OK, Jonathan?”

A nod, and a mumble: “Yeah...sorry.”

Another soft brush of her lips. “Good. It was just a dream, love. Now, we need to get a bit more sleep. I’ve got a long day ahead.”

Geri settled down in his arms again, and Jonathan felt her doze off. He wondered at the miracle of her, of being in her bed again. He wanted this so much he was certain that something was going to take it from him. Just like every other time.

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The sound of Geri’s phone alarm jangling and buzzing woke them both from deep sleeps. Reluctantly, Jonathan released her from his embrace so she could sit up. After she swung her legs
over the edge, she paused and turned to him.

“You can stay where you are. I have to get to Belvoir Castle early, to start off with the bride dressing. You can have a lie-in, take your time.”

“Can I come with you?”

“Huh? What do-”

“I could be your assistant for the day, carry your equipment… like I used to?” He was grinning now, because what had begun as an impulse born of reluctance to be parted from Geri was growing into a brilliant idea in his mind. He felt the good tingle of anticipation for the first time in ages.

Geri was less sure, but his enthusiasm was pulling her in. “Okay… But you can’t come into the bride’s room. There’ll be half-naked bridesmaids, and her mother, I should think, from previous experience… But, yes, it would be great to have help with the step-ladder, and my reflectors and tripod.”

Jonathan began to get out of bed, but Geri shoved him back. “Not so fast, Sunny Jim. I need to have a shower first…”

He grinned wolfishly. “So do I.”

“…alone! I’m on a tight schedule!” He looked comically sad, then nodded and laid back down, pouting. Geri stuck her tongue out at him and skipped to the bathroom, feeling more than ten years younger. She hurried through her routine, aware of the clock ticking. Rubbing her hair dry with a towel, she returned to the bedroom. Jonathan was sitting on the side of the bed.

“Will there be time for me to go home for a change of clothes? Jeans and t-shirt, not exactly wedding-friendly…”

“I was just thinking that. We can go via your place, yeah. Do you have a suit or something? We need to blend in.”

He was nodding. “Yeah, I have a few smarter things.” He looked at Geri’s trouser suit hanging on the wardrobe door. It was pale coral pink, the collarless jacket with a subtle abstract pattern in shades of orange, red and pink. She had draped a cream camisole over the hangers to wear with it. “You have to dress smartly, I guess.”

Geri was fastening her bra. “Yeah, especially at ones like this. Posh venue, expensive, and the family have thrown shitloads of cash at the thing. I don’t do videos, but I recommended someone good I know, so he’ll be there too. They’re having a carriage, a band and a DJ, the works…” She steadied her thoughts. It was a big responsibility, but if it went well, she might get a lot more work as a result. Sitting down at her dressing table, she finished her morning routine.

By the time Jonathan returned from the bathroom after a quick shower, Geri was in the kitchen, making coffee and texting. “Toast OK?” she called across the corridor as she saw his bare backside pass.

“Have we got time?”

“You bet! I never miss breakfast - you know I’m no good without my coffee, and we’ll need the carbs. Hang on…” she looked at her phone, “Good, I texted Magda, told her I’m bringing a helper, that’s fine…” The sight of him pulling his t-shirt on made her breath catch. “Yeah, um… As I was saying, we might get fed, but sometimes I get forgotten, or it’s cleared away before I get a chance to
Thirty minutes later they were in her car, heading for Avenue Road and a rapid pit stop. Jonathan turned his head and looked at Geri as she drove up London Road. She had put on full make-up, blow-dried her hair and pinned it into a loose chignon, with a floral hair decoration in coral on one side. Small rose-gold studs with citrine stones sparkled in her ears, and a matching pendant dangled just above her cleavage. He sighed heavily, overwhelmed by her. A smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. “What?”

He sighed again. “Just feeling sorry for the bride. She’s going to be outshone by her photographer.”

Geri barked out a sceptical laugh. “Not very likely. By the camera assistant, maybe….”

She knew she’d been correct in her assessment when Jonathan emerged from his flat after a lightning-fast change and shave. His tanned face glowed, and the light grey suit and snug white shirt he’d put on made him look like a film star. She noted with some surprise that he was carrying a tie that seemed to coordinate with her outfit. He ran across the forecourt and stood by the open passenger door. “Will I do?”

“God, you look good enough to…

“You’ll pass. Just.” He grinned, and slid his long frame into the small car. They set off, heading north around the city, towards Melton Mowbray, and then beyond it to Grantham and Belvoir Castle.

Geri was glad she had her ad hoc helper 45 minutes later when she discovered that she had been relegated to the most distant car park, and thus all her equipment would have to be carried up the steep castle mound. It was a beautiful morning, with a clear sky, and despite the many trees surrounding it, the path up was exposed and hot. The castle perched up high, lording it over its estate, the honey-coloured stone of its walls and battlements glowing in the sunshine. Geri grinned; it would make for beautiful photographs. They toiled up the hill to the tradesmen’s entrance where Magda, the castle’s event coordinator, met them. Jonathan had shouldered his burden happily, untroubled by the weight or awkwardness of the load, but nevertheless he was relieved when Magda asked them to follow her to a small storeroom/large cupboard just feet away from the grand ceremonial space. She handed Geri their official passes and the key and explained that they could use the room for the duration of the day, to save them having to cart everything around all the time.

“Brilliant! Right, well, I’d better get up to the bride. You OK for a bit, J-j-j-, um...James?”

Jonathan smiled and nodded. “Yep. I’ve got these,” he held up Geri’s notes on locations for the various formal and informal shots and the estate guidebook and map, “so I’ll stash this stuff, then I’m going to have a bit of a scout around. Ring me when you’re finished with the garters and false eyelashes.” They exchanged a quick kiss - which Jonathan would have preferred to prolong - and went their separate ways.

They met back by their hidey-hole an hour later. “How was it?” Jonathan’s eyes sparkled with a mischief Geri hadn’t seen since school days. She smiled broadly in response.

“It was fun, actually.” She’d surprised herself; she’d felt able to join in the excitement genuinely, not just her usual going through the motions. Declining the proffered buck’s fizz, Geri had nonetheless found herself smiling and joking along with the women. Jonathan observed her carefully. While she retained the professional air she had adopted when they got out of the car earlier, she was detectably more relaxed. He looked at his watch.
“What’s next?”

Geri consulted her schedule. “The groom’s party should be arriving in about twenty minutes. Let’s get set up for their session.”

“You’ve got the rose garden pencilled in, I see. I’ve had a quick look, it seems ideal.”

She laughed. “Yes, well, we have agreed everything, but… There is always someone, a friend or relative, whatever, who has a better idea. Anyway, let’s get out the front and take a-.” Her phone buzzed. Reaching into her pocket, she glanced at the screen. “That’s Jason, the video guy. He’s just arrived. Sorry, I’d better…”

“Off you go. I’ll be by the main entrance.”

From then on, the day became a blur of silk, flowers, morning dress and fascinators. Geri was constantly busy, either corralling the principals and some of their hundreds of guests for formal shots, spending an hour photographing the happy couple following the ceremony in the Guardroom, or mingling in the function room taking candid snaps as the wedding breakfast proceeded. During the ceremony she dare not look in Jonathan’s direction, feeling a dizzying mixture of love and sadness as she heard the young couple speaking their vows.

Jonathan felt strange. He had supervised at a few wedding parties over the years, and they had always made him feel queasy, bringing with them as they did unpleasant memories of his own abortive marriage. Today, in this unfamiliar capacity and this new situation, he was surprised by how comfortable he felt. But then, he need only look at Geri, at her swift but careful movements, at her kindness with people and her skill with the camera. He had never felt more at ease.

He stood a little apart most of the time, passing Geri fresh batteries or memory cards, alternative lenses or different cameras, as and when necessary. She quickly discovered he could anticipate her needs. Several times their eyes had met, or their hands touched, and Geri felt a frisson of desire. As the speeches and toasts began, they withdrew, to find Jason stuffing his face from the delicious-looking platters Magda had placed in the corridor for them. He looked shamefaced. “Sorry, I started without you, guys. Couldn’t wait,” he brushed pastry crumbs off his red beard, “they want me to film the speeches. Better go!” He swept past them, going back through the door just as the toastmaster tapped the microphone.

After they had finished tucking into a few of the goodies and guzzling the water and juice they’d been given, Jonathan took her hand. “How long have we got…?”

“Ages, for once. They want some informals of the guests, but not ‘til after the meal, and then some more at the start of the evening reception. Then we can leave, by, say… eight? That OK?” He nodded and began walking towards the little room they’d been allotted, pulling her along behind him. “Jonathan?” He turned his head to look over his shoulder, put a finger to his lips and smiled. Still not saying anything, he held out his hand for the key, which she gave him, beginning to guess his intention. He opened the door and pushed her through. Before Geri had time to turn around, he had locked the door and grabbed her from behind. His lips were on her neck in an instant.

Geri allowed her head to roll back onto Jonathan’s shoulder as he sucked softly on her flesh, moaning almost inaudibly. His hands began to explore under her silk camisole, running over the hot flesh of her waist. She wiggled against the hardness she could feel pressing into the small of her back. “Jonathan, we can’t… Not-”

“Shhhh…”
His right hand moved down, fingers swiftly undoing her button and slipping under the waistband of her trousers and into her knickers. The left pulled her harder against him, and she whimpered as his fingertips brushed her clit. She turned her head and their mouths met, her teeth biting gently on his lower lip, making his hips buck into her. He pressed harder, circling her nub, then lighter and faster, varying his movements until she started to make desperate noises. Reaching lower and finding her wet, Jonathan slid his middle finger inside her and used his thumb to work her clit hard and fast. Feeling her orgasm building, Geri kissed him deeply to muffle her inevitable squeaks and loud moans as she gasped and writhed to her climax.

They stood, Jonathan supporting her as her legs wobbled, both breathing heavily. “Wow.”

He grinned and she felt it against her neck. “Nice?”

“God, yes, wonderful.” Recovering, Geri turned in his arms and kissed him, simultaneously unfastening his belt.

He shook his head. “No, I. we… you said it, we can’t… aah!” She had hold of him now, her fingers cool around the hot, velvet hardness of him. She pulled a packet of tissues from her jacket pocket triumphantly.

“See? We can…”

Jonathan had to hold onto the shelves beside him as her hands did their magic. She spat on her palms and watched his face closely as she pulled and squeezed his length and allowed her thumb to swipe over the head, spreading the pre-come as it did. When he started to moan, she kissed him as he had her, swallowing his shouts as his orgasm shot into her hand and the waiting Kleenex. Forehead to forehead, they looked into each other’s eyes. He was still panting, she was smiling serenely. “Geri, wow, that was… like old times, but better!”

Too soon, the murmur of voices outside alerted them that the meal was over and they adjusted their clothing, Geri fixing her make-up, too. “I’d have, you know,” she licked her bottom lip, “but then my mascara…” Jonathan moaned at the thought, shaking his head.

“God, Geri, don’t even…”

Checking her appearance in her hand mirror, she assumed her professional air once more and unlocked the door.

The trees by the path were casting long shadows by the time they were trudging down the hill, back to Geri’s little Citroën. She was tired and aching, from being on her feet all day, and bending every which way, squatting or kneeling to get the best angles. Jonathan, on the other hand, was energised. He hadn’t enjoyed a day so much in many years. His work at the Gateway was rewarding, but spending the day helping Geri do what she was so good at was of a different order. He hitched the tripod carrier higher on his shoulder and looked over at her, walking by his side. “We make a good team, don’t you think?”

Geri smiled and looked up into his face. “We do. You’re amazing. How you seemed to know what I…” She smiled as he looked down shyly and shrugged.

“Just, well, you know, years of waiting on people. In the hotel business, you have to be able to anticipate what guests might need…” His eyes caught hers as he lifted his head again. “... and I have helped you, and watched you working, before, Jellybean.”

Jonathan insisted on driving them back, and Geri only resisted for a moment, glad of the chance to
shut her eyes for a while. The car was pleasantly quiet as they headed home in through leafy Leicestershire, deep shade painting the roads and the red sunset making her brown hair glow. Feeling sleep tugging at her sleeve, she shuffled in her seat to get more upright. Her tiredness reminded her of a question she’d wanted to ask him. “Do you remember what your bad dream was about? From last night, I mean?”

He nodded. “Fragments, yes. It was...you were...” He stopped, not wanting to revisit it, nor to frighten her.

“What was I?”

He sighed. “In danger. You were in danger. I couldn’t stop them. I was tied up. That man I spoke to you about, Roper… He had you and I couldn’t stop it.” He held his breath.

“It was only a dream, love. Do you have many nightmares?”

He kept his eyes on the road, but she saw his jaw tighten. “Sometimes. It varies… After Cairo, and what happened to Sophie… yeah, I used to. But they mostly went away, until…” He stiffened. “I can’t help it, Geri. I worry that I’ll be the cause of something bad. Because I always have b-”

“Do you really think that? That someone might…?” She paused. She had been so focused on their relationship, and on how he was feeling and what she wanted from him that she had pushed the real dangers of his situation into the back of her mind. “But you said that the people who-”

“Yes, they assure me I’m safe, and anyway, I’m not worried about me, but you… I can’t help but worry, after what happened to Sophie.”

“But... she knew, I mean, you said she chose... she gave you the papers, made sure you saw what they were, you told me-”

“She did, yes. But...Hold on.” He had spotted a layby ahead, and made a split-second decision to pull in and stop the car. He cut the engine and turned towards Geri. “It was only after I interfered, took her away with me...” He took a juddering breath. “They told me that she had refused to give me up. Wouldn’t say who it was she had passed the papers to… She died for me, because of me… Because she loved me.”

Geri reached over and wiped the tears away. “But we’re safe here, you said so, love.”

His eyes were full of anguish. “I know, but I can’t help it. Every time I’ve loved someone, she’s suffered for it. I’m not good for you, Geri, I’m nothing but-”

“Stop it!” Geri’s heart was racing. Deliberately quietening her voice, she tried again. “Please, Jonathan, please stop this. We have to move on, if this is going to work. You have to look forwards, not assume that history will repeat itself.” She stroked his face and neck. “This is a new start, a clean slate, for us both. Please?”

Jonathan’s eyes closed, squeezing out the remaining teardrops as he made a visible effort to compose himself. “You’re right, it’s just… It’s hard to be confident, with everything that’s-”

“But here we are. You and me, Jon. What a miracle, that you came here, of all places, and we found each other again! Doesn’t that constitute a tick in the positive column of fate?” He looked at her smile and managed to return it.

“It does, yes.” He took in her beauty: beautiful eyes, hair fiery in the evening light, mouth so sexy. “God, yes, Geri. A miracle.” He kissed that mouth then, long and slowly and deeply, then he turned
the key and drove them the rest of the way home.

*************

“Hello, is that Barry? DS Wilkinson?”

“It is! Long time, no speak, Ollie! How are you? How’s life in Norfolk these days?”

“I’m fine, it’s fine. Look, I’ve got a tip-off for you, mate.”

“Oh yes?”

“Yeah. I was at a wedding, wife’s niece, at the weekend, up in your neck of the woods. Belvoir Castle.”

“Ooh, very posh! And?”

“There was a bloke there, helping, or at least hanging around with the photographer woman. I thought he looked familiar…” His friend laughed. It was an occupational hazard for coppers: clocking people. “…so, when I got in this morning I had a quick scan of the wanteds. I’m pretty sure he’s Jonathan Pine, wanted for murder, theft and dealing, down in Cornwall last year, remember that case…?”

“Oh, right, yes, I do remember, big hoo-ha, Interpol, the works…well, I s’pose I’d better look into it… what’s the photographer’s name?”
Chapter Summary

The couple get a visitor from London

NOW

*It was just like a movie*

*This is the life I might have had... No, stop right there.*

Geri checked herself. She was on the sofa, her MacBook on her knee, her feet in Jonathan’s lap. It was Sunday afternoon and things were still going well between them. On the way back from Belvoir Castle he had asked, carefully and unassumingly, if he could stay over. She had agreed without hesitation, keen to keep the joyful momentum of their day going. A quick stop in Avenue Road for an overnight bag and they were soon back here, and unable to keep their hands off each other once again.

She could not recall a weekend like this, not even when they had been together before. He was always distracted in Guildford, with one foot mentally out of the door. She had become the expert at overcompensating, and thus exhausting herself in the process. So relaxation and mutual comfort was the farthest thing for either of them, back in those difficult days. But today had been a true partnership, much like Saturday had been. Geri needed to prepare a proof file for the newlyweds, so she had made a start, trawling through the thousands of shots, discarding the duff ones and putting the remainder into subfolders, ready for a more intensive selection in a day or two. The concentration required was tiring, especially if you hadn’t had a huge amount of sleep, but she always tried to do this as soon as possible after a job, while the atmosphere of the event was fresh in her memory.

Jonathan had done some housework for her in the morning, been for a run, and returned with fresh bread and cheese for lunch. Now Geri was catching up on her emails while her feet were being rubbed.

“You’d better stop doing that. It’s super-distracting.”

He chuckled softly. “I know.” A firm sweep of a long thumb over her sole made Geri squirm.

“Please, I know you want to-”

“Don’t *you*?” He dropped her foot gently against his thigh. “I’m sorry if I’m coming on too strong.”

He looked serious, but Geri wondered if this was another of his teasing jokes. “Oh you know I do, but... I need to ring Mum, Jon. She’s worried about me. She never nags, and she’s very respectful of my privacy, but I feel I should...”

Jonathan sucked in a breath sharply. “You can’t tell her it’s me.” It made him nervous, and sad, but that was the situation.
“I know, of course. But I want her to know I’m OK. The last time we spoke, I wasn’t. I had to be so evasive, and I can tell from her messages that she’s more worried than ever.”

He nodded. He thought about what it must have been like for Elaine, having to watch Geri going through everything he had done to her. “I understand. Of course.” He began to lift Geri’s feet out of his lap and get up.

“Hey! Where do you think you’re going?”

He froze, mid-action. “I thought you’d want to speak to her without-”

“Sit back down, you. And keep rubbing my feet. Just do it a bit less… sexily.”

He laughed loudly while Geri picked up her phone and dialled her mother’s number.

“Darling! How’s your Sunday? How did the wedding go?”

“Good, thanks. Very good, actually.”

“You sound very jolly.”

Geri smiled. “I am.” She felt a giggle bubbling in her chest. “I have some news, Mum.”

“Oh yes?” Back in Weston, Elaine stood in the kitchen, looking out at her garden, trying to keep calm.

Geri took a breath, and steadied herself, composing a carefully crafted speech. “I’m seeing someone.”

“Oh darling! I’m so glad.”

“I thought you would be.”

“Does this ‘someone’ have a name?”

Ah.

She glanced at Jonathan. He was watching her, listening to what she said and the muffled sound of Elaine’s voice. He shrugged and mouthed Say James.

“James. His name is James.”

Elaine was crying now, silently, hoping it wouldn’t be obvious in her voice. She swallowed hard. “Does he make you happy, Jellybean?”

Geri looked at Jonathan for a longer time. “He does, Mum. He does make me happy, yes.” A large warm hand tightened a little around her ankle and she was treated to an intoxicating half-smile.

“Then that’s all I need to know.” But a million questions filled her head, bursting to be asked. “Where did you meet? And what does he do?” Jonathan had to stifle a laugh. “He’s there now, isn’t he? I can hear something…”

“Yes, Mother, he’s here.” Geri grinned. She hadn’t had such a fun conversation with Elaine in a very long time. “We met at a party. He’s a charity worker. With refugees.”

“Sounds perfect, love!” She lowered her voice to a hoarse whisper. “Is he handsome?”

Geri laughed, nodding. “Gorgeous, Mum. Absolutely fucking gorgeous.” She shivered with pleasure
as long fingers stroked their way up her calf. Jonathan was smirking, even if his eyes were downcast and his cheeks glowed like traffic lights.

*******

“Oh, FOR FUCK’S SAKE, JONATHAN!”

Rob Singhal held the phone away from his ear. He knew Angela wouldn’t be happy to hear his news. Cautiously, he brought the handset back, hearing a cough followed by heavy, snuffly breathing. “Right, well, what’s done, blah, blah…”

“Yes.” Rob’s habitually sad expression deepened a little. “Stroke of luck, the officer contacted our man, and not anyone else. Because it was an unofficial tip off, with no paperwork, he’s just sat on it.”

“Will...what’s his name?”

“DS Wilkinson. Wilko.”

“Will Wilko be able to shut his Norwich mate up?”

“He says so, yes, boss. He’s going to give him the old doppelganger story, he tells me. The bloke wasn’t 100% certain, so…”

Angela sucked in a deep breath, which set off a fresh bout of coughing. When she recovered, she continued. “Looks like I’m off up to bloody Leicester again then, doesn’t it? And I suppose I’d better talk to the woman as well-”

“I’ll do it.”

“You sure, Rob?”

“Yes, boss. You’re on leave, and you’re not well. I can drive up tomorrow afternoon, tear him off a strip.” He didn’t relish the thought, but Pine had been reckless. Again. He’d known this had been a terrible idea from the start.

Angela sighed and leaned back in her chair. Her anger was abating now, being replaced by a wistful sadness. His relationship with this Geri woman had obviously made Jonathan lose his head, because attending such a big event, with so many people, was an unbelievably idiotic thing to do. “Rob?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t be too hard on him. He deserves…” A thought occurred to her. “Maybe plant the seed, about what we discussed last week?”

*******

Frankie & Bennie’s was quite busy for a Wednesday, Rob thought, but that was good, because they
wouldn't stand out so easily. As the stunningly beautiful waitress guided him to a booth, he began to see that his remaining concerns were completely unfounded. Every occupied table seemed to be ethnically mixed, with a pleasing rainbow of work colleagues and/or friends of all ages, talking, laughing and eating. A British Asian with a white couple would not look amiss in the least.

Rob took a seat facing the door, and after just a few minutes he saw Jonathan’s tall frame enter. He was alone, and Rob watched as he scanned the room quickly, locating him in seconds. Skirting the attention of the server, he waved and walked over, smiling pleasantly.

As he reached the booth, the acting head of the IEA spoke quietly but clearly, and through gritted teeth. “Where’s Ms Muir?”

“Nice to see you again, too, Rob.”

“This isn’t a social call, James.”

Jonathan’s demeanour changed once he saw how angry Rob seemed to be. He knew he was in trouble; perhaps more than when Angela came up to see him. “No, of course not. She’ll be here any minute. I offered to pick her up, but she’s not keen on the bike.”

“Angela asked me to see you both. She’d have come herself, but she’s not well, and supposed to be on leave.” He was glaring at Jonathan, who had begun to fidget, feeling uncomfortable.

“Not well? What’s wrong?”

“Just a cold, but she doesn’t need any-”

He saw the door open and a tall woman with long dark hair came in. She paused in the entrance, looking around for them. Jonathan followed Rob’s gaze and waved to Geri, who quickly joined them.

After Jonathan introduced them, Geri apologised to Rob for being late, even though she wasn’t. “I’ve come straight from work. I finish late on a Wednesday. It’s only a revision group at the moment, but still…”

“It’s fine.” Rob remained solemn. Satisfied their booth was secluded enough, and the forties swing music playing through the speakers was sufficiently loud, he began. “I’m afraid I am here to tell you that there cannot be a repeat of Saturday.” His voice was low, but he tapped the table with the outside of his hand in a chopping gesture. Sitting opposite him and alongside one another, Geri and Jonathan exchanged a worried glance. “How did he…? “A policeman from another county was there. He reported seeing you, James. It was fortunate that instead of making an official report, he spoke to his friend, who just so happens to be our contact in the Leicestershire force, and not anyone else.”

Jonathan banged his forehead with his fist and let out a long breath. “Fuck. I’m… it was a spur of the moment thing, I’m sorry. Tell Angela it won’t-”

“It can’t, James. This is exactly what I was afraid of, when you insisted on coming here. It’s too tempting to get involved, there are too many-”

The waitress arrived and took drinks orders. Nobody felt much like eating, but for appearance’s sake they began to look disconsolately at the huge laminated menus. The print swam before Geri’s eyes, her pulses pounded in her ears and she felt the tension pouring off Jonathan as he sat close beside her on the banquette. Nobody spoke until the drinks arrived, when Rob ordered a pizza to share and some fries. Watching until the girl was out of earshot, he looked at Geri, who was pale and trembling.
“We got away with it, this time, but there is always the risk, in a big city, that someone will remember his face from the papers or the telly.”

She nodded. “Of course, I know that.”

“Would it help if I grew a beard?” Jonathan rubbed his chin. He’d considered it, once or twice.

Rob laughed, despite not being amused, but his lugubrious manner soon reset. “Maybe. But it would be better if you were somewhere else, frankly.”

Jonathan’s hand reached for Geri’s under the table. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“We can talk about specifics later, but you know what I suggested before: abroad, rural, quiet.”

Jonathan pulled a face and straightened up from his hunch over the table, shaking his head. “I don’t want to hide, you know that. I want to contribute-”

“Hold on a moment.” Geri looked from one man to the other. “Are you saying you chose to come here? Against advice?”

Jonathan didn’t turn his head at first, but she saw his jaw muscles tighten. He nodded, his eyes down, as finally he faced her. “I wanted to work with refugees, Geri. From war, specifically. It felt like the right sort of thing to do.”

She saw them both then, in his eyes: the beautiful boy she had loved for so long and the man he had become. Somehow, through all the terrible things he had seen and done, all the losses and the pain, he had matured into someone his father would have been proud to call his son. Someone she loved so much that it hurt. She couldn’t speak, but she squeezed his hand tight where it lay in hers on her lap.

Rob was less impressed. “Very noble, but-” From the corner of his eye, he saw the waitress returning, holding the huge pizza high to make it possible for her to navigate the tables. Once she had delivered their order and wished them a good meal, Rob fixed Jonathan with the steeliest look he could manage. “Just talk about it.” He moved his gaze to Geri. “The two of you. Because, if the time comes, well, there won’t be much notice, you can be sure of that.”

They ate some of the food. They talked a little, or more precisely, they endured a lecture from Rob on clear guidelines about what to do and what was definitely off the agenda. Rob asked many questions about her, her work and how it might cause the occasional difficulty. It felt bizarre to Geri. She had barely begun to contemplate spending time with Jonathan again and here she was having an impromptu security briefing from MI-whatever. All of his mysteriousness and the cagey way he had acted at first made more sense now. Up until this evening, it had all seemed like a bit of a sideshow to her; what had happened between the two of them seemed so much more important. Those were the things she had had to grapple with, and the anguish she had been living with for all these years.

Sitting there, vaguely aware of the everyday going on around them while they huddled in that booth like spies in a movie, she had a revelation. She realised that she had been thinking of his life since he left her as a series of adventures, as simply his convoluted route back to her. Meeting Rob, hearing his words and seeing how concerned he was brought it to the front of her mind. It was real, and it was dangerous. But if Jonathan had to move on, to a safer place, that meant she had to go with him - if they let me. Would they allow that? - or lose him again. Forever, this time.

They said goodbye to Rob in the wide, windswept space at the centre of Meridian Park. They were the only people outside at that moment – everybody else was being entertained inside the brightly lit
crescent: eating, exercising, bowling or watching a movie. As they watched his car drive off, Jonathan put his arm around Geri and kissed the top of her hair. “Fuck. What a stupid… I shouldn't have been so hasty, love.”

Geri leaned back and looked up at him. “No, but it’s done.” She let her eyes caress his worried face for a few moments. “What are you going to do?” She saw his eyes narrow in a frown.

“What are we going to do, you mean?”

She had hurt him, just a little. “I don’t want to presume…”

Jonathan turned to face her fully, his hands lightly holding her upper arms. “I don’t know. I don’t want to leave the Gateway. And I like it here. In Leicester, I mean.” He smiled ruefully. “But...whatever happens, I want you to understand this: I want you, no... I need you, in whatever life I have from now on. Wherever that is, Geri.” He took a juddering breath, visions of Sophie in his head. She was speaking to him a lot now, telling him he was a good man, he deserved this. “I have no right to ask this of you, I know that. Not after... But if you love me…” She nodded, and smiled weakly. “…then please, think about it.”

Geri drove home, following him in the twilight, finding it hard to focus on the road because her head was spinning. She kept her eyes on the rear light of the Yamaha, up ahead of her for most of the journey. The adjustment of having Jonathan back was huge, but it was a welcome one. After her initial doubts, she had come to accept that she had to take this amazing second chance at happiness, albeit cautiously. But now? With this whole new aspect to it? The thought that she might have to run and hide from the world, that she would have to give up the life she had worked so long and hard to make was completely impossible to deal with.

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Jonathan went back to his little basement flat alone that night. He parked the bike, pulled it up onto the centre stand and fixed the extra locks. He closed his front door, threw his helmet and gloves down, put the kettle on and shed the rest of his bike gear while it boiled. He felt a bit sick. The pizza he had eaten still sat in his tense stomach, giving him nothing but indigestion. He had not been expecting to hear what Rob had to say, and he was concerned about Geri’s reaction.

Having hung up his bike jacket and trousers, and stowed the boots in the cupboard, he made a cup of tea and sat with it, staring at the wall. He recognised that Rob’s words had shocked Geri too - of course they had. When he got the message about meeting him - and that he should bring her too - he had assumed it was some kind of semi-official briefing for her. Even after the fact, he hadn’t seen the danger of the immense miscalculation he had made on Saturday. It was done out of love, out of a foolish desire to stay with her that morning and to watch her doing the job she was so good at; but it had been monumentally idiotic. And now it seemed that he would have to move on, sooner rather than later, most likely. And Geri too.

If she will come with me

He sipped his tea without tasting it, anxiety and insecurity tearing at his heart thanks to the thoughts he tried to push away or stamp on. He had wanted to protect her from the madness, and especially from the dangers of the life he had flirted with, however briefly. His spell undercover had its attractions. Roper’s world was exciting, and comfortable (at least when you weren’t fearing for your life). He had accepted from the beginning that it was a one-way ticket. He had known going in that he could never return to being Jonathan Pine, hotelier. But he hadn’t expected, less than a year later, to be in a position of having anything to lose.
Chapter Summary

A Friday night drink with the girls, but a world away from her old life, then dinner and some discussions about possible, even bigger changers to come...

NOW

*It was just like a song*

Tony seemed to have got the message at last. He sat through the final bi-weekly class of *Improving Digital Photography* at the ALC without saying a word to Geri, not even about the course. She handed back the final assignments, gave everyone feedback forms to complete and invited them all to consider her colleague’s new course which was starting in September, *Advanced Digital Photography*. Most of the students thanked her personally, and the group, to a round of applause, presented her with a bottle of champagne and an orchid in a pot. But all her erstwhile admirer did was treat her to a wounded expression whenever their eyes met.

Geri wasn’t annoyed or even surprised; it was a familiar pattern for her. In the past she had never been interested at all, not in any of the men who had tried to ask her out. One or two of the thwarted had suggested in anger that she might be a lesbian, or that she was a cock-tease (as far as she was aware, you had to at least flirt a little to qualify for that epithet), or frigid. They had found it hard to accept was simply *not available*. Now that was more true than ever, and perhaps Tony had picked up on the change.

Her friends certainly had. Although Charlotte knew better than to comment much, she did casually ask if Friday drinks were permanently off the agenda now. Annie, a gentler soul, had been quietly probing, watching with sparkling eyes as she mentioned James, just in passing, and Geri had smiled but said nothing. Geri wondered what she had done to deserve such good friends, people with so much intuition and kindness. *Can I bear to lose them?*

Gathering up her things, putting the orchid carefully into her canvas shopper and switching off the lights in the teaching room, she ran through Rob’s words for the thousandth time in the last 24 hours. *Abroad. Rural. Quiet.* She sighed as she walked slowly and unseeing along the corridor. The scratched and gouged wooden floor made her steps echo in the mostly deserted building, but she did not hear them. *With new names as well, no doubt. New jobs, too.* She reached the exit and stepped out into the cool of the evening. The sounds of the city were largely muffled by the narrowness of the road and the tall church that filled the opposite side. The occasional siren sounded far off, and she heard whooping from London Road, a few hundred yards to her left.

“Geri.”

Her head turned sharply, shocked out of her musing. “Jon... James!” *Sorry,* she mouthed.

“It’s OK.” Half-smile deployed: heart duly melted. “I wanted to see you. My fault for showing up unannounced.”
“What a lovely surprise.” A quick scan to see nobody much was around; just Rachid locking up behind her, and an elderly lady shuffling along opposite. She stepped into Jonathan’s embrace, feeling him relax into her arms as he kissed her hair, then her mouth.

“Are you OK? I know it was a shock. What Rob said last night.”

“It was. It seemed to catch you unawares, too, I think.” She scanned his face. He looked tense. And tired; she wondered if he’d slept any more than she had last night.

Jonathan shrugged. “It did a bit. Which worries me - I should have seen the risks, Geri.” He wanted to say that he was already beginning to think that Rob was right, and that he had to move on. But he dare not. Not until he knew.

Geri stroked his face, feeling more roughness than usual. “Looks as if you’ve decided on the beard, then?”

He chuckled breathily. “Yes...well, I’ve never tried properly. I don’t know if I can grow a half-decent one, but…”

“I’d like to see what you look like with one, actually.” Her eyes drifted over the contours of his face. “I think it would suit you. Make your cheekbones more defined.”

Jonathan rubbed his cheek roughly with the heel of his right hand, grinning shyly. “Well, I’ll give it a try. Might let my hair go a bit, too.”

Geri clapped her hands, making him laugh heartily and his eyes twinkle. “Oh god, yes!” She reached up and pulled him to her, kissing him hard and hot. Pausing, she pressed her forehead to his and spoke softly but clearly against his lips. “Grow those curls back and I won’t be held responsible for my actions, Jonathan Pine.”

********

Early the next evening, Friday, Geri met Charlotte and Annie at Timo for drinks. It had been a regular date for them for years, and in many ways it felt at least superficially like a regular, familiar start to the weekend. She got home from work, showered, chose an outfit (a pretty sleeveless print blouse and cropped white jeans) and did her hair and makeup (just enough to cover any tiredness, not the full slap). Setting off just before seven, she walked the short distance from her flat, first crossing the parking area diagonally, going down the narrow alleyway to Stoneygate Road, then turning left onto Francis Street, past her favourite wine merchant, before reaching her destination.

The good weather was holding, and as she strolled Geri admired the patches of golden cloud that decorated a pale blue evening sky that was fading to yellow.

Allandale Road, with its upmarket shops and restaurants, was, she freely admitted, impossibly middle-class-trendy, but she loved it nonetheless. The hairdresser she had used (when she could afford to) for as long as she lived at Lyndwood Court was there too. Her heart was light as she almost skipped her way to their favourite wine bar; she had made her decision, more or less, even if her mind had not totally processed the fact yet. Her tummy was tingling in anticipation, because the dynamic of the group had shifted.

Over the years Geri had always felt a little on the edge of things on their girly nights out. Not because of the old adage about three being a crowd, but because talk inevitably worked its way around to men, sooner or later, and she had never had anything to contribute on that subject. She had been a spectator as Annie had met and fell in love with Will, as well as watching from the side-lines through a few relationships of Charlotte’s. Making it clear early on in their friendships that she was
not interested, neither had ever attempted to set her up with blind dates or even nudge her towards any potential suitors. So she knew that this evening she was going to have to talk about her and ‘James’, at least a little. It was only fair.

Charlotte had got there first and was waiting at the bar with two spare stools and three cosmopolitans. “Annie’s just texted,” she said as Geri eased her bottom onto the seat next to her, “she’s running late. Be with us in about ten.”

“Lovely.” Geri picked up her drink. Mario, the barman there always mixed the best cosmos. Apart from Jonathan. That one he made me the other week was... FUCK, that was less than two weeks ago. The sudden disorientation must have shown on her face because she felt Charlotte touch her arm.

“You feeling alright, Geri? You’ve gone a bit pale.”

Smiling, she turned to her friend. “Yes. Something just hit me.” Charlotte raised a questioning eyebrow. Oh, what the hell. “James and I, it was only three weeks ago we started, well, met up... well, it was longer... four, if you count the party, but... fuck.”

“It’s happened quite fast, then. But you told me you already knew him. From before.”

“Yeah. But... “I thought I was broken. That I would never do this again. Least of all with him. Charlotte was smiling. “I have to say, you look great, Geri. Different.” She paused, pondering and searching for the right word. “Happy.”

Geri laughed sharply. She had been, most of the time since the firebombing; until Wednesday, anyway. “Yeah, I s’pose I am. Happier, anyway.”

“Well, let’s drink to that!” They clinked glasses and sipped their sharp-sweet tasty drinks.

“Hey! No fair! You started without me!” Annie’s blonde head appeared as she put her bag on the bar and climbed onto the stool beside Geri’s.

“Never fear, I got you a cosmo too, darling. We were just toasting Geri’s new-found happy.”

“Excellent!” Another round of glass-tapping and all three sighed with pleasure at Mario’s genius with the shaker.

“And where is lover-boy this evening?”

“Oh dear god, Charlotte, you sound like my mother! He’s at his place, cooking me dinner, if you must know.” She preened just a little, relishing the long-lost pleasure of boyfriend-talk.

“Oh yeah, Lottie, Will says he’s a dab hand. Cooks a mean steak au poivre, he says.”

“Don’t tell me. He’s gorgeous, and he cooks? Why can’t I find one like that?”

Annie chuckled and raised her glass to her lips. “Few and far between, babe, few and far between.”

“Is Will domesticated?” Geri couldn’t recall if it had ever come up.

“He’s OK. He can make a meal without setting fire to the house, and he does his own washing, that sort of thing. His scrambled eggs are edible, but he’s not exactly Masterchef material.”

Geri grinned. Jonathan could win that, no problem. An image of Greg Wallace fainting at the taste of
his carrot cake passed before her eyes.

“Another?”

“Let me get these.” Geri reached for her bag. “I'll have to go after this one, though. I promised I’d be there by eight.” Annie leaned forward and winked salaciously at Charlotte along the bar. Geri flapped at her. “Oh, pack it in. He’s cooking, like I said. I don't want to ruin it by turning up late.”

“And drunk.”

“Oh shut up, Charlotte.”

Geri managed to leave Timo by seven-forty, which meant she had to hurry back to her flat if she wasn’t to cause a culinary disaster. As she scurried along she ordered an Uber. She ran into the building, cursed the slowness of the lift, grabbed the bag she had packed and was back down by the doors when the Prius swung around the corner.

As she crossed the forecourt in Avenue Road a few minutes later, she could just see Jonathan’s bottom half through the window next to his front door. He was by the little square dining table there, apparently laying it. She saw his hand appear, and realised he was lighting a candle. There was also a bowl with roses in it. Grinning, she bounced down the steps and tapped on the door.

“Something smells delicious.” Geri made a performance of sniffing the air. Jonathan was smiling as he hugged her, then pecked her on the nose.

“Not as good as you do.”

“Oh, get away with you. What have you cooked me?”

“Chicken liver pilaf. It’s nearly ready.”

Geri emitted a noise that made his cock jerk awake. “Oh, my gaaahhdd, Jonathan! Seriously? Chicken livers are my fav-” He was grinning, wider than ever, and she pursed her lips. “But you knew that, of course.”

She was still in his arms, and despite the need to finish the food, he couldn’t seem to let go. It had been nearly twenty-four hours, and that was much too long to be apart. He kissed her mouth sweetly, nuzzled her hair, and felt her hand reach up to touch his chin.

“Coming along nicely.” She moved her attention higher, brushing the pads of her fingers over the whiskers on his top lip. “Those feel good.” His cock began to fill as she looked at him darkly. Had Geri ever been this seductive before? Yes, but not since the early, happy days. He coughed and tried to pull his mind back round to dinner.

“Wine? I think you might have had a little something already, I am right?”

She giggled. “A couple of cozzies with the girls. Don't worry, I didn't drive.”

“Good girl. Right, do you want to put your bag in the, er, bedroom? It’s through there. I just need to check on the rice.”

Geri watched as he strode into his tiny kitchen and lifted the pot lid. The glorious fragrance of onion, herbs, livers and mushrooms was multiplied a thousand fold and she heard her stomach rumble in anticipation. His bedroom was the last door off the living room, beyond the kitchen and the bathroom, at the back of the flat. It was exactly how she expected: bare, spartan almost, but
somehow very Jonathan. A tall chest of drawers stood just by the door, with a mirror above it. His two spare wristwatches were laid out neatly on the top, along with a comb and a bottle of *Eau Sauvage*. There was an iPod dock and a paperback on his bedside cabinet (*Wolf Hall*), and the bed was neatly made with a trendy dark grey duvet set. Tossing her bag carelessly onto the rug by the bed, she returned to the other room and sat down at the table as he came through with the wine. “Ooh, Pinot Grigio, my f-“ His chuckle stopped her. He was blushing a little as he poured her a glass. “Is there anything you don’t remember, Jonathan?” He shook his head and shrugged simultaneously.

“I don’t think so.” Their eyes met, and Geri felt that old pull again. “I hope there is more to discover, though.” Her hand reached for his and she pressed his palm to her lips. She smelt onion and parmesan cheese; a hint of soap too. “I’d better…” She released him so he could fetch the pilaf.

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“What would it mean, exactly? Moving on, I mean.”

They had finished eating, more or less. A homemade tarte au citron had followed the main course, sharp and zesty. “It depends.” Jonathan looked at her carefully. “At minimum a new name and a different place… probably pretty much what Rob said.”

“So another country. And somewhere remote…”

“Yeah.” It more of a sigh than a word.

“Have you thought… do you have any preferences?” His eyes flicked to his laptop on the shelving behind her, and she saw a subtle change in his expression.

“Rob tried to persuade me to do it before, last time… *this time*, I mean. They have people, you know, that specialise… but to be honest, I didn’t want that, not at all. It felt, well, I told you… And the other thing was, I didn’t want to be alone anymore.” His hand crossed the table and covered hers. “I still don’t. Even less, now.”

Geri looked down, because the intensity of his gaze was making her want to cry. “I know. And I can’t bear the thought of you, on your own... and so lonely, anywhere. But…” She sighed, and his hand tightened a little over hers. “... there’s been so *much* to take in, Jon.” She dared a glance at his face and saw his eyes looked wet. “This has all been so fast. I know that sounds silly, when we’ve known each other so long, but a month ago…”

He nodded, his face in a grimace. “I get it. A month ago I was the ogre, right? The cruel bastard who’d broken your heart, who’d…” He had to stop, his throat was too tight. He’d closed his eyes, so he was taken by surprise when Geri’s arms wrapped around his shoulders. He tried to hold his emotions in check, but the warmth of her embrace and the weight of his guilt was too much. He hid his face in her shoulder.

“I never thought of you like that. I’ve always loved you, Jonathan. I told you that. Shhhh.” He was silent, but she still felt a need to soothe him. He held her tightly, his arms around her waist as she stooped to gather him to her body. She was still afraid and full of doubts about what might happen next. But her love was certain, and she could not lose him again; he needed to understand that. She felt him relax a degree and loosened her hold so she could kneel down beside where he sat, still in his chair. “*I love you*, Jonathan. And,“ she put her hands on his stubbly cheeks to make him look into her eyes, “I believe you when you say you didn’t mean all those things you said, the day you left. I know you were in a terrible place, I knew it then, and I understand it better now. The war, the army, I know it hurt you and you couldn’t… We can leave all that in the past now. We *have* to, both of us.”
She let him absorb her words for a beat. “Because I **want** to trust you, my darling, but I need to know that if things… I don’t know, I suppose I need you to say that if things get bad again, you won’t go back there, to that bad place.”

He nodded, and swallowed hard. “I… I hope not. I don’t think I would, not now, Geri. I understand myself, in a way I never did then. Everything that’s happened to me, since Cairo. Since…”

“Sophie?”

“Yes… Her, and working with… It’s all made me see what happened, how my life had led me to that bad place. And how I could have changed it, if I had let myself accept the truth sooner.” He looked into Geri’s eyes for a long moment. “If I had let your love in, properly. Fully. I-” She never knew what he was going to say next because she stopped him speaking with a kiss of such passion he could not breathe.

He slid off the chair onto his knees, joining her on the floor as the kiss deepened further. Needing more, Jonathan stood and pulled Geri up to her feet with him. Her hands reached up and caught in his curls, tugging and making him groan with lust as his hips ground against hers. He wanted to tell her what her words meant to him, and how much he meant his replies, but he could not speak; he could barely think. So he spoke with his body, communicating with her in a way that had almost always worked for them, from that first quiet lunch in St Botolph’s churchyard. Sharing the same space, breathing the same air, feeling the other’s pulse and respiration. *It was only when I tried to hide from her that I fucked it up.*

“She…” The word was enough, breathed softly into his ear as she kissed and nibbled it, her breasts pushing into his chest, soft flesh against hard muscle. “Please, Jonathan…” Her hands roamed his back, settling finally on his backside, kneading and pressing him harder against her as she strove for friction. Her need for him was a fever, making her delirious. She was calm and reasonably rational one moment, then the pendulum would swing and all she wanted was to ravage him, to feel his hot hard flesh against her, inside her. She tugged at his clothes, fumbled with the buckle on his belt, her hands as incoherent as the rest of her.

Jonathan suddenly lifted her off her feet and carried her the ten or so steps into his bedroom. She clung to his neck, kissing his mouth greedily, hitching herself up on his waist, provoking louder moans from them both. As soon as her feet hit the carpet she yanked at his jeans, while shaking fingers made him struggle with the buttons on her blouse, but his customary determination meant he persisted. Geri could hardly breathe; there had been passion before, desperation, but the need that swelled in her now was beyond anything. She paused long enough to drink in his eyes, which glowed in the orange light of the sunset that was filling the room. “My darling…” she murmured, and then there were no more words.

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“I’m sorry.”

“You need to stop saying that.”

He smiled. “No… I mean, I know, but I meant about jumping you.”

“You didn’t, Jonathan.” Her fingers tweaked his nipple, making him squeal with pain. “We jumped each other. That keeps happening.”

“It does.” He smiled, using that deadly lop-sided grin of his and Geri craned her neck to kiss his whiskery chin.
“Those…” she ran the pads of her fingers over the stubble, they’re rather, um…”

His eyebrows rose questioningly and he turned more onto his side so he could see her expression better. “Rather…?”

“… stimulating. Extra, I mean… a whole new…”

“…dimension?” Jonathan was trying to keep it sexy and serious, but Geri’s waggling-eyebrow response to that broke the mood, making him giggle. He leaned over and kissed her laughing mouth, and although she feigned resistance, she quickly surrendered. After a moment he drew back and looked into her eyes. “We were talking about what might happen, before we… about where…”

She nodded, the humour having departed. “So have you got somewhere in mind for us?”

Jonathan did not miss the implication of her words. He shuffled to get comfortable and even closer, still on his side facing her. “I have a few thoughts. I don’t really want to leave Europe, and you speak good French, so…”

“Right.” France, then. It seemed like a sensible choice. Plenty of quiet parts, and British immigrants are hardly a notable rarity. “Any particular region?”

“Like I said, I have a few ideas. The resettlement people have sent me some stuff. They have their own criteria… I need to work through them all, see which places overlap.” He was watching her face carefully. “Will you help?” He felt his stomach flip as she smiled and nodded. Then she asked the question that had been on her mind since Wednesday night.

“But Jon, what about my Mum? I’m all she’s got.”

His hand stroked her hair. “I know. And I don’t know what they’ll say, but I want to see if there is any way she could come with us.” Geri felt butterflies swooping inside her and her face gave her away. “But you mustn’t say anything to her, not until it’s all settled. One way or the other. Which might take a while. OK?”

“I know about not telling her, of course. But are you sure? You wouldn’t mind?”

“Why would I? I love your Mum, you know that.”

“But most blokes wouldn’t want, you know, the mother-in-law in tow.”

He tried to keep his sudden bubble of euphoria in check, deciding on teasing as a means to prick it. “So you want to…?” He held up and turned his left hand back and forth, Beyonce-style. “I was hoping for a more romantic proposal, darling, but-”

“Oh, STOP IT! You know what I mean.” Does he…could we…can we?

“Honestly, I don’t know, but I got the impression that Rob was indicating we could go together, didn’t you? But whether Elaine… well, I suppose, she’d be a loose end, so they might… I’m sorry to be vague, Geri, but this isn’t something I know much about. I only know what I have done on my own, what they arranged for me. How it all works, for more than one person, or even if it can…” He shrugged his shoulders.

A million questions that had been filling her thoughts bubbled up. “And what would we live on? Would we need to get jobs? I’m not sure my French is-”

“That won’t be a problem. I have money.”
She frowned at him. “But to keep three of us?”

He looked steadily at her. “Yes.”

“Jonathan…”

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s just say that if we need it, there’s plenty to last us, OK?”

She wasn’t sure she understood, but she knew that look well enough; the matter was closed for the time being. She sat up and began to get out of bed.

“Where are you going?”

“In case you’ve forgotten, before we went at it like rabbits again, we hadn’t cleared away the dinner things. Tut, tut… you’re losing your touch, hotel-boy.” She grabbed his grey bathrobe from the back of the bedroom door and put it on. It was too big, and long, especially on her arms, but it made her look incredibly sexy. Jonathan followed her out, not bothering to cover up. She rolled her eyes, bent down to scoop his boxer briefs up from the floor and threw them at him. “At least put those on. Your body is very, um…” she gave him a quick up and down glance, lingering on his hardening cock, “distracting.”

Catching the underwear, he closed the space between them and whispered in her ear. “So is yours. Dressed or undressed. Doesn’t matter which.” His free hand caressed her arm, the silky fabric of his robe sliding under his palm. “And I owe you one more apology.”

“I said-”

He squeezed her arm. “I know, but there is one last lie from that day I need to take back.”

She looked up at him, a doubtful expression on her face. “Okay…”

“You were never anything other than way, way above average, Geri.”
Chapter Summary

It's the end of the academic year, and tentative plans are being made. But events are about to overtake them...

NOW

*Everybody here is watching you*

I always hate these days.

Geri sat, crammed on the saggy seating between Charlotte and Pat from Physics, in the stuffy heat of midday in the QE staffroom. It was the last day of term at the college, the students had been banished from the building, and the Principal was giving her customary end-of-year speech and farewells. A few colleagues were teary-eyed at the prospect of saying goodbye to good friends, and Geri was among them. While she was closest to Charlotte, she was also very fond of several other staff at the college, and one of those, Edie from Modern Languages, was moving on. She was returning to France with her husband, to take up a post in a lycée.

The general emotion of the room was good cover for Geri; it gave her an excuse to seem a bit melancholy. Although nothing had been finalised as yet, she feared that she, too, might be gone before the start of the next academic year.

Over the past couple of weeks, she and Jonathan had worked their way through their options. They needed to find a place in a quiet, *untouristy* area, and it turned out that most of France is at least a bit touristy. However, with the help of the resettlement experts, they had narrowed it down, after much discussion and the occasional argument, to two properties that met the specialists’ criteria as well as their own, and which were, as Jonathan put it, ‘two hours from anywhere’. Accepting that Geri was giving up a great deal, he left the final choice to her, as he felt there was little to choose between them. Both were some distance down gated private drives from quiet lanes; both had a lake and plenty of land; both had *dependances* (outbuildings) and an associated *gîte*. She struggled to make up her mind at first, but finally settled on the slightly newer, larger house, which hid from the road behind a large poplar plantation. That one had a small swimming pool as well, but most crucially from her point of view, the second, small, guesthouse was not attached to the main one, but across the lake, with its own garage and spur of driveway.

Her other reason for the choice was more aesthetic: the other was a very old building, the history of which appealed, but the windows were small and photographs revealed a dark interior, whereas her final choice was a classical 19th-century French mansion, with high ceilings, big windows, French doors on the ground floor and beautiful tiling and mouldings everywhere. It had been wonderfully restored by the former owners to a very high standard, from the bright blue wooden shutters to the large state-of-the-art kitchen, so the two of them would not need to spend the first months there doing work or living in a mess. What would be Elaine’s house was fully renovated, too, and Jonathan loved the prospect of maintaining the nicely landscaped grounds. So they had settled on *Le Grand Bois*. Now it was a waiting game: for precisely what, she didn’t know. Their fate was in other hands;
those of people who knew what they were doing, Jonathan assured her.

Geri looked carefully around the packed room at her colleagues. She had loved working there; it had the relaxed atmosphere of her own sixth form experience, and she had felt at home as soon as she took up her post. She loved the High School, too, and her classes at the Adult Learning Centre. Was she really going to give it all up, wave goodbye to her career to go and live in a rural idyll with Jonathan, of all people? It seemed she was. Her heavy sigh made Charlotte look round.

“Alright, love?”

“Yeah. Just weary. It’s been a long term.”

Charlotte grinned. “Not getting enough sleep?” Her elbow nudged Geri’s ribs almost painfully.

“Shut yer face.” The two exchanged pouts. “No, it’s me. I always feel a bit sad at these things. I’m gonna miss Edie.”

The boss lady handed over to the Head of Modern Languages for her farewell, and Geri fought to keep composed as she listened to the kind words. What would they say about me, if they knew I was leaving too?

To settle her nerves, she did what had become second nature recently, and thought about Jonathan. Once all the wine and juice had been sipped, the flowers and leaving gifts handed out, and the hugs and tearful goodbyes exchanged, Geri and Charlotte headed into the city for a bite of lunch. “I mustn’t eat too much, we’ve got a table at Bistrot Pierre booked for tonight.” They were in the queue at Costa and Charlotte was dithering over a large goats’ cheese and salad baguette. She rolled her eyes at Geri.

“Oh for goodness’ sake…”

Geri smiled sweetly, hiding the pain she felt. She was going to miss this. “It’s just an end-of-term celebration. He insisted. Sorry.”

“No you’re not,” said her friend bitterly, “and I don’t blame you.” She looked into Geri’s eyes, serious for a moment. “No one deserves it more, love.”

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Jonathan was running late, thanks to a last-minute panic with a client at the Gateway. While he was dressing for their evening out, Geri sat at the table with his laptop and looked at the pictures of the house again. The man who was dealing with everything over the Channel for them had taken as many photos as he could, from every corner of the property. As she looked, she tried to imagine it with their things, and them. “Why are the people selling it, did he say? It’s so lovely, I wouldn’t want to give it up.”

Jonathan’s head appeared around the doorframe from his bedroom. “The husband’s got cancer or something, something terminal, anyway, Keith said. They’ve spent thousands since they bought the place. It was just finished. Shame.”

“Sad, yes, but it’s our good fortune, I suppose.” She continued to scroll, lingering on the shots of the trees. According to the plans, the plantation was a lozenge shape, with the driveway passing diagonally through the middle, then zigging back left towards the main house at the point where the gîte drive diverged from it. The rows of poplars had been planted in precise lines, so whichever way you looked you saw neat rows. Here and there, dark green balls of mistletoe dangled, and a few cheeky seedlings were gaining a foothold between the serried ranks. She felt the familiar photographer’s itch; she was already planning a series.
She became aware of Jonathan standing behind her just before a large warm hand settled onto the crook of her neck. He bent down and kissed the top of her head as she looked again at the beautiful kitchen. “I can imagine all kinds of things that could be achieved on that island unit,” he whispered darkly.

“If we are going to shag in the kitchen, we’ll need to set up some kind of signal for Mum.”

“Ah...yes.”

“Some kind of sock on the doorknob equivalent.”

“Flags… or traffic lights, perhaps.”

Geri snorted.

“A pot plant in the window...?”

“No, that she’d mind walking in on us, of course. I doubt my mother would bat an eyelid at your arse going in and out, but we might be traumatised…”

They both went quiet for a moment. Nothing had been said to Elaine so far, but authorisation from on high had been received for them to take her with them into this new life. The people who do these things (Geri visualised them as Gringott’s goblins, toiling away at high desks in attic rooms) were busy constructing a legend for all three of them, along with all the documentation and electronic trails necessary. The plan was to go and see her in a week’s time. Her daughter was spending a lot of time thinking about the best way to break all of this to her: she was concluding there was no easy way. Elaine would have to deal with the double shock of learning that ‘James’ was in fact Jonathan, and that overnight some time very soon, she was going to be whipped away from her life and transplanted into a new one with him and Geri.

“Let’s get going, shall we? The table’s booked for eight.” They had decided to walk into the city, as it was such a beautiful evening. As they crossed Victoria Park, her arm tucked around Jonathan’s at the elbow, Geri gazed over at the sunlit University buildings, and the QE on the far edge of the park and mused about what they might be doing a year hence. Doué-les-Ponts was just over two kilometres from the property, mostly along very narrow roads, upstream on the little river that fed the lake and passed through what was soon to be their land. The largish village boasted a primary school, a bar and a mini-market-cum-boulangerie, so she envisaged herself, or Jonathan, running, cycling or driving to get bread and croissants in the mornings. In the summer they could breakfast on the terrace overlooking the lake, and stroll with their coffees through the rose garden, along the path to visit her mother. A warm breeze brushed her face and she almost fancied herself there already.

“Could we get a dog?”

Jonathan laughed. Geri had been quiet since they left the flat and he assumed her mind was on France. “Of course. I’d love one. We can have more than one, if you like...and cats... goats...?” She shuddered and shook her head. “Horses, then...?”

“I don't ride. And don't they need a lot of looking after?”

“I suppose. I don't really know. I can ride, but I’m not an expert. But we’ll have those paddocks... I feel as if we should have something in there.”

Geri smiled to herself. The cover story being assembled was that they were a wealthy young couple looking to withdraw from the rat race. Having horses would fit the image. *Not sure about livestock. Maybe ponies, one day...?* Not for the first time, her mind wandered ahead. They walked along the
buzzy evening streets of Leicester, hand in hand, the balmy air bathing them. Everything felt so calm and normal, but they both knew that was just a veneer. They were on the edge of precipice, invisible though it might be to everyone but them. The truth of that was emphasised when they reached the restaurant and were seated in a quiet corner. The waiter had just taken their order when Jonathan’s phone buzzed.

“Oh!”

“What is it?”

“It’s Rob. He says… hang on, he says he’s sent me an email.”

Jonathan frowned as he tapped the screen and looked at his phone intently. Geri’s heart was racing, because she could see the tension in his face. He shifted in his chair and coughed and her stomach began to sink. “What is it?”

He looked up, a shade paler than he had been. “He says they’ve detected some activity on your website, from IP addresses in Lebanon. Quite a lot.”

“Oh god. Does he think…?”

Jonathan nodded, his face grave. “It could be something to do with…” he lowered his voice to a whisper, “Roper’s former associates, yes.” His hand reached for hers and they looked at each other in silence for a long time. The waiter came and went, with wine and their starters, but neither had any appetite now. They ate mechanically, without tasting the food. Between courses, Geri asked the question.

“So what happens now?”

Jonathan sighed, and looked down for a moment. “I don’t know. He says to carry on as normal right now but he wants us to ring him when we are back in private.” He looked up into her face. “We might have to go now. Tonight.”

“What?” Geri struggled to keep her voice low. “To France?”

He shook his head. “No, not yet. Just to a staging post of some kind. A hotel, probably, or a safe house. Because if they are sniffing around you, then it might not take long for them to put two and two together.”

Geri’s anxiety increased exponentially. “Mum…”

“Yes. But look, let’s not panic yet, OK? They’re checking everything, making sure it’s not just some weird mistake or coincidence.”

They ate the rest of their meal, declining a dessert but having two coffees, knowing that they would need to be alert. Their intended walk home was shelved in favour of a taxi-ride, as suddenly threats seemed to lurk in every shadow. Jonathan checked the street as they hurried to his front door and as soon as they were inside he dialled Rob.

“Looks kosher, mate.”

“Sorry, what do you mean?”

“It looks as if they are closing in on you. Or on Geri, anyway.”
“Right.” He looked at her, standing by the kitchen doorway, her arms wrapped around her body. He thought she might be trembling. “So, what do we do?”

“You stay where you are. I’ve already sent some people to collect you. Some of them will stay to pack up your stuff, then return with vans to move it all out...” Rob imagined the Jonathan he knew pacing the room. “Ms Muir must not return to her flat, you understand? It may be being watched already. We will get her things.”

“But what about Mrs Muir, Rob? Surely they can find-”

“A team is heading her way, too. They will bring her to where you will be, but she needs to be warned. When your guys arrive, they’ll have a secure phone you can use to call her.”

“Fuck…” Jonathan looked at Geri again. She was closer, her face pale. “You’re going to have to ring your Mum.”

“What?”

Jonathan ran through what he’d been told for her benefit. She nodded. They had been warned about this possibility, but Geri had hoped she’d have time to tell Elaine in less pressing circumstances. Her pulse was racing: all the dangers of Jonathan’s former life were front and centre for her and she didn’t like it. She raced through her previously prepared speeches, none of which had satisfied her and now she needed to condense it into a rushed explanation over the phone. This evening was turning into a nightmare.

Headlights swept the room and Jonathan jumped up to check the window. “I think that’s them.” He opened the door before they could knock, and three solid-looking, serious men swept in. They oozed efficiency and competence. While one - Jason, he called himself - spoke quietly to them, the others checked out the flat, began opening cupboards and conferring in corners. Jason handed Geri a phone.

“You need to ring your mother. Her scoop team are nearly there.” Geri’s expression must have given away her anxiety because he continued immediately, “but don’t worry, they’ll hold back until we tell them she’s been told.”

Geri steeled herself. There was no more time for prevarication. “OK. Let’s do it. I’ll put the phone on speaker.”

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mum.”

“Geri? I didn’t recognize the number. And you’re ringing very late...is everything alright, love?”

“No, well...look, something’s happened and... I was going to explain it all next week when I came over, but things have got a bit crazy...”

“Geri, what are you talking about?”

Her daughter took a deep breath. “Sorry, look... I am going to tell you some things, and they’re going to sound a bit mad, but I need you to listen, OK?”

“Geri, what is going on?”

“Mum, this is very important. I need you to listen. Please”
“Alright.”

“The man I’m seeing. It’s Jonathan.”

Elaine had no response to this beyond stunned silence.

“Mum?”

“I’m here. What has he done now?”

“Nothing, Mum. He’s here with me.” She looked at him.

“Hello, Elaine.”

“Jonathan.” He could feel the chill in her tone.

“Mum, it’s OK… look, this will all make sense when we see you, but… we are in a bit of danger, because of what Jonathan’s been doing. He got in the way of some bad people, last year, and they seem to have found me…”

“God, Geri! Are you safe? What the… have you called the police? Jonathan! What have you got her into?”

“Mum! Please, listen. The good guys are looking after us, and some of them are coming to get you as well. Now listen, this is really important: you must not ring or talk to anyone. None of your friends, no cousins… not a soul. Don’t go on the computer, put your phone down after this and don’t answer any more calls. Just wait for them to get to you, and do what they tell you. They will say that someone called Angela sent them, OK?”

“Geri, what is all this? What did he do?”

“He did something good, Mum. A very good thing. But you know the world is full of bad people and they don't like that. So we have to hide. And you are coming with us.”

“With you? Where?”

“We can explain all that when we’re together. Now please, try not to panic. This was all being planned, it’s just been brought forward a bit as a precaution, just to be super-safe, OK?”

Elaine tried to make sense of it all, but it sounded insane… like the start of some TV spy drama or something. But her biggest concern was simple. “Jonathan?”

“Yes, Elaine?”

“Why have you come back?”

“I… that is, I wasn’t looking for Geri… but we found each other by accident. There’s a lot I want to explain Elaine. I will, when I have the chance to see you in person.”

“It’s true, Mum.”

He reached for Geri’s hand and squeezed it. “But I am very happy we did.”

“But you won’t… You broke her heart, you know that.” Fear and anger on her daughter’s behalf were bubbling up, but she recalled Geri saying he made her happy, so she held it in check.
“I do.” He looked at Geri intensely. “And I intend to spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to her.” He heard Elaine’s harrumph. He understood her scepticism, but he knew the truth.

“We’d better go, Mum. Our people are here already and they want us to leave.”

“Geri-”

“Just do what I said, Mum. We can talk properly when we see you. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

**********

The hotel was familiar to him. It was the same anonymous one on the Embankment in which he had met Angela and Rob, drank tea and ate hobnobs before embarking on his terrifying and life-changing adventure. Such an ordinary place for the start of such extraordinary events.

“This is it.” The short, stocky man called Jason who was leading them slid the card-key into the slot and opened the door. The room was as bland as he remembered, all generic fabrics and abstract wall art, but Geri illuminated it, even in her state of fear. “Someone will be here shortly to talk to you. Stay in the room, don’t use the phone.” Jason put the key in its card folder on the desk/dressing table by the window and left. Jonathan stepped over and wrapped himself around Geri.

“I feel...it’s like some weird dream, Jon.”

“I know.”

“So ordinary, but so strange.”

“Yeah.”

They stayed like that, holding each other, standing still and silent, for several minutes. Eventually Jonathan released her and she sat down on the chair in the corner, looking around her listlessly.

“Do you want a cup of tea, or anything?”

Geri shook her head. “How long do you think, until Mum gets here?”

“I don’t know. Can’t be too long, she’s coming from nearer than we were.”

A knock on the door startled them both. Jonathan went cautiously towards it. “Yes?”

“Let me in, Jonathan.” He smiled at the sound of Angela’s voice, and opened the door. She stepped in and he engulfed her with a bear hug. Geri watched, moved by the obvious affection between them. “Aren’t you going to introduce me, then?”

“Geri, this is Angela Burr. She looked after me when I was, you know…”

“I got him into it, is what he means.” She reached for Geri’s hand and grasped it firmly, smiling kindly. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Geri. I’d say Jonathan has told me all about you, but that would be a complete lie. He’s told me next to nothing. Except that you are very important to him.”

Their hands were still entwined as Angela regarded her steadily. Geri sensed she was being assessed, but she could not help feeling bemused; the motherly, ordinary-looking woman with a northern accent in front of her did not fit her mental image of a spymaster. “Well,” Geri wasn’t sure how she was expected to respond, “he’s very important to me, too. Thank you for all this.”
“Oh, don’t thank me! None of this would be necessary if I hadn’t-”

“I knew what I was doing, Angela.” Jonathan’s voice was quiet but firm from behind her. “And without you, I might still be in Zermatt, or somewhere even further away from Geri.” A chill ran over his body at the thought.

“Right, well, let’s agree that some things are worth all the aggro, shall we? Now, Geri, your Mum’s nearly here. She’s a bit shaken up, but she’s OK. I sent a member of my team called Pearl to get her, because they are about the same age. I thought that she would find it easier than with some burly, mono-syllabic bloke.”

“Aren’t you still supposed to be on maternity leave, Angela?”

“Officially, yes, Jonathan. But I wasn’t going to sit at home changing nappies, not tonight. Now,” she let go of Geri’s hand, pulled her large messenger bag off her shoulder and sat down on the bed, patting the cover on both sides of her, “sit down. I’ve got some papers for you both to sign. Rob’s on his way with your new passports and other papers. Fortunately they were all delivered to him the other day.”

They had just completed signing the waivers and, in Geri’s case, the Official Secrets Act which seemed to be threatening all kinds of horrors, when there was a tap on the door. Jonathan opened it at Angela’s bidding and Elaine stood in the corridor, just behind the Pearl’s serious freckled face.

“Elaine. Good to see you. Thank you, Pearl.” The red-haired operative nodded grimly. Jonathan suspected she had never quite forgiven him for sucker-punching her colleague in Istanbul when he needed to keep his cover intact. She stepped aside to allow Geri’s mother to enter the room, and she did so hesitantly, only relaxing a little when she caught sight of her daughter rushing towards her. They hugged tightly, Geri breaking down with the surge of relief that her mother was safe and with them.

“Shhhh, love. It’s alright.”

“It is now you’re here.”

Geri took a step back so that Elaine could look at Jonathan. They stood a few feet apart, the tall young man and the shorter middle-aged woman. He felt her anger burning him, and took it willingly.

“Jonathan.”

“Elaine.”

She was staring at him, breathing a little fast, her face pale. She had tied her greying brown hair in a loose ponytail, and was dressed in jeans and a white shirt. She looked younger than her fifty-eight years, even under stress. “Well, is anybody going to tell me what the hell this is all about? I feel like I’ve woken up in the middle of an episode of Spooks!”

Angela spoke up. “Mrs Muir, my name is Angela Burr. You could say I’m responsible for all of it. It might be best if I explain to you why you’re here and what’s going to happen. Then I will leave you with your daughter and Jonathan, and they can tell you the more, um, personal… their side of the story.” She looked quickly at Jonathan and Geri, who nodded. “Good. Now, cup of tea?”

********

An hour later, Angela was gone, along with Rob. They had left a large envelope but nobody had opened it yet. It was almost three a.m., but none of them felt like sleeping. Elaine was sitting in the
only armchair. Geri was perched on the bed beside her, and now Angela had vacated it, Jonathan had moved to the upright chair by the desk.

“So… you’re a hero, then.” She sounded unconvinced, despite the glowing tributes Angela had paid.

“I wouldn’t say that, no.”

“Neither would I.”

“Mum, please.”

“I’m sorry, Geri, but I can’t believe you’ve taken him back. After he… after everything.”

Geri sighed. “I know it must be hard for you to understand, but…” She let her eyes move to his face. He was tense, but when she caught his eye his expression softened. “When we first bumped into each other again, I wasn’t at all sure I wanted to talk to him, even. But the thing is, I never stopped loving him, Mum.”

“I know. But Geri, what he did, how he made you-”

“He didn’t make me, Mum. And we have to get past that. There were reasons why he was like that then, and I accept that he didn’t really mean any of it.” She turned her body towards her mother, whose face was still dark with mistrust. “I know you’re only being my Mum, and I am grateful for that. But I love him. We love each other.” She reached for Jonathan’s hand. “We always have. You know that, Mum. And the universe has given us this second chance. We have to take it.”

Jonathan watched as Elaine’s features loosened as she looked into Geri’s eyes. “Fair enough. I suppose if you can accept him, then I must as well.” Jonathan reflected on the fact that she did not know the full extent of his sins against Geri. She might be less willing if she had heard his words that morning. “Now, I’m bloody knackered. I’m a bit old for all this James Bond malarkey.” They all smiled. “They’ve given me the room next door, so I think I’ll go and get my head down for a bit, if that’s OK.”

Geri hugged her, and Jonathan escorted her the few steps to her door, acknowledging as they went past the agent whose head popped out of the room across the corridor. As the green light came on and she turned the handle, she hesitated and spoke quietly but clearly to him. “Hurt her again and I’ll chop off your bollocks and feed them to you in a pie.”

“And I would eat it, quite happily, Elaine.” He took a breath. “I won’t. I promise.”

“You’d better not, Jonathan Pine. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Elaine.”
Chapter Summary

New identities have been handed out, but not everyone is as prepared for the future. Some ruffled feathers need to be smoothed before the family can head off for France.

NOW

'Cause you feel like home
You're like a dream come true

It was light outside already, although the grubby double-glazed windows muffled the sound of the capital’s morning bustle. Geri had lain awake all night; she had watched the yellow-black city sky fade to the pale grey of a London summer dawn, unable to sleep. At some point around sunrise, it had hit her: her life in Leicester was gone. Everything that had been normal for her just a handful of hours ago was now as distant as the Himalayas. She could not say goodbye to her friends. She would never hug them again. She would never set foot in her home of over ten years, not even one last time. She would probably never teach another lesson.

Jonathan had dozed, but only fitfully. Now he was still and silent but aware of Geri’s restlessness; he could hardly miss it, so tightly were they clinging to each other in this strange place and time. He was more familiar than she with the feeling of disconnection that was distressing her; he was as good as immune to the disorientation and loss. And for Jonathan, for once it was actually a welcome change. For all the helter-skelter, minor-panic nature of the last few hours, he was eager to get started on a life he had never believed was possible for him.

He tightened his hold on Geri subtly, pulling her a little more firmly against his chest and she responded, her arm around his waist squeezing and her lips brushing the skin where it stretched over his collarbone. He let out a soft grunt and found her lips with his, tasting the salt of tears.

“It’s OK, love. I know it’s hard.”

“Yeah.” She looked into his mysterious eyes, which were less of an enigma now. “I just… I can’t get my head around it yet. I thought I was getting there, but…”

“I know. But we’ll be OK. I promise.”

In the room next door, Geri’s mother was also awake. Since the phone call the evening before she’d had no time to think properly, or to get a grip on events. The night hours had given her that chance, and she had considered her situation. When her husband died so young, leaving her with a little daughter to bring up alone, she had made a few choices she had never regretted. She could have run back to the Welsh Marches and her parents, but she chose to stay in the home she and Peter had made together. She could have wrapped their darling Jellybean in cotton wool and held onto her like grim death in an attempt to prevent history repeating itself. But instead she determined that she would
give Geri the life that she and Pete would have, if he’d not been in the wrong place at the wrong
time: freedom, choice and every opportunity within her means.

So she decided to try to be the kind of parent she would have wanted herself: supportive, trusting and
as far as possible, hands-off. She had been proud of how she handled things when Geri began
dating, even when she was less than thrilled by her daughter’s early choices. Elaine had loved
Jonathan almost from the start, not least because he was a definite cut above the previous
incumbents. He had a good heart; she had seen it right away. As things had begun to go bad, she did
her best to offer support and understanding to Geri. She stood by her through the worst of it, and
tried not to fret too much when she saw Geri drifting. But now? After all this time? He just swans
back in and sweeps her off her feet? The fucking NERVE of it!

But if the things that Burr woman were all true… It did seem to explain how the three of them came
to be here, in this surreal situation. However… A light tap on the door made her sit up.

“Yes? Who is it?”

“It’s me, Mum.”

Elaine jumped out of bed and let Geri in. They hugged, mother holding daughter just a little longer
than usual, needing the reassurance.

“How are you this morning?”

“I’m OK. Still a bit dazed, I think. How about you, love? You look shattered.”

“I didn’t sleep much.”

“No, well, me neither.” Elaine took Geri by the hand and they sat side by side on the bed.

“Where’s Jonathan?”

“He’s next door. Talking to the man who brought us here on the phone. Asking for some breakfast
and the bags they said they’d pack for us. I need my pills, and my makeup, you know. Hair stuff.”
She glanced at her mother’s overnight bag on the luggage shelf. “They let you pack some things?”

Elaine shrugged. “I started before they got to me, after you rang. I was grabbing random stuff, really.
Pearl helped me do it properly. I can lend you—”


“OK!” She looked at her mother. “I came to ask you if you’d come and have breakfast with us. They
should be bringing us something.”

“Um…OK. Just let me make myself respectable.”

A lovely young black woman who introduced herself as Grace-who-works-with-Rob arrived ten
minutes later with a care package from Starbucks: three grande coffees, Danish pastries, yoghurt and
bottles of water. “Angela will be here with Keith in a couple of hours. He’s high-tailed it over from
Paris with your car and the rest of the paperwork.”

“Who’s Keith?”

“He’s the guy who’s been arranging everything in France for us, Elaine. He signed the Acte de Vente
and all the other things on our behalf.”
“Oh, I see.” Elaine looked at Grace. “Does he work with you?”

“Not really. Same department but he’s more, er, they’re called *Resettlement*. He does most of the Western Europe ones. The on-the-ground stuff. He’s very good, knows all the wrinkles.”

“Yes, well… I never knew there was all this, what would you call it... *infrastructure*?”

Grace laughed lightly, a beautiful sound. “Good! It’s not supposed to be *visible*, Mrs Muir.” She glanced at the other two. “Have you looked at the documents Rob brought you last night?”

“No,” Jonathan shook his head, “not yet.”

“Well, I suggest you read the covering letters at least, before Angela and Keith arrive. You need to start learning your legends, getting used to your new… well, you know the score, Jonathan.”

He nodded. “I do. Yes. Thanks, Grace.”

She turned to leave, but Geri stood up. “Grace, can I ask you something?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you think that the people looking at my site are… do you think they are the same ones that are after Jonathan?”

Grace kept her face professionally neutral, but she had been the one who first spotted the red flag. “We can’t be 100% certain, of course, but yes, I do. I can’t see why a Lebanese person would be looking at a Leicester photographer’s site otherwise, can you? I expect they want something from you, Jonathan.”

His eyes flashed. He had never discussed what happened to the payment with Angela, but he knew she knew. Or guessed. Little hints, secret smiles…

“What do they want?” Elaine spat out a few crumbs. “*Jonathan*?”

Geri watched all this in silence. *He said he had money*…

Grace looked carefully at Jonathan’s uncomfortable posture and smiled quickly. “I’d better leave you to it. I have to get back to the office. I may not see you again… almost certainly not, unless you are delayed and I need to make another mercy dash to *Starbucks* or somewhere… so, good luck to you all.” She flashed a gorgeous smile and was gone.

“Jonathan?” Geri’s voice was soft, but undeniable. “What was she talking about?”

“You don’t need the details. In fact, it’s best you don’t know.”

“Is this what you meant when you said we’d have plenty to live on?”

“Yes, but.”

“Is it stolen?”

“*Geri*…”

“Tell me! Is it dirty money?”

Jonathan put down his coffee cup and sighed. He thought carefully how he could explain it to her.
He had hoped he could just slip a little out of the Swiss account, every now and then, small enough amounts not to be conspicuous; to top up the allowance the government would be paying them. “It was the money for the deal. The one I was involved with. I was the one who had the online access, to the account. I hid it somewhere, as a safety net. A bargaining chip, I suppose you could call it, to be used if needed. It turned out that Angela had rescued Jed, so I didn’t have to use it in the end.”


“Someone who needed to escape from- From the dealer. The man Angela told you about.”

“So what did you do? Didn’t the authorities ask you to hand over the money?”

“No. Angela’s never mentioned it, actually. Not in so many... I didn't say anything either, so I assumed she didn't know what I’d done. Not exactly, anyway. It wasn't part of the plan... me moving it, I mean. When I got back here, and I was settled, I made a decision. I started sending some of it to charities. Just small amounts that wouldn’t get noticed. To all kinds of NGOs that help people affected by conflict, all over the world. Most of it’s gone now.”

Elaine leaned forward. This sounded more like the Jonathan she knew. “Such as?”

“Well... An organisation in Vietnam that provides amputees with prosthetic limbs. You know, from all the ordnance people step on, or pick up. And a similar one in Mozambique. Anti-landmine campaigns, groups that help to clear them from agricultural areas... Little projects in refugee camps, and places like the centre I’ve been working in. An organisation helping people in Liberia, former child-soldiers... that sort of thing. And a few of the bigger ones, like MSF. UNICEF, Oxfam, Save the Children. But mainly small ones, which need an injection of cash.”

Geri was very moved, and she did the only thing she could. She stood up and took him in her arms and squeezed hard. She heard her mother’s voice behind her.

“Clever boy.”

Jonathan was standing a little stiffly, but he accepted her embrace and rubbed her back with his palm. “There’s a little bit left, not much, I haven’t had the chance to give it all away yet, and it seems we might need some of it now. Think of it as a loan, Geri.”

“Oh, Jonathan, I love you so much!”

He was tense and his face was a grim mask as memories of the finale of his mission in Egypt came to the front of his mind. His gaze was fixed on the wall in front of him, but had he caught Elaine’s eye he would have seen that she was smiling and had tears in her eyes.

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Angela arrived at the advertised time, with the miracle-working Keith. “Right then, Mr Ash, Mrs and Ms Cartwright. You all genned up, the three of you?”

Geri nodded, as did Jonathan. They had been through the papers together and individually, reading the background story that had been concocted, looking at their ‘new’ passports and driving licences, and the details of French bank accounts in their new names. It all seemed bizarre to Geri, but Jonathan was unfazed. He simply accepted it and sat at the desk calmly practicing his new signature some more.

Elaine said nothing, just sat stiffly in her chair and stared at the carpet.
“Elaine? Or should I say, Wendy? Is everything alright?”

“Not really, no.”

Looks were exchanged. “Mum? What’s wrong?”

“Nobody has actually asked me.”

“Asked you?”

She looked up, first at Geri with a glance in Jonathan’s direction, and then addressed herself to Angela. “Not one of you has bothered to ask me if I want to do this. If I want to just... abandon the whole of my life and run away to a new one.”

“Mum…”

“Elaine…” They had both spoken at once, and her anger flared as once again she felt she was being ganged-up on. Jonathan took a deep breath and continued. “We had to do it this way. It was the only safe option. And we did intend to explain it all to you, but... I’m sorry-”

“Oh, yes, you’re sorry.” Her snarling sarcasm was unmistakeable. “If you were really sorry, if you really cared about her you’d have kept my daughter well out of this business!”

“But Elaine-”

“Mrs Muir,” Angela spoke quickly, hoping to keep things calm, “I think it might help if you and I go to your room and have a chat. Just the two of us. So I can fill you in on the bigger picture.” She paused and looked meaningfully at Jonathan and Geri. “Mr Pine here has had a couple of years to adjust… and even your daughter has had a few months. Time to get her head around the realities of it.”

“Realities? The realities of it? It all seems like total fantasy to me!”

“Exactly. That’s part of the danger.” She smiled kindly. “Look, come on, let’s go and have a chat, woman to woman. I’ll bring the Hobnobs.”

“You don’t have to humour me. I’m not a child. And I don’t appreciate being patronised.”

“I know that, Elaine, and I am not doing that. I understand, honestly I do. But the thing is, you don’t have many options. Not if you want to protect Geri.”

“Please, Mum. Please, listen to her…”?

“You’ve done all of this, Geri… you’ve agreed to all this on my behalf, without… I get that there was a need for secrecy, but I thought you trusted me, Jellybean.”

“I did! I do. I’m sorry. It was all for your safety. Until it was all set up, the less you knew…”

The silence in the room was awkward. Jonathan held Geri’s hand in his, his thumb rubbing her knuckles in the way it used to when they first began dating. It was a comfort to them both as they felt the heat of Elaine’s fury. Angela was running other scenarios through in her head, but knew her best hope was logic and gentle persuasion. And a mother’s love for her daughter. She knew a little about that herself. She stood.

“Shall we?”
Elaine shrugged. She wasn’t trying to be difficult, but the papers, and especially the passport with her picture but another woman’s name and date of birth… the full implications of what was happening had all become horribly clear to her. Her parents were gone, she had only a few distant relations other than Geri, but nevertheless she had a good life in Weston. The house was one she and Peter had bought together and it had been her home for over thirty-five years. This was all too sudden, and moving way too fast. And it still felt unreal.

“Alright.”

Once they had moved to her room and Angela had settled herself in a chair, Elaine sat down as well, still bristling with annoyance. “Look, Mrs Burr-”

“Angela. Only the cleaner calls me that anymore. And Gordon, when I’m pissing him off.”

“OK. Angela… I know you have our best interests at heart, I’m sure you are doing good wor-”

“I’m sorry Elaine, but I think you need to understand a few things.” Her kind face was serious, and even the soft brown eyes were fierce. Elaine shifted a little in her seat but nodded slightly in acceptance. “This situation… these, I hesitate to call them people… They would not think twice about killing you or Geri or anyone to get to Jonathan. And if they get their hands on him they will kill him. You can be certain of that.”

Elaine kept her eyes on Angela’s face, but she wanted to look away, She wanted to run away and be anywhere but here.

“He double-crossed them. He got in their way, and these… creatures… they don’t forgive and they never, never forget. So if it looks as if they have found him, or are close to doing so, then he has to run. And now he has to take Geri with him. They both want that, but she’d have to hide, either way. And the same goes for you.” She put her hands on her knees and leaned forward. “If they get hold of either of you, they will try to extract what you know and they will do that until you talk or you die. And then they will kill you anyway. I am sorry to be so brutal, but you have to realise the gravity of the situation you and your daughter are in.”

“Why did he come back? Why did he approach her? He must have known he was putting her in danger!”

Angela sighed and leaned back in her chair again. “I’m sure he hesitated. I fact, I know he did. He’s a good man, Elaine. He loves Geri. I can see that and so can you. I think he… well, that’s a conversation for you and him, I should say.” Her heart went out to this woman. “Now, I can arrange for a separate resettlement for you, if that’s what you want. But you can’t go back. We’ve burnt that bridge; they did it, whether you like it or not. Going back is not possible.”

Elaine stood up and looked out of the window. The view was less than inspiring: walls and blank windows identical to the one she was standing next to. She fought with the impulse that raged inside her; to grab Geri and run away. To get them both away from these people with their secrets and their fake documents and their assumptions about what is good for others… But already the common sense that had got her through the struggles she had faced in her life was taking the reins.

“No. I don’t want that. I will stay with Geri.”

“And Jonathan…”

“Yes, well… it seems he’s part of the package, so yes.”

**********
“I’m not sure about the name.”

“Cartwright? It’s a bit Archers, but-”

“No, that’s alright. I meant Wendy. Judith’s much nicer.”

“I’m going for Judy. But I thought you liked Wendy. Wasn’t that on the list for me?”

Elaine threw a chip at Geri. “Shut up! Yeah… I suppose I’m finding fault. I’d have liked to be consulted.”

“I chose it for you-”

“What?”

“They asked… I thought you really liked the name. You used to read me Peter Pan.” Her bottom lip was protruding. Jonathan ate his burger silently, watching from the side-lines as he used to in the early days as the fencing continued.

“You couldn’t have asked for Claudia-Jane? Or Laura?” she pulled a wistful face, “…Inara… Or Dana…?”

“As in Scully? Now I know you’re taking the piss, Mother. You’ll say Buffy, or Willow… or Cordelianext.” A soft chuckle came from the corner of the room. “And you can shut yer face, Joseph Ash!”

“I like it though.” He grinned, considering his latest name. “You know that Anj and Rob call me ‘Woody’...?”

“Ha! Good one.” Elaine turned her fake ire back on her daughter. “So you chose my new name, as well as everything else?”

The mood in the room shifted suddenly. Elaine had returned from the side meeting with Angela calmer and acquiescent, but it was obvious she wasn’t exactly happy. “Oh, Mum. I was only trying to do the right thing.”

“I know.” She reached over and touched Geri’s arm. “I get it. It’s just… you know me. I’ve looked after myself, made all the decisions, had to, for so long. It goes against… you know.”

“I do. And I promise, you can do that from now on. Starting with your house. We’ve not changed anything.”

“What about furniture?”

“The gîte is fully-furnished, but there is a budget for you to buy anything you want, Elaine,” Jonathan had a smile in his voice, “within reason, of course.” He winked at Geri.

“Oh… right. What about my things? My own furniture at home?”

“Keith says there’s a barn, well, a big outbuilding, he says. When the vans arrive, you can choose to swap it out with what’s there, or put your stuff in the barn for the moment. We can move things around, when you’re ready. It might be an idea to live with the place, for a bit. See how you feel in a week or two.” Jonathan was used to this, although not to having so many possessions to wrangle.

“What about you two? Is the main house furnished, too?”
“Partly,” Geri picked up Jonathan’s laptop and opened the file, “but we have asked for a few things. A bed, to match the built-in storage. And a dining suite... We have our own stuff, of course, but none of that’s exactly great.”

“Except your Dad’s armchair.” Elaine had handed that on to Geri when she moved to Leicester.

“Yeah. That’s going in the living room, or perhaps the kitchen-diner… whatever.”

Elaine put her polystyrene tray to one side, and drained her drink. “So, when?”

Jonathan and Geri exchanged a look. “Well… you heard him. We’ve got the car. The vans are being packed tonight. We can get the shuttle tomorrow. Keith said he’ll book us into a hotel about three-quarters of the way there, so we can arrive at the property in the morning and have most of the day to get our bearings.” Jonathan was getting antsy, stuck in the small room. He wanted to be moving, making progress.

“And I suppose there’s nothing to keep us here.”

“No, Mum, there isn’t.” Geri lifted her mostly-gone cup of Diet Coke and summoned up her courage. “To infinity and beyond!”

*********

The next morning, the three of them pulled out of the underground car park into the grey London morning in a brand new Lexus hybrid 4x4, complete with left-hand drive and a French number plate. They followed Keith, who was in an IEA pool car, and headed south eastwards, towards Kent, the Channel Tunnel and the future. It felt like some strange holiday to the women, albeit one without the usual planning and packing. It certainly did not feel like a moving day, but that was the reality of it. As the car began to stretch its legs on the M20, none of them quite believed that they were leaving. Even Jonathan, seasoned traveller and practiced re-starter that he was, shared the feeling of unreality. Only when they had passed through passport control without incident did they begin to relax, but still it felt more like a jaunt than a new beginning.

The moment came, at last when, after a long drive down various AutoRoutes and through pleasant countryside, they checked into their hotel, just an hour from Le Grand Bois. The Frenchness of the receptionist, the slightly faded Gallic charm of the rooms... whatever it was, they all felt the same: **we are here, and it is real.**
Twenty-Four and Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Jonathan Pine is home at last.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

NOW

My God/This reminds me/Of when we were young

Jonathan was there. He was only Jonathanand he was only there.

This first night in France had brought him a better rest than in many weeks, perhaps years, and now he had awoken, warm and comfortable, with Geri’s back pressed up against his body. He lay there, enjoying every tiny sensation and for once not remembering another bed, another woman or another time. Because there had never been a time quite like this before. Not for Jonathan Pine, the orphan, the lonely boy, the serial leaver of women, the heart-breaker, the lost soul, the funny fish. He had reached this time and place by the most circuitous of routes, and almost by accident. But nonetheless, here he was, with the person he knew he wanted to stay with for the rest of his life.

He took a deep draught of Geri’s fragrance. All the years and all that had happened had not changed it; she still seemed to smell the same to him as she had when they were first together all those years ago. It occurred to him that he might be misremembering, or looking back through the soft filter of time and love, but as so much about her that he loved had remained unchanged, why not that as well? He snuggled against her, the arm he had around her waist pulling her even nearer, making them feel like one person. Her long sigh made a tingle of love and longing pass through him and he nuzzled her hair. He could not recall feeling happier or more secure.

After a few minutes his mind drifted a little, but only as far as the night before and the dinner the two of them and Elaine had shared with their ‘fixer’. All three of them were rapidly growing quite fond of the stocky, ginger-haired and charmingly relaxed Keith. His face always seemed to be open and smiling, and he had a manner that set everyone at ease instantly. And he certainly knew what he was doing. Using his local knowledge, he had chosen this particular hostelry on the basis of its culinary reputation, aware as he was of Jonathan’s interest in cooking. It had proved to be the ideal introduction to their new life: beautiful, sophisticated but essentially simple food, served with charm and efficiency and accompanied by the best regional wines. Everyone was tired but the conversation flowed; the talk was of inconsequential things of course, nothing serious or risky, and the atmosphere was light. At one point, Jonathan had looked over at Geri and Elaine as they chatted happily, their faces lit by the candles on the table. I am really here, with them. After all that. After everything.

Dinner had been delicious, and so civilised. White linen, flowers and respectful waiting in a high-ceilinged, elegant room. It had been such a contrast to the meal they had eaten the previous evening, perching uncomfortably on chairs and the bed; five adults squeezed in one cramped London hotel room. Angela had brought them take-away from a selection of the cornucopia of food outlets that lined the street skirting Charing Cross and leading to Embankment tube station. It was a fitting
farewell to London’s cultural melting pot.

As they shared an eclectic feast, Elaine had quizzed Keith about her little house, the locale and anything else she could think of. He had answered her patiently and she had seemed to be a little mollified by what she heard; that was the impression Jonathan had got, anyway. The occasion felt like a midnight feast on a school trip; everyone was a little giddy, and not just thanks to the beer. Angela was the only person who had an air of melancholy. She had been looking at Jonathan during the meal, a smile playing on her lips.

“I like the hair by the way. Makes you look ten years younger.”

Jonathan had run his fingers through his expanding blond curls, looking down shyly and laughing softly.

“He had those curls when I first met him,” Geri had piped up, “only they were even longer then.” She’d sighed and reached across the bed to stroke his head. “I love them.”

“Well, I must say that those plus the beard you seem to be trying to grow… haha, only kidding… they do make you look quite different. More like an artist, or something. Less military.” A grunt of approval had come from Elaine at this.

When she got up to leave, Angela had seemed near to tears. After wishing them all a good journey and good luck, she had beckoned Jonathan over for a hug. As she squeezed him she had whispered in his ear.

“I’ll try and pop over to visit you, but it might be tricky. We’ll have to see. But listen, you.”

“Okay…”

“Be happy, Jonathan Pine. You deserve it. Nobody does more than you.” She’d punctuated her words with sharp pinches on his arm that he bore stoically.

“Thank you, Angela. You too.”

Geri brought him back to the here and now with a jolt, turning in his arms and sliding her right hand over his flat belly towards his treasure trail as she sinuously moved herself against him. His sudden intake of breath was stopped by a lingering kiss, which made them both whimper.

“Geri…”

“Mmmm…?”

Her hand reached lower and the feel of her soft fingers enveloping his hardening cock caused a bucking of his hips and a low moan of pleasure. Jonathan began to turn towards her but she pressed him back into the mattress.

“Uh-uh. My turn.”

He chuckled and rested back into the pillow as she kissed a path from his neck to his nipples. A sharp gasp greeted her teeth running over one dark pink bud, then the other as he began to squirm. Geri’s nose lingered in the dark hair that marked a path down from his navel and he held his breath as he felt her sigh cooling him where a drop of pre-cum was resting.

“Seemed a shame to waste your morning, um, Woody...”
Her voice was low and sexy and he thought of the first time she had done this for him. How erotic and adult she had been, and how out of control it had made him. A deep moan rose from somewhere inside him as her hot, wet mouth closed over the head of his penis. She sucked gently and teasingly, and then took him a little deeper, her tongue pressing hard on the underside as he fought the urge to jerk his hips.

“Ohgodohgodohgod, Geri…”

“Unnnnnnnnn…”

The thrum of the sound she made caused a spike in his pleasure and he had to grab fistfuls of sheet to keep a hold on his desire to fuck her face. He watched her, his mouth alternating between a stunned gape and gritted teeth until she began to play with his balls and he couldn’t take any more.

“Please, Geri, come here.”

She gently released him and smiled. “Good?”

He sat up and reached for her. “Too good. I need to-”

“Like I said, my turn.” Geri shoved him back once again and straddled his hips, gliding her soaking quim over his now purple-headed erection, making his moans louder as she added her own. Unable to sustain teasing him any longer, she lined him up and slid down over him, her eyes closing with pleasure as he filled her. “Oh bloody hell, Jon.” Her pelvis clenched and they both groaned. Geri leaned forward and kissed him deeply. He took the chance to wrap his arms around her and he sat them both up, his hands on her hips as he was able at last to thrust into her as he needed to so very badly. The angle made his pelvic bone rub over her clit and Geri accentuated it by meeting his movements. Jonathan was dimly aware of the brass bedstead hitting the wall behind him rhythmically, but his focus was on her and their bodies. Their faces rubbed over one another, mouths open, lips brushing skin and beard, sweat trickling and being licked away in a frenzy of desire and love.

Geri came with a great shout, and the tightening crush of her around him brought Jonathan to the edge and over it a moment after, his moans and gasps and their heavy breathing filling the room with noise. Geri could hear little above the sound of her own pulse in her ears. Her eyes were closed and she lay her head down on Jonathan’s shoulder, feeling it rise and fall as he gasped for oxygen himself.

“Oh my god, Geri. That was…”

“Yeah.” She kissed the freckle on the crest of his shoulder, then lifted her head to look into his glazed eyes. “I’d been dreaming about fucking you. Or, to be more accurate, I’d been dreaming you were going down on me.” He laughed breathily. “That’s why I said ‘my turn’.”

“I see.” He ran a hand over her hair and down her neck. “It certainly...well, that was incredibly hot.”

********

Breakfast at the hotel was a generous buffet, and when they reached the dining room, they discovered Elaine was already helping herself from a selection of cooked meats and cheeses. She smiled knowingly at her daughter, and when Geri joined her she was nudged.

“Morning.”

“Bonjour, Mother.” Geri knew she was being teased.
“Lovely morning, dear.”

“Yes.” Geri looked at her steadily, not sure what she was getting at.

“A little noisy, but I don’t mind.”

*Oh shit. She’s in the next room.*

Geri turned to look at Jonathan, who was just walking over having put their delightfully old-fashioned actual key on a table. He saw her crimson face and began to blush himself, immediately grasping the situation.

*Gonna have to come up with a system…*

Elaine was cheerfully unperturbed, but the lovers were somewhat discomforted. Fortunately, Keith arrived in the nick of time to defuse the tension.

“I’ve just popped over to *SuperU,*” he said as he joined them, “picked you up some milk, coffee, bread and something for lunch. There’s a smaller one about half-an-hour from the property, and the little shop in Doué, of course. If you like, I can drive one of you over there later, to stock up properly.”

“Oh, thanks. That’s very thoughtful. You seem to have thought of everything.”

Keith smiled shyly and tapped the side of his hooked nose with one finger, “Practice, *Wendy.*”

******

Elaine was smiling as they passed a glowing field of sunflowers when Keith spoke quietly.

“It’s next on the left.”

Her eyes went to the wing-mirror and she waved and pointed, not sure if they could see her. But Geri had already spotted the poplars up ahead: shimmering clouds of silver as the light breeze ruffled their leaves.

*This is it, Jon…*

Jonathan glanced at the satnav. “Yes, it is.” He smiled as Geri sat forward in her seat, her hand reaching for his thigh as they saw Keith indicating left and slowing down. His stomach tightened a notch more. He’d been aware of the butterflies since they set off from the hotel. Elaine had opted to ride with Keith to spare them any more embarrassment, although he also suspected she had a teeny crush on their helper.

“Oh my GOD, Jon… It’s beautiful!”

He had steered the Lexus onto the apron and was waiting behind Keith while the automatic gate opened to allow them into the property. Through the lines of trees, off to the left, a few flashes of blue were just visible. Straight ahead down the driveway was the edge of the lake, sunlight reflecting from a narrow finger of water they could glimpse, and to the right they could see the corner of the red brick and blue woodwork of what was to be Elaine’s new home. Originally the carriage-house and stables for the main house, it had been artfully converted into what Keith had described to them as ‘all the twos’: a two-storey, two-bedroom, two-bathroom house with its own garage, a small rear garden and a view of the lake. A slate roof complemented the blue shutters. Out of sight from them was a sunroom on the far wall, perfectly placed to make the most of any winter warmth.
Beyond the lake, as became obvious when they drew nearer, there was a large paddock studded with specimen trees and lined with a high hedge. The tree nearest the water was a weeping willow, but Geri could see a cedar and other evergreens of varying shapes and sizes, as well as a copper beech. She knew from the details that there were two more fields beyond the hedge. The cars crunched slowly along the gravel, Keith deliberately driving at a speed that would allow them to take everything in. Then, all at once they had reached the junction in the drive. Keith pulled to the right and Jonathan went left. The lake shimmered, with reeds, sedges and a few late yellow irises dotted around the edge, and a raft of pink water lilies floating near the middle. Geri caressed it all with her eyes, then she turned to look at what was to be her home.

The main house had the same charcoal-grey roof and royal blue woodwork as Elaine’s little home, but it was otherwise very different. Whereas the old carriage house was squat, its larger counterpart was tall and elegant. The walls were made of pale grey stone, with intricate white moulding around the windows. There were three storeys, the uppermost one having dormer windows that broke the roofline, while the next had tall casements with little wrought-iron balconies and on the ground floor, two sets of double ‘French’ doors opened onto a neat terrace that spanned the front of the building. The main entrance was in the centre: a lovely art nouveau glass panel in, of course, a grand royal blue door.

Jonathan drove to the left of the house and parked outside the garage, which was almost hidden behind it. Beyond that there was an open hangar attached to a conventional closed barn. He turned off the engine and looked at Geri. She had been very quiet.

“You OK, love?”

She nodded. “Just a bit, you know, overwhelmed.”

“Yeah. It’s even better than I thought.”

“Yes, it is.” They held hands and smiled at each other for a moment. “We’d better get out, see if the rest matches up.”

Elaine had already been given her keys and as Jonathan and Geri walked back along the drive towards the smaller house they could hear her cries of delight. By the time they had reached the door to be met by a grinning Keith, Elaine had sat down on the sofa in the cosy sitting room to the right. She was bouncing up and down with childlike glee.

“Look at this wood burner! And go see the kitchen! It’s fabulous...and I haven’t even been upstairs yet!”

“You like it then, Wendy?”

“I do, Jona- Oops! Joe.”

Jonathan smiled. “Yes, we’d best all start doing that now. To be safe.”

Keith, who was waiting patiently outside, jingled a set of keys and a thrill of excitement ran up Geri’s spine. She looked at her smiling mother. “We’d better go and look at ours, Mum. Come over in a few? We can have a coffee or something…”

Elaine was peering out through the full-height sliding glass doors at her back garden. “Okeydokey.”

They made the return journey using the route through the rose garden. A narrow paved path wound lazily through the red, pink and yellow blooms that divided the lake from the tree meadow. Some of the roses were scented, and the climbers that adorned the pergola at the halfway point in particular
filled the air with heady perfume. A pair of benches had been put there. Geri heard a soft splash to her left.

“Are there fish in the lake, Keith?”

“Yes, a few koi. Just ornamental. A lot of folk around here have fishing lakes, but this one’s a bit small for that.”

Jonathan looked ahead as their house (our home. Geri’s and mine) drew nearer. To the right was a single-storey extension, with frosted glass windows. “That’s the utility, is it?”

Keith nodded. “Or laundry, as you wish. It has the cellar entrance, too. I think that was the scullery or whatever, all just for the servants, in the old days.”

Geri had been holding his hand, but now she put her other arm around Jonathan’s and clung to him. She was suddenly nervous. What if I don’t like it?

He turned and kissed the top of her head. They crossed the tiny bridge that spanned the stream, climbed the three steps up to the terrace and then Keith handed Jonathan the keys. He opened the door, then without warning, scooped Geri up and stepped over the threshold with her in his arms. They shared a sweet kiss before she tapped him on the nose.

“Romantic idiot.”

He shrugged, grinning. He hadn’t planned that; the impulse had grabbed him as he turned the key in the lock. He put her down and they looked around them. The hallway that stretched out in front of them was light, with cream walls and a lovely warm oak parquet floor. Light poured in from the back, and through the doors Geri could see the sliding roof of the swimming pool, which backed onto the barn. Jonathan began to walk to the right and she followed him into the huge kitchen-diner, which ran the full depth of the house. The floor here was terracotta tiling in a diamond pattern. The front part of the room was empty, awaiting their new dining suite, but the kitchen itself was complete. The walls were the same cream as the hall, with black tiled splash backs, glossy cream units and black granite worktops. A large square island unit with a sink and a 2-burner hob occupied the centre of the rear half. Geri ran her fingers over the surfaces, opened doors and grinned when she discovered the fridge was already stocked with three bottles of champagne.

“Bless him...Keith!”

A mop of red hair appeared in the doorway. “Yes, Judy?”

She pointed to the bubbly. “Your doing?”

“Yes. SOP, ma’am.” The faux-American accent was accompanied by a cheesy grin.

Jonathan was examining the range cooker with a professional eye while Geri continued her survey, locating the dishwasher and then wandering through the door to the utility/laundry room and checking out the washing machine and dryer. A loud buzzer sounded from near the door to the hall.

“That’s your gate intercom. I expect it’s the vans.”

Keith pressed the ‘talk’ key on the screen and exchanged a few words with a man with a Brummie accent, then pressed a green button. Moments later one medium-sized pantechnicon and another larger one lumbered out of the trees. Geri watched as the latter headed for Elaine’s place and the other turned in her direction. Jonathan came and stood beside her as they saw Keith walking out to greet the driver.
“Let’s have a quick look at everything else, so we’ll have some idea of where we want stuff, shall we?”

She nodded, still dazed from the fabulousness of the kitchen, but took his hand as he went out of the door to the rear part of the hallway. The sitting room was the same size as the kitchen-diner, but painted a pale sage green. A pale oak parquet made the entire space feel light and airy, and the previous owners had left two sofas and two matching armchairs in a shade or two darker than the walls. A large art nouveau-style mirror hung over the fireplace, which was filled by a handsome wood burning stove.

Geri sighed happily and Jonathan could not hide his delight. “Oh, my love… it’s better than the pictures!”

“Yes! Let’s check out the bedrooms!”

Geri squealed with laughter as he chased her up the stairs, which went up from the rear part of the hall. As she reached the landing, she turned to the right. A corridor ran ahead of her with two doors off it, a bathroom and a double bedroom. She returned to the top of the stairs and followed Jonathan’s voice and found him in the huge master suite. The first part was a dressing room with a small home-office area, a door to a bathroom and then a large space with a couple of chests of drawers and bedside cabinets. Jonathan lifted his arm and Geri slid into his embrace. He kissed her temple softly.

“Welcome home, Judy.”

“You too, Joe.”

*********

Two hours later, the removers were in full swing, bringing in boxes and furniture. The brand-new bed had been unwrapped and Jonathan was busy assembling it in their room, with Keith’s help. Their new table, chairs and buffet were on the terrace by the dining room doors, awaiting attention. Geri was carefully unpacking glassware from boxes she had not packed. It felt like a weird birthday, as every piece of bubble wrap concealed a surprise. Every so often she would break off to wash the glasses and put them away in a cabinet. As she closed a cupboard door she paused and looked past the cardboard and plastic wrapped chairs and table, across the lake to her mother’s house. The two guys had been coming and going constantly since they got there, taking in box after box of stuff, but now she could see no movement. Deciding to investigate, she called up to the men to let them know and set off along the drive.

She found Elaine and her two removers sitting at the kitchen table, sharing a coffee. Much as in the place she had just left, most of the space was filled with boxes.

“We’re just having a break, love. Want a coffee?”

“Oh, yes please!”

She took an empty chair and smiled at the two men, both of whom nodded and grinned.

“How’s it going?”

“Oh god… OK, I suppose. There’s so much. Once the bed is put together I’ll feel happier. At least I know we’ll have somewhere to sleep!” She looked at her mother, who seemed a little quiet. “How about you, Mum?”
Elaine shrugged. “Oh, you know… It feels so strange. I think I’m going to do what Jon—... I mean Joe suggested, and leave my furniture for the moment. I can’t think about that yet, and there is plenty to unpack as it is!”

“Good idea.” Geri looked at her watch. “Bloody hell, it’s gone noon already!”

“Is it? Yes, I suppose it must be.” Elaine ran her forearm over her brow. The house was cool, which was welcome because the day was heating up.

“I’ll go find some plates and we can have lunch on our terrace in, say, an hour? There’s a gorgeous table and Keith tells me the chairs are in the barn.” She grinned at her mother. “You can come and check our place out.”

“Oh yes… lovely.”

Geri gulped down her coffee and headed back with renewed enthusiasm for the tasks ahead. Keith’s early-morning shopping expedition meant they had enough bread, cheese and fresh tomatoes, ham and fresh fruit for a small feast. After unpacking a few more boxes, she located enough china for everyone after a prolonged rummage, along with some cutlery. That readied, she found the key for the barn, and sure enough, ten wooden chairs were waiting. She put them out around the heavy refectory-style table, set up the parasol to protect the exposed end on what was now the very warm terrace, and laid out the feast. She summoned everyone to lunch once she had added a selection of drinks.

This first breaking of bread in their new home felt momentous to Jonathan. He sat quietly at the head of the table, dimly aware that a seismic shift had taken place in his life. From now on, this was how it would be: here, in his own home, with Geri at his side. He had a strange feeling in his gut as he surveyed the table. Geri was to his left, smiling and chatting, passing the plate of cheese around. Her hair shone in the sunlight and her face was more beautiful than ever.

How can that be?

He allowed his eyes to run over the others: Keith at the far end, next to Elaine (Wendy), talking animatedly as he filled his fork with cheese and cornichons; the removal men (do they do this exclusively? They’re trained operatives, I can tell), all tucking in after a hard morning’s work.

Something about the table, the sunlight, the happy babble of voices reminded him of an evening two years before, when he had sneaked a few glances at a party dining at a remote cliffside restaurant. But that group was far tenser, and the occasion ended in violence. He felt the tingle of fear and the memory of the adrenaline that had pumped. It was not a place he wanted to revisit. Everything about the good cheer he had witnessed then was forced and fake; this happy atmosphere was real.

“I think a toast is in order.”

Everyone stopped talking and turned to the sound of his voice. It wasn’t loud, but it had the authority he had gained at Sandhurst and from all the leadership that had followed.

“Excellent idea, Joe.” Keith stood up and raised his glass. “To Judy, Wendy and Joe. All the very best for the future in your new home.”

The murmur of voices filled the air as the men echoed his words. Jonathan stood and the table looked at him expectantly.

“To all of you. Thank you for everything you have done for us. Especially you, Keith.”

A smattering of applause followed and once all the glasses had been clinked, the group returned to eating. Geri leaned over and spoke softly to Jonathan.
“Lovely.” He smiled shyly. “We’re actually here, um… Joe. Our own place. You and me.”

Suddenly he dare not look at her, for fear he might break down in front of the others. He nodded and squeezed her hand, and she saw the emotion in him. Looking down the table she saw her mother watching them. Elaine nodded and gave Geri a quick smile.

*********

Jonathan and Keith made an afternoon run to SuperU to stock the fridges and freezers, at least with enough supplies to last them a few days while they finished their initial settling in. While the removers put most of Elaine’s furniture in the barn, she and Geri made up the beds and finished the majority of the unpacking in both kitchens. The time alone together gave Elaine a chance to ask a few probing questions.

“This has all been so sudden, Jellybean. Are you sure about this… about him?”

“I think so, Mum. I’m sure about how I feel. That’s never changed, but…”

“He needs to prove something to you?”

“Yeah.” They were tucking in the sheet on the new bed in the main house. Our bed. “He hurt me, Mum. Not just about the abortion.” Elaine straightened up and looked at her. “He said some horrible things, the day he left.” She felt a lump rising in her throat. Even now, whenever she thought about that day, the emotion of it would return. “He wanted me to move on, and in his… his damaged mind, he thought he had to make me hate him.”

“But you didn’t.” I did.

“No. But I felt as if…” Geri walked over to the window and looked out, across the lawn, past the swimming pool and the little potagert to the high hedge and the field of sunflowers beyond. “I felt as if my life had lost its meaning. As if everything we had been to each other meant nothing to him. Or at least, it didn’t mean enough to stop him trampling it underfoot.” She turned back to see her mother’s stricken face. “But he lied to me that day. I always knew it deep down. And so I waited for him to realise and come back and say so.”

“Oh, Geri…”

“But I never quite believed he would. Not until I heard his voice at that party.” She looked around her, at the luxurious room, and at the beautiful surroundings she could glimpse through the windows at either end of it. “He’s my everything, Mum. He has been since the day I first saw him at school. I want to trust him again, but… Either way, I had to take this chance, or give up on my life.”

Elaine walked over and took her daughter in her arms. Her heart was beating fast; she wanted to be happy for them, but she feared it would be some time before she could forgive Jonathan. If she ever could.

Everyone else had left by six, leaving the lovers and Elaine to prepare their first dinner alone. Jonathan cooked three entrecotes he had bought, while he fried sauté potatoes and stirred a pepper sauce. He felt at home, truly, and looking over to see his love making the salad in their kitchen, with her mother sitting by the window reading… He wanted to do a dance.

“What?” Geri had noticed his soppy grin.

He turned back to the griddle pan, blushing lightly. “Nothing. Just, you know.”
“Yeah.” She walked over and stood beside him, her arm snaking around his waist. She stretched on tiptoe to whisper. “You’ve got a way to go with Mum, though.”

“I know.” He glanced at Elaine who had closed her eyes, apparently dozing in her late husband’s old chair. “But I think she’s willing to let me try, and that’s half the battle.”

After dinner, the three of them went for a walk around the property. The sun was sinking down behind Elaine’s house, into the trees that marked the boundary with a field of maize. In the quiet of the evening, they could hear the trickle of the little stream that fed the lake. It had been tidied up where it passed through the meadow and it was narrow enough to step over in most places. Geri held Jonathan’s hand as they strolled around admiring the trees, and then walked along to look at her mother’s little garden.

Saying goodnight to Elaine, they wandered back; passing through the roses whose scent was even stronger in the twilight. They paused for a while on one of the benches under the pergola. They kissed, Geri running her hands through his soft curls, occasionally tugging on them lightly to make him moan. They stayed there for a while, snogging like teenagers before the irritating mosquitoes drove them indoors. As they climbed the stairs to bed, Geri thought about Leicester, her old life, and her friends. She would have loved to share all this with them. But she could survive, just sharing it with her mother and the love of her life.

Epilogue

TWO YEARS, TWO MONTHS LATER

You still look like a movie

You still sound like a song

Autumn had arrived; there was no doubt about it that morning. A cold wind blew across the plantation, and spotty yellow-brown leaves were gathering in huddles around the roots of the poplars and in small heaps against the fence posts. The bare soil of the ploughed field the other side of the boundary smelt sweet in the damp air as he trundled along the narrow path on his lawn tractor.

“Bailey! Capa! C’mon!”

The loping forms of two long dogs appeared from among the trees and jumped gracefully into the trailer behind him. They sat down quickly among the tools, hay bale and twigs gathered for kindling, the fawn curve of Bailey’s back beside Capa’s black and white blotches. A sharp yap from behind and to the left alerted him to the presence of a third, unexpected canine. He stopped and looked
“DeeDee! What are you doing here? Wendy will be looking for you.”

A small terrier with a rough dun coat seemed to grin at him as she scrambled up over the wheel arch to join her two greyhound companions, panting and wagging her stump of tail madly. Jonathan pulled out his phone and texted quickly.

<DD is with me>

Re-starting the engine, he carried on with his weekly survey of the boundary. He was checking the fences were secure enough to keep the dogs in and unwanted visitors out. Not that there’d been a hint of that, but it didn’t pay to become complacent, as they had learned the hard way once before. He reached the back of the main house’s rear garden, noting the hedge there could do with a last trim of the season to keep it as smart as it had been when they arrived. For some reason he couldn’t quite pin down, he still felt an obligation to maintain the place to the same standard as it had been when the previous owners lived there, not least because the man had since died. That is not to say that the three of them weren’t gradually putting their own stamp on *Le Grand Bois*. Continuing along the border, he reached the far end of the tree meadow and turned right towards the gate to Mathilde’s field.

Geri had been rather doubtful, and was still urging caution, but he had felt they should make use of all the land they had, including the two large paddocks at the rear of the property. How his life had changed! Not so very long ago he had owned little beyond the clothes he stood up in, feeling the need to be nimble and unencumbered, as if he were still on the run; now here he was surveying his country estate and tending to the livestock. It seemed he was truly settling down.

Six months after they moved in all three of them visited a local animal refuge, looking for dogs to adopt. They came home with two *lévrier* pups, the bundle of spit and hair Elaine had fallen in love with, and a piece of paper pledging them ownership of Mathilde. As Jonathan opened the gate, stepping aside to allow all three dogs to go through, he recalled the day she arrived. A volunteer had delivered her in a trailer, and when Geri led her through the meadow to her new home, undid her halter and let her loose in the field, she had trotted and cantered around, bucking and skipping, the very image of joy.

As he fastened the bolt, he felt a soft muzzle on the back of his arm. He grinned and turned, stroking her brown and grey head, squeezing her furry ears gently.

“Good morning, Mattie.”

The donkey nuzzled his hand and began to root around his jacket pocket.

“Hey, greedy. What makes you think those carrots are for you?”

Only when she was satisfied he was completely treat-free and her manger was topped up was Jonathan allowed to continue his patrol unmolested, checking the fencing around her field. At Keith’s suggestion, they had installed CCTV cameras at each of the furthest corners of the property. So far, all they had seen were foxes, badgers and beech martens; interesting, but not a security threat, happily. Bending to check a section of the wire, Jonathan felt a twinge in his back. He smiled, recalling a good-naturedly competitive game of *pétanque* in Doué the afternoon before. Claude, the *maire* and their guardian angel, had invited them to his house for Sunday lunch and a match, and they had enjoyed his hospitality enormously.

Claude Bisset was one reason why this place had been shortlisted for them. He was a retired French Army colonel who had connections to the military secret service, the *DRM*. Keith knew him and had
taken Jonathan, Geri and her mother to meet him the day after they moved in. Claude had been made privy to their true status, watched over them and helped with any administrative or bureaucratic difficulties. He was also great company, and he and his young family were charming and extremely welcoming.

Leaving the dogs to play with each other and Mathilde, Jonathan did a quick scout around the other paddock. He smiled as he thought about the on-going conversation he and Geri had been having about getting a pony.

“I don’t know, Joe. I mean, Mattie’s OK, but she’s no trouble. We don’t really know what we’re doing, or even if… well, let’s wait for a bit, shall we?”

He understood her reluctance. They had plenty of time and space, but none of the expertise. He had not told her, but he had been researching courses in horse care surreptitiously, just to see if he could gain the necessary knowledge. And they had met a few people who kept horses in the time they’d been there, most of whom he was sure would be willing to help. As he crossed the empty space he thought about where they might build a stable and tack-room. *In the event…*

He whistled and three bright-eyed, lolling-tongued faces appeared, slinking under the gate.

“Get in, you hairy herberts!”

He started the engine and they all bounced along the path between the rear fields and a line of conifers. Pulling up outside the old carriage house he chided DeeDee.

“Now, young lady, next time, you need to ask your Mum if it’s OK to come out to play, right?”

Elaine stood chuckling in the doorway, having heard his approach.

“She’s a little devil! I swear, I turn my back and she dematerialises! I don’t know how she gets out half the time…”

“She does love to be with Bailey and Caps.” He bent down and ruffled the bitch’s fur as she and her two bfs wandered past into Elaine’s kitchen.

“I know. Got time for a cup?”

“Time is one thing I am not short of.”

Jonathan found a seat and watched as his mother-in-law busied herself making coffee and getting out the biscuits. Her laptop was open at the other end of the table. She had taken up writing, and her latest project was coming up with the text for a collection of Geri’s photographs that they were hoping to get published. As she put a mug in front of him, he nodded at the computer.

“How’s it going?”

Elaine sighed as she sat down. “OK, I think. But her work is so good I feel inadequate. And some of the images are beyond words.”

Jonathan laughed breathily and nodded. The walls of their house were filling up with framed prints, and they had converted one of the attic bedrooms into a darkroom for her. When not otherwise occupied, Geri could usually be found up there, developing, printing, or sitting at the computer working on her digital pictures. She was never idle, no more than he was. He sipped his coffee and looked at Elaine. The two have them had reached a sort of détente over the last two years; he felt he was gradually earning her trust, and Geri’s too.
He glanced at his watch.

“T’d better get on. Jude needs to leave for the school straight after lunch. I can finish what I’m doing later.”

Heading for the hangar, Jonathan glanced up at the house and Geri waved from the window. His heart swelled as he saw Michael was in her arms. My son. My wife. My family. He swallowed quickly and gritted his teeth. He had thought this would pass: the sudden, overwhelming emotion that still gripped him daily.

And the fear.

The vile, nauseating, gut-wrenching fear that this would not, that it could not last. That he, the husband-and-father-formerly-known-as-Jonathan-Pine did not deserve this. That he would f*ck it up, hurt her; harm her. Harm them.

So he fretted about the fences, checked the video feed, emailed Keith and had monthly chats with Claude. He had occasional nightmares in which Tabby or Frisky appeared. It was not rational. There was no sign of any activity that might lead the wrong people to them. All three of them had been keeping strictly to the proscribed parameters: Jonathan played the wealthy country gent, looking after his land and enjoying nothing more risky than some sailing on a reservoir, the local wake boarding park and rock climbing in a gorge an hour away; Geri had begun to take photographs for fun again, and was hoping to get a couple of collections published, and once a week she volunteered to help the village schoolchildren with their English; Elaine had joined the craft club run by a local British woman, was trying her hand at writing and took DeeDee to weekly agility classes.

The dogs jumped out of the trailer as he parked it and followed him as he walked across the garden to the back door of the utility extension, where the boot room was. After shedding his wellies and washing his hands, he passed through the laundry, hearing baby Michael giggling in the next room as his mother sang.

“Round and round the garden, like a teddy bear…”

She was kneeling by his changing mat, on the rug between the two armchairs that sat either side of the terrace door. Her son was smiling and kicking his legs as she cleaned him up.

“Keep still, Micky-P! You’re wearing your poor Mum to a frazzle, you little monkey…”

Jonathan paused and observed them silently as the dogs brushed past him and made their way to their beds in the corner. Michael Peter Ash: named for your two long-dead Grandads. Let’s hope wisdom has skipped a generation. Geri leaned down and blew a raspberry on the baby’s round tummy, making him squeal with delight and grab handfuls of her hair.

“Ow! Let me go, hooligan!”

Jonathan crossed the room in a few swift strides and gently uncurled his tiny son’s fingers from the glossy brown tresses.

“Hair-pulling in this house is your mother’s prerogative, my lad.”

Michael heard his father’s voice and kicked even harder and faster, reaching out to be picked up.

“Hold on a minute! Let me get the bloody nappy on first.”

Geri wrestled with the writhing seven-month-old, but managed to get the nappy fastened and his little...
jeans pulled up before he escaped, one sock almost off, commando-crawling across the tiles to where
his father had gone to pour himself a glass of iced water. He put it down and crouched, waiting for
his son to reach him.

“Hello, young man.”

The baby pulled himself into a sitting position and again held his hands aloft, demanding to be
picked up. Jonathan obliged, roaring and laughing; two little legs kicked wildly as their owner was
swung high and jiggled. The loose sock went flying. Two pairs of grey-blue eyes met and Jonathan’s
toothy grin was returned with a gummy one: just one little white peg broke the smooth pink so far.

Jonathan felt a rush of warmth fill his body. It happened every time. Whatever the fear was, however
real or imagined, likely or improbable, the minute he was with them it was gone. He was there,
present and focussed on his wife and his son. Nothing else mattered, nobody else had any power
over him. All the lonely years in rooms as bare as a monk’s cell, all the empty hours when he had no
one and nothing were behind him now. He was grasping the happiness, as Angela had urged him.

His former handler had been able to visit, as she had hoped, just once so far, soon after Michael was
born. In a private moment she had asked him if he ever missed the excitements of his former lives.
The question had floored him momentarily. Miss it? Miss the gut-wrenching fear of combat? The
constant stress and permanent insomnia of my hotel career? The utter terror of the mission to stop
The Worst Man in the World? The terrible loneliness? But she had smiled slightly and he saw what
she meant: this quiet, rural life was somewhat lacking in adrenaline. He had shaken his head and
answered her honestly.

“Not at all. Whatever thrills and glamour there might have been, they’re no match for any of this.”
He had looked over at his wife and baby, and her mother sitting beside them in the beautiful sitting
room of their gorgeous home. What on earth could be better than this?

He tucked Michael against his side and picked up his glass, sipping at an awkward angle to keep it
out of reach. The baby babbled and wriggled in his attempt to touch what his daddy was holding.

“I’m really looking forward to him walking,” Geri said gloomily as she cleared up the changing mat,
“it’s bad enough now when he can hardly reach anything.” Jonathan’s eyes began to twitch around
the room, spotting a thousand dangers. “We might have to use that playpen Mum bought.” She saw
his jaw stiffen. “Just when we are cooking or whatever. Just to be safe, love.”

“I suppose.” He looked down at his son and kissed the top of his head, his lips brushing soft brown
curls. We will keep you safe, my boy.

Geri laid out some lunch while Jonathan put Michael in his highchair. After they had eaten, he
cleared away, she gathered her materials and got ready to go to the école primaire. Father and son
waved her off from the window as she drove past them in her BMW and turned right, heading for
the road. Jonathan stood there for a while after she had disappeared, just enjoying the feel of his child
in his arms and the tranquillity of the view. The only sounds were the hum of the fridge, the soft
snores of two greyhounds and Michael’s breathing. The baby yawned, prompting his father to take
him up for his nap.

He put sleepy Michael down in his cot and covered him with a thin blanket; the room had been
warmed nicely by the autumnal sunshine. He tiptoed out and pulled the door almost closed. The wall
on the landing outside was the spot they had chosen for the old family photos, and Jonathan lingered
by a fuzzy, faded, brownish picture of a curly-haired blonde woman cradling a small boy in a blue
babygro. He brushed the glass with his fingertips.
Then Jonathan Pine, no longer the lost boy, the lonely, the forgotten; no more the unloved, the unloveable walked down the stairs of the home he shared with his family. He passed the mirror Geri had hung by the hall table and saw himself. Dark blond curls, a darker neat beard: a few lines on his forehead above eyes that he hardly recognised. They were changed; more profoundly than his coiffure or his facial hair. For all that he was living under a false name in a foreign country, all the mystery that had first beguiled the young Geri Muir was gone. Looking back at him was a man without doubts.

A man who knew his place in the world at last.

Chapter End Notes

I must, of course, pay tribute to the creator of Jonathan Pine, the sublime John Le Carre. He created such a fascinating and irresistible character that I felt I had to explore him further. I hope you will feel I have done him some justice.

Works inspired by this one: Kindred Spirit by LateStarter58

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