

A SECRET THAT WILL CHANGE HIS LIFE

GOLD BEACH



Elizabeth Jones

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**A novel based on real events
written by Elizabeth Jones**

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*To Britain,
a country I adore.*

*To Elwyn and Peggy Elizabeth, my second parents,
whose lives have inspired this story.*

*And to Philip,
the love of my life.*

*Nobody can return to the past
and make a new start,
but anyone can change,
and create a new ending.*

Prologue

On the 14th of November, 1940, the Luftwaffe almost destroyed Coventry. From that day on, few cities escaped the German bombers though those most affected were the most industrialised: London, Southampton, Liverpool, Glasgow, Birmingham... It seemed Hitler's plan was to conquer a country in ashes. He may have thought that when it came to rebuilding it in his own image, the job would be easier that way. What he probably didn't count on was facing a country whose character had been shaped by its own rather unique history, a history of which the British people felt hugely proud, and which they would fight tooth and nail to preserve.

It was during those days of darkness, pride and hope when this story began.

Chapter 1

PHILIP

Moffat, Scotland, July 5th 1975

Mr Young told me I should be more aware of signs. His tone of voice and the pats on my back as we said goodbye reminded me of my first father. Ever since I had run away to Lichfield with a tiny suitcase, he had treated me as if I were someone special to him, which I actually was, although I had no awareness of that then. I told him he was right, and to humour him, I added that I would follow his advice, while inside me I was thinking “*What on earth is he talking about?*” However, as I walked into the pub that day with Isobel, to the sound of Pink Floyd's latest song, “Wish You Were Here”, I began to get my first inkling as to what he had meant.

My recent breakup with Claire had made me take a fresh look at my life. I had a family who, with the exception of my mother and little sister, I barely kept in touch with, and at thirty years of age it looked very likely I would never manage to settle down. Once Claire and I taken the decision to break up, or rather, once she'd taken it, living together quickly became unbearable, and it was clear I needed to get away from Lichfield until she had left my house for good. But where could I go without having to

give explanations to anyone? I came across the solution on a chance phone call to my mother. It seemed fate was determined to bring me back to where everything had begun.

Ever since my mother had opened her Bed & Breakfast she had never been on a summer holiday, but as luck would have it, that year she had decided to spend the whole month of July with her husband and my sisters in Saundersfoot, Wales, meaning my childhood home would be vacant to accommodate a single tenant: in short, me. Seeing an unexpected opportunity, I told her that I had been thinking I might spend some days in Moffat, and when she heard, she was speechless for a moment as if she couldn't quite believe what I was saying. I didn't need to see her to guess that she was close to tears, but when her voice had steadied, she told me that my news was a gift she had been hoping for, for many years. From my brief, grunted answer she quickly understood that I wasn't quite ready to talk about the past, so it didn't take her long to change the subject.

There wasn't a single question from her about Claire and I guessed she had worked out what had happened from the fact I wasn't giving her the usual update. While my mother always kept up with the comings and goings of the women in my life, post-Isobel, her discretion on these matters was absolute. After thanking me for wanting to spend some days at home, she begged me to stay on longer until her return. I don't know if I was simply trying to

avoid answering her, but it was at that point when I decided to ask her about Isobel.

I hadn't seen her since she made the decision that broke my heart thirteen years previously, and while I broke up with her that day as a result, I also opened up a huge breach with my family at the same time because I blamed them for the break-up. A few years later, I picked up the relationship with my mother again but never heard anything from Isobel. So I was surprised to learn she was still living in Moffat, was a much-loved teacher at the local school and strangest of all, had no partner. Was that one of the signs I should pay more attention to?

It took me nearly five hours in the Mini to cover the 233 miles that separated Lichfield from Moffat, but the journey flew by as I used the hours to try and sort out my mind a little. Pain and sadness, those faithful sidekicks to any romantic breakup, didn't join me this time. I was feeling alright and I could see some of the signs Mr Young had talked about, very clearly. I should have left Claire long ago, that much was clear. But the surprising bit was that I was feeling that teenage joy again at not being able to get Isobel out of my mind. Why had I asked about her? It seemed that the pride that had previously stopped me from framing that simple question, much less from coming home, had vanished completely. Maybe I was making the journey that had eluded me back then? Well, time would tell, I thought.

The hands of the clock were closing in on noon as I arrived in Moffat. As soon as I went through the front door of the house I had grown up in, the memories and feelings that I had managed to shut out during the previous years crowded into my head, demanding my attention. The house had been closed for a week but there was still the scent of fresh flowers in the air. I paused for a moment just to look around. Although the decoration had changed slightly, it didn't feel like someone else's home. I left my suitcase on the floor and set about opening the curtains to let in some of the bright sunlight that rather surprisingly bathed the town that day. Then I headed to my old bedroom to unpack. As I opened the door I could see everything was exactly as I had left it. A baffled half-shake of the head was all I could manage as I closed my eyes and sighed, more with sadness than anything else. How could I have hurt my mother so much? At that moment I wanted her by my side, to hug her, but as ever, we were miles apart.

I opened my eyes and shook my head again, this time more agitatedly as if to tell myself that it was time to put things right, at least with her and my sisters. In a blur of opening and closing doors and drawers, I arranged all my clothing neatly. After many years of hearing the same complaints from the lips of every woman who had been in my life, I had introduced at least an air of order to my structured disorder. I looked around again, and was surprised to

see a note I hadn't spotted at first, sitting in plain view on my pillow. It was written in my mother's hand.

Isobel. 5, Warriston Rd.

She would love to see you again.

Mum xxx

Isobel. Would she really be happy to see me after all we'd said to each other that day at the train station? I had my doubts. I definitely hadn't come back to Moffat to be reunited with her. That story was already over and done with. Maybe my mother had misinterpreted my asking about her. The only thing I was looking for in Moffat was a bit of solitude, away from prying eyes and difficult questions, at least for the next month. The inquiry about Isobel had been nothing more than courtesy. I crumpled the note and put it in my trouser pocket to throw in the bin later.

I went down the stairs like a kid late for school. As I passed through the hall leading to the kitchen, I stopped by the wooden table opposite the front door. It was just as I remembered it. There was a little bunch of dried flowers at the centre, lilac this time, tied with a pink ribbon alongside a white candle, not yet lit. To the left a picture of John with his white coat and tie, to the right a picture of Elwyn in his army uniform. The two men my mother had loved, sharing with deliberate parity, this tiny sanctuary. I stared at my two fathers. The first one I remembered fondly; I still couldn't bring myself to love the second one.

As I opened the kitchen cupboards my stomach began to murmur. If I had phoned my mother sooner, the pantry would no doubt have been full, but that was not the case. Thankfully I found something to eat and wolfed down a plateful of beans on toast along with a cup of tea. To my further astonishment, I washed up and tidied the kitchen, recalling the daily words of reproach from Claire about “plates all over the place”, and smiling at her tiny victory. It was a pity, for her, that she wasn't there to savour the moment. I went back into the hall, put my jacket on, picked up the car keys and set off for the supermarket.

In the thirteen years I'd been away, Moffat had changed considerably. I drove down Old Carlisle Rd trying to remember where the nearest supermarket was. When I reached The Holm, I turned left to head for the town centre but inexplicably, instead of carrying on, I turned into Park Circle, went round the large roundabout and took the second exit to the right. *Where was I going?* I slowed down and stopped as soon as I could to try and turn around, but by then I was clearly lost. I had lived in this town for seventeen years but it looked like I was making my first visit. I glanced around to try and get some bearings. I had stopped in front of five semi-detached houses, all of them with their little garden at the front, enclosed by perfectly varnished fences that added some slight colour to the monotonous grey facades. I searched in both directions for the name of the street. Warriston Rd? I read the name

again, eyes popping out of my head, then stretched my legs forward to feel inside my trouser pocket and pull out the note I had forgotten to throw away. *I give in Mr Young, you are absolutely right.*

My pulse raced and it wasn't hard to work out why. A false logic that was nothing more than a cover for my pride, told me that what I ought to do was to head for the supermarket and forget these foolish stories from the past. But something inside me, which I refused to call a heart, repeated her name, insistently. I looked at my watch. It was half past one. With a little luck I could invite her for lunch, I thought, planning rapidly. I told myself I had plenty of time to go shopping before 6pm. But then a glimpse of reason brought me quickly down to earth. Could I just show up after thirteen years and throw a lunch invitation around as if nothing had happened? The arrogance of thinking that this relationship couldn't affect me anymore, together with my belief in the charisma I'd developed, charming the many women that had passed through my life, all made me believe I could. By then the clouds had called an end to their truce with the sun and the sky had turned a bleak grey.

For some minutes my mind tried to find the right responses to whatever might come of this re-encounter, but although I still didn't believe it was a good idea, I wasn't feeling scared at least. I got out of the car, straightened my clothes and only as I was about to go through the gate did I remember Claire. It was just a few

hours since I had left her in Lichfield. I looked at the door and told myself that what I was about to do was *definitely* not an attempt at a new conquest; I was simply going to visit a childhood friend.

The dark clouds had now blotted out the sun completely, and shortly it would start to rain. I stood at the entrance to her new house for some minutes before finally pushing the doorbell. When she opened the door she looked at me with those wonderful, unforgettable blue eyes, and though she appeared unruffled, her mouth remained open in surprise. She pulled up the high neck of her sleeveless pullover until it covered her jaw and adjusted the knitted cardigan she was wearing to cover her bare shoulders. For a few seconds we stared at each other with nothing held back, as if each of us wanted to take in, and even admire, the changes that time had worked upon both of us. And that was when it dawned on me why things hadn't worked out with anyone else.

Isobel had become a beauty. Her skin was still as soft and white as I remembered. Her long jet-black hair had grown to cover her back in falling waves. It was all I could do not to kiss her at that very moment. The last thing I expected on seeing her again was to feel the same passion of years before, a passion I believed was long dead. For a moment I regretted bitterly the pride that had prevented me from coming back for her years ago. Mr Young's words came to life once again: *'Philip, nobody can return to the past and make a new start, but anyone can change, and create a*

new ending. ' I would have given anything to know what she was thinking just then. The silence became so uncomfortable that I couldn't think of anything better to break the ice than trying the most restrained phrase in my urban wolf repertoire, 'Let me buy you a beer at the pub.'

Without a word, she turned and disappeared inside the house. My first reaction was to think, 'You deserved that,' but since the door remained open I stood waiting, rather haplessly. Those ten minutes were as long as any in my life but when she appeared again, it was worth the wait. She had changed clothes and redone her long hair in record time. She now wore a short sleeveless dress, with a high neck and large patterned flowers stamped in vivid citrus colours. Her handbag and cardigan hung over her arm. Her long hair was tied back with a wide white headband that matched her high platform shoes and made her nearly as tall as me. The result was stunning. She locked the door and with her childish smile said, 'Let's go before the rain starts.' I looked at her and smiled, not politely, but because I felt that she had been waiting for me. And as if all those years had been shrunk to a few hours, we picked up our friendship just where I had abandoned it.

As we entered the pub, Isobel started to hum along with the Pink Floyd song that sounded above the bustle around the bar. After ordering, we sat at a table by the window and raised our pint

glasses with barely a look at each other. Neither of us could maintain eye contact. She crossed her legs purposefully and started to question me about my life. It was embarrassing to discover that she was aware of everything that had happened to me, even that I had broken up with Claire. My mother's sturdy discretion had one weak point - Isobel.

‘How are you?’ she asked with a tenderness that seemed to carry some concern.

‘Fine, if you can believe that. There are breakups that hurt and others that set you free. Luckily, this is the second kind.’

‘Have you come back to Moffat to spend the summer or just to switch off at home for a few days?’ she said as she sipped her beer.

‘I really don't know yet. I was supposed to give re-sit classes for the next two weeks, but Mr Young recommended I start my holidays, so I don't need to go back to Lichfield until the end of August.’

‘Who is Mr Young?’ she asked as if she didn't know.

‘He's the headmaster of the school where I work. He's a great person and a great professional who doesn't like scandals, so when Claire showed up at the staff meeting ranting about our breakup, and pushing her version of the truth, he called me into his office to hear my side of the story. Evidently, he said, it wasn't his intention to meddle in my private life, but he wanted to be aware of

the facts to make the right decisions. I still don't know why, but he thinks highly of me and I believe that he was actually happy that I had finished with her. He had never been a big fan of Claire. He told me he would find a substitute for the re-sit classes and that the best thing I could do was to go back to my family home and start over. So that's why I'm here.'

'But when you return to Lichfield and see her again, won't you just fall back into her arms?' she asked, clenching her jaw slightly.

'Fortunately, she has decided to return to London. She says she misses real cities.'

'Well, in Moffat she would have died of boredom, then' Isobel burst out laughing at the idea.

'Probably. In a couple of weeks, when she finishes her work at the school, she'll go back to London. She told Mr Young she wouldn't be coming back to the school next year, so, problem solved.'

'Come to think of it, weren't you worried leaving her alone in your house? What if you come back and find it empty or smashed up?

'She's hysterical but classy. She'll just collect her things and leave.'

The maturity of her thirty years hadn't affected Isobel's youthful features or her bright, almost childlike manner. The

Isobel I remembered had become a beautiful woman who hid her childhood wounds under coloured fabrics. My smile, my silence and the way I looked at her made her blush so much that she didn't take long to change the subject.

‘How did you manage to stay so long with a woman like that? At least tell me that she was good in bed because I don't get it. English, maths teacher, blonde, whatever did you see in her?’

Apparently, my mother had given her a full description. Basically, she was right. What had I seen in Claire? What did I expect to achieve with that relationship? And with the previous ones? Unintentionally I had followed Mr Young's advice to the letter. I was at the place where everything started and now that I saw her before me I knew that I was where I should be. I smiled and without stopping to look into her eyes I raised my pint to make a toast.

‘To new beginnings, Isobel.’

She looked at me for a moment not knowing what to say, her cheeks went a little red and then her lips curved into a slight smile.

‘May they be the long-lasting kind, Philip.’

We left the pub at half past six. The afternoon had passed by almost without my noticing and I even forgot I was hungry. A light rain fell as soft as dew, as we walked along familiar streets. The temperature had dropped quite a lot, so I zipped my jacket up

to the neck and decided I'd accompany her home like I used to do. On the way back the old Isobel reappeared full of that natural contagious joy. It was the last thing I'd expected but I was thankful. I don't know what I'd have done if she had acted as I deserved. As we got to her house we took shelter under the porch to avoid the rain. Unless any last-minute pretext came to mind the time for farewells had come, but the truth was, I didn't want to leave. I had missed her company so much that the hours we had spent together didn't feel nearly enough. Isobel gave me peace. When I saw her taking her keys out of her handbag, I came up with the first thing that came to mind that might let me see her again. It must have come as quite a surprise when I asked her if she fancied going fishing with me the following morning, and she gave me a sceptical look. It was a pretty tactless suggestion, but it was too late to backtrack now. 'If you're hoping that we end up like the first time you invited me you're very mistaken,' she told me.

I moved away from her shyly and said with as serious a countenance as I could manage, 'I just wanted to see you and spend the morning together, nothing else.'

She looked at me, winked and said, 'Tomorrow, ten o'clock sharp. Picnic's on me.' She waved goodbye and gave me a smile that touched the soul, and with no more ado, she closed the door in determined fashion. I stood motionless for a moment because I wasn't quite able to credit that she hadn't invited me in, but the

door didn't open again. My physical appearance and talent for seduction, which for others had proved completely irresistible, didn't seem to affect her at all any more. The summer looked like becoming my own re-sit for an exam I should have passed long ago.

Remembering I was still hungry I went back to the car and set off for Maria's Fish & Chip shop on the High Street and the feast I felt I deserved. I would find time to stock up the larder the following day.

My childhood home was located on the outskirts of town. Once you went past the rugby field, you turned first right into a dark, narrow road that led through a dense forest. The sunlight could hardly get through those tall, imposing trees. After about a mile, a clearing opened and a building came into view. The house had undergone several changes through the years. It had been built initially for arable farming but also had some areas for keeping livestock. When my father purchased it, he transformed the building it into his surgery and his home. The land passed into the hands of the town council and the stables were turned into basic shelters for parking and there extra rooms there too which extended the house. Before he died he converted it into the Bed & Breakfast that it was nowadays.

As I came in I was immediately grateful to someone that the heating had been on for a while, because it was already quite cold outside. I had forgotten that summer in Scotland became a mild winter at nightfall. I took off my shoes to avoid dirtying the lush spotless carpet in the hall, hung my jacket on the coat stand and walked to the bedroom to put on some slippers. Before leaving the bedroom, I stopped for a minute by the window. If there was one thing I liked about that room it was the view. I drew the curtains to admire the leafy mountain slopes, always green and full as if they were there to protect the rear of the house. There were sheep scattered across the hillsides, grazing peacefully in their own private heaven. During the month of July, a fringe of light could be seen all night over the mountaintops, as if dawn was always on the point of breaking.

I left the curtains open and went to the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea to help warm me up. It wasn't even 8pm and I didn't have any plans other than watching TV and going to bed. Fortunately, Claire didn't have my phone number so she wouldn't be bothering me with her insults, recriminations and repeated suggestions that I should see a psychiatrist. I started to really appreciate the solitude of the house and congratulated myself on coming.

When I walked into the living room I felt a slight difference of temperature. It was definitely chilly in there and I gave an

involuntary shiver from head to toe. I looked around as if searching for something but of course all I saw was furniture, curtains and china ornaments. The lamp on the side table by the sofa was on, which was surprising because I couldn't remember having touched it. As I walked towards the sofa, I refused to accept that the sudden flush surging up from deep inside me, was being caused by fear. *Fear of what, exactly?* I thought. I sighed and shook my head to clear out any of that kind of nonsense. I turned on the TV, flopped onto the sofa and was about to lay my cup of tea down on the table when I caught sight of something.

My mother's diary was resting beside the lamp, almost in wait, I thought. I couldn't believe that she had left it there by accident, with her always being so careful about protecting the words she wrote to herself. Unlike other occasions, I opened it this time without a second thought. I quickly thumbed through the pages right to the end.

June 23th, 1975

I know I lost Philip years ago. And the worst thing is that now I don't know how to get him back. I owe it to him that my life regained its sparkle, yet I let his life grow dark. What we believed we were doing for his own good ended up pushing him away from me. How could I have kept him at such a distance? Everyday I'm ashamed of my attitude and I only hope that fate will bring him

back to me soon so I can make up for my mistakes and perhaps help him find his way. I know who can make him happy. Am I a terrible mother for not telling him what to do? I'm sure he wouldn't follow my advice anyway. I need him to come back and I want us to be together again. Please Philip, come home.

Not for the first time in my life, her diary made a huge impact. My mother's words were heartbreaking and made me ache to see her again. I closed the book slowly and put it back on the side table. At that moment the last thing I wanted was to bring all those memories back so I turned my eyes to the TV to forget what I had read, but by then I was already well on my way down a path that seemed to be full of signs, just as Mr Young had predicted. The show *Top of the Pops* announced some new act. On stage 10cc broke into I'm Not in Love. The lyrics of that song summed up my own situation, I thought. I kept a photo of Isobel too. The lamplight started to flicker as if the bulb was about to blow, and then it died leaving the living room lit only by the light from the TV. I cuddled up on the couch as if fit were cold in there, but actually, and I was ashamed to admit it, I was scared. As the song kept repeating, '*Big boys don't cry,*' I glanced at the diary and remembered the first time I had seen it. I was only fourteen years old at the time, but it was a moment that determined the course of my whole life.

Back then, the trunk my mother kept in the attic was my favourite plaything, then an obsession and finally a container for the most shocking discovery of my life. What would have become of us if I hadn't found out what was hidden inside? Although I still regretted the adventure that began that day, I never strayed from the conviction that had moved me at the time, that my mother deserved to be happy.

As a child I always believed that I had to protect that trunk because I was convinced there was treasure inside, and in a way, there was. On days when the winter chill stopped me from playing in the garden, I would spend my time in the attic fighting an imaginary army with the wooden sword that my father had made for me. During those childhood years I never asked my mother what was inside, because my own fantasies assured me it was full of jewels, but when I grew up and asked her to show me the fortune I had been protecting, she only told me that there was nothing but old clothes inside, and she never seemed to find the right moment to open the mysterious trunk and show me. If her words were true, why did she keep it locked?

Some years later I went from being its most ardent defender to becoming its most obsessive looter. I tried to open it in a thousand different ways and none of them worked. If my mother had learned of my futile attempts, she certainly would have been pleased at how safe her secret was, and even happier to see my

total lack of talent as a thief. Nor could I find out where she was keeping the key. The only option left to me was to break the lock, but if I didn't want to get a good telling off I would have to pretend that something had fallen onto the trunk and broken it. As it turned out, there was no need to carry devise an ingenious plan. One of those twists of fate which sometimes intervene in our lives, gave me the opportunity to change the course of all of our lives.

Thinking of my mother, I remembered her permanently melancholy look, her black hardback notebook where she claimed to write recipes that never got put to the test, her early morning visits to the attic when she thought I was sleeping, and that trunk which seemed to have a life of its own. All of these had become mysteries which I was sure I needed to unravel. I had to break that lock.

I had thought that my mother's melancholy was due to my father's death, but then I began to remember what she was like while he was still alive and one of her most characteristic features was the way she seemed at times to be absent from us, sitting quietly with a faraway look on her face.

My father, John McCoolant, had been the doctor in Moffat all his life, so it was easy for him to diagnose the condition that ended his life. One of the advantages of his profession was that, from the first moment of diagnosis, you could establish, more or less, the amount of time you had left to live. So he spent his time

sorting out our futures. When two years later I asked my mother the cause of his death, her answer only sowed further doubts. No one dies of sadness, I thought.

I recall the five years that life allowed me to enjoy my father's company, as my favourite childhood period. It seems hard to believe that time hasn't worn away the memories of my time with him. His patients were his life and the two of us were his passion. When his hours of practice were over, he would leave his coat on the chair, loosen his tie and run up the stairs to play with me for half an hour while my mother prepared dinner. After eating, they tidied the kitchen together, made two cups of tea and we all went into the living room to watch some TV. We always sat on the sofa in the same way. He would sit in the corner because he always had something he was reading under the light of the table lamp. My mother would lie down with her legs resting on a pair of cushions and her head on my father's leg and I would curl up on his lap until I fell asleep. Although it seemed more dream than reality I was always aware of how tenderly he used to tuck me into bed and kiss me goodnight.

If I had to pick three days out of those five years I wouldn't have a single doubt as to which I would choose. The first one would be the day my father held my hand and took me to the porch to make my sword. After he'd cut the wood with a handsaw, we sanded it down, his hands over mine, until we got it smooth and

splinter-free. We gave it several layers of varnish to get it gleaming and shiny and then left it to dry until the following morning. That year, Father Christmas brought me a pirate hat, a patch for my eye and a scabbard to sheathe my sword.

The second day would be the first time he took me fishing. My mother prepared us a basket with sandwiches and biscuits, a flask with tea for him and another one with milk for me. Despite the brilliant sun that shone that Sunday morning, she stayed at home. As we set out for the river she waved us goodbye and smiled happily. On my part I felt as if I was already a big boy, but when I saw how the first fish fought to get back to where it belonged, I got so afraid that I hid behind my father's back to avoid watching that agonising struggle. I think he threw it back into the river anyway, guessing that I wouldn't be keen to eat it later. I suppose he thought that in time I would come round and appreciate his greatest hobby.

The third day was the day I said goodbye to him.

Two days before his death, my mother asked me to go into his bedroom to say goodnight. His slow heavy breathing looked painful for him. I remember perfectly how pale his face was and how much older he looked. The perpetual smile drawn on his lips couldn't hide the sorrow or indeed the pain he was obviously feeling. He hugged me and covered me with kisses with the little strength he had left. He was actually saying goodbye and although it was hard for him to talk, he summoned the strength he didn't

have to tell me a few things that have stayed etched in my mind ever since.

‘Are you sick, dad?’ I asked him anxiously.

‘No, I just have a little cold, that's why I have to rest. But before I go to sleep I need you to promise me something.’

‘Whatever you want, dad,’ I told him and I got closer as if he was going to tell me a secret.

‘Promise me you'll take care of your mother and you'll do what it takes to make her happy, no matter what.’

At my tender age it was almost impossible that I could have known what he meant, but those words made me feel like a big boy again, so I promised him without hesitation, unaware that I had just taken on the first mission of my tender life.

‘I promise, Dad,’ I told him as I crossed my heart with my thumb and sealed the promise with a kiss on my finger just as he had taught me.

‘Good boy. And one last thing, my son. Promise me you'll never forget how much I love you and how happy you've made me.’

I promised him without really knowing what he meant. My mother embraced me but she needed a moment to recover her voice.

‘I'll see that he never forgets you, John. Come on, Philip, kiss Dad goodnight.’

As I drew near to him I saw some unwilling tears trickle down his face. I kissed him and waved a child's goodbye as I left the room.

The night he died, my mother had put me to bed early but his moaning kept me from getting to sleep. I got up, patted barefoot to their room and stood at the doorway, unnoticed. Death was something unknown to me so far, so when I saw my father lying on the bed with his eyes closed I thought that he was just sleeping. My mother was on her knees beside the bed. She was holding his hand and her face rested close to his chest. She was sobbing and kept repeating over and over again, 'Forgive me.' Some years later I would understand what she meant. My father's chest fell and rose with rasping breaths as if he was about to draw his last at any moment. Suddenly he opened his eyes and seemed to turn his head towards me, though probably it had simply fallen on that side. It was scary but when I saw him smiling at me, I relaxed. His chest fell slowly and he never moved again.

Some months before his death, my father had turned our house into a guest house or Bed & Breakfast, as they began to call it after the war, but it took my mother six months from his passing to get the place ready for business. At the beginning of that August our life changed from one day to the next. On practically the same day as our first guests started to appear, I set foot in the local school for the first time and met Isobel. Although I had been

looking forward to my first day ever since my mother told me that they would teach me to become a man, but when I left her at the door and a stranger took my hand to walk me inside, panic took over and I screamed in terror. I don't know who was crying more, my mother or I, but my new teacher knew my mum and she allowed her a few more minutes to say goodbye again. She hugged me and managed to quieten me down a bit with some comforting words. 'Remember what you promised your Dad,' she said, 'you're going to study and become a man so you can take care of me when I'm older.' Of course I remembered. I rubbed my eyes to dry away the tears, pecked my mother on the cheek and took my teacher's hand again as I walked into the classroom full of new purpose.

From the very first day the Bed and Breakfast was never short of guests. From Monday to Friday I was of little help, but weekends were different. My mother wouldn't wake me up, but I would get up as soon as I heard her in the kitchen. After a quick wash and comb-through of my rebellious curls, it was on with some clean clothes and then dash downstairs to serve breakfast and provide our guests with a little morning conversation. Everyone seemed charmed by the dimples that appeared when I smiled. Later, while mum cleaned the rooms and changed the bedding, I would wash up. I had to do it standing on a chair until I grew tall enough to reach the sink unaided.

Saturday afternoon was my favourite time, because after lunch we would go to the park to play with Betty, the border collie we had adopted when my father died. We'd stroll by the river until dinner time and looking back I'd say it was the only time I saw my mother genuinely happy.

The house was never closed for guests except for a particular day: the 6th of June. For the whole day my mother seemed very lost in thought, and as year followed year I learned to respect her silence and understood it to be a day for us to commemorate my father, which in reality it was. She used to get up early in the morning and even though she would walk slowly across the attic floor trying not to wake me, the boards always creaked under her feet. When I heard her coming down to make breakfast, I got up so we could have it together. Across the hallway near the kitchen, there would be a white candle already burning on a small table by the door, just next to a tiny bunch of dried flowers held together by a ribbon, and a photo of her husband that she had put there.

I would tiptoe into the kitchen and sit at the table without so much as a good morning, so as not to interrupt her with her thoughts. After placing a bowl of porridge next to me, she would crouch slightly to take my face in both hands and look me in the eyes with a smile of deep melancholy. For several seconds she would lose herself in each tiny feature of my face as if on that day,

there was some peace to be found there. A kiss would follow and then breakfast, usually in silence. As I grew up questions came into my head that I never dared ask. What did the 6th of June have to do with my father? It wasn't his birthday, it wasn't the date of his death. Could it be the day they met? The answers were not long coming.

The 6th of June 1959 began like all the previous ones, but it was to be a life-changer for Isobel and I. Dawn was breaking when my mother went upstairs to the attic and though her stealthy footsteps woke me up I curled up under the covers and waited for her to go down to the kitchen. Not even an hour had passed when I heard Betty barking desperately. I sat up with a start, alarmed by the barking but more so by the sound of Geena, crying for help.

Geena was Isobel's mother and my mother's best friend. Like so many women, she had lost her husband in the war and had had no option but to raise Isobel on her own. Although she was a beautiful young woman she hadn't yet met a man who could live up to the memory of Gareth. She was a cook at the pub in town, and since the day my mother had opened the Bed & Breakfast, she had worked mornings at our house, both to help her friend out and to earn some extra money. Isobel and I were the same age and so were classmates, but it wasn't until that day that our real friendship began.

I jammed my feet into some trainers and ran down the stairs to the front door with my mother right behind me. She had become a superb nurse during the years she was married to my father and no-one in Moffat treated cuts and wounds as well as her.

‘Geena! What's wrong?’ asked my mother, as she held her shoulders trying to calm her down.

‘Please come and help me!’ she shouted with no little desperation, her eyes flooding with tears. ‘There was an accident, a pan of boiling water fell off the stove and spilled all over my daughter!’

‘My God!’ spluttered my mother in anguish, as she ran inside the house to get her first-aid kit. Betty ran in frantic circles around her as if offering to help while Geena repeated over and over, ‘My little girl,’ with the sort of heart-wrenching sobs that made me tremble at the thought of the pain Isobel would be suffering. She was hiding her eyes with her hands as if to hide her crying from me. I came closer to her, not knowing what to say to console her so I just held her tightly as she seemed to be on the point of collapsing to the floor at any time. She clung to me fiercely, overcome with anxiety and no little desperation. When my mother came out again, she literally dragged Geena away from me and ran to the front gate to get in the car. Geena let herself be taken and I stayed at the door not sure what to do until I saw them

disappearing down the road to town. Betty sat beside me, raised her paw to stroke my hand and uttered a soft, sad moan.

As I said, Isobel and I were not great friends back then. We were classmates but I hardly exchanged a word with her at school. Right then though, I felt I couldn't sit idly by and do nothing. It was clear to me I had to get dressed, get my bicycle and head round to her house in case my mother needed me. At fourteen I was old enough to learn how to dress wounds. But as I was going up to my room to change my clothes, the trunk flashed into my mind. My first thought was that the most important thing was to attend to Isobel, or at least be on hand, but then I reconsidered whether this in fact was the opportunity I had been waiting so long for. I decided there was no harm in going up to the attic to check whether the trunk had its padlock in place. Betty followed me. I climbed the stairs slowly as if aware of the mistake I was making, but I pushed on steadily, nevertheless. When I reached the trunk and saw no lock on it, my eyes closed, partly, I admit, in fear. Betty started to bark but not loudly, and she padded back and forth as if telling me to get out of there. I squatted down and began to scratch her behind the ears.

‘I need your help, Betty. I’ve just got to see what my mother keeps in this trunk but she mustn't know, so warn me when she comes back. Understood?’

Betty went to the window, stood up on her back legs and leaned on the frame. She looked at me and waved her tail energetically as if to say “ready when you are”. I said, ‘Good girl,’ and slowly walked to the trunk. As I stood over it, I knew that what I was about to do was a direct betrayal of my mother's trust, but even though I did feel ashamed of my behaviour, there was no stopping me. As I paused for or a moment I was thinking that if she hadn't thought fit to share with me what she kept inside, there had to be a reason, but then maybe it was true that she just kept old clothes there and it was my own wild imagination which made me believe I would find some guilty secret locked inside. These thoughts battled away, one in favour of opening and the other dead against it. How could I please both sides and at the same time, get rid of some of this anxiety? The solution popped up quite suddenly. Before lifting the lid, I promised myself that whatever I found, I would never disclose to my mother the fact that I had opened the trunk, telling myself that in that way her secret would still be safe. It was a pretty thin excuse.

I knelt facing the trunk. The padlock was on the floor along with the key. I lifted the lid and held my breath as I looked inside. Lying at the bottom of the trunk I found just three things: a pair of shiny black tap shoes, a perfectly folded blue dress with short sleeves, and a pair of white socks. I sat back open-mouthed and pretty disappointed. I must have looked very foolish just then.

When I did react, it was just to close my mouth and frown. What a blow this was. For a start, who did these clothes belong to? As far as I knew, my mother had never been a tap dancer. When I recalled all those years of trying to open that trunk I had to laugh. How could I have doubted my mother? Still smiling, I leaned on the bottom of the trunk to stand up when quite unexpectedly it gave way and my hand pushed through to what seemed to be some sort of false bottom. I leaned in again to remove the piece of wood, laid it carefully on the floor beside the dress and shoes, and looked inside.

It was all very neat. Numbered and arranged in order, there were twelve black hardback notebooks, just like the one I'd seen her use to write her recipes in. Alongside were some photographs, a handwritten note and five letters still inside their respective envelopes and tied together with a pink ribbon. I picked up the note and read it greedily.

'Yet it is necessary to hope, though hope should always be deluded, for hope itself is happiness, and its frustrations, however frequent, are yet less dreadful than its extinction.' —Samuel Johnson.

Love,

Daddy.

I put it back in its place and took the first photo to have a closer look. On it were two couples, embracing in a park. Everyone was smiling except one of the women. I recognised nobody so I put the photo back in its place and picked up some others wrapped in faded pink paper. The first one was of a young soldier who was smiling broadly and sporting two healthy dimples identical to mine. On the back there was something written: ‘Dream of that first sunrise we’ll see together when we never have to be apart again. Birmingham, May 21st, 1944.’

The second photograph brought still greater discoveries. The young lady in a dress identical to the one lying beside me, was my mother. I had a look at the back and could make out the following lines: ‘The day this photograph talks back to you, is the day I will stop loving you. Birmingham, May 2nd, 1944.’

How much my mother had changed in those fifteen years. There was no doubt that time had left its mark and I looked again at the photographs and the dates. What did it all mean? Who was that man? Her first boyfriend? If I had been looking for answers in there, all I had found were more questions.

Still holding the photograph, I tried to remember details about my parents living together. Although I had only been five years old when my father had died, I still remembered moments from our lives then. I knew I was happy and I thought we were a happy family. Was there some connection between the man in the

photograph and my mother asking for forgiveness when my father died? I wasn't ready to believe that she had loved another man at that time. My father didn't deserve such a thing. By now angry and absolutely indignant I put the photo back in its place. Whatever my misinterpretation of the facts, there was no doubt that at that moment I hated my mother. I slammed the trunk shut as if I wanted to hurt it. Betty gave a start but kept her mind on the job I'd given her. I pressed clenched fists against my face to block any unwanted crying but my tears were already making their own way and there was no stopping them. I thought of going downstairs to put some distance between myself and all the unpleasantness, but I stopped. I thought again of the recipe books and wondered why she would keep them under lock and key? Wouldn't it be more logical to keep them in the kitchen? Betty looked at me in wonder but followed my steps back faithfully.

When she saw me opening the trunk again, she went back to her guard post. I stared at the notebooks uncertainly and was now a little nervous. I didn't know which to pick up first, but since they were numbered it seemed sensible to start at the beginning. There was a date on the first page: March 5th 1944, followed by some perfect handwriting. 'Brenda has told me his name, it's Elwyn...' There was no sign of any recipes in there. I turned a few more pages. 'He told me that he's setting off for the South

tomorrow to join the army'... My heart began to race. I was holding in my hands my mother's diary.

I looked at the window but Betty was on full alert in case she returned and poor Isobel was forgotten. In front of me there were twelve notebooks which had to be read to the end, though I knew that as soon as my mother came back I would have to close the trunk again. That wouldn't do. I looked at the padlock and the key and an idea came to me. I hurtled down the stairs followed by a racing Betty, and ran to the porch, where my bicycle lock was hanging from the wheel of my bike. I grabbed it and flew back up the stairs, this time to my room in search of the spare key I'd stored somewhere when I bought the lock. For probably the first time I cursed myself for not having listened to my mother and her nagging about keeping my room tidy. Where on earth had I hidden that key? After pointlessly throwing around almost everything in the room, I finally came upon a box where I kept my marbles and catapult, and there it was. I gave a grateful sigh. It had been my mother who had said I might need it someday and how right she was. I ran back up to the attic followed by my now utterly disoriented pet. I left the lock and key in the same position as I had found my mother's lock, and put hers in my pocket to hide away later. A quick glance through the window confirmed that for now things seemed to be under control so I plunged back into my mother's secrets. Betty went back to her post and I settled down on

the floor with the intention of reading for as long as Isobel's misfortunes would let me.

The first diary was a sequence of notes headed with dates. The notes described decisions she had taken or moments which had been important to her and which she wanted to remember.

Birmingham, May 21st 1944

Dear diary,

I've taken a decision. No one knows, I haven't even told Brenda. I'm just telling you because I know you'll keep my secret. I'm going to spend the night with him. I've been thinking about it a lot but I've finally made up my mind. I've arranged to meet Elwyn this evening to say goodbye and early tomorrow morning he'll be setting off South to join the army. What if the same thing happens to him that happened to my father? What if he doesn't come back? If you could speak you would probably tell me that I'm only a sixteen-year-old child, but as Brenda's mother keeps saying: 'In war time you grow up faster.' I feel like a woman who is hopelessly in love and who knows what she wants. And what I want is to be with him. I haven't told him yet and I don't know where we'll be staying either, but I'm not going back on this. Any punishment that my aunt will hand out for staying out all night is the least of my concerns, I don't care because the worst thing that could happen to me would be to never see him again.

Birmingham, May 22nd 1944

My dear diary,

I'll never forget as long as I live, the night I shared with Elwyn yesterday. I can only say that he is and always will be the love of my life. I wish this war would end soon and he would come back to me and never leave again. When I finished work at the bakery, my aunt sent me to my bedroom without dinner. I don't want to write down all the things she said to me here, because I don't want to repeat them. Thank goodness Peter gave me two scones this morning, I'll eat them when I finish writing. All the stuff she said barely registered, because it's not true. Today I realised my days in this house are numbered and I have to write down everything Peter told me. I understand so many things now. I knew there had to be some explanation to justify my aunt's behaviour. But nothing of what happened is my fault. I can only rely on Brenda and Peter until Elwyn returns.

Birmingham, June 25th 1944

Dear diary,

I've just got back from hospital. This morning, when it was my turn to check the lists of the deceased, the thing I've been dreading all this time, happened. I saw his name. My legs turned to jelly and I staggered. Two men lifted me up as I began to cry uncontrolledly. Without a word of thanks, I summoned up what little strength I had and ran outside.

I didn't hear it. No one heard it. There was no warning siren. Only as I flew through the air and landed on the floor, did we hear the blast of the bomb. I was taken to hospital and Eileen let my aunt Jennifer know that I was there. I think she only came in to see if I was dead. The doctor who saw me told us that miraculously, I had escaped with a few bruises that would heal soon, and that as far as the baby was concerned we would have to wait and see over the next few days. I am pregnant with Elwyn's child.

We have just arrived home. My aunt has told me to leave the house as she refuses to feed and raise someone else's child. I don't know where to go. If it wasn't for his child that I carry inside me, I feel I would take my own life right now.

By now my heartbeat was crashing along like drums setting the pace in a rowing boat. My breath raced and a cold sweat sprang

from my forehead. Everything was getting out of hand. I was struggling to believe I was reading about my mother's life, though it did begin to explain those moments when she would appear very absent. Nobody could forget such a past, much less get over it? I was haunted by endless questions that didn't appear to have any answer. What had happened on the 6th of June? Did my mother eventually give birth to that child or did she lose it after the explosion? Where did she go when her aunt threw her out of the house? My first thought was that somewhere not too far away, I had a brother, but reading the story, it seemed impossible to believe that my mother would have abandoned him. So, I leapt to the conclusion that the child had never actually been born. But when did my father come on the scene? When did they meet? When was I conceived? As I went through the dates again counting on my fingers, it didn't take me long to come to the painful conclusion that I could possibly be that child.

It was Betty who suddenly interrupted my thoughts, barking excitedly. I didn't bother to check through the window to see whether it was my mother or not, but instead put the notebook back quickly, replaced the photographs exactly as they were, and returned the false bottom to its position. I closed the trunk carefully, patted my pocket to check I had the lock and grabbing my loyal guard's collar, before running down the stairs as if the

devil himself was after us. As we reached the entrance hall my mother came through the door.

‘Philip, darling, you scared me! What's wrong, love? You look pale.’

I ran to her arms crying. My desperation was absolute. I couldn't tell her I had discovered her secret, couldn't ask her to explain what I had read, and worst of all, I couldn't ask her who my father really was.

‘Calm down darling, Isobel is fine. The poor child has suffered a lot but the painkillers I've given her will let her rest a while. Geena will bring her here every day to change the dressings, but unfortunately, I won't be able to prevent her skin from being marked forever. Luckily, the boiling water didn't touch her face, but her neck and right breast are scarred.’

My mother pushed me away a little to hold my face and look at my eyes. She rubbed away my tears with her thumbs. ‘Promise me that from now on you will do your best to keep her from feeling lonely. I want you to be her best friend. Can you promise me that?’

‘I promise Mum, and I'll take care of you too, and do my best to make you happy.’

My mother gave me a look of surprise. ‘What's all that about, Philip? I am happy. I've got you.’

I hugged my mother again tightly, unable to stop crying. She held me in her arms and tried to soothe me with her kisses. My adventure was just beginning.

Chapter 2

ISOBEL

Moffat, Scotland, June 6th 1959

Isobel's accident almost made her forget what day it was. She was so worried about what had happened that she was moving around as quickly and nimbly as she would on any working day. Fortunately, because of the date, we didn't have any guests, and that Saturday we didn't go walking by the river with Betty either. However, the candle would burn throughout the day, flickering out only much later as night fell.

About the author



After her debut with *The Day I Met Hugh Grant*, Elizabeth Jones is back on the literary scene with her second novel *Gold Beach*.

A lover of Britain and its history, she never imagined that she'd end up marrying a World War II soldier's son. Her marriage not only allowed her to travel to the locations

where this story takes place, but also to become part of the family of a veteran of the Normandy Landings.

The stories first-handedly experienced by her second parents Elwyn and Elizabeth have been the inspiration behind the creation of this novel where fiction and non-fiction are combined in this emotional story.

Booktrailer: <https://youtu.be/tTonLKgljbQ>

Meet the real protagonists at this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Op9eilzUVjY>

Aunque la historia de esta novela es fruto de la imaginación de la escritora, está basada en las vivencias reales de Elwyn y Elisabeth vividas en los años de la guerra y en los años que Philip, su hijo, vivió en Lichfield. En la actualidad, Elwyn y Elisabeth viven en esta ciudad.



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