

# The Summer Son

By Vicki Jarrett

It wasn't as if she'd pushed him. It just felt that way.

Linda could feel the small bones of Jonathan's shoulder blades through the thin material of his t-shirt as she placed a hand on his back to guide him into Wendy's house.

'What time will you be back?' he asked, his dark, serious eyes searching her face.

'Six o'clock,' she said, trying to sound matter-of-fact. 'I'll be back by six. Have fun and be good.' She landed a kiss on the top of his head.

Wendy smiled encouragingly and Jonathan went in, drawn along the hallway by the sound of a television playing cartoons, casting one backward glance to his mother before disappearing from view.

As she pulled away from the kerb, Linda twisted the car's radio tuner, found something mindless and loud, and sang along until her voice stopped cracking. She would not arrive on her first full day at work in over eight years with smudged mascara. She gripped the steering wheel, trying to erase from her palm the imprinted memory of Jonathan's fragile bones and the feeling of having just pushed her only child off a cliff.

'You're doing the right thing,' Yvonne reassured her over coffee at the office.

'I just feel so guilty. He needs a mother, especially now.'

It had been six months since Stewart ended both his own life and the comfortable existence enjoyed by his wife and son. They had been an average suburban family. Stewart worked in pensions and she kept her hand in by showing the occasional property while Jonathan was at school. They shopped at Tesco's and holidayed in Spain. They were happy, averagely happy. Then, at 8am on an otherwise unremarkable Tuesday, Stewart had driven into a brick wall at sixty miles an hour, without his seatbelt on.

The insurance people found no fault with the car's breaking or steering, or any skid marks at the scene. He wasn't drunk or mentally unstable. He didn't leave a note. Linda half hoped she would uncover money problems, or a clandestine affair - something, anything to offer an explanation.

'Jonathan has a mother, Linda. But you need to work. Or, you can sell up, get a one-bedroomed flat and mother him full-time over the chicken nuggets and oven chips, if you'd prefer. And he can join the local knife gang in a year or so.'

Yvonne was right. Wendy was a blessing and had come into their lives exactly when needed.

She'd been at the funeral, although Linda wasn't exactly clear on why. There had been a lot of people there that day, squeezing her hands and avoiding her eyes. They met again months later, by chance, in the supermarket. There was something about Wendy that invited confidences. She had a wide, pale face framed by thick auburn hair and sprinkled with freckles. Her voice was softly sing-song and she smiled often, showing strong, even teeth. Linda found herself spilling out all her worries about Jonathan, the house and work.

'I know exactly how you're feeling,' Wendy had said, giving her arm a sympathetic squeeze. 'I was widowed when my son was around the same age as your Jonathan, so I know how it is. Why don't you and Jonathan come round for a visit?'

Wendy had moved to the area last year and lived less than a ten minute walk away in a comfortable semi-detached villa very much like their own. In the sitting room, a framed photograph showed a man and a boy standing squinting into the sun. Linda glanced from the picture and met Wendy's gaze.

She nodded in confirmation. 'Yes, that's Paul, my husband, with our John. That was taken just a few weeks before the crash. John's...out just now.' Wendy's voice wavered, she blinked slowly, her green eyes darkening. Then she gave herself a shake and smiled broadly at Jonathan. 'Why don't you come into the kitchen with me and I'll fix you a sandwich?'

Linda wasn't surprised to learn that Wendy worked as a childminder. And it seemed like incredible good fortune that she was looking for work. Before long it felt obvious that Jonathan should spend his days with Wendy over the summer holidays while Linda worked full-time, solving both of their problems. Jonathan munched passively on his sandwich and nodded.

'Hang on there, love,' said Wendy as they were leaving. She licked her thumb and wiped a smudge from Jonathan's cheek. Linda cringed. She knew he hated that. He would have accused her of 'being gross' but Jonathan didn't seem to mind, and even turned to wave and smile at Wendy from the gate. Always a self-contained boy, he hadn't asked much about his dad's accident and, if she was honest, Linda was relieved, since she had no answers for him. She was glad he had taken to Wendy. It made everything so much simpler.

The days stretched to weeks and as the summer wore on, their new lives expanded to fill the space left by Stewart so completely, Linda struggled to remember how things had been before. She worried about spending so much time away from Jonathan, who seemed more distant than ever, but he was getting older, more independent, he was just growing up. It

would be childish to resent the growing bond he had with Wendy. This was simply the lot of any working mum.

It was the small things that niggled. Jonathan's new favourite place to eat on their rare days out together was now a tacky fast food place she'd always avoided. He'd also started using some of Wendy's sayings. 'Everything happens for a reason,' he told her cheerfully when their planned trip to the seaside was rained off. Determined to salvage something from the day, Linda took pictures of him grinning over his burger and chips.

'He's really changed,' commented Yvonne holding the print at arm's length, 'he's put on weight, hasn't he?'

Linda supposed he had, but he could stand to gain a bit, he'd always been too skinny, like her.

'His hair's got a bit of colour too. Must be all that time in the sun.'

Linda looked again at the photograph. The faint reddish halo around the edges of Jonathan's hair was just an effect caused by the camera flash. Back at her own desk, she pulled an older photo from her purse and placed it alongside the new print. She must have been more preoccupied with work than she'd realised. Kids change so fast.

When she collected Jonathan as usual, she tried not to compare the hug Wendy received in parting to the vague nod with which Jonathan greeted her, but she couldn't help it, and it hurt. At home, she searched his face over dinner, tried in vain to get him to look at her.

'I think I'll just go up and read until bedtime,' he said, retreating to his room. She sat downstairs late into the night flipping through old photo albums. Was that really her sitting in the sun with her husband and baby? She searched her memory for a trace of how that day might have felt but found nothing. None of it felt real, those people no longer existed.

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Yvonne took in the dark shadows under Linda's eyes, pulled a chair over to her desk and lowered her voice. 'You're not still worrying about Jonathan, are you?'

Linda rubbed a hand across her eyes. She had eventually fallen asleep on the couch, the photo album on her lap, and slept badly. 'It's probably just my imagination.'

'What?'

'He's just changed so much,' Linda blurted. 'I think he's actually starting to look like her.'

'What? Like Wendy?' Yvonne was incredulous.

'I know it sounds crazy, but listen. You mentioned his weight and his hair, but that's not all. His eyes were like mine – now they're turning green. And his teeth, always a bit squint like his dad's? Now they're perfect. *And* he's getting freckles.'

Yvonne looked at her for a couple of seconds before responding. 'You're right,' she said, 'that does sound crazy.'

'I know! But he's just *different*, he's...' Linda searched the air above her head for the right word, 'happier,' she finished, her voice trailing off.

'And that's a bad thing now, is it?' Yvonne laughed.

'Well no, obviously not. Of course I want him to be happy. It just feels, wrong...'

'And it's not because of you. You're not the one making him happy.' Yvonne gave her a 'case solved' look.

Linda sighed. 'Perhaps you're right.'

'Look, why don't you take the rest of the day off? Pick him up early, take some time together, relax. Come in tomorrow when you've had some rest. I'll cover for you.'

'Thanks, Yvonne. I'll do that.'

Linda hurried from her car to Wendy's gate, her eyes on the house, and nearly collided with an old woman coming out of the house next door.

'Friend of Wendy's, are you?' The woman had the look of someone who never had enough opportunities for a good chat. 'Isn't it lovely to see her so happy again? Goodness knows, after everything she's been through, she deserves it.' She shook her head. 'A terrible thing. Just terrible.'

Linda agreed politely. 'Yes, terrible.'

'Losing a child like that. It'd send anyone over the edge. Still, that little lad has certainly brightened her up. I don't know how his mother can bear to be parted from him. These career women!'

'Ah, yes,' Linda mumbled and attempted a laugh which came out like a bark. Losing a child? The old woman was obviously confused.

'I'll not keep you then. Nice to meet you.' She hoisted up her bags and started off down the street.

The door to Wendy's house stood ajar. Linda raised her hand to knock but stopped at the sound of laughter from the back garden. She peered round the side of the house and saw Wendy and Jonathan lying together on a rug in the middle of a lawn dotted with daisies. She looked back to the open door. She wondered if she should. Perhaps just a quick look around. She didn't know what she would find; something, anything, to explain the emptiness she felt expanding in her stomach.

She slipped inside and went into the front room. On the dining table was a half-finished jigsaw of a retriever with a pheasant hanging limply in its jaws. She went through to the

kitchen: some crumbs, a sticky knife and a jar of peanut butter sat on the worktop. Surely she'd told Wendy that Jonathan had a nut allergy? At least, he used to.

The window of the front room looked out over the garden and she watched the two of them for a few stolen minutes. They were a picture of normality. She scanned the room. Nothing untoward: kids' toys, a pile of folded laundry, a spider plant sprouting a little miniature version of itself.

A sudden cloud brushed past the sun, rearranging the patchwork of light and shade laid across the room.

It was then that she noticed the photograph of Paul and John had been replaced. In the same frame, was a new shot of Wendy with the boy, both of them smiling into the sunshine with matching grins. Linda had never actually seen Wendy's son in the flesh, he'd always been either in his room or out somewhere.

She moved closer and studied the boy's face, so close that the photograph became just dots, which swam then resolved, like an optical illusion revealing only what had been there all along. She stumbled backwards gripping the edge of the table, sending jigsaw pieces tumbling to the floor. The boy in the frame was Jonathan, her Jonathan, her son.

Outside, they were making daisy chains. Jonathan reached out and dropped a fuzzy white halo onto Wendy's head. She laughed and hugged him. Linda's stomach clenched into a tight knot as vertigo uncoiled from where it had been waiting in the emptiness. Although it seemed she was now viewing the scene from a great height, Linda could still make out the freckles on the back of Wendy's hand as it rested on Jonathan's back, holding him close.

It wasn't as if she was really standing on the edge of a cliff. But it certainly felt that way.