

POLLY COURTNEY

the day i died



Could you
fake your own
death to
start again?

The publication of Polly Courtney's debut novel *Golden Handcuffs*, a fictional exposé of her career in the Square Mile, earned Polly acclaim in the *Observer*, *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Independent*, *Guardian*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Evening Standard* and many other publications. Her second novel, *Poles Apart*, came out in 2008 and is an eye-opening depiction of life as a young migrant in England today. Aside from writing, Polly works on various sports-related web ventures including *Girls in Football.com* and is a keen footballer, playing for Acton LFC. Polly is also part of a semi-professional string quartet, *No Strings Attached*, an all-girl ensemble that plays all over the UK. She has a Masters degree from Cambridge University in engineering and lives in London.

For more information about Polly go to pollycourtney.com.

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Thanks to Charlotte, Natalie, Vanessa and everyone else at St Christopher's who helped me create the fictional Fairmont House and all the Dunston's characters. St Christopher's is a charity that supports and encourages children, young people and vulnerable adults to realise and achieve their potential.

Thanks also to my infallible agent, Diane, to Kesh and the rest of the team at Avon, and of course to Chris.

1.

She came to with a jolt. Someone was pressing a finger against her neck.

“You’re alright. Take it easy, OK?”

Her eyes slowly focussed in the dim morning light and she propped herself up on one elbow. A man in a luminous yellow jacket was crouching over her.

“Steady now... Slowly.” He reached round to support her and shone a small torch in her face. She tried to twist away but her muscles felt all spongy. There was a noise like a hundred car alarms going off at once. And the people... There were people everywhere.

“Okaaaay,” he said, clicking the torch off and rocking back on his heels. “You’ve had a bit of a shock, but nothing serious.” He gently hoisted her into an upright position.

“Derek, over here!” cried someone above the din.

The paramedic gestured that he was on his way and took another look at the girl.

“Here,” he said, grabbing what looked like a crumpled jacket from the gutter and shaking off the grit. “Sit on this – you don’t want any more cuts and bruises, do you?”

She allowed him to slip it underneath her and for the first time, looked down at her body. Her palms were grazed and bleeding slightly, like a child’s after a playground fall. Her bare feet were scratched too, probably from the shards of glass that littered the street. But it wasn’t her skin she was

looking at; it was her clothes – or lack of. Tugging at the stretchy material of her dress, she tried to cover the tops of her thighs, only to find that the whole garment moved down and she didn't appear to be wearing a bra.

“Once we've accounted for everyone we'll get you to a hospital and check you over properly. Can you tell me your name?”

She nodded vacantly.

The man waited a moment then repeated the question. “Can you tell me your name?”

“Derek!” the voice yelled again. “Over here please!”

Holding up a hand in acknowledgement, the paramedic peered into the girl's face. She avoided his gaze and stared out at the mayhem. The road was strewn with fallen masonry, pieces of twisted metal and broken, blackened furniture. Parts of the street were stained with blood. But she saw none of it. She wasn't listening to the sirens or the screams. Something else was occupying her thoughts.

“I think you may be in shock,” said the paramedic, standing up. “Put the jacket around you and I'll get one of my colleagues to check you over. Just wait here, OK?”

She nodded vaguely as the man rushed off, continuing to stare into space. The questions were mushrooming inside her head, multiplying, jostling and competing for space. Questions like why she was here, where the hell 'here' was, what had happened... But of all the fears crowding her mind, one was so immediate, so profound that it eclipsed all the rest.

She didn't know her own name.

How was that possible? And it wasn't just her name that was missing; it was her whole life: her background, her home, her family... Friends, lovers... Everything was a blank.

Ignoring the mounting nausea, she tried to focus, to force her memory back into action. She ran through as many names as she could think of in the hope that one might click. None did. Her head pounded and there was a high-pitched whining in her ears. The harder she struggled to remember, the emptier her mind seemed to be.

She shivered and wrapped the coat around her bare legs. Her breathing was shallow and her hands were shaking uncontrollably. The fear engulfed her all of a sudden. She looked around. It was as though she was scared of something, or someone. It wasn't just the fear of the unknown - the unknown that was her identity - it was something dark and amorphous: a paranoia that she couldn't explain. She only knew one thing for sure: *she had to get away.*

On autopilot, she grabbed the jacket from under her and stood up. Her legs wobbled and the ringing in her ears intensified. She was half-expecting a paramedic or one of the other uniformed men to stop her as she slipped away, but nobody did.

The scattered debris hindered her bare-footed progress, but slowly she picked her way down a narrow street bordered by tall buildings that seemed eerily quiet

compared to the pandemonium she'd just left. She looked back. It was a night club, she ascertained. That explained her flimsy dress. The remains of a neon sign, bulbs half-shattered, stuck out above the entranceway, which was now little more than a burnt-out concrete shell. She wondered what could have caused the destruction. A burst gas main? *A bomb?*

She slowed down, relieved to have escaped unchallenged but still feeling tense and scared. It was partly the fear of what lay ahead, she thought, but mostly it was fear of what had gone before: the huge, gaping hole that was her past and more specifically, the thing – whatever it was – that had caused her to run away.

The sun had yet to rise in the mottled pink sky and her dress wasn't providing much warmth. She shook the grit off the jacket and pulled it around her. Something rubbed against her hip as she tied the belt. The pocket was open and her fingertips brushed smooth. Leather.

Stopping in the shadows, she pulled out the wallet. *Joe Simmons*, read the name on the credit card. She leafed through the other items. Two more credit cards, one cash card, one gym membership card, a couple of other unidentifiable swipe-cards, lots of receipts randomly folded up and shoved into one compartment – definitely a man's wallet, she thought – and a post-it note covered in anonymous scribbles. Hoping that Joe Simmons was a rich man, she unzipped the notes pocket and peered inside.

Despite the anxieties, she felt a rush of excitement as she counted the eighteen twenty-pound notes. Mr Simmons *was* a rich man. And careless. Only a fool carried that much cash around with them. She slipped the wallet back into the pocket and continued walking towards what looked like a main road, wondering how it was that she could know such things as the value of money, how to read, how to add up and how to speak English, without knowing her own name. Her memory seemed to have blotted out the facts whilst maintaining the skills.

She stopped at the curb and took in her surroundings. In front of her was a leafy park, a pleasant surprise after the claustrophobic alleyways and looming buildings. She darted across the four lanes of traffic – light at this time in the morning and mainly black cabs. *Black cabs*. Again, she was perfectly familiar with such things, as a concept. She knew how they worked, what the little yellow lights meant, she could imagine herself getting into one and telling the driver where to go. She knew that black cabs were a feature of London, that London was the capital of England and that England was home of the Sunday roast and the royal family... But she didn't know whether Sunday roasts or royal families had featured in *her* life.

The park gate was locked. She looked around, not yet sure of her plan. A sign told her she was on Piccadilly. *Piccadilly*. That rang a bell. Piccadilly Circus. She knew the name. But then, she knew the names Einstein and Mozart and New York and Jesus but she didn't know what they meant to

her. General facts were fine; personal facts were a mystery. Had she been here before? Perhaps.

She quickened her step. There was an underground sign up ahead. Underground. Tubes. She remembered all that. Perhaps she could get on a tube and head out of London. Because that was what she needed to do. *Get out.*

She peered through the grating at the entrance to Green Park tube station.

“You alright there, love?” asked a voice.

She jumped in alarm. A man in a fluorescent yellow jacket grinned back at her, his face black with dirt.

“Er, um, I’m fine.”

“You hoping for a tube?”

“Um, yeah.”

He shook his head. “Bit keen, aintcha? S’not even four yet. First tube’s half-five!”

“Oh – yes, of course. Silly... Yeah...” She started to retreat up the steps. Her heart was still thumping from the shock.

“Hey. Where’s you tryin’ a get to?”

She hesitated. It was a good question. “West London,” she said, plumping for somewhere that seemed sensible but not too specific.

“Tribe, us,” he said, winking.

She looked at him. “I guess I’ll come back at half-five,” she said, perplexed. “Thanks!”

“Tribe, us!” he shouted as she hastened up the steps. She was glad of the grating that separated them. “N-ninety-seven or N-nine!”

It was only when she stopped to pull a piece of gravel from her heel that she realised her mistake. 'Try a bus,' he'd been saying. Of course. Nothing to do with West London tribes at all. She thought about running back to apologise, but as she deliberated a pair of bright white headlights swung into view.

She stuck out her hand as the double-decker powered towards her – another reflex that just came naturally – and stepped back from the road. Her jacket belt came undone in the blast of air as the bus stopped, revealing her tattered dress. She caught the momentary look on the driver's face and tied the belt in a double knot as she stepped aboard.

The driver's suspicions were clearly confirmed when she reached into the wallet and brought out a crisp twenty-pound note. He raised an eyebrow, looked at her and jerked his head sharply towards the back of the bus. She tried to poke the money through the clear plastic partition but he just shook his head, checked his mirrors and pulled out. She staggered off and climbed to the upper level where he wouldn't be able to see her.

There was a surprising number of people sprawled around the top deck, in various stages of consciousness. At the front were three inebriated girls in short skirts, talking in loud voices about faking orgasms. A few rows back was a bunch of kids in hoodies, looking mean and pretending not to be interested in the girls' conversation. There were three or four lone passengers and a guy clutching a sleeping girlfriend, semi-snoring with his jaw hanging open.

It was strangely comforting to be around people – people who were too tired or too engrossed in their own lives to think about hers. Her paranoia receded a little. She slipped into a seat near the back feeling comfortably anonymous and wondered whether that was what she was afraid of: people scrutinising her condition, trying to force the memories back into her head. Maybe that was partly it. But even as she contemplated this, the dark, unidentifiable fear crept to the front of her mind, blotting out the drunk girls and the snoring man. It was more than just a fear of people meddling; it was something else.

The girls blabbered on, discussing the merits of panting versus groaning at a volume that only applied to drunk people. They had been clubbing, she thought, just as she had. But they hadn't lost their memory – or at least, not more than a night's worth. She pressed her shoulder against the window and let her head roll back.

Jane. Kate. Louise. Sarah... She reeled through as many names as her tired brain could muster, hoping for a glimmer of recognition. Nothing. She thought about how people saw her, as a person. Was she kind? Funny? Smart? Was she honest? Was she the sort of person to steal a wallet containing three hundred and sixty pounds? That was different, though. She'd had no choice about stealing that. If she'd handed it in she would have had to tell the police about losing her memory, and then some psychologist or psychiatrist would have asked all sorts of questions, and... no, it just didn't bear thinking about.

Another worry was creeping its way through her conscience. It was the fact that she had just run away from a scene where people had been badly injured – maybe even *killed*, she thought anxiously – some of whom might have been people she knew. Nobody went clubbing on their own, did they? In which case... She shuddered. There would be friends or a sister or a boyfriend out there. Perhaps they'd been even more badly affected than her... Perhaps – no. No. She forced the thoughts out of her mind.

Her eyelids dropped shut. She had no idea where the bus would take her, but she didn't care. They were powering along a main road out of London, away from the scene, away from the questions and the prying paramedics. The window juddered against her head as her brain fought a losing battle with exhaustion. Jenny... Lucy... Rachel... She fell into a shallow, fitful sleep.

2.

The moment her eyes fluttered open, she knew something was wrong. The bus was empty and flying along a dual carriageway through fields and forests that didn't look at all like London.

She poked the crustiness out of her eyes and ran both hands through her hair. A pain shot down her neck and spine as she pushed herself up in the seat. She tried to catch her reflection in the window, but the sun was shining fully now and all she could see was a layer of translucent grime. She staggered to the front of the bus and down the steps.

"Gad Almighty!" cried the driver as she tapped on his plastic booth window. The bus lurched a little to the left, then righted itself. He looked at her and shook his head. "What da hell is you doin' in here?"

She shrugged apologetically. "I fell asleep. Sorry - I..."

"You been on dis bus all mornin'?" he demanded, slowing down for a roundabout.

"Mmm," she replied, flying sideways as they swung round. She wondered where they were. Not London, she was fairly sure.

"You comin' to the depot then?" he asked aggressively. "How was you up dere widdout me seeing, eh?"

She mumbled something about being tired and glanced through the window for a clue. There was a road sign a little way off, but too distant to read.

"Where was you wantin' to go to?" growled the driver. He seemed quite cross.

"Um..." The road sign was almost upon them; she could nearly make out the place names. "Well, west..." She strained her eyes. "Bagley," she said.

"Bagley?" he repeated angrily. "Where da hell's dat?"

She glanced up as the sign flashed past. "Radley," she said. "I said Radley."

He screwed up his face and looked at her, perplexed. "Radley's where we's at now! You was tryin' to get to Radley by gettin' on the N97? Jeez." He shook his head again. "I don't know what you's playin' at, but you better get off my bus 'fore I get done for runnin' a taxi service. I'll drop you up here."

The bus slowed down and pulled off the main road, then to her surprise, turned a corner and weaved through a series of narrow lanes that were clearly not designed for motorised vehicles, let alone double-decker buses.

"Station's up there," he barked, pressing a button that made the doors hiss open and watching her stumble out into the daylight. He was still shaking his head as the bus thundered off down the small country lane.

It wasn't clear whether Trev's Teashop, the greasy spoon that occupied part of the quaint station building, was open; it looked dark inside, although she thought she saw movement in the window as she approached.

She was about to enter and ask about her chances of a cup of tea when the door swung open and a ruddy-faced bald man in an apron waddled out.

“Morning!” squawked the man, who sounded as though his voice box was blocked, a bit like his arteries perhaps.

She smiled and watched as he set to work winding out a frilly brown awning above them, humming tunelessly to himself.

“Hi,” she ventured, watching as he straightened out one of the tassels on the awning and stopped to admire his work.

“Yes, yes.” The man – whom she presumed to be Trevor himself – brushed his hands against one another and bustled back inside. She followed him in. “I haven’t forgotten about you. You’re a tad early though, aren’t you? Not that that’s necessarily a *bad* trait. I mean, early is better than late, of course. But *on time* is preferable.”

She frowned and loitered by the counter, wondering how a café stayed in business when its owner was so rude to the customers.

“Are you... Are you open, then?”

“Nearly there, nearly there,” he muttered, switching the lights on and squeezing behind the counter to flick more switches. She waited patiently, hoping that the preparations would soon be in place for her cup of tea. “Watch and learn, watch and learn.”

She continued to wait, perplexed as to why she should watch or learn, and irritated by the man’s habit of saying everything twice.

When it was clear that the water was boiling, the mugs were in order – twice rearranged by the red-faced man – and there was milk in the fridge, her frustration began to get the better of her.

“Can I have a cup of tea?”

The man stared at her as though she’d just demanded he hand over the contents of the till. “What a presumptuous young lady!”

She stared back at him, mirroring his expression. She was the customer, for God’s sake. She’d been here nearly ten minutes. All she wanted was a cup of bloody tea.

“I think perhaps we’ll have to run through the ground rules again. Remember, I’m paying you to serve the customers here – not to sit around drinking cups of tea,” he said testily.

“I –” she started to protest and then stopped herself. The pompous man seemed to be assuming she was here to serve customers. He thought she was a waitress or something. Which might mean... which might mean he’d pay her. And if he paid her, she might be able to use the money on somewhere to live, which would mean that she could get a proper job, lead a normal life, do all the things that normal people did when they had a background and qualifications and experience and *a past they could remember*. In a moment of clarity, the plan formed in her mind.

“Of course, no, sorry.” She smiled apologetically, still thinking through the details. “I didn’t mean to sound rude. I was just asking whether, *in general*, I can have a cup of tea.

You know, like, in a quiet moment when there's not many customers, when I've been on my feet for hours... whether I can have a cup of tea in that instance."

The man looked at her, touching his shiny head and clearly trying to work something out. "Hmm."

He continued to look at her, his forehead deeply creased. *He knew*, she thought. He knew she wasn't the girl he'd hired.

"Well, in that instance... well yes, I suppose that would be OK." He nodded, dipping his head in and out of his multiple chins. "Where did you say you were from, er... sorry, I've forgotten your name."

She opened her mouth, hoping something would tumble out automatically. Nothing did. Her finger nails dug into the leather wallet in her pocket as she struggled desperately for an answer.

"Er, what, *my* name?"

He looked at her strangely. "Of course *your* name."

Then it came to her: not her name, but the closest thing to it.

"Jo," she said. "Jo Simmons."

"Oh. Right." He frowned again. "And you're from...?"

Oh God, thought Jo. Too many questions. Where on earth was she supposed to be from?

"Well, London most recently."

At least that much was true, she thought.

"But you're *foreign*, aren't you?"

"Um... My parents are."

Genius. She was getting quite good at this.

“But where—”

“Could you just remind me of the hours I’ll be working?”

He looked at her, smoothing the apron over his enormous belly, then finally replied. “Well, you’ll remember we settled on seven ‘til noon because of your classes in the afternoons.”

“My classes, yes, exactly... Seven, that’s what I thought. And I can’t remember what you said about pay. Could you...?”

“Thirty pounds a day, as we agreed,” he snapped. “Six days a week.” Jo nodded again. That was a hundred and eighty pounds per week. How much did it cost to rent around here?

“Shall I show you the ropes?”

Jo breathed a sigh of relief and allowed the bald man to give her a sweeping tour of what was really quite a basic setup: hot water tank, toaster, fridge, coffee machine, cupboards filled with grotesque sets of matching brown and gold crockery. It was clear that the man had delusions of grandeur for Trev’s Teashop.

The reference to Jo’s parents had left her feeling ill at ease. It wasn’t that she didn’t like to lie to the man; she barely knew him, and what she did know she didn’t particularly like. It was that she didn’t know what the truth *was*. She didn’t know where her parents were from – or where they were now. She didn’t know whether they knew about the night club explosion, or whether they knew she’d been

caught up in it. She didn't even know if she *had* parents. The chances were, though, there was someone out there who cared about her. She just didn't know how to let them know she was OK without turning herself in – and that was the one thing she couldn't do.

“I'll expect you to do most of the flitting between tables.” The man waved a stubby arm across the premises. She nodded again, wondering who had been flitting up until now. “Now, you're wearing black trousers, I trust?”

Jo froze, suddenly remembering that she was wearing a tiny dress and no shoes underneath the jacket. “Well, I couldn't find trousers, but–”

“Ooh, Mr Jackson! First customer!” cried Trevor. “First customer!” he said again, ushering her towards the back of the café. “Your shirt's in the store cupboard under the stairs. Quick, quick!”

It was with mixed feelings that Jo pulled the brown aertex shirt over her head. She wasn't keen on the embroidered tea cup that covered her left breast, or the fact that she had *Trev's Teashop* plastered across her front, but she had to admit that it was more appropriate than her own attire, which she was desperately trying to convert into a knee-length skirt to cover the tops of her long legs.

Along with a trowel, a plastic rhino, a sketch book and a rah-rah skirt, Jo found what she was looking for in the back of the store cupboard. She peered at her reflection in the half-light.

It was like looking at somebody else. Jo pulled at her skin – young skin, she thought, probably early twenties – and tilted her head this way and that, inspecting her face in the mirror. Her eyes were bottle green, with dark lashes that were coated in heavy, day-old makeup. Her lip was bleeding slightly. She gathered her long, knotted hair in one hand and tried to twist it into some sort of order. It was almost raven-black, with a streak of dark red at the front.

She spat on her hand and wiped the worst of the dirt off her forehead, wondering how her appearance had passed without comment by the portly teashop owner. Something caught her eye in the mirror. On the back of her hand was a splodge of blue ink. Writing. SASKIA DAWSON, it said.

Who was that? Was it her? Was *she* Saskia Dawson? If so, why had she written her name on her own hand? Saskia. It didn't sound familiar. But then, very little did. Jo tore a page from the faded sketch book and scrabbled around for a pen. Letter for letter, she copied it down and tucked it into the waistband of her newly-formed skirt.

“Ah, Jo! Go and serve table four would you?”

Jo quickly worked out how Trev's Teashop operated. It wasn't so much a tea shop as a caffeine outlet for commuters on their way into London – at least, that was how it seemed at seven o'clock in the morning. She did her best to flit from table to table, but there was only so much flitting one could do with so few seated customers and a queue for takeaway coffee that occupied most of the shop. She marvelled again at her boss' self-delusion.

“Blasted thing,” muttered Trevor, turning purple with exertion as he tried to break his way into a new tub of coffee beans.

Jo cast her customer an apologetic look and turned round. “Let me try.”

“Doesn’t work,” he said, reluctantly loosening his grip on the tin-opener. “The tub’s got some new-fangled seal thing on it. We’ll have to – oh. Right. You’ve done it.”

Jo handed over the open container and got back to serving customers, trying not to smirk. It had just been a case of employing some common sense: twisting the seal, applying some pressure and then levering off the lid.

Common sense. That was something. At least she had that. And having it gave her a clue as to what type of person she was. Her brain worked in a logical way – like a scientist’s, perhaps. She could think laterally and solve problems. It was true, she made a reasonable waitress, but she didn’t think she’d been one before. Not properly. Maybe as a summer job a few years ago, while at school... School. That was another blank.

She tried picturing herself in various workplace scenarios. Sitting in an air traffic control tower. No, too stressful. Patrolling the streets in police uniform. Too much authority. The Trevor experience had taught her that she didn’t like being told what to do. Staring at a computer screen in an office. Boring. Standing up in court dressed in robes and a wig. Not unfeasible, she thought, although she

was probably a bit young for that... Jo poured another filter coffee and sighed. She didn't have a clue.

Fortunately, Trevor seemed sufficiently unobservant to overlook his waitress' lack of footwear. Her feet were freezing and the soles were turning slowly black, but there was nothing she could do except try to keep them in the shadows behind the counter. Occasionally, he would send her to check on Table Ten, the little bench outside the café where a commuter would occasionally perch as he waited for a train or a friend, and every time, somehow, he failed to spot the bare feet.

It was on one of these errands that Jo found herself in the situation she'd been dreading. Another girl, about her own age and of similar build and colouring, was running up the road towards the tea shop, hair flying, satchel banging against her hip. She was dressed in black trousers and a cheap polyester blouse.

Jo caught her attention and stepped out to greet her. "Hi! You must be..."

"Renata," she gasped, trying to push her way into the café.

"Yes, you were due to start work at seven, weren't you?"

Jo stood in her way.

"Am so sorry," she said breathlessly. Her accent was Polish, or something like that. No wonder Trevor had been confused by Jo's fluency. "Bus was not come, so I walk, then bus come but wrong bus..."

"Oh dear." Jo smiled sympathetically. She felt terrible for doing this, but her need to survive outweighed her

remorse. “Unfortunately, because you were late, we had to find someone else for the job. It was getting busy, you see—” she gestured towards the queue snaking out of the café.

The girl’s mouth fell open. Her English wasn’t perfect, but she understood.

Jo couldn’t bear it. “But if you come back in three or four weeks we may well need another waitress.” She nodded encouragingly. “Do come back, won’t you?”

The girl muttered something in her own language and looked at the ground. For a moment, Jo thought she might march into the tea shop and demand an explanation from the boss, but then she just turned, shook her head and walked back the way she had come.

Jo wandered into the café to help with the coffees. She was filled with self-loathing. Good people didn’t behave like this. Good people didn’t steal wallets. They didn’t con innocent girls out of jobs. They didn’t reject the help of others and they certainly didn’t turn their backs on friends or loved ones who might have been hurt or even killed...

She stared into the frothing milk. It was a possibility – and one that left her feeling very uncomfortable – that actually she *wasn’t* a good person. Deep down, with everything else erased, all that was left was this. A lying, calculating, hard-hearted thief. Or maybe she was just desperate. Maybe the terror and guilt and paranoia had made her act in this way. Maybe she was just trying to stay alive.

3.

Jo's basket was filling up quickly. She hadn't eaten since, well, sometime before the explosion, presumably. She was ravenous. Everything in the shop looked appealing: cakes, bread, meat pies... She even found herself salivating over the Budgens own-brand malt loaf.

The cashier girl was politely trying to extract herself from a conversation with the pensioner, but he clearly wasn't seeing the urgency.

"Well it is August," she said patiently. "It gets quite warm. D'you need a hand?"

The man attempted to balance his shopping on his walking frame and started to release his grip on the checkout.

"I need new legs!" he cried as the load slipped off for a second time and he started all over again.

Jo wondered where she usually did her shopping. She had a feeling that old aged pensioners and conversations about the weather hadn't featured much in her life up until now. London, she thought. That was where she had lived. The paranoia - the ugly, dark fear of whatever it was - had originated in London.

She tried again to determine what *had* featured in her life. Friends. A mum. A dad. Brothers. Sisters. School mates. Neighbours. Any or all of the above. They'd start missing her soon, she knew that. It was selfish to vanish without a

word to any of them - but this was the problem. It seemed too daunting, too dangerous to turn herself in. She couldn't face the idea of going to the police. And without going to the police, she couldn't let people know she was OK - unless she could somehow enlist the help of Saskia Dawson without giving herself away - whoever Saskia Dawson was.

"Do you know of any B&Bs around here?"

"Any what?" asked the girl, mechanically scanning the pack of chocolate digestives.

"B&Bs. Bed and breakfasts. You know, places to stay."

The girl looked momentarily enlightened. "Oh, right. Um..." She scratched her greasy forehead. "No. Sorry."

"Is there another town nearby?" asked Jo. She wondered whether she'd be better off asking one of the deaf pensioners instead.

"Yeah. Abingdon. That's four pounds fifty-four." She glanced at the growing queue.

"Thanks. Is that far? Can I walk there? Do they have clothes shops, that sort of thing?"

The girl shrugged and took Jo's crisp twenty-pound note. "I guess."

"Thanks." Jo sensed that she wasn't going to get much more information out of the girl. She held out her hand for the change. It was shaking badly, she noticed, and sweating. The fear had receded a little since she'd come to Radley but it was still there, looming in the back of her mind.

"That's fifteen forty-six change."

Jo took the money and tipped it into Joe Simmons' wallet. As she was leaving, she glanced at the shelves behind the cashier's head.

She stopped and looked harder. Suddenly, she knew what had featured in her life before now – what would cure the shaking hands, the sweating, the anxiety. She knew what would relieve the nagging sensation that she hadn't been able to identify up until now. And the revelation brought on a fresh wave of nausea.

“Sorry – one more thing.” She reopened the wallet.

The girl gave her a look that she'd previously shown the old man.

Jo picked out the cheapest bottle, paid the cashier and rushed out.

The high street was empty save for a couple of hunched-over residents shuffling from shop to shop. Jo perched on the wall by the parish hall and drained the bottle of water, then quickly decanted the vodka. She was desperate, but she wasn't desperate enough to swig from inside a plastic bag – not around here.

She took her first sip. It burned her insides, ripping at her throat and leaving an after-taste that was instantly familiar. The reactions of her body and mind were at odds. It was good to have fed the need, allayed that symptoms, but it was frightening to think of the implications.

OK, so she had had quite a shock and everyone knew alcohol was known for curing the shakes, but this was more

than the shakes. This wasn't a taste for vodka; it was a *need*. Her body was craving the stuff.

She stared at the parish notice board trying to make out where Radley was in relation to Abingdon and Oxford. She couldn't focus. All she could think about was this new, abhorrent revelation. She swigged and thought. Swigged and thought. What did this mean? What sort of life had she been living up until now? And why was she so damned scared about turning herself in, coming clean? What had happened in her past? Who *was* she?

Jo took another swig and delved into the plastic bag. Her fingers curled round the little notebook and then felt about for the biro she'd nicked from the cashier. That was another thing. Why had stealing the pen come so naturally to her? It wasn't the incident itself that troubled Jo - the biro leaked and was worth nothing anyway - it was the principle. She was a thief. The pen wasn't the only thing she'd pinched, either. First, there had been the wallet, then the Polish girl's job... It was a worrying trait.

She pushed aside her concerns and glanced at the food in her bag. Drinking on an empty stomach was stupid, she knew that much. But the eating could wait. It had to. Before she did anything else, she had to straighten out her thoughts - pull together what she knew. She tore off the cellophane wrapping and started to write.

Night club near Piccadilly

Live in London?

Impatient, intolerant - feel wrong in
small village

Thief - comes naturally. Survival?

CAN'T STAY IN LONDON - WHY?!

Jo swallowed another gulp, larger this time. She knew she should probably find this Abingdon place, buy some clothes, some shoes, find a place to stay... but the writing was helping. It was as though, by pouring everything she knew into the pages, the notebook was becoming her. It was filling up with all the details and characteristics that only a few hours ago had eluded her. Soon, she hoped, she would be able to piece together who she really was.

Alcoholic?

But healthy - slim, good skin etc.

Going through bad patch / partying too hard?

Maths, common sense

She stared at the words and felt a twinge of resentment; it was as though this life, this personality, this *person*, whoever she was, had been thrust upon her. It wasn't fair. She didn't want to be an alcoholic. She didn't want to have this paranoia. Like a teenager taking umbrage at her parents for conceiving her, she wanted to scream: "It's not my fault! I didn't *ask* to be the way I am!" But she had no one to scream at.

Jo closed the notebook and slipped it into her jacket pocket, willing herself to screw the lid on the bottle and think about something else. Her hands were shaking less now, she noticed. One last swig. She stood up to study the notice board. Her feet wobbled beneath her. Grabbing onto the hand rail, she pulled herself steady. *Street Lighting in*

Gooseacre, she read. *Rats in Lower Radley*. *Mahogany Dresser for Sale*. Jo squinted up at the area map.

Abingdon was a brisk twenty-minute walk, according to the directions – although Jo wasn't sure how brisk her walking would be after half a bottle of vodka. Everything around her had become fluid: the pavements, the shops, the clouds. She dropped the bottle into the bag and then turned and nearly fell down the parish hall steps.

Jo wondered how long the amnesia would last. What if the memories never returned? She reached for the vodka, then stopped herself. There was a panicky sensation inside her, the sort you got in a nightmare when you were desperate to run away but your legs wouldn't work. Perhaps she would never find out who she really was. Jo forced herself to breathe normally and tried to ignore her yearning. Actually, given what she had seen of her character so far, there was a part of her that wasn't sure she *wanted* to know who she was. And more specifically, she wasn't sure she wanted to find out why she'd run away from everything this morning.

Abingdon's selection of shops was slightly broader than that of its neighbouring village, but not much. Jo had expected to recognise some of the high street stores – such as they were – but she felt reasonably certain that Choice Buys and Stylz weren't big names in UK fashion.

“Sorry Miss.”

Jo blinked back at the security guard whose arm was blocking her way. He shook his head at her. She stepped back, waiting for an explanation. It was four o'clock in the

afternoon and the shop was swarming with people. It couldn't be closed.

Then she realised. She saw herself through the doorman's eyes. She saw the crazed expression on the dirty face, the bare feet sticking out from the bottom of the crumpled raincoat. She smelt her breath and spotted the telltale plastic bag. *She* wouldn't have let her into Stylz of Abingdon.

The mirror in the McDonalds toilet was made of some sort of brushed metal that wasn't particularly reflective, but even so, Jo could tell it was an improvement. She had tried to simulate a shower by rubbing the accessible parts of her body with hot water and the strange foamy syrup she assumed to be soap. Her hair was still knotted and the soles of her feet seemed to be painted black, but that was no bad thing. From a distance, it almost looked as though she was wearing shoes.

An hour later, Jo had acquired a couple of non-descript cotton tops, some cheap underwear, a pair of black trousers and some shoes for less than thirty pounds, which seemed suspiciously cheap – even to someone half-cut. She looked presentable, if not fashionable.

Jo tugged at the trousers so that they covered her shoes, wondering what type of clothes she had worn before. She still had a sense of her likes and dislikes – not a memory, exactly, more a natural bias towards certain styles. Just as she'd known in the supermarket that she liked fruitcake but not mushrooms, she knew that her preference was for the

bootleg cut and sleeveless tops. Today, of course, there were other constraints, like money and the requirement for her clothes to double up as teashop uniform.

She perched on a low car park wall, allowing herself a short break but very aware that needed to find a bed for the night. Her head was throbbing and her limbs felt heavy and weak – not just because of the vodka. It was the homelessness. It was being in a strange place. The pressure to find somewhere to stay before nightfall, the running away, the loneliness... All these things, combined with the stress of the morning's events and all the unknowns, were weighing down on her, crushing not just her spirit but also her physical strength. Breathing deeply, she pushed herself up and followed the signs to the Tourist Information Office.

She arrived just in time to see a Fiat Punto reverse from its spot in the empty car park and zoom off. Jo peered through the tinted windows of the building. The clock said one minute past five.

“Fuck,” she said out loud. It made her feel a bit better.

A young man walking past with a briefcase looked up. “I beg your pardon?”

“Um. Hi. I just... I'm looking for a stace to play.”

The man frowned. “Sorry?”

“A – a place to stay, I mean. Is there a bed and breakfast or something around here?”

“D'you know, I'm not sure!” He chuckled as though it was quite amusing that she would have nowhere to sleep tonight. “Of course, there's the Premier Inn, but that's on

the other side of town, and..." he looked her up and down. "I think it's about seventy pounds a night."

Jo nodded irritably. The man was offensive and useless. "Thanks."

"Ooh, there *used* to be a place on the way into Radley. Above the convenience store half way along Radley Road. That's quite a walk though, and I'm not sure it's still running. I have a feeling there's somewhere around here, too - Bath Street?" He waved his hand vaguely. "Hmm, sorry."

The man strode off, leaving Jo squinting through the darkened glass of the Tourist Information office. She knew it was futile, but she had to make sure she'd explored every avenue. Maybe there would be a list of nearby guesthouses pinned to the wall or something. A leaflet lying open on a desk, or a phone number...

The walls were covered in large, laminated posters of church spires and Oxford colleges. A banner hung from the ceiling advertising guided tours of the old County Police Station and on every surface was a little plastic box containing guidebooks in a variety of languages. *Bienvenue à Oxford! Добро пожаловать в Оксфорд! Willkommen in Oxford! Bienvenido a Oxford!*

Jo's forehead made contact with the dirty glass and she closed her eyes. Then she opened them again, realising something. She looked again at the nearest set of guidebooks. *Bienvenido a Oxford!* she read again. *Aprenda*

sobre una de las ciudades más hermosas en Inglaterra. Welcome to one of the most beautiful cities in England.

She could speak Spanish.

Jo pulled away from the window and looked at her own reflection. It wasn't much; it wasn't a huge revelation, but it was something. She reached for her notebook and scribbled it down. Walking along Bath Street, her newfound sense of elation gradually diminished as she realised that there were no signs of hospitality in the vicinity – not unless the B&B was masquerading as a Chinese restaurant or a night club called Strattons.

She stopped to consider her options. The hotel was a last resort; Joe Simmons' money wouldn't last forever and she wasn't sure when she'd get paid for the waitressing work. A bed and breakfast, or better, a youth hostel: those were her only real options. There was a remote chance that the guesthouse above the shop was still operational – if indeed it existed at all – but she knew the chances were slim.

She was obviously going to have to ask around. But how long would that take? And who would help her? The only people nearby were four lanky youths who were practising the art of suspending their trousers from beneath their buttocks.

Jo wondered what day it was, and whether the night club would be open later. She briefly considered the option of going out drinking, relying on meeting a guy and being invited back to his for the night. She dismissed the idea immediately. It was too risky, too ridiculous. She took a

swig of vodka to help her think. She had to find people to ask. Perhaps the shopping centre would be a good place to start.

The idea of clubbing stayed with her as she hobbled back to the town centre, the cheap plastic shoes wearing away at her ankles. It was the alcohol, she thought. Her imagination was running wild. She was picturing a scene: her at the bar in a club, finishing her drink. A guy leaning sideways towards her. He was an older guy, maybe twice her age but not unattractive. It was so vivid, the scene, almost as if... *it was a memory.*

She was remembering something from before the blast. Jo could feel him tapping her elbow, offering her a drink. It wasn't her imagination; it had happened. And she was remembering.

Jo stopped and shut her eyes, trying to summon more. Maybe it would all start to come back to her now. She stood there, waiting for the scene to re-materialise, but it wouldn't come; she was trying too hard.

Jo walked on, distracted but with a newfound sense of hope. It wasn't much to go on, but it was a start. Perhaps this flashback was the first of many. She reached for her notebook and laid it against a wall, scribbling down what she'd seen.

The next two people she asked had no idea about local guesthouses and the third just looked at her suspiciously and hurried away. For the first time all day, Jo started to lose faith in herself. She had no one to call. She was alone in

a strange town where nobody wanted to help her, and before long it would be dark. She had limited cash, and even if she did opt to blow seventy pounds on a hotel room, she'd have to find it first. She found herself on the road back to Radley, hoping, despite all the odds, that the man was right about the B&B. The alcohol was blurring her thinking and she could hear the blood pounding round her head. Walking into the store, she headed straight for the bottled water.

"Evening," croaked the elderly woman behind the till. Despite the wizened face and white hair, she had incredibly sharp-looking green eyes.

"Hi." Jo hardly dared ask the question. "Could you tell me... Is there a bed and breakfast above this shop?"

The woman looked slightly taken aback. "Goodness! Who told you that? There *used* to be."

"Used to be?" Jo's hopes fell away. She had walked up another dead-end.

"Well, yes. About ten years ago!"

"Oh." Jo paid her for the water. "And are you sure it's not running any more?"

The woman laughed. "Quite sure! It was my little business, until they made me shut up shop..."

"Oh, right." Jo nodded and broke open the bottle of water. "I don't suppose you know of any others around here, do you?"

The woman looked at her. Jo could feel her eyes roaming the cheap clothes and knotted hair.

"I'm new," Jo explained. "I - I arrived this evening. I was supposed to be staying with a... a friend, but that didn't, er, happen." She could hear the lack of conviction in her voice and tried to assert herself. "We fell out. And I've got a job in Radley that starts early in the morning so I have to stay nearby."

The woman raised an eyebrow. Jo held her breath. She had gone into too much detail.

After a long pause, the woman spoke. "I'm afraid I don't know of any this side of Abingdon," she said. "I'm sorry."

Jo nodded and made to leave.

It was a last-ditch effort, but as she leant on the door, she looked back at the woman. "Who made you shut up shop?"

The shrewd green eyes narrowed for a moment. "The council. You know. Rules. Regulations. Paperwork, fire hazards. That sort of nonsense. They don't like me because I blocked the ring-road development going through my shop - but that's another story."

Jo nodded, seeing an opportunity. It was a long shot, but her only one. "Do you... still have the rooms and everything?"

The woman's expression slowly changed to a sceptical smile. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Jo."

"I'm Pearl. Pearl Phillips. Are you really stuck for somewhere to stay?"

"Totally. I've tried everywhere. There's nothing this side of town - I've looked," she gabbled. "I can pay. I've got

money. Like, twenty, maybe twenty-five pounds a night? I'm desperate! I wouldn't tell anyone. D'you think maybe—"

The woman smiled and held up her hand. "Calm down, Jo. Let's call it fifteen."

4.

“Cornflakes or toast? That’s all there is I’m afraid.” Mrs Phillips looked at her expectantly from behind the kitchen counter.

“Toast please,” she replied in a daze. Her head felt heavy. It was half-past six and Jo had slept badly, despite her exhaustion and the comfortable bed. Her mind had been racing with anxious, panicky thoughts that became less and less rational as the night wore on. Then at two a.m., having finally drifted off, she had woken with a jolt, her breathing shallow, covered in sweat, her pulse racing. The nausea had taken hold as she lay there willing her brain to shut down, ebbing and flowing for what seemed like hours. Sometime around dawn she must have dozed off again, only to be woken by the sound of birds and a blocked nose, which, on later inspection, turned out to be a nosebleed.

The landlady started ferrying jams and spreads onto the table and arranging them in an arc around her guest. Jo mumbled her gratitude, distracted by the incredible number of cat replicas that covered every shelf and surface in the room.

“You like cats, then.”

There were china cats, furry miniature cats, cat teapots, cat postcards... Even the woman’s slippers were shaped like cats.

Mrs Phillips looked up and smiled. "Very observant. Yes. I'd get a real one if I knew it wouldn't out-live me." She whipped the toast from under the grill and slid it onto a plate. "There you go. Gone are the days when a full fry-up came as standard, I'm afraid... Mind you, the marmalade's home-made."

Accepting the slightly burned toast, Jo's eye was drawn to the stack of newspapers on the table – presumably copies that would later be sold in the shop. Her stomach flipped as she considered the possibility that the explosion she'd run from the day before might warrant coverage.

"Pick a channel." The landlady pushed the remote control over and nodded at the small TV. "I like to see my news in print, but you probably prefer the television." She started flicking through the first of the papers.

Jo scrolled through the stations in search of some news, eventually settling for a mindless chat show. She started to butter her toast and tried to guess Mrs Phillips' age. Physically, she looked quite old, maybe seventy, but her mannerisms belonged to a younger woman. She was lithe and full of energy.

"So, what brought you to Radley?" She aligned the pages of the first newspaper and moved on to the second.

Jo jiggled her head, implying that she had too much toast in her mouth to talk. *A bus.* A night bus on its way to the depot. She couldn't tell the truth, and she'd already told Mrs Phillips about the job at Trev's Teashop. Nobody would move to Radley in order to work in a place like that.

“A friend,” she said finally. “I, er, wanted to get out of London for a bit – change of scene, you know.” She took another bite to buy herself some time. “Um... My mate offered to put me up for a while, so I found myself a job – the job at the tea shop – and then...”

“Then you fell out with your friend,” finished the woman, nodding. “And this friend – was it... a *male* friend, by any chance?” She raised an eyebrow.

Jo looked at her. With a surge of relief, she realised that Mrs Phillips had assumed the most plausible story of all: that Jo had just split up with the boyfriend who she’d been planning to live with. She nodded.

“I see. Ooh, kettle’s boiled. Tea or coffee?”

Jo opted for coffee, relieved. Mrs Phillips was a perceptive woman, she thought. And nosy, too. Jo knew she’d have to stay on the ball to avoid getting caught out by her own lies.

“Have you always been a waitress? I’ll leave you to add milk and sugar.”

Jo stuffed a large piece of toast in her mouth and made a winding gesture with her hand. Why hadn’t she thought about this? She should have invented a background. Sooner or later, people would start asking – of course they would. And she had to stick to a story. She’d already told Trevor her parents weren’t English... What other nonsense would she come up with?

“No,” she said, still chewing on the toast. For some reason, she could only think of one possible career path that

involved part-time waitressing, and she wasn't sure it would stick.

Eventually, it was time to swallow.

"I'm an actress."

"Goodness! Really? Would I have seen you in anything? What sort of acting?"

Jo shrugged modestly. "It's just minor parts, mainly - nothing big." She was trying to remember the name of a low-budget film or series that would seem plausible for a small-time actress. Nothing sprang to mind.

"Go on," the woman goaded excitedly. "Try me. I might've seen you in something."

Jo shook her head. This really was testing her acting skills. "No really - it's been mainly screenplays and short films, like..." She thought frantically, trying to make up a name that sounded like a title but wasn't likely to already be one. "The Goose," she said finally.

Mrs Phillips was still looking at her expectantly.

"And..." God, this was hard. "Jim's... Secret... House." Jo poured some milk into her coffee and stirred it ferociously. She could feel her cheeks burning.

"Hmm, I'm not sure I know them," Mrs Phillips said tactfully.

Jo sipped her coffee and reached for the remote control, hoping that the TV would stave off any more questions.

"Never anything worth watching in the mornings," the old lady commented woefully. Jo wondered whether she was like this when she was on her own, or whether this

endless chatter was simply her way of making up for her ten-year break from hospitality.

As if to prove Mrs Phillips' point, one of the presenters got up from his multi-coloured couch and started enthusiastically demonstrating some sort of home steam-cleaning machine. Jo flicked to another channel, where a furry red creature with a hook on its head was carrying a wheelbarrow across the screen.

She had nearly given up on finding anything informative when her grip suddenly tightened on the remote control. She stared at the TV in horror.

"...don't know any more about the motive behind the explosion, but police tell us they're pursuing multiple lines of enquiry."

The reporter pressed on his earpiece as the studio presenter asked him another question. Jo's eyes were fixed on the screen. She couldn't even blink. A strip of red and white police tape fluttered in the breeze behind the newsreader's head but other than that, the scene hadn't changed since yesterday morning. She could even see the spot on the pavement where the paramedic had left her to wait. One word was echoing round and round in her head: *motive*. Someone had wanted the explosion to happen. It had been some sort of bomb.

"Very little is known about the guests or staff present on the night of the explosion, so the death toll isn't clear. But we understand that at least fourteen people are missing, feared dead, and there are twenty-one seriously injured in hospital. It's understood that a memorial service will be held for victims later this month."

The camera panned back to the studio.

“Thank you, Jamie, reporting from the scene of the Buffalo Club blast in Mayfair, London. And now, the renowned Turner Prize has created fresh controversy, this time not over a pickled cow but a picked egg...”

Jo stopped listening and looked down at her coffee. Mrs Phillips scooped up the newspapers and prattled on about the state of modern art today, but Jo could barely hear it. A bomb had gone off. A *bomb*. Bombs only went off films and the Middle East and occasionally in Western tourist destinations abroad. Not in London. Not in *her* world – whatever world that was.

Mrs Phillips started making noises about opening up the shop. Jo just nodded into the steam of her coffee. She knew she should probably be leaving for the tea shop, but the newsreader’s words were still swirling around in her mind. *Fourteen people missing, feared dead*. It was only now that the implications were starting to trickle through. People had died last night. They could have been her friends. Fourteen, out of... How many did a nightclub hold? Three hundred? That was one dead in every twenty people. It was possible – probable, in fact, depending on how many she’d been out with – that not all her mates had escaped alive.

An unpleasant feeling swept through her. It wasn’t just the realisation that her friends – whoever they were – might have died in the blast. It was the realisation that *she* had died in the blast; that she was one of those ‘missing, feared dead’. And if she didn’t give herself up soon, then she

would officially *be* dead. As far as her loved ones were concerned – assuming she had loved ones – she had died.

“...I don’t suppose you know yet, do you?”

Jo looked up. Mrs Phillips was peering at her.

“I’m sure everything’s a bit up in the air at the moment,” she said. For a moment, Jo thought the woman might have guessed her connection to the Buffalo Club blast. Then she realised.

“Er, yeah. A bit up in the air,” she repeated vaguely. “Not sure about anything just yet.”

Mrs Phillips nodded and started shifting all the pots and jars back onto the shelves. “Well, if you’re OK with the arrangement and you keep it all quiet, then I’m more than happy for you to stay for as long as you like.” She gave the table a brisk wipe and threw the cloth into the sink.

Jo nodded and drained her cup, still in a daze. “Thanks.”

She should have come clean. That morning, with all the paramedics and policemen and noise, she should have stayed put, and then told someone about her amnesia. But she hadn’t. And she still couldn’t. Nor could she quite fathom why, but she knew that coming clean wasn’t an option – not until she’d shrugged off this horrible black feeling of guilt or whatever it was.

“Nice to have company again, actually,” said the woman, lifting the apron from round her neck and looking around the place.

You don't say, thought Jo. Then she felt bad. The woman had picked her up off the streets and offered her home-made marmalade, for God's sake.

And then it came back to her again, that sinking feeling. This wasn't the first time she'd felt bad about Mrs P. It had started this morning, when she'd woken up and seen the half-empty bottle of wine next to her bed, pieces of cork floating inside and the biro all splintered and leaking onto the carpet beside it.

She had stolen from her landlady. Last night on her way up the stairs, Jo had slipped the wine off its shelf and shoved it into her plastic bag while the woman waffled on about fire extinguishers and smoke alarms. It seemed almost surreal - as if it hadn't happened, or it had happened to someone else. She'd been drunk, but it *had* happened. Or rather, Jo had made it happen. Stealing wasn't a passive thing. It was something you chose to do. Jo had chosen to steal from the person trying to help her - again.

"You've got your door key, haven't you? Not that you'll need it, unless you're back late. You can just come through the shop. I'll be there."

Jo nodded and jangled the keys she'd attached to Joe Simmons' wallet. She was still thinking about what she had done. And how she was starting to hate the person she thought she was.

Jo waved mechanically and set off down the stairs. Then she stopped and looked back. "One more thing. I don't suppose you're online here?"

"On what line, dear?"

"Uh..." Jo nearly went on, but decided it was too early in the day for explaining the concept of the world wide web.

"Never mind."

5.

“Afternoon! Tickets please, thank you, lovely, tickets please...”

Jo’s heart fluttered up into her mouth as she offered her ticket up to the inspector, her palms sticky with sweat.

“Errrr,” he squinted for several seconds and then handed it back. “Lovely, thank you.”

Jo pushed the ticket back into her pocket with a shaky hand, trying to steady her breathing. It was ridiculous, this anxiety. She had to get it under control. It wasn’t as though she’d done anything wrong; she had paid her three pounds, she was sitting in Standard Class, she wasn’t playing loud music... But that wasn’t the point.

The point was, the inspector was in a position of authority. He wasn’t a policeman, but almost. He reminded her of the people she’d run away from two days before. His voice was like that of the paramedic’s: firm but kind, with the propensity to turn officious. Any small reminder of that scene outside the club was enough to make her skin crawl.

According to the map outside, Oxford station was a little way out of town. Jo assessed the commotion by the bus stop – screaming brats and stressed mothers and pushchairs – and looked up at the near-cloudless sky. The walk would do her good, she thought.

She had a vague plan: to wander round town, looking at people, seeing things, trying to remember something about

her life. She had come into Oxford because she needed to see something that wasn't a pensioner or a cat or a well-kempt lawn, or an irate commuter on his way into London. If Jo was right about being a London girl - and she felt strangely sure she was - then the comings and goings in Radley village weren't enough to trigger any memories from her past.

She knew she was being impatient, expecting things to come flooding back after only a few days. But, as she was beginning to realise, impatient was just the way she was. She hated queuing, she didn't do walking slowly and she wasn't a fan the slow pace of life. That was one of the reasons she felt so sure she'd been a Londoner before. Londoners didn't stop at the check-out to talk about yellow lines or lamp posts or letter box sizes like the ones she'd seen in Mrs Phillips' shop that morning. Jo wanted to remember things *now* - or at least, she was pretty sure she did.

Oxford town centre was a typical mix of old stonework, sixties breezeblocks and modern, all-glass storefronts. The pedestrian zone was teeming with Saturday afternoon dawdlers: ambling couples, spotty teenagers on skateboards, bored-looking fathers with boisterous children on reins, frazzled mothers laden down with a hundred plastic bags. Jo lapped it up, inhaling the smells - jacket potatoes and coffee and sun cream - and picking out fragments of conversation perforated with peals of laughter.

Towards the edge of town, the streets turned into cobbled lanes that meandered between tall, sandstone buildings lined with bicycles and occasional students. It was August, so the undergraduates were on holiday, Jo guessed. She stopped in an archway and looked out at the vast, sun-lit courtyard that lay beyond. It was like looking through a secret door into another world: fountains, lawns, turrets and gargoyles... Jo watched as a pair of girls her own age wandered past clutching folders and books, wondering whether she had seen this world before. Maybe she'd even lived in it.

"Can I help you?"

A small man in a bowler hat stepped out of the shadows and smiled at her kindly.

"Oh. Um, I was just..."

The man continued to look at her, and from the corner of her eye Jo could see his eyebrows lift. But she didn't reply. Something else had caught her attention. Along the street, propped up on the pavement, was a small black sign.

QUIET PLEASE. EXAMS IN PROGRESS.

Jo couldn't breathe. She felt nervous and sick. *Exams*. It was something to do with exams, only she didn't know what.

"Are you a student, ma'am?"

"Er..."

"A prospective student?"

"Um... No." Jo looked at the man. "No, sorry. I was just, um, waiting for someone. But I guess they've... gone."

“Right you are.” The man dipped his head politely and disappeared back through the arch.

Jo walked on, past the sign, trying to form a sensible explanation for her sudden twitchiness. She felt nervous at the idea of exams. So what? No one liked doing exams. They were horrible things. But... Jo tried to dig deeper, but the reasoning became flaky and brittle. She couldn't draw any conclusions. Except perhaps that she had done badly in exams at some point, or cheated, or failed... She didn't know. Jo continued her random circuit, turning left and right at will and trying to quell the anxiety inside her. Eventually, she heard the bustle of the high street and followed the sounds back into town.

In the hour that followed, Jo wandered and watched people's faces: old, young, black, white, smiling, scowling. Sometimes, someone would catch her eye. Occasionally, on making eye contact, a shudder would pass through Jo's body and she would dart into a shop or a drift of pedestrians, fearing recognition - or worse, acknowledgement. She spoke to no one.

A blackboard outside one of the large chain bookstores promised 'Half-price iced coffee and cool, comfy sofas'. A few doors down, a JD Wetherspoon advertised double shots for two pounds. Jo hesitated. Her mouth was already watering at the thought of the cold, sour liquid ripping through her insides. She could taste the vodka on her tongue.

Jo stepped past the doors of the bookshop and headed for the pub, then stopped. The special offer bunting fluttered over the entranceway, inviting her in for her two-pound shots. She tracked back and tried to feel tempted by the half-price iced coffee.

It was no good. Jo didn't want iced coffee. She wanted alcohol. She turned again and then came to another halt, feeling her addiction pulling her forwards and the reins of her willpower holding her back - a tug of war where both sides were so strong that neither could win. Then finally, her willpower gave a final tug. She spun round and marched into the shop towards the stairs that led to the second floor café.

The 'cool, comfy sofas', it turned out, were all taken. So were all the other seats except for a couple of wooden chairs hidden amongst large family groups that looked neither comfy nor cool. Jo hovered by the window, clutching her half-price iced coffee and waiting for someone to leave.

"Wanna sit down?"

Jo realised that the bald, bespectacled man with a laptop was talking to her.

"Um..." She floundered. Of course she wanted to sit down; she just didn't want to sit down with him. "Yeah, thanks."

She perched on the vacant seat and smiled to show her gratitude. The man grinned back in a rather creepy way. She looked out of the window.

“You went for the special offer too,” he remarked in a mechanical monotone.

She nodded civilly and sipped her drink.

“Not so special, really, is it?”

Jo forced a laugh.

“You wanna know what I think?”

No, thought Jo. She looked at him briefly, so as not to appear rude.

“I think they double the price for a day, then they put it on ‘special offer’ –” he indicated quotation marks with his pale, bony fingers – “at the usual rate. Ha.”

Jo grunted, turning her head pointedly towards the window. The man took the hint and started tapping on the keys of his laptop. When she was sure he was fully engrossed, she reached into the plastic bag that was serving as her handbag and drew out a chocolate digestive.

It would have been nice, she thought sadly, to have someone to talk to – someone trustworthy and practical and sensitive. She wouldn’t feel quite so alone, so vulnerable, if there was someone else in the world who knew her secret. What would be really helpful, of course, would be a friend who had known her *before* the bomb, but of course there was no way of finding such a person without coming clean to the world.

She still wasn’t entirely convinced that hiding herself away like this, pretending to be dead, was the best thing to do. There was a police station down the road; she had walked past it an hour ago. If she wanted, she could walk in

there and declare herself a victim of the Buffalo Club explosion. She could let them contact her family and wait while some probing shrink asked questions she couldn't answer, then she could sit in an interview room, or cell or whatever, and hear from other people what sort of a person she really was. But even as she contemplated the idea, she felt sick with fear.

Something drew her attention at the edge of her field of vision. A headline. She had seen earlier that day, in Mrs Phillips' shop, but hadn't dared stop to read the article in front of her landlady in case she aroused suspicion. Mrs P had already caught her trawling the newspapers for clues the day before, and she'd had to invent a ridiculous story about an old acting friend.

SINGLE LINE OF ENQUIRY FOR BUFFALO CLUB BOMB, read the headline. The woman reading the newspaper was directly behind her bald companion, so Jo could only just read the text without letting specky think she was trying to make eye contact.

A group of young, radicalised Muslims are thought to be... The newspaper was lowered as the reader sipped her drink. Jo drank some of hers and waited. *...at the centre of the only line of enquiry for the explosion that claimed fourteen lives last Thursday. The bomb, thought to have been planted in a rucksack and left in the cloakroom of the...* Baldy looked up from his typing. Jo gazed randomly around the café until she could hear the tap-tap of his fingers again.

She glanced at the newspaper and was perplexed to read GIRL RESCUED BY INFLATABLE LOBSTER. The woman had turned the page. Jo stirred her drink. Perhaps she'd slip into the shop and grab a paper when Mrs Phillips wasn't around, or pretend to be looking for something else. Or maybe she should actually spend eighty pence or whatever and *buy* a newspaper instead of sneaking around stealing things from people who were trying to help her. Jo sighed. She didn't want to be like this. She wanted to be honest and kind, to put others first. But it was hard to put others first when... well, when her own survival was at stake. She had to think about herself, to stay on her toes – that was the reason for all this deceit. Or at least, she hoped it was.

Surreptitiously, she pulled out the notebook from her makeshift handbag and jotted a couple of things down under the heading 'Bomb details'. She flicked back a couple of pages and stared at her messy scrawls from the other day. Then the typing stopped and she could feel the man's eyes boring into her again through his thick-rimmed glasses. She shut the book.

"Still using pen and paper, eh?" He glanced proudly at his silver laptop and for a dreadful moment, Jo thought he might try to show her what he was working on. "I've practically forgotten how to write!"

Jo grunted politely and took a long swig. A vodka would have slipped down more easily, she thought. But that was the problem. She didn't like the fact that alcohol had such a minor effect on her, that she was conditioned to use it. She

hated that her body craved the stuff, that it functioned better with it than without it.

She looked out at the bustling high street below. Across the road, a middle-aged woman was standing, her handbag tucked under one arm and a giant box-shaped present on the ground beside her, all shiny red paper and curly ribbons. Anxiously, the woman looked left and then right, then checked her watch. Jo scanned the street, wondering which person or people, of the hundreds she could see from her elevated viewpoint, the woman was waiting for.

Like a character in some elaborate cuckoo clock, the woman went through her routine again. Look left, look right, check watch. Wait. Jo could see the anxiety on her face. She scanned the crowds again, then turned her attention back to the woman. Look left, look right, check watch. Wait.

Jo felt sorry for her; someone was clearly keeping her waiting, making her worry. But it wasn't pity that she was feeling, five minutes later when the woman was still standing there, her head scanning the crowds even more frantically. It was shame.

Jo was making someone worry. Jo – or whatever her name was – had let herself become 'missing, presumed dead', and there were people, or at least she *guessed* there were people, who were worrying about her, waiting, hoping.

Eventually, the woman's stony face melted into a smile and even through the double-glazing Jo could hear a muffled cry as the two women threw their arms around one

another. It was her daughter, thought Jo, watching as the younger woman emerged from the embrace and pointed gleefully at the red shiny parcel, her stylish white coat flapping in the breeze. It was her daughter who had been keeping her waiting.

The women moved off, laughing frivolously and making animated gestures with their hands. Jo felt a fresh wave of uncertainty wash over her. She couldn't say why, but she felt quite sure that somewhere, right now, her mother was waiting for her, worrying.

She finished her drink and thought again of the police station down the road. That was the right thing to do. She had to turn herself in. She had to own up, for her mother's sake. Whatever she'd done before, whatever the reasons for the paranoia, whatever the consequences, the only fair thing she could do was walk into that police station and come clean.

Jo stood up and took one final look out of the window, even though she knew the mother and daughter were long gone. In the spot where they had hugged, a man was sitting - or rather, lying. Jo peered down at the scene. Two people in uniforms were crouching over the man, who was dragging himself along the pavement like a slug.

A clearing had formed in the crowds as shoppers gave the crawling man a wide berth. It was only when Jo saw the dog - skinny, mangy and limping - that she realised. The man was a beggar. He was being 'moved on' - only slowly,

because he was drunk. Or disabled. Or ill. She didn't know, and clearly the policemen didn't care.

She watched as the man sloped off into the shadows and the crowds flowed back into the area. She picked up the pen and stared at her notebook. Yet again, she had convinced herself that coming clean was the right thing to do. She had gone right to the edge and looked over. And yet again, she was talking herself back down. She might have been right about her mum being out there, worrying. It was perfectly likely that she had family and friends who cared about her. But she'd been wrong to believe that their reunion would be like the one she'd witnessed outside.

Her role wasn't that of the daughter in all this; she wasn't an innocent latecomer. She was the tramp. She was the outsider, the one who didn't belong. Maybe she did have friends and family, but so too did the homeless guy, presumably. For different reasons, they had left them behind. Jo didn't even know what the reasons were, in her case, but she knew one thing for sure: she was on the run. And until she had worked out what exactly she was running from, she had to keep running.

Jo slipped the notebook into her bag and caught sight of the two words she had scribbled on the back. SASKIA DAWSON. For the hundredth time, Jo strained to summon her memory. For the hundredth time, she drew a blank.

She bid her table companion farewell and walked out, having made her decision. It was time to put the only clue she had to good use.