

# The Day I Died



Polly Courtney

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**The Day I Died**

«HarperCollins»

## **Courtney P.**

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Can you walk away from your own life? Dark, disturbing and utterly enthralling women's fiction from a stunning UK talent. It's 4am, London and a young woman comes to amidst sirens and screams – the result of a bomb that has left utter carnage in its wake. Wearing the remains of a tattered black dress and wrapped in a filthy blanket, she is utterly unaware of where – and more importantly – who she is. Disorientated by overwhelming feelings of shame and guilt, the woman picks up an abandoned wallet from the gutter and, following her instincts, flees the scene. Escaping on a bus into a remote country village, she adopts the name 'Jo' in place of the identity that still eludes her. Jo quickly builds herself a new life in the country, finding a job and settling into a new community. But fragmented pieces of her past keep encroaching on her present – from the realisation that she is an alcoholic, to a chance meeting with a man that triggers flashbacks – and Jo is forced to solve the mystery of her own identity. But as she pieces together her past – and in doing so uncovers some shocking secrets about her old life – can Jo face the truth of who she is really is?

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POLLY COURTNEY  
*The Day I Died*

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For mum and dad.

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## Chapter One

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

‘You’re all right. Take it easy, OK?’

Her eyes slowly focused 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, ‘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, continuing to stare into space as the man rushed off. The questions were mushrooming inside her head, multiplying, jostling and competing for space. Questions like, why was she here, where the hell was ‘here’, 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 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 nightclub, she ascertained. That explained her flimsy dress. The remains of a neon sign, bulbs half shattered, stuck out above the entrance, which was now little more than a burned-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 kerb 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 all right 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 loomed 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 along the aisle 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 memories—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.

## *Chapter Two*

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 N ninety-seven? 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!' he squawked, sounding 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 staring 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 fingernails 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.

'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 till 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 a 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 nightclub 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 teacup 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 sketchbook and a rah-rah skirt, Jo found what she was looking for in the back of the store cupboard: a mirror. 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. Her eyes were bottle green, with dark lashes, which were coated in heavy, day-old makeup. Her lip had been 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 dyed red streak 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 sketchbook and scabbled around for a pen. Letter for letter, she copied it down and tucked it into the waist 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 teashop 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's 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's 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 teashop, 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 teashop 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.

## *Chapter Three*

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-age 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—whatever 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 she'd bought, 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 aftertaste that was instantly familiar. The reactions of her body and mind were at odds. It was good to have fed the need, allayed those 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 she'd bought 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 the cellophane wrapping off the notebook and started to write.

Nightclub 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 transferring what little she knew into the pages, the notebook was becoming her. It was slowly 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 the hand rail, she pulled herself steady. 'Streetlighting 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 beneath the crumpled jacket. She smelled her breath and spotted the telltale plastic bag. *She* wouldn't have let her into Stylz of Abingdon.

The mirror in the McDonald's 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 nondescript cotton tops, some cheap underwear, a pair of black trousers and some shoes, all for less than thirty pounds, which seemed suspiciously cheap, even to someone half-cut. She looked presentable, if not fashionable.

She 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 the teashop uniform.

She perched on a low car park wall, allowing herself a short break but very aware that she 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... 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 halfway 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!*’ ‘*Witamy, w Oxfordzie!*’ ‘*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. ‘*Conozca una de las ciudades mas bellas de Inglaterra.*’ Learn about 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 nightclub called Strattons.

She stopped to consider her options. The hotel was a last resort; Joe Simmons’ money wouldn’t last for ever 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 nightclub 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 rematerialise, but it wouldn’t come; she was trying too hard.

Jo walked on, distracted but with a new 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.

When she reached the convenience 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 leaned 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 ringroad 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.'

## Chapter Four

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

‘Toast, please,’ Jo replied in a daze. Her head felt heavy. It was half-past six and she 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 outlive 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 buttered her toast, trying 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 teashop—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. 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 be one already. '*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 multicoloured couch and started enthusiastically demonstrating some sort of home steam-cleaning machine. Jo flicked to another channel, where a red cartoon character with a hook on its head was pushing 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 reporter'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.'

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 pickled 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*. But bombs were what happened to other people, usually in the Middle East, 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 teashop, but the reporter'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. 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. Yesterday 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 about the place.

*You don't say*, thought Jo. Then she felt bad. The woman had picked her up off the streets and offered her homemade 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.

She 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.'

## *Chapter Five*

‘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. She alighted from the train with relief.

According to the map outside, Oxford station was a little way out of the city. 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-kept 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 going to be 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 walk slowly and she wasn’t a fan of 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 checkout to talk about yellow lines or lampposts or letter box sizes like the ones she’d seen in Mrs Phillips’ shop that afternoon. Jo wanted to remember things *now*—or at least, she was pretty sure she did.

Oxford city centre was a typical mix of old stonework, sixties breeze blocks 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...

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 J D 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 entrance, 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 go 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 it 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 speccy 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, feared 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 on the back that she'd copied from the scrap of paper. '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.

## *Chapter Six*

Jo slipped into the wobbly swivel chair and logged on. The keyboard was coated in a grey sheen and the O key was jammed with something sticky, but eventually she punched in the password and pulled up an internet browser. With much stabbing, she managed to type the search engine URL into the address bar.

She stared at the screen while the website loaded. It was obviously a slow connection. Jo frowned. *A slow connection.* How did she know that? How was it, she wondered, that she knew about website loading times and keyboard shortcuts and the differences between Internet Explorer and Firefox, when she didn't even know her own name?

The site finally loaded and Jo typed 'Saskia Dawson' into the box. Her hands were shaking—partly because she hadn't drunk anything in two days but also because she was nervous about what she might find. It was possible that Saskia Dawson would lead her to discover something about herself—or that Saskia Dawson *was* her, although admittedly Jo couldn't think of a sensible explanation for having her own name written on the back of her hand.

There were only six results, of which five related to the findings of a German professor on the subject of Endogenous N-acetylaspartylglutamate in the *Journal of Neurochemistry*. Jo clicked on the links in case they offered any clues, but everything was written in a mixture of German and gobbledegook. The sixth hit was a Facebook profile. *Facebook.* Yet another thing she was perfectly familiar with.

Eventually, the page opened: 'Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life. Sign Up. It's free and anyone can join.'

Jo thought for a second. Something told her she had a Facebook account, but she didn't know her login, and the sign-up form required an email address. She opened up another browser, navigated to Google Mail—slowly and noisily, due to the letters involved—and registered for a new address. Then she returned to Facebook and set up Jo Simmons as a member.

Finally, she was in. Saskia Dawson winked back at her, all pouting and saucy and seductive. And blonde. Jo stared at the photo. It definitely wasn't her face.

She looked at the image for a while, scouring it for something she recognised. Bleached, wavy hair, plump lips, alluring brown eyes...Saskia was gorgeous, in a cheap sort of way. She was probably in her early twenties, like Jo, but it was hard to glean much more from the photo. Her expression seemed to imply both naïve and sophisticated at once: flirtatious, yet coy. But anyone could look like that in a photo.

After a couple of minutes, Jo had to look away. She had stared at the face for too long. It was like saying a word over and over again; after a while, you weren't even sure it was a word. Saskia Dawson could have been her sister, her friend or a complete stranger. She had no idea.

There were three options next to the profile picture: Add as Friend, Send a Message, View Friends. Jo clicked on the third link.

*Saskia has 267 friends.*

A long list of names appeared, each accompanied by a small photo. Jo ran an eye down the page, carefully scanning the smiles for one that resembled her own. Nobody looked familiar. Unless Jo had been one of the hilarious people who had used a picture of a washing machine or cartoon character instead of her face, then she wasn't one of Saskia's friends.

Some of the names had extra information too, like 'London' or 'Brunel graduate' or 'Jake Dickson is off to Southend' or 'Kirsty Graham is soooooo hungover', but there was nothing useful. All Jo could glean was that Saskia Dawson had a lot of so-called friends who were all, like her, in their early twenties and that she probably lived in London. There seemed to be no link to the girl now masquerading as Jo Simmons.

Jo went back to the girl's profile page and assessed her options. Add as Friend, or Send a Message. She could send a message, but what would it say? *Hi, my names not actually Jo Simmons, but I had your name written on my hand. Any idea why?* Jo didn't fancy her chances of getting a reply.

She needed to know more about Saskia—needed to see her full profile. Perhaps the messages and postings and other photos would give her a clue as to where she lived, where she worked, which pubs she went to, that sort of thing. Jo stared at the face for a moment longer, then pressed Add as Friend.

## Chapter Seven

‘Morning!’ squawked Trevor, the sound grating on her nerves as it did every day.

Jo responded with her usual mumbled greeting, going straight to the back of the teashop to dump her plastic bag. She wasn’t sure why he’d gone to the effort of getting a door key cut for her; he always arrived first.

She returned to the counter, ran the hot water, wiped the surfaces and brought the supplies through from the back. Her mornings had developed a kind of rhythm that was disconcertingly predictable. She could hardly believe that only just over a week had passed since she’d stumbled off the night bus into Trev’s Teashop.

‘I’ll open up,’ said Trevor, needlessly. Jo had learned her lesson on the second morning: opening up was the proprietor’s job. Other tasks he would happily delegate—and generally did—but winding out the awning each day was something he liked to be seen doing. It allowed him to show the world that he, owner and manager of Trev’s Teashop, Oxfordshire, was open for business. He probably thought of himself a bit like the Queen cutting the ribbon on a new institution, thought Jo, watching him sweat with the effort.

‘I’ve got an errand for you,’ said Trevor, propping the door open and waiting for her to look up. ‘I need these things posting,’ he said, patting a pile of letters on the counter.

Jo nodded and started to dry her hands.

‘No—not now. Post office only opens at nine. You’ll need to buy stamps. You can take the money from the till.’ He explained this last point slowly, in case it might be too complex for her.

Jo got back to stocking the fridge, wondering again what she had done for a living before she’d lost her memory. She hoped it was something more challenging than this.

Her contemplation continued as the morning progressed. This being a Friday, the usual eight o’clock rush was less frantic than usual and spread over a longer period. She was on autopilot: taking orders, serving drinks and doing as much ‘flitting’ as was possible, given the lack of seated customers and Trevor’s recent transition into more of a managerial role. Instead of manning the counter, he preferred to busy himself in the background, keeping an eye on Jo’s handiwork, making unhelpful suggestions and trying to strike up conversations with the commuters—most of whom did their best to ignore him.

Jo handed over a double espresso and watched as the suited customer added a mound of sugar, then another, then another. She frowned. The sugar wouldn’t dissolve in that small amount—anyone could tell that. But that wasn’t why Jo felt perplexed. She felt perplexed because of something going through her mind, something she knew.

The man’s espresso was becoming a suspension. That was the proper term for a liquid solution where not all the particles were dissolved. The man hurried out and Jo was left staring at the space where he had been. A *suspension*. Where had that word come from? And how had she known to use it?

Another customer came in and Jo found herself mechanically filling the shot-holder again, trying to work out what this new piece of information meant—if anything. Perhaps it was insignificant. It was probably something they taught in school that anybody might remember. Perhaps all this meant was that Jo had paid attention in school—which was something of a revelation in itself, but not a particularly interesting one.

Jo watched the dark brown liquid bubble into the paper cup, wondering whether coherent memories would come back to her or whether she’d have to piece things together from clues like this. If she didn’t start remembering things properly, then she’d only have half the picture. She might discover what she liked, what she was good at and what type of person she gravitated towards, but she wouldn’t know *why*. She wouldn’t know what, in her past, had caused her to be the way she was.

She handed over the coffee, caught up in a complex internal debate about nature versus nurture and the pros and cons of remembering her past. There was still a part of her that didn't actually want to know what had happened. If they were bad memories, it might be better that she didn't have them at all. Because once they were back, there was no way of un-remembering them.

What she really wanted was the *option* of remembering. As if her memory operated like a tap, she wanted the ability to turn it on, gently, then if it started gushing out unpleasantly and making a mess, she could turn it off again. The problem, of course, was that her memory didn't operate like a tap. She wasn't in charge. Nobody was. The more she tried to remember, the more elusive the memories became. She just had to wait, and observe, and jot things down.

The media was one possible source of information. Jo had been following the coverage of the bombing all week. She was half hoping, half dreading that one day she'd return from her shift to see her face on the lunchtime news—a grainy version of a holiday snap or a Christmas family photo—with her real name and the word 'MISSING' underneath. She insisted on helping Mrs P arrange the newspapers every morning so that she could skim the pages for a reference. But there was no such reference. Every article seemed to be a rehash of the initial coverage, and even that hadn't said very much. As the week progressed, the news of the Buffalo Club bomb became less and less significant, and this morning the investigation hadn't even warranted a mention. Clearly the media wasn't going to help her very much.

There was a lull in customers. Jo distracted herself, wiping the surfaces and rinsing the milk jug, but she wasn't fooling anyone. Or at least, she wasn't fooling herself. Her hands were shaking and her eyes kept wandering down to the cupboard under the sink where six dark liqueur bottles sat, teasing her. They were supposed to be for adding to coffees, presumably, but if the crusty, sugary coatings inside the lids were anything to go by, they rarely got used. And there *were* crusty, sugary coatings inside the lids, because Jo had checked. She had opened them all, sniffed them and put them away again. About fifteen times.

The craving was stronger than ever today, perhaps because it had been nearly a week since her last proper drink. She reached down and extracted the leftmost bottle, unscrewing the lid and preparing to duck behind the counter. Amaretto—not her first choice, but better than the other options, which all smelled rather like petrol and had unrecognisable Italian names. She glanced around, then crouched down.

Her lips made contact with the crystallised sugar and she tilted the bottle, gagging for the sweet, fiery liquid in her throat.

'Nine o'clock!'

Her head hit the counter.

'Sorry?' Jo fumbled around for the lid and replaced the bottle with one hand, holding out the other for the pile of letters. Her body was filled with unfulfilled desire.

'You hadn't forgotten, had you?' Trevor grinned at her stupidly.

Jo flashed a smile and removed her apron. The sense of anticlimax, of getting so close and then pulling away, was exasperating. 'No, just about to go,' she said, swallowing a mouthful of saliva. 'Down the road and on the right?'

'Down the road,' he motioned like an obese air steward, 'and on the right.'

The warm air felt good on her skin, and gradually, with concerted effort, Jo managed to disentangle herself from the yearnings and focus on the things around her. Birds cheeped in the hedgerow, trees rustled in the breeze and somewhere nearby, farm machinery was whirring into action. A cloud skittered across the sky, briefly obscuring the sun and then leaving it to shine, and for a moment, Radley looked like the most beautiful place on earth.

Semi-detached and set back from the road with a pebble-dashed front, the post office looked exactly like somebody's house except for the rounded red sign on the telegraph pole outside and the billboard announcing the headline, 'VIOLIN CASE THWARTS ROBBERY'.

Not for the first time, Jo marvelled at how some things seemed so familiar whilst the details of her life remained a mystery. She knew exactly what first-class stamps looked like and how the UK postal system worked. She knew what Facebook was and how to use it. How, then, could she not name a single one of her friends?

She applied the stamps and looked at the swarthy young man behind the counter.

‘I don’t suppose you have an internet connection?’

He nodded over to a large, bulbous monitor in the corner of the store. It looked like a TV from the 1920s.

‘Could I just...?’

‘One pond for fifteen minutes.’

‘But I only—’

‘Three pond an hour.’

‘What about two minutes?’ She smiled virtuously.

Reluctantly, the man smiled. ‘OK, but quickly. Log in as Admin. Password is password .’

The internet connection was even more sluggish than the one she’d used before. Jo waited for the Facebook login to appear, wondering whether perhaps, by some sort of administrative error, Radley had been left off the UK broadband rollout map.

She logged in and clicked on the Friends tab. Her face fell.

*You have 0 friends.*

Then she noticed the message. She clicked on her inbox.

**Saskia Dawson**

**Today at 03.49**

**Who R U?**

**Do I know U Jo Simmons?! I don’t accept friends who ain’t got no profile pic...**

Jo drummed her fingers against the makeshift desk, frustrated. Of course Saskia hadn’t clicked Accept. The request had come from an anonymous stranger. For all Saskia knew, Jo Simmons was a dirty old pervert looking for cheap online thrills.

‘Time’s up,’ called the guy from behind the counter.

‘I’ve hardly logged on!’ she yelled back, fingers hovering over the keyboard.

**Jo Simmons**

**Today at 09.11**

**Re: Who R U?**

**Hi Saskia, sorry for the randomness—I’m using an alias...Long story. Haven’t got round to putting up a photo.**

**Here’s a clue—long, black hair with a red streak at the front. Know who I am? :-) xx**

Jo logged off and ran through the door, the adrenalin still pumping from the brief correspondence. She was so busy devising an excuse for her boss that she slammed straight into somebody on the post office forecourt.

‘I’m so sorry!’

She squatted down to pick up the letters, which had scattered in the breeze.

‘No worries.’

With relief, Jo realised that the man she’d knocked flying had not been one of Radley’s aged inhabitants; in fact, the man seemed quite youthful—early thirties at most. He laughed as she handed over the gritty pile.

‘I’m used to being rugby-tackled.’

She smiled. It wasn’t that she was flirting, exactly, but...well, OK perhaps she was, just a little. The man was handsome: tall, with coiffed light brown hair and a tan. He could well have been a rugby player.

‘Hope they weren’t important.’ She nodded at the letters as he pushed them into the post box.

‘Oh, just replies to my fan mail. Standard responses, you know.’

She laughed uncertainly. Gosh, maybe he *was* a sportsman, like, maybe the captain of the England rugby team...

He shook his head, smiling and revealing a row of pearly teeth. ‘I’m kidding. It’s bills, mainly. Are you heading for Trev’s Teashop, by any chance? Want a lift?’

Jo was confused again. He must have been a customer at the café. She had probably served him coffee.

‘How did you know where I worked?’

He shook his head and smiled again, motioning for her to get into the passenger seat of a slick little BMW parked on the road. ‘Well I wasn’t *deliberately* looking at your chest, but...’

Jo groaned at her own stupidity. Of course. The aertex shirt.

She wasn’t sure whether getting into a complete stranger’s car was entirely sensible, but neither, probably, was accepting a job from a complete stranger, or a place to stay. And besides, he had an honest smile.

‘It wasn’t just the shirt, actually,’ he confessed, pulling out and accelerating to quite a speed.

‘No?’

‘No. I’ve seen you in there.’

‘What, you’re a customer?’

‘No. I’ve seen you through the window. I work from home quite a bit so I walk around town. Stops me getting cabin fever.’

‘Oh, right.’ Jo wanted to ask what he did for a living and where in Radley he was based and a whole load of other questions, but they were already at the teashop. ‘Well, thanks for the lift.’

He laughed. ‘Saved you all of thirty seconds.’

‘Well, yeah.’ She released her seatbelt and opened the door. Then, in a moment of boldness, she added, ‘Pop in for a coffee some time. I’ll give you a freebie.’

He raised an eyebrow.

‘Free, er, coffee, I mean.’

‘I look forward to it,’ he said, winking through the passenger window. She slammed the door, feeling the blood rush to her face.

She heard the whirr of his electric window behind her as she re-entered the café.

‘By the way, I’m Stu. What’s your name?’

She turned back and smiled.

‘Jo. See you around.’

## Chapter Eight

Jo punched in her login and password and looked around the empty internet café as the page loaded up. A sign hung above her head, advertising 'FAX-PRINTING-WEB @ CCESS' in spiky handwriting. Appended to the last point was an additional explanation: 'Check your email! Chat!'—presumably to entice the technophobic Radley residents online. Jo looked back at the screen. She had one new message.

**Saskia Dawson**

**Today at 12.54**

**Re: Who R U?**

**Roxie?!?! Good to hear frm U hun! Bin textin U & no reply...Thought you was dead! Why the alias? U freaked me out xx**

Jo's heart pounded against her ribcage. *Roxie*. She was getting somewhere. Saskia Dawson had given her a name—such as it was. Roxie. She rolled the word around in her mouth a few times, trying it out. It seemed...odd, somehow. Not what she'd anticipated.

She read the message one more time. *Thought you was dead*. So presumably Saskia had known about Jo being caught up in the bomb blast. Which implied that Saskia had been there too...or maybe not. She would have to find out—but carefully. It was clear they were friends, but Jo couldn't tell what sort of friends. She didn't know how far back they went, how much they confided in one another, what she supposedly knew of the girl. She would have to trust Saskia, to some extent, but not more than she needed to. Opening up completely would leave her too vulnerable.

**Jo Simmons**

**Today at 12.56**

**Re: Who R U?**

**Yep it's me! Sorry I didn't reply to your texts—I lost my phone. All been a bit mad these last few days...**

**Alias thing just a joke—I lost my fb login details (stored in my phone—duh!) so just set up a random account for now.**

Jo clicked Send and looked again at the young blonde who continued to pout back from the mugshot. The face seemed more familiar now, but that was hardly surprising; Jo knew the streaks of blusher and locks of hair off by heart. She tried to remember something about the girl, or the friendship—presumably it had been a friendship—but it was just speculation, nothing more.

The fact that Saskia knew about Jo's presence at the club that night was intriguing, but alarming too. It seemed likely that they had been out together, possibly with others. And if that were the case, Jo thought anxiously, then they probably had a lot to discuss. Which could prove tricky, although not unfeasible. Assuming Saskia was happy to converse via Facebook. That was the ironic thing about Facebook—you weren't actually talking face to face; there was always time to plan your response. Except, Jo realised, watching the page refresh, when both parties were online.

**Saskia Dawson**

**Today at 12.59**

**Re: Who R U?**

**U dopey cow! Want me 2 hack in2 yr fb account? Glad ur ok—reckon most of the girls r keepin a low profile, eh. xx**

Jo frowned. It was the second part of Saskia's message that really interested her—although the first half did too. She tried to think of a way of finding out who 'the girls' were, and why they'd want to keep a low profile.

**Jo Simmons**

**Today at 13.03**

**Re: Who R U?**

**Hack wd be good—if you can! So have you spoken to others recently?**

She was treading dangerously, but she had to. Saskia was her only lead. Coming clean on the amnesia thing was an option, but not one she wanted to take. If she was clever, she would be able to mine her friend for information without divulging anything about her situation.

**Saskia Dawson**

**Today at 13.05**

**Re: Who R U?**

**Whats ur user name then—think u said rebecca.ross99@hotmail.com? Yeah I spoke 2 Candy yest...She aint sayin nothin either.**

Rebecca Ross. So that was her name. Roxie was just a nickname. Jo looked at the words on the screen. They sounded good. Better than Jo Simmons, she thought. Although it probably wasn't wise to embark on any sudden name-changes in Radley Her boss and her landlady were already suspicious enough.

And who was Candy? What was the deal with all these porn-star names? Jo pictured the three girls together, even though she didn't know what Candy looked like: Saskia, Roxie and Candy, getting ready for a night on the town. A night in the Buffalo Club. It was like a scene from some corny American movie.

**Jo Simmons**

**Today at 13.06**

**Re: Who R U?**

**Thanks mate. Yes, try that...Hopefully it's right—I haven't logged on in ages so can't quite remember!**

Jo wondered about asking some sort of clever question about Candy and Saskia—something that would give more away about their relationship, or explain why the girls were 'keeping a low profile'. It seemed odd that Saskia hadn't talked more about what had happened in the club that night; surely bombs didn't go off that often in London nightclubs?

**Saskia Dawson**

**Today at 13.08**

**Re: Who R U?**

**Cool—leave it w me. I'll send U a new login. By the way, U got any work? I'm quitting the stripping thing—gonna get a real job!**

Jo stared. Then she glanced over her shoulder in case anyone happened to be looking at her screen. She reread the girl's words and then opened another browser.

'Buffalo Club London', she typed into Google.

And there it was. The Buffalo Club: Mayfair's Premier Table Dancing Establishment.

## Chapter Nine

A motorbike screeched to a halt in front of her.

‘Look where you’re goin’!’ yelled the man from inside his helmet.

Jo leaped back onto the pavement and looked around, trying to focus. The vodka had gone to her head and she wasn’t sure where she was, or where she was going.

Her heel made contact with something. She put her hand out and nearly fell over a sign advertising English Cream Teas. To her left was some sort of fairytale castle and beyond that, a black and gold sign hung over the street with the words ‘Ye’ and ‘Olde’ and something else she couldn’t read. Jo held the vodka bottle up to her face and ascertained that it was indeed empty.

‘Just in time for the second half,’ said the barman, nodding towards the giant screen that took up most of the back wall of the pub. He had loose, wobbly jowls and a missing front tooth.

She slumped on the only available stool at the end of the bar and tried to concentrate as the barman pulled her pint. The pub was packed—or, at least, one end of the pub was packed. Like prayer mats, all seats had been turned to face the giant screen and there wasn’t a man in sight not staring upwards. Jo leaned forwards on her arms, relishing the warmth and the hubbub and the shouting. There might even have been people here who were more inebriated than she was.

‘Th’nil-all,’ the barman lisped through the gap in his teeth. Jo smiled politely and sank into her pint.

The jigsaw was fitting together, slowly, but Jo didn’t like the image that was materialising. The Buffalo Club was a lap-dancing club. She was a stripper. Less than two weeks ago, she’d been making a living by taking her clothes off for strangers. Jo gulped down more beer, repulsed. Presumably she’d been doing it for the money. Perhaps she’d been in debt. Perhaps Roxie was *still* in debt, she thought. Maybe it was a good thing she had died. It was like an extreme way of declaring yourself bankrupt—declaring yourself dead.

Another good thing had come out of this, she realised—amongst all the bad things. At least now she knew that she hadn’t been partying with her mates on the night of the explosion. Jo—or rather, Roxie, or Rebecca or whatever her name was—hadn’t lost any close friends after all. Unless, of course, her close friends had also been strippers. Which they might have been.

Strippers. Jo closed her eyes, picturing Saskia Dawson’s profile picture: the Bambi eyes, the bottle-blond hair, that pout. Of course. What other profession involved looking so superficial, so flirtatious? Jo wondered how close they had been. The Facebook conversation gave her an idea, but you couldn’t read much into a few lines of text; after all, Jo hadn’t been telling Saskia everything, so maybe the converse was true too. Maybe they’d only just met, and that was why she had Saskia’s name on her hand. Or maybe they’d been best friends, chatting backstage before they went out to get naked. She just didn’t know. Jo beckoned the barman over.

‘Thirsty, eh?’ he said, grabbing the empty glass with a look of approval and filling it up. ‘There you go. On the ’ouse,’ he said with a cheeky grin that might have been attractive on someone less flabby.

Jo tried to thank him and found her words came out in all the wrong order.

‘I should probably be warning you of the risks of irresponsible drinking and such like,’ he said. She tried to fix him with a look that said ‘leave me alone’.

‘But, tell the truth, I like a girl who can sink a pint.’

Jo claimed her free drink and looked around for an alternative seat. She briefly considered settling on the carpet amongst the legs of the avid fans but decided she was marginally safer at the bar.

Perhaps she’d been a student, thought Jo. Students were always short of money. That would explain the stealing. That would explain why someone like her had turned to stripping. She swallowed more beer. What was she thinking? *Someone like her*. As if she knew what she was like. She was

making assumptions about herself based on what? Gut feeling? Hope? The fact that she had a reasonable grasp of English grammar and spoke with a middle-class accent?

She reached into her plastic bag and drew out her notebook. The fact was, she didn't *know* what she was like. It was quite possible that she wasn't actually a very nice person.

Suddenly, a tremendous roar filled the room and Jo felt glad she hadn't opted for a seat on the floor. Men cheered, footballers cartwheeled and pints of beer spilled all over the place.

'One-nil,' said the barman excitedly. Jo nodded as though she cared.

Buffalo Club = strip club

Needed the money?

Friend(?) Saskia

'You a journalith, then?' asked the barman, peering at the book.

Jo turned the page quickly. 'No,' she said. 'Just...writing a shopping list.'

She was impressed at her quick-wittedness, given the amount she had drunk. This pint would be her last, she decided.

'You causing trouble, Den?' yelled a coarse voice from across the bar. Lumbering towards her was a large man in a dirty white vest. 'Is he causing trouble?'

*Definitely* her last drink, thought Jo, shaking her head politely and realising that her head was actually resting on her arms. She sat up.

'She's writing a shopping lith,' explained the barman.

'Oh, very organised,' chuckled the man, leering over Jo's shoulder. 'Chips,' he said, nodding. 'My missus always forgets them.'

Jo glanced at his belly and decided he was lying. She shut the notebook and slipped it back in her pocket.

'What're you drinking?' asked the fat man.

'Hey, she'th got a pint,' said the barman. Clearly Jo didn't get a say in the matter.

'It's nearly finished,' argued vest man.

Jo looked down. It was true. She was nearly through her second pint. She had to slow down. 'I'm fine, thanks,' she tried to say, although it came out as 'phalanx'.

'Come on, let me buy you a drink,' pressed the man.

It was then, as the man leaned sideways and gave a sort of nod of encouragement, that Jo saw it again. She saw the guy at the bar. She felt him tap her elbow. She heard him ask what she wanted to drink. Only this time—and maybe it was the alcohol doing funny things with her head—it was much clearer. She could see every line on his face. She could picture the rows of expensive spirits behind the bar, even hear the throb of the music in the club. And this time, the memory didn't stop there. She knew what happened next.

'You all right?' asked the barman, squinting at her anxiously.

'Yeah,' she said quietly, trying not to lose hold of the memory, feeling the blood drain out of her face. 'Where are your toilets?'

Locked in the cubicle, slumped on the lid with her head in her hands, Jo closed her eyes. Her head was spinning and she felt as though she was on a boat in stormy weather.

She remembered accepting the offer and choosing a vodka martini—an expensive drink, as the club dictated. Wow, it was coming back to her. The man had pushed the glass towards her and then moved closer himself. He'd smelt nice. Expensive aftershave. She had smiled seductively, the way she'd learned to do, and then asked him a question. Something mundane. Nothing personal. Jo fought to hold on to the image as she marvelled at how much was coming back.

She had led him away from the bar. He'd settled in one of the leather chairs in the corner of the club. He was shy, she thought. Probably not a regular. She'd started to dance, gyrating a little, nothing special—then something had happened.

Jo ground the palms of her hands into her head, trying to remember the details. It was hazy now, though. She couldn't picture the scene. Just voices. Shouting. And those alarms, the frantic noise. There was panic everywhere. She thought she remembered struggling with the straps on her shoes, scratching at her ankles so she could take them off and run, but it was all muddled.

'Is there someone in there?' The cubicle door rattled.

Jo flushed the toilet for effect and lifted the lid. Her thoughts swung back to the present.

'Sorry.' She brushed past the girl, falling sideways against the sink. A strange feeling of *déjà vu* came over her. She tried to summon more detail, but her brain was fuzzy. Had something happened in a toilet, somewhere, sometime...?

'You want that drink, then?' asked the barman as she walked back through the pub.

Actually, Jo had been heading for the door. 'Gottago.'

'C'mon, juth one more—ooh.' The man seemed distracted. In fact, as he squinted across at the screen the entire roomful of bodies erupted like an over-shaken can of beer and the noise levels rose to deafening. 'Hey!' yelled the barman along with everybody else. 'We won! C'mon, you gotta have one more now!'

Jo said something that got lost in the din and wandered unsteadily onto the street. She didn't even know who'd been playing.

She was somewhere in West Oxford, it transpired. Out of courtesy to the helpful shopkeeper who told her how to get to the bus stop she needed, Jo purchased some crisps and a couple of cans of lager.

She ignored the scowls of fellow passengers as she cracked open the first can. It was probably illegal or something, but Jo didn't care. She had worked it out. She had discovered what made the memories come back: alcohol. Good or bad, her thoughts were flowing freely now.

Jo wondered how many people knew her dirty secret. In a way, it made things easier, the fact that she was officially dead. It meant that nobody was looking for her. Maybe there were people out there who knew that Rebecca Ross had been a stripper, but now she was dead... Saskia Dawson was the only potential leak, and she had her own skeletons locked away—assuming she didn't make a habit of disclosing her line of work. Jo had to hope that that was enough of a threat to keep the girl quiet.

It occurred to Jo as she fell off the bus and tottered onto Radley Road that Jo Simmons was no longer just a temporary alias. It wasn't just something she used in order to fit in. It was her name. Her new identity. So as long as she didn't draw attention to herself in Radley, she could survive as Ms Simmons for... well, for ever if necessary. Jo shuddered. That was a horrible idea. She couldn't just draw a line under the last twenty-odd years of her life. But at the same time, in a way, it appealed. There was something comforting and neat about the idea. Like wiping a virus-ridden computer: it was a drastic step, but it worked. And everything ran more smoothly afterwards.

Of course, there were benefits to starting again, cleaning the slate of her life and all that. But what about Rebecca? Effectively, Jo had killed her off. She hadn't done so intentionally; it had just been a consequence of events. And now she had to decide whether to resurrect her old self or leave her behind and move on. She opened her second beer, her mind in a state of flux.

It was early evening when she stumbled into the shop. Mrs Phillips was on a stepladder with her back to the door, sliding packs of toilet roll onto the top shelf. Jo slipped past quietly. She didn't have the energy for a conversation this evening—let alone one of the landlady's interrogations.

'Nice day?' sang the woman without turning round.

Jo stopped in her tracks.

'You knocked the doorstop,' she explained.

'Oh, right. Yeah, good.' The words tumbled out like porridge: lumpy and stuck together.

Mrs Phillips got down from her stepladder and started packing it away. Jo took the opportunity to sneak out unnoticed. Unfortunately, she misjudged the angle at which she was standing and found

herself walking into the dried foods aisle. The shelf wobbled a bit and a number of packets jumped onto the floor.

‘Shit.’ She squinted to assess the damage, hoping Mrs P hadn’t seen.

‘Drinking, were you?’

Jo turned to find the old woman standing right beside her. How she got there so fast was a complete mystery. ‘Er, yeah. A bit. Sorry—I’ll clear this up.’

‘Are you all right, Jo?’

‘Yeah, fine! Why?’

Mrs Phillips didn’t answer, exactly. She just leaned forward and extracted some crisp crumbs from Jo’s hair.

‘Oh, must’ve...fallen...’ Jo was quite surprised by the size of some of the flakes. A couple of them were whole crisps.

‘Have you eaten anything today?’ Mrs Phillips asked. ‘Apart from these?’

Jo thought for a moment. Actually, she hadn’t. No wonder the beer had gone to her head. ‘A bit, not much.’ She started to pick up the fallen packets of lentils.

Mrs Phillips looked down at her. ‘Look, Jo. I don’t want to interfere...I know it’s none of my business, but... You must look after yourself. Alcohol isn’t the answer.’

Jo shoved the packets back onto the shelf and scowled. It was true. This *was* none of her business. ‘The answer to what?’

Suddenly, she felt angry. This woman was her landlady, not her counsellor. She had no right to preach about ‘answers’.

‘Well, to your problems,’ said Mrs Phillips. ‘Whatever they are.’

‘I haven’t got problems!’ Jo replied, louder than she’d intended.

‘No, I didn’t mean that. Of course you haven’t.’

Jo shook her head. Now the woman was patronising her. *Of course you haven’t*. That was another way of saying, *I know you’ve got problems*. Well, that was uncalled for. This woman was stepping out of line. She had no idea what Jo was going through.

‘Don’t take the piss.’

‘No, no, I wasn’t.’ Mrs Phillips held her hands up defensively. ‘I just don’t like to see people upset.’

‘Upset?’ Jo stared at the woman, unable to stop the words pouring out. ‘I’m not fucking upset! I’m fine! Or at least, I *was* until you started telling me I wasn’t!’

The landlady nodded.

That did it. She didn’t have to stand here being nodded at like that by a woman who barely knew her.

Jo stormed through the back door and up the stairs. She stuffed her possessions—the few she had—into a plastic bag and marched out the way she had come.

‘Here,’ she said, stuffing some twenty-pound notes into the woman’s hand. She was quite proud to have mastered the maths. ‘That’s eight nights at fifteen quid a night. Take it. *Take it*’

Mrs Phillips looked shocked. Initially her fingers resisted curling round the notes, but eventually they did. Jo pushed the wallet back into her pocket and left the shop. She didn’t need this. Her life was messed up enough without some meddling old cow trying to offer advice.

She strode down the path, forming a plan as she went. At six o’clock the teashop would be shut, and she reckoned there was just enough space behind the counter for her to lie flat without being seen from the road. She was resourceful. She could look after herself—which was just as well, because yet again, she was on her own.

## Chapter Ten

Jo rolled over and buried her face in the pillow. Something hard dug into her forehead. She wriggled onto her back again but the light burned through her eyelids. Her feet were cold.

Gradually, consciousness took hold. She realised why her hip was jutting into something cold, why her mouth tasted stale and why her head felt as though it had been placed in a pressure cooker. She was fully clothed, surrounded by moulding, hairy blankets and coats. The teashop blinds were set at exactly the right angle to allow the sunlight to stream into her eyes.

Jo hauled herself into a sitting position and craned her neck to look up at the clock. Strange. There appeared to be only one hand. She squinted up at it for a couple of seconds, then worked it out. The hands were diametrically opposite. It was six o'clock, she deduced.

Suddenly, a long, protracted whining noise made her jump. Jo looked up at the clock again. A wave of panic rose up inside her. It wasn't six o'clock, it was five past seven. *The noise was Trevor's singing.*

She leaped up and kicked the makeshift bed to one side. She would have to somehow get everything back into the store cupboard without him noticing. Her head was pounding so hard it felt as though the capillaries were about to burst. She couldn't think. Her throat was crying out for water but she knew there were things that needed to be done before sorting herself out. She just couldn't work out what.

'Morning!' Trevor emerged from the back of the teashop with his customary swagger.

'Hi!' Jo managed with more than the usual level of cheer. *Oof.* Her head was about to explode.

'Late again?' he said, approaching to embark on his opening-up ritual. Thankfully he wasn't the type to notice details like crusty eyes or scarecrow hair.

'No, I was...wiping the tables.' Jo stepped backwards as he rifled through the drawer, looking for the awning key. Her foot landed on the pile of blankets.

'What's that?' he asked, following Jo's anxious downward glance.

'What?'

Trevor bent down, brow furrowed. 'It looks like a sock.'

Incredibly, he hadn't actually noticed the giant mound of linen next to the bin; he was more interested in the sock that must have worked its way off her foot during the night.

'Oh, *that.*' Her brain wasn't working quickly enough. 'Yes, it does look like a sock.'

She swooped down to pick it up whilst yanking her trouser leg down to conceal her bare foot, thankful that she'd had the drunken foresight to sleep in her uniform.

'What on earth...?'

'Oh, I remember,' she said, finally thinking of something. 'It belongs to a customer. He took it off the other day.'

Trevor's frown intensified. 'A customer took his sock off? Why?'

Jo blinked back at him, wondering what had possessed her to say that. 'Oh, you know...He was just...showing me something. Er, on his foot.'

Her boss's suspicions seemed to intensify. 'My question is: why is it still there? You're supposed to sweep the floor at the end of your shift.'

Jo bent down to pick up the offending item. 'Sorry. Must've missed it. Careless.'

'Hmm.' Trevor shook his head despairingly and marched out of the shop. Jo breathed a small sigh of relief.

She waited until he was part-way through his opening-up ceremony before gathering her bedding and carrying it back to the store cupboard. Her head was pulsating. It felt as though her brain had come away from her skull and was getting more bruised with every footstep.

'Jo? Are you there? Jo?'

Trevor's voice sounded quite insistent. Jo stuffed the bedding into the cupboard and hurried out to where he was standing, shoving her feet into her shoes on the way. She would sort it out properly later—once she'd splashed some water on her face and done something about her hair and the onion-like stench on her breath.

'Look at this!' Trevor was standing outside beneath the newly erected awning, pointing at the little bench he called table ten.

She followed his finger and stared at the cheap white surface. She couldn't see what she was supposed to be looking at.

'Look!' he said again. 'You said you'd wiped the tables!'

Jo frowned at him. The bright light was hurting her eyes. 'What?'

He stared incredulously at her. 'There are coffee cup marks all over it—and bits of food! We'll get rats. And think of the impression we're giving. This isn't some cheap fast-food outlet, is it?'

No, thought Jo. It's an over-priced fast-coffee outlet. She could just about make out a faint ring-mark on the table and a couple of microscopic crumbs. 'Sorry Think the detergent ran out.'

'I pay you good money,' he said angrily. This was a slight inaccuracy, thought Jo, given that she was earning just thirty pounds a day and he hadn't actually paid her for this week's work yet. She was rather hoping that payday would be today, but now didn't seem like a very good time to ask.

She mumbled something apologetic and referred again to the detergent—which, by happy coincidence, had nearly run out. Trevor seemed excessively grumpy this morning.

'Well, I'll show you where the new ones are and you can do the tables again,' he said patronisingly. *Properly*, this time.'

Jo rolled her eyes and followed her boss back inside. It was only as he threw out his hand to open the store cupboard that she realised what was about to happen. Sure enough, agonisingly slowly, the blankets and coats tumbled onto Trevor's feet and unravelled all over the floor.

'What...?'

'Oh, those old things,' said Jo, feeling inspired. 'I found them the other day. I thought they could probably do with going to the charity shop.'

Trevor poked around in the pile with his stubby foot. 'Did you indeed? And where did you get them?'

'The back of the cupboard,' Jo said casually. She couldn't actually remember where she'd found them. Last night her mind had been preoccupied and addled.

'Oh, right.' Trevor extracted a beige full-length coat from the muddle. 'So you took it upon yourself to consign my coat, along with other items you found whilst poking around in *my* cupboard, to the charity shop?'

'Er, no, well...'

Trevor looked furious. 'I don't like being lied to, Jo.'

She stammered some more but the inspiration had run dry.

'I should warn you that I'm seriously considering your position in this teashop. You've already demonstrated that you're lazy, careless and deceitful, and I'm beginning to think you may have an unhealthy relationship with some of my customers.'

Jo cursed herself for inventing the ridiculous story about the sock. She put on her most apologetic expression and hoped she didn't look too much like the hung-over wreck that she was.

A voice sounded from the front of the shop. 'Hey, anyone in?'

They returned to the shop like a chided schoolgirl and teacher, Jo recognising the smooth, confident tone instantly.

'Ah, hi, Jo. How's things?' Stuart stepped forward, not seeing her warning glare. 'Just popping in for my "freebie". You open yet?'

'Um, er...'

‘I can answer that,’ replied Trevor, stepping out from behind the counter. ‘Yes, we’re open but no, you can’t have your “freebie”. This teashop does not offer “freebies”.’

Stuart looked a bit taken aback. ‘Er, right. I see. Well, I just wanted to leave this for Jo,’ he said, depositing what looked like a five-pound note on the nearest table. ‘See you later.’

Like a crab, he sidestepped out of the café and disappeared.

Trevor looked at Jo. ‘*That* is exactly what I’m talking about.’

Jo nodded feebly. It seemed fairly pointless to protest.

‘Well?’ squeaked Trevor, nostrils flaring. ‘What are you waiting for?’

Jo wasn’t waiting for anything, but presumably that wasn’t the correct response.

‘I suppose I should give that table a good scrub...’

‘You should do no such thing. Get out. You’ve had your last chance. I don’t want to see you in here again. I’ll find someone else. Someone honest. Someone who can do things properly. I should’ve known there’d be trouble as soon as you said you were *foreign*.’

Jo hastened towards her bag of possessions on the counter, trying to work out a line of defence but distracted by the irony of her boss’s last comment. She couldn’t think straight. It wasn’t just the alcohol in her bloodstream or the fact that Trevor was waving his flabby arms at her, exposing his sweat patches; it was the fact that she didn’t *want* to form a defence. She needed a job because she needed the money, but that wasn’t enough of a reason for her to stick around.

‘And because I’m an honest man,’ he went on, still smouldering, ‘I’ll pay you for the week. It’s more than you deserve.’ He grudgingly handed over a brown envelope.

Jo didn’t speak. She had nothing to say. With a final glance at the nasty plastic seats and the flowery café walls, she walked out, picking up Stuart’s fiver as she left.

## Chapter Eleven

She had walked for a couple of hours before Jo remembered to look in her pocket. When she did, despite her situation and despite her pulsating head, she smiled. It was an old five-pound note. Clearly Stuart had intended to use it to pay for his coffee. Across the front, in red biro, he had scribbled five words: ‘Dinner Thurs? The Grange, 8 p.m.’

Jo didn’t know whether to feel flattered by his chivalry or amused by the man’s presumptuousness. Clearly, Stuart was assuming that she’d accept the invitation. There was no phone number, no alternative, no information about where The Grange was or what type of place it was. The only thing Jo could glean from the note was a confirmation of something she had already suspected: Stuart was full of himself.

She stuffed the note in her wallet, then pulled out the envelope and transferred her week’s wages across. A hundred and eighty pounds. A hundred and eighty much-needed pounds. Jo still had over a hundred from Joe Simmons’ original stash, but she knew how quickly it would disappear if she couldn’t find somewhere cheap to live soon.

She massaged her temples, trying to alleviate the throbbing pain. She suspected the headache wasn’t just a result of yesterday’s drinking. The developments of the last few hours were also partly to blame. She was homeless and unemployed—again. Being constantly on the move, or constantly ready to be on the move, was tiring, and the uncertainty of her existence was beginning to wear her down.

In a way, she longed for the stability of a ‘normal’ life. Every once in a while—like now—she considered turning herself in and reverting to the life of Rebecca Ross. Every time—like now—she rejected the idea on the grounds that, for all she knew, Rebecca Ross’s life wasn’t ‘normal’ at all, and even if it had been ‘normal’, the turmoil of transplanting Jo Simmons back into it didn’t bear thinking about.

The houses petered out and she realised she was on a track that led to the turquoise lakes she had seen from Mrs Phillips’ guesthouse. *Mrs Phillips*. Jo cringed. Thinking back to the scene in the shop, she wondered whether she might have been a bit harsh on the old lady. Sure, Mrs P had been meddling in something that didn’t concern her, but still...Jo felt a twinge of guilt. Now she was sober, last night seemed like something of an over-reaction.

The lakes looked unnaturally blue, as though they’d been airbrushed for a holiday brochure. Jo guessed they were the flooded remains of a chalk quarry pit and her mind wandered to other possible industries in the area. What could she do for a living? Was she trained in anything useful? She wondered whether any skills she might have would still apply. If she could add up, could she do other things? Perhaps she was a qualified plumber, she thought, or a doctor or brain surgeon... Hmm. She could picture it now: walking into a hospital and offering her services as a neurologist. The irony almost made her smile.

The path veered away from the lakes and took her west in the direction of Abingdon. The sun was high in the sky now; it was probably nine, maybe ten o’clock. Maybe Stuart could help her get a job. He looked like a well-connected young man—if such things could be deduced from the cut of a man’s trousers or the whiteness of his teeth. You couldn’t own a convertible BMW 3 Series if you didn’t know a few people, could you?

The track brought her out on a single carriageway that she took to be the Abingdon ringroad. Jo found herself weaving through a suburban maze of estates punctuated by corner shops and miniature parks.

A group of young men about her age were kicking a ball about in a small patch of grass. Jo stopped by a tree and looked on. To call it football would have been an exaggeration; this was more like watching a bunch of apes jumping around on a giant pinball machine.

‘Sanjit, you fat bastard! You could’ve got that if you’d moved!’

The ball rolled past the goalie at a leisurely pace and came to rest a few metres from where Jo stood. The goalkeeper, a rounded young man with sloping shoulders and a Roman nose, lumbered towards it. Jo stepped forward, rolled the ball onto the top of her foot and flicked it back to the man.

It was a couple of seconds later, when the wolf-whistles from the small Asian guy in the England shirt had died down, that Jo stopped to think about what had happened. She had flicked the ball up and booted it back into the game, as if...as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Surely that wasn't normal? Surely not everyone could do that—especially not many *women*?

A tall young man with a side parting and alarmingly short white shorts looked over. 'Sorry about him,' he shouted. 'Doesn't get out much.' He rolled his eyes in a way that was clearly designed to make him look more mature than his friends. Unfortunately, at that exact moment the ball came plummeting down on his head.

'Stop flirting, Henry,' yelled England man, clearly pleased with the accuracy of his shot.

Finally the ball was controlled and the game of pinball resumed. Jo stayed put for a moment, contemplating her apparent skills. She had kicked the ball. But not just in a lucky, kick-it-and-see way. She had rolled it from stationary onto the top of her foot, lifted it into the air and launched it at exactly the angle she'd intended.

The haphazard game continued, the score-line developing as predictably as a lottery draw. Sanjit was hopelessly inept at stopping the ball, despite taking up most of the space between the two piles of jumpers. That didn't matter much, though, because the guy at the other end, who was wearing what looked like a fisherman's hat, was equally lacking in skills.

There was a small amount of talent on the pitch, thought Jo, admiring the man nearest her manoeuvre around the wolf-whistler with the relative skill of a professional. He was tall, like the well-spoken guy, but with less of a belly and—if the shorts were anything to go by—more of a sense of style. He dribbled the ball up the wing and sent it straight between the legs of the fisherman, who looked as though he was sitting on an invisible toilet.

'Wanna play?' asked the scorer, jogging halfway to where Jo was standing. He had spiky blond hair and chiselled features that were glistening slightly with sweat.

Jo hesitated. Running about seemed like a good hangover cure, but she still wasn't convinced by her newfound ability. It could have been a fluke. A lucky kick. She wanted to test out her theory, but she wasn't sure she wanted an audience while she did so—especially not this fit guy with his blue eyes and sexy smile.

'Come on. We're two against three.'

As he said this, the fisherman attempted a drop kick and managed to send the ball behind his head onto the main road.

Jo nodded. 'All right then.' She dumped the plastic bag under a tree and tied her hair in a ponytail. 'I'm Jo.'

'Matt,' the fit guy replied. 'You're on my team, with Sanjit.' He nodded at the rotund goalkeeper, who waved back like a clown. 'On the other team there's Raj—' he pointed at England shirt—'Henry—' he motioned to the man in tight shorts who gave a little bow—'and Kieran.'

Kieran came running back from the main road and attempted to head the ball back into the game. It was a reasonable effort, thought Jo, considering the hat.

'OK, ready?' yelled Raj, clearly keen to show off his footwork.

Jo found herself taking the left side of the pitch. Passing and dribbling, she and Matt worked together and quickly turned the game into an exercise of shooting practice against poor Kieran, who was still searching for a technique that worked. Henry and Raj darted about randomly, confounded by the new opposition but unable to bring themselves to admit that they were losing because of a girl.

It felt good—not just because Jo was running around, winning the ball from Raj, scoring goals and clapping hands with the gorgeous Matt. It felt good because it felt *instinctive*. She didn't have to

think about it. Despite not remembering the exact circumstances, Jo knew she had been here before. She'd been a midfielder. She'd been on a team she was proud of. Football had been a part of her life.

Eventually Raj held up his hand. 'OK, next goal wins,' he yelled, and proceeded to kick the ball straight past Sanjit's stationary limbs. Jo looked across at Matt. He winked at her and smiled.

'Bravo! Good game, all,' cried Henry, clapping Raj on the back as they wandered round picking up goalposts.

Jo was nursing a blister on the sole of her foot—a consequence of playing in eight-pound Choice Buys plimsolls—when the questions started.

'So, where d'you play usually?' Matt rubbed his face with the fabric of his T-shirt, revealing a perfect six-pack underneath.

'Er...left wing,' she said, trying to stay focused.

'No, I meant what club—where do you train?'

'Oh, er, right.' Jo shook her sock. It was a good question. 'Well, I used to play for a team in London, but I've just moved here so I'm not really playing, er, properly.'

Henry gasped in mock offence. 'What, you mean you don't call this "proper"?''

Jo smiled and carefully pulled her sock back on. The pain shot up from the circle of exposed pink flesh.

'Thanks for the game, anyway. Ow.'

'Any time. It's nice to have someone who scores.'

Raj looked a bit put out. 'She didn't score *all* the goals.'

'Hey, you should swap numbers with one of us,' suggested Matt. 'We're here most Saturdays, sometimes weeknights too.'

There was a rustling noise as all five young men reached for their mobile phones.

Jo smiled. 'Actually, I don't have a number at the moment.'

They all looked at her as though she'd claimed to be without arms.

'I'm sort of...between numbers. Between houses...'

'Between jobs?' suggested Sanjit.

'Yeah, as it happens.'

'What field of work?' asked Matt as they headed towards the edge of the park.

Shit. Again, she was unprepared. Jo tried to think up a plausible story that wouldn't command too many follow-up questions. Using the actress line on these guys would be suicidal. Annoyingly, though, her brain was buzzing from the football and she could only think of silly responses like bull fighter and inventor and sky-diving instructor.

'Instructor...' she found herself mumbling. Then for some reason she added, 'of kids.'

'Isn't there a name for that?' quipped Raj. 'Aren't they called teachers?'

Jo rolled her eyes as though she heard that joke every time. 'I'm not a teacher,' she replied. 'I kind of help children...do stuff.'

She was desperately trying to think of something else to say when Matt came to her rescue.

'I know what you mean,' he said. 'You're a support worker, aren't you? A kind of mentor.'

'Yes! Exactly.' Jo nodded fervently, slightly concerned that Matt knew so much about her supposed career. 'A mentor.'

'I work at Dunston's in Oxford,' Matt explained. 'I don't actually work with the kids—I do the marketing and press and that.'

'Saint Matt,' muttered Raj under his breath.

Matt casually stuck his foot out and tripped him up. 'And what is it you do these days?'

'I'm an entrepreneur,' Raj replied stiffly. 'Anyway, see you next week.'

He cut down a side street at the edge of the park and disappeared with an impressively large swagger for someone so small. Matt laughed quietly.

Kieran stopped walking, all of a sudden, and stuck out his hand. 'Nice to meet you, Jo.'

Jo shook it, surprised by the sudden formality. He seemed like quite a peculiar young man.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Matt. ‘We, er...we live together, don’t we?’

‘I need to buy some flowers,’ Kieran explained.

‘Flowers?’

‘Yes. I like flowers.’

Matt looked perplexed but didn’t push it. ‘OK. Well, see you later then. Jo, which way are you heading?’

Jo picked a direction at random, which by happy coincidence was the way Matt seemed to be going. They left Henry and Sanjit at a bus stop and set off up the road together.

‘So, how d’you all know each other?’ asked Jo, keen to keep the topic of conversation away from herself.

‘I went to school with Sanjit, who knew Kieran from uni. Raj is some sort of distant relative of Sanjit’s, and Henry...well, he just appeared one day and started poncing around. He’s all right. They call him Tim Nice But Dim.’

Jo smiled. For the first time since arriving in Oxfordshire, she was having a conversation with someone her own age—and not having to do too much lying. It might have been partly the exercise, but she felt almost relaxed around Matt.

‘Watch out for Henry,’ he warned. ‘He’s a real charmer. Got a way with the ladies...Or at least, that’s what he reckons.’

‘Mmm, must be those shorts.’ Jo laughed. Talking to Matt reminded her of something. Someone.

‘And Raj probably thinks he’s in there too. He’s the *entrepreneur*’

‘Oh yes,’ said Jo, straight-faced. ‘I’ve never met an entrepreneur before. Did you say he’s related to Sanjit?’

‘I don’t think they have many genes in common. Sanjit’s the laziest git in the world and Raj has ADHD. But then, Sanjit’s dad owns the patent to some sort of satellite widget that means he’ll never have to work in his life, so I guess that explains it.’

Matt reached into his pocket to pull out a set of keys, and with a sense of disappointment Jo realised they were standing outside his flat. Suddenly, the image crystallised and a scene started playing out in her mind.

She had seen fragments of it before, she realised: first when she’d run into the man outside the post office, then again when she’d gone drinking in Oxford. It could have been a daydream or some weird trick of the mind, but now she felt certain it wasn’t.

She was in somebody’s bedroom. Maybe hers. The details of the room weren’t clear but she knew she was sitting on a bed. A guy with blond hair was standing over her, looking at her, arguing. He was crying. She might have been crying too, Jo couldn’t tell. All she knew was that it was her fault. She was hurting him.

For several days now, Jo had tried to reassemble the scene, enhance the images, hear the words...but it was impossible. The memory wasn’t clear enough. It was like trying to complete a jigsaw puzzle with only half the pieces. She didn’t know who the guy was, or why she was seeing him now, so clearly.

‘Where are you heading?’

Jo forced the blond guy out of her head.

‘Into Abingdon.’

It was the truth. She needed to find a place to stay, and a job. It was all very well messing about with footballs, but the fact remained she was in a pretty desperate situation.

‘You’re going off into the outskirts—you know that?’

‘Um...’ In a moment of rashness, Jo decided to come clean. Well, nearly clean. ‘To be honest, I’m a bit lost. I need to find a B&B for the night. I had a bit of a...a problem with the place where I was supposed to be staying.’

‘So you really are between houses?’

Jo nodded.

‘Tell me that’s not your worldly possessions in there?’ He nodded at the carrier bag, smiling.

‘Ha!’ Jo forced a laugh. ‘No. No, the rest is with...with a friend back in London. This is just, er, some stuff. Toothpaste, knickers, you know...’

‘Oh, right.’ He raised an eyebrow and Jo wished she hadn’t mentioned the knickers. ‘Well, I’m not too hot on B&Bs. If it was social housing you were after, I’d be full of ideas, but...’

Jo’s expression clearly revealed her ignorance.

‘Dunston’s,’ he explained. ‘That’s what we do. Get people off the streets and into housing.’

Jo closed her mouth. ‘Yes, obviously.’

‘Ooh, I know. What are you after, posh and expensive or cheap and cheerful?’

‘Cheap and cheerful,’ Jo replied quickly. She hoped she wasn’t coming across as too much of a loser.

‘Good. That means less of a walk.’

Matt led her up his road and along a perpendicular street where the purpose-built flats turned into tall, rambling Victorian houses that looked significantly more run-down. Jo’s attempts at thanking her guide were brushed aside.

‘I’m not missing much. I’d only be waiting for Kieran to come home and keep me amused with his flower arrangements.’

Jo laughed. ‘He seems quite, er...unique.’

‘He’s special, that’s for sure. Twenty-three, going on twelve.’ Matt slowed to a halt and led her through a set of white gateposts. ‘So, here we are. Don’t expect too much.’

The hostel turned out to be perfectly adequate. Run like a B&B but with none of the dusty ornaments or potpourri, it was basic but clean. The man in charge seemed to know Matt and offered Jo a discounted rate of twenty pounds a night.

‘D’you wanna take down my number, in case you’re bored enough to want another run-around next week?’

Jo shrugged casually, wondering whether Matt was single. Then she stopped her thoughts right there. There were so many reasons why she shouldn’t let herself fall for this guy. She didn’t know a thing about him, for a start, and he certainly didn’t know her. And if they did ever get close then she’d either have to tell him the truth—which was way too dangerous—or live a permanent lie. And it was too soon to be thinking like that, anyway—not to mention the fact that she was seeing another man in a few days.

‘Thanks,’ she said, taking the scrap of paper. ‘I’ll call you in the week.’

## *Chapter Twelve*

It was amazing the difference you could make using only free samples and testers, thought Jo, dipping her finger deep into the pot of lip gloss then wandering casually down the aisle. She applied the finishing touches whilst browsing hair removal creams, so as not to arouse suspicion with the Boots security guards.

According to the tattered phone book she'd found in the guesthouse, The Grange was a restaurant in central Oxford. It was tucked down a cobbled side street that Jo walked past several times before noticing. When she eventually did, it was still only ten to eight so she went for a longer walk to make herself late.

She hadn't meant to start drinking; it was just that the gaggle of girls coming towards her had looked faintly familiar and the glow of the deserted pub had seemed welcoming. And yes, her nerves were playing up too; she hadn't been on a date since...well, she didn't know.

Frankly, thought Jo, tipping back the glass and enjoying the familiar burning sensation in her throat, she deserved a drink. She hadn't had one in nearly a week (not counting the odd sip from the bottle of vodka beside her bed). Hunting for jobs with no qualifications and no CV was thirsty work.

Jo had resigned herself to a career as a waitress or barmaid or assistant—something involving no particular skills. But even that was proving difficult. The cafés in Abingdon were welcoming enough but they all seemed to be staffed with sixty-somethings who could (and sometimes did) serve soup and rolls in their sleep and who showed no signs of planning to move on. The sports centre, the library and several bars in town had sent her away with a smile and a patronising promise to call her if anything came up.

Jo spotted her date as soon as she crept through the doors. Dressed in a cream shirt with the top buttons casually undone, Stuart looked like an aftershave model. His hair, with its flat top and coating of gel, looked almost plastic in its perfection. Jo felt instantly ashamed of her charity-shop attire.

'Hey,' he said, rising from his seat and kissing her on each cheek. 'Fashionably late.'

Jo nodded bashfully. It ruined the aura somewhat, she thought, having someone point it out.

'What are you drinking?'

'Er... ' Jo sat down, hoping he couldn't smell the alcohol on her breath. 'Wine? Please.'

Stuart made a hand gesture that sent a waiter gliding up to their table as though on runners.

A wine menu appeared between them. Jo made it clear that she wasn't getting involved in the decision, but that didn't stop Stuart muttering, 'Louis Latour Puligny Montrachet? Veuve Clicquot Rosé? Bestue Santa Sabina?'

Jo shrugged.

'Is red OK? Ooh, that looks good. Bodegas Luis Cañas Reserva Selección de la Familia.' Stuart looked up at the patient waiter. 'Yes, we'll go for that.'

Jo watched him snap shut the menu. She had guessed correctly: he was full of himself. Sexy, but a little bit arrogant.

'So, everything going well at the teashop then?'

Jo grimaced. 'Er...well, no. Not exactly.'

'I didn't get you in too much trouble, did I?' He grinned cheekily.

'Well, I think I was already in trouble,' Jo replied. 'But you were the clincher.'

'Really? The clincher? Me? Oh God. I'm sorry.' He leaned back as the waiter returned with the wine and poured some with great panache into Stuart's glass. Swilling it for quite some time, Stuart took a sip and proclaimed it 'OK', without looking at the waiter.

'I had no idea I was the clincher,' he went on.

The waiter filled Jo's glass and topped up Stuart's.

‘Don’t feel bad,’ said Jo, wondering whether he actually did. He seemed to be rather enjoying his guilty act. ‘I had it coming. The boss was just telling me how he was worried about my “unhealthy relationship with some of the customers” when you walked in and asked for a freebie.’

Stuart pulled a look of mock horror. ‘Oops. Oh dear. Cheers, by the way.’ He tapped his glass against Jo’s.

The menu was one of those cryptic ones with phrases like ‘bourride of brill with rouille and Gruyère’ and ‘foie de volaille mousse with Madeira’. Jo decided to go by price and opt for something mid-range for each of the courses.

‘You’re not allergic to shellfish then,’ said Stuart.

Jo laughed frivolously and wondered what she’d asked for. Allergies. That was a point. The thought hadn’t even crossed her mind.

‘So, what will you do now?’ asked Stuart, when Jo finished explaining about the fiasco in Trev’s Teashop.

The wine was slipping down too quickly. Jo tried to reduce the frequency of her sips. ‘I’m looking for something else. Any ideas?’ She was only half joking.

He clicked his teeth. ‘Not really my line of work.’

‘Oh, yeah? And what *is* your line of work?’

He waited to catch her eye. ‘Have a guess.’

‘Well...you work from home a lot and you drive a nice car...And you dress well...’ She looked him up and down. ‘And you’re good with people...’

‘Am I?’ Stuart smiled back coyly. ‘Jo, it almost sounds as though you’re flirting with me.’ He raised an eyebrow.

Jo looked down at her wine, embarrassed.

‘I’m not always good,’ he went on, unabashed. ‘But then, nobody’s good all the time.’ He fixed her a meaningful stare. ‘So, what am I?’

Jo waited for her cheeks to stop burning. She hadn’t meant to flirt; it had just sort of happened.

‘Jo?’

‘You’re a property developer,’ she said, plucking something out at random that sounded suitably unflattering.

He frowned. ‘Nope.’

‘Um...’ Jo shrugged helplessly, ‘insurance broker.’

He looked offended this time. ‘No. Try again.’

Jo smiled, lightening up again. ‘Helicopter pilot. Fireman. Farmer.’ This was more fun than inventing her own career. ‘Hairdresser. Oh, I know, you’re a stunt double!’

‘OK. Now it’s gonna be a real anticlimax.’ Stuart allowed the waiter to present the starters. Jo looked down and saw a mass of rubber tubing on her plate. ‘I’m retired.’

Jo screwed up her nose. ‘What?’

‘I was a trader until just over a year ago, then I quit while the going was good. Well, goodish.’

‘What... You don’t work *at all* any more?’ Jo wondered how much money the man had managed to put away. Two million, she reckoned, at least.

Stuart cut into his sliver of salmon. Jo wished she’d been better able to read the menu. ‘I do a bit of consulting to keep myself busy, but other than that I play golf, go to the gym, entertain beautiful ladies...’

*Ladies*, Jo noted. Plural. She wasn’t sure what to make of that. ‘What sort of consulting?’

‘Well, people consult me to ask where they should put their money. I do a little voodoo dance, throw a few sticks on the ground and give them their answer.’

Jo laughed, pushing the chewy rings around her plate. At least the lettuce was recognisable. Stuart continued to talk, somehow making his vacuous life sound quite interesting. Jo felt like a

contestant on some awful life-swap reality TV show: here she was dining with a multimillionaire while only a few nights ago, she had been sleeping on a café floor.

‘Same again?’ asked Stuart, holding up the empty bottle.

‘How did that happen?’ asked Jo, pretending to be shocked by their rate of consumption. She really had to slow down.

The main courses arrived, in Jo’s case, giant prawns and some unidentifiable sea-dwelling creatures with shells, and Stuart steered the conversation back round to her.

‘So, what are your prospects like?’

‘Prospects?’

‘Prospects of finding another job.’

‘Oh. Well, I was thinking of going into financial consulting. What d’you reckon?’

He smiled, filling her glass from the new bottle. ‘I think I’d have to assess your tribal dancing skills. There’s more to it than meets the eye, you know.’

Jo laughed. ‘Maybe later. No, actually, I’m not sure I’ll find another waitressing job. There doesn’t seem to be much demand for them in Abingdon.’

‘Abingdon?’

‘Well, Abingdon or Radley I moved to Abingdon last weekend. My other place...didn’t work out.’

Stuart shook his head. ‘Radley’s loss. So what will you do? I mean, what happens in waitressing circles? Are there agencies, that sort of thing?’

Jo knew she was being patronised. ‘You know, waitressing isn’t my *career*’

‘Oh?’ Stuart looked intrigued. Clearly he’d taken her for a dumb, tea-serving bimbo—which, in a way, she was.

This time, Jo was prepared. ‘I work in cafés to fill in the gaps. My real job is working with kids. I’m a...a mentor.’

At least this one she thought she could pull off without coming unstuck. It wasn’t like saying she was an astronaut or a vet. You couldn’t ask tricky questions about working with kids.

‘Where did you train? My mate’s girlfriend is a child psychologist.’

*Bollocks.* ‘London, um...University...’

‘Oh. She went to Manchester.’

Jo managed to mumble something and had another go at dissecting the creatures on her plate. They seemed to be all shell and no flesh, and the strange twisted utensil she’d been given didn’t seem to help in the slightest.

‘Is that where you were before, then? Try pulling the head off first.’

Jo couldn’t see anything that looked like a head. She yanked the animal in half and tried to work out which was edible. ‘Sorry, what?’

‘London. Were you in London before you came here?’

‘Oh. Yes.’ Result. There seemed to be a tiny piece of soft grey tissue amongst the debris.

‘So, you moved from a mentoring job in London to a teashop in Radley?’

*Jesus.* The meat was disgusting. Jo washed it down with some wine and tried to straighten her thinking. Her behaviour did seem a bit odd, when he put it like that.

‘I thought I’d got this job sorted in Radley, so I found a place to live. Then the job fell through and I was already settled, so I thought, well, why don’t I find another job?’

A piece of fishy gristle flew across the restaurant.

Stuart nodded, politely ignoring her ineptness. ‘Right. And then you moved again.’

‘Right.’ Oh dear. This wasn’t sounding at all plausible. Jo gave up on her main course and had one last go at explaining.

‘I moved to Radley for one job, which fell through, but once I’d moved I thought I’d find another job nearby, so I moved again, but then that fell through.’

‘The job or the place?’

‘The place. No, the job.’ Jo was utterly confused. ‘Um, can we talk about something else?’

Stuart laughed. He speared his last mouthful of steak and offered it across to Jo. She bit into it gratefully. It tasted delicious.

‘So, whereabouts did you live in London?’

Jo made the steak last as long as she could, hoping desperately that a vivid memory of some part of London might leap into her head. ‘West,’ she said, when it didn’t.

‘Anywhere near Ealing? I used to live in South Ealing.’

Jo puffed out her cheeks as though trying to remember the local geography. ‘Not far, I guess. I was a bit further out—a place called...’ Shit. ‘West Ham.’

‘West Ham? That’s East.’ Stuart frowned.

‘West Ham-ly’, she corrected, quite credibly she thought. What was the logic behind West Ham being in East London?

‘Never heard of it. Dessert?’

Jo didn’t want to take any more risks with the indecipherable menu so she shook her head and finished off the wine. Stuart asked for the bill and seemed to forget all about the West Hamly thing, conveniently for Jo, who was rapidly losing track of her lies.

The waiter swooped back with the bill, then swooped off again with Stuart’s card tucked neatly inside. Jo wondered how much it had come to. She probably would have got a more substantial meal in the Burger King down the road, but this had been an experience. A good experience, she thought as she set off for the bathroom. Tonight had been enlightening.

‘Bit of a worry,’ said Stuart, when she returned. ‘They’ve still got my card.’ He gave a look of mock concern. ‘I might go and hunt down our man.’

He darted off, heading for the cluster of waiters who were doing just that—waiting.

Stuart was still complaining to the head honcho when their original waiter appeared at the table with the little machine in his hand. Jo leaned over and took a peek. She guessed it would have come to over a hundred pounds, probably nearer two hundred. But it was something else that caught her eye.

Even though her vision was blurry, Jo was fairly sure she wasn’t mistaken. Embossed on the gold card sticking out of the reader were the characters, ‘MR & MRS S. THO—’

Stuart returned to the table, glanced crossly at the waiter and punched in his PIN. Jo watched him through suspicious, drunken eyes. Surely he wasn’t married? There must be some other explanation. Maybe he was separated and using an old card. Maybe it wasn’t his card. Although, strictly speaking, that would make him a thief, which wasn’t particularly reassuring either.

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