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**Opening Extract from...**

# **A Song for Jenny**

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# CHAPTER 1

## *Overture*

*Time is constant, life changes*

### **Traeth Bychan, Anglesey, Thursday 7 July 2005**

I awake to a tap on my bedroom door and the rattle of china as my uncle comes into the room with a cup of tea. 'It's going to be a lovely day' he says as he puts the cup and saucer down on my bedside table.

I mutter a sleepy 'thank you', watching through half-closed lids as he leaves the room, a dressing-gowned form capped with a head of snowy white hair. I lie still, becoming aware of the early-morning sun pouring in through the curtains and the gentle chirping of birds outside the window confirming the lovely day. The room is bathed in a warm and creamy glow. I watch the curtains for movement, for sign of a breeze; there's not a flicker in their long creamy folds. As I laze in a half-asleep, half-wakeful state, the sound of a distant kettle boiling reminds me of my waiting cup of tea. Propping myself up on one elbow, I lean over to drink some, narrowly missing banging my head on the frame of the bunk bed. I take a couple of sips, replace the cup in its saucer and pick up my watch to check the time before lying back on the pillows: 7.40 a.m. No rush to get up. Looking above I contemplate the strips of pine in the base of the top bunk, crossing from side to side, supporting the mattress, bedding tucked neatly

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around; even the underside made up with care and precision, no crinkles or creases. I smile, remembering countless arguments and negotiations between children over who got the top bunk.

Voices and noises merge from other parts of the house: a teapot being filled; cupboard door opening and closing; bathroom door locking; a cough. Still I lie, cocooned in the bottom bunk while sounds, sun and domestic activity wash over me. Holiday mode!

An image of the church where I am Priest-in-Charge intrudes briefly. With a blink it is gone. There is no one to call me vicar here and I can relax in the knowledge that I am what I have always been with these people in this place, daughter and niece. For a week; no clerical collar or ministerial responsibility, bliss!

This holiday is a bonus for me. My parents planned to visit my uncle and aunt and I was in a position to take some time away from work at short notice in order to drive them, leaving Greg, my husband, at home in charge of the dog and other household delights. While I'm languishing under the covers, enjoying a lazy start to the day, Greg will already have left for his office, avoiding the worst of Bristol's morning rush-hour traffic and be getting ready to begin a day's work.

I close my eyes, not sleeping but thinking, daydreaming, and roaming back over years of visits to the island. I try to work out how long it is since my Uncle Jimmie first came here to work; it seems like a lifetime ago. It is. I was in my teens. Had it not been for that move I may never have ventured far enough into North Wales to discover this small Isle of Anglesey, and a whole chunk of family history would have been different. Is that fate or serendipity or maybe just plain old chance? One action leads to another. My uncle, aunt and cousins moving to Anglesey from Gloucestershire set in motion a whole other sequence of meetings and relationships. There's a thought and not yet eight o'clock in the morning! I consider writing the thought down,

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it may come in useful for a sermon, but decide the effort of getting out of bed and looking for a pen is too great. I ponder instead a rapidly moving montage of memories – adventurous, ambivalent – spanning thirty-plus years of visiting Anglesey. After a few moments I yawn and stretch, returning to the present. One thing at least remains constant: the warmth and close affinity with this household.

Martyn and Sharon; Julie and Vanda: two sets of siblings; four cousins with a close bond from childhood which has not diminished over age or distance and which has extended to our children and partners. In theory our children are a mixture of nieces, nephews, first cousins and second cousins. In practice they are all simply cousins and their parents a collective of aunts and uncles.

It gets better. Two cousins then married two brothers. My cousin Sharon met Mike, whose family had a holiday home on the island. Later, I was introduced to Mike's elder brother Greg at a party and the rest as they say is history. Sharon and I are first cousins who became sisters-in-law through marriage. Our respective children are our cousins but also our nieces and nephews. To each other the children are second or third cousins through their mothers and first cousins through their fathers.

It is impossible not to smile at memories of when Sharon and I have referred to each other interchangeably as cousin and sister-in-law. The children have always been close cousins whether they are one, two or three times removed and Sharon and I have always been 'auntie' more than cousins to each other's offspring.

To people who meet us en masse, as it were, this can appear a complicated set of family relationships. I prefer to see us a wonderfully diverse group of individuals who look, sound and act differently but who all come together as something akin to a pseudo Greek chorus. This doesn't mean to say we are always in perfect harmony. Quite the contrary. Over the years there have been fallouts, hurts and

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disagreements as I imagine there are in most families. Somehow we all muddle through and keep reforming in solidarity and unity.

Fully awake now, I make no effort to leap out of bed, reaching instead for my book. I spot a pencil and write down the earlier thought in the inside cover. My uncle pops his head around the door. 'More tea?'

'Yes please,' I answer, draining the cup of now cold tea before handing it over for a refill. I hear my mother and aunt discussing the merits of showering first or last. Decision made, my aunt comes into my room and asks how I slept, tells me my mother is currently taking a shower. We talk briefly about the change in weather and the fact that the washing machine is about to go on if I need anything washed. I nip out of bed and hand over a small pile of light washing before retreating back under the covers, book in hand, turning resolutely away from the room to immerse myself in a tale of subterfuge and deceit.

After a second cup of tea and short but satisfying read, the bustle of household activity finally coaxes me out of bed; that, and my mother pointedly informing me that the bathroom is now free!

Showered, dressed for a day at the beach, bed made and curtains pulled back, I join the kitchen throng and offer to help with breakfast, handing my used cup and saucer to my uncle washing up at the sink after the early morning round of teas. I glance at the kitchen clock: the time is just coming up to 8.45 a.m. My aunt is preparing a pan to cook bacon for the men and taking orders for breakfast as she places plates in the oven to warm. A partly cut loaf of bread and bread knife are laid out on the bread board. Toast in waiting. I decide to leave the bread-slicing task to my mother. Instead I open a cutlery drawer, count out five sets of breakfast cutlery, and gather side plates, jar of marmalade and other breakfast paraphernalia and head for the dining room. As I walk down the hallway I pass my father coming out of the bathroom, clutching his toilet bag and upbeat about the sunny

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start to the day. His hair is standing up in little white tufts, not yet brushed. 'Not dressed yet dad?' I joke. 'No,' he quips back indignantly. 'I've been waiting to get in the bathroom. You lot have taken so long!'

I go about the ritual of setting the table for breakfast, placing my armful of cutlery and crockery temporarily on the sideboard while I pull out the gate-leg table and position the chairs. Sunlight filtering through trees casts patterns across the carpet, like little scatterings of popcorn. Drawn by the sunlight I go over to the window and look out at the garden; my eyes are attracted by greenfinches feeding greedily from tubes of nuts and seeds suspended from the bird table, hanging on by clawed feet, their heads bobbing up and down as they peck busily. Every now and then one lifts its stout head, seeming to look around, proudly displaying distinctive flecks of lime green on its breast and wings. I watch, unobserved, before looking beyond the bird table to the hedge of shrubs by the stone wall that borders the property: dark green leaves mingling with bright red drooping fuchsia heads. My eyes skip over the road to trees standing tall and partly obscuring the sun, then on to an empty car park adjacent to the local pub, fields rolling away into the distance, grazing sheep dotted about the landscape, the edge of a golf course; beyond it all, towering vast and magnificent in the distance, the Snowdonia mountain range. Hands cupped around my chin, elbows resting on the window sill, I lean for a while and gaze out at the glorious picture, embraced in the stillness. A movement to my right draws my attention as my uncle moves into the frame and scatters crumbs on to the bird table; part of his morning ritual. I straighten up and turn back into the room.

I move contentedly from table to cupboard, counting out place mats and arranging them around the open table, completely engaged in my task. My aunt comes in with some glasses and orange juice,

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saying she and my mother would just have toast so wouldn't need forks. She's freshly showered, hair still damp. My mother comes in and the three of us continue a conversation started the previous evening as to how we should spend the day. We talk about driving to a cove further around the island, or going across the Menai Straits and driving down to Criccieth where we can have a walk along the coast and buy some home-made ice cream. I mention going to visit my husband's aunt in a local nursing home later in the day.

My mother and aunt are alike and easily recognisable as sisters although they are slightly different shapes. My mother is the taller and more slender younger sister and my aunt is shorter and slightly more rounded. Both now have grey hair, my mother's slightly more steel grey than my aunt's, but both with modern short cuts which, without any shadow of doubt, will soon be transformed from their current slightly springy post-shower state into stylish coiffures.

Alone again I get on with setting the table. A ray of sun streams in through the window illuminating particles of dust floating in the air. Pictures of children and grandchildren mounted on the wall are caught in the line of sunlight. Distracted, I lift my face for a moment and gaze at the pictures, each telling their own story of time passing. How lazy I feel. The ray passes and the room is cast in shadow as the sun is hidden momentarily behind some clouds. The sound of a toaster popping up reminds me to get a move on as the irresistible aroma of bacon cooking wafts along the hallway from the kitchen. A voice calling out from the kitchen instructs everyone to sit down, breakfast is almost ready. I speed up my task, leaning across the table to set the last few bits and pieces and just as I retrieve two surplus forks the telephone rings on the sideboard behind me.

Transferring the cutlery into one hand I lift the receiver to my ear, expecting to pass it over to my aunt Karina. It's my younger daughter Lizzie. I can hardly take in what she's saying; she sounds urgent and

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is speaking too fast to make sense. Words leap out: explosions ... underground ... mobile ... not able to reach Jenny. The words are confused but the fear in her voice is clear.

'It's all over the news,' she says firmly and with absolute clarity. 'Haven't you heard?'

'No,' I say. 'Calm down, tell me again.'

Lizzie speaks slower this time but with no less urgency. 'I think something's happened to Jenny, Mum.' She sounds upset.

'Calm down,' I repeat. 'Don't panic. There's no reason to think anything has happened to her.'

A small crowd gathers in the doorway as my parents, uncle and aunt make their way in for breakfast, the latter laden with plates.

'Who is it?'

'What's the matter?'

Voices overlapping; I try to shush them, waving my cutlery-laden hand, indicating for someone to turn the television on and speaking over the mouthpiece: 'It's Lizzie; there's been some kind of explosion on the London Underground.'

A small portable TV is switched on in the corner of the room and the space is suddenly full of excitable voices and transmitted confusion. I try to concentrate on what my daughter is saying, keeping an eye on the television screen.

Lizzie tells me she had woken to her radio alarm and the 9 a.m. news reporting explosions on the London Underground. She had tried to call Jenny's mobile but wasn't getting any response. 'Something's happened to Jenny, I know it has' – more insistent this time – 'I've tried her mobile over and over but she's not answering.'

'What time is it now?' I ask. Someone says 9.15.

'She's probably at work already and has her phone switched off.' My voice is calm, more concerned with reassuring my younger daughter than troubled over the whereabouts of my elder daughter.

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‘As soon as Jenny realizes what’s happened she’ll call to let us know she’s OK.’ Of this I am certain.

My father and Uncle Jimmie are heartily tucking into a plate of bacon and egg.

‘We’re about to have breakfast,’ I tell Lizzie. ‘I’ll speak to Dad and James then call you back.’

‘OK, Mum, thanks, but promise you’ll call me as soon as you find out anything.’

‘I will, don’t worry.’

I replace the receiver and relay Lizzie’s call to the others as I simultaneously dial my husband’s office number. Greg answers immediately. I ask if he’s heard the news. He hasn’t. I tell him about Lizzie’s phone call. He says he’ll listen to the news and try Jenny at work. Then I try James, Jenny’s partner, on his mobile. He’s in the lab and probably hasn’t heard any news either. James’s phone goes on to voicemail. I leave a message for him and then send a text to Jenny, tapping out the words ‘are you ok? call me as soon as you can. Mx’.

I join the others at the table and start to eat breakfast, quite calmly, despite the drama of the phone conversation with Lizzie. The television remains on in the background. A report that the explosion could be a collision between two trains is debated. I drink a glass of orange juice and eat a slice of bacon. I ask my mother to pass the toast.

‘White or brown?’ she asks.

‘I don’t mind.’ There are coffee cups on the table, filled with coffee, Poole pottery, white, with a brown rim – no mismatched crockery in this house! I don’t remember putting the cups there; someone else must have. My father asks what the plans are for today and what time we are going out. ‘Later this morning,’ I suggest, ‘about eleven?’ I spread my toast with some butter and marmalade as the others discuss the day’s itinerary.

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The landline rings; my cousin's daughter calling to speak with my aunt. Delighted, my aunt replaces the receiver, a proud grandmother. 'Joanne has her results, a 2:1.'

Joanne asked if we had heard from Jenny. Apparently she had sent a text as soon as she saw the news but hadn't heard back yet. Jo had also sent a text to her other cousin working in London, Michelle, who had replied saying she was fine and in work.

I take a bite of toast and wash it down with a mouthful of coffee, freshly brewed, savouring the aroma. Replacing my cup in the saucer, I pick up the slice of toast to take another bite and stop, feeling suddenly that it is imperative I speak to Jenny. I drop the toast on my plate and get up from the table, picking up my mobile and searching for Jenny's name in my contacts list. I press call. Ringing out; no reply. I send another text urging her to call a.s.a.p. I don't panic; there's still no real cause for alarm. I just need to hear her voice and then we can all get on with the day.

We switch the television on in the sitting room; listen to reports of power surges, speculation over the cause, explosions at three underground sites, one is Edgware Road, Circle and District line. The camera shows a slanted angle of the entrance down a side road. 'That's the tube station I used when I lived in London,' I comment to no one in particular. We all watch, aghast, as the horror unfolds. I didn't think Jenny's route took her on that line. 'Something has to cause a power surge,' my father's voice cuts across the voices on the TV.

I track down Jenny's work number and call her office. She hasn't arrived yet but her colleague assures me they'll get her to contact me as soon as she walks through the door. I ask if anyone else has failed to turn up. There's a moment's pause before the person on the other end of the phone says, 'No, only Jenny,' and then hastily explains that London is in complete chaos and lots of people must be delayed

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getting to work. I phone my husband Greg who has also called Jenny's office and left messages on her mobile. We don't linger talking in case Jenny is trying to get through.

Loud sirens blare out from the television, filling the air across London, piercing the already frenzied atmosphere and spilling over into the Anglesey household. Breakfast is being cleared away in the next room and for a few minutes the rhythmic chink of crockery and cupboard doors and drawers opening and closing mingles with the jarring sounds on the screen. Strips of distinctive blue and white police tape begin to appear, criss-crossing the screen, defining scenes of crime. My mother sits beside me saying there's more coffee if anyone would like it.

Confused-looking commuters emerge from the underground, immediately set upon by reporters asking questions, eager for news and information. I listen intently, my senses alert to what is happening on the screen hundreds of miles away, yet immediate here. People seem muddled; most don't have any clear idea of what has happened; some talk of bangs, smoke, darkness; some nurse minor wounds and are being helped away. One person says they heard a bang and describes how the train just suddenly stopped. Another passenger, at Edgware Road, describes seeing bodies in the wreckage. Oh God!

My aunt stands watching in the doorway for a while, a cloth in her hand. 'Terrible, isn't it,' she says, more of a statement than a question.

My mother asks again if anyone would like coffee. I say, 'Yes, please,' and she follows my aunt out into the kitchen, needing to be active more than drink coffee.

My father, uncle and I are left alone in the room, watching, not speaking; Dad in an armchair, sitting back, legs crossed, neglecting the newspaper open on his lap; my uncle leaning forward, intent on the

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screen, arms resting on his knees; me on the sofa; all three of us basking in sunlight flooding through picture windows on two sides of the room. There's a calm silence between us, in contrast to the tension and barrage of sounds and images currently being transmitted from London. As we watch, reports flood in of another explosion, a bus. 'That's not a power surge,' I hear my father say.

Shocked, we wait for further news, more details. My uncle calls out, 'There's been another explosion,' and my mother and aunt rush back in and sit down wondering out loud, as we all do, how many more? Where will it end? Five of us gaze at the screen in horrified awe as the minutes tick by with barely a movement or a sound between us.

My mobile rings; I snatch it from the sofa and grasp it to my ear. Automatically I move out of earshot of the television and into another room. It's Jenny's partner James; his phone has been switched off as he was doing a radiation test in the lab, he's only now picking up messages. I tell him what I know, or don't know. He says he'll call back when he's checked out news reports. I report back to the others whose looks of resignation mirror my own.

I try to assimilate all the information streaming from the television, beginning to feel uneasy at Jenny's silence and non-appearance at work. It doesn't make sense; she can't be anywhere near any of the explosion sites, so where is she? Why aren't we hearing from her? My eyes are fixed on the screen but my mind wanders. Come on Jenny, call. Maybe networks are blocked; everyone must be using mobile phones. She'll call one of us as soon as she can. Probably she's walking to work – hence the delay in getting to the office. Jenny's never one to hang about waiting for public transport. If anything, she'll be caught up in the crowds somewhere, part of the general throng and exodus spilling out from the underground. Still, it's slightly unsettling that she hasn't put in an appearance at work. I look

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at my phone, willing the familiar tune. I send another text: 'hope yr ok call me. Mx'.

The TV screen is displaying charts and computerized maps of the underground; coloured dots represent the movement of trains. There's more speculation and repetition of news for people recently tuned in. References to the G8 Summit – of course, that's going on in Scotland, peace talks, poverty, world issues with heads of state. Scotland Yard reports a major incident, multiple explosions but confusion over how many. From time to time I check my mobile, which is resting close beside me on the sofa, close at hand.

The household is quietly functioning, in limbo while we wait for news. Through the side window I see my aunt is now talking to her neighbour, across a stone wall and expanse of garden. The conversation is predictable. Occasional hand movements and a turn of the head in my direction tell their own story. My uncle gets out of his seat, muttering irritably over a journalist's inane comment. A few moments later he appears in the garden and walks around for a bit, before going over to my aunt, saying something to her and then disappearing out of view around the side of the house.

On the television there's still confusion over whether there have been four or six explosions and the official line is they're 'still unsure' as to the cause. The bus explosion was in Tavistock Square, outside the British Medical Association.

My mother comes back in with cups of coffee, followed by my aunt who pulls some small tables out. The tension emanating from the television is eased by routine conversation, reasoning and reassurance as to Jenny's whereabouts. For the moment everyone seems to have given themselves up to following events as they transpire in London; all talk of driving to Criccieth and idly meandering and eating ice cream temporarily suspended. I realize I've slipped from the sofa on to the floor, kneeling closer to the screen. Behind me some-

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one says we're sure to have heard from Jenny by lunchtime so maybe we could have a sandwich here then drive to a cove further around the island for the afternoon.

I pop into the bathroom, clean my teeth and wonder whether to put on a bit of make-up. Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I decide it's hardly worth it as we'll be going to the beach later.

Lizzie calls again; I tell her there's no news and we're waiting for James to call back. I ask about her brother Thomas. She's woken him up and they're sitting together, glued to the television. I call my sister Vanda but she's at work so I leave a message.

Almost immediately my phone goes off again. It's James saying he's received an email from one of Jenny's work colleagues, Michaela. Apparently Jenny sent her a text at 8.30 a.m. saying 'Bakerloo line screwed arse!' We try to fathom out her cryptic text, does it mean Bakerloo line wasn't working, overcrowded, delayed? James is convinced that if there was a problem with the Bakerloo line Jenny wouldn't have hung around waiting but would have found an alternative route to work and confirms she is most likely caught up in the general chaos of it all as her route wouldn't take her near any of the explosion sites. He seems confident and I relax a little. We agree to keep in touch though.

'Was that James?'

'What did he say?'

'Has he spoken to Jenny?'

'No.'

I turn and look into the faces of my family who have gathered in the doorway and relay the conversation with James. My mother moves further into the room and sits on a dining-room chair. My father, frustrated at not being able to hear properly, interrupts; wanting confirmation of what's being said, bending his head in the direction of my voice, deafness causing him to frown in concentration.

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As promised, I call and speak to Lizzie, who sounds less fraught, though no less anxious. She and Thomas are regularly leaving messages on Jenny's mobile: 'At least when she checks her phone, she'll know that we've all been looking out for her.' I agree and bring her up to date with what James has said. Bemoaning the fact that I'm so far away, but glad that Lizzie and Thomas are home in Bristol together, I end the call and go back to the television. All we can do is wait and watch.

Over and over again, we watch scene after scene of emerging commuters, visibly shaken. I dare not take my eyes from the screen, scanning for a face with shoulder-length blond hair. Would she be wearing it loose or tied back? What was she wearing? Why am I looking for her? I peer deeper into the screen, tutting with frustration as the camera moves away before I have a chance to properly scan a group of bystanders near Edgware Road tube. A stretcher is brought out and borne towards a waiting ambulance; a girl walks alongside, with long fair hair and a denim skirt. I hold my breath for a second. More passengers emerge. Some turn away from cameras; others speak to reporters. I pick up my phone, press to contacts ... search ... Jenny ... call ...

Official voices emerge; the Home Secretary makes a statement from Downing Street, speaking of a dreadful incident and terrible injuries, his face, solemn and worried, communicating more than the careful words being spoken. The Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair states there have been about six explosions and suggests this is probably a major terrorist attack. Nothing clear; nothing confirmed.

I feel a sudden need to break up the atmosphere in the room and make something happen; all at once I feel uneasy and unable to sit still any longer watching more and more of the same barely changing scenes. I move over to the window and stare out over the panorama of garden, fields and mountains. All so tranquil, no passing cars or

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even a breeze to sway the leaves in the trees, motionless except for the birds busy and unconcerned, flitting from shrub to tree then away to somewhere beyond my sight. Where are you, Jenny?

A robin lands on the bird table, ignoring the scattering of crumbs, and seems to look directly at me, not moving, its red breast shimmering in the sunlight. We hold the stillness; I gaze back unblinking and scarcely breathe, afraid to break the connection. Moments tick by until unconsciously I raise a finger to my eye and wipe away a tear. The robin captures the movement and flies away. A shiver goes through my body. Why a tear: the beauty of the moment? Or something else, unspeakable, unthinkable?

With sudden determination I turn from the window and move purposefully out of the room, away from the television, calling out to my aunt, asking if I can use the telephone. I dial a number and wait while it rings. Taking a deep breath and keeping my voice steady I say for the first time: 'Hello, it's Julie. We can't get hold of Jenny.'

Silence at the other end of the phone, then a voice, quiet, tentative.

I only pick up fragments of what's being said: watching television; questions; concern.

I respond calmly, hearing only my voice going round and round in my head: *We can't get hold of Jenny.*

'I'll let you know. As soon as we hear, I'll let you know.'

Then again, another number, another silence, more questions – more or less the same questions and replies as before, everyone is watching the television and each time I repeat the words: *We can't get hold of Jenny.*

The morning takes on the quality of a vigil. Watching and waiting. There's very little conversation, all of us focused on events in London. Physically we're gathered together yet each of us is sitting quietly and isolated in our own thoughts and hanging unspoken between us is the hope that we will hear from Jenny soon. If we talk, we talk about

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what we see, leaving anything else unsaid. Sitting around waiting for a call and watching developments is about all any of us can do, apart from the odd household chore or necessary trip to the loo. Telephone calls are hastily dealt with to keep the lines free for that all-important voice.

I can't bear to leave the television screen, can't bear to watch and can't bear not to. It's the only way of keeping in touch. I look at my watch; it's just turned mid-day.

The scene moves to Scotland, Gleneagles; we're told the Prime Minister is about to make a statement. He steps forward, flanked by other world leaders; there's an ominous air of solidarity, suits and ties, a sea of grey and white against a stone backdrop and blue sky. Tony Blair looks grave and, wringing his hands, begins to speak, telling us what we've already worked out for ourselves: London has been subjected to a terrorist attack. There have been serious injuries and people killed. The PM is returning to London, leaving the summit to carry on without him.

Cameras take us back to London. The Home Secretary confirms four explosions and announces the underground will be closed all day. Never mind that, my mind screams, what about the people, what about Jenny. I don't care if the underground is closed, I don't care if the summit continues or not, I want to know where my daughter is. But I stay calm and don't say anything, just keep watching.

Some of the time I watch from my position on the sofa, a ring-side perspective, not wanting to miss a possible sighting, recognition of a precious face glancing at the camera as it passes by, like the girl in the denim skirt who, for a moment, could have been Jenny. Or, when the screen is taken up by politicians, maps, police, reporters, I move over to the window and spend the time gazing into the distance, listening as the myriad voices behind me assess, explain and attempt to reassure. Voices fade in and fade out as my mind wanders, lost in

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thought, picturing Jenny, wondering where she is, wishing I could speak to her and hoping she's far away from the places of terror and harm. I imagine her half walking, half running along Shaftesbury Avenue, preparing to burst through the doors of Rhinegold Publishing, full of loud and exuberant explanations for her late arrival at work and being told to phone home, someone saying hastily, 'James, your father, your mother, your sister and your brother are waiting to hear from you, they need to know you're OK.' And I hear her voice as I have so many times on the past from friends' houses after school, teenage jaunts, late trains back to university, almost singing down the phone: *Hi, it's me, I'm here, I'm fine, there's no need to worry.*

Standing at the window, my back to the room, I become aware of other voices.

'I thought we might as well have some lunch.'

'Can you pull that table out, Jimmie?'

'Alf, would you like ham or cheese?'

'Do you want tea or coffee, Julie?'

I turn back to the room. 'Tea please.'

Plates of sandwiches appear: cheese, ham and English mustard, cherry tomatoes halved on each plate. Questions easily answered dart backwards and forwards as lunch temporarily takes priority over television.

'Any salt for the tomatoes?'

'It's already on.'

'Be careful you don't get tomato juice down your shirt.'

'What time is it?'

'Quarter past one.'

New voices speak and voices already heard are repeated. I listen to the Mayor of London describing the attack as a cowardly act and praising Londoners for the way they've responded, with calm and courage. President Bush tells us the War on Terror must continue and the

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Archbishop of Canterbury urges all religious leaders to stand and work together for the wellbeing of the nation. I listen and I listen and I listen, nibbling at my ham and mustard sandwich and sipping tea from a white china cup.

The phone rings and all our attention is jerked away from the television. I jump to my feet, spilling tea in the saucer as I replace the cup before rushing into the dining room and grabbing the receiver to my ear. I listen to my sister's voice, calling from work in her lunch hour, and hear myself say, 'I'm not overly worried.' Neither of us speaks for a moment – Vanda knows it isn't true and in my heart I know it isn't true. I feel suddenly I have to get out of Anglesey and in a moment I make my decision. 'I'm going to look at train times.'

There's another pause in which I picture Vanda in the blue uniform she wears as a theatre nurse in a Hampshire hospital. 'I'll call as soon as I get home.' Home being a village on the outskirts of Reading which, like Bristol, seems far away from Anglesey.

After replacing the receiver, I stand for a moment looking at it, knowing I've made the right decision, the only decision, and I tell myself not to panic. Then I go back to the others waiting with half-eaten sandwiches, a television with the sound turned down, the sun pouring through the windows and say to their expectant faces, 'I'm going to London.' No one is surprised, no one tries to dissuade me. My mother wants to come with me but is worried about slowing me down. There's also my father to consider. I think it would be better if they stay in Anglesey with my aunt and uncle as I don't know where I'm going when I get to London, how I'm going to get around or how much walking there's likely to be. My mother understands and, hard as it is for her, agrees I should go without her. It's all very gentle and considerate, both of us trying to do what's best. As I leave the room to phone Greg I hear my father say, 'It's just as well she isn't going to drive,' or something like that.

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Greg is still at work, keeping occupied but listening to the news and in touch with Lizzie and Thomas.

‘I’m going to London.’

‘When?’

‘As soon as I can make arrangements. This evening probably. I feel too far away from everything here and want to be on hand, just in case.’

He doesn’t ask me in case of what, which is just as well as I don’t think I could answer.

‘Are you driving?’

‘No, I’m going by train.’

‘Good. Do you want me to come with you?’

We talk about practicalities for a while and settle on Greg staying in Bristol with Lizzie and Thomas so they have one parent with them at least.

I come off the phone and think what to do next; find out about train times, I suppose. I don’t do anything straight away but sit on the dining chair next to the sideboard, thinking about the conversation with Greg. I’m not sure the full significance of Jenny’s continued non-contact and non-appearance at work has quite sunk in with him yet. Has it with me? I lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes for a minute, feeling the warmth of the sun on my face. *Please be all right, Jenny, please don’t be hurt.*

I think about Lizzie and Thomas, alone at home. Anyone would think they were 12 and 7, not young adults of 22 and 17. Still, when the pressure’s on, they’re my babies and I’m their mother; and the pressure is on. I think of them huddled together on the sofa, frightened and waiting for news. The reality is they’re spending the day in the same way as me, watching, waiting and feeling helpless, calling someone when they need to and keeping vigil for their sister. Even so I can’t help but worry about them. Which is perhaps why, when my

## *A Song For Jenny*

sister-in-law calls from Dorset a few minutes later asking if there's anything she can do, I ask, without hesitation, 'Can you go to Bristol and be with Greg and Lizzie and Thomas?'

Jenny's route takes her from Reading into Paddington, then the Bakerloo line tube from there via Edgware Road to Oxford Circus, change to the Central line for Tottenham Court Road and walk from there to Shaftesbury Avenue. I've checked with James; he's certain of the route. Nevertheless, I call him and ask about the route again, repeating it back for confirmation. We talk about what we should do, how we can get information. James tells me what he knows, which isn't much more than I do, just a few details. The police will be issuing a number for people to call if they're worried about someone – I must have missed that – which will be released through the media. Meanwhile people are being urged not to travel into London.

I can't believe we're having this conversation.

James has decided to go to London as well and is working out the best way to get there if we still haven't heard from Jenny by late afternoon. He thinks there isn't much point in trying to get into London yet, owing to the transport situation. If Jenny hasn't contacted any of us by the time the police release the helpline number we'll phone in with her details and decide what to do from then.

We talk more about where Jenny could be and why we haven't heard from her, staying rational, calm and focused on the positives. She could be trying to find a way to work on foot, there's still such chaos with commuters trying to get places, the underground at a standstill, mobile phone networks down, people trying to get out of London. We talk about the cryptic 'Bakerloo line screwed' message to Michaela and how she may have been forced to find an alternative route. We explore all the possibilities we can think of. James also believes she would walk, not hang about. If by any chance she is caught up in the mayhem, she would be helping others in some way; if some-

## Overture

one was hurt Jenny wouldn't leave them. Maybe she's standing on the sidelines somewhere, in the crowds, watching from a distance? All sorts of things could have happened in the mass exodus, people falling over each other, incidents that wouldn't be noticed or reported, minor road traffic accidents. She might have dropped her bag, be searching for it. *But it's several hours now since the blasts*, a little voice in my head niggles. I drive the thought back. I tell James I'm going to phone my friend Bruce, a police inspector, to see if there's any other way we can get information.

When I call Bruce he's shocked and concerned, says it's best to go with the system at the moment, frustrating as it is. He's going to keep in touch and asks if there's anything he can do, or anyone he can call. I don't know. I don't want it to become a big thing, maybe let one or two mutual friends know.

There's a passenger talking to a reporter outside Edgware Road, sounding shaken and describing what he can remember. As the tube pulled out of the station his eye was caught by a girl at the opposite end of the carriage who was standing by the doors reading a book. He was looking at her immersed in her book; he said she glanced up for a moment and smiled, he noticed her big eyes and how attractive she was, then the next moment there was a blast and he watched her fly backwards out through the window or door.

I can only stare at the screen in horror and disbelief. He could be describing Jenny. *Don't be so ridiculous*, I tell myself. *It's not Jenny. It couldn't be Jenny.* The train was going in the wrong direction; he said it was going to Paddington. Jenny would be travelling away from Paddington, not towards it. But it sounded so like her, head buried in a book, everything he described. The reporter and camera have gone to another passenger. *No*, I want to scream at the television, *come back to him; I want to find out more.* I look around the room to say something and find I'm alone, no one to share it with. The moment has

## *A Song For Jenny*

gone. When my mother and aunt come back into the room, I tell them about the interview and they watch with me for a while in the hope that it will be repeated. A number of eye-witness accounts are retold or rerun, but not this one and I wonder if I imagined it.

No one has mentioned going out since lunchtime. We all know the possibility has long gone.

I've looked at train times but connections are not good at this time of day, I wouldn't arrive in London until late tonight and there'd be lots of hanging about on station platforms. My mother and aunt ponder the alternatives with me as we sit in front of the television.

Police release the promised casualty hotline number for people to call. It's just after 4 p.m. I copy the number down from the screen and go into the dining room to call from the landline but when I dial the number nothing connects. Perhaps it isn't activated yet? I go back into the sitting room and double check I've taken the number down correctly and try again. Nothing!

I keep trying, and finally get an engaged tone. Over and over again I try to get through and all I get is engaged, engaged, and engaged.

'Can't you get through?' my mother asks.

'No,' I answer, slightly impatiently.

Vanda calls again; she's spoken to James and had much the same conversation as I had earlier. It doesn't make any logistical sense that Jenny could be caught up in the explosions. We keep telling each other the same thing. She's also spoken to a friend whose husband works in London. He doesn't know whether he'll be able to get home because of the transport situation. Vanda said she's been trying the casualty hotline number also, as has James. Apparently operators can't deal with the level of calls.

I keep trying and finally get through. Someone takes down Jenny's name and details plus some details from me. I'm given a reference to quote. As soon as there's any news someone will be in touch;

## *Overture*

meanwhile if I hear from Jenny can I call and let them know, quoting the reference? End of call. I don't know what I expected but, after the ardours of getting through, it seemed so matter of fact and all too brief.

My cousin Sharon calls from Manchester and I tell her about wanting to go to London and the difficulty with connections. She's back on the line a few moments later saying her husband Mike and middle daughter Joanne were looking up train details on the computer, and then asks if I'd like her to come with me to London. There's a pause, I can't speak and nod my head before getting out an emotional 'yes'. In that second's pause time rolls back to another phone call, in the middle of the night, when I picked up the phone to hear my cousin's voice telling me her baby Matthew had died. That time it was me asking 'Do you want me to come?' Simply that, and Sharon answering, 'Yes.'

I stop off to tell the others that Sharon is coming with me to London and then head for the bathroom, locking the door and sitting on the side of the bath. I feel the tears rising up and spilling over and I don't know who or what I'm crying for: Matthew, Sharon, or myself. I wash my face and go back to the sitting room to answer what seems like twenty questions about the whys and wherefores of meeting up with Sharon and getting to London. 'I've decided not to travel tonight but to leave as early as possible in the morning.'

'I'm glad Sharon's going with you.'

'Is she coming here?'

'Are you going to meet her?'

'What will Sharon do about Megan?' Megan is Sharon's youngest daughter.

They ponder the questions between them while I fetch a notebook and pen from the bedroom to begin making a list of numbers and things to take with me.