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Opening Extract from...

One Small Act of Kindness

Written by Lucy Dillon

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key-losing writer.



Chapter One



Arthur stared up at Libby, his beady eyes conveying what his elderly owners were too polite to say. Which was, 'You haven't got us booked in, have you?'

On the other side of the Swan Hotel's polished oak reception desk, Libby's hand froze as she clicked through the computer check-in system. He *knows*, she thought, staring back at Arthur. He *knows* that we have no record of any reservation, that we currently have not one room in a fit state to show to a guest and that I secretly don't even think dogs should be allowed in hotels, let alone on a bed.

The dachshund wagged his whippy tail slowly from side to side and tilted his head as if to confirm she was right. Particularly the bit about dogs on beds.

Libby blinked hard. It's a sausage dog, she reminded herself. Not a hotel inspector.

Although, as the hotel forums warned, you never knew . . .

'Two nights, name of Harold,' repeated Mrs Harold, shifting her handbag onto her other forearm. 'Is there a problem? We've been travelling since eight to get here.'

'From Carlisle,' explained Mr Harold. 'Three changes and a replacement bus service. I could do with a cup of tea, love.'

'I'm so sorry.' Libby tore her gaze away from Arthur and increased the warmth of her smile – the smile she hoped was

covering up her panic as the upstairs rooms flashed before her mind's eye. She'd launched Operation Deep Clean two hours ago specifically *because* the hotel was empty, and now not one of the rooms had a bed in the right place, let alone a spotlessly smoothed set of pillows. She and Dawn, the cleaner, had moved everything so they could tackle the carpets properly; as Dawn pointed out, there was enough accumulated dog hair under the beds to knit your own Crufts. Libby pushed that thought away. 'My husband and I only took over last month,' she explained. 'We're still finding our feet with the booking system.'

Mr Harold coughed and awkwardly touched his salt-and-pepper hair, confirming the sinking suspicion forming in Libby's mind since she'd sprinted downstairs to answer the brass reception bell. 'I don't mean to . . . Is that something in your hair?'

Libby casually ran a hand through her blonde bob. Yup. It *was* a cobweb. A massive one.

'We're in the thick of renovating,' she explained, trying to flick it discreetly off her fingers. Maybe if Dawn moved one bed back and closed all the doors, they could get one room ready . . . 'Now then, where are we?' She willed the screen to stop messing her about. 'You're absolutely sure it was *April the twenty-fourth*?'

'Yes! I spoke at some length on the telephone to your receptionist. An older lady.'

An older lady. The penny dropped. 'Oh. In that case . . .' Libby reached under the desk for the battered reservations book, angling it so the Harolds couldn't see that Friday and Saturday's columns were untroubled by any bookings, whether in pencil, on Post-its or any of the other haphazard note forms



employed by her mother-in-law, Margaret, who had only recently started writing down reservations at all.

'Donald and I never wrote anything down,' Margaret would insist. 'When it's your hotel, you just *know* who's coming.'

The problem was, though, thought Libby, scanning the book in vain, this wasn't Margaret's hotel anymore. It was *their* hotel: Libby's, Jason's and Margaret's. And at the moment, pretty much no one was coming.

The booking spreadsheet was just one of the ideas Jason had introduced when he and Libby had moved into the hotel to help Margaret after his father, Donald, had died very unexpectedly; however, like most of their efforts to make Margaret's life easier, she had taken it as a personal criticism. Jason's website suggestions hadn't gone down well either ('Your father wasn't at all convinced about the internet, Jason . . .'), nor had their ideas about making some rooms dog-free or putting croissants on the breakfast menu.

Libby's heart broke on a daily basis for Margaret, who seemed suddenly colourless and lost without jolly, sensible Donald, whom she'd nagged and adored for thirty-five years, but the Swan was in urgent need of attention. Both financially and hygienically. In order to get the deep clean started without a hurt Margaret arguing that most guests didn't share their 'paranoia about a dog hair or two', Jason had had to take his mother over to the big Waitrose for a leisurely morning's shopping, leaving Libby in charge of a hotel *and* a guerrilla cleaning operation. Not to mention Margaret's self-important basset hound, Bob, who was safely shut in the office. Libby wasn't even going to think about what he might be getting up to in there.

'Does it matter? You can't be full, surely?' said Mr Harold,

looking around at the deserted reception. He made eye contact with the moth-eaten stag's head over the door to the lounge and did a violent double take.

Libby sighed. If Margaret was putting her foot down about the reservations book, it was nothing compared with her resistance to their plans to update the decor. Jason had grown up in the Swan and didn't mind the wall-to-wall thistlemania in the public areas, and Libby had rather enjoyed its gloomy charm when they visited a few times a year from London, but now their remaining life savings were tied up in the shabby, stag-infested surroundings, it made her twitchy. She wished there were some way she could persuade Margaret to let them get on with the revamp they'd agreed when they'd sold up and moved here for their own fresh start.

As it was, thanks to Margaret's reluctance and their own careful budgeting, she and Jason were doing it room by room, by themselves, in the evenings. The bedrooms were more Laura Ashley than Braveheart, and they'd spent the previous month stripping the busy pink paper from room four, replacing it with soothing dove-grey-painted walls and soft linens. Libby had made mood boards for the luxurious boutique look they'd decided the hotel needed if they were going to attract a bigger-spending clientele. Or any spending clientele, come to that. Jason and Libby's savings had just about managed to rescue Margaret from the clutches of the bank, but there wasn't a lot left over to rescue the hotel from the ravages of time.

Neither of them had done any DIY before – Jason had been a stockbroker; Libby had been a television researcher – but room four looked pretty good, considering. And she'd quite enjoyed watching Jason wielding a sander, with his sleeves rolled up and his fair hair dark with sweat. She'd always known

him in his City suit, or his off-duty weekend wear. And it gave them time alone to talk. And to not talk, too, sometimes; just working alongside each other, worn out in a good way, knowing every scrubbed board or sanded windowsill was a step forward. Room four was the start of something precious, Libby reminded herself. Proof that fresh starts sometimes came disguised as horrible endings.

As if she could read Libby's mind, Mrs Harold said, 'The lady we spoke to over the phone said she'd give us a specially refurbished one. Room four? Arthur likes a firm bed for his back, and I understand room four has a brand-new memory-foam mattress.'

'Indeed it does! Room four is—' Libby started to address her reply to Mr Harold, then remembered that Arthur was, in fact, the guest currently sniffing the laundry bag and . . . Oh lovely. Cocking his tiny leg against it. 'Room four, um, might still need a day or two's airing. Wet paint,' she finished, as convincingly as she could.

Arthur wagged his tail at her, but it cut no ice with Libby. Dog hairs weren't part of the plan, despite Margaret's stubborn insistence that dog-friendly rooms had been their trademark for years.

'I can give you a lovely ground-floor room,' she went on. 'With a garden view on—'

'What was that?' Mr Harold put one finger in the air and inclined his head towards the door.

'Could have been our cleaner upstairs,' said Libby. Dawn was getting full value out of the rented carpet shampoo-er; the water coming out was mesmerising them both with its tarry blackness. 'It's just this morning. We won't be disturbing you later on.'

'No, it was definitely something outside,' he said. 'Unless I'm losing my hearing . . .'

'I do sometimes wonder if you can hear a word I say,' muttered Mrs Harold to herself.

Libby stopped and listened. Nothing, apart from the sound of Dawn shampooing. And some ominous crunching from inside the office. She remembered, too late, that she'd left the nice biscuits in there. The ones that were supposed to be in the lounge, for guests.

'Did I just hear a car braking?' said Mr Harold.

And then they all heard something: the undeniable sound of a woman's scream. A thin, falling yelp that cut through the air.

Libby's throat tightened up. The hotel was on a bend, and the turning for the car park wasn't obvious, so cars slowing down to find it were in danger of being hit by someone coming the other way. The locals, of course, knew the road and so wouldn't – Margaret had assured her – need the safety mirror Libby thought they ought to install as a matter of urgency.

'I'd better go and see if everything's all right. Would you like to take a seat in the lounge while I check?' She slipped out from behind the front desk, grabbing her mobile as she went, and crossed the reception to open the door to the lounge. More tartan, more squashy sofas, but at least Dawn had cleaned in there already today, and Libby had replaced the pre-millennium *Country Life*s with some more recent magazines. 'If you and, er, Arthur would like to relax in here and help yourself to tea and coffee, I won't be a moment.'

The Harolds gave the stag's head a nervous glance and made their way underneath his glassy stare into the chintzy comfort of the lounge.

* * *



Outside, the bright sunlight shining through the trees made Libby squint, but the scene on the main road was all too clear.

A rough-and-ready farmer's 4x4 and a red Mini had stopped at strange angles, like toy cars abandoned by a bored child: the Mini was pointing up towards the banked hedge, and the Land Rover was in the middle of the road. There was no sign of a driver in the Land Rover, but a man was getting out of the Mini, looking shell-shocked.

It was his guilty expression that set a chill running across Libby's skin. Whatever awful thing had just happened was clearly reflected on his face.

'Are you all right?' she called. 'Do you need an ambulance?'

The man shook his head – he was about thirty, dark hair, stubble; Libby thought she should try to remember details in case she was later asked as a witness – and it was then that she saw what he was staring at.

A pair of bare feet on the ground, partially hidden by the Land Rover's wheels. Libby spotted a flip-flop, a plain black one, thrown across the other side of the road.

Her chest tightened. The feet were long and pale, a woman's feet, and the calves above them were speckled with tiny drops of blood from fresh grazes.

'I didn't see her,' the Mini driver was saying, rubbing his face in disbelief. 'The sun was in my eyes. She was in the middle of the road . . .'

Libby hurried round the Land Rover, where the driver was bent over a young woman's body. An older man, she noted, not wanting to look down. Grey hair, fifties, checked shirt and cords. Probably a farmer. Good. He'd know what to do. He wouldn't be scared of blood. Libby was very squeamish.

Moving to the countryside hadn't helped; there seemed to be a kamikaze amount of roadkill around Longhampton.

Don't be such a wuss, she told herself. Who else is going to help?

'Is she breathing?' Libby inched nearer. 'Is she . . . OK?'

The man winced. 'She hit the Mini, only just missed me. She went up his bonnet, then straight down onto the road. Head took a fair knock. Don't know if anything's broken, but she's out for the count, poor lass.'

The woman was curled up as if she were napping, her dark brown hair fanning out around her head and her denim skirt riding up above her bare knees. Her toenails were painted a bright candy pink, the only bold colour on her. Everything else was plain: dark skirt, dark hair, long-sleeved black T-shirt, even though it was a sunny day.

A startling thought flashed across Libby's mind: she looks just like Sarah. It was followed by a protective pang. She knew it wasn't her little sister – Sarah was in Hong Kong – but something vulnerable about her face jolted her. The creaminess of the skin, with the oak-brown freckles underneath. The long eyelashes, like a doll's. She leaned forward, forgetting her squeamishness, and put her fingers to the woman's pale throat.

The skin was cool under her fingertips, but she felt a pulse. Libby let out a breath and realised her own heart was beating hard, high in her chest.

'It's OK – there's a pulse.' She glanced up. 'Have you called the police? And an ambulance?'

'I'll do that now.' The man stepped away and went back to his car.

Libby couldn't take her eyes off the woman, but her brain



was clicking into gear, throwing up practical information to blot out the panic. She'd been on a one-day first-aid course for the hotel (thankfully mostly theory, not gory practice) and they'd covered the basics. Don't move her, in case of spinal injuries. Airway – clear. Good. There didn't seem to be any blood, though her grazed arm was at a funny angle, pale against the rough grey tarmac, crossing the white line.

The white line. Libby stood up with a jerk, signalling to the Mini driver.

'We need to stop the traffic coming round the corner. You've got warning triangles, haven't you?'

He didn't move, just carried on staring at the motionless body, hypnotised by what had happened, so quickly, in the middle of a perfectly normal morning. Libby would have stared as well, but she was too aware of every second ticking past for the woman on the ground. A lump the size of a duck egg was rising on the woman's pale temple, and the skin around her eyes was bruised. Libby tried not to think about what internal injuries there might be.

'Warning triangles – get them out, quickly! Do you want someone else to get hurt, crashing into your car?' She glared at him and he opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind and hurried off.

Libby bent down to hide her own shock. 'It's fine,' she murmured, putting her hand on the woman's shoulder. It had been something the first-aid trainer had said: keep talking, keep contact going, even if you think they can't hear you. 'Don't worry – the ambulance is on its way. You're going to be fine. Everything's going to be OK.'

Silence fell again, apart from the half-conversation of the farmer on the phone to the police dispatcher, and birdsong in the

trees around them. Something this dramatic shouldn't be happening in such peaceful surroundings, thought Libby. In London, there'd be sirens by now, passers-by crowding round, opinions, people shoving in to help, or walk past. In Longhampton, there were just a lot of birds. Possibly a distant sheep.

It made her feel very personally responsible.

'Hang on,' she murmured again, trying not to see her younger sister in the woman's face. 'You're going to be all right. I'm not going to leave till you're safely in that ambulance. I promise. I'm here.'

What else could she do? Libby looked at the woman's bare feet and took off her blue cashmere cardigan to cover them up. This was a strange place for her to be, wearing flip-flops, she thought. There was no footpath along this side of the road, and the hotel was a bit of a hike out of town. Sometimes Libby saw walkers strolling past with dogs; there was a bridle path running through the grounds, one of the routes that made up the Longhampton Apple Trail, but she obviously wasn't on her way there – Libby knew from walking Margaret's dog that the paths were still muddy enough to need wellies.

Was she heading for the hotel? Libby looked around for a bag, but couldn't see one. And there was definitely no booking for a single woman in the hotel that night – although, if Margaret had taken the booking . . .

She checked her watch. Nearly ten to one. Jason hadn't said what time he and Margaret would be coming back. Margaret liked to spin out her trips to the big Waitrose: not only did she much prefer the superior-quality produce, but it gave her a chance to show off Jason, her successful financial-expert son, to the various committee friends of hers who also liked to make a morning of their shopping. Libby didn't



want Margaret to be upset by the accident, but at the same time she didn't want the unsupervised Harolds to explore too far into the hotel, not with the chaos upstairs. It had been a stupid idea to do all the rooms at once, she thought, mentally kicking herself. A beginner's mistake – thinking like a home-owner, not a hotelier.

Libby sat back on her heels, ashamed of obsessing about cleaning logistics when the unconscious stranger might be seriously injured.

'It's fine,' she whispered, hoping the woman would hear her voice and know someone was trying to help her. 'It's fine. Not going to leave you.'

She hummed tunelessly, as much to calm her own rising panic, until she heard footsteps approaching. Libby's head bounced up, hoping for a reassuring figure in uniform or at least the farmer returning with an update. Instead, she saw Jason's broad frame striding towards them and relief swept through her like the sun coming out from behind the clouds.

Jason looked concerned but not worried – worrying wasn't his style. But as he got closer, he frowned and ran a hand through his blond hair – farmer's-boy thatch, as Libby used to tease him when they'd first met. It never looked quite right above his pinstripe suit, unruly and thick. Now, in his checked shirt and jeans, it looked fine. He'd fitted back in here as if he'd never left.

'Has there been a shunt? I saw the triangles up just before the turning to the car park, so we left the car and—' His eyes widened as he registered the woman on the ground. 'Christ! What's happened? Are you all right, babe?'

'No.' Libby rose to her feet, and wobbled. She felt light-headed. 'I mean, I'm fine, but I don't think she is.'

'Hey, come here. You're white as a sheet.' Jason hugged her to his chest, dropping reassuring kisses onto the top of her head while he rubbed her back, and Libby felt her shoulders relax. His touch was comforting; she fitted into him perfectly, the top of her head level with his chin. Thank God Jason's here, she thought, and realised how many ways she meant it.

Then, just as she was about to ask if Margaret had gone straight in to the hotel, Libby saw her mother-in-law carrying two bags of shopping. For a moment she looked like the old Margaret – fussy, filling her clothes exactly, bustling somewhere – but the smile that had started on her round face slipped away as she took in the scene in front of her. In an instant she looked older, nearer seventy than sixty. She put the bags down and covered her mouth; her eyes, an unusual pale blue like Jason's, filled with horror.

'Oh my goodness.' It came out like a wail. 'What's happened?'

Libby wished she hadn't had to see this. It was only six months since Donald had collapsed in reception, then died from a massive heart attack before the ambulance arrived. Margaret had been alone. Overnight her confidence had vanished, leaving a twitchiness that could easily turn to frightened tears. Libby broke free from Jason's arms and took a step towards Margaret, blocking her view.

'I don't know. I didn't see it – I just came out and found those two cars and this lady on the ground. Don't worry – we've called an ambulance and the police are coming.' Libby glanced down as she spoke; it felt odd talking over the woman's body as if she weren't there. 'She's going to be absolutely fine,' she added, in case the woman could hear.

'Sounds like you've done everything you can.' Jason hovered

between his wife and his mother, unsure who he should be comforting first.

Libby gave him a nudge towards Margaret and muttered, 'Take her inside. There's a couple waiting in the lounge – can you deal with them? They're called Harold, and they say they're booked in for the weekend, but there's no record on the computer.'

Jason looked exasperated, but Libby shook her head. 'It doesn't matter. Don't make a big deal about it, but we need to put them somewhere. See if Dawn's finished one of the rooms. Or, we hadn't started the carpet in room seven – try that.'

'Is there something we can do?' Margaret called. Her voice was brave but plaintive.

'No, everything's on its way, Margaret. You go inside.' She glanced at Jason. 'Hurry up before your mother checks them in to room four. They've got a *dog*.'

His eyes rounded at the mention of room four. 'Say no more.' Jason squeezed her shoulder. 'But are you sure you don't want me to stay till the police get here? You've done your bit.'

Libby half wanted to let him, but she felt a strange reluctance to leave the woman. 'No, it's fine. I said I'd stay with her and I will.'

'What's she called?'

'Oh. I don't know.'

'Where's her handbag?'

They both looked around; there wasn't one in sight.

'I'll check the hedges,' said Jason, but Libby waved him away.

'I'll do that once the police arrive. You sort the guests out. And make sure your mother hasn't let Bob into the lounge

again. I spent all morning hoovering that sofa. He should be *bald*, the amount of hair that dog leaves behind him.'

Jason opened his mouth to reply, but at that moment, in the distance, Libby heard the sirens tearing through the air, and the raw anguish on Margaret's face washed away any lingering worries about the bookings system.

The ambulance crew worked briskly around the injured woman, and as they were getting a stretcher ready, a police car arrived. Two officers began interviewing the drivers, marking off the scene and radioing instructions ahead.

The controlled activity felt reassuring after the stillness before. Libby walked up and down the road, looking for the woman's handbag, but couldn't find anything. After that, she wasn't sure what she was supposed to do. She wasn't involved and yet she didn't want to leave until she knew what was happening to the stranger. The paramedics had wrapped the woman in a blanket and strapped an oxygen mask over her pale face. She looked much smaller under the blanket.

'And did you witness the accident, ma'am?'

Libby jumped. A young police constable was standing right next to her. He had a local accent, with the stretchy vowels that made Libby think of tractors and fields and cider orchards. Jason's accent, sharpened by years in London, had already started to soften again, mainly thanks to the catching up he'd been doing in the Bells with his old mates, none of whom had ever managed to leave Longhampton for more than two years.

'No, I heard a noise from inside the hotel.' She gestured towards it. 'My name's Libby Corcoran. We own the Swan. When I got here, everything was just as you see it now.'

'And you don't know this lady?'

'No, I've never seen her before.'

'Did you pick up her handbag?'

'I didn't see one. I've checked the hedges, but there doesn't seem to be anything. It might have gone through to the field.'

The policeman looked frustrated. 'I was hoping you'd say you'd picked one up. That's going to make things trickier. No ID.'

Libby was surprised. 'None at all? No phone? Have you looked under the cars?'

'We've searched the scene – there's nothing. And you're definitely saying you've never seen her before?'

'Definitely,' said Libby. 'Why do you ask?'

He frowned. 'Because the only thing the ambulance lads found on her was your address, in her pocket – she'd written it down.'

'*My* address?' The unexpected connection between them startled her. Why would this stranger have her address? They were miles away from Wandsworth.

'Yes.' The policeman seemed surprised by Libby's reaction. 'You did say you ran the hotel, didn't you?'

'Um, yes, of course, the hotel.' What was she thinking? That house wasn't hers anymore, anyway. Someone else was wafting around her gorgeous kitchen now. Someone else soaking in her roll-top bath. She shook her head. 'Sorry – I'm still getting used to the new job. We've only been here a couple of months.'

The policeman smiled politely. 'Thought you didn't sound local, ma'am.'

'If I had a fiver for everyone who's said that—' Libby began, then stopped, because she was going to say, 'I'd have enough to pay some bills.'

But the tingle of connection was still there: this dark-haired,

bare-legged stranger had written down the name of the hotel, looked it up somewhere. She was coming to them. Another two minutes and she'd have been walking through the door and none of this would be a mystery. She was a stranger to Libby, but she knew Libby's name, Jason's name. The hairs on the back of Libby's arms prickled up.

'We don't have anyone booked in for tonight,' she said.

'She might have been calling in to enquire about work. Have you advertised for any staff recently? Cleaners? Cooks?'

'No, we haven't. We're not taking on any new staff.'

Far from it. When Jason had gone over the books, it had been touch and go as to whether they could afford to keep on both part-time cleaners.

'Maybe she was meeting someone at the hotel?' The police officer knitted his brows. 'A friend? A boyfriend?'

'Excuse *me*,' joked Libby, 'it's not *that* kind of hotel,' but then realised when the policeman's ears turned cerise that that was a townie joke too far.

'We don't really get spur-of-the-moment guests, and we don't do lunch or dinner, so there aren't many drop-ins,' she amended hastily. 'I'll certainly keep an eye on anyone arriving looking for her.'

'If you could call us, I'd appreciate it.' He started to take her contact details, and out of the corner of her eye, Libby saw the stretcher being loaded into the back of the ambulance. The woman was almost invisible under the blankets, apart from the fall of brown hair that reminded Libby of her sister's fringe, always getting in her eyes, and she felt a tug of guilt: she'd promised she'd stay with her.

'Should I go with her? To the hospital?' she asked. 'Will she be all right on her own?'

'It's kind of you to offer, but there isn't much room in the back of those ambulances, and they'll want to get her straight in for a CT scan.' The policeman's radio crackled and he turned to answer it. 'I've got your details – and if you find anything else, give me a ring.'

'OK.' Libby watched the ambulance's blue lights start up again and she felt cold inside, thinking of the grazed legs, the pink toenails. The flashes of colour on the pale skin. 'I just wish . . . there was something more I could do.'

'You've done plenty just by staying with her and getting us out as soon as you could' – he checked his notes – 'Mrs Corcoran.'

'Libby,' she said. 'It was nothing. What else are you supposed to do?' The other officer was looking at her now, standing next to the surly Mini driver, who was holding a breathalyser and trying not to cry.

'Plenty don't do anything, believe me. You'd be surprised. Now, then. Get someone to make you a cup of sweet tea, eh?' he added, patting her arm. 'The shock will probably hit you once you sit down. Don't always sink in at first. But you've done a good turn here today.'

Libby managed a smile. His kindliness, not the shock, was making her tearful.

The ambulance siren wailed, making Libby jump as it accelerated away. She watched until it vanished, then hugged herself tightly.

'We'll be in touch if there are any . . . developments,' said the policeman, and with the dip of his head on the word 'developments', the reality of what had happened finally did hit Libby, square in the chest, and a cold shiver ran through her whole body.

Chapter Two



The first thing she noticed when she woke up was the smell of antiseptic and coffee.

There was someone in the room with her. A woman. A nurse in blue overalls, checking the charts at the foot of her bed. She was frowning. When she moved, the nurse didn't stop checking the charts, but turned the frown quickly into a smile and said, 'Good morning!'

She started to say, 'Where am I?' but her throat was too sore and dry, and nothing came out apart from a croak.

'Don't move,' said the nurse. 'Let me get you a glass of water.'

It took the time between the nurse leaving the room and returning with a very cold plastic cup of water to process where she was: a hospital room, on her own, view over a half-full car park, heavy sheets pinning her to the bed. Her brain seemed to be moving extremely slowly.

How did I get here? she thought, and instead of an answer there was just a heavy black sensation in her head like a rubbery cloud, filling up where the answer should be. She felt that should worry her more than it actually did.

'There you go. Sip it slowly. You're probably still a bit groggy. Been out of it a little while, haven't you?' The nurse guided the cup into her hand.

She smiled back automatically, but felt something stopping her facial muscles moving. She reached up and her fingers touched bandages. Rough elasticated bandages on her cheek.

There were bandages on her head. How did that happen? What had she done? She lifted her hand upwards to feel where the bandages stopped, but there was a drip attached to the back and the thin tube caught on the blanket.

The nurse stopped her moving, gently but firmly.

'Don't touch the bandages. I know they must be itchy.' She slipped a blood pressure sleeve up her arm and started the machine. 'You've had serious concussion. Probably feels as if you've got the hangover to end all hangovers!'

Bad hangover. That felt about right. Her head was throbbing with the worst headache she'd ever had, as if her brain was too big for her skull, and her eyes felt sore and gritty, and the inside of her mouth . . . Rough. But there was something else. Something bigger at the edges of her mind, something that kept sliding sideways out of her fuzzy grasp.

She was in a hospital, but she had no idea how or why she'd got here. Everything was fine, but in an oddly synthetic way. As if everything was a little slow. A little far away, like a bad recording.

Why am I not panicking more? she wondered, and before she could speak, the nurse said, 'And you'll still feel woozy, with the painkillers.' She slipped off the sleeve. 'Blood pressure's fine. Well done. Can I check your pupils? Look over here . . . And here . . .'

She blinked as she focused on the nurse's finger, moving slowly backwards and forwards, side to side. There was a name badge: Karen Holister. She had short grey hair, black-rimmed glasses. Her face wasn't familiar, but her voice was. And as she

followed the nurse's finger, the movement of her eyes felt familiar too. She didn't know why. A distant flutter of fear skimmed across the back of her mind like wind rippling across a deep lake.

'What happened?' It didn't sound like her voice. It was scratchy and faint. It ached to speak – not just her throat, but her head, her chest.

'You were in a road accident. You came in to A&E unconscious, and you've been under observation for two days. Don't worry – someone's been with you the whole time.'

Two days? Had she been here for *two days*?

She sipped at the cup to distract herself. The icy water hurt as it ran down her parched throat and increased the throbbing in her temples. Hung-over. Was this a hangover? Had she been so drunk that she'd blacked out? Been found somewhere? Nothing made sense.

'Was that why I was in the accident?' The words came out painfully.

The nurse took away the plastic cup. 'How do you mean?'

'Was I . . . drunk?' She probed in her mind for the details, but there was nothing, just darkness. A blank space. Like putting your hands into water and connecting with nothing.

'No, you weren't drunk. You were hit by a car.'

A car? Hit by a car. Again, nothing. Nothing in the memory. No ambulance, no pain, no panic. 'Where am I?'

'Longhampton Hospital. We put you in a side room because it's rather noisy out there.' The nurse was checking her notes, then checking the upside-down watch on her blue tunic top. 'The head injuries specialist will be along to check on you again very soon.'

'Longhampton?'



That wasn't right. Or was it?

The nurse picked up the notes from the plastic shelf at the foot of her bed and clicked her pen. She smiled. 'And now you're awake, maybe you can help us solve a couple of mysteries. First off, what's your name?'

She opened her mouth to speak, and then it hit her like a sheet of cold water, out of nowhere.

She didn't know.

The neurological consultant arrived a few minutes after eleven o'clock, followed by the same nurse.

The nurse was Karen, she reminded herself. Karen Holister. She could remember things *now*. *Now* wasn't a problem. It was just everything leading up to now.

'So, good morning.' He smiled, then pushed his glasses up his nose to study her notes. 'I'm Jonathan Reynolds. I'm from the traumatic brain injuries department. You are . . . ?'

'I told Karen,' she said, trying to sound calmer than she felt. 'I can't remember.'

The foggy black sensation in her head intensified, and underneath the artificial calm of the painkillers, she felt a distant wrench of panic. Hearing that made it real. And it didn't prompt a sudden flood of information, as she realised she'd secretly hoped it would.

Jonathan Reynolds murmured something to the nurse, who went to close the door. Then he took a seat on a chair next to the bed. He smiled calmly and crossed his legs.

'That must feel distressing, but please, don't worry. You suffered concussion as a result of your accident and it looks as if that's resulted in retrograde amnesia. Memory loss, in other words. It's really not uncommon. Things generally right

themselves in a short time frame. You had a CT scan when you were brought in and you didn't present with any significant neurological damage, which is a very positive sign.'

He had a relaxed manner, but she could tell he was watching her, his sharp brown eyes moving behind his glasses. She'd been here two days. They'd been watching her for two days. And she had no memory of any of it.

'Does that mean I've got brain damage?' she asked slowly. 'Or not?'

'Yes and no. The brain's a funny thing. I don't know how much you know about how memory works,' he went on, as if they were discussing the weather, 'but we store recent memories and remote memories in different areas of the brain. If you bang your head, or sometimes if you have a very traumatic experience, the connections are broken and you can't access things that happened in the recent past, but you can still remember things that happened when you were a child. Or things you've learned through lots of repetition, like walking or driving. All those things would seem to be fine with you so far. You can speak; you have coordinated movement. We just need to work out which parts of your memory have been affected and then see if we can't coax the rest out. It's very, very rare to lose your memory completely. So don't worry.'

'I don't remember the accident.'

'Well, that's not surprising. The good news is that apart from a few cracked ribs and some rather nasty grazing, you managed to walk away from it with nothing broken. You've got some spectacular bruises, mind you.'

She stared at him, cold under the warm blanket of the painkillers. He kept using phrases like 'good news' and 'positive



sign', but how could that possibly be true if she didn't even know who she was?

'But I don't know my own name.' Saying it gave her a physical tilt, as if she were on a rollercoaster that had suddenly dropped. She felt weightless, balancing on the edge of every second. 'I don't know who I am. How come *you* don't know who I am? Aren't there . . . records?'

The doctor (Jonathan Reynolds) turned to pass the question to the nurse (Karen Holister). She gave her a quick apologetic shake of the head.

'We're not quite at that police state yet. You didn't have any ID on you when you were brought in. We were waiting for you to wake up properly to tell us who you were.'

That didn't make sense. 'I had no ID? But what about my handbag?'

'You weren't carrying it. Or rather, the police couldn't find one at the scene.'

'No phone? Didn't I have a *phone* on me?'

'I know, it's quite incredible, isn't it?' He smiled. 'You weren't carrying a phone either. The police are going through their lost property, in case anyone's handed something in locally.'

'But no one's called looking for me?' Another strange sensation rippled through her: quick and shimmering, too quick to pin down. Her whole identity reliant on someone else, someone finding her, naming her. Bringing her back.

'Not so far. We're checking the missing person reports, obviously. But actually, we do have one thing,' said Nurse Karen. 'The police found this in your back pocket. Does it mean anything to you? I'm afraid the people at the address didn't know you.'

The nurse handed her a small Ziploc bag with a piece of paper in it.

An evidence bag, she thought, like on television dramas. I'm in a television drama. I'm the mystery woman. It felt as if they were all talking about someone else.

The paper was a page torn from a notebook, and on it was written:

Jason and Libby Corcoran, The Swan Hotel, Rosehill Road, Longhampton.

A phone number was scrawled underneath.

Disappointment rose up her chest, spiked with panic. It meant nothing. It wasn't a clue at all – more like the back of a piece of paper with something more important on the other side.

Is that my handwriting? she wondered. Neat capitals, very clear and precise.

'No,' she said. 'That . . . that's not bringing anything back.'

'No? No problem,' said Mr Reynolds. If *he* was disappointed, he didn't show it. 'What we're going to do to begin with is try to work out when your memory stops and starts, by running through some questions. Is that all right? Do you feel up to it?'

She nodded. What choice did she have?

'Don't think too hard about your answers. Just say whatever pops into your mind.' He clicked his pen and glanced down at his notes, but a thought pushed its way out of her before he could ask the first question.

'What have you been calling me? While I've been here. What name's been on my notes?'

She felt vulnerable, completely at the mercy of these strangers. The nurses didn't 'know' any of the patients on the

ward, but they had names. They had an identity, the start of a conversation. Clues to who they were – an Elsie, a Camilla, a Natalie.

'We've been calling you Jo,' said the nurse kindly. 'Short for Joanne Bloggs. We were waiting until you were conscious so we could ask you what your name was.'

Her eyes widened. *Joanne*. I'm not a Joanne. But that's who I am now. That's who they've decided I am.

'Or if you didn't know, what you'd like us to call you,' the nurse (Karen) went on, as if that were completely normal.

They were both looking at her. Waiting for her to say what she wanted to be called. Who she wanted to be.

'Um, I don't know what I want to be called.' She struggled between wanting to help them and, at the same time, not feeling able to make a decision so huge.

'We'll come back to that – give you time to think.' Mr Reynolds (Jonathan) smiled. 'So, where do you live?'

'I don't know.'

'OK. Mum and Dad. Where do they live?'

'They don't.' It came out automatically; it was a fact, not something she felt. 'They're both dead.'

'I'm sorry. How long ago did they die?' It was conversational, but she knew he was aiming the questions carefully, pinpointing something technical, medical, within the soft emotional fabric of her life.

She squeezed her eyes shut as the thick pain in her head increased and the detail of the memory slipped away. It was there, but she couldn't get it. 'I don't know.'

'We'll come back to that,' he said easily. 'It's a good sign that it's there. How about you? Where do you live?'

She opened her mouth, but . . . nothing. She shook her head.

'Do you live here? Do you live in Longhampton? Or nearby? Martley? Rosehill? Much Headley?'

She shook her head again. None of those places sounded familiar.

'Don't think of a name. Just think of home. What can you smell? What can you hear?'

The blackness behind her eyelids thickened. She panicked, and then suddenly something made her dry lips move.

'I think . . . London?' It was a vague sensation of windows high up, counting red London buses. The smell of fried chicken and hot streets and a park with scrubby grass. Noise.

'London! Very good. Well, you're a long way from home, in that case.'

'Not recently, though,' she said, without opening her eyes, carefully probing the memory, trying to sneak up on something unawares so it popped into her mouth like a fact. 'I think that was when I was younger.'

'But that's a start. Do you live with someone? Are you married?'

She opened her eyes and glanced down at her hands, but they didn't help. No ring. No pale mark where a wedding ring would have been. No nail varnish, no bitten nails. Just average hands.

This is surreal, she thought, her head aching with the effort of it, that I'm looking at my body for clues to my life. What else would her body tell the doctors that she couldn't? Was it possible that she could be a mother and not remember, yet have a caesarean scar on her stomach? Had the nurses already looked, checking her naked body for clues while she was unconscious? Did they know something about her that she didn't?

The lurching, edge-of-a-cliff sensation swept through her again.



Who am I?

'I don't know. I don't think so.'

'How old were you last birthday?' Mr Reynolds asked, and she heard herself say, 'Thirty,' without thinking.

'Good.' He sounded pleased.

But her brain was beginning to tick over now. 'How do I know that's right, though? What if that's just the last birthday I remember?'

'Possibly. But we know you're at least thirty,' he replied with the same conversational ease, glancing over the top of his glasses. 'I don't think anyone imagines their thirtieth birthday before they have to have it, do they?'

She looked past the consultant to the nurse. To *Karen*, she made herself think. 'Has no one called at all? In two days?'

Surely after two days someone would have noticed she was missing? If not a husband, then work colleagues?

Her chest felt tighter and tighter. What sort of person didn't have anyone to miss them? Or what if someone was missing her but couldn't find her?

'Well, we don't know that they aren't calling. You might be a long way from home. They might be trying local hospitals first.' Nurse Karen's eyes were brown and sympathetic. 'Don't worry – there's a good network for missing people. The police are on to it. *They*'ve called quite often to check on you – makes a change from investigating missing tractors and shoplifters.'

She looked down at her hands again. There was a long graze down her wrist, and a bandage on one palm where – she guessed – she'd scraped it along the road surface. Questions were rising now like dark birds from the back of her mind, set free as the sleepiness wore off. What if no one comes? What if my memory doesn't come back? Where do I go?

'Can you remember where you were last Christmas?' Jonathan Reynolds asked, and without warning a deep sadness filled her.

'No.'

Exhausted tears rushed up her throat, filling her head, flooding her gritty eyes, and she saw a movement – the nurse glancing at the consultant, the briefest twitch of her eyebrows suggesting this was enough. She felt grateful: the doctor was curious, and he wanted to solve the problem in front of him, but she was still struggling to get her head around the fact that she *was* the problem. However keen Jonathan Reynolds was to work out who she was, it was nothing compared with how much she wanted to know.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I can't . . . My head . . . it's aching.'

'Of course. I think that's probably enough for now,' he said. 'Rest is going to be crucial. We'll leave some paper and pens here, and if anything pops into your mind, just jot it down or call one of the nurses and let them know. I'll drop by later.'

Was that a test too? she thought. Whether I can still write?

She picked up a pen gingerly. Her fingers gripped it and she felt nauseous with relief.

'And please don't worry,' he said. 'Most patients with retrograde amnesia find that everything comes back after a day or two. Like turning the computer on and off again.'

She found herself mirroring his reassuring smile. But she didn't feel very reassured at all.