

CHAPTER 1

GOOD MORNING!

At exactly 7am, five days a week, Sally opens a concealed door into the hotel's marble-and-mirror lobby. Feeling nervous, like a gladiator entering the ring at the Colosseum, unsure of what she will face, she checks herself one more time in the large wall mirror across the lobby from her desk.

'Good morning, mirror!'

Yes, it's definitely a red-and-black checked ribbon day! Red nail polish, black panties and black tights. Not a spotty or stripy day. Just a normal old day for me to get through. Done it many times, so no worries today.

'Good morning, flowers!'

Good, Matt's still at the reception desk after his night shift. But why is there a young girl standing alone in the middle of the lobby at 7am?

'Hi, Matt, what's that girl doing in the lobby at this time?'

'Oh, really? I'm not sure, I never noticed, I was busy cashing up.'

'She's coming over here.'

I wonder what she wants, she doesn't look upset. Where are her parents?

‘Good morning, how can I help you?’

‘I saw you talking to the flowers. Why do you talk to them? They don’t have ears so they cannot hear you!’

What do I say? Why do I talk to the flowers? It’s been a long time since I confided in a human. I always found them unreliable and two-faced. I would tell school friends secrets, and the next thing, everyone was laughing at me. I found over time that human relationships were usually painful. Flowers never cause me anguish, except when others hurt them. The mirror never lies to me. It never says, ‘You look great, go out in that dress’ and then I get ridiculed by everyone when I’m out with so-called friends. The flowers and mirror are all I need.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Lily.’

Ah, what a sweet name.

‘Lily, I am Sally. The flowers can hear. Just because you don’t have ears doesn’t mean you cannot hear! When I talk to them they feel the vibration, and hear that way. Obviously they cannot talk back, but that’s OK, I think I know what they would say.’

‘How?’

‘Because they are my friends. You always know what your friends are thinking, don’t you?’

‘My mummy says she can read my mind!’

‘I am sure she can. Some people hug trees. I am sure it makes the trees feel better, and helps the people too, I am told.’

‘Mummy says I mustn’t go near strange people who want to hug.’

Oh my. There goes innocence. But I know all about scary hugging in childhood. I still suffer the consequences.

‘That’s quite right.’

‘There’s Mummy, she’s finished in the toilet, so we can go to breakfast now.’

From an early age, all the way through my younger teenage years, my parents sent me to religious summer holiday camps, mainly to get me out of their hair. I hated it. Nobody understood my ideas, they didn’t even want to listen. When I first went they listened patiently and explained their views, but later, no. They told me I was wrong. I couldn’t work out how they could say that, what they said did not make any sense to me. The moral principles sounded good on the surface, but the explanations behind them seemed just plain crazy to my mind. Everyone is free to have their own religion, their own beliefs. I wonder if all religious groups are like the one I had to suffer. Probably not – maybe I just hadn’t found the right one. I felt like I was ignored in favour of those who agreed with what they were told. Then there was the physical contact. All that hugging after a service made me uncomfortable. Old men touching me, squeezing up to my breasts. I hated my parents for making me go through that. I wonder, why are the little girl and her mother up so early? Why was her mother in the loo, having just left the room? Presumably she went for a pee there, just before coming down. I am sure she would have made sure her daughter did!

‘Thanks for hanging around, Matt, how was last night?’

I know he wasn’t waiting for me, he normally rushes off. Guess he was just late cashing up.

‘Boring, no hooker game I’m afraid! She came in, according to Katie, just after your shift but left after about forty-five minutes. So there’ll be no betting on which guest she stayed overnight with! Sunday night was a bit quiet, no groups yesterday.’

‘Did she do her usual, getting the guest to distract reception as she sneaks out of the lift?’

‘It’s pointless her doing that, we all know her game. But it’s funny watching the guest come up to the desk with obviously made-up excuses with which to try and distract us. Katie didn’t say which guest it was, so I can’t tell you who to try to embarrass by asking if they had a good time rather than a nice stay! Anyway, gotta rush, there are a few things in the night logbook to look at. The man in 1703 died, but it’s all been dealt with. But make sure you watch out for the guy in 1308, the whinger room!’

Matt has always ‘gotta rush’ when there is shit lurking around but yet to hit the fan. I wonder what it is this time.

‘Is Frank about? He’s supposed to be working with me as duty manager this week.’

Don’t tell me I’ll have to deal with everything alone, yet again.

‘No, you know management! Oh, there goes Mr 1308 off to breakfast. Bet he’ll be here in a few minutes with a complaint! Have you seen the new notice? Bye!’

Yes, I wonder what is that in the frame? Why’s it clattering up the desk? I stand in the middle, flowers to my left, mints for guests to the right. That’s all that is allowed on the top of the desk. Nothing else confusing things, messing things up, spoiling the picture.

The Hotel Management will not tolerate any abusive language or behaviour by customers towards its employees. Signed, The Management.

What idiot put that there? Has the boss, Mr Temple, seen this? Maybe he put it there? Surely not. He knows how I like things, he always says he understands me. Mind you, since his management course he's gone weird, and seems to have forgotten all our names. 'Its employees' – who does he think he is? I'm not owned by him, nor by the hotel! And what's with 'customers'?

'They are guests, in fact my guests, not bloody customers. This isn't a supermarket!'

Oops, I didn't see someone was standing there – the damned notice is already causing me problems.

'Good morning, how can I help you?'

'What were you shouting about?'

Shouting? Shit, I thought I was muttering!

'It's a notice the management have put on the desk.'

It's actually a really stupid notice for guests, saying not to abuse us or else!

'What does "will not tolerate" actually mean?'

'I haven't a clue!'

It's supposed to intimidate you guests into having a nice attitude. I don't want it on my desk. And the frame is awful, it doesn't go with anything! Why are so-called 'important' signs put in old-fashioned gold frames? It doesn't match the flower vase, or the mint bowl, or my nails or the bow holding up my hair, not even the lobby decor or our black uniforms!

'Well, I agree: people should be nice to you!'

‘Thank you.’

But my job is my job. The guest is always right, so they always have the right attitude. My job is to be as tolerant as possible, as understanding as possible, and keep everyone happy and feeling special. No matter how much of a shit they are. I smile, or look concerned, or use another appropriate expression, and give an answer to please them.

‘Can I help you with anything else?’

‘No, thank you.’

That it? Why did you come to the desk in the first place? I bet you forgot! It’s a stupid notice and I don’t want it on my desk. It’ll just encourage sarcastic comments, and won’t change people’s behaviour. Someone may even want to hit me with it! It’s going under the table!

‘There we are, flowers, let me move you back to where you go. The notice is under the table now, safely out of your way. That’s better, isn’t it? Do you know, flowers, in the northern hemisphere it’s snowing and the holiday season? Here summer is approaching and brings with it my birthday.’

Celebrations are not a part of my life. Living alone, with no family and friends, I only share special times with my stuffed toy pets and those poor animals at the rescue centre. At work we occasionally exchange gifts, but it’s not personal, it’s work. As much as my colleagues feel like family when I am here, I know they are not. They are never at my home. As I am paid a minimum wage, my rent and bills use up all my money. The glamour of the hotel is not the reality of life for the workers. My simple existence is all I can afford. Not having to buy gifts is one less stress in my life. I am happy to keep it that way.

Well, here we go again, another week at work, another week like all the rest in the year. Definitely a red-and-black checked ribbon day today! Nothing in my life has changed in the last week, month, even years. Every week like all the others. I don't mind that, I know where I stand. No doubt this week will bring a new set of events, characters, chat-up lines and challenges to exhaust me. Having to be nice to people all day, which I take seriously as it is my job, is mentally tiring. The constant barrage of having to say one thing but really thinking another is tough. Flowers, you know me, when I get tired I am tempted to let rip, but I always seem to hold on and just make it to the end of the day without upsetting anyone! I'll be OK, I will make it through, I've had the weekend to recharge my batteries. No doubt on Monday next week we will be having the same conversation as we always do! So, let's see what's in the night book.

The guy who died in 1703 had a heart attack. Let's see... yes, he was fifty-nine. Poor bugger, too young. I bet he spent his whole life looking forward to retirement and never got there. Imagine working all those years and the golden days are taken from you. Sucks. I wonder if he was with the hooker? No, with his wife. Poor thing. She'll be shattered by this. I guess she'll be too old to easily get a new man. The rest of her life, maybe fifty years, alone. I'm happy alone, but she'll not be used to it. It will be a big adjustment for her. I hope she has some family for support – not like my family, a real family. Hope Matt checked them out... good boy, but he charged them for the room anyway! Bastard. Too chicken to make a decision himself, and no doubt the night manager

Craig wasn't around at the time. I imagine he would have been 'supervising' by chatting with the ambulance guys whilst having a cigarette. I'd better check with Maria that housekeeping have cleaned up properly!

Now let's see, what else? A no-show – well, better call them.

'Hello, it's Sally at reception at the hotel. You have prepaid for a room for two people for three nights but have not checked in yet. Are you still coming?'

'Prepaid? I didn't know that!'

'It's your credit card.'

'What? Bitch!'

'I'm sorry, sir?'

Did he just call me a bitch?

'No, not you. My ex-girlfriend! She said she had booked a surprise, but I won't be coming.'

'Will she still be coming?'

'She better not! We split up two days ago!'

'Oh, I am sorry.'

'Not half as much as I am! Using my card! Bitch! Bet she planned it that way!'

'I'm afraid the room is a non-refundable rate.'

'What? I can't get a refund?'

'I might be able to change your reservation to another date, should you wish?'

'You joking?'

'Just trying to be helpful.'

Oh, he hung up. Who's the bitch now?!

'You see, flowers? That's what I get for being considerate.'

But I would never change my job. You know I love the

idea of travel, although I have never been abroad. Working at reception in a hotel feels like travelling, with all the tourists, businessmen and people on trips coming and going to the airport, and of course, the cruise ship passengers. Their stories make me feel part of it all. Of course I could never travel abroad. I don't have the self-confidence or money to do that. I am happy with my routine, my job, and get out of it what I can cope with. My holidays are at home, with little visits to nearby places I know, especially the animal sanctuary. I empathise with the poor things. Nobody gave them a notice in a gold frame about not being abused. They have all suffered, you can see it in their eyes. Mind you, if I had a relationship I could travel, as I would not be going alone. The problem is, that whilst there is no shortage of suitors, it's difficult finding someone I feel comfortable with. I've lived alone for a long time now.

'Flowers, will this week's batch of chat-ups be any different? Probably not!'

OK, what else do we have in the night log? Who's this guy in 1308? Mr Wilson. What? How many complaints could someone possibly make? If he's after a discount he's gone way over the top. Surely his stay can't possibly be that bad! He's even moved rooms twice, claiming the bathroom mixer taps didn't work in the first one, and the air conditioning didn't work well enough in the second! In this room he says it's not clean enough, room service didn't collect his tray, which was smelling the room out, the bar guy Peter ignored him when he was waiting to be served, the restaurant didn't have what he wanted and wouldn't make it for him. No wonder they moved him to our whinger room. Room 1308

is a special room. Historically it's had the most complaints, and Maria in housekeeping thinks it is haunted. As whingers will complain anyway there is no point in trying to please them with a nice room. So now I put Whinger of the Day candidates into it deliberately, and the complaints become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

'As usual, flowers, I'm the one who has to try to make whingers leave the hotel happy when they check out in the morning!'

I can't wait. I am loyal to the hotel, it is my family, my life. I hate it when people criticise the hotel and staff. I feel very defensive when they do. Obviously, like family, I am allowed to criticise the hotel and staff as much as I want, although I keep staff criticism largely to myself – I have to work with them!

I'm so happy they have changed the telephone system so it flashes rather than rings. No more *ring-ring* all day, echoing around the lobby and in my head. Trying to help a guest with the phone shouting at you is hard.

'Good morning, Sally at reception speaking, how can I help you?'

'This is Mr Jones, room 1304.'

Oh, he sounds serious.

'Good morning, Mr Jones, how can I help you?'

'There is something under my bed!'

'What does it look like?'

'A dead mouse, but it's a bit bloody.'