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Opening extract from  
**Missing Me**

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# 5

## A Hitch

Getting away from home and Annie was the easy bit, despite Annie's overprotective habit of demanding to know where I was going and who I'd be with. I told her I was meeting my friend Rosa from school. I'm not exactly popular at school – I'm too shy and too serious for most of the airheads in my class – but Rosa and I genuinely get on. She comes from a majorly dysfunctional family too, with no dad and three older brothers, one of whom is in constant trouble with the police. Anyway, Rosa was quite happy to cover for me that evening.

I took the tube to Westminster then followed the map on my phone to the building with the designated entrance for the Brisbane Media drinks reception. The Houses of Parliament is huge and sprawling and it took longer than I'd expected. I didn't reach the building I was looking for until almost 7.30 pm.

I'd taken a lot of trouble over how I looked. I normally wear jeans and jumpers or T-shirts and never any make-up, but today I put on a proper skirt and one of Annie's silk shirts tied over a vest top. I was even wearing mascara and lipstick. As I walked towards the iron gate at the side of the big brick

building, I could feel a million butterflies zooming around inside my stomach.

What was I going to say to Allan Faraday? I could hardly just march up to him and announce that I was his long lost daughter. For all I knew, he might not even remember donating sperm over twenty years ago. Lauren's warning rang in my ears:

*He . . . he might not want to know you. And I'd hate to see you hurt.*

She was right, of course. But I was prepared for rejection. The most important thing was that I met him . . . that I knew who he was . . . It was, surely, like a total sign that he should be in London the very day I went looking for him. And I knew from his Tweets that he was leaving tomorrow. So this was my only chance to find him and introduce myself. I'd deal with whatever happened next, once it actually happened.

I was so caught up with all these thoughts, that I didn't notice the security guards at the gate until I was just a few metres away. They were really dressed up – in uniforms with . . . jeez, were they *guns*?

I stopped in my tracks.

Why hadn't I thought that it might be tricky just to walk inside a drinks reception? Especially one in a high security area like Parliament. As I watched, two women approached the gate. They showed the guards pieces of card. Invitations.

What was I going to do now? Even if it had occurred to me earlier that I might need a formal invite, I'd have had no idea how to fake one. The two women laughed at something the

guards said, then went inside. I backed away, looking around for an alternative entry point. There was nothing obvious. I could see a few ground-floor windows, but they were all closed – and all within the guards’ sightlines. There were no other doors.

I sauntered away, trying to look like I was casually strolling about. I rounded the corner. Now the guards could no longer see me. I spotted a fire door and rushed over. I pushed at it, hoping against hope that it wouldn’t be locked, but it was.

Of course it was, this was the Houses of Parliament for goodness’ sake. Feeling defeated, I turned away. *Was this it?* I felt suddenly swamped with desolation. I’d been so close to Allan Faraday and now I was as far away from meeting him as ever. I knew I could hang around outside, waiting for him to arrive, but it was nearly twenty to eight now. He was probably already at the drinks reception. And I had no idea how long that was likely to last.

Jeez, I was so useless. When Lauren had gone looking for her birth family she’d faced far harder obstacles than I was up against, including crossing the Atlantic, boarding a flight to a place she’d never been and breaking into a building in the middle of the night.

Lauren had faced down every single challenge, while I couldn’t even get into a simple drinks reception in my adopted hometown. So much for wanting to be a journalist. I wandered back towards the guards. What was I going to do? I could try talking my way in, but I really didn’t feel confident enough for that.

And then I spotted another door, on the other side of the guards. It was some way beyond them, though still clearly visible from where they were standing. A man – young, maybe early twenties – was standing outside, smoking a cigarette. From his stained apron and white cap – plus the steam issuing from the door behind him – I was guessing he had just stepped out from inside a kitchen.

I took a circuitous route that led me towards him without walking directly past the guards. As I approached he looked up and smiled.

‘Hey, beautiful,’ he said, his eyes twinkling. His accent was heavily eastern European. ‘You want cigarette?’

I shook my head, tongue-tied. I was useless at talking to strangers, especially male ones. Boys quite often tried to chat me up but usually gave up in the face of my shyness. It didn’t much matter whether I liked someone or not, I could just never think of anything to say. ‘I . . . I don’t smoke,’ I stammered. What on earth was I doing? This guy wasn’t going to let me in anymore than the guards were. Unless . . . ‘I’m looking for a job,’ I said.

The young man raised his eyebrows. ‘You don’t want work here,’ he said in a loud whisper. ‘Pay is terrible and boss is worse.’

‘Just a bit of part-time work?’ I glanced along the building. A large group was approaching the two guards. Neither of them were looking in my direction. I forced a smile onto my face. ‘Please?’

The young man stubbed out his cigarette. He winked at me. ‘You know with all security screenings is more trouble than

worth for part-time work, but I will ask the boss if he hiring,’ he said. ‘You wait here, beautiful. I come back.’

‘Sure.’

The young man disappeared inside. He let the door shut behind him, but I caught it before it closed completely and peered inside. The young man was whistling to himself as he strolled towards a set of swing doors. Steam swelled up above the doors and I could hear the sounds of pans clanking and people shouting.

I looked in the other direction. The corridor disappeared round a bend. Surely that had to lead to the rooms where the reception was being held? Either way, it was my best chance to get inside. As soon as the young man vanished behind the swing doors, I darted inside and tiptoed along the corridor. Round the bend, I reached a short flight of concrete stairs. Up these and through a door to another corridor – this one oak-panelled and lushly carpeted. As I crept along, voices drifted towards me from the doors on either side – a series of low, male mumbles. Where on earth was I? And how was I going to find the drinks reception and Allan Faraday?

I headed for the door at the end of this corridor. Hopefully this would lead me back down to the rooms where the reception was being held. I wiped my palms on my skirt as I sped along. Behind me a door smashed open against a wall.

‘Hey! Stop!’

I spun round. *No*. One of the guards from outside was just a few metres away, running towards me.

‘Stop!’ he yelled again.

Panic rising, I turned and fled for the door ahead. I reached it in a few steps. Yanked at the handle.

It was locked. The guard behind me pounded up. His hand slammed against the door by my head. I turned to face him. He was panting and puce in the face. His hand slid down to his gun. I stared at it in horror.

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ he demanded.