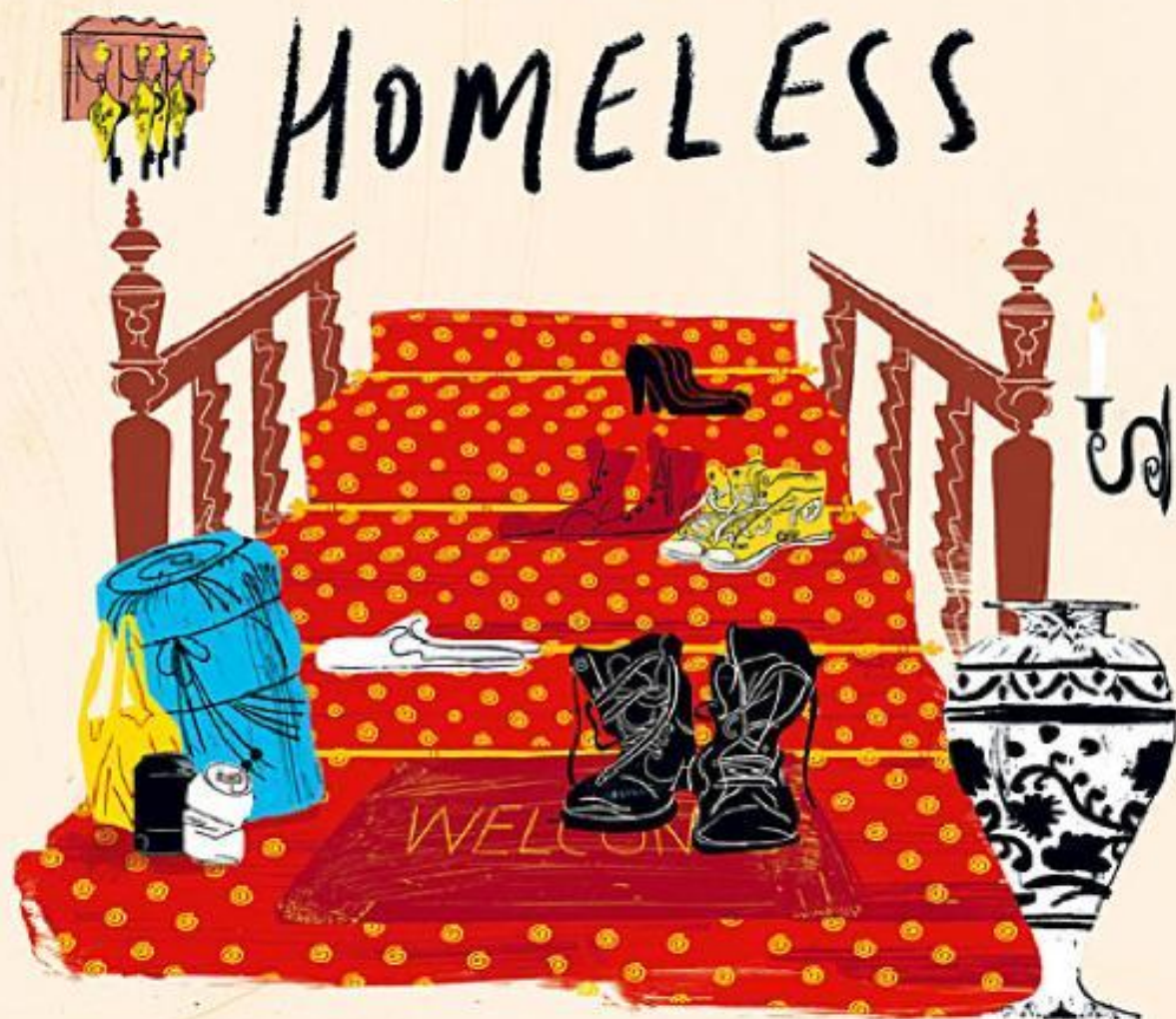


THE PRINCE RUPERT HOTEL

FOR THE

HOMELESS



A True Story of Love and Compassion
Amid a Pandemic

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In an olde-worlde town of steeples, spires and higgledy-piggledy black-and-white houses on a hill, looped around by a river along which swans glide between an English bridge and a Welsh bridge, there stands a hotel like no other. High up in the town, reached along a cobbled alley called Butcher Row, it is a hotchpotch of timber-framed buildings dating back nine hundred years where a Bohemian prince once lived, and overlooks a square with a twisty tree and the church of St Alkmund's that was founded long before the Black Death.

'Let's meet at the Prince Rupert' has long been a common refrain in Shrewsbury, whether among ladies that lunch, business-people wanting to discuss deals, bridal parties planning a wedding or tourists wandering in wonder through the narrow streets of the medieval town centre.

Inside, on this Saturday, a welcoming fire crackled in the lobby and guests sallied back and forth past the portrait of a long-haired man with a romantic air. This was Prince Rupert, the Prague-born grandson of King James I, who stayed here in the seventeenth century trying to marshal Royalist forces during the English Civil War, and gave the hotel its name.

That day the Prince Rupert had sixty-one paying guests and the two restaurants and lounge bar had a steady stream of custom-



ers. The Camellias Tea Rooms were so busy that hotel manager Charlie was helping out alongside her daughter Gabriella, serving pots of Earl Grey and tiered cake-stands of scones, fruit slice and cucumber sandwiches while the tinkling digital piano played the theme from *Titanic*.

Upstairs, the hotel's sixty-one-year-old owner Mike Matthews was sitting in his wood-panelled office, the prince's old lounge, head in his hands. The computer screen in front of him revealed a summer full of bookings for the Prince Rupert's seventy rooms, thanks to the crowds that were going to descend on Shrewsbury for its food festival in June; for Let's Rock in July, featuring the eighties stars Adam Ant and Tony Hadley; and then in August for the folk festival and the Shrewsbury Flower Show, the world's oldest, dating back to 1836 when only carnations and gooseberries had been allowed.

Everything had been shaping up to be a good year. On television, however, as there had been for days, were terrifying images from northern Italy, where hospitals were so overwhelmed by a deadly virus that had come from China that they were running out of ventilators and doctors were having to play God and decide who to save. Some hospitals were so full they were treating people in car parks. Similar scenes were being repeated in Spain. Mike's cousin in Malaga was sending daily messages about the fear that was spreading across the country.

Mike called in the two fifty-something women he considered his 'right-hand men' – Charlie Green, the bubbly red-haired manager with a heart-shaped face, and Jacki Law, his watchful pale blond accountant, both as petite as he is tall. 'I think they will close us down,' he said. The women were surprised. The day before, almost seventy thousand people had gathered for the races at Cheltenham Festival. Boris Johnson, the mop-headed British prime minister, was playing the virus down, going to a rugby match at Twickenham with his young fiancée Carrie Symonds, shaking hands with all and sundry, and telling a press conference with his usual bluster, 'I'm absolutely confident that we can send coronavirus packing in this country.'

Mike shook his head. Italy, Spain, France, Germany and Greece were already in some form of lockdown, closing restaurants, shops

and schools, and telling people to stay at home. 'It's economy versus life,' he said, 'and that's no contest.' He couldn't understand why the government wasn't shutting the borders, closing airports and seaports, taking advantage of being an island to keep the deadly virus out. It seemed to him as clear as daylight that weddings, banquets, business conferences and holidays would all have to come to a grinding halt.

His mind whirred. How on earth would he pay the staff? Some of them had worked there for decades. Part of the hotel was leased – how would he pay the landlord? Then there was the insurance, the mortgage, the utility bills and what about the suppliers – local farmers, grocers and butchers, as well as Tanners, the town's old wine merchants. He couldn't just say, 'Stop now, I won't pay.'

Centuries-old Grade II listed buildings like the Prince Rupert were not like a modern Holiday Inn you could just shut down. Behind the walls lay a myriad of pipes and wires that, if not used, could seize up. Water had to keep circulating or legionnaires' disease could take hold. If the boilers were shut down, they might not restart. The pipes were a mix of copper and iron – if hot water didn't flow, they would corrode. If the heating wasn't on and air wasn't flowing, mildew and mould would grow. And what about security: the hotel was a jumble of buildings with multiple entrances and exits, and it was right in the centre of town.

You couldn't just stop everything in its tracks. The Prince Rupert needed care and attention, like a living breathing thing.

Mike was particularly worried about paying Charlie and Jacki, who were so dedicated to the hotel and had no significant other in their lives – how would they survive without their jobs? He'd read about Nordic countries that were putting in place a furlough scheme whereby the government would pay 80 per cent of people's wages, which in his view was seriously generous. He couldn't imagine the UK doing that.