



Peppermint  
Kiss

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USBORNE

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“So, like, where’s the rest of it?”

Sapphire opened a door off the kitchen, looking for more rooms, or perhaps stairs to another floor, and found a cupboard with a high window instead. Inside was an ancient vacuum cleaner, which, judging by the state of the flat, hadn’t been used for at least fifteen years.

“I know it’s compact—” Mum began, but Grace, who was peering round another doorway, cut in: “There are beds in the sitting room. How weird.”

“Well, we’ll probably have to do without a lounge for now,” Mum muttered. “I thought you and Saff could have that room—”

My two older sisters stared at each other, then at Mum, in horror. “What – share?!” they both cried at once.

“But I can’t have all her clothes and shoes and stuff in MY room! You know how messy she is!” (That was Grace.)

“I can’t relax with her in MY room, wanting to study all the time. I can’t creep around in silence, I need to express myself!” (Saff that time.)

“What about Abbie?” Grace said then. “It’s not fair she’s getting her own room – I’m the one with GCSEs next year!”

I looked at Mum. “Yeah, what *about* me?” I asked. I didn’t think I’d seen a third bedroom, and it would have been hard to miss in a place this small.

Mum gave me a strained smile. “Well, I thought *we* could—”

Not joking, my mouth actually dropped open. “No way!” I gasped. “I’m fourteen, not four! I can’t share a room with my MUM! I’d rather sleep in that cupboard!”

“Okay, I’ll go in with Saff,” Grace said quickly.

“No way!” Saff cried. “I’d rather have Abbie.”

My gaze skipped across all three of them, trying to work out who would be the least hideous option. But I couldn’t think straight. Grace and Saff were

shouting at each other by then, and at Mum, and she was shouting back, telling them to calm down...and then I saw it. It just ran across the hall in front of me. "RAT!" I screeched.

We all absolutely screamed our heads off, and jumped up on the peeling plastic chairs.

"Oh my gosh, where's it gone?" Mum shrieked.

"It ran down the hall!" I cried.

"Someone get a broom!" yelled Saff.

"I am NOT leaving this chair!" Mum squealed.

"Don't be ridiculous, it's only a rat," Grace snapped. "Behaving like this is what gives women a bad name."

Just then there was a flash of fur and tail as the rat ran back across the doorway. We all screamed again, and Grace clambered onto the wobbly sticky-topped kitchen table. Then...

"Dad! Help!" I yelled.

Honestly, it just came flying out of my mouth on its own. We were all plunged into shocked silence. You could feel the pain, buzzing and pulsing between us like electricity. Snapping and sparking and sizzling. I glanced quickly at Mum, hoping I hadn't made her cry. But she just looked ragged and defeated and numb, which was worse somehow.

I suppose I should say what happened, why Dad's

*not* here. I mean, even though I don't really want to talk about it. Okay, so, deep breath...

Mum and Dad have split up. Dad had an affair, Mum found out, and our whole world just seemed to explode. He ended it straight away, but that didn't seem to make things any better. At first they tried to talk about it – in fact we *all* did once, sitting down together round our big chunky kitchen table (Mum's idea). Yes, it *was* the most embarrassing half hour of my life, in case you're wondering. But the talking didn't work – instead it always seemed to turn into shouting, then crying, then door-slamming and silence.

And then we woke up that morning three weeks ago to find Dad gone. Well, I did. Grace and Saff were still in bed. So was Mum, I saw, as I crept across her and Dad's room to nab some of her re-shine hair serum. As soon as I walked into their en suite, I knew something was wrong, although it took me a while to work out what.

7.30 a.m. It should have still smelled of shaving soap, but the shaving soap wasn't even *there*, or the razor, or the strip of disposable contact lenses and the pair of cufflinks that sat beside them. I felt a sudden knot in my stomach. I sneaked out again and tiptoed down the stairs, my heart pounding.

Dad should have been making fresh coffee from the built-in Italian machine, grinding beans and frothing milk in the special little jug. But there was no coffee smell. No hiss and bubble of the milk steamer. No Dad.

I'd stared at our kitchen table, the place where we'd had so many fun Friday takeaway nights and lazed about on Sunday mornings, peeling vegetables or painting our nails. There was always chatter, with everyone coming and going, sitting down for a quick cuppa and a flick through a mag, or spreading out homework for long afternoons. That table had been covered with birthday cakes and Christmas turkeys, and sometimes late-night tears and hot chocolate, when Sapphire's latest crush had turned into yet another disaster, or when Grace had got less than top marks on some test or other.

Now it was empty, except for a note in Dad's scribbly handwriting, on the back of an envelope. One word.

*Sorry.*

"Sorry," I murmured then, looking anxiously at Mum again. That seemed to bring us all out of our trance.

Her eyes filled with tears as she leaned across and hugged me. "There is *nothing* for you to be sorry

about,” she said, her voice going as wobbly as the chair I was standing on.

“I’ll make some tea,” Grace mumbled, as we climbed down.

Just then, a knock at the door made us all jump. We were on the first floor, the only flat up this stairway, and the shop unit below was empty. “That’ll be the landlord,” said Mum. “Mr. Vulmer.”

“Perfect timing,” Saff said haughtily. “Now you can tell him it’s all been a horrible mistake and that we’re leaving – pronto.”

“Shush!” Mum hissed.

We stood in the kitchen doorway and had a quick row over who was going to walk past the “rat bit” to get to the front door, and finally Mum went, springing across the carpet on tiptoes to touch it as little as possible, even though she had her shoes on.

She smoothed down her hair and adjusted her jumper and skirt before opening the door, as she always did. There stood Mr. Vulmer, wheezing from the effort of climbing one flight of stairs, his huge belly spilling out from under a polyester top that released this horrible smell of sweat, stale bacon fat and cigarettes. I actually had to stop myself from wrinkling up my nose, and I tried to smile politely as he waddled past us into the kitchen. We all looked at



Mum, waiting for her to break the news that we were leaving.

But instead she started chatting on pretend-brightly about how convenient it was to be near the shops (we were right above a parade of them – not that I’d call the wool shop, chippy and laundrette I’d seen exactly *useful*). Then she offered him a cup of tea. But he just snorted, like something was funny. “No thanks, Mrs. Green,” he wheezed. “I’m not the welcoming committee. I’ve just come for my money. A month’s rent and the same as a deposit, as we agreed on the phone.”

Mum turned around, kettle in hand, looking astonished. “What – now?” she stuttered.

Mr. Vulmer frowned. “Yeah. You’re here, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but, well...I hadn’t realized. I thought... there are still contracts to be signed, and I was going to organize the direct debit tomorrow, when the bank’s open, and...” She pulled herself up, looked him in the eye and added bravely, “Also, there are a few things we’re not happy with. We’ve just seen a *rat*. And the mattresses are in a terrible state. We’ll need these things remedied before I’m willing to pay the full amount.”

Mr. Vulmer let out a wheezy laugh, which ended

in a minor choking fit. “You’re not from round here, are you, love?” he spluttered. “I don’t *do* direct debit.”

Mum looked helpless, but Saff had had enough by then. “It’s irrelevant, because we’re not staying in this dive anyway,” she said snottily.

Mr. Vulmer wasn’t laughing then.

“She just means that unfortunately there’s been a mistake,” said Grace, cutting in quickly to smooth things over. “Regrettably, this flat isn’t suitable for our needs. Tomorrow morning we’ll go straight into town and find something more...*appropriate*.”

Saff looked horrified. “Tomorrow morning?” she squealed. “You’re having a laugh! I’m not staying one second longer!” She turned to Mr. Vulmer and flicked her long chestnut hair imperiously. “We’ll book into that spa hotel I saw on the edge of town for tonight. If you could just help us with our suitcases—”

Mr. Vulmer stared at her, his eyes bulging slightly. We all held our breath – we didn’t know if he was going to do his wheezy laugh again or shout in her face. It was the laugh luckily – he probably didn’t have enough breath for shouting. But his voice had a nasty edge all the same. “Well, I’m sorry the accommodation isn’t up to Madame’s standards. Fine, go then – I’m well shot of you. But be warned

– if you’re still here tomorrow, I’ll want at least a week’s rent on the spot, otherwise you’ll be out on the street.”

He lurched back up the hallway, squeezing past our stacked pile of stuff, and opened the door. He lumbered through, turned and said, “Oh and there’s a box of rat poison under the sink. That usually does the trick.” Then he slammed the door behind him.

“Urgh!” cried Saff, shuddering dramatically. “What a horrible man! Anyway, let’s get going. I think that nice hotel was called the Royal Devon or something. I’ll ring for a cab to take us there.” She pulled out her slim pink mobile and stabbed in 118 118 with a perfectly-manicured purple fingernail.

“There’s no money,” Mum mumbled.

“That’s okay,” said Grace, “I can pay for the taxi with my last bit of cash and then what money do we need? Everything else can go on your Amex.”

“Too right – let Dad pick up the tab,” Saff grumbled. Then she frowned at her phone. “Hey, that’s weird, I’m not getting through – there’s just this *beeeep*.” She held it up to the ceiling and waved it around. “Typical if there’s no signal in this hellhole.”

“Abs, if it’s a spa hotel it’s bound to have a pool,

so when we get there we can go for a swim if you like,” said Grace. “I forgot my cozzie but these sort of places always have a little shop. We can get new ones.”

That cheered me up a lot. I love swimming. It’s one of the things Mum promised we’d be able to do more of if we came down here.

The move had only been decided after school the day before. Mum had said it would just be for a few weeks, a couple of months at the most, to get some country air and clear our heads. Saff had finished her GCSEs a couple of weeks earlier and there was only a month of the summer term left for me and Grace. Mum doesn’t usually let us have a day off unless we’re on death’s doorstep, but she said she’d found this fab summer school down here that we could go to for a few weeks, with art and cookery and crafts for me, and a top maths tutor for Grace. And amazing grounds with a swimming pool. She’d made it sound like just the change of scene we needed.

We hadn’t had time to say goodbye to our friends – I’d texted Em and Zo on the way down, letting them know I wouldn’t be back till September, and inviting them to stay sometime. But no way was I bringing them *here*. Mum had come down to Devon on a yoga retreat last year, and she’d made Totnes

sound like an amazing, magical place. Well, there was nothing amazing or magical about it so far.

Suddenly I felt really uneasy. “What are we doing here, Mum?” I asked. “In this flat, I mean. It *is* just a mistake, isn’t it?”

Mum sighed. Then she said, “I’m so sorry, girls, it’s not a mistake. There’s *no* money. As in, no Amex. No credit cards at all. And Saff, it’s not the signal. Your phone’s been cut off.”

“WHAT?! How DARE he do this to us!” Saff shrieked, obviously meaning Dad. “How could he be so spiteful? He’s the one in the wrong!” She glared at Mum. “Right, well done for trying to be independent and everything, but I’m taking charge here – someone’s got to. I’m ringing Dad this minute to come and take us home – it’s his duty, this is his mess after all. And it’s totally out of order that he’s cut off our money. I’m not having it, I’m just not.”

Grace tutted loudly. “I’m not going anywhere with *him*. The money situation will have to be sorted out – it’s his duty to support us. And he can at least pay our deposit for another flat until things are sorted out officially. I suppose we’ll have to camp out here tonight after all and then get down to the letting agents’ first thing in the morning.”

“With no job?” Mum asked wearily. “With no

references and no income? No one will even consider renting me anywhere. I had to go with this place, it was our only choice. And I haven't even got the money for *this*. I didn't realize he'd want it up front."

We all looked at her in total horror. My stomach felt like a dishcloth being wrung out as I started to realize what a mess we were in.

"But *Dad* can just pay it for us, can't he?" asked Grace, looking uneasy.

"I don't get why we didn't just stay in our house in Ealing if this is what we were coming to," said Saff.

That's what *I* was wondering – Dad had gone, after all. He was the one who'd had the affair. The wife and kids got the house, didn't they? It was the way things were.

That's when Mum started crying, big choking sobs from deep inside. We weren't expecting that. My sisters looked as worried as I felt. "It's okay, we'll sort it," said Saff more gently, as we led Mum to the revolting brown sofa shoved in the corner of the kitchen and sat her down.

"Please don't cry," Grace begged.

Mum finally got enough breath back to speak, her words coming out in sharp, tear-choked bursts. "I was only trying to protect you. I couldn't face telling

you the truth. The house... It's gone. Repossessed by the bank."

"What?" shrieked Saff.

"Oh my gosh," murmured Grace.

My head felt numb. Like the words wouldn't go in.

In a torrent, Mum poured out the whole story. We'd known about the affair, but it turned out that Dad had been keeping a whole load of other secrets from us too. His business had been struggling and he'd run up massive debts. Just the day before, he'd called Mum and finally told her how bad it really was – that the bank would be repossessing the house and debt collectors were on their way to take anything they could to make up for the money he owed. If we hadn't left when we did, right at that moment, we'd have lost all our personal things too.

"So there actually isn't *any* money?" Saff gasped.

Suddenly I felt really, really angry, like I'd been tricked. "What about the summer school?" I demanded. "And Grace's tutor? Saff's new car and driving lessons... Was it all lies? All of it?"

Saff put her arm round me and glared at Mum.

"I'm so sorry, girls," Mum stuttered. "I shouldn't have lied. It was all such a shock – I just panicked. I knew we were running out of time, so I just said

whatever I could think of to make you pack your stuff and come with me.” She sighed heavily. “I really am sorry,” she said again.

“Well, that’s ruined my chances of getting into Cambridge then, hasn’t it?” Grace snapped. “Thanks very much!”

“So you’re saying this is it? This flat?” I stammered. “This is our life now?”

Saff just looked bewildered. “Has all our stuff been taken?” she murmured.

Mum’s face crumpled again. “I hope not. Roger and Laura next door offered to move as many of our belongings as they could into their garage, but I don’t know how far they got before the debt people turned up.”

“How dare those men just walk into our house! We should have locked ourselves in and called the police!” Grace cried.

Mum shrugged. “It’s not our house any more.”

I imagined two scary men with bomber jackets and shaved heads riffling through our cupboards and drawers, pulling out our ballet shoes and board games, tennis racquets, ski suits, recipe books, the pottery animals we’d made in primary school. It made me feel really sick.

“But why didn’t Dad just tell us the truth when



things started to go wrong?” Grace asked. “It might not have got so bad then.”

Mum found a tissue in her bag and blew her nose. “I think he’d been living in a fantasy world, acting like everything was great, spending *more* than usual, and having an affair. Desperately running away from the facts, basically.”

All I could think about was that yesterday, while Dad had been telling Mum what was about to happen to us, I’d been in double Science, worrying about why my litmus paper wasn’t going pink like Em and Zo’s, and giggling with them about how geeky we looked in our safety goggles. I’d had no idea that my whole world was about to change. Again.

Mum sighed. “So now your dad’s moved into some horrible bedsit, and he’s going to declare bankruptcy. He can’t give us anything because he’s got nothing to give.”

We were all silent, in utter shock. How could Dad have let this *happen* to us? Then, as I was still staring numbly at the peeling kitchen worktop, Grace and Saff went into meltdown.

“Oh my gosh, we really are stuck here, aren’t we?” cried Grace, panic in her voice.

“What about my friends? And my singing lessons?” screeched Saff. “You know I’ve already

enrolled for Arts Ed in September! How could you do this to me?”

They both stared at Mum as if she'd taken their dreams, thrown them on the floor and stomped them to smithereens.

As for me, of course I was scared. Terrified. I mean, I'd just found out that I'd lost my home, my friends, my *life*, and that we had no money (how would we even buy food?). And everything I owned now fitted into a suitcase. But as for my *dream*, well, that had already been ruined. I'd only ever wanted one thing: a big, cosy, rowdy, happy family – me, Mum, Dad, Saff and Grace all together. And that had gone when we found out about the affair. To me, the fact that we were now penniless and stuck in a disgusting flat, with a repulsive landlord and at least one rat... Well, that was just the rancid icing on the mouldy cake. “None of this is Mum's fault,” I told my sisters firmly. “What else could she do? Seriously – what?”

Thankfully that made them stop freaking out for long enough for Mum to speak. “Please, girls, I'm begging you to give this a go,” she gabbled. “I suppose we could have gone running to Granny and Grandpa, but they don't have enough room for us all, and anyway, I really, *really* want us to do this on our own.”

Wow, if Mum thought the only other option was moving us to Yorkshire to live with Granny she really must have been desperate. They don't exactly get on.

"I'm going to look for work first thing in the morning," she said then. "Thank goodness I managed to finish my yoga teacher training before...all this. There are plenty of places I can give classes around here. Grace and Abbie, I've spoken to the education department at Devon County Council and they've been able to make emergency arrangements for us. You're enrolled in the local school, to start tomorrow."

We both gasped. *Tomorrow?*

"No way, I—" Grace began.

But: "Please, just give it a go, that's all I'm asking," Mum begged. "Go for one day, and if you hate it we'll have a rethink."

Grace sighed, but she didn't say anything else.

Mum turned to Saff. "I thought you could go down to the college in Paignton and see what beauty courses there are to start in September," she said, almost in a whisper. "You've always been interested in that kind of thing."

"Yeah, as in I like being pampered," Saff spat. "I'm not going to be some boring old beauty

therapist like you were. Forget it. I'm going to *be* someone!"

The way Mum flinched, Saff may as well have slapped her. She used to be a beautician before she married Dad and had us three. She did sometimes talk about going back to work, but then a few years ago, when Dad's corporate events business took off, we moved to the big house in Ealing, and they got the matching Range Rovers. After that, Mum was only ever the one *getting* beauty treatments, not giving them.

I gave Saff a sharp nudge in the ribs. "Ow! Jeez, Abs!" she complained. But then she sighed and said, "I'm sorry, Mum, I didn't mean it like that. This is just such a lot to take in. Look, let's all try to get some sleep tonight – we can put towels in the gaps under our doors so the *thing* can't get us. And I'll go down the college tomorrow, just to look."

"I'll give the school a go for one day, if you will," I said to Grace.

She grimaced, but muttered, "Deal."

Mum smiled weakly, although tears were now sliding down her cheeks again. "Thanks," she said, her voice cracking. "Oh, come here, my girls, my lovely girls."

We all snuggled together on the vile sofa, our feet tucked up behind us in case the rat decided to make another run for it. We watched the last of the light fade outside the kitchen window, and we didn't move until long after dark.