

# New Year's Eve

‘Quick! It’s nearly time,’ I shout, and we turn on the TV, just as Jools Holland is counting down to midnight. The kids run in from the lounge and I put my arms around Tilly, my eldest, and Jacob, my 13-year-old son, as we yell out the final three seconds at the top of our voices.

There are cheers and hugs as all twenty of us kiss each other happy new year and quickly form a rag-tag circle between the long wooden table and the wood-burning stove in the kitchen of Scout’s Suffolk farmhouse. As we overlap hands to sing ‘Auld Lang Syne’, we are all half singing and half laughing as Pooch, our dog, earnestly wags his tail like he’s trying to do a butt shimmy.

‘We’ll take a cup of kindness yet, for auld lang syne,’ I bellow, bumping shoulders with the kids, my cheeks pink. Who knows what it means? It feels good to sing it.

Afterwards, we break apart and I fall into Tom’s arms. In all the mayhem, I haven’t been able to wish him happy new year yet.

‘Steady on,’ my husband laughs, holding me up. ‘Have you been keeping up with Joss on the champagne?’ We both know Joss can drink all of us under the table.

‘Yep, but I love you,’ I slur looking up into his familiar face. He wears thick framed glasses that make him look kind

of distinguished and funky. His once lustrous hair has thinned so much he now shaves his head, but he's better looking to me than ever – and definitely improving with age.

'I love you too, my Keira.' He runs his hands over my hair and looks into my eyes, then kisses me tenderly, and my heart melts, as it always does.

'OK, OK, you two lovebirds, break it up,' Joss says. 'There are children present. Honestly, you're just as soppy as you were twenty years ago. You coming outside?' she asks me, in a meaningful way. A meaning not lost on Tom.

'Good idea to get some fresh air. I'll put Bea to bed,' Tom says, letting me go and nodding to our youngest, who is heading for the cosy window seat with Pooch. Joss grabs three glasses of champagne and my arm and we head for the back door. 'Have fun. I'll distract the teens,' Tom calls after us and winks at me.

Outside, Scout joins me and Joss as we sit on the stone wall outside the kitchen. The huge garden is bathed in silvery shadows and the stars twinkle in the black sky. Inside, through the steamed-up window, we can see Scout's husband, Mart, lining up tequila shots. It's going to be a long night.

'So a new year,' Joss says, lighting one of her thin menthol cigarettes. 'What are we all going to change? Apart from the no smoking – which starts at daybreak.'

Scout and I laugh. She and I have known each other since our school days, but we only became proper friends when we both wound up at the same uni and she, Joss and I were in halls together. The three of us became inseparable friends and we shared a flat in Ladbrooke Grove when we graduated, partying together through the mid-Nineties. Scout and I stopped

clubbing and smoking years ago when we got married and had babies, but Joss remains an eternal 25-year-old. Every new year, she swears she's going to give up, but she never does. I don't mind though, because it means I can still bum the occasional party cigarette off her. I check through the window to make sure that Tom really has distracted the teenagers. I can't risk being caught by Tilly.

'You know me, I hate change,' I say, as she hands the cigarette to me. I take a drag, squinting through the unfamiliar smoke. 'And anyway, everything is just fine and dandy.'

'Now that you're going to be Brightmouth's retailer of the year,' Joss says in an excited voice. She's referring back to the speech Tom gave over dinner, saying how proud he was that Wishwells, my shop, has been nominated for the award.

'Yes, well,' I say, handing the cigarette to Scout. 'I haven't actually won yet, but it's good to be recognised for what we've achieved.'

'You'll win it,' Joss says confidently, and I smile at her unwavering faith.

'What about you, Scouty? You happy living the dream?' I ask.

Scout left a high-flying city job five years ago and moved up here to this lovely patch of Suffolk to start a new life as a farmer. You'd never know from looking at her. She's small with a blonde bob and she looks lovely tonight in her ancient Karen Millen velvet dress. She blows a stream of smoke out thoughtfully.

'It's good, I think,' she says. 'But if I'm honest, it gets lonely sometimes with just the alpacas for company. I don't get to meet new people.' It's true that she's isolated up here and

I worry about her. Mart still commutes to London, so he's away three nights a week, and her twin boys are in boarding school during term time.

'Oh, they're overrated,' Joss says, though for a second I'm not sure if she's referring to people or the alpacas. She works in a London PR agency and has to schmooze for a living. 'Right, K? New friends?' She pulls a face. 'Who has time for those?'

I nod and laugh in agreement. I already have a host of gorgeous women in my life – friends who I've known for twenty years, or even decades longer, like these two. Then there's the staff in the shop, not to mention my suppliers and all my regular customers. My days are full of people. I don't have room for anyone new.

'I get a lot of time alone to reflect,' Scout says, taking another drag and blowing a smoke ring towards the stars. She's the only one of us who could ever do that.

'Uh-oh,' Joss jokes, pulling a face at me. 'About what?'

'Well... don't you ever wonder if this is it? The peak point of our lives?'

'And it's all downhill from here?' I exclaim. 'Don't say that.'

'But we're all around halfway through.'

'We're not even fifty. We're going to be marching up mountains when we're ninety,' I remind her. 'Don't start talking like this is the beginning of the end.'

'Exactly. We've still got it, right?' Joss says and pulls a pout, looking at her reflection in the window, leaning forward to plump up her cleavage in her low-cut leather dress.

'Don't you ever want to do something big – that makes a difference?' Scout asks, handing the cigarette back to Joss. 'You know... don't you ever think about your legacy?'

'Your legacy will be a string of heartbroken toy boys,' I tease Joss.

'How exciting,' she says. She's recently single, having finally dumped her useless long-term partner, and has found Tinder. Scout's face falls. She has a tendency to go all existential when she's squiffy and me and Joss always undermine her, but we've gone too far and I relent.

'I know what you mean, Scout, but personally, I'm happy. I really, *really* don't want anything to change,' I tell her, grabbing her hand and Joss's and kissing their knuckles. They laugh, knowing how sentimental I am.

And I don't. Right here, right now, surrounded by my best friends, I feel drunk and content. And yes, of course there are things I *could* improve, but on the whole, I've made good choices, I reckon. I'm lucky. I want my life to stay just as it is.

# 1

*3rd January*

In the room on the fourth floor of the breast clinic, I'm flipping through Pinterest on my phone, searching for new ideas for the shop, when a WhatsApp pings up from Lisa, my ceramics supplier. *Check these out*, it says and I open her message to see the picture she's sent.

'Oh, they are lovely,' I gasp out loud, looking at the pretty batch of espresso cups she's made with our latest floral design. I can't wait to get back to the shop and show the girls.

I feel a glow of pride as I text Lisa back with effusive praise, and once again I thank my lucky stars that I found her when I had to outsource my ceramics all those years ago. She's been making teapots galore for me and it's lovely to see her hit the ground running this new year with renewed enthusiasm after our fantastic Christmas sales.

But as I send the message, I'm momentarily distracted by the vase of plastic yellow dahlias on the table which seem to throb in the shaft of sunlight coming through the slatted blind.

'Come on,' I sigh, tapping my foot. I really don't have time to be here. Lorna, my business partner, has scheduled a meeting this morning with our accountant, Miles. He's a dry old thing

and I'm much more fond of him than Lorna is, so I need to be there to grease the wheels. He's been with us forever. He even used to do the books for Dad, when Wishwells was Dad's framing shop.

So, I don't want Lorna – or worse, Pierre – to have the meeting with Miles without me. Don't get me wrong, Pierre, Lorna's husband, has been very helpful over the last few months, and him re-vamping the office computer system with a much-needed upgrade was a job I would never have got around to. The problem is, I'm not sure how long he's going to stay 'helping'.

I said he could come in, as a favour to Lorna, really. He'd been sitting at home twiddling his thumbs since he got fired from his job in finance (unfairly apparently) at the end of last summer. Lorna made the good point that it's ridiculous to have someone with the business nous of Pierre at our disposal and not use him, so I said he could come in. But I can't help feeling that he's got his feet too far under the table and wants to change everything. And Lorna seems to dote on his every word.

The door opens and the nurse comes in. She's wearing a blue smock and she checks the dangling watch on her chest before smiling at me and sitting down in the chair with a sigh, as if it's good to be off her feet. 'So, Mrs Beck...'

'Oh please. Just call me Keira,' I say. I don't like being Mrs Beck. It gives me too much in common with my battle-axe of a mother-in-law. I kept my maiden name for the business and I'm used to being Keira Wishwell at work.

'Keira,' she smiles, 'thanks for waiting.'

'Do you know how long this will take?' I ask, looking at

my phone, as I slide it into my handbag on the floor. The big clock on the screensaver says 10.08, which means Lorna will almost certainly have to face Miles alone. *Shit.*

‘Well that depends...’

‘On what?’

She shuffles her bottom on the chair. ‘Well you see, after your first mammogram, before Christmas, we’ve called you back because...’

Something in her tone makes my ears prick up like a prairie dog’s. I’m under the impression I’ve been called back to the breast clinic as a routine kind of thing. That’s what they said might happen. People get called back *all the time.*

She holds my gaze. ‘... because we can see some unusual breast tissue.’

*Breast tissue?*

BOOM!

*I’m in the quiet room.*

It only dawns on me now that she’s brought me in here with the plastic dahlias to *deliver bad news.* Is this bad news?

‘Unusual how?’ My voice is squeaky and quivery, not like my voice at all.

Ten minutes later, still not having been told anything conclusive, I’m ushered through to the mammogram room and another lady introduces herself as Sinitta and it’s on the tip of my tongue to start singing ‘So Macho’, that Eighties hit by the singer Sinitta, which *this* Sinitta is probably far too young to remember, or appreciate at all. She’s also in a lab coat and has an intense stare as she looks at my notes.



I stand naked from the waist up feeling cold and exposed and trapped inside her ominous silence, whilst the lyrics ‘He’s got to be so macho, he’s got to be big and strong enough to turn me on...’ roll around my head. Of all things, how has that song and its ridiculous lyrics managed to lodge itself in the filing cabinet of my memory?

As she marks lines on my breast with a pen and adjusts the machine, she’s concentrating so hard, I don’t feel like I can talk. I have to forcibly gag Sinitta in my head.

She skilfully, clinically, manoeuvres my breast onto a cold plate in front of a giant white machine and the other plate comes down and squishes it. A sort of boob sandwich. It hurts. More than last time, back in December, when I was up to my eyeballs in work and my appointment was a quick in-and-out job and not like this at all.

After she’s taken some shots and is squinting at the screen, I pipe up, ‘Can I take a look?’

‘Oh, are you medical?’ she asks.

‘No... er... no, just curious.’

She swings the screen round.

There’s my left breast in dark outline, looking like a distant planet in outer space. Or it could be a scene from a *Planet Earth* programme about the deepest part of the ocean. Strange tendril-like white things float around. What are they? They are spidery and spindly and creepily floating. Are they milk ducts or something?

At no point in my life have I really paid attention to the internal workings of me. My cells, blood, organs, *tissue*. It’s a shock to have a glimpse into this inner world, which is living, evolving, doing stuff all by itself. It’s like seeing time-lapse

photography of moss in close-up. It's a world that I own, except I don't. The machine does.

'Can you tell anything? From the images?' I ask Sinitta, but she lowers her eyes.

'I'm afraid it's not my job to interpret the data,' she says.

*Data?* Is that what I've become?

## 2

I'm told that there's probably at least a half-hour wait until I'm seen for the ultrasound, but I have to get out of here. I can't keep watching the women with clipboards going in and out of rooms as my panic mounts. I need some fresh air and a decent coffee and besides, there's no reception and I should call Lorna and grovel about my lateness. I queue and get an insipid Americano from the Hospi-Coff kiosk and walk over the road to the park. I feel profoundly discombobulated, like I've been temporarily air-lifted out of my life.

It occurs to me as I sit staring at the barren trees, that I haven't actually sat dog-less and alone on a park bench since I was a teenager. I had my first snog with Gary Stubbs on a park bench, just like this one. How long ago that seems now. When Sinitta was in the charts. That's how long ago.

So macho...

*Shut the fuck up, Sinitta! Not now, OK?*

My phone pings. It's a text from Lorna.

Er... Earth to Keira? Come in please...

I try and type a text to Lorna but delete it. I can't seem to focus. All I can think about is those tendrils and what they might be.

But until I've had the ultrasound, telling her anything – even where I am – seems a bit dramatic. Instead, I put my phone in my pocket and clutch the coffee in my hands for warmth, but my teeth chatter. There's a few clouds around and I watch the shadow gobbling up the grass.

'Bloody hell, Dad,' I say out loud, noticing how my breath clouds.

Dad died fifteen years ago, when his converted camper van collided with an articulated lorry. They said he died instantly and he wouldn't have suffered, but the shock and heartbreak of losing him so suddenly and unfairly remains to this day. I often talk to him – mostly when I'm muttering about the kids and their spectacular messiness and I need someone to be on my side, which he invariably was. Or when I'm in the shop and I need to find something – like scissors, or the electricity meter cupboard key. I quite often ask him to locate the said item and usually it turns up right in front of me in his old cabinet.

'Can you just fix it so that it's OK, please? I can't do this. Can't. Just can't.'

I'm far too busy to have a medical problem. I don't *do* medical problems. I'm robust. Healthy. I barely even have fillings, for God's sake!

I mean, it can't be serious, can it? I'm only 47. In my prime. Most women don't even get mammograms until they're 50 and I only got one as I was sent a letter saying they were doing a random pre-50 screening programme. I would have ignored the letter, except that Tom found it and told me I might as well go. Because of the dimple. The tiny weeny dimple in the bottom of my breast that I noticed...

how long ago now? A year ago? Not that I've been that worried about it.

Because *my GP said it was fine.*

*But what if it isn't fine?*

### 3

I wait for some sort of sign, but there's only the wind in the bare trees. I notice a woman running slowly along the path towards me. She's a terrible jogger. She might as well be walking. That's how *I'd* look if I was jogging. Not that I ever jog these days, despite all my good intentions. I think the last time I went running was about six months ago and it was so hard, I somehow never managed to get round to putting my trainers on again. I always joke with Tom that I'm built for comfort, not speed.

Besides, I have an issue with running – ever since sports day 1984, which is indelibly marked as possibly the most humiliating experience of my life. After a long, involved campaign to snare the attention of heart-throb (and Danny from *Grease* dead-ringer) Ollie Redfern, I had lost weight and taken up fitness and – breasts plumped up with socks in my bra – thought I looked pretty irresistible as I limbered up for the 800 metres.

All was going well as I came up to the finishing line. I could see Ollie in the stands cheering, but as I sped up, what I didn't see was that my left breast had bounced free of my low-cut bra. And, as I triumphantly crossed the finish line, I only realised when I heard the laughter of the whole school ringing out. And, dying of mortification, saw that Ollie Redfern was cheering the loudest and whistling – but for all the wrong reasons. Ugh. Still makes me shudder.

As the runner gets nearer, I see that her chest is heaving. She's making a rasping sound as she tries to breathe in. She's fairly covered up by logoed running kit, but I can see that she's got tattoos over her neck beneath her jet black hair. I know everyone has them these days, but I really don't get the appeal of tattoos and I'm immediately a bit judgemental about her. *Maybe she's on drugs.*

*Oh, for God's sake!* I sound like my mother-in-law – even to myself.

As she reaches the bench where I'm sitting, she stops, leans forward and puts her hands on her knees and pulls in air. She's just metres away and I can see that her fingers are covered in chunky silver rings. She looks slim and fairly fit, so it's a surprise she seems to be having difficulties. Her eyes are closed – as if she's in pain. She's not having a cardiac arrest is she?

I'm jolted from my own potential medical crisis into her very real one.

'Are you OK?' I ask, getting up, feeling slightly panicked about my lack of first aid know-how. 'You want to sit down for a minute?'

She nods and I help her over to the bench. She sits, her eyes still closed. She seems to be concentrating very hard – almost as if she's meditating. She has deathly pale skin, which I see now is white make-up, and thick black flicky eyeliner which has smudged a bit. Her lips, which I thought had gone blue through lack of oxygen are actually that shade because of her metallic lipstick. Her black hair which pokes out beneath her Nike cap is very obviously dyed and makes her look even paler. She has multiple piercings in her ears.

But the most surprising thing is that she must be my

age, *at least*. I tell myself off for being a bit prejudiced about her being a druggie. But then, a full-on elder goth runner is a bit of an anomaly.

‘Thank you,’ she says, eventually, opening her eyes. They are a deep blue. Her voice is soft and low. ‘You’re very kind.’

‘Can I get you anything?’ I ask, although I don’t have any water, so it’s a fairly empty offer. I look down at the plastic lid of my coffee cup. It has pink lipstick around the little hole. She’s not going to want that.

‘*Christ!*... I hate how hard it is,’ she says, shaking her head. She means the running.

‘New year’s resolution?’ I ask because I’ve already made up her back story. She’s a repentant punk. She’s spent years getting stoned (and/or shooting up) whilst listening to dark music (*in* the dark obviously – or in the glow of a skull candle), but now, with the new year upon us, she’s turned over a new leaf. She’s out for the first bit of daylight exercise in years...

‘No. I’m a long-distance runner.’

*Oh.*

That cancels out all that then. Has she just run a really, really long way? I’d be out of breath if I’d only run from the park gate to here.

‘Well I used to be,’ she says and there’s a real bitterness in her laugh. She takes a deep deciding breath, then slapping her chunky ringed hands on her knees, gets back up again. ‘Keep at it. It’s the only way,’ she says, as if to herself.

‘Are you sure you’re OK?’

‘I’m not dead yet,’ she says, smiling at me now. It’s a wide smile – a proper cheeky Cheshire cat grin. There’s something impressively defiant in her look and I immediately take back



all my pre-judgements. This is a woman with ‘gumption and pluck’, as my mother would say. I kind of like her.

‘You waiting to go back in there?’ she asks, before she goes. She rolls her eyes over towards the breast clinic over the road. Is it that obvious? Is this the bench where panicking middle-aged women sit? It frightens me that I’m not the first.

‘How did you know?’

‘Nobody in their right mind would get a coffee from that kiosk in there, unless they were stuck between appointments. I mean what muppet in branding thought of Hospi-Coff? It sounds like heated phlegm,’ she says as she nods at my cardboard coffee cup with the logo of the kiosk on it and I laugh. ‘Good luck,’ she says and then she’s off.

I sip my coffee and wince, thinking of it being heated phlegm, as I watch her lumber up the path out of the shadows and into the sunshine.

## 4

My encounter with the tenacious punk runner has cheered me up a bit and I muster up a gung-ho attitude as I'm shown into the ultrasound room. It's dark and womb-like and it reminds me of having the scans for the kids when they were babies. I remember seeing their little forms in black and white – their beating hearts, their spiky fingers, feeling overwhelmed with relief and joy. Jacob famously gave us a double thumbs up. I somehow know this won't be the same.

Another nurse lies me down on the bed and puts a sheet of scratchy paper over my naked breasts, whilst the radiographer looks at the screen and presses some buttons.

*It's going to be fine. I know it's going to be fine. I'll be out of here in ten minutes, hot-foot it to the office, apologise to Lorna. Maybe take in cakes for everyone. Sod the new year's resolutions. Let's treat ourselves. I'll get those little donuts from Jennifer's café...*

The radiographer has dark circles beneath her intelligent eyes, but the look she gives me is kind as she does the ultrasound. The jelly is warm, not cold like I'm expecting it to be. She tilts the screen and I can see another type of outer space, as she rakes the scanning wand over my breast again and again. I try to will it into performing real magic, into making everything OK.

But then I see her expression change and I know it, *just know it*. She's found something.

A lump.

I stare very hard at the dark grey mass she can see clearly on the screen, but that I can't make head nor tail of. Is it a lump?

I hardly hear the words as she explains that she'll have to do a biopsy and nods at the nurse. I tell myself in a steely internal voice that this is nothing. *This is a cyst. A little lump of nothing, right?*

The nurse applies local anaesthetic gel and I watch and flinch in pain as the needle pierces my skin on the screen. Talk about a jab in the wab! I've been warned that the needle will make a noise, but it sounds alarmingly like a staple gun. I'm reminded of Moira, our shop manager, putting shop rotas on the office noticeboard.

The radiographer does it twice, and each time I watch the needle on the screen shooting the dark matter. Then little samples of my alien planet growth is stored in a jar, then the nurse helps me to sit up.

'Can you just tell me what it is?' I ask, sounding confident and strong. The radiographer looks at me.

'I can't say for sure, until the test results are back,' she says.

'But you must know?' I probe. 'You don't have to soft soap me. I'd rather know.'

She glances at the nurse and I catch the look between them. This is not protocol, obviously.

'Please,' I urge. 'Just tell me. I can take it.'

The nurse looks at the box of tissues on the desk next to her and picks them up.

'Well, it's just an opinion, based on years of experience, but I'm afraid that it looks very much like cancer to me.'

## 5

I don't remember getting into the car, but I come to as I pull next to Lorna's Mini in the small car park we use behind the high street and notice that my hands are gripping the steering wheel so hard my knuckles have gone white. I look up at the back of Wishwells and the higgledy-piggledy black timber-framed building that is like a second home to me, and slowly relax.

The building hasn't changed much since I was a child and it was Grandpa's joinery shop, and I can still remember the smell of putty and sawdust and the sound of Grandpa whistling. Then later, when Dad turned it into a framing business, it still smelt of sawdust and I remember Crosby, Stills and Nash playing on the turntable as Dad chatted to the customers, always with a pencil behind his ear and a smile on his face.

That's what I need. I need to get inside and to forget what's just happened. I need to see Moira. Dear, wonderful Moira, who worked for Dad for ten years and stayed on to help me, although that makes her sound like an employee, when she's actually more like a second mother. It was Moira who encouraged me to do ceramics in the first place, Moira who knew that Tom was 'the one', Moira who helped look after each of my babies when they were newborns and kept the business afloat when Dad died. She's my rock, and right now all I want is to

be engulfed in her soft, perfumed, jangly-wristed embrace. I need everything to be normal.

But Moira isn't in the shop. Ruby is in her place, folding the cashmere tartan blankets that are going in the January sale. We employed Ruby straight out of college and she's a good kid, although she dresses in shapeless black garments. Lorna is always – very unsubtly – trying to suggest that she goes on a diet. Seeing her, I remember now that I was going to stop and get donuts. But that was before.

It's like I'm experiencing everything through a weird Instagram filter. Everything is different. There is a *before* this morning and an *after*. Two distinct parts of my life. The person I was this morning belongs to the past. To the old me. This is new territory.

'Hey,' Ruby calls out, when she sees me in the stairwell by the back door. I see straight away from her face that something is wrong.

'Hi darling,' I say, although my voice sounds odd. 'Everything OK?' She shrugs, but I don't have time to wrinkle out the details of her latest problem. 'Where's Lorna?'

Ruby flicks her eyes towards the stairs in front of me and I make my way up the rickety wooden staircase touching the framed newspaper centrefold on the wall, a local press splash about Wishwells, when I first brought Lorna on as my partner.

Back then, she'd been my brother Billy's girlfriend and I gave her equal shares, thinking she might marry Billy and the business would have a lovely family symmetry. But then she split up with Billy, who surprised us all by moving to Australia, and Lorna married Pierre, who is just about the opposite of my brother in every way.

I can't knock her though. Like me, Lorna's lived the Wishwells brand and if it wasn't for her, I'd still be just doing ceramics, rather than expanding into the whole world of gifts. She's also made me take on venture capitalists so we could expand the business online – although, I have to admit, this latest thing with Jackson has grated a bit.

Jackson is Lorna's cross-breed pug, which as far as I can make out, doesn't have a brain cell in its head. Lorna did a loose doodle of him, and spurred on by the girls in the office, plastered the image on our various phone and iPad cases. Then this YouTuber who I'd never heard of – but is HUGE with the youth, I later found out from my own teen, Tilly – came into our shop and bought the phone case and then declared it her 'must have' for Christmas online, so then the demand went nuts.

Even so, I still can't stand Lorna's dog – who has now been elevated to celebrity status and has even been given his own Instagram account, FFS.

But then, boom! It hits me again like a brick – that Jackson, work, perhaps everything my entire life has been about up until this point, is no longer really important at all.

*No. Don't. I can't just give in like this. Life must go on, right? Isn't that what they say? Think of the children. Of Tom.* I've picked up the phone to call him ten times since leaving the clinic, but I couldn't... just couldn't find the words.

OK, so deep breath. Here goes. *Get your game face on, Keira.* It's time to face Lorna.

## 6

I push through the stairwell doors into the office, which has several desks and lots of yet-to-be labelled and sorted merchandise in boxes stacked around the place. Becca, our online manager, sits at the desk with headphones on staring at the giant Mac screen in front of her. She doesn't notice me.

Lorna is standing by the window, some bulky order folders in her arms. She's wearing orange trousers and a black roll-neck jumper, which accentuates her slim, toned body. She looks effortlessly stylish as usual. In comparison I feel shabby in my green tweedy coat.

'Afternoon! Where have *you* been?' Lorna says, trying and failing to pull off a comedy voice. She must see something in my harrowed look, because she doesn't continue. 'Oh. Right. You want a black coffee?'

This is our code for a 'power meeting' in the office kitchenette. She marches after me and shuts the door.

She knows something serious must have happened for me to have missed the meeting this morning and to have ignored her text, so I can see her scanning my face for clues. I have to make something up, I tell myself. Right now. I can't let her know the truth.

'Is it Tom? The kids? Is it Tilly? Don't tell me you've caught her taking drugs?' she says, in a low, worried voice.

*Oh Jesus. This is actually what goes through her mind about my life.*

I shake my head.

‘What then?’

And that’s when I know I can’t lie. It’s just too big... too momentous... I have to spit it out: The C-bomb. Here it comes...

‘I’ve got breast cancer.’

It’s the first time I’ve said it out loud and words fall between us like a guillotine. For once, Lorna is silenced.

Suddenly, the tears that have been shaking around inside all the way here arrive. Big, fat drops that now erupt like a burst water main. ‘I j-j-j-just c-c-came from-m-m the c-c-c-clinic.’

Lorna envelops me in a hug. She smells of expensive Diptyque perfume.

‘Oh, Keira. I’m so sorry.’

‘I just can’t believe it. What if I’m riddled?’ I sob. ‘What if I die?’

I haven’t cried like this since... well, forever. I’m properly gasping. It’s quite alarming.

Lorna grips me by the shoulders and leans in, her eyes fierce beneath her choppy fringe. ‘Stop it,’ she says in such a harsh tone, my tears stall. You’re not going to die. This is a blip. A speed bump.’

She guides me into taking a few slow, deep breaths, before taking the tea towel from next to the microwave and dabbing it at my face. It smells, but I don’t care.

‘It’s a-a-a bit of a b-b-bumpy speed bump,’ I say, eventually. I’ve stopped the torrent of tears. It’s embarrassing to have had such an outburst in front of Lorna. I blow out a deep breath, glad that the tears have receded for now, but I’m aware there are still more. Lots more.



‘Have you told Tom?’ she asks.

‘I can’t. He’s in court. And it’s that big case. This is just... this just couldn’t be a worse time.’

‘I don’t think anyone schedules in a convenient time to get... you know...’ She can’t say the word.

‘I’ll have to tell him later. I can’t leave a voice message.’

I tell her what happened at the clinic and the biopsy and that I won’t have any conclusive results for a week. I’m still doing that post-crying inadvertent hiccupy thing the kids used to do when they were little.

‘So you don’t know for sure, it’s... you know...?’

Oh wow. She really *can’t* say the word.

‘The radiographer looked super experienced to me. She wouldn’t tell me it was... you know... cancer... if it wasn’t.’

‘But she could be wrong?’

‘Theoretically, yes.’

‘OK, so there’s no need to panic for a week.’

She’s diarising her panic. Or rather, my panic. She’s telling me to pull myself together. And maybe she’s right? Because what good’s panicking going to do either of us, anyway?

I let out another hiccupy thing and put my hand on my chest. My waterworks have left me feeling flooded, like you do when you’ve done a roly-poly in a pool and the water has gone up your nose.

She smiles at me, but her face has a look on it that I’ve never seen before – sort of abject pity. I try and ignore it. ‘Lorna, please don’t tell anyone. Not yet.’

‘OK.’ She nods, then her phone pings and she pulls it out of her pocket.

‘Where’s Moira anyway?’ I ask, trying to keep her attention.

‘Oh... er,’ she says, distracted. ‘I meant to tell you. She’s not coming in. She’s... er... it’s... um... she’s having a holiday,’ Lorna says, looking at her phone and moving towards the door. ‘I said it would be fine.’

‘A *holiday*?’

‘She got the chance to go on a cruise.’

This is certainly big news. Moira has hardly been away for a day from Wishwells for as long as I can remember.

‘It just came up suddenly,’ Lorna says, holding the kitchen door open for me to follow, but I’m still confused. Moira would have texted me, or told me something so exciting.

‘How long will she be gone for?’

‘I don’t know – a month maybe?’ Lorna says. ‘It’s fine though, right? We don’t need her.’

That’s not the point. *I* need her.

## 7

The whole atmosphere of Wishwells feels different now without Moira. Maybe I'm being paranoid, but I sense that there's something unspoken in the air... not just my cancer news. I suspect that something serious happened this morning with Miles, but Lorna won't discuss it.

Instead, she busies herself with arrangements for the Birmingham trade fair at the end of the month – even though that's usually my department. She's suddenly treating me like I'm fragile – like one of our teapots that might smash into a million pieces.

I wish I'd never said anything now. I wish I'd kept everything that happened this morning a secret.

Becca, however, is oblivious to how Lorna is treating me. She's Lorna's mini-me and is achingly trendy with a nose ring and half-shaved head. She openly marvels about the success of the latest online footage of Jackson chewing a sock and Lorna laughs indulgently over her shoulder, as they stare at the screen. I can't share their enthusiasm. In fact, the whole vacuousness of it makes me want to scream, when the word 'cancer' is pulsing through every single thought.

I retreat downstairs to the shop, but Ruby is still sulking. She seems to be nervous of me and it's not until I've gone over the road to Jennifer's café and brought back a mochaccino for each of us that I finally get to the bottom of what's going on.

'I do understand the company policy,' she says, like this is something she's given a lot of thought to. Her dark hair is piled up in a scrunchie on the top of her head and even though her pale skin is caked in foundation, she looks very young.

'Company policy? What are you talking about?'

'I overspent at Christmas and it's not payday for ages and I haven't got enough for the rent.' She looks close to tears. 'I asked for a sub.'

'Well, that's fine, surely?' I say, confused. I've never had a problem subbing the girls on their salaries before. I know how tough things are for everyone in January. And anyway, Ruby worked her socks off over Christmas. It's the least we can do to help her out.

'Lorna said no,' Ruby said.

'Er, Ruby... I hope you're not worrying Keira with your problems.' We both turn to see Pierre, Lorna's husband, by the till like he owns the place. He's obviously crept in through the back door. Jackson is tucked under the arm of his designer leather jacket.

Ruby goes bright red and I beckon Pierre back into the corridor, away from the shop. I instinctively put out my hand to pet Jackson's head, but the small dog lets out a low warning growl. Its brown bulbous eyes glare at me.

I want to challenge Pierre about interfering with my conversation with Ruby, but instead, he crouches down and lets Jackson go, with an '*Allez, allez. Go find Maman,*' and affectionately watches as the small dog snuffles up the back stairs to Lorna.

Pierre is tall, with black, coiffed hair that makes him look like a hairdresser's model. There's something a bit aloof and

superior about him that means I'm never quite myself around him. He's not 'tribe' as Joss would put it. Or maybe it's just that he's French.

'Oh Keira, I heard your news,' he says, his thick eyebrows ruffling together, his face contorting into what he obviously thinks is a sympathetic look. The way he says it makes it sound like I've been shouting it from the rooftops, and I'm instantly cross that Lorna has broken her promise so soon.

There's a beat. He's obviously waiting for my reaction. I glance towards the shop to make sure Ruby hasn't heard.

'It's, um... actually... I'd rather not discuss it.'

'Well, I'm here for you,' he says, earnestly, squeezing my arm. I feel the urge to shake him off. 'Whatever you need. Anything at all.'

'Um... thank you,' I say, awkwardly. And this *is* awkward. I don't need anything from Pierre, only for him to mind his own bloody business.

'Do you know why Lorna refused to sub Ruby?' I ask, desperate to change the subject.

'Well, actually, *I* said no,' he says, then picking up on my look continues, 'we discussed this, didn't we? We agreed that I could streamline the finances.'

*Did* we? I remember the hurried conversation I had in the shop with Lorna just before Christmas and, with a jolt, remember that I did sort of agree to Pierre looking at the books, but *this*... this just feels too much. I've always liked to think of Wishwells as an extension of my family. And family help each other out, right?

'It's just about putting in a level of professionalism, Keira. That's all. I appreciate your soft style of management, but it's

not healthy. Certainly not for the balance sheet. We're trying to grow a business here.'

I swallow down this barbed criticism and my shock at his casual use of 'we'.

'You know,' he says, looking directly down at me, but I find his eye contact very intimidating. 'I don't want you to be offended by this, but you look very tired and stressed. Why don't you go home early today? Nobody is going to mind if you need to take some time for yourself.'