

My Best Friend's Girl

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Extract

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prologue

To be honest, I'd been tired for so long I don't remember, not accurately, when I realised something serious was wrong with me. I put up with it, though. Told myself I needed more rest and that it'd pass. But it didn't.

No matter how much I slept I was always tired. Proper, bone tired. It wasn't until Tegan asked me to go to the doctor that I realised. My four-year-old actually voiced what I couldn't – wouldn't – face, the simple fact that I wasn't myself any more. She'd gotten tired of me being too exhausted to play with her. Of me having nosebleeds. Of me being breathless after even the smallest amount of exertion. 'Mummy, if you go to the doctor she can make you better,' she said one day out of the blue. Just said it, and I did it.

I sat in the doctor's, told her what was wrong, and she did a blood test. Then called me in for more tests. More tests with names and words I'd heard on the medical shows on telly, then words that never had a happy ending on TV were being bandied around. But they couldn't truly have anything to do with me. Not really. They were eliminating possibilities.

Then, I got the call. The call saying I had to go see my doctor straight away. Even then . . . And even when she told me . . . When she said she was sorry and then started talking about treatments and prognosis, I didn't believe it. No, that's not right. I did believe it. I just didn't understand. Not why. Not how. Not me.

It took a good few days for what I'd been told to sink in. Maybe even a week. Every second counted, they said, but I still couldn't comprehend. I didn't look that ill. A little paler, a little slower, but not really and truly ill. I kept thinking they were wrong. You hear about it all the time, the wrong diagnosis, people defying the doctors' theories, people finding out they had glandular fever instead of . . .

About a week later, on my way to work, I got to the train station early, mega early, as usual. You see, I'd built lots of compensators — things that made normal activities easier — into my life to accommodate the disease invading my body: I left for the station early so I wouldn't ever have to run for the train; I brought food to work so I wouldn't have to walk to the sandwich shop at lunchtime; I cut the childminder's hours so I wouldn't be tempted to go for a drink after work.

Anyway, on this particular day I sat at the station and a woman came and stood beside me. She got her mobile out of her bag and made a call. When the person on the other end picked up she said, 'Hello, it's Felicity Halliday's mother here. I'm calling because she's not very well and she won't be coming to school today.' I fell apart. Just broke down in tears. It hit me then, right then, that I would never get the chance to make a call like that. I would not get to do a simple mum thing like call my daughter's school. There were a million things I would never get to do again and that was one of them.

Everyone was terribly British about it all and ignored me as I cried and sobbed and wailed. Yes, wailed. I made a hideous noise as I broke into a million, trillion pieces.

Then this man, this angel, came to me, sat down, put his arm around me and held me while I cried. The train came, the train left. As did the next one and the next one. But this man stayed with me. Stayed with me as I cried and cried. I totally soaked and snotted up the shoulder of his nice suit jacket but he didn't seem to mind, he waited and held me until I stopped wailing. Then he gently asked me what was wrong.

Through my sobs, all I could say was, 'I've got to tell my little girl I'm going to die.'

‘mummy?’

chapter one

The postman jumped as I snatched open the front door to my block of flats and eagerly greeted him.

Usually when we came face to face, he'd have buzzed up to my first floor flat and I'd come shuffling down, pulling on my dressing gown as I tried to rub dried sleep drizzle off my face. Today, though, I'd been hanging out of my window waiting for him. I was still in my usual post-receiving attire of dressing gown and had sleep-sculpted hair, but this time my eyes weren't barely open slits, I'd washed my face and I was smiling.

'Special day, is it?' he said without humour.

He clearly didn't like this reversal of roles. He wanted me to be sedate and disorientated when he handed over my post. It was probably the only power trip he got of a day. Ahhh, that's not fair. He was lovely, my postman. Most postmen are nice, aren't they?

In fact, everyone in the world was lovely today.

'It's my birthday,' I grinned, showing off my freshly cleaned teeth.

'Happy birthday,' he commented, dour as a priest at prayer time, and handed over the post for the four flats in our block. I keenly took the bundle that was bound up by a brown elastic band, noting that almost all of the envelopes were red or purple or blue. Basically, card coloured. 'Twenty-one again,

eh?' the postie said, still unwilling to be infected by my good humour.

'Nope, I'm thirty-two and proud,' I replied. 'Every birthday is a bonus! And anyway, today I get to wear gold sequins and high heels and brush gold dust all over my cleavage.'

The postie's small brown eyes flicked down to my chest area. Even though it was the height of a long, hot, humid summer, I was wearing pyjamas and a big towelling dressing gown, so he didn't see anything suggestive – he was lucky to get even a glimpse of my throat skin. That seemed to startle him, that the chest of which I spoke was highly covered, and he immediately snatched his eyes away again. It'd probably occurred to him that he shouldn't be eyeing up the women on his delivery route – especially when said lady wasn't even undressed enough to make it worth his while.

He started backing away. 'Have a good day, love,' he said. 'I mean, dear. I mean, bye.' And then he legged it down the garden path far quicker than a man of his girth and age should be able to.

The postman moved so fast he probably didn't even hear me call 'You too' after him as I shut the door. I slung the letters that weren't for me, but had the audacity to arrive at this address today, on the floor of the hallway. They landed unceremoniously on top of the other, older letters that sat like orphaned children, waiting, longing to be rescued. I usually felt sorry for those letters, wished the people they'd been sent to would give them a good home, but they weren't my problem today. I barely gave them a second thought as I took the stairs two at a time back up to my flat.

In my bedroom I had already laid out my birthday breakfast feast: fresh croissants with smoked salmon, three chocolate truffles and a glass of Møet.

Everything had to be perfect today. Everything. I'd planned it that way. After I'd devoured my special brekky, I'd stay in bed

until midday, opening birthday cards while receiving calls from well-wishing friends and relatives. Then I had an appointment at the hairdresser to get my hair washed, deep conditioned and cut. I was going for a radical change – ditching my usual chin-length bob for a style with long layers and a sweeping fringe. After that, I'd come back home and get dressed up. I really was going to wear a dress of gold sequins that set off my dark skin in a spectacular fashion. I was going to squeeze my feet into gold high heels and I was going to brush gold dust over my cleavage. And then a few of the girls from work were coming round for drinks and nibbles before we went into town to dance the night away.

I slipped carefully under the sheets, not wanting to spill any of the special spread, then took a swig of champagne before I tore through my cards like a child. Around me the pile of brightly coloured envelopes grew as I tugged out the cards and smiled at the words written inside.

It wasn't dim of me, then, not to notice it. It was like all the others. Slipped in among the bundle, innocuous and innocent looking. And, like all the others, I didn't really look at it, didn't try to decipher the handwriting on envelope, ignored the picture on the front. I simply opened it, eager to receive the message of love that had been scrawled inside. My heart stopped. I recognised the handwriting before I read the words. The words I read with a racing heart.

Dear Kamryn, Please don't ignore this.

*I need to see you. I'm dying. I'm in St Jude's Hospital
in central London.*

Yours, Adele x PS, I miss you.

Slamming it shut I registered for the first time that the card had 'I love you' on it instead of one of the usual birthday greetings.

The piece of glossy cardboard sailed across the room when

I slung it as though it had burnt my fingers. It landed on the wicker laundry basket and sat there staring at me. With its white front and simple design, and three treacherous words, it sneered at me. Daring me to ignore it. Daring me to pretend the words inside weren't carved into my brain like they were scored onto the card.

I took a slug of my champagne but it tasted like vinegar in my mouth. The croissant, carefully sliced and filled with smoked salmon, was like sawdust as I chewed. The truffles were paste on my tongue.

Still the card stared at me. Goading me. *Ignore me if you can*, it mocked. *Go on, try it.*

I threw back the covers, got out of bed and went over to the card. Dispassionately, I tore it in half. Then tore those pieces in half again. I stomped into the kitchen, stamped on the pedal bin to open it and dropped the remains on top of the rotting vegetables, the greasy leftovers and discarded wrappers.

'There. That's what I think of that! And you!' I hissed at the card and its sender.

I returned to my bed. That was better. Much better. I sipped my champagne and ate my food. And everything was all right again. Perfect, even. Just like it should be on my birthday.

Nothing could ruin it. No matter how much anyone tried. And they were bloody trying, weren't they? You don't try much harder than with that message, dressed up as a birthday card. Very clever. Very bloody clever. Well it wasn't going to work. I wasn't falling for that nonsense. I was going to carry on with my plan. I was going to make my thirty-second more special than my eighteenth, twenty-first and thirtieth birthdays combined.

Because when I am thirty-two I shall wear gold sequins and six-inch stilettos and brush gold dust over my cleavage, just as I promised myself ages ago.

★

The door was ajar and didn't protest as I gently pushed on it. I didn't knock. I never knocked on an already open door because to me it always said, 'Come, no knocking required.'

From her place amongst her white pillows she smiled as I stepped into view. 'I knew you'd come,' she whispered.