JUST ANOTHER LITTLE LIE

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For Kevin – Our Crazy Diamond.
Shine Bright x

ONE

I hear Mum laughing as soon as I walk into the house. To be fair, the sound would be pretty hard to miss. Mum has the kind of laugh that can wake the dead – shrill and high pitched. It's the type that can shatter glass. Mum's friend Maggie must be here again. *Great!*

"No, Maggie!" Mum says loudly. "It's not like that at all!"

I throw my school bag down and stroll along the hall to find her. Freddie is sitting at the kitchen table and looks up at me right away. He is always so excited when I come home, like I'm the best thing ever.

"Vee!" Freddie cries. He throws down his crayon and runs over to me. I am bowled over

by a sticky four year old. I can smell the sweet scents of coconut shampoo from his messy hair and the chocolate that is smeared all around his face.

"Have you been eating biscuits again?" I say, and peer down at my school skirt, which is now covered with dark handprints.

Nice! I need to stick it in the wash now.

"Mum said I can!" Freddie says.

"It's a treat!" Mum shouts from the conservatory. "Don't moan at him, Vee. He's been so good!"

I pull out a wet wipe from the pack on the table and rub at Freddie's dirty face. "You'll attract wasps and flies," I tell him. "And you shouldn't be eating biscuits at this time – you won't eat your dinner."

"I still will …" Freddie says. "I promise."

Mum is laughing again. Her voice floats over to me. "Sometimes, Maggie," she says to her friend, "I wonder who the mother is here."

She isn't the only one.

I wander over to her. The conservatory is basically Mum's studio, where she cuts people's hair and sometimes does their nails. She has put proper hairdressing chairs in there, lined up facing the mirrors on the wall. There are expensive blinds hanging at the windows to stop it getting too hot. She even has a small table with a selection of dull magazines and trashy books.

Maggie is one of Mum's regular customers, as well as her best friend. She's currently sitting under a dryer with her head plastered in bright silver foils that are glinting in the sun. Both Maggie and Mum are drinking wine. No surprise there then.

"Why are you so grumpy?" Mum asks me, and sits back in her chair. "Have you had a bad day at school or something?"

"No. Not at all." I glare at her wine glass. "Isn't it a bit early for that?"

Mum's bright lips curl into a smile, but I can see that her eyes are much cooler, warning me off. "It's just one glass, Violet." She uses my full name and flaps a hand at me. "You need to loosen up a bit."

I shake my head at her. *Whatever*. To be fair, I can't see a half-empty wine bottle anywhere, so perhaps this time they actually *are* just having one glass.

It is no big deal.

"I'm going upstairs," I tell Mum. "I have homework to do."

"OK, but would you mind putting Freddie's tea on in a bit?" Mum says. "I'll be busy with Maggie for a while yet."

Maggie glances over at me as if to apologise and then looks away again fast.

"No, that's fine," I reply. "I'll make a start on my English at least."

"You really are an angel," Mum says. "Wasn't I just saying that, Maggie – what an angel Violet is? I don't know where I'd be without her."

I walk away before I can hear the answer.

One thing you need to know about my mum is that she always takes good care of herself. I guess she has to because of her job. You only

have to walk into our bathroom to see the amount of beauty products and make-up that she has. Hardly any of it is mine. I can't be bothered with it all really. But Mum is different. She spends ages at the mirror, curling her long dark hair, smoothing foundation onto her tanned skin and taking time to apply her false lashes.

She looks amazing afterwards – pretty, glamorous and confident. That's just how she is, my mum. She always tells me, "You have to look good, Vee. You have to give a good impression at all times." Then she will raise her eyebrows at my messy hair and pale skin and beg me to use some of her products.

"I can't understand why you're not more like me," Mum often moans. "You could be, you know. You could be really stunning if you just let yourself."

And I can never answer her, because I don't know why stuff like make-up doesn't interest me. I can't really explain to her why I find it heavy and uncomfortable. I know that I am very different to Mum. I am the quiet one – the class swot who dreams of being a lawyer one day. I'm the worrier who can never be confident.

It isn't like that for Mum. She has always been strong, funny and in control.

At least that's what I always used to believe. But then, I used to believe in fairy stories too, until I realised that not everything ends in a happy ever after.

Much later, I put Freddie to bed after I've fed him and given him a bath. Mum and Maggie are still drinking downstairs but have now moved into the living room. Mum has decided to put her music on. It's some really annoying rubbish from the eighties with screechy vocals.

"It's too loud," Freddie moans, pulling his duvet over his head.

"It's OK," I soothe him. "I'll close your door. You'll soon be asleep."

"I wish Dad was here," he mutters. "It was so much better when Dad was here."

I blink, trying to think of the right things to say. Freddie's dad, Steve, left us nearly a year ago. That's when everything started to unravel. Now Steve lives miles away with his

new girlfriend. I sometimes wonder if he even remembers we still exist.

"Mum will stop soon," I say. "Just you wait."

But we both know she won't. Mum does this all the time. If I complain, she'll just say that I'm trying to spoil her fun. I'm not in the mood for an argument, so instead I slip into my own room and try not to think about it.

Hopefully it *will* be over soon. The only thing I can do is wait until she falls asleep and then I can creep downstairs and turn the music off myself.

On my desk, the rest of my English homework is waiting for me. I sit for a bit, trying hard to focus, but all I can hear are Mum's shrieks of laughter from downstairs. And then a bit later comes her high-pitched singing – out of tune and piercing my brain. It's impossible to focus.

"Please be quiet," I whisper.

The words in front of me are swimming around, almost jumping off the page. I can't focus at all. Frustrated, I push the papers aside and lie down on my bed instead, ramming my pillow over my head. After a while I hear the front

door slam. Maggie has gone home at last. That's something at least.

But the music stays on. Booming and relentless.

I know that Mum will keep going for a good while yet. This has become the new normal for us.