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To Touch the Stars

Written by Jessica Ruston

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To Touch the Stars

JESSICA RUSTON

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For Clemency

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Prologue

He was watching from his position inside a taxi, just up the road from the villa, as they arrived. This golden, glittering family, their skin touched by the gloss of wealth and privilege. Their luggage unloaded for them, their feet hardly touching the dusty ground of the streets of Anacapri before they were stepping inside the property's gates where the tiles would have been swept clean in preparation for their arrival, and where they would be able to slip their sandals off and feel the cool stone beneath them.

There was the old caretaker, welcoming them as they emerged from the fleet of vehicles, one by one. A passer-by paused to watch their arrival, struck by the family's beauty and shimmer, as people always were, before carrying on his way. First came Fran, young and beautiful, despite the scar that ran down her face. Then Blue and Adam, his boyfriend, Blue jumpy as ever, his legs twitching as he swung them out of the car and blinked in the sunlight. No Flip, yet. He would be in the office still. Catching a later flight, probably. Always working. And then there was Violet. Stepping out of the car, her arms full of bracelets, her hair twisted up into a knot on top of her head, wearing a loose silk sundress. Her silver flashed in the sunlight and reminded him of a splash of seaspray.

'I drop you here?' his driver asked, turning to face him. 'You go inside Cavalley family villa? Very rich family. Big party soon, for Signora Cavalley's birthday. Been coming to Capri a long time. You are going to the party? You friend of Signora Cavalley?'

The watcher shook his head. 'No, I'm not going to the party. I don't know the family. Take me back to Capri town, *per favore*.'

The driver shrugged, and drove off down the hill.

Part One

Chapter One

Violet Cavalley had come from nothing. From nowhere, she liked to joke, when interviewers asked her about her background. She gave different stories, depending on her mood. 'I'm the daughter of a Ukrainian builder,' she would say, a wink telling them it was not true. Or was it? 'A French marquis, disgraced and exiled.' 'A shepherd, who lived in the hills of Scotland and raised me alone.' A thousand exotic tales, none of them true. Like a diamond she had been born out of almost nothing, and she had polished herself until she sparkled as brightly as light.

Like the diamonds she was wearing as she walked through the gardens of the villa in Capri. The large courtyard at its heart had been transformed into an outdoor dining room full of scented candles. The air was heavy with their fragrance – gardenia, peony, freesia, rose. Tables were arranged in the centre of the space, each topped with mirrored glass. Lanterns cast flickering shadows over the feet of the guests as they walked down the avenue in the dusky light. Sixty guests, one for each year of Violet Cavalley's life, were gathering. Family, friends, colleagues. Violet watched from the edges of the garden. The life she had built so carefully was displayed before her.

Dark-red candles rose up from the centre of the tables in pillars of wrought iron, surrounded with blood-red flowers. The chairs were covered in the palest duck-egg-blue chiffon which dropped to the ground in puddles, and on the back of each chair was a single red flower – a rose, or carnation, or gerbera.

She did a quick head-count now. Twenty, thirty, one, two . . . Forty-three guests were milling around the courtyard, gradually gravitating towards their seats, as directed by the seating-plan

which had been engraved on a huge ornately framed mirror propped up on a stand in the corner. She could see her friends' faces reflected in it as they looked for their places. Kalisto Kauffman, her oldest and closest friend, was already seated and holding court. He saw her watching him and winked at her from across the courtyard. There was her daughter, Fran, straight-backed and smiling, chatting politely, her eyes flicking around nervously. What was wrong with her? She had been jittery all afternoon since coming back from visiting the castello again. No time to worry about it now.

Blue and Adam were making their way through the arched stone entrance which was covered with billowing dark-red chiffon (a small air-pipe had been run from outside to keep the fabric dramatically puffed out). Their arrival brought the head-count up to fifty. Blue wore a perfectly cut three-piece suit in the palest baby-blue velvet, with a candy-striped blue and white silk shirt. He was smoking a pale-blue Sobranie cigarette. Ever the showman. His partner, Adam, walked, as usual, half a step behind him, letting Blue go first, soak up the compliments, dazzle and flutter. Adam was good for him, Violet knew. Steady, constant. 'People like us need people like him,' as Blue had put it.

In the distance she thought she heard a rumble of thunder, and looked up at the sky. But it was clear.

As they sat, their starters in front of them, Violet remained standing. Before each guest was a bowl of champagne risotto, an oyster placed on one side. Around the courtyard, guests gasped as they realised that inside each shell was a single, perfect pearl. The tables buzzed with laughter and conversation. Violet closed her eyes for a second and allowed herself to tune into snippets of chatter, letting her attention roam around the room. It made her skin tingle to listen.

She opened her eyes, and cleared her throat. It was time.

'Excuse me . . .' she called out. The courtyard fell quiet.

'I'll be brief. I don't want this wonderful food to go cold. I just want to thank you all for coming. I still can't believe I'm sixty years old. That's the age other people are, isn't it? I'm still seventeen, surely.'

Laughter.

‘I am very blessed,’ she continued, more serious now, ‘to have so many of my family and friends here with me to celebrate. My children . . .’

She gestured at the top table. Flip, her eldest son, and his fiancée, Tillie, to one side of her. Blue, Adam. Frangipani, the youngest.

‘My partner, Patrick . . .’

She looked down to her left. Patrick winked a bright blue eye at her. She hated the word ‘partner’, but to call him her boyfriend at sixty felt absurd.

‘Kalisto, who has been like a brother to me – more than a brother . . .’

Kalisto stood and bowed, making a flourish with his long tailcoat. There was a round of applause. Violet laughed.

‘Hey. Stop stealing the limelight!’ she teased.

But no one could really steal the show from her, and she knew it. Then she paused. She had suddenly become aware that Pietro – the villa’s housekeeper and caretaker, who had been here since before she owned the place, who was part of it – had appeared and was urgently gesturing to her.

‘Signora Violetta, Ms Cavalley.’ The elderly man looked utterly panicked – floored in a way that Violet had never seen before. His walnut-brown skin had turned pale, and he gazed at Violet with eyes that were full of concern.

She carried on. Whatever it was, it would have to wait.

‘And, just as important, are the ones who are not here. Scarlet. Sebastian. And the others. Please, raise your glasses and drink with me, to absent – no, not to absent friends. To lost loves, wherever they may be.’

The room stood as one, and did as she asked.

‘To lost loves.’

Violet smiled. ‘Thank you. Now – eat, drink, enjoy! Life is short.’ Then she turned to Pietro, touched his hand. ‘Pietro? What on earth’s the matter?’

‘Someone’s here,’ he said urgently.

‘All right. Who? Show them into the library and I’ll see them after dinner.’

‘He says he won’t wait. He says . . . he says he is Signora Cavalley’s brother.’ He addressed the last few words to Flip, who had stood

and gone to his mother's side. It was as though the loyal caretaker could somehow not bear to speak directly to Violet.

Flip shook his head in bemusement. 'My mother doesn't have a brother, you know that. What are you talking about, Pietro? Are you feeling all right? I think you should—'

Pietro steeled himself, and did something he could never have imagined doing. He interrupted.

'I'm sorry, signor, but he says . . .'

'Oh God.' Violet's voice was low.

Flip looked at Violet, sensing her trembling next to him. 'Mama?' Her hand went to her mouth.

Pietro's eyes dropped to the ground. 'I told him this,' he went on. 'I said to him, "Signora Cavalley has no brother, no sister. You must leave," I told him. But he said . . .'

And before he spoke, Violet knew the words that were going to come from his mouth. The words that she had dreaded hearing for so long.

'He says Signora Cavalley does not have a brother. But he says Signora Cavalley is not . . . *is not Signora Cavalley.*'

Violet stared. The courtyard had fallen silent. Everything had slowed down. She felt as though she were floating; her arms and legs were numb.

'Hello, Violet,' a voice said, from over Pietro's shoulder. 'That's what you're calling yourself now, isn't it?'

And as she collapsed, she looked beyond Pietro, into the shadows of the courtyard, and into the eyes of her brother.

Earlier that day

Violet Cavalley had spent her life in the single-minded pursuit of her goals. She was decisive, clear, resolute. But now, for the first time in as long as she was able to remember, she found herself utterly unable to make a decision. She sat on the striped windowseat that faced directly out to sea, in the bedroom of her villa in Capri, and wondered how she should divide up her empire amongst her three children. How she would choose.

To bestow Cavalley's on one of them would be to burden them

with a responsibility so heavy that there had been times in her life when she herself had not believed she would be able to go on carrying it; and she was the one who had created it. How would they – the heir, the chosen one – cope with the burden of being the person with whom the buck stopped? The person upon whom the livelihoods of thousands depended? Who could not easily take a day off, who could not just wake up one morning and decide to turn over and drift back into an unfinished dream.

She loved Cavalley's, the company that she had built from nothing into one of the world's most valuable brand names in fashion, loved it as strongly and as fiercely as her children. She and it were bound tightly together like tendrils of honeysuckle around a rose. And like two plants they had grown together, from the weedy and undeveloped shoots of an idea in the mind of a green girl, into a woman and a business with strong, deep roots that clung tenaciously to the earth beneath her feet. Cavalley's was as much a part of her as her own skin, and just as impossible to shed or to think of giving to someone else.

It wasn't just about the responsibility, of course. It was the bad luck that haunted her. It was why she had not let Cavalley's be split up and sold off or become public. Maybe if she had done it earlier, it would be easier, she thought now.

She ran her finger along the windowsill. Violet had owned the villa for more than twenty years. It was the place where she had spent countless summers with her family, hundreds of evenings dining on the terrace that she could see from her room now, lingering over dinner and wine in the candlelight. Hundreds of afternoons working in her study upstairs while the children and guests napped under parasols by the pool or splashed in it. Had she sacrificed too many hours like that? Working, always working? Once, when Fran was small, six or seven, she had been sulking about having to wait to go on some outing on the island she had set her heart on, and had accused Violet of liking work more than her, in that melodramatic way small children have. Violet had turned and stared at her, and Fran's eyes had become wide, afraid that she was going to be in trouble, standing in the doorway of Violet's room, half inside it and half out of it, ready to scamper away in her white cotton skirt and sandals.

Violet had stood up, and said, ‘Right, that’s it,’ in a stern voice. ‘We’re going to take the afternoon off. Girls only.’ And she had taken her daughter for her first manicure in Capri Town, and bought her a new dress, and they had drunk virgin Bellinis on the terrace bar of the Quisisana.

Fran. It hadn’t been easy for her, growing up so much younger than the others. And then after the accident . . . Frangipani was as beautiful as the flower she was named for, was clever and ambitious, more ambitious than most girls of her age and class, many of whom were busy tripping around Town getting paid to attend nightclub openings, if they were doing anything at all. Fran was halfway through a law degree at King’s College, and worked in the Mount Street salon in Mayfair at weekends. She worked hard – too hard, her mother sometimes feared – but she was still young. Inexperienced. And there was no way Violet could entrust sole care of Cavalley’s to her. Not now – it would be too much, too soon. One day, she could well prove a worthy figurehead, but not yet. And Violet needed someone *now*.

The problem was that she didn’t feel that any of her children were in a position to be handed the reins of Cavalley’s. They were all of them missing some essential part that would be needed by whoever stepped into her shoes. And she wanted that person to be family – of her blood. She could not risk passing all that went with Cavalley’s to an outsider, however close. Kalisto, her oldest friend, would not do it, and she regarded him as family – as good as. He had kept his own label smaller than it could have been, purely because he didn’t want all the worry and stress that went with running a company of this size, and in her heart of hearts she didn’t blame him. He now had the luxury of designing for a successful line run by someone else – having sold out to Violet a few years ago – and now, it seemed, he had the best of both worlds: the protection and clout of Cavalley’s behind him, along with the freedom to be creative and not have to worry about the balance-sheet or property fees or employment law.

Fran was too young; it wouldn’t be fair to steal her youth by giving her such a job, but also, Violet worried that she lacked the ruthless edge required by whoever took over from her. Fran, despite her crisp, cool shell, had the tenderest of hearts. She had always

been the child who Violet would discover weeping over a ladybird with a broken wing that she had found in the corner of her bathroom, who would insist on funeral services for dead pets, and who would when taken to the toy shop and asked to select a new teddy bear for a treat, inevitably find the one with a wonky arm or an eye sewn on not quite straight and choose him. Violet knew it was because she was worried that no other child would choose the imperfect stuffed toy, and he would be left at the bottom of the pile.

Once, a long time ago, Violet had wondered whether Blue might be the one to end up leading Cavalley's. But that was before. Before everything with Scarlet, before his demons got worse and his condition became unmanageable. Before. There was no question of him running the company now. He was a talented designer, however, one of the best. His dresses had made Cavalley's into a name to contend with for red-carpet events, joining labels such as Armani and Marchesa on the list for Oscar nominees and starlets en route to Cannes; in fact, it was seeing Blue's designs that had inspired Violet to build up the business around his clothes, and it had paid off, tripling the company's value in the first year, and exponentially ever since. Her son drew like other people breathed or walked, his black Fineliner an extension of his long, thin fingers, flying over the pages of his sketchbook as easily and lightly as a dragonfly hovering over a lake, pulling out of his imagination more beautiful, shimmering creations. Yet he was fragile, so fragile. He had to be constantly protected from stress, could not cope when plans changed and his carefully ordered world shifted even slightly. No, there was no way he could run Cavalley's, not now and not ever – though Violet hoped his designs would always be at the heart of it.

The obvious choice, then, was Flip. Violet knew this. She also knew it was what everyone was expecting her to do, eventually. Announce that she would take a smaller role, or that she was signing over some more control to him. No one was expecting her to step down right away, of course not – why would she? But he had been working with her closely for years, had plenty of responsibility already. He was the logical choice. She trusted him. Didn't she? Of course she did. She trusted Flip like she trusted herself. Out of all of her children who were still here, he was the one who knew her

best, he was the one she worked with the most, who had sacrificed the most for her and for the company. He deserved it. And yet.

There was something that stopped her wanting to bequeath Cavalley's to him in its entirety. She wasn't sure what it was. He didn't have great flair, but did he need that to run the company? Blue would be around to provide all the style, after all, and Tillie, Flip's girlfriend, worked for Violet and was a talented junior milliner whom she had been nurturing. Tillie would support him, and it would be good to have a woman's touch still steering the ship, even at one remove. Maybe, maybe . . .

Flip

Flip Cavalley waited for his assistant to put his coffee and the morning's papers and cuttings down on his desk, then waved his thanks to her as she shut the door of his office behind her. The voice at the other end of the phone belonged to the Head of Sales in Cavalley's office in Shanghai – a market into which the company was expanding with a speed that had surprised even Flip and his mother, and which showed no signs of slowing. It seemed there was an insatiable demand among Shanghai's high society for the quirky couture hats that his mother was so famous for, and an almost limitless pot of money with which to purchase them. There might have been a global recession, but it didn't seem to have reached China.

'I also recommend that we think of a limited edition collection, for China only, in the mass-market side,' the voice continued. 'There's a high demand for what customers perceive as unique, even in the mass market, which might seem to be something of a contradiction in terms. It would also provide us with an opportunity to include some traditional Chinese design, possibly. I wonder if you might suggest this to Mrs Cavalley?'

Flip made a noncommittal sound, and began to glance through his correspondence. He had been on the call since 5.30 a.m., in his office at home in Berkeley Square, and then taking the call with him as he walked, as he did every morning, to Cavalley's headquarters above the original salon on Mount Street. He looked out of the window. The street woke up slowly and late. This was no

7 a.m. in the City, where the streets would already be packed and the day well underway with people treading on one another's toes to get to meetings, coffee cups in one hand, laptop case in the other, *Financial Times* tucked under an arm, the pavements already littered with free newspapers. Here papers were still being delivered, trolleys full of dark-red sides of beef trundled into Allens of Mayfair, the famous butcher's, and a man in a deerstalker tweed hat strolled slowly along the street, smoking a pipe in the pearly-grey morning sunshine. It was a tiny pocket of London where everything felt calm, refined; where it still seemed reasonable to linger for three hours over lunch of a plate of oysters and a bottle of white wine at Scott's, where within a radius of just a few yards you could buy a rifle, a Porsche, a couture Violet Cavalley hat, a set of leather luggage, a French-trimmed rack of lamb, a diamond ring, an Old Master, a Monte Cristo cigar, perfume in a cut-glass bottle and a tailormade suit. Flip sometimes found it difficult to imagine much that he would want to buy that was *not* for sale on this one street; Mount Street had been his second home since before he could remember. His first memory, indeed, was of cutting his head open in the storeroom underneath the salon. The street and the shop were part of the fabric of his life.

The thought of the *FT* reminded him, there was an interview with him scheduled to run today. Ending the call, he opened the cuttings file and turned over the pages of articles about Cavalley's, his mother, a rare photo of Blue in public at a gallery opening. He paused over that for a moment, touched, as he always was, by Blue's face staring into the camera, his eyes shocked, as usual, that anyone wanted to take his photo. The photographer must have been quick, since he had caught him before his hands had started to flutter in front of him, his long fingers moving quickly, as though drawing images that only he could see in the air; they were still holding the gallery programme and a glass of white wine, a straw Trilby on his head, circled with a pink-striped trim. Also as usual, Flip was surprised to see the faint crow's-feet around his brother's pale eyes, and the lines in his forehead, the changed boundary of his hairline. In Flip's mind, Blue would always be sixteen, and it never ceased to come as something of a shock to see that he was not. Or not on the outside, at least.

Flip sighed and turned the page over. Here it was. *Heir to the Cavalley Throne* the headline read, above a large photograph of Flip sitting – looking somewhat regal, he thought to himself – on an antique chair that had been stripped down and painted with a punky, gold-leafed skull-and-crossbones design. His eyes moved quickly over the image. His dark suit was classic, well-cut – cut by Blue – with a deep-purple silk lining. The photo had been taken in the workshop in Battersea, the chair positioned on top of one of the worktables, activity going on all around him. At his left foot, a woman was hand-sewing silver sequins on to peach chiffon; at his right, someone shifted images around on a mood board, moving photographs of crocodiles and crumbling houses and beehives on the page in the swirling, mysterious process involved in creating a collection. On the walls, Polaroids of celebrities wearing Cavalley hats were visible – here was a top model blowing a kiss to the camera in a red bowler hat, there was a minor royal in a vivid cobalt-coloured and heavily feathered headpiece.

In the corner of the room, half of a tailor's model was visible, draped in a tightly corseted ballgown, and Violet herself was standing in front of it, pointing to the area above the model's neck, sketching a design in the air with her hands, watched by Kalisto Kauffman, her best and oldest friend and creator of the dress. The two worked closely together, and had done for years; Violet designed all of the hats for Kalisto's catwalk shows, and was co-owner of his shops on Bond Street and Savile Row. She had been the one to encourage him to create a diffusion line that could be sold in boutiques and department stores, and had invested in it. This had made him his first million (and many more since).

The image was impressive, Flip thought, gazing at the photograph. He looked young but not immature, handsome but with enough rough edges that he could not be accused of being a pretty boy, a pampered Little Lord Fauntleroy. The sub-heading was less pleasing. *But with Violet Cavalley showing no signs of slowing down as she approaches her sixtieth birthday, will eldest son Flip always be The Man Who Would Be King?*

'Fuckers!' exclaimed Flip. 'Fuck'. Examining the photo again, more closely this time, he noticed that the lighting had been digitally altered so he appeared in shadow, as though lurking back-

stage. There was only a sliver of his mother in the image, but somehow your eye was still drawn to her. She appeared lit from above: Golden Girl Violet.

Flip skimmed the article. Nothing was misquoted, he had said everything that was printed, but everything read badly. He sounded spoiled, expectant. *'Of course I'd like to be in sole charge of Cavalley's one day. Who wouldn't? It's a multi-million-pound company.'* And: *'Every child of successful parents feels that they have something to live up to – it's our blessing and our curse.'*

Idiot. Idiot! Why had he said that? He sounded petulant, and 'poor me' – all the things he despised in others. 'Poor me, with my famous mother and immense fortune at my fingertips; poor me, with a job I walked into and a successful company that will one day be mine.' He knew that was how he sounded. He could kick himself. He knew better than to talk honestly to journalists, to open up to them, however many times they'd chatted in the pub, or however many so-called friends they had in common. He knew better. So why had he?

Flip knew. It was a weight in his chest, a stone that was growing inside him. He bit his lip, and carried on skimming the article, trying to take in what he needed to know without dwelling on his self-pitying, inane remarks. There was a lot of stuff about the business, about how Violet had come from nowhere, the mysterious young woman who appeared in London's swinging sixties like *a snow-drop, overnight, or so it seems, arriving fully formed, fully fledged, amidst a harsh winter, heralding Spring*. For crying out loud, talk about hyperbole, Flip thought. All of her major triumphs were mentioned – the Oscar, the ballets, the catwalk shows, the eventual recognition by the establishment, the honours, the weddings, both her clients' and her own. And of course, here it was, of course it would be here. The Cavalley Curse.

The Cavalley Curse, as it has become known in recent years, seems to have blighted the otherwise charmed life of Violet Cavalley. Violet herself laughs it off, in public at least, as rumour, gossip, coincidence. But sources close to her allege that, despite her claims to the contrary, she is deeply troubled by the thread of bad luck and misfortune that appears to dog

her personal life at every turn. Is such tragedy the price demanded by the Fates for success? The Cavalleys might be the latest great family to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, but they are far from the first – think of the Kennedys, the Onassis family, the Redgraves. Or is it simply the decadence of privileged lifestyles that brings with it a moral decay that infects and insidiously . . .

Flip could not read on. He closed the file of papers and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. The rumours of the curse had been following the Cavalleys for years. They would not go away now, he knew. Once something was named – labelled, like that – it became eternally linked with its subject, casting a shadow over its gilded surface. And, God knew, there was enough evidence for it. Flip blinked. *He would not think of that.* But it wasn't the mention of the curse or of the tragedies that hung in its wake like ghosts at the feast that bothered him. It was the way he felt inside.

He burned with – yes, with jealousy. He could admit it here, in his own head, in the privacy of his office, even though the admission made him clench his teeth. *He was jealous of his own mother.* It burned inside him like a forest fire. The article was meant to be about *him*, the interview had been with *him*, the photoshoot was of *him*. And yet, as ever – it was all about Violet.

'I can't believe you let them run it like that', he raged. 'I can't believe you approved it.'

'Flip, I didn't. It was your interview, I was just in the background.'

'But you weren't just in the background, were you, Mama? You're never in the bloody background.'

Violet sighed, and Flip glowered as his driver wove in and out of the heavy M25 traffic towards Heathrow, gliding smoothly between lorries and holidaymakers, finding spaces where there were none.

'Flip, listen to yourself. I'm sorry if you feel pushed to one side,' Violet said, 'it's not my intention.'

'I don't . . .' He found it hard to speak. 'I don't feel like that. I'm not that childish.'

'Forgive me, darling boy, but then maybe you should try and stop acting so childish!—'

Flip cut her off and threw the phone down on to the seat next to him. On his other side, Tillie squeezed his hand.

‘She won’t listen to me. Cavalley’s can be bigger – it can be better. But she has to let me start making some decisions. We should be exploiting the Chinese market more. Jason’s right – we should be getting in there before our competitors do. We should attract local investment and build quickly. Spend less time on couture and more on what makes the money.’

Tillie stroked his hand with her thumb. ‘She won’t ever let go of couture. And I think she’s right.’

Flip snorted in exasperation.

‘She is,’ continued Tillie. ‘It’s what gives Cavalley’s value. You can buy a cheap hat anywhere, pick it up, throw it away. People don’t do that with Cavalley’s; even the mass-market ranges last. You lose couture and you lose what makes it special.’

‘You stop losing millions of pounds a year,’ he snorted.

‘Not overall.’

‘It’s not just the couture. She’s stuck in her old ways, to the point where she can’t see the future.’ Flip swivelled round in his seat to face his fiancée. ‘I can make it better, Till. *We* can make it better.’

‘Are you sure it’s not just that you want to do it your way?’

Flip shook his head. ‘No. But, even if it was, what would be so wrong with that? What’s wrong with wanting a chance to show that I can do it – to be in charge?’

Tillie shrugged. ‘It’s not your company, darling. It’s hers. It’s always been hers.’

‘And don’t I know it.’ Flip’s voice was bitter.

‘Sorry. I don’t want to fight with you about it. I just want the chance, that’s all.’

‘I know.’ Tillie pulled his hand to her lips and kissed it. ‘And I love you for it. As long as it’s not at the expense of what really matters. Which is family.’ She prodded him in the chest. ‘Go on, send her a text. Make it up before we get to Capri.’

‘All right,’ he grumbled. Then he groaned. ‘Oh God.’

‘What?’

‘Just the thought of it all. Family dinner. Boodle. Mungo.’

‘Oh Flip.’ Tillie frowned, and Flip felt awful. ‘You mustn’t say

that. He's your son. He adores you – worships you. Make an effort. Please.'

'I know, I know. I just find him impossible. He's so – so needy. Like . . .' Flip stopped himself. It wasn't fair to complain about the boy or his mother to Tillie. To anyone. They had done nothing wrong. He resolved to make an effort tonight, a proper effort to talk to his teenage son. Take him down to the terrace after dinner and give him his first cognac, maybe. Do some of that father and son bonding he was always hearing about. He cheered up, leaned over and kissed Tillie full on the lips.

'I'll spend some proper time with him this weekend, I promise. You've worn me down. How can you be such a nag when we're not even married?' he teased.

Tillie waved the ring on her finger at him. 'Nearly,' she joked. 'I'm practising.'

'Hmm. I can still change my mind, you know,' he said, mock stern, stroking the side of her face.

'Just you try it. Anyhow, your mother wouldn't let you. She's planning the wedding of the century.'

'Tell me if she gets too much.'

'I like it. It's nice to have someone who cares.'

Flip looked at her tenderly. Tillie was an orphan, just like his mother. It was one of the things that had brought them together, Tillie told him, that had made them closer than boss and employee, or friends, or future mother-in-law and daughter-in-law – all roles that they had played during the years that they had known one another. When Tillie had started working at Cavalley's she had been untrained but obviously talented. Violet had seen her potential straight away. Seen something of herself in her. There was a fire in the girl's eyes that Violet recognised; a determination to make something better of her life. So Violet had spent time with her, given her responsibility, promoted her. Tillie had a flair for marketing, a knack for knowing what people wanted and how to give it to them. She had progressed quickly up the ranks. And then, when she had reached a level where no one could accuse her of sleeping her way to the top, she finally allowed Flip to take her out on the date he had been badgering for since her first day.

He kissed her nose. 'Good. Anyhow, I think she prefers you to me at the moment.'

Tillie shrugged. 'I don't really blame her.'

'Neither do I.' He smiled.

'Now send that text.'

'Yes, Miss.'

'Mrs, soon.'

'I can't wait.' Flip picked up his phone and opened a new message. As he did so, his phone rang. 'Damn. It's Boodle.' He sighed. What did his ex-wife want? She was going to see him in a few hours. His hand hovered above the phone. Tillie reached over and flipped it open. He glared at her, and she pointed at the phone. 'Go on,' she mouthed. Flip rolled his eyes.

'Hello, Boodle. What can I do for you?'

He listened as she wittered on about a delayed taxi and a birthday present for his mother, and he closed his eyes and let her words wash over him – and he never sent the text.

There was a knock at Violet's bedroom door. She sighed and stood up; she would carry on thinking about the problem later. Nothing was going to happen today, after all. As she stood, she felt a sudden twinge, and winced. '*Momento*,' she called out, knowing that Pietro would wait until she told him to enter. She stood still, waiting for the pain in her back to subside, breathing slowly through pursed lips.

When she opened the door, a few seconds later, a bouquet of pink roses and peonies took up the whole space.

'Signora Violetta, beautiful flowers for you – from a secret admirer, I think?'

Pietro came inside and carefully placed the arrangement on the low table in front of the sofa. Violet reached down and opened the little white envelope that was tucked into the side of the blue glass vase holding the flowers. Their scent hit her, sweet and rich, and her hand shook a little. Pietro's eyes gave away his concern with a slight wrinkle at their corners. She must reassure him.

'*Ecco*,' she said, holding her hand out, spreading her fingers wide. 'I'm like a schoolgirl getting her first Valentine. So silly, at my age.'

He smiled, relieved. '*L'amore domina senza regole*,' he said proudly. Love rules without rules.

Marry me, the card said. Violet smiled. Every day since Patrick

Byrne had walked into her life, long after she had given up on finding someone with whom she could share it, he had asked her to marry him. They had met three years ago, at a dinner party that Violet hadn't wanted to go to, and he had charmed her immediately. He was funny, affectionate and, most appealingly of all perhaps, he didn't take either himself or Violet too seriously. Their relationship was quite unlike any that Violet had experienced before – which was, she supposed, why it was so special.

'I'll never marry again,' she had told him, the first time, and the time after, and the time after that. 'I'm too old.' And, 'What would my children say? It would look ridiculous. And anyhow, I don't believe in marrying twice. I made those promises once.'

Patrick just shrugged, and carried on asking. 'I'll wear you down one day,' he joked. 'You'll run out of excuses eventually.' Violet couldn't help but admire his tenacity and find it attractive. But she couldn't marry him.

She smiled as she read the second line of the card. *A thousand-and-thirty-second time lucky? Yours, in hope eternal, Patrick.* One thousand and thirty-two days, she had known him. And she had been happy in his company for every single one of them. People had married on far, far less. They lived separately but closely, both agreeing that they were too old to merge their households and start playing house. Both happy with the arrangement that had evolved, where they met once a week for a date that felt like the definition of romance, and the keys they held to each other's homes that felt like the comfort and companionship and security they both valued. People wondered why they didn't marry, she knew that. Violet shrugged to herself. It didn't matter what other people thought. It never had.

'Grazie, Pietro,' she began to say. But as she opened her mouth, the pain in her back returned, and she gasped.

'Signora? Signora Cavalley!'

Violetta, she thought. *Call me Signora Violetta*, as normal. But everything was not normal, and she could not speak, and her eyes were shut tightly, as if by shutting they could ward off the wave of pain that had spread from her back around her body and all through it, and then there was nothing.

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