

## Beguiled

Violet bolted the gate and looked back up the garden path to the front door where Gordon and Michelle smiled, arm in arm, under the roses.

She gritted her teeth in a smile and waved back at the couple.

'Bye again! '

'Keep in touch', called Michelle.

'See you soon', said Gordon.

Then the couple smiled at each other and disappeared inside.

Only an hour previously she had arrived at Gordon's home, carrying a casserole full of Swedish meatballs and a head full of vague notions about the future, hers and Gordon's.

She reflected on the time when the four of them had been close friends, Gordon and his wife Esme, Tony and herself.

They did everything together: outings, holidays, visits to each others' homes. Gordon always showed his affection for her, Violet was always gentle with him. She sensed his love in the little things: the way he would kiss her when they met or parted., the supporting arm when it wasn't really needed. The other two would look on smiling, quite unsuspecting. Gordon, of course, was a perfect gentleman, he would never deliberately cause pain.

Violet understood him perfectly.

All of them were horrified when Esme, his wife and her dear friend, suddenly died of an unsuspected aneurysm. Gordon took months to start recovering from the shock. He accepted a few invitations from Violet and Tony, then dropped out.

Except, of course, for the Golf Club. She knew he needed some male company. That was when Violet started to take casseroles round to his home, just to make sure he was getting some good, home made food. She loved the cosy home he and Esme had made, but the cookery stars had always gone to Violet. She sometimes wondered if he felt a tiny bit guilty about their innocent relationship.

Certainly, he never so much as patted her arm after Esme died.

He was always the perfect gentleman.

When Tony accidentally electrocuted himself with the hedge cutters they were both devastated. Tony usually borrowed Gordon's more recent model but Gordon had been out that day, and it seemed he almost blamed himself. Violet missed Tony dreadfully, but she knew she could always call on Gordon, had she needed help.

She seldom saw him now and often her casserole had to be left in the porch, the dish collected at her next visit.

Thus had Violet's genteel dreams continued until today.

Her tap at the front door was quickly answered by a well made up, well coiffured and well upholstered woman she'd never seen before.

'Violet, isn't it? Do come in – and what's this? Another delicious meal – really, you're spoiling Gordon. Come on in, sit down, we're just about to have coffee – do have a cup with us?'

The effusive welcome gave Violet some time to pull herself together.

She allowed herself to be settled into an armchair after the woman had plumped up the fat cushions. The room looked different, things had been moved, bright cushions added.

Esmé's mother's silver epergne had gone.

'Or perhaps you'd like to stay for lunch? And share the casserole? There's plenty, and I'm making a salad?'

This was the first time, Violet realised, that she'd been invited to share the meal. She stared at the woman.

'Just coffee, thank you.'

'Oh, and I'm Michelle. Michelle Robb.'

'Violet Quayle, my husband Tony and I were- are old friends.'

'Of course, of course. I knew both men from the Golf Club. Years, Gordon and I have known each other.'

Michelle smiled across at Gordon, who was carefully rearranging a pile of books.

Violet drank the coffee, nibbled at a home made biscuit, made her excuses and started to leave.

'Wait, dear, till I fetch your casserole dish.'

Michelle returned the emptied dish, washed and in a paper bag.

'Gordon has appreciated your help, you know, but in truth he's all right now. Really.'

She glanced sidelong at Gordon, and this time he twinkled back at her.

Violet had attempted a twinkle herself, but couldn't catch his eye.

Confused by her thoughts, she trudged down the lane to her own house.

A stinging breeze over the fields made her eyes water and at the same time dried her tears.

.She grunted at her next door neighbour's cheerful wave. She hurried inside and sped to the cloakroom.

Down the lavatory bowl went her chocolate biscuit, her coffee and, as she watched it all swirl colourfully, an awful lot of foolish, unformed, unshared daydreams. She splashed her face with cold water and regarded herself in the mirror. Red nose, redder eyes, hair hung in strings. She stood up straight and tossed her head back.

A decent haircut would make all the difference, she thought, as she swept it off her face; maybe with a bit of colour. She noticed the dark green wall behind her – what had she been thinking? Dingy must have been fashionable, all those years ago. Out in the hall she looked about the house, critically: yes, it could all do with a face-lift.

No point sitting on her bit of money, why not spend it making life more comfortable? She could do what she liked, after all, she was an independent woman now.

In the kitchen she poured out a glass of wine and sat at the table with pencil and paper: time to make a plan.

But first she had to decide: should she involve Gordon from the start, or simply amaze him when he came round to see the transformation?

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