

VIOLETTE: CHAPTER ONE

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Monika Publications

First published 2017 by Monika Publications
1 Tulip Court, Middle Ridge, Queensland, 4350
Australia
www.monikapublications.com.au

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-publication data:

☞Creator:☞Rotondo, Louise, author.

☞Title:☞Violette / Louise Rotondo.

☞ISBN:☞9780987269263 (ebook)

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One



BABY BLUE

Aurora wiped her wet hands down the front of her jeans before sauntering over to the table and leaning against the end of it. Laughter erupted from her as she watched the antics of the kids—Charlie, Liam, Jed, Kate, Harriet, Mitchell, Thomas and Pete— with the pair of blue heelers, Rough and Tumble. The group of them were doing a children’s running version of a conga line with Rough at the front and Tumble bringing up the rear. It had started normally enough with Charlie chasing Rough, Rough trying to escape, and Liam following after Charlie, his twin. Jed had watched the pair running and giggling and had joined in, Kate and Harriet had got into the spirit of things, bent their knees and pretended they were both chasing Jed who was chuckling madly.

The laughter coming from them had dragged the three little boys from next door away from the lollies and they had joined in. Tumble had cocked his head at them all and then decided he must be missing out, before joining the end of the line and throwing in the odd soft bark or two for good measure. All the party hats had gone awry and were bobbing at odd angles as they all toddled around. Rick had been snapping pictures and Aurora hoped that he managed to get one of this—it would make a great shot to have blown up for the boys’ twenty-first.

A quick swivel of the head and Aurora could see Orinoco, her Siamese, sitting on top of the dresser, appearing to look down her nose at the shenanigans. The cat regarded them all for a few more moments, before curling herself up and closing her eyes. The corners of Aurora's mouth turned up—when Aurora brought Orinoco out here she may have had to adapt to a new set of circumstances, but she had certainly maintained her high maintenance personality.

Aurora had to suppress a laugh as she watched Fiona pass by the dresser and stop for a moment to give Orinoco's head a scratch. She was glad the two of them had attached themselves to each other. Orinoco had proved to be a good companion for Fiona following the loss of Arthur, and Fiona had been better placed than Aurora, with the new-born twins, to lavish Orinoco with the affection she required. It had turned out to be a win-win situation.

Callan came to stand beside Aurora, casually draping his arm around her waist and drawing her to him before planting a quick kiss on the side of her head. He let out a chuckle of his own as he spoke.

'I can't believe they're one already. Seems like only yesterday they were born.'

Aurora rested against him.

'I can't believe they are one and RUNNING! I am still stunned my babies were up and walking at eight months old.'

She gave a soft laugh before she continued.

'I seem to have been running after them ever since.'

Aurora couldn't believe how fast the last year had passed. It seemed as though every time she turned around the boys were passing another milestone. Here they were having their first birthday party complete with balloons, streamers and side by side connected cakes with two different pictures of Spot the Dog from the boys' favourite story book. The artwork again courtesy of Heather, who had shown her talents at Aurora's baby shower, and had done something to adorn cakes for every major occasion since. Dogs had become the theme for

the party, which made the conga-chase line that was just now breaking up even funnier; the Bilgarra dogs had unwittingly joined the 'doggy' party.

Theresa, grinning madly herself from ear to ear, came to stand on the other side of Aurora.

'I feel like I left this place at the worst possible moment. These guys are hilarious.'

Aurora smiled at the sentiment knowing full well that Theresa hadn't made the decision to leave Bilgarra lightly. Theresa looked a little sadly at Aurora and Callan.

'I would be lying if I said I didn't miss it out here.'

Any reply that any of them would have made was cut off when the two party boys came barrelling across the pavers on their little legs, each one launching themselves at one of Theresa's legs, squealing in delight. She bent down and pulled them both in for a group hug.

'How are my boys?'

She nuzzled underneath each one's neck which resulted in giggles but no real answer. In a fluid movement, she scooped up both boys and planted one on each hip, lowering her head so that she was a little closer to theirs.

'Can you boys keep a secret?'

Two sets of eyes were fixed on her, although neither boy responded. Theresa chuckled and looked at Aurora and Callan.

'They seem so much older than one. Sometimes I forget they're still babies.'

She returned her attention to the boys.

'You're going to have a new little cousin soon. Aunty Tess and Uncle Brad are going to have a baby.'

Liam came out with, 'Bubby,' as Theresa placed a quick kiss on both boys cheeks before placing them on the ground. She looked at him, pointedly ignoring Aurora and Callan, unsure of whether Liam had actually understood what she said it or not. Charlie gave her a grin and bolted.

'That's right, a bubby.'

Liam squealed and took off after Charlie, who was headed for Rough and Tumble again. Theresa flicked her eyes up from watching the twins run away and looked at Callan and Aurora. Callan came around and grabbed Theresa in a crushing bear hug before soundly kissing her on the cheek and if Aurora wasn't mistaken there were tears in his eyes and a slight wobble in his voice when he congratulated her.

'That's wonderful news.'

When Callan let her go, the pair simply looked at each other for a couple of moments before Theresa's tears started flowing. He squeezed her into another hug and murmured against the side of her face.

'Those had better be happy tears.'

Callan let Theresa go and she turned to look at Aurora. The sheer happiness that Aurora could see on Theresa's face caused the tears that had pooled in Aurora's eyes to overflow. In an uncharacteristic act for her, Aurora took the couple of steps necessary to reach Theresa and enveloped her in a hug. Her voice was none too steady when she spoke.

'You must be ecstatic.'

She smiled when she felt Theresa nod against her shoulder. When she let go both women looked at each other and giggled, both trying to discreetly dispose of the tears and get a handle back on their emotions. Theresa's voice was still a little thready when she spoke.

'Look at the pair of us. Happy news and we're both in tears.'

Aurora grinned.

'At least you have pregnancy hormones as an excuse.'

Aurora's words finished with a tiny chuckle. She quickly flicked her attention to the boys, to make sure that they were staying out of trouble before pressing Theresa for all the details, eager to know how something that could only be classed as a minor miracle had happened.

'Obviously I know how it happened, but in the greater scheme of things, how?'

Theresa gave a small shrug of her shoulders.

'Absolutely no idea. Because we'd been told that the chances of us conceiving were virtually impossible, we never worried about contraception. I don't know how and I don't know exactly when, but I can tell you that I am definitely eight weeks pregnant.'

Theresa hesitated for a moment before she continued.

'I do want to ask a favour though, since I am still in the first trimester and anything could go wrong, we aren't telling many people in case it all comes unstuck, so if you wouldn't mind keeping it to yourselves until we get past the twelve week stage I would appreciate it. We just really wanted you two to know...'

Aurora was touched and teared up again.

'Absolutely, no problem at all.'

Callan nodded his agreement. Aurora looked at Theresa again.

'I'm just so happy for the two of you. You do realise that your life will never be the same?'

Theresa gave a tinkly laugh.

'We're happy for the two of us. And yes, things won't ever be the same again. It wasn't something that we had ever anticipated and to have it just pop up like this, just over a year after our marriage is...'

One side of Aurora's mouth turned up as she helped Theresa's loss for words.

'No words for how good it is, is there?'

Theresa grinned madly and shook her head.

'Nope'

At that point they were joined by Trudy and Amy. Trudy eyed the three of them.

'You three look like you're up to no good. You have the same look on your faces that Kate and Harriet get when they are plotting something fun but forbidden.'

Aurora gave a chuckle and decided to deflect the question by turning the attention to Jed.

'No plotting here. Jed looks like he's having a ball.'

Amy smirked.

'Kids, animals and lollies are usually a winning combination.'

As if to reinforce the point, Jed started laughing uncontrollably before spinning circles. Liam and Charlie were trying to imitate him and whilst they had no problem trotting around in general, they were having trouble trying to turn circles on their little legs, which was producing a huge amount of laughter out of the three of them. Their party hats were by this stage sitting more on the backs of their heads than on top and Aurora hoped the points weren't sharp enough to damage any body part they may come in contact with.

She needn't have worried as a few moments later they all took off running around again and both Liam and Charlie were tugging on the elastic under their chin. She didn't think it would be too long before both of them had yanked the little cardboard hats off and disposed of them.

With that thought in mind she turned around to Callan.

'Do you think that we should grab the boys and cut their cakes before they rip the party hats off and before they get too ratty to stand still for a bit?'

Cal nodded.

'Good idea. I'll go grab the boys.'

Trudy looked at Aurora.

'While you round up the troops I'll grab the knives from the kitchen.'

Aurora nodded and watched as Callan strode off and grabbed the boys making loud dinosaur noises as he scooped them up, one under each arm, and carried them kicking and squealing with delight. For some reason the two of them loved being carried like a log on his hip. Personally, Aurora couldn't work out their attraction for that position, it had to be dead uncomfortable, but it seemed to work for them.

Callan handed her Liam, who instantly starting wiggling madly, trying to get back down so that he could run around some more. Aurora briefly wondered what had happened to

the cuddly baby that he used to be. Now he couldn't stand being held and bolted at the first opportunity. Charlie was much the same for that matter. Aurora whispered in his ear.

'How about we cut your cake?'

That stopped the wiggling for a moment or two, which luckily timed with Trudy's return, two knives in hand. She looked at the four of them; the boys looked incredibly keen to be on their way again.

'I brought the matches out with me since I figured you only had a small window of time before the boys would want to be down and off again.'

Aurora smiled her thanks at Trudy's thoughtfulness. Both boys watched as the candles were lit. Rick's voice came out of nowhere.

'Righto, everybody ready to sing Happy Birthday?'

He then launched into the song and one by one everybody else joined in. Liam and Charlie looked at each other before breaking out into huge grins, and not for the first time, Aurora wondered what they were silently communicating to each other.

While they were singing, Trudy handed both Aurora and Callan a beribboned knife. At the end of the song it was Rick who spoke again, this time from in front of the table where the cakes were.

'Ok boys, you ready to blow out the candles.'

He snapped a photo as both boys looked at him. Aurora and Callan then leaned them in to blow the candles out, which they ended up needing a bit of help with, whilst Rick's flash went off a few times. A quick glance at Callan, who nodded and they got ready to cut the cake. Aurora waited until he had the tip of his knife ready and had started to cut before cutting herself. She flicked him a private smile, wondering if he was remembering when they had cut the cake together at their pregnancy congratulatory party before the boys were born.

So much had happened since then. Aurora glanced over at Lisbett and George who were sitting with Fiona. She was still

struggling nearly a year later to comprehend the fact that her grandmother had a sister that she either never knew about, or never acknowledged.

Lisbett and George were great and had welcomed her wholeheartedly into their family. One of their daughters had even come up to meet her which had been fun. As much as she had been absorbed into the Fairley family and the Bilgarra crew as if she had been born here, it was still nice to have blood relations of her own.

Aurora was jolted out of her reverie by Liam's squeals as his patience at being restrained finally ran out. She placed the knife on the table before bending down and releasing Liam to run wild again.

'Alright, off you go.'

She ruffled his hair as he got his footing. Liam didn't even spare her a backward glance as he made for Rough and Tumble, who were doing a not bad job of hiding from the kids out on the grass partially hidden by a shrub.

Aurora cut three slices of cake and took them over to George, Lisbett and Fiona.

'Thought I would save you the trouble of getting up.'

Fiona flashed her a smile.

'Very thoughtful of you love. Thanks.'

Lisbett was eerily similar in personality to Fiona, which was probably why the two of them got on so well, and also why Lisbett and Aurora hit it off as well as they did. Lisbett also thanked Aurora.

'Yes. Thank you so much. These old bones take a bit of moving sometimes.'

Fiona scoffed at that.

'You're hardly old, I must have at least twenty-five years on you.'

Lisbett looked a little chastened.

'That's probably true, but I don't feel young anymore.'

George simply grinned at Aurora and thanked her when she passed him the slice of cake. He was another man of few

words, but what he didn't say tended to be entertaining in its own right. Lisbett returned her attention to Aurora.

'I was just saying to Fiona that it would be lovely if we could convince you Cal and the boys to come and visit us.'

Fiona's face split into a grin from ear to ear.

'I told Lisbett I thought it was a fantastic idea. You and Cal have never really had a holiday away together and we are going on for winter, so there won't be as much work around here. You have my vote for yes.'

Callan chose that moment to walk up to the group.

'Your vote for what, Nan?'

Fiona looked determined when she filled him in on the part of the conversation he had missed.

'Lisbett and George have suggested that you and Aurora and the boys should go and stay with them for a couple of weeks and have a bit of a holiday. And I, for one, think it's a great idea. You two didn't have a honeymoon and you've never really gone away together for any decent length of time. Bilgarra won't grind to a halt without you for a couple of weeks, so I think you should go.'

Callan gave a slight shrug of his shoulders and threw a quick look at Aurora.

'I can't see a problem with that. What do you think?'

A stack of thoughts were buzzing through Aurora's mind. Did she really want to return to the house where she grew up, which she no longer owned? Would the memories that it would be sure to evoke be too hard to cope with? She could feel the weight of four sets of eyes on her and still she hesitated.

Lisbett spoke into the silence.

'There's more than enough room in the house for you all, as you know. Or if you don't want to stay upstairs, there's always the guest suite on the bottom floor. The offer's there. We would love to have you come and stay and it would be great opportunity for you to meet our other daughter, son and both their families.'

Lisbett grinned.

'It may turn out to be a baptism of fire for you, but I know that everybody else is keen to meet you.'

Aurora couldn't help but feel a little bit pressured, but she was also attracted by the chance to meet the rest of her 'new' family and by the opportunity to show Callan around Sydney. Throwing caution to the wind she gave a brief shrug of her shoulders and a small smile to Lisbett and George.

'Ok. Why not? For the boys' sake, I would prefer not to go in the middle of winter, but apart from that, just let me know when suits.¶

Lisbett looked at George who gave her a small nod.

'The whole family will be gathered in early May for Amanda's fortieth birthday celebrations. If that would work for you, you're welcome to come then. Most of us live in and around Sydney, and there's heaps of room. So don't let that worry you.'

George looked at both Aurora and Callan.

'We'd love to have you join us if you'd like to.'

Aurora flicked a quick look at Callan to check if he was okay with that. His reply didn't help with the decision.

'I'm fine with that if you are.'

Aurora took a deep breath.

'Okay then, I guess we're coming down in two weeks time.'

George's face lit up with the news and Lisbett clapped her hands together in excitement.

'That's fantastic. I can't wait to tell everybody. They're going to be as excited as I am.'

Fiona was grinning from ear to ear.

'Excellent. About time you two took some time out to enjoy yourselves together.'

Callan grinned madly.

'I won't know what to do with myself. I'm not used to relaxing. Like now. Sorry gotta go rescue a kid.'

With those last words Callan strode away from the group to cut off Liam and Charlie and the group of kids with them.

They were headed towards the side horse paddock and whilst Cal knew that Slurp and Flirt wouldn't worry too much about Liam and Charlie, he wasn't too sure how they would react to a gaggle of kids with a couple of dogs thrown in.

Aurora shook her head as she watched him. They couldn't keep Liam and Charlie away from the horses usually, which given that they were one of their birthday gifts was a good thing, but in this instance she had to agree with Cal, the noisy group may be a bit too much for them. The twin foals were the result of the first breeding with the new stallion that had arrived on Aurora's first visit. Since live twin foals were incredibly rare, Cal had decided that it would be fitting to give them to the boys for their birthday.

Luckily Slurp and Flirt were incredibly quiet under normal circumstances. Callan was working with them and they weren't ready to be ridden just yet, which suited her just fine, since she wasn't ready to put her babies on them yet either. She trusted Callan's judgement implicitly when it came to horses, and they'd been on top of one with him, but she still couldn't imagine putting the boys up on their own, even when they were older and the horses ready.

Aurora let out a sigh. Her babies were growing up and whilst she had put baby blue streamers, plates and balloons everywhere, she was well aware that her babies weren't really babies anymore. They'd lost interest in feeding from her not too long ago, which if she were being honest with herself she had been doing more for her benefit than theirs anyway, and at the moment, they didn't want to be cuddled and kissed anymore either. Her cuddly babies had become little boys now. The 'baby' stage was over, which caused her a small pang. She cast her eyes around the group until she found Theresa, wondering whether all going well, she was going to have a girl or a boy of her own.