



THE INVITATION

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Clementine Rose stood on her tippy-toes with her arms around her mother's waist. The woman leaned down and kissed the top of the child's golden head.

'Have a wonderful day,' Lady Clarissa said to her daughter.

'I will.' Clemmie let go and ran to the basket near the stove where Lavender, her teacup pig, and Pharaoh, Aunt Violet's sphynx cat, were snuggled together. She knelt down and pressed

her face between them. Pharaoh's sandpaper tongue shot out and licked Clementine's cheek.

'That tickles, Pharaoh,' she giggled.

Lavender grunted, then closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

'Run along, Clemmie. You don't want to keep Uncle Digby waiting,' her mother instructed, then turned and headed up the back stairs. She was on her way to check that all of the bedrooms were made up, ready for the full house they were expecting on the weekend. It would be the first time since Lady Clarissa had opened Penberthy House to paying guests that every single room was booked.

Clementine wriggled into her coat and threw her backpack on her shoulders. 'Bye Mummy.' She sped towards the entrance hall.

She glanced up at the portraits of her grandparents on the wall as she flung open the front door. 'By Granny and Grandpa.'

Clementine hadn't noticed Aunt Violet standing on the third-floor landing.

'Does she really think you could care less,

Edmund?’ the woman said as she peered at the painting of her brother. She didn’t hear Lady Clarissa approach.

‘Who are you talking to, Aunt Violet?’ asked the younger woman.

‘No one!’ Aunt Violet snapped. ‘You must be hearing things, Clarissa.’

Her niece grinned. ‘Has Clementine got you talking to the relatives too?’

‘Oh, don’t be ridiculous. The child clearly lives in fairyland,’ Aunt Violet said with a huff. ‘I was not talking to my brother or anyone else, for that matter.’

‘Well, there’s no harm in it, I’m sure,’ Clarissa replied. ‘Clementine seems to get on rather well with all of them.’

‘What a load of tripe.’ Violet harrumphed and strode off towards the bathroom.

Meanwhile, Clementine Rose had met Uncle Digby and clambered into the car. The pair chatted away as they always did on the short run from Penberthy Floss to the school in Highton Mill.

The little car sputtered down the lane, which was lined on both sides by low stone walls. They soon stopped outside Ellery Prep's ornate gates and pretty hedge. Clementine leaned through the gap in the seats and kissed Uncle Digby's cheek.

He turned and grinned at her. 'Have a good day, Clemmie.'

'I will.' She hopped out of the car and ran to join Sophie, who had just arrived too.

Uncle Digby rolled down the top of his window. 'Good morning, Pierre.' His warm breath fogged up the cold glass as he called to Sophie's father, whose van was idling on the other side of the road.

'Good morning, Monsieur Digby. Please tell Lady Clarissa that the cake is almost finished and it looks beautiful.' He squeezed his forefinger and thumb together and kissed them.

'Good job, Pierre. I might pop around to the shop and have a quick look.' Uncle Digby winked. 'Just so I can put her mind at ease and let her know that it's perfect.'

‘Ah, I think the cream buns will be ready too,’ Pierre replied. ‘I have some deliveries to make but Odette is there.’

Digby waved goodbye and eased the little car onto the road. He could have walked the short distance to the shop but the wind was chilly and he hadn’t been feeling quite himself the past couple of days. He didn’t want to get sick before the weekend. Lady Clarissa would have too many guests to manage without his help.

Clementine and Sophie bounded across the playground and straight to the classroom to drop off their bags. Poppy was already there talking with Astrid, the cleverest girl in the class. If anyone could be relied upon to know the answer to a difficult question it was her.

The girls greeted one another and decided to play hopscotch before the bell.

‘Are you going to Angus’s party?’ Poppy asked the group as she threw a cold stone onto the asphalt.

Sophie and Astrid nodded. Clementine’s



tummy twinged and she wondered what they were talking about.

‘I don’t really want to but Mummy says that it’s unkind not to go, especially since he wrote the invitation himself and even put it in the mail,’ Sophie explained. ‘What about you, Clementine?’

‘I didn’t get invited,’ she replied, frowning.

‘Maybe the postman is running late at your house. My invitation only came yesterday,’ Astrid offered.

Clementine nodded. That seemed reasonable enough. They didn’t have the mail delivered every day. Her mother or Uncle Digby had to go to Mrs Mogg’s store to collect it.

Angus and Joshua raced past the girls.

‘You’d better get me good presents,’ Angus called. ‘Otherwise I’ll tie you up and feed you to the dragon.’

‘Yeah, you’d better,’ Joshua yelled. ‘His dragon is really mean.’

Clementine wrinkled her nose. ‘I bet his dragon is bossy too, just like him and his Nan.’

Sophie looked at Clementine and coughed loudly.

Mrs Bottomley was standing right behind the group. ‘What was that, young lady?’

The child spun around.

‘Nothing, Mrs Bottomley,’ Clementine lied. As the teacher also happened to be Angus’s nan, Clementine hoped she hadn’t heard her.

‘I’ll have you know that my daughter is going to a lot of trouble for this party. Even though I told her it was a ridiculous idea to have it after school, when the children will be tired and grumpy. I’ve been asked to make the cake, which I trust will not be eaten by some ghastly cat this time.’ Mrs Bottomley was referring to the last sponge cake she’d made, which had been nibbled by Aunt Violet’s cat, Pharaoh, at the pet day and then completely ruined when Mrs Bottomley fell into it. ‘I suggested that she leave some of the students who might not be able to behave themselves properly off the guest list.’

Mrs Bottomley arched her eyebrow at Clementine and walked away.

Clementine felt another twinge in her tummy. What if she really wasn't invited? Did Mrs Bottomley think she couldn't be trusted at a birthday party? That wasn't true at all. There were plenty of other kids in the class who were naughty – Joshua, for a start. He was always in trouble, especially with Miss Critchley, the head teacher.

Sophie pulled a face. 'She's so mean.'

'Don't worry, Clementine. If you're not invited I'll tell Mummy I don't want to go either,' Poppy said.

'I don't want to go to Angus's stupid party anyway,' Clementine declared.

But that wasn't true at all. By morning tea time Clementine had learned that the whole class had been invited. Every – single – one. Except her. There was even a dress-up theme: kings and queens, princes and princesses. Angus said that he was only having the queens and princesses so that the kings and princes

could capture them and feed them to the dragon that lived in the cave at the bottom of his garden. Astrid said that was rubbish because everyone knew dragons weren't real. Clementine wasn't so sure but she hoped Astrid was right.

Clementine loved to dress up. She even had the perfect outfit, which Mrs Mogg had made for Clemmie's own princess party the year before. It was a pink gown with lace, and a hooped skirt underneath to make it stick out, just like a proper princess dress. She had a silver tiara with pink stones in it and her mother had found a long pearl necklace and a pearl bracelet in one of the trunks in the attic. Deep down, Clementine hoped that when she got home that afternoon, the invitation had arrived.