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THE PRINCE'S PROPOSAL

Sophie Weston



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The Prince's Proposal

«HarperCollins»

Weston S.

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Conrad Domitio likes to keep his title of Crown Prince of Montessuro a secret. After all, it doesn't affect his life in England. Or at least not until his grandfather calls to say his country needs him—and that he'd better bring a bride! Francesca is shocked by Conrad's sudden proposal. She doubts she's princess material: she's never worn a tiara in her life! But though she's reluctant to be royal, she wouldn't mind being married to gorgeous Conrad! Even if it's only pretend—for now....

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“Ordinary couple? Who are you kidding? We aren’t ordinary. And we aren’t a couple!” Francesca exclaimed.

This did not phase Conrad one bit. “We could be. And nobody’s ordinary if you think about it. All you have to do is come with me to official functions. There’s about three in the rest of the year. I’ll let you have some notes nearer the time.”

“Great. Parties with briefing notes,” muttered Francesca. “You’re sure that’s all I have to do?”

“Anything else is entirely up to you.”

Born in London, U.K., Sophie Weston is a traveler by nature who started writing when she was five. She wrote her first romance while recovering from illness, thinking her traveling was over. She was wrong, but she enjoyed it so much that she has carried on. These days she lives in the heart of the city with two demanding cats and a cherry tree—and travels the world looking for settings for her stories.

Sophie Weston’s novels are well-known for whisking the reader away to exciting exotic locations. And the sparks are guaranteed to fly when her lively, contemporary heroines take on men of the world!

Readers are invited to visit Sophie Weston’s Web site at www.sophie-weston.com.

Look out for The Bedroom Assignment (#3725) by Sophie Weston

Books by Sophie Weston

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3687—THE BRIDESMAID'S SECRET ([linked 2 of 2](#))

The Prince's Proposal

Sophie Weston



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CHAPTER ONE

‘TODAY,’ said Francesca Heller forcefully, ‘has been the worst day of my life.’

She was still rather pale. But, being Francesca, she was already fighting back. Jazz decided that the fight needed support.

‘Sure it was. So now you show Barry de la Touche that he can’t get you down. What better way than to go out and have a good time?’

Francesca looked at her in disbelief. ‘You can’t expect me to go to a party after that.’

Jazz shook her marvellous head of tiny black plaits and refused to back down.

‘Yes, I do. You’re a professional bookseller now. You go to a publisher’s party if it kills you.’

Francesca glared. Jazz was tall, black and gorgeous but Francesca had a glare that would cut steel when she put her mind to it.

Francesca was not tall. She was small and slim with ordinary brown hair and an ordinary, pleasant face. ‘Invisible in a crowd,’ said Francesca’s elegant mother with resignation, and Francesca agreed.

But they both underestimated the impact of her eyes. They were huge, wide-spaced and golden brown, fringed with long, sooty lashes. And they spoke. Whatever Francesca might say she was feeling, you could see the truth of it in those toffee-brown eyes. Even masked, as they normally were, by big-framed glasses.

Currently she was feeling put-upon. But Jazz Allen was her partner in London’s newest independent bookshop, The Buzz. Jazz knew what she was talking about.

‘You’re not serious,’ Francesca said. But without much hope.

‘Yes, I am.’

Jazz unwound her long legs from the top of the ladder from which she had been restocking ‘Crime, authors F to G,’ and slid to the ground.

‘But you were here,’ said Francesca in despair. ‘You saw.’

Jazz grinned. ‘Your father’s got a temper on him,’ she said with relish. ‘So?’

Francesca stared at her. Jazz had the reputation of being tough. But this was armour-plated.

‘Hello?’ she said. ‘We didn’t split off onto different planets this afternoon, did we? You did see my father walk in and demolish the man I thought I was going to marry?’

‘I saw your father lob a few firecrackers,’ said Jazz serenely. ‘But you were never going to marry that twerp.’

Francesca shook her head. She had not confided in Jazz but when she left home that morning she had made up her mind to accept Barry’s proposal.

She said desolately, ‘I meant to.’

They were supposed to be going out to dinner at one of their favourite restaurants this evening. Francesca had been fondly imagining the candlelit scene. She had even cast the Italian owner to bring out champagne and his concertina while all the other diners applauded. And Barry de la Touche would take her hand, hook her glasses off her nose and look straight into her eyes, in that way he had.

‘My bird,’ he would have said. And then, ‘We were meant for each other.’

But that was this morning’s fantasy. And then her father had walked in.

It had been one of Barry’s days for working in the stock room. He and Peter Heller had come face to face. Barry, as she could have foretold, was completely outgunned. Peter Heller had been a fifteen-year-old entrepreneur when he escaped from Montassurro. He had survived, and ended up a multimillionaire, by ferreting out his opponents’ weaknesses. Then going for the jugular. Barry didn’t have a chance.

Her father had produced a string of offences—petty-criminal convictions, a dubious name change, even old school reports. And pointed out that Barry had only started his heavily romantic campaign after he had researched her wealth on the net.

Francesca had not believed him. Well, not at first. But then Peter Heller had announced that he was disinheriting her and Barry's romantic attachment dissolved. Fast. Taking with it a whole raft of Francesca's dreams and most of her self-respect.

But no one would believe that, of course. Everyone thought Francesca was such a fighter.

Now Jazz was bracing. 'You would have thought better of it eventually. There was nothing to Barry, after all. Just Bambi eyelashes and a good story.'

After the scene when her father had flung his accusations at Barry, Francesca could not really take issue with that. She bit her lip.

'Why didn't I see that?'

'You did really,' said Jazz comfortingly. 'Your father may have done the research. But the demolition was strictly down to you.'

Francesca's eloquent eyes widened and widened. She sat down rather hard.

'Think about it,' advised Jazz, seizing a pile of new stock and leaping nimbly up her ladder again to 'Crime, authors H to J'.

Francesca stared blindly at a pile of giraffe-shaped bookmarks that complemented the latest toddlers' book.

She had stood up to her father. She had linked her arm through Barry's and defied Peter Heller for the manipulative, money-grubbing troglodyte that he was. Only Barry was having none of it.

'My bird,' he said tenderly. He drew the glasses off her nose and slid them into his pocket, one of his more charming little tricks, Francesca always thought. It had cost her a fortune in replacement glasses, which she now had strewn about his flat and hers. 'I can't do this to you.'

He kissed her forehead. It was clearly meant to be a gallant renunciation.

Peter Heller snorted. Francesca felt sick.

Without her glasses Francesca could only see a blur. 'We're both young. Healthy. Why do we need my father's money? We can work,' she said in a level voice. 'I don't care what you've done in the past. I'll stand by you. We can make it together—'

And that was the point when Barry turned on her, all charm wiped. She couldn't see him properly. But she could feel it in the jagged movement; hear it.

'No, we can't.'

Peter was delighted. He snapped his fingers. 'Aha!'

Francesca ignored him. She said to the Barry-shaped shadow lowering over her, 'I don't need money—'

'But I do.' It was a cry almost of anguish. 'Don't you understand? I've done my time wondering where the next meal is coming from. I'm never going back to that.'

Francesca said nothing.

'Goodbye, Mr Trott,' said Peter. That was Barry's real name. Not de la Touche, after all.

Francesca ignored him. 'You mean you don't think I can afford you,' she said to Barry. Even to herself her voice sounded odd.

'That old bastard has just made sure of that.'

That was when she gave up. That was when she realised this was the end. And this was the worst day of her life.

She gave a little laugh that broke in the middle. 'Yes, I suppose he has.' She held out her hand politely, in the general direction of his voice. 'Goodbye, Barry.'

She was less polite to her father.

And then she went off to the stock room and sought out her absolutely last pair of emergency glasses.

They were in the first-aid box. Their loose arm had been taped up with whatever had come to hand. It looked as if it had been a plaster originally, though it was difficult to tell. It had turned grey in the first-aid box and was fraying elastic bobbles by now. It kept catching on her hair, making her eyes water. That had to be what it was. Francesca, after all, never cried. As her mother always said, she was too like her father to cry.

So now Francesca blinked hard and said to the witch on the ladder, 'What do you mean—the demolition was down to me?'

Jazz looked down at her affectionately. 'Because you didn't tell Barry that you are rich in your own right.'

Francesca jumped. 'What do you mean?'

'Have you forgotten? You told me. When we were first talking about you coming into business I told you I was worried about asking anyone to invest in The Buzz who couldn't afford to lose money. I believe in it—but I could be wrong. And anyway it will take a long time to make a reasonable return on the investment. Let alone get its money back. And you said, "My father settled a lot of money on me when I was a teenager. It's mine. I can do what I like with it." So I said, OK, then, let's go for it. Don't you remember?'

Francesca swallowed. 'Yes. Yes, I do now. I see.'

'So when you said Peter couldn't disinherit you, that was the literal truth, wasn't it? He's already handed over your inheritance. Why didn't you explain that to Barry?'

'I—tried.'

'No, you didn't,' said Jazz shrewdly. 'You wanted to know too. Didn't you, Franny?'

'Know?'

'Whether the money was important to him or not.'

Francesca flinched. But she was a woman who faced the truth, however unpleasant. Truth was important. 'I suppose so.'

'See? You weren't completely taken in. You had your doubts, like the sensible woman you are.'

'Sensible, unattractive woman,' muttered Francesca.

'You would never have married that idiot—' Jazz did a double take. 'What?'

Francesca made a clumsy gesture. 'Every man who has ever been interested in me was either dazzled by my mother's title or my father's millions.' Truth had taken hold with a vengeance. 'When they managed to focus on me long enough to see what was really on offer they all backed off.'

Jazz was shocked, as much by the resignation in her voice as what she had actually said.

'Nonsense,' she said.

It was just ten seconds too late. Francesca smiled wearily.

'You don't know the disasters I've had, Jazz.'

'Haven't we all? It's called growing up.'

'By twenty-three I should have cracked that one,' Francesca said drily. 'No, I've got a bit missing when it comes to understanding people. Figures, fine. I can do sums standing on my head. Facts, great. I can remember them and I don't muddle easily. But people! I'm hopeless and I always have been.'

Jazz could not think of anything to say.

Francesca stood up and squared her shoulders. She even managed a lopsided smile.

'So that means I'd better concentrate on a career, right? So lead me to this damned party.'

Conrad Domitio shook his head at the hundredth canapé and thought wistfully about fresh air.

'How long will this go on?' he yelled at the publicity assistant.

She stepped a little closer to the tanned god in front of her. Tall, hazel-eyed, with an athlete's frame and philosopher's formidable brow, Conrad Domitio had everything. Even his voice was sexy. It made her shiver in spite of the competition from a heavy drumbeat. Her and every other woman at Gavron and Blake, his publishers. Probably every other woman in the room, now she came to think about it.

‘Another hour,’ she yelled back.

She knew, of course, that it would be longer than that. But Conrad Domitio was impatient with publicity. In her dealings with him she had learned to undersell the full extent of their campaign. So she was not telling him that tonight, after the party, she was under strict instructions to bring him to dinner with the girls. After all, he was not only a hero and handsome as hell, he was a prince. A prince.

The publicity department had hardly believed their luck when they found out. ‘He’s a heck of a good writer, too,’ his editor had reminded them. But they had waved that aside. They knew what was important in selling books. And *Ash on the Wind* was going to be their spring number-one seller. She could feel it in her bones.

‘An hour?’ Conrad looked at his watch. He could take an hour. Just. ‘OK.’

It would not be so bad if the walls were not plastered with huge photographs of him, looking like a movie star, he thought. He had never wanted to have those photographs taken. To be honest, he had not really wanted to write the book at all. But the expedition’s photographer had taken some amazing footage of the erupting volcano and even more telling photographs of the escaping crater party. Always fair, Conrad acknowledged that they deserved a book. Conrad, an inveterate diarist, had more than half of the story already written.

So he had agreed. He did not regret it. He was even quite proud of the book now that it was done. But he was unprepared for the circus that the publishers seemed to fancy.

So far they had come up with wheezes guaranteed to strike cold horror into the heart of a serious seismologist who wanted to work again. Tonight’s publicity handout, for example. It made him sound like an ego-driven control freak. That or a comic-book super-hero. Conrad shuddered inwardly and told himself that he could get through an hour of anything if he had to. And the profits from the book were going to a really good cause.

Which was why, nine months after he had led six weary men out of the dust-filled darkness of the erupting volcano, they were standing here drinking Gavron and Blake’s cabernet sauvignon surrounded by six-foot-high photographs of steaming mountains and multi-eyed grasshoppers. The lighting was halfway between a disco and a forest thunderstorm, and the music was frankly jungle drums along the river. There were tables piled with copies of glossy books, *Ash on the Wind*, among them, but it would take infrared binoculars to find them, as Conrad had already pointed out.

He looked at his watch again. He could just about see it in the gloom.

‘What do you want me to do?’ he asked the publicity assistant.

She waved a hand at the seething, chattering crowd. ‘Circulate. Circulate.’

Conrad’s mouth twitched. For a moment there, she sounded just like his grandfather, ex-King Felix of Montassurro. He did not say so. Instead he gave one of his expressive shrugs.

‘The sooner we’ve spread the word, the sooner I can get my train back to normality, I suppose,’ he said with resignation. ‘You go that way, I’ll go this.’

They turned their backs on each other and he plunged back into the cavernous lighting to do his duty.

The disco lighting shook Francesca out of her shell-shock. Well, a little.

‘I should have changed,’ she said, watching a woman in a strappy silver top flit past, waving.

Jazz grinned after the woman. ‘Party organiser,’ she diagnosed. ‘Don’t worry about it. Half the people here will have come straight from work like us. The only people in combat gear will be authors and the younger editors.’ She surveyed Francesca and made an unwelcome discovery. ‘Oh, no. Not the first-aid-box glasses.’

Francesca was defiant. ‘They’re all I could find.’

Jazz held out her hand. ‘Give them here.’

‘But I’m as blind as a bat without them. You don’t know what it’s like to be as short-sighted as I am.’

'I'll read the instructions to you,' said Jazz without sympathy. 'Try to get a drink and not bump into the furniture. That's all you need tonight. Get a business card off anyone who sounds worth following up.'

'But—'

'No serious businesswoman is going to work a room like this with bandaged glasses.' And, as Francesca muttered rebelliously, 'You're going all out for the career, remember?'

'I'd still like to be able to see.'

'No,' said Jazz with finality. 'You're representing The Buzz tonight. We're hip. We're cool. Bandaged glasses aren't.'

Francesca gave in and surrendered her glasses. Jazz picked up a glossy bag and handed it to her.

'Publicity handouts and party favours. Take what you want. Lose the rest.'

Francesca was rueful. 'I've got a lot to learn.'

Jazz was already flicking through the bag's contents. 'Chocolates,' she said with satisfaction. 'Keep them. Party programme. Need that. Now, what books have we? Spot the Whale. Nah. Five Thousand Years of Refuse. The definitive story of trash by Professor Somebody. That will pull the punters in. Not. Ash on the Wind. Two authors. I don't like that. Still, they both look quite tasty. Let's see.'

Francesca knew it was hopeless to try and read anything without her glasses. In that dark party room she was going to do quite well if she managed not to walk into something.

'I'm going to be a hazard to shipping tonight,' she said drily. 'Curse all serious businesswomen and their image problems.'

But Jazz was not paying attention.

'Hey. Look at this,' she said excitedly. She stuffed a shiny sheet into Francesca's hand, scanning the entrance hall avidly.

Francesca squinted at a moody black and white photograph. There seemed to be a face in there somewhere. She gave it back. 'Sorry.'

'He's yummy,' said Jazz, seizing the handout impatiently. 'But he's a lot more than that. Listen.'

She read the publicity blurb aloud.

"Conrad Domitio is one of the best seismologists of the age. But he is not a vulcanologist. When he went along on Professor Roy Blackland's expedition to Salaman Kao it was his first venture into a volcano's crater."

'Oh, not another volcano book!'

'Listen,' said Jazz, rapidly skimming the handout. 'This is the good bit.'

"For Conrad Domitio is also known as Crown Prince Conrad of Montassurro. He is heir to his grandfather, the seventy-five-year-old ex-King Felix. Felix himself fled to London via Italy, having spent his teenage years fighting assorted invaders from the Domitios' impregnable fortress in the mountains. Ex-King Felix has no doubts. 'My grandson is a born leader,' he says.

"To Conrad Domitio himself the answer is simple. 'I was doing everything by the book because I was new,' he said. 'The others were just too used to the conditions. But I'd only just finished reading up everything about volcano eruptions. So I still remembered the Idiots' Survival Guide.'

"Six men are alive today because he did. This is their story."

She looked up.

'Montassurro?' said Francesca. She pulled a face.

Jazz ignored that. 'Body of Apollo, and he saves lives too,' she said with relish. 'Cool, huh?'

Francesca shrugged. 'I should think he took charge because he expects people to jump when he says jump. They were a hard lot, the Montassurran royals.' She did a double take. 'How do you know what sort of body he has?'

'I looked,' said Jazz calmly. 'He's over there. Tall guy, navy shirt, buns to die for. You're probably the only woman here who didn't clock him the moment she got here.'

Francesca flung up her hands in a gesture of surrender. 'All right. All right. I'm sorry about the glasses. What else can I say?'

'It's not just the way he looks,' said Jazz throatily. She cast a languorous look across the room. 'I want him. Get him for me.'

Francesca shook her short brown hair vigorously. 'Get him yourself,' she retorted. 'What am I? A retriever?'

'You're the one in charge of book signings and evening talks,' pointed out Jazz smugly. 'And this is your subject. Go and make him an offer he can't refuse. The man's a dish.'

Francesca gave her a wicked grin. 'Dishes are your department. I just do figures and boring science books. And I can't even see the man.'

'At least that means you'll keep your hands off him. By the look of it, that will have rarity appeal tonight,' said Jazz drily.

Francesca tried not to wince. 'You want him, you do the luring,' she said firmly.

Jazz laughed aloud and stopped smouldering in the man's direction. 'I wish. That man is going to be hot, hot, hot. The publishers wouldn't be interested in a new independent like us. They'll concentrate on the big book chains.'

'Well, he doesn't have to do everything exactly as his publisher says, does he?' demanded Francesca, revolted. 'Is he a man or a mouse?'

'He's a writer who wants to sell his book,' said Jazz practically. 'If the publisher's PR people tell him to paint himself green and juggle babies, he'll do it. He wouldn't look at us. It's hopeless.'

Francesca was not a pushy person. But she was sufficiently her father's daughter to dislike being told anything was hopeless. And Barry had dented her ego as well as her heart.

Well, there was not much she could do about a broken heart, she thought. It would just have to heal in its own time. But all the ego needed was to go all out for something—and get it, of course. Tonight was not her night for being a good loser.

'Oh, won't he?' she said militantly.

Jazz watched with well-disguised satisfaction as she plunged into the crowd in the general direction of the Crown Prince of Montassurro. Even without her glasses, there was a reasonable chance that she would connect with him, thought Jazz. Three months of working together had taught her that Francesca on a mission was nearly unstoppable. She smiled, well-pleased with her strategy.

Francesca set off on a spurt of pure adrenalin. It took barely three steps for it to wear off.

She was too small for this sort of crowd, she thought wryly. She tried to suppress the urge to keep jumping for air. It felt as if everyone was twice as tall as she was. Taller and more confident and a whole lot more knowledgeable. And all talking over the top of her head.

'So what else is new?' muttered Francesca, unheard. She pinned on a bright, impervious smile.

Exit adrenalin. Enter pure will power. I can do this thing. And then maybe, just maybe, this won't be the worse day of my life after all.

She plunged into the drum-filled darkness.

It was like searching for extraterrestrial intelligence. Of those that managed to hear her shouted enquiry, no one knew where Conrad Domitio was, even if they recognised the name. Most of them were having too good a time even to pretend that they were interested.

Francesca cursed all crown princes and paused to take stock.

Then, 'Did you say Domitio?' said a tall man behind her.

She swung round. And had to look up. And up.

It was too dark to make out much, of course, even if she had not been missing her glasses. But she had the overwhelming impression of strength. More than strength.

She blinked and said in a little confusion, 'Yes. Do you know him?'

The man hesitated.

Francesca tried to focus her eyes. It was hopeless. But there was something about the man that made her really want to see him. Ridiculous, of course.

She shook her head and said with determined practicality, 'Because if you do I really want to talk to him.'

The man bent towards her. 'What?'

She caught a hint of some outdoorsy smell, cedar or wood smoke, faint as a half-forgotten memory. And as powerful. She was taken aback. When had she last noticed a stranger's scent? It made her feel somehow feral, animal in a way she did not quite like.

He took her elbow. 'Let's go somewhere where we can hear ourselves talk.'

He took her out onto a small balcony. The dark, seething room fell away like a suffocating cape. It was raining but an awning kept the worst of it off them. And he turned her towards him.

An impression of strength? She must have been out of her mind. This man had more than strength. He was like rock. Warm, magnetised rock. And he knocked all the breath out of her just by being there. Something inside began to vibrate, imperceptibly, in response to that magnetism.

'Cold?' he asked.

Francesca shook her head. She did not trust herself to speak.

His voice sent little trickles of awareness up and down her spine. It startled her. She did not usually react to complete strangers with that sort of physical response.

This is rebound time. Barry's gone and you haven't had time to find your feet. Don't do anything stupid.

He pushed the glass door shut behind them. The party noise modified somewhat. The drum throb stayed. So did the abrasive guitars. But the conversation died down to a background hum.

Even without her glasses, she could make out the way he moved. It was slow, smooth as oiled machinery, almost lazy. And yet there was such purpose there. Yes, definitely an outdoors man, she decided.

And then he turned and said, 'So why are you looking for Conrad Domitio?'

And she felt as if she had walked into a wall.

She stared up at him. Wishing she were taller. Wishing like mad that she was wearing her glasses and the dark features were more than a blur. Wishing that she could be calm. For some reason the adrenalin seemed to be back in charge again. It was making her pulses gallop crazily.

The bright, impervious smile wavered. 'I—I want to invite him to a book signing,' she said literally, shaken.

'A book-signing?' He sounded lazy.

So why didn't he feel lazy? He felt watchful and wary. It was as if there he was, watching and criticising and formulating acute observations right here and now in his head. He was just not going to share them with anyone. It was unsettling. And very, very sexy.

If only I could see his face properly. I'm getting new glasses first thing tomorrow.

'Er—yes.' Francesca made valiant attempts to pull herself together. Except for a slight ringing in the ears she managed it, too. 'I'm a bookseller.'

She realised quite suddenly that it was the first time she had said it. It felt good. She stood taller and her pulses slowed a little.

'Rather a new bookseller. I bought into an independent bookshop a few months ago.'

'So you're trying to prove your mettle,' he said thoughtfully.

That hadn't occurred to her. 'I suppose so.'

'Is it fun?' He sounded genuinely interested.

She widened her eyes at him. It did not make her see any better but at least it hid the fact that she was as blind as a bat.

'So far.'

‘You’re very cautious.’ He was so close that she could hear the smile in his voice, in spite of the heavy rock beat in the room behind them.

A laugh was surprised out of Francesca. She grinned up at him. ‘OK. So far it’s a blast. How’s that?’

There was an odd pause. She had the impression that he had suddenly become very intent. The temptation to wrinkle up her eyes to bring him into focus was almost overwhelming. I will not squint, she told herself fiercely.

‘Much more encouraging.’

Someone tried to slide the door open. He shifted, so that he blocked their way out onto the balcony. There was a muttered apology and the door went back into place.

Of course, she couldn’t be absolutely sure, not without being able to see his expression. But it felt as if he wanted to talk to her alone. As if he was uninterested in everyone else. And was making sure that nobody gatecrashed their tête-à-tête.

Oh, wow, thought Francesca.

And then caught herself. That was the woman who had just been dumped speaking, right? She was much too mature to get excited because a man backed her into a corner at a party. Even if it was on a balcony under the stars.

‘Where is this bookshop of yours?’

‘A funny little side-street near the river in Fulham. Our shop was originally a couple of Victorian cottages. Behind the gasworks. You turn left off the King’s Road travelling west...’

She gave him precise directions because that was the way she worked. Francesca was nothing if not spot-on accurate. It seemed to amuse him.

He laughed. ‘You’re not a map-maker, by any chance?’

‘I like to get things clear,’ she said, slightly shamefaced. ‘Sorry.’

‘Don’t be. It’s very useful. I could do with you on my team sometimes. You have no idea the number of people who think that getting you to roughly the right area is good enough.’

Francesca thought of the photographs of mountains and waterfalls she had seen in the entrance area before Jazz confiscated her glasses.

‘Are you a geographer?’

‘Sort of.’

She clocked the evasion and wondered about it. Was he a rival bookseller trying to tease out her secrets? But what would be the point of that, when he knew she had only been in the field for a few months? She was hardly a candidate for industrial espionage yet. Now, if it had been Jazz—She remembered her self-appointed task.

‘Of course, when I say book-signing, I mean more than that really. We are really building a customer community at The Buzz. Evening events, readings, talks, that sort of thing. People are actually phoning us up and asking when the next one is. We might even do something like this. Oh, not the disco atmosphere. But promoting several books on related subjects. It’s a great idea!’

She was babbling. She knew it. But she didn’t know why. Sure, he was tall but then so was nearly everyone here by her standards. She did not normally find tall people intimidating.

And he wasn’t intimidating exactly. Just—well—compelling. There was a quality in his silence that made her talk, too much and too loudly. And all the time she could feel him looking at her, as if there was something going on in his mind that he was not going to tell her about.

Boy, I get perceptive when I haven’t got my glasses.

She cleared her throat and said more rationally, ‘And what are you doing here?’

She sensed that he made his mind up about something.

‘Oh, I’m one of the performing fleas,’ he drawled.

She did not think she had heard him aright. ‘What?’

'I'm singing for my supper. Or I will be when I'm trotted out to meet the Press in a few minutes' time.'

'Oh, you're a writer,' she said, relieved.

'That's not how I'd put it,' the tall man said ruefully. 'I just got caught by a predatory photographer when I was too weak to say no.'

'Really?' Francesca was sceptical. She did not think this man was ever weak.

He laughed. 'You must have seen the pictures when you came in. Ten-foot-high volcanic eruptions and a leaping wolf that makes everyone take two steps backwards.'

'I missed the wolf,' she admitted.

'Just as well. Nightmare stuff.'

She couldn't imagine him having nightmares either. She did not say so.

Instead she said curiously, 'You sound as if you disapprove.'

'Me? Hey, what have I got to disapprove of? I've written one of the things. I don't have to endorse each and every one.'

She did not believe the disclaimer. 'But...?' she prompted.

'You're sharp, aren't you?' He sounded faintly put out. 'OK, I admit it. I'm not that keen on coffee-table books. I never expected to find myself contributing to one.'

'So why did you?'

'Phew. Sharp and to the point.' No doubt about it, this time he was seriously taken aback. Then he decided to be amused. She sensed it even before he said, 'They offered me a lot of money. OK? Interrogation over?'

'Interrogation over,' she said. But she could not quite get rid of a feeling of disappointment. She would not have expected this man to be persuaded to do something he did not want to just because someone offered him a lot of money, somehow.

'Now you're the one who sounds disapproving,' he said acutely.

Francesca shifted her shoulders uncomfortably. 'It's easy to be puritanical about money when you have enough, I know.'

He looked down at her and she could almost feel that undercurrent of a commentary she could not hear.

'That's very broad-minded of you.' There was an edge to his voice.

She hurried to change the subject. 'And I'm sure your book will be a success. People lap these picture books up for presents. Especially if they're by a blonde in a wetsuit. Or a royal prince, I suppose.'

'Prince?'

'Yes. That's why I wanted to talk to Conrad Domitio. I see from their handout that they've managed to get him to do some Boys' Own adventure.'

There was a long, long pause.

'Ah. So that's why you wanted to find him.' He sounded more than disapproving. He sounded downright hostile.

For a moment a faint suspicion occurred to her. But she dismissed it at once. This was no prince, this tall, rangy man with his backwoodsman's prowl and his slow drawl. Besides, all the Montassurrans she knew were small and dark like her father.

'Well, he's an ex-prince, to be honest. But it seems to impress some people,' she said, thinking of the normally cool Jazz's reaction.

'Some people but not you.'

Francesca gave a hiccup of laughter. 'No, not me. But then, I'm a special case.'

'Yeah? No princes need apply?'

She laughed aloud at that. 'I'm not a rabid anti-monarchist, if that's what you mean. I just happen to know a bit about this particular monarchy.'

‘Really?’ The drawl was even slower than before. And profoundly sceptical.

It flicked her on the raw. She straightened smartly.

‘The Crown Prince of Montassurro,’ announced Francesca, back in precision-detail mode, ‘is pretend royalty from an obscure bit of the Balkans. Couple of mountains, couple of trout streams which they call rivers. Not so much a kingdom, more a family estate.’

There was a faint pause. She certainly had all his attention now.

At last, ‘You’re very well-informed,’ said the backwoods-man lazily.

‘I certainly am. Main crops, wine and wheat. Main occupation, brigandage.’

‘You’ve done your research—’ He broke off sharply. ‘Brigandage?’

‘The Montassurrans in exile run a good story,’ said Francesca hardly. ‘But basically they have always been a bunch of mountain brigands. Who just happened to settle on the motorway-services station of the Middle Ages. Everyone passing through had to stop there. And pay tribute.’

‘That’s hardly brigandage.’

‘They developed that later. Harried the Turks. Raided the Crusaders. Made a good thing out of kidnap and extortion for about ten centuries. Then got some great PR at the Conference of Vienna and turned themselves into professional freedom fighters.’

There was stunned silence.

Then, ‘You sound like an expert,’ he said slowly. ‘Did you major in Balkan history?’

Francesca gave a snort of laughter. ‘In a way. My father came from Montassurro. I grew up on the stories.’

Another, longer silence. She could almost feel him thinking. It was still unsettling. And, even now, when they were clearly at odds, it was still sexy. Blast!

‘Not very flattering stories by the sound of it.’

‘Well, my father is an anti-monarchist.’

‘And you’ve inherited his prejudices,’ he said as if that explained everything.

Francesca stiffened. ‘Not at all. I don’t care about monarchy one way or the other. What I can’t bear is a lot of people living in the past. Ex-kings, huh! You can’t spend your life as an ex-anything. You have to draw a line and go on.’

‘You’re very—unforgiving.’

She stared, confused. ‘Why? Because I don’t like a lot of phoney nostalgia?’

He was looking at her in that way again. She couldn’t see him properly but the reservations were coming off him in waves. As if there were two conversations going on and she was only hearing one—and the less interesting one, at that.

Oh, God, here I go again. Listening to the facts. Not hearing the meaning. What the hell is wrong with me?

‘Because you think you can draw a line under a bit of yourself and leave it behind.’ He was drawling again. ‘How old are you?’

Francesca’s eyes snapped. ‘Twenty-three. How old are you?’

He gave a soft laugh. ‘Thirty-two. Going on a hundred, just at this minute.’

‘Why this minute?’

But there was no chance for him to answer. The glass door was pushed violently back. Music and revellers spilled out onto the balcony with equal disruptive force. He sidestepped them and took the opportunity to look at his watch.

‘I ought to be doing my duty in the Press room.’

‘Oh.’ She was horribly disappointed and furious about it. Rebound indeed! She curbed it and held out her hand. ‘Good luck.’

He took it. ‘Will I see you later?’

She shook her head vigorously. As much at her own unwanted fantasies as at him. ‘As soon as I’ve caught up with my prince I’m going home.’

He smiled faintly. She could hear it in his voice. 'Exprince.'

And he held on to her hand. It was heady stuff.

'Whatever,' she said, distracted.

'You like to be accurate.'

'Yes.' She was still oddly shaken. 'Yes, I suppose I do.'

'It's obvious. Well, then, we'd better say goodbye.'

He tugged her hand, bringing her a critical step closer to him. Bent—he had a long way to bend—and brushed her cheek with his lips.

Francesca gulped. For a moment she was in a cloud of cold, pure air, surrounded by cedar and a sense of imminent danger, as if she were facing a climb that was beyond her. And then she was on a crowded balcony again on a wet London night. And the stars had gone in.

'Er—goodbye,' she said, more breathless than she would have liked.

He straightened. 'Good luck yourself. I hope you get your ex-prince.'

Francesca, who never gave up on any of her self-appointed tasks, was for the first time in her life going to pass. She had no intention of doing anything more this evening than going home and trying to get her breath back. But she was not admitting that to anyone else. And, besides, there was always another day. One way or another, she would get the crown prince to one of The Buzz's book-signings if it killed her.

'Cast-iron certainty,' she said, sticking her chin in the air. She was not going to lose focus because Barry de la Touche had dumped her and a tall stranger had not quite kissed her. She was not. She said as much to herself as to him, 'I always get my man.'

CHAPTER TWO

'I WANT,' said Conrad, pleasant but very firm, 'to know about a bookshop. It's near the gasworks in Fulham. I'm not moving until I know the name of the woman who owns it.' He looked as if he meant it.

The publicist had been looking for him with increasing desperation. The Press interviews were not going well. The editorial director had called one journalist a freeloader. Then he told a researcher for a daytime television programme that he didn't expect her viewers to be able to read words of more than one syllable. It was definitely time to break out their secret weapon. Only it looked as if the secret weapon had ideas of his own.

'I'll find out for you,' she promised. 'Just please come and talk to the Press now.'

'How will you find out?'

'Ask. Someone in this crowd is bound to know.'

'But I don't know the name of the bookshop.'

'Doesn't matter. It's a small world, books.' She urged him towards the room where the Press interviews were taking place. 'What does she look like? How old? What's she interested in?'

'Small. Dark. Huge brown eyes. Sometimes they go all big and misty as if you're the most wonderful thing she's ever looked at. Sometimes they snap. She's twenty-three, and she's fierce.'

'Oh,' said the publicity assistant, rather taken aback. 'Well, that ought to find her. Fulham, you said?'

By the time he had played his part in the discussion of *Ash on the Wind*, she was back.

'Sounds like Jazz Allen's place. It's called The Buzz. But Jazz is nearly six feet, black and beautiful.'

'Not her. Look again.' He thought. 'She also knows a lot about Montassurro. Or thinks she does. Her father was some sort of refugee.'

One of the journalists who had slipped out in the hopes of a private exchange with the ex-prince overheard. He inserted himself between them.

'Do you mean Peter Heller's daughter?'

Conrad's brows twitched together. 'Heller?' he said in tones of acute distaste. 'That crook?'

The journalist grinned. 'Can I quote you? He's an esteemed international financier these days.'

Conrad did not smile. He was looking really disturbed.

'Are you telling me that Peter Heller's daughter would waste her time with a small bookshop? In the shadow of the gasworks? I don't believe it.'

'Not that small,' said the journalist drily. 'Everyone's talking about The Buzz. They've got quite an internet presence already, too. It was the Heller girl who set that up, by what I hear.'

'You mean Jazz Allen's new partner?' said someone else, joining them. 'I hear she's a phenomenon.'

'Yes,' agreed the journalist. 'Everyone thought it was going to be a three-day wonder for her. Well, she's rich enough to invest in a little business like that without caring too much if she gets her money back. But it hasn't turned out like that.'

'You are so right,' agreed someone else, with feeling. 'Francesca Heller is no sleeping partner. My reps say she challenges them all the time. Fearsome woman. But she's certainly improved their ecology list. And Jazz thinks she's wonderful.'

'So does Prince Conrad, from the sound of it,' said the journalist with a sly glance sideways.

But he did not get the response he was hoping for. The tall man looked at him in silence for a moment. The heavy-lidded eyes were quite unreadable. Then he turned away, shrugging.

'Well, would you get the email address for me?' he asked the publicity assistant indifferently. 'I said I would do a talk for them some evening.'

He did not say another word on the subject of Francesca Heller all evening. Instead, to his hosts' surprised delight, he circulated conscientiously. He even stayed until the very end of the party.

But, though he got a very good proposition from a giggling copy editor in low-cut spandex, and the editorial director offered to take him to dinner and throw ideas around about a series, there was no sign of Francesca Heller. He shook his head at both invitations.

'No, thanks. Unless—there's no one else left inside, is there?'

'No. Just us,' said the copy editor, weaving slightly. 'You'd better come. You'll have missed every last train. Come to the club with us and then take the milk train at dawn.'

'I'm all partied out, thanks. I'll get a train after breakfast.'

There was consensus that this was a waste.

Conrad's steep eyelids drooped in the familiar bored expression.

'Goodnight, everyone. Have a good one.'

He strolled away. He didn't appear to move fast. But those long legs had taken him out of sight before anyone could think of an argument to call him back.

Francesca, Conrad thought.

Odd name for a girl who was half-English, half-Montassurran. Sounded Italian. Come to think of it, she looked like one of the Italian beauties you found in Renaissance paintings, all abundant hair and wide pure brow, with their enigmatic half-smiles. He had always thought they were probably too intelligent for their own good, those serene, secretive women. There was always something mysterious about them, something that said, 'You don't really know me at all.'

Of course, Francesca Heller had not been particularly serene this evening. But she had not come across as a second-generation Montassurran confidence trickster either. His jaw tightened.

Not that she thought of herself as Montassurran, obviously. All that nonsense she had talked about brigands! He should have challenged her on it at once. He could not think why he had not.

Hell, yes, he could. He knew exactly why. She had been looking at him with those wide, wide eyes, as if she was somehow caught up in a dream, and all he wanted to do was keep her looking at him like that forever. OK, maybe she was not serene. But the mystery was there all right. By the bucketful.

Fool, he castigated himself. Stupid fool! All she was interested in was catching a prince for one of her bookshop events. She had even admitted it. From all he could find out, she was as good at business as her father. And Peter Heller's daughter was the last person in the world he wanted to tangle with.

Yes, that was better. He would walk a while and think of everything he knew about her father.

Conrad reminded himself that he knew a great deal about Peter Heller and his business dealings. The whole Montassurran community in London did. And they knew Heller was ruthless, acquisitive, and not at all scrupulous. Without actually doing anything criminal, Peter had exploited more than one of the Montassurran exiles who had been so ready to welcome him when he first got to London.

Remember that! Conrad thought. Thinking of Peter, the multimillionaire exploiter, would put mysterious, misty-eyed Francesca Heller in perspective.

Except that it did not. Not quite. She was under his skin, like a rose thorn.

Conrad walked hard, hardly noticing the cold night or the desultory rain. Feet pounding on the pavement, he could convince himself that she was a momentary aberration; that he did not want a woman in his life whom he would be ashamed to introduce to his grandfather and the people his grandfather thought of as his subjects; that he did not want a misty-eyed innocent in his life either, come to think of it. And then he remembered the way her chin came up when she thought he was mocking her. The way her breath caught when he touched her. And the wide, wondering eyes that seemed to look into his very soul.

Look, he said to himself. Either Francesca Heller was what she ought to be as her father's daughter, a real wily operator. In that case she was not the woman for him. Or she was what she had

looked tonight. It was a faint outside chance. No woman of twenty-three was so open, so unguarded, so—he said it to himself deliberately—vulnerable. But if she was—

Ah, if she was, then Conrad Domitio was not the man for her.

Francesca gave up soon after the tall man left her. The crowd was too pressing. She couldn't find Jazz. She was never going to find a prince she did not know. Especially if everyone else was after him too. She collected her coat and bumbled out into the rainy dark.

Without her glasses, of course, it was not easy to find a cab. She flagged down a Range Rover, a delivery truck and a traffic light showing amber before she connected with a taxi for hire. She gave the driver the address and then fell back against the upholstery and closed her eyes. Tomorrow morning she was going to order three pairs of glasses—one for home, one for the shop and one for her handbag. This evening's nightmare was never going to happen again.

But it had not all been a nightmare, something whispered. The tall man on the wet balcony. He had not been a nightmare. He had been—exciting.

Yes. Well. There was such a thing as rebound. She had already warned herself once tonight...

That was when it hit her. The difference between expectations and reality—it got you every time. She had expected the evening to end with herself and Barry going back to the riverside flat together. They should have been planning their future. They would have been acknowledged as lovers. She would have belonged somewhere at last.

Instead of which she was sitting alone in the back of a London taxi cab, going through streets she could barely see and certainly not recognise, dreaming about a man she would not recognise if she saw him again.

Well, probably not. Though that air of power was pretty impressive. Maybe that would survive, even when she got her glasses back and could actually see the man's face. And that aura of leashed energy, the outdoorsy smell of wood smoke and cedar—she would recognise those at fifty paces.

Francesca realised it with a little shock.

'Wow! Rebound and a half,' she muttered, trying to laugh at herself.

But it wasn't funny. Barry's defection must have left her so vulnerable that she was fantasising about a complete stranger. That was what adolescents did. And Francesca, the world's most self-contained schoolgirl, had not done it, even when it was normal.

'Oh, boy. Postponed adolescence strikes at last,' she said bitterly. 'Francesca, my girl, you have got to be careful. Or this could get out of hand.'

It was not a good night. She tried to go to bed. But she kept thinking of Barry. And the stranger. And Barry again.

There was a nasty moment when she found her second best pair of glasses behind a sofa cushion. She remembered when he had taken them off, between kisses. She remembered what she had thought they would be doing tonight. By now she and Barry would have been stretched out on that sofa. He would have been playing with her hair, teasing her about what he called her twenty-twenty pernicketyness.

'Let yourself go,' Barry would instruct. 'Stop counting. Free the imagination. Fly with me.'

Fly? Fly? How on earth had she ever thought she could change? She was never going to fly. She did not have the imagination. And her taste in men was terrible, too. Look at how she only had to close her eyes and she smelled wood smoke...

Forget the man on the balcony. Think about Barry. At least you knew him. Well, nearly knew him.

For now that she was on her own she was remembering all the times Barry had appeared to be dating another girl. When he made his move on Francesca he had explained all those incidents away so easily. Now she thought about it, she realised that he must actually have been running the two of them in tandem. God, but her judgement was awful.

She gave up on sleeping and swished round the empty flat in her long crimson housecoat. Her mother had given it to her for Christmas. She did not like it. It was too dramatic. But it was almost the only thing in her wardrobe that Barry had not seen.

Her eyes leaked tears. She brushed them away furiously. She never cried, she reminded herself bitterly.

She was not missing him. She had never known him, so how could she be missing him? What she was missing was tenderness. Well, the illusion of tenderness. No man in his right mind would really feel tenderness for a woman who found it easier to add up than let her imagination fly. Who inherited her looks from a father who looked like a troglodyte. Who wore glasses held together with a grubby plaster.

Even the stranger would not have wanted to talk to her if it had not been too dark to see her face.

No, no, in the race for emotional fulfilment she was a non-starter. And she had just proved it for about the tenth time in her adult life.

‘Get used to it,’ said Francesca aloud. ‘Concentrate on the career. At least you have a chance of getting that right.’

So she was already tidying the tables of books when Jazz arrived the next morning.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t get you your prince,’ Francesca announced, even before Jazz had unwound her rainbow scarf. ‘I couldn’t find him.’

Jazz extracted a large latte from a paper carrier bag and eased off its plastic lid. She passed it across. After three months she and Francesca knew exactly how the other liked her coffee.

‘I’m not surprised,’ she said philosophically. ‘I managed to chat up Maurice Dillon. He’s going to do a workshop for new writers for us next month. What about you? Find anyone interesting?’

Francesca shook her head. ‘Only a man who wanted to go out onto the balcony and talk in the rain.’

Jazz raised her elegant eyebrows. ‘Sexy.’

To her surprise, Francesca flushed slightly.

‘Hey, you didn’t do anything I would have done, did you?’ Jazz said, amused.

‘Of course not,’ said Francesca, uncharacteristically flustered.

Jazz laughed aloud.

‘I didn’t mean that. Well, I did, but—Stop laughing at me. Hell, what do I know what you would have done?’

Jazz sipped her own double espresso. ‘Not a lot on a wet night in the open air, to be fair,’ she admitted. She sent Francesca a thoughtful look. ‘It must have been freezing.’

‘Er—yes. Maybe. I—um—I didn’t really notice.’

‘Ah.’ Jazz sipped more coffee. ‘So how long did you stay out there?’

‘I don’t remember.’ A hint of defiance had crept into Francesca’s voice.

‘Ah.’ Jazz sucked her teeth. ‘Fanciable, I take it?’

Francesca thought about warm magnetism and alien lips brushing her cheek. She could not help herself. She gave a little shiver. It was purely involuntary. And she knew Jazz saw it.

‘Fair to middling,’ she said, unconvincingly. ‘Well, what I could see of him, which was about as defined as a Rorschach inkblot. Which reminds me—can I have my spare glasses, please?’

Jazz did not say anything.

‘Look, you can’t think I was seriously attracted. Not to someone I only met once.’

‘Attraction is usually instantaneous,’ pointed out Jazz mildly. ‘Not a lot you can do about it. OK, you can choose whether you go with it or not. Spend the night. Or hold out for the whole white wedding with pageboys and bells. That’s the stuff you get to take decisions about. Attraction just hits you.’

Francesca shivered again. Even her feelings for Barry had not just hit her. Not in the way that Jazz meant. Not the way they hit other people. Barry had had to tell her that she fancied him, laughing. 'You're such an innocent,' he had said tenderly.

She folded her lips together. 'Not me,' she said quietly.

Jazz was unimpressed. 'Which bad fairy came to your christening and gave you immunity?'

'Listen,' said Francesca intensely. 'Until yesterday I thought I was in love with Barry. I'd made up my mind to marry him, for heaven's sake. I'm not in the market to be hit by attraction.'

Jazz grinned maddeningly.

'What?' yelled Francesca, frustrated. 'What?'

Jazz wiped the smile off her mouth. It stayed everywhere else, though. 'Whatever you say.'

'Give me my glasses,' said Francesca haughtily. 'I have work to do.'

Jazz did. Francesca stamped off into the stock room, muttering.

Eventually Jazz wandered in after her. 'I know you didn't get hold of this prince last night,' she said. 'But I really think we could do an exciting panel one evening, if we could get him along.'

Francesca had not forgiven her yet. She pushed her glasses up her nose and sniffed. 'Cheap sensationalism!'

'Yes, that's what I thought,' said Jazz equably. 'But I looked at his book last night. Have you read it?'

Francesca stuck her nose in the air.

'Thought not. Well, it's a hell of a story as well as being good popular science.'

'So?'

'So call him—talk to him—tell him how great our customers are—sell him The Buzz.'

Francesca forgot that she had told the stranger last night that she was going to do exactly that. 'Why should I?'

Jazz was prepared for that. She whipped out a glossy laminated sheet of paper from behind her back.

'Take a look at that,' she said impressively.

Francesca stared. This time she could actually see the photograph. It was beautifully composed in moody black and white. It would have made anyone look spectacular. But in this case the photographer had had plenty to work with.

It was an impressive face. Not classically handsome. Not even mildly good-looking. It was too strong for that, with its high cheekbones, prominent crooked nose and heavy-lidded light eyes. But it was a face you wouldn't lightly forget.

Francesca had one instant thought: I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of him. She shivered, inexplicably.

She turned the sheet over. In addition to the blurb there was another photograph. From the book this time, and in glorious colour, it showed off the man's spectacular tan. He was posed—hell, not even posed—he was standing in a vertiginous landscape. His shirt had clearly lost most of its buttons. It was open and falling off one tanned shoulder as he brandished an axe above his head, laughing. The snow-covered peaks behind him should have made him look small. They didn't.

It was not just that Conrad Domitio was unexpectedly tall. Or even that the strongly muscled shoulders looked as if they could shift Stonehenge if they had to. Lots of men were tall and broad-shouldered. It was the lazy confidence. The mobile, knowledgeable mouth. And the laughter in the steady, steady eyes.

Francesca thought suddenly, I can't deal with a man with eyes like that.

Jazz did not share her reservations. 'He's every woman's dream,' she said practically. 'And men are all going to want to be like him. He seems to have got that volcano party down single-handed.' She read aloud,

“Why was it the new kid on the block who took charge? Was it because of rivalry among the others? Most of them had known each other for years and competed for academic honours. Was it because he was younger and fitter? Conrad is thirty-two and a regular rock climber who swims daily. Or was it because he is genetically programmed to take charge?”

Francesca told herself to stop the adolescent palpitations and get real. This was nonsense and every atom of her experience told her so.

“Genetically programmed to take charge!” she snorted. ‘Ludicrous! He’s just a bossy guy who’s used to throwing his weight about.’

‘He saved a lot of lives doing it,’ Jazz pointed out. ‘And the book’s very accessible.’

Francesca turned the sheet back over and looked at the moody photograph.

‘So is the author, by the looks of it.’

Jazz bit back a smile. ‘Oh, I do hope so,’ she said with a languishing look.

Francesca narrowed her eyes to slits. ‘You can stop right there. You’re not going to wind me up, so don’t try it. You don’t give two hoots about princes. Not even a sexy article like this.’

Jazz stopped languishing and laughed. ‘If he gets the royalty-magazine readers buying real books, I give plenty of hoots,’ she said drily. ‘And they’re the ones we can never get in through the doors.’

Francesca groaned.

‘He can write,’ Jazz wheedled. ‘Oh, boy, can he write. And this is a tough time of year for us. We could really use an Evening with Prince Charming, Franny.’

Francesca sighed. But she did not wriggle any longer. ‘OK. I’ll ring the publisher.’

‘I told you. They won’t look at us. We’re too small. You’ll have to get to him direct. Go on a charm offensive.’

‘Charm? Me?’ Francesca snorted. ‘Dream on!’ She thought. ‘OK, if the publisher won’t come through I’ll get on to the Montassurran network and see how much he costs.’

Jazz boggled. ‘Costs?’

‘Rent-a-Royal,’ said Francesca cynically. ‘How do you think these ex-royals earn their crust? They hire out their only asset.’

Jazz peered over her shoulder at the strong face in the photograph. ‘Would you say his only asset?’ she murmured wickedly.

Francesca was lofty. ‘You have a very low lust threshold.’

‘Me? Nonsense. Everyone knows I’m picky, picky. You’re the one that’s odd. Getting yourself all fogged up by Barry de la Touche!’

Francesca flinched. ‘Go on, rub it in, why don’t you?’ she muttered.

‘I can’t believe that you were really thinking of marrying him.’

Francesca had had a bad night, thinking about just that point. Half the time she could not believe it herself. The other half she remembered him saying caressingly, ‘My little bird,’ and could believe it all too easily. And, if she was falling for an elusive hint of wood smoke, all the indications were that she could do it all over again. Get a grip, she told herself fiercely. Get a grip.

‘All that shows is that I have no discrimination and an excessively gullible response to tenderness,’ she said savagely.

Jazz shook her head. ‘Why didn’t you say something? I could have told you what a phoney he was.’

‘Could you?’ Francesca was not entirely glad to hear that. ‘On the principle that anyone who fancied me had to be a con man?’

‘On the principle that, for an alleged playwright, he never put pen to paper,’ retorted Jazz. ‘I never knew that he claimed to fancy you. You both kept it very quiet.’

Francesca looked away. 'Barry's idea,' she muttered. 'He said it was bad form to date people you work with. I—well, I've never really worked anywhere for long enough to find that one out. I believed him.'

Jazz swore under her breath.

'Oh, well.' Francesca was determinedly bright. 'I suppose I should look on it as a learning experience.'

Jazz scrutinised her expression. 'Did you really care for him?'

There was a pause.

'I thought so,' Francesca said at last in a low voice.

The normally cool Jazz kicked a waste-paper basket viciously. 'Toad!'

Francesca was touched. 'Hey, I'll get over it.' She rallied. 'Enough learning experiences like this and I'll end up normal.'

And thought, If only that were true!

As Jazz predicted, the publishers were unhelpful. More than unhelpful. The publicity assistant did everything but laugh down the telephone at her request.

'His Highness really has no room in his diary for any more personal appearances,' she announced.

She did not say that she wished His Highness had been persuadable to do any personal appearances at all.

So Francesca had to fall back on Plan B. She was not very happy about it. After her father had inserted himself so dramatically into her love life she had told him exactly what she thought of him and refused to see him, on principle. Actually, she had been very dignified until he had said, 'But I was right. I am always right.' At which point she had lost her rag and told him to get back to New York and not bother about next year's Christmas present.

So to call him and ask his help to contact the Montassurran royals was a real climb-down. She only talked herself into doing it after reminding herself that he had never had any time for the monarchy. He had said so publicly more than once. So he would not be able to introduce The Buzz management to the royal family himself. He would have to pass her on to a friend of a friend of a friend. If he could help at all.

So she called him.

Peter Heller had not gone back to New York but he was clearly at lunch. Somewhere expensive, thought Francesca, hearing the echo of vaulted ceilings as glass and cutlery clinked. Still, that went without saying. Her father enjoyed his wealth with enthusiasm.

'Hello, Dad,' she said, struggling to forget their last encounter. 'How are you?'

'Francesca,' he said, pleased. 'So you have forgiven me for being right.'

Francesca gave up the struggle. 'Thank you, I'm well,' she said coldly, in reply to the question he should have asked. She became as direct as he was. 'I need a favour.'

'Ask. But ask quickly. I have a guest.'

She cut out all explanation. It reduced her request to a single sentence. There was silence.

'You want to meet Prince Conrad?' said her father slowly.

You want an explanation, you ask for it, thought Francesca vengefully. 'Yes,' she said aloud.

Another, longer pause. She heard a waiter murmur something; her father's clipped assent; the sound of wine being poured into crystal. She maintained stubborn silence.

Then her father said abruptly, 'I can arrange that. I will be in touch later.'

And cut the connection before Francesca could even say thank you. Probably just as well in the circumstances, she admitted wryly. She knew she ought to be grateful. But, as always, her father's high-handed commands left her fuming. Still, she wanted his help and he had agreed to give it. Think positive, she told herself.

She would not have been so philosophical if she had seen her father after he snapped his digital phone shut and slid it into his jacket pocket.

He sat back in the generous carver chair and beamed across the table. He looked, thought his elderly luncheon guest, like a cat who had found its way into a cream plant. The guest was not used to it. It made him uneasy. He looked over his shoulder, as if expecting the heavy mob to materialise from the Ritz's impeccable kitchens.

His troglodyte host gave him a wide, wide smile. He leaned forward.

'Now, have I got a deal for you...'

'No,' said Conrad Domitio firmly. 'Absolutely not.'

He had been taking a stand against his grandfather's wackier schemes ever since he was twelve. Experience had taught him that you had to say no early and keep on saying it. Any hint of negotiation and you were lost.

'But you haven't even heard my idea,' said his grandfather. His squashed toad's face managed to look both hurt and hopeful at the same time.

His tall grandson looked down at him with a good deal of understanding. The wind whipping across the urban playground raised Felix Domitio's thin hair. He shivered. Conrad fished some gloves out of the back pocket of his tracksuit and passed them across. But he did not relent.

'I don't need to,' he said, ever rational. 'You got out of bed before eight on a wet Saturday morning to blag me into it. That means you know I won't agree willingly.'

'You are so suspicious,' mourned his grandfather. He pulled the gloves on and stamped his feet a bit to warm them. His highly polished shoes were not designed for the puddle-strewn concrete. They seemed to be letting in water.

'Learned from experience,' said Conrad drily.

He had a dark, secretive face. But, during these Saturday sessions, most of the time it looked as if it was on the edge of laughter. Just at the moment, it had tipped over the edge into outright amusement.

Amusement, Felix Domitio knew, did not bode well for his grand design. He banished thoughts of a warm fire, at least for the moment.

Instead he folded his newly gloved hands over his old-fashioned waistcoat and said virtuously, 'But it's such a good cause.'

'Sure it is. That's why I'm going out to Montassurro with the relief expedition just as soon as we can get that mobile hospital equipped.'

'Well, then, my idea is such a tiny thing to do, in comparison,' said Felix in triumph. 'All you have to do is climb into the Mountain Hussars uniform and be polite to people.'

The dark face hardened. 'You mean prance around like something out of a Strauss operetta wearing a lot of medals I'm not entitled to.'

When he wasn't laughing Conrad Domitio could look quite forbidding, thought his grandfather.

'You're entitled,' he protested. 'I confer them on whomever I want.'

Conrad shook his head. 'You don't understand, do you? All right, Grandad. Medals I didn't earn. Does that make it clearer?'

His grandfather hunched his shoulders pettishly. 'You're such a puritan.'

But Conrad was laughing again. 'Sorry about that.'

Felix huddled his coat round him and stamped his feet some more.

'Take this place, for example,' he said, momentarily distracted. 'You know your aunt offered you the big room in the house at Prince's Gate for your class. You don't have to trail out to a wretched housing estate. So dreary.'

There was a slightly dangerous pause. I wish I hadn't said that, thought Felix.

'You need to get out more,' Conrad said at last. But he was not laughing any more. He spoke curtly. 'It's a perfectly OK housing estate. It's where the children live. I teach them the language of

their grandfathers. I know why I do it. I'm never quite sure why they do. They would much rather be watching television or playing computer games. If I didn't come to them, if they had to struggle up to central London, it might just tip the balance. And then they wouldn't come. OK?

Felix backtracked fast. 'Of course, you're right. I wasn't thinking. Put it down to the early morning and wet feet. Now, about the people you need to be nice to. Peter Heller's made me an offer to fund the mountain clinic for the first year—'

There was an odd silence. Felix found Conrad was looking at him in disbelief.

Eventually he said, 'You do need to get out more. Heller's as cunning as a fox. He never gives anything for nothing, least of all money.'

But Felix thought that was not the first thing he had intended to say.

'Well, maybe,' he admitted. 'But this time I think he genuinely wants to help the relief effort.'

'No, he doesn't. Peter Heller has never had a disinterested urge in his life.'

The children were beginning to arrive. Conrad greeted them as they passed. He knew everyone by name, Felix saw. Some of the smaller girls gave a quick, shy bob in response to Conrad's smile.

Felix gave a sharp sigh. What a king Conrad would have made, he thought wistfully. So shrewd, so tenacious, such an excellent judge of character. He pulled himself together. Might still make, if things turned out as Felix hoped and planned. As long as he could persuade Conrad, of course.

But Conrad was not thinking about his potential future subjects. Conrad was being as uncooperative as he knew how.

'You can't trust a word Heller says. If he's signing a cheque he'll want a damn sight more for it than a photograph of me in my gold trimmings, shaking his hand.'

Felix's eyes slid away. Fortunately Conrad was looking at a couple of boys who had just arrived and were quartering the playground like secret-service agents, so he did not notice.

'He'll want to make money,' Conrad said, following their progress with hawk-like vigilance. 'What does he think we can do for him? Get him the inside track on the cigarette franchise?'

'Er—no.'

'Well, he'll want something.'

Felix studied the grey sky as if he had just been appointed to the weekend-weather bureau.

'Maybe he's just a patriot,' he suggested to the cloud cover.

Conrad was unimpressed. 'Patriot? Peter Heller? He went through the patriots in London twenty years ago and left most of them poorer. He's a fixer.'

'A rich fixer,' murmured the ex-king ruefully.

'So he backed the right generals.' Conrad shrugged. 'He was a wide boy when he got out of Montassurro all those years ago. And he's a wide boy now. We shouldn't have anything to do with him.'

This was turning out more difficult even than Felix had expected.

'That's why I came over,' he said craftily. 'I really value your advice, you know. When you've heard the rest of my idea—'

But his grandson was one of the few people in the world ex-King Felix of Montassurro could not manipulate.

'No,' said Conrad briskly. 'Whatever the rest of your idea is, the answer's the same. No way. No. Now go away. I have work to do.'

Felix was undeterred.

'No, you don't. The children are perfectly happy.' He waved a hand at the cheerful early-morning buzz.

'That's what worries me.'

Conrad swept the crowded urban school yard with a sector-by-sector surveillance. His eyes were narrowed in concentration. Not just vigilant, he was merciless as a hawk, too.

His eyes came to rest on the secret-service couple. At once the boys shoved their hands in their pockets and looked airily at the sky. Conrad's eyes stayed on them, unwavering. They took their hands out of their pockets and tried hard to disappear into a chattering group.

His grandfather was rather relieved. It was easier to talk to Conrad when he was engaged in a power struggle with playground bullies. Ex-King Felix was not easily deflected from his argument but there was no doubt it was easier to set out your points when your grandson was not taking them to pieces one by one as you did so.

'Think for a moment, my Conrad. What would it cost you?' he said, his accent suddenly pronounced. 'What would it really cost you to do this small thing for your country?'

Conrad did not take his eyes off the cauldron of the playground. 'Don't do your elderly-refugee act with me, Felix. Never forget, I can see the wires.'

His grandfather abandoned the heavy accent. 'All right. But I only want one weekend out of your life. Is that so much to ask?'

'Yes,' said Conrad. 'If it requires me to cosy up to Peter Heller. Absolutely too much.'

His grandfather made East European noises indicative of shock and disappointment.

Conrad looked down at him. He had passed his grandfather in height when he was fourteen. Now he towered over the older man. And it was not just the height that was different. Unlike his grandfather, Conrad had high cheekbones, and unblinking, slanted eyes so dark they were almost black even when he was smiling. They were intimidating, those eyes. He relied on them to keep control of the playground, as much as he relied on his speed of reaction. The only person they had failed to intimidate in the last five years was his grandfather.

Now Conrad said with feeling, 'I'm already kissing goodbye to every Saturday morning. Just so I can teach a lot of kids, who don't want to learn it, a language that they will never use. At least, not unless they manage to get in touch with the ghosts of their great-grandparents.' He added bitterly, 'And I'm not good with kids.'

'Rank has its obligations,' said his grandfather, grinning. 'I'd trade rank for the occasional Saturday morning lie-in.'

'Unfortunately, rank is not a tradeable commodity.'

Conrad flicked up one black eyebrow. 'No?' he said mockingly. 'And there was me, thinking you wanted me to hire myself out as Rent-a-Gent to Heller Incorporated.'

His grandfather snorted. 'You're so sharp you'll cut yourself.'

But suddenly Conrad was not attending. 'Hell, that monster is going to strangle the kid with her own plait,' he muttered. He set off in the direction of the intended mayhem and intensified his voice so that it bounced off the playground walls. 'Gligor!'

An intent ten-year-old looked up, momentarily arrested.

'Don't even think about it,' advised Conrad, arriving.

The ten-year-old narrowed his eyes, assessing the situation with the air of an experienced criminal. Meanwhile a small girl with a plait was sweetly unaware that she had ever stood in any danger; or that it had been averted, however temporarily. But she knew that Crown Prince Conrad had been graciously pleased to approach their group. Her eyes lit up and she broke out a slightly wobbly curtsy.

'Your Royal Highness,' she said, staggering a bit as she came up from the bob.

Conrad sighed and steadied her automatically.

'Why do they do that?' he muttered.

His grandfather came up, rather more sedately.

'You're royal and they do ballet classes,' he said, answering the question literally. 'Put the two together and curtsies become inevitable.'

As if to prove his point, that was the moment at which the small girl identified him. She squeaked, 'Your Majesty,' and sank to the ground, head bowed, red dirndl skirts billowing.

‘Now look what you’ve done,’ said Conrad, exasperated.

‘Me?’ His grandfather was wounded. But he looked down at the small tumble of scarlet skirt and chestnut pigtail that did not rise from the ground. He was a touch disconcerted at this excess of respect. ‘Well, well, child, that’s enough. Get up now.’

Conrad gave a sharp sigh. ‘Don’t you see, she’s trying?’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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