



JESSICA HART
Ordinary Girl in a Tiara

MODERN
tempted™

Jessica Hart

Ordinary Girl in a Tiara

Аннотация

Fresh, flirty and stylish – sexy stories for the modern woman who loves to live life to the full! Faking it – as a princess! Unceremoniously dumped by her posh fiancé, Caro Cartwright's decided that when it comes to life (and men) – ordinary is good. Until an old friend begs her to stage a gossip-worthy royal diversion! Reluctantly, Caro packs her shamefully non-designer bags and prepares to masquerade as a European prince's latest squeeze... Used to pampered princesses, Philippe doubts Caro's ability to look the part, but soon her warmth and humour – and the odd fashion faux pas – are toppling hearts like dominoes! Meanwhile Caro's uncomfortably aware that their play-acting is increasingly convincing. It's a tempting fantasy – after all, Philippe is gorgeous – but in the real world ordinary girls don't become princesses – do they?

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Praise for Jessica Hart

‘Sweet and witty, with great characters and sizzling sexual tension, this one’s a fun read.’

—RT Book Reviews on

Honeymoon with the Boss

‘Strong conflict and sizzling sexual tension drive this well-written story. The characters are smart and sharp-witted, and match up perfectly.’

—RT Book Reviews on

Cinderella’s Wedding Wish

‘Well-written characters and believable conflict

make the *faux*-engagement scenario work beautifully— and the ending is simply excellent.’ —RT Book Reviews on *Under*

the Boss’s Mistletoe

‘Hart triumphs with a truly rare story ...

It’s witty and charming, and [it’s] a keeper.’

—RT Book Reviews on

Oh-So-Sensible Secretary

About the Author

About Jessica Hart

JESSICA HART was born in West Africa, and has suffered from itchy feet ever since, travelling and working around the world in a wide variety of interesting but very lowly jobs, all of which have provided inspiration on which to draw when it comes to the settings and plots of her stories. Now she lives a rather more settled existence in York, where she has been able to pursue her interest in history, although she still yearns sometimes for wider horizons.

Also by Jessica Hart

Juggling Briefcase & Baby
Oh-So-Sensible Secretary
Under the Boss's Mistletoe
Honeymoon with the Boss
Cinderella's Wedding Wish
Last-Minute Proposal

Ordinary Girl in a Tiara

Jessica Hart



www.millsandboon.co.uk

CHAPTER ONE

To: caro.cartwright@u2.com

From: charlotte@palaisdemontvivennes.net

Subject: Internet dating

Dear Caro

What a shame about the deli folding. I know you loved that job. You must be really fed up, but your email about the personality test on that internet dating site really made me laugh—good to know you haven't lost your sense of humour in spite of everything that skunk George did to you! All I can say is that compared to Grandmère's matchmaking schemes, internet dating sounds the way to go. Perhaps we should swap lives??!

Lotty

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

To: charlotte@palaisdemontvivennes.net

From: caro.cartwright@u2.com

Subject: Swapping places

What a brilliant idea, Lotty! My life is a giddy whirl at the moment, what with temping at a local insurance company and trying to write profile for new dating site (personality test results too depressing on other one) but if you'd like to try it, you're more than welcome! Of course, living your life would be tough for me—living in a palace, having (admittedly terrifying) grandmother introducing me to suitable princes and so on—but for you, Lotty,

anything! Just let me know where and when and I'll have a stab at being a princess for a change ... ooh, that's just given me an idea for my new profile. Who says fantasy isn't good for you???

Yours unregally

Caro XXX

PRINCESS SEEKS FROG: Curvaceous, fun-loving brunette, 28, looking for that special guy for good times out and in.

'What do you think?' Caro read out her opening line to Stella, who was lying on the sofa and flicking through a copy of *Glitz*.

Stella looked up from the magazine, her expression dubious. 'It doesn't make sense. Princess seeks frog? What's that supposed to mean?'

'It means I'm looking for an ordinary guy, not a Prince Charming in disguise. I thought it was obvious,' said Caro, disappointed.

'No ordinary guy would ever work that out, I can tell you that much,' said Stella. She went back to flicking. 'You don't want to be cryptic or clever. Men hate that.'

'It's all so difficult.' Caro deleted the offending words on the screen, and chewed her bottom lip. 'What about the curvaceous bit? I'm worried it might make me sound fat, but there's not much point in meeting someone who's looking for a slender goddess, is there? He'd just run away screaming the moment he laid eyes on me. Besides, I want to be honest.'

'If you're going to be honest, you'd better take out "fun-

loving”,’ Stella offered. ‘It makes it sound as if you’re up for anything.’

‘That’s the whole point. I’m changing. Being sensible didn’t get me anywhere with George, so I’m going to be a good time girl from now on.’

She would be like Melanie, all giggles and low cut tops and flirty looks. Melanie, who had sashayed into George’s office and knocked Caro’s steady, sensible fiancé off his feet.

‘I can’t say what I’m really like or no one will want to go out with me,’ she added glumly.

‘Rubbish,’ said Stella. ‘Say you’re kind and generous and a brilliant cook—*that* would be honest.’

‘Guys don’t want kind, even if they say they do,’ Caro said bitterly, remembering George. ‘They want sexy and fun-loving.’

‘Hmm, well, if you want to be sexy, you’d better do something about your clothes,’ said Stella, lowering *Glitz* so that she could inspect her friend’s outfit with a critical eye. ‘I know you’re into the vintage look, but a *crochet top*?’

‘It’s an original from the Seventies.’

‘And it was vile then, too.’

Caro made a face at her. With the top she was wearing a tartan miniskirt from the nine-teen-sixties and bright red pumps. She was the first to admit that she couldn’t *always* carry off the vintage look successfully, but she had been pleased with this particular outfit until Stella had started shaking her head.

Still, there was no point in arguing. She went back to her

profile. ‘OK, what about *Keen cook seeks fellow foodie?*’

‘You’ll just get some guy who wants to tie you to the stove and expect you to have his dinner ready the moment he comes through the door. You’ve already done that for George, and look where that got you.’ Stella caught the flash of pain on her friend’s face and her voice softened. ‘I know how miserable you’ve been, Caro, but honestly, you’re well out of it. George wasn’t the right man for you.’

‘I know.’ Caro caught herself sighing and squared her shoulders. ‘It’s OK, Stella. I’m fine now. I’m moving on, aren’t I?’

Pressing the backspace key with one finger, she deleted the last sentence. ‘It’s just so depressing having to sign up to these online dating sites. I don’t remember it being this hard before. It’s like in the five years I was with George, all the single men round here have disappeared into some kind of Bermuda Triangle!’

‘Yeah, it’s called marriage,’ said Stella. She picked up *Glitz* again and flicked through in search of the page she wanted. ‘I don’t know why you’re looking in *Ellerby*, though. Why don’t you get your friend Lotty to introduce you to some rich, glamorous men who eat in Michelin starred restaurants all the time?’

Caro laughed, remembering Lotty’s email. ‘I wish! But poor Lotty never gets within spitting distance of an interesting man either. You’d think, being a princess, she’d have a fantastically glamorous time, but her grandmother totally runs her life. Apparently she’s trying to fix Lotty up with someone “suitable” right now.’ Caro hooked her fingers in the air to emphasise the

inverted commas. ‘I mean, who wants a man your grandmother approves of? I think I’d rather stick with internet dating!’

‘I wouldn’t mind if he was anything like the guy Lotty’s going out with at the moment,’ said Stella. ‘I saw a picture of them just a second ago. If he was her grandmother’s choice, I’d say she’s got good taste and she can fix me up any time!’

‘Lotty’s actually going out with someone?’ Caro swivelled round from the computer and stared at Stella. ‘She didn’t say that! Who is he?’

‘Give me a sec. I’m trying to find that photo of her.’ When the flicking failed, Stella licked her finger and tried turning the pages one by one. ‘I can never get over you being friends with a real princess. I wish I’d been to a posh school like yours.’

‘You wouldn’t have liked it. It was fine if you had a title and your own pony and lots of blonde hair to toss around, but if you were only there because your mum was a teacher and your dad the handyman, they didn’t want to know.’

‘Lotty wanted to know you,’ Stella pointed out, still searching.

‘Lotty was different. We started on the same day and we were both the odd ones out, so we stuck together. We were both fat and spotty and had braces, and poor Lotty had a stammer too.’

‘She’s not fat and spotty now,’ said Stella. ‘She looked lovely in that picture ... ah, here it is!’

Folding back the page, she read out the caption under one of the photographs on the *Party! Party! Party!* page. ‘Here we go: *Princess Charlotte of Montluce arriving at the Nightingale Ball—*

fab dress, by the way—with *Prince Philippe*.

‘Philippe, the lost heir to Montluce, has only recently returned to the country,’ she read on. ‘The ball was their first public outing as a couple, but behind the scenes friends say they are “inseparable” and royal watchers are expecting them to announce their engagement this summer. Is one of Europe’s most eligible bachelors off the market already?’

‘Let me see that!’ Caro whipped the magazine out of Stella’s hands and frowned down at the shiny page. ‘Lotty and *Philippe*? I don’t believe it!’

But there was Lotty, looking serene, and there, next to her, was indeed His Serene Highness Prince Philippe Xavier Charles de Montvivennes.

She recognised him instantly. That summer he had been seventeen, just a boy, but with a dark, reckless edge to his glamorous looks that had terrified her at the time. Thirteen years on, he looked taller, broader, but still lean, still dangerous. He had the same coolly arrogant stare for the camera, the same sardonic smile that made Caro feel fifteen again: breathless, awkward, painfully aware that she didn’t belong.

Stella sat up excitedly. ‘You *know* him?’

‘Not really. I spent part of a summer holiday in France with Lotty once, and he was part of a whole crowd that used to hang around the villa. It was just before Dad died and, to be honest, I don’t remember much about that time now. I know I felt completely out of place, but I do remember Philippe,’ Caro

said slowly. 'I was totally intimidated by him.'

She had a picture of Philippe lounging around the spectacular infinity pool, looking utterly cool and faintly disreputable. There had always been some girl wrapped round him, sleek and slender in a minuscule bikini while Caro had skulked in the shade with Lotty, too shy to swim in her dowdy one-piece while they were there.

'He and the others used to go out every night and make trouble,' she told Stella. 'There were always huge rows about it, and one or other of them would be sent home on some private plane in disgrace for a while.'

'God, it sounds so glamorous,' said Stella enviously. 'Did you get to go trouble-making too?'

'Are you kidding?' Caro hooted with laughter. 'Lotty and I would never have had the nerve to go with them. Anyway, I'm quite sure Philippe didn't even realise we were there most of the time. Although, actually, now I think about it, he *was* nice to me when I heard Dad was in hospital,' she remembered. 'He said he was sorry and asked if I wanted to go out with the rest of them that night. I'd forgotten that.'

Caro looked down at the magazine again, trying to fit the angular boy she remembered into the picture of the man. How funny that she should remember that moment of brusque kindness now. She'd been so distressed about her father that she had wiped almost everything else about that time from her mind.

'Did you go?'

‘No, I was too worried about Dad and, anyway, I’d have been terrified. They were all wild, that lot. And Philippe was the wildest of them all. He had a terrible reputation then.

‘He had this older brother, Etienne, who was supposed to be really nice, and Philippe was the hellraiser everyone shook their heads about. Then Etienne was killed in a freak waterskiing accident, and after that we never heard any more about Philippe. I think Lotty told me he’d cut off all contact with his father and gone off to South America. Nobody knew then that his father would end up as Crown Prince of Montluce, but I’m surprised he hasn’t come back before. Probably been too busy hellraising and squandering his trust fund!’

‘You’ve got to admit it sounds more fun than your average blind date in Ellerby,’ Stella pointed out. ‘You said you wanted to have fun, and he’s obviously the kind of guy who knows how to do that. You should get Lotty to fix you up with one of his cool friends.’

Caro rolled her eyes. ‘Do you really see me hanging around with the jet set?’

‘I see what you mean.’ Pursing her lips, Stella studied her friend. ‘You’d definitely have to lose the crochet top!’

‘Not to mention about six stone,’ said Caro.

She tossed the magazine back to Stella. ‘Anyway, I can’t think of anything worse than going out with someone like Philippe. You’d have to look perfect all the time. And then, when you were doing all those exciting glamorous things, you wouldn’t be able

to look as if you were enjoying it, because that's not cool. And you'd have to be stick-thin, which would mean you'd never be able to eat. It would be awful!

'Lotty doesn't look as if she minds,' said Stella with another glance at the photo. 'And I don't blame her!'

'You never know what Lotty's really thinking. She's been trained to always smile, always look as if she's enjoying herself, even if she's bored or sick or fed up. Being a princess doesn't sound any fun to me,' said Caro. 'Lotty's been a good girl all her life, and she's never had the chance to be herself or meet someone who'll bother to get to know her rather than the perfect princess she has to be all the time.'

A faint line between her brows, she turned back to the computer and opened Lotty's last email message. Why hadn't Lotty said anything about Philippe then?

To: charlotte@palaisdemontvivennes.net

From: caro.cartwright@u2.com

Subject: ??????????????

You and Philippe?????????????????????????????????????

Lotty's reply came back the next morning.

To: caro.cartwright@u2.com

From: charlotte@palaisdemontvivennes.net

Subject: Re: ??????????????

Grandmère is up to her old tricks again and this time it's serious. I can't tell you what it's like here. I'm getting desperate!

Caro, remember how you said you'd do anything for me when

we joked about swapping lives for a while? Well, I've got an idea to put to you, and I'm hoping you weren't joking about the helping bit! I really need to explain in person, but you know how careful I have to be on the phone here, and I can't leave Montluce just yet. Philippe is in London this week, though, so I've given him your number and he's going to get in touch and explain all about it. If my plan works, it could solve our problems for all of us!

LXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Deeply puzzled, Caro read Lotty's message again. What plan, and what did Philippe have to do with it? She couldn't imagine Philippe de Montvivennes solving any of *her* problems, that was for sure. What could he do? Make George dump Melanie and come crawling back to her on his knees? Persuade the bank that the delicatessen where she'd been working hadn't gone bankrupt after all?

And what problems could *he* possibly have? Too much money in his trust fund? Too many gorgeous women hanging round him?

Philippe will explain. A real live prince, heir to the throne of Montluce, was going to ring her, Caro Cartwright. Caro nibbled her thumbnail and tried to imagine the conversation. *Oh, hi, yeah,* she would say casually when he called. *Lotty mentioned you would ring.*

She wished she knew what Lotty had told him about her. Not the truth, she hoped. Philippe would only sneer if he knew just

how quiet and ordinary her life was.

Not that she cared what he thought, Caro reminded herself hastily. She loved living in Ellerby. Her dreams were ordinary ones: a place to belong, a husband to love, a job she enjoyed. A kitchen of her own, a family to feed. Was that too much to ask?

But Philippe had always lived in a different stratosphere. How could he know that she had no interest in a luxury yacht or a designer wardrobe or hobnobbing with superstars, or whatever else he'd been doing with himself for the past five years? She wouldn't mind eating in the Michelin starred restaurants, Caro allowed, but otherwise, no, she was happy with her lot—or she would be if George hadn't dumped her for Melanie and the deli owner hadn't gone bankrupt.

No, Philippe would never be able to understand that. So perhaps she shouldn't be casual after all. She could sound preoccupied instead, a high-powered businesswoman, juggling million pound contracts and persistent lovers, with barely a second to deal with a playboy prince. *I'm a bit busy at the moment*, she could say. *Could I call you back in five minutes?*

Caro rather liked the idea of startling Philippe with her transformation from gawky fifteen-year-old to assured woman of the world, but abandoned it eventually. For one thing, Philippe would never remember Lotty's friend, plump and plain in her one-piece black swimsuit, so the startle effect was likely to be limited. And, for another, she was content with her own life and didn't need to pretend to be anything other than what she was,

right?

Right.

So why did the thought of talking to him make her so jittery?

She wished he would ring and get it over with, but the phone remained obstinately silent. Caro kept checking it to see if the battery had run out, or the signal disappeared for some reason. When it did ring, she would leap out of her skin and fumble frantically with it in her hands before she could even check who was calling. Invariably it was Stella, calling to discover if Philippe had rung yet, and Caro got quite snappy with her.

Then she was even crosser with herself for being so twitchy. It was only Philippe, for heaven's sake. Yes, he was a prince, but what had he ever done other than go to parties and look cool? She wasn't impressed by him, Caro told herself, and was mortified whenever she caught herself inspecting her reflection or putting on lipstick, as if he would be able to see what she looked like when he called.

Or as if he would care.

In any case, all the jitteriness was quite wasted because Philippe didn't ring at all. By Saturday night, Caro had decided that there must have been a mistake. Lotty had misunderstood, or, more likely, Philippe couldn't be bothered to do what Lotty had asked him to do. Fine, thought Caro grouchily. See if she cared. Lotty would call when she could and in meantime she would get on with her life.

Or, rather, her lack of life.

A summer Saturday, and she had no money to go out and no one to go out with. Caro sighed. She couldn't even have a glass of wine as she and Stella were both on a diet and had banned alcohol from the house. It was all right for Stella, who had gone to see a film, but Caro was badly in need of distraction.

For want of anything better to do, she opened up her laptop and logged on to right4u.com. Her carefully worded profile, together with the most flattering photo she could find—taken before George had dumped her and she was two sizes thinner—had gone live the day before. Perhaps someone had left her a message, she thought hopefully. Prince Philippe might not be prepared to get in touch, but Mr Right might have fallen madly in love with her picture and be out there, longing for her to reply.

Or not.

Caro had two messages. The first turned out to be from a fifty-six-year-old who claimed to be 'young at heart' and boasted of having his own teeth and hair although, after one look at his photo, Caro didn't think either were much to be proud of.

Quickly, she moved onto the next message, which was from a man who hadn't provided a picture but who had chosen Mr Sexy as his code name. Call her cynical, but she had a feeling that might be something of a misnomer. According to the website, the likelihood of a potential match between them was a mere seven per cent. *I want you to be my soulmate*, Mr Sexy had written. *Ring me and let's begin the rest of our lives right now.*

Caro thought not.

Depressed, she got up and went into the kitchen. She was starving. That was the trouble with diets. You were bored and hungry the whole time. How was a girl supposed to move on with her life when she only had salad for lunch?

In no time at all she found the biscuits Stella had hidden in with the cake tins, and she was on her third and wondering whether she should hope Stella wouldn't notice or eat them all and buy a new packet when the doorbell rang. Biscuit in hand, Caro looked at the clock on wall. Nearly eight o'clock. An odd time for someone to call, at least in Ellerby. Still, whoever it was, they surely had to be more interesting than trawling through her potential matches on right4u.com.

Stuffing the rest of the biscuit into her mouth, Caro opened the door.

There, on the doorstep, stood Prince Philippe Xavier Charles de Montvivennes, looking as darkly, dangerously handsome and as coolly arrogant as he had in the pages of *Glitz* and so bizarrely out of place in the quiet Ellerby backstreet that Caro choked, coughed and sprayed biscuit all over his immaculate dark blue shirt.

Philippe didn't bat an eyelid. Perhaps his smile slipped a little, but he put it quickly back in place as he picked a crumb off his shirt. 'Caroline Cartwright?' With those dark good looks, he should have had an accent oozing Mediterranean warmth but, like Lotty, he had been sent to school in England and, when he opened that mouth, the voice that came out was instead cool and

impeccably English. As cool as the strange silver eyes that were so disconcerting against the olive skin and black hair.

Still spluttering, Caro patted her throat and blinked at him through watering eyes. 'I'm—' It came out as a croak, and she coughed and tried again. 'I'm Caro,' she managed at last.

Dear God, thought Philippe, keeping his smile in place with an effort. *Caro's lovely*, Lotty had said. *She'll be perfect*.

What had Lotty been thinking? There was no way this Caro could carry off what they had in mind. He'd pictured someone coolly elegant, like Lotty, but there was nothing cool and certainly nothing elegant about this girl. Built on Junoesque lines, she'd opened the door like a slap in the face, and then spat biscuit all over him. He'd had an impression of lushness, of untidy warmth. Of dark blue eyes and fierce brows and a lot of messy brown hair falling out of its clips.

And of a perfectly appalling top made of purple cheesecloth. It might possibly have been fashionable forty years earlier, although it was hard to imagine anyone ever picking it up and thinking it would look nice on. Caro Cartwright must get dressed in the dark.

Philippe was tempted to turn on his heel and get Yan to drive him back to London, but Lotty's face swam into his mind. She had looked so desperate that day she had come to see him. She hadn't cried, but something about the set of her mouth, about the strained look around her eyes had touched the heart Philippe had spent years hardening.

Caro will help, I know she will, she had said. This is my only chance, Philippe. Please say you'll do it.

So he'd promised, and now he couldn't go back on his word.

Dammit.

Well, he was here, and now he'd better make the best of it. Philippe forced warmth into his smile, the one that more than one woman had told him was irresistible. 'I'm Lotty's cousin, Ph—' he began, but Caro waved him to silence, still patting her throat.

'I know who you are,' she said squeakily, apparently resisting the smile without any trouble at all. 'What are you doing here?'

Philippe was momentarily nonplussed, which annoyed him. He wasn't used to being taken aback, and he certainly wasn't used to having his presence questioned quite so abruptly. 'Didn't Lotty tell you?'

'She said you would *ring*.'

That was definitely an accusing note in her voice. Philippe looked down his chiselled nose. 'I thought it would be easier to explain face to face,' he said haughtily.

Easier for him, maybe, thought Caro. *He* hadn't been caught unawares with no make-up on and a mouthful of biscuit.

There was something surreal about seeing him standing there, framed against the austere terrace of houses across the road. Ellerby was a quiet northern town on the edge of the moors, while Philippe in his immaculately tailored trousers and the dark blue shirt open at the neck appeared to have stepped straight out of the pages of *Glitz*. He was tall and tanned with that indefinable

aura of wealth and glamour, the assurance that took red carpets as its due.

A pampered playboy prince ... Caro longed to dismiss him as no more than that, but there was nothing soft about the line of his mouth, or the hard angles of cheek and jaw. Nothing self-indulgent about the lean, hard-muscled body, nothing yielding in those unnervingly light eyes.

Still, no reason for her to go all breathless and silly.

'You should have rung,' she said severely. 'I might have been going out.'

'Are you going out?' asked Philippe, and his expression as his gaze swept over her spoke louder than words. Who in God's name, it seemed to say, would even consider going out in a purple cheesecloth shirt?

Caro lifted her chin. 'As it happens, no.'

'Then perhaps I could come in and tell you what Lotty wants,' he said smoothly. 'Unless you'd like to discuss it on the doorstep?'

Please say you'll help. Caro bit her lip. She had forgotten Lotty for a moment there. 'No, of course not.'

Behind Philippe, a sleek black limousine with tinted windows waited at the kerb, its engine idling. Tinted windows! Curtains would be twitching up and down the street.

No, this wasn't a conversation she wanted to be having in full view of the neighbours. Caro stood back and held the door open, tacitly conceding defeat. 'You'd better come in.'

The hallway was very narrow, and she sucked in her breath to

make herself slimmer as Philippe stepped past her. Perhaps that explained why she suddenly felt dizzy and out of breath. It was as if a panther had strolled past her, all sleek, coiled power and dangerous grace. Had Philippe always been that *big*? That solid? That overwhelmingly male?

She gestured him into the sitting room. It was a mess in there, but that was too bad. If he didn't have the courtesy to ring and let her know he was coming, he couldn't expect the red carpet to be rolled out.

Philippe's lips tightened with distaste as he glanced around the room. He couldn't remember ever being anywhere quite so messy before. Tights hung over radiators and there were clothes and shoes and books and God only knew what else in heaps all over the carpet. A laptop stood open on the coffee table, which was equally cluttered with cosmetics, nail polishes, battery chargers, magazines and cups of half drunk coffee.

He should have known as soon as the car drew up outside that Caro wasn't going to be one of Lotty's usual friends, who were all sophisticated and accomplished and perfectly groomed. They lived on family estates or in spacious apartments in the centre of London or Paris or New York, not in poky provincial terraces like this one.

What, in God's name, had Lotty been thinking?

'Would you like some tea?' Caro asked.

Tea? It was eight o'clock in the evening! Who in their right mind drank tea at this hour? Philippe stifled a sigh. He'd need

more than tea to get himself through this mess he'd somehow got himself into.

'I don't suppose you've got anything stronger?'

'If I'd known you were coming I would have stocked up on the Krug,' she said sharply. 'As it is, you'll have to make do with herbal tea.'

Philippe liked to think of himself as imperturbable, but he clearly wasn't guarding his expression as well as he normally did, because amusement tugged at the corner of Caroline Cartwright's generous mouth. 'I can offer nettle, gingko, milk thistle...'

The dark blue eyes gleamed. She was making fun of him, Philippe realised.

'Whatever you're having,' he said, irritated by the fact that he sounded stiff and pompous.

He was *never* pompous. He was never stiff either. He was famous for being relaxed, in fact. There was just something about this girl that rubbed him up the wrong way. Philippe felt as if he'd strayed into a different world, where the usual rules didn't apply. He should be at some bar drinking cocktails with a gorgeous woman who knew just how the game should be played, not feeling disgruntled in this tip of a house being offered tea—and herbal tea at that!—by a girl who thought he was *amusing*.

'A mug of dandelion and horny goat weed tea coming up,' she said. 'Sit down, I'll just be a minute.'

Philippe couldn't wait.

With a sigh, he pushed aside the clutter on the sofa and sat down. He'd let Lotty talk him into this, and now he was going to have to go through with it. And it suited him, Philippe remembered. If Caroline Cartwright was half what Lotty said she was, she would be ideal.

She's not pretty, exactly, Lotty had said. She's more interesting than that.

Caro certainly wasn't pretty, but she had a mobile face, with a long upper lip and expressive eyes as dark and blue as the ocean. Philippe could see that she might have the potential to be striking if she tidied herself up and put on some decent clothes. Not his type, of course—he liked his women slender and sophisticated, and Caro was neither—but that was all to the good. The whole point was for her to be someone he wouldn't want to get involved with.

And vice versa, of course.

So he was feeling a little more optimistic when Caro came in bearing two mugs of what looked like hot ditchwater.

Philippe eyed his mug dubiously, took a cautious sip and only just refrained from spitting it out.

Caro laughed out loud at his expression. 'Revolting, isn't it?'

'God, how do you drink that stuff?' Philippe grimaced and pushed the mug away. Perhaps he made more of a deal about it than he would normally have done, but he needed the excuse to hide his reaction to her smile. It had caught him unawares, like a step missed in the dark. Her face had lit up, and he'd felt the

same dip of the stomach, the same lurch of the heart.

And her laugh ... that laugh! Deep and husky and totally unexpected, it was a tangible thing, a seductive caress, the kind that drained all the blood from your head and sent it straight to your groin while it tangled your breathing into knots.

‘It’s supposed to be good for you,’ Caro was saying, examining her own tea without enthusiasm. ‘I’m on a diet. No alcohol, no caffeine, no carbohydrates, no dairy products ... basically, no anything that I like,’ she said glumly.

‘It doesn’t sound much fun.’ Philippe had managed to get his lungs working again, which was a relief. Her laugh had surprised him, that was all, he decided. A momentary aberration. But listen to him now, his voice as steady as a rock. Sort of.

‘It isn’t.’ Caro sighed and blew on her tea.

She had been glad to escape to the kitchen. Philippe’s presence seemed to have sucked all the air out of the house. How was it that she had never noticed before how suffocatingly small it was? There was a strange, squeezed feeling inside her, and she fumbled with the mugs, as clumsy and self-conscious as she had been at fifteen.

Philippe’s supercilious expression as he looked around the cosy sitting room had stung, Caro admitted, and she had enjoyed his expression when she had offered the tea. Well, they couldn’t all spend their lives drinking champagne, and it wouldn’t do him any harm to have tea instead for once.

Caro thought about him waiting in the sitting room, looking

faintly disgusted and totally out of place. In wealth and looks and glamour, he was so out of her league it was ridiculous. But that was a good thing, she decided, squeezing the teabags with a spoon. It meant there was no point in trying to impress him, even if she had been so inclined. She could just be herself.

‘I’m reinventing myself,’ she told him now. ‘My fiancé left me for someone who’s younger and thinner and more fun, and then I lost my job,’ she said. ‘I had a few months moping around but now I’ve pulled myself together. At least I’m trying to. No more misery eating. I’m going to get fit, lose weight, change my life, meet a nice man, live happily ever after ... you know, realistic, achievable goals like that.’

Philippe raised an eyebrow. ‘It’s a lot to expect from drinking tea.’

‘The tea’s a start. I mean, if I can’t stick with this, how am I supposed to stick with all the other life-changing stuff?’ Caro took a sip to prove her point, but even she couldn’t prevent an instinctive wrinkling of the nose. ‘But you didn’t come here to talk about my diet,’ she reminded him. ‘You’re here about Lotty.’

CHAPTER TWO

‘AH, YES,’ said Philippe. ‘Lotty.’

Caro put down her mug at his tone. ‘Is she OK? I had a very cryptic email from her. She said you would explain about some idea she’d had.’

‘She’s fine,’ he said, ‘and yes, I am supposed to be explaining, but it’s hard to know where to start. Presumably you know something of the situation in Montluce at the moment?’

‘Well, I know Lotty’s father died last year.’

The sudden death of Crown Prince Amaury had shocked everyone. He had been a gentle man, completely under the thumb of his formidable mother as far as Caro could tell, and Lotty was his only child. She had taken her dead mother’s place at his side as soon as she’d left finishing school, and had never put a foot wrong.

Lotty was the perfect princess, always smiling, always beautiful, endlessly shaking hands and sitting through interminable banquets and never, ever looking bored. There were no unguarded comments from Lotty for the press to seize upon, no photos posted on the internet. No wild parties, no unsuitable relationships, not so much as a whiff of scandal.

‘Since then,’ Philippe said carefully, ‘things have been. rather unsettled.’

‘Unsettled’ was a bit of an understatement, in Caro’s opinion.

Montluce was one of the last absolute monarchies in Europe, and had been in the iron grip of the Montvivennes family since Charlemagne. Small as it was, the country was rigidly traditional, and the ruling family even more so. Lotty's grandmother, known as the Dowager Blanche, was only the latest in line of those who made the British royal family's attitude to protocol look slapdash.

Since Lotty's father had died, though, the family had been plunged into a soap opera of one dramatic event after another. A car accident and a heart attack had carried off one heir after another, while one of Lotty's cousins, who should have been in line for the crown, had been disinherited and was currently serving time for cocaine smuggling.

Now, what the tabloids loved to refer to as the 'cursed inheritance' had passed against all the odds to Philippe's father, Honoré. In view of the tragic circumstances, his coronation had been a low-key affair, or so Lotty had told Caro. There had been much speculation in the tabloids about Philippe's absence. None of them could have guessed that the current heir to the throne of Montluce would turn up in Ellerby and be sitting in Stella and Caro's sitting room, pointedly not drinking his horny goat weed tea.

'Amaury was always more interested in ancient Greek history than in running the country,' Philippe went on. 'He was happy to leave the day-to-day business of government in his mother's hands. The Dowager Blanche is used to having things her own way, and now all her plans have gone awry. She's not happy,' he

added dryly.

‘She doesn’t approve of your father?’ Caro was puzzled. She’d only ever seen photos of Philippe’s father, but he looked tailor-made for the part of Crown Prince. She couldn’t imagine why Lotty’s grandmother would object to him.

‘Oh, he’s perfect as far as she’s concerned. His sense of duty is quite as strong as hers.’ There was an edge to Philippe’s voice that Caro didn’t understand.

‘So what’s the problem?’ she asked. The truth was that she was having trouble focusing. Part of her was taken up with thinking: there’s a *prince* on the sofa! Part was trying not to notice that beneath the casual shirt and trousers, his body was taut and lean.

And another part was so hungry that she couldn’t concentrate on any of it properly. She could feel her stomach grumbling. Caro wrapped her arms around her waist and willed it to be quiet. How could she follow Philippe’s story when she was worried her stomach might let out an embarrassing growl at any minute?

‘Can’t you guess?’ Philippe smiled but the silver eyes were hard.

Caro forced her mind away from her stomach. ‘Oh,’ she said slowly. ‘*You’re* the problem?’

‘Got it in one,’ said Philippe. ‘The Dowager thinks I’m idle and feckless and irresponsible and has told me so in no uncertain terms.’

The sardonic smile flashed again. ‘She’s right, of course. Personally, I’ve never seen the appeal of duty and commitment.

The thought that the future of the Montvivennes dynasty rests with me is almost more than my great-aunt can bear,' he added. 'She's decided that the only way to keep me in line and ensure that I'm not a total disaster for the country is to marry me to Lotty.'

'Lotty said that her grandmother was matchmaking,' said Caro, adding, not very tactfully, 'I'm surprised she'd approve of you, though.'

Philippe acknowledged that with a grim smile. 'She doesn't but, from her point of view, it's the only solution,' he said. 'Once shackled to Lotty, I'll settle down, they think. Lotty's bound to be a good influence on me. She's the perfect princess, after all, and there's no doubt it would be popular in the country. Compared to what the people think, what does it matter what Lotty and I feel?' Bitterness crept into his voice. 'We're royal, and we're expected to do our duty and not complain about it.'

'Poor Lotty! It's so unfair the way she never gets to do what she wants to do.'

'Quite,' said Philippe. He was leaning forward, absently turning his unwanted mug of tea on the coffee table. 'With a new Crown Prince in place, she thought that she would have a chance to get away and make a life of her own at last, but of course my father doesn't have a wife, having been careless enough to let his wife run off with another man, and now Lotty's being manoeuvred into being a consort all over again. I'm fond of Lotty, but I don't want to marry her any more than she wants to marry me.'

‘But there must be something you can do about it,’ Caro protested. ‘I know Lotty finds it hard to resist her grandmother, but surely you can just say no?’

‘I have.’ As if irritated by his own fiddling, Philippe pushed the mug away once more and sat back. ‘But the Dowager doesn’t give up that easily. She’s always pushing Lotty and I together and leaking stories to the press.’

‘It said in *Glitz* that you were inseparable,’ remembered Caro and he nodded grimly.

‘That’s the Dowager’s handiwork. She adores that magazine because they’re so pro-royalty. And you’ve got to admit, it’s not a bad strategy. Start a rumour, let everyone in the country whip themselves up into wedding fever and wait for Lotty to cave under the pressure. Montlucians love Lotty, and she’ll hate feeling that she’s disappointing everyone by being selfish, as the Dowager puts it.’

Caro’s mouth turned down as she thought about it. It did seem unfair. ‘Why don’t you go back to South America?’ she suggested. ‘Surely the Dowager Blanche would give up on the idea of you and Lotty eventually.’

‘That’s the trouble. I can’t.’ Restlessly, Philippe got to his feet. He looked as if he wanted to pace, but the room wasn’t big enough for that, so he picked his way through the clutter to the bay window and stood staring unseeingly out to where the limousine waited at the kerb.

‘It hasn’t been announced yet, but my father is ill,’ he said, his

back to Caro. 'It's cancer.'

'Oh, no.' Caro remembered how desperate she had felt when her own father had been dying, and wished that she had the courage to get up and lay a sympathetic hand on Philippe's shoulder, but there was a rigid quality to his back that warned her against it. 'I'm so sorry,' she said instead.

Philippe turned back to face her. 'His prognosis isn't too bad, in fact, but the press are going to have a field day with the curse of the House of Montvivennes when it comes out.' His face was carefully expressionless.

'Montluce doesn't have specialised facilities, so he's going to Paris for treatment, and he's been told to rest completely for at least six months. So I've been summoned back to stand in for him. Only nominally, as he and the Dowager keep saying, but they're big on keeping up appearances. I'm taking over his commitments from the start of the month.

'I thought about refusing at first. My father and I don't have what you'd call a close relationship,' he went on with an ironic look, 'and I don't see why they need me to shake a few hands or pin on the occasional medal. If I could have some influence on decisions that are made, it would be different, but my father has never forgiven me for not being a perfect son like my older brother. When I suggested that I have some authority, he was so angry that he actually collapsed.'

Philippe sighed. 'I could insist, but he's ill, and he's my father ... I don't want to make him even sicker than he is already. In

the end, I said I would do as they asked for six months, but on the understanding that I can go back to South America as soon as he's well again. There's no point in me hanging around with nothing to do but disappoint him that I'm not Etienne.'

So even royal families weren't averse to laying on the emotional blackmail, thought Caro.

'Meanwhile, you're being thrown together with Lotty at every opportunity?' she said.

'Exactly.' He rolled his shoulders as if to relieve the tension there. 'Then, the other day, Lotty and I were on one of our carefully staged "dates" and we came up with a plan.'

'I wondered when we were going to get to the plan,' said Caro. She made herself take another sip of tea. Philippe was right. It was disgusting. 'What is this great idea of Lotty's?'

'It's a simple one. The problem has been that we're both there, and both single. Of course Lotty's grandmother is going to get ideas. But if I go back to Montluce with a girlfriend and am clearly madly in love with her, even the Dowager Blanche would have to stop pushing Lotty and I together for a while.'

Caro could see where this was going. 'And then Lotty can pretend that it's too awkward for her to see you with another woman and tells her grandmother she needs to go away for a while?'

'Exactly,' said Philippe again.

'I suppose it could work.' She turned the idea over in her mind. 'Where do I come into this? Does Lotty want to come and stay

here?’

‘No,’ said Philippe. ‘She wants you to be my girlfriend.’

Caro’s heart skidded to a stop, did a funny little flip and then lurched into gear again at the realisation that he was joking. ‘Right.’ She laughed.

Philippe said nothing.

Her smile faltered. ‘You can’t be serious?’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, because ... you must have a girlfriend.’

‘If I had a serious girlfriend, I wouldn’t be in this mess,’ he said crisply. ‘I’m allergic to relationships. When I meet a woman, I’m clear about that, right from the start. No emotions, no expectations. It just gets messy otherwise.’

Caro sighed. ‘Commitment issues ... I might have guessed! What is it with guys and relationships?’

‘What is it with *women* and relationships?’ Philippe countered. ‘Why do you always have to spoil things by talking about whether we have a relationship or not and, if we do, where it’s going? Why can’t we just have a good time?’

Balked of the prowling he so clearly wanted to do, Philippe stepped over to the mantelpiece, put his hands in his pockets and glowered down at his shoes as if it was their fault. ‘Six months is about as long as I can stand being in Montluce,’ he said. ‘It’s a suffocating place. Formal, stuffy, and so small there’s never any chance to get away.’

He lifted his eyes to Caro’s. They ought to be dark brown, she

thought inconsequentially, not that clear, light grey that was so startling against his dark skin that it sent a tiny shock through her every time she looked into them.

‘I’ll be leaving the moment my father is better, and I don’t want to complicate matters by getting involved with a woman if there’s the slightest risk that she’ll start taking things seriously. On the other hand, if she gets so much as a whiff that I’m not in fact serious, the Dowager Blanche will have Lotty back in a flash. For me, that would be a pain, as I’d have to go back to fighting off all the matchmaking attempts, but it would be far, far worse for Lotty. She’d lose the first chance she’s ever had to do something for herself. And that’s why you’d be perfect,’ he said to Caro.

‘You’re Lotty’s friend,’ he said. ‘I could pretend to be in love with you without worrying that you’d get the wrong idea, because you’d know the score from the start. I’m not going to fall in love with you and you don’t want to get involved with me.’

‘Well, *that’s* certainly true,’ said Caro, ruffled nonetheless by the brutal truth. *I’m not going to fall in love with you.*

‘But you could pretend to love me, couldn’t you?’

‘I’m not sure I’m that good an actress,’ said Caro tartly.

‘Not even for Lotty?’

Caro chewed her lip, thinking of her friend. Lotty was so sweet-natured, so stoical, so good at pleasing everyone but herself. Trapped in a gilded cage of duty and responsibility. From the outside, it was a life of luxury and privilege, but Caro knew how desperately her friend longed to be like everyone else, to

be ordinary. Lotty couldn't pop down to the shops for a pint of milk. She couldn't go out and get giggly over a bottle of wine. She could never look less than perfect, never be grumpy, never act on impulse, never relax.

She could never have fun without wondering if someone was going to take her picture and splash it all over the tabloids.

I'm getting desperate, Lotty had said in her email.

'No one would ever believe you would go out with someone like me!' Caro said eventually.

Philippe studied her with dispassionate eyes. 'Not at the moment, perhaps, but with a haircut, some make-up, some decent clothes ... you might brush up all right.'

Caro tilted her head on one side as she pretended to consider his reply. 'OK, that's one answer,' she allowed. 'Another might be: why wouldn't anyone believe that I could be in love with you? Don't change a thing; you're beautiful as you are.' She smiled sweetly. 'Just a suggestion, of course!'

'See?' said Philippe. 'That's what makes you perfect. I can be honest with you if you're not a real girlfriend.'

'Stop, you're making me feel all warm and fuzzy inside!'

He smiled at that, and went back to sit on the sofa. 'Look, just think about it seriously for a moment, Caro. You don't need to come for the whole six months. Two or three would probably be enough for Lotty to get away. We'd both know where we were. There would no expectations, nobody needs to get hurt and, at the end of two months or whatever, we could say goodbye with no

hard feelings. I stop my great-aunt hassling me about marriage, you get two months away living in a palace—’ the glance he sent around the sitting room made it clear what a change *that* would be ‘—and Lotty gets a chance to escape and have a life of her own for a while.’

He paused. ‘Lotty ... Lotty needs this, Caro. You know what she’s like. Always restrained, always dignified. She wasn’t going to cry or anything, but I could tell how desperate she feels. She’s been good all her life, and just when it looks as if a door is opening for her at last, the Dowager and my father are trying to slam it closed again.’

‘I know, it’s so unfair, but—’

‘And you did say you wanted to reinvent yourself,’ Philippe reminded her.

Caro winced. She had said that. She clutched at her hair, careless of the way it tumbled out of its clip. ‘I just don’t know ... There’s so much to consider, and I can’t think when I’m hungry like this!’ Uncurling her legs, she put her feet on the floor. ‘I’m going to get a biscuit,’ she announced.

‘I’ve got a better idea,’ said Philippe, checking the Rolex on his wrist. ‘Why don’t I take you out to dinner? We can talk about the practicalities then, and I could do with a proper drink, not that disgusting stuff,’ he said with a revolted glance at his tea. ‘Where’s the best place to eat around here?’

‘The Star and Garter at Littendon,’ said Caro automatically, perking up at the prospect of dinner. There was the diet, of

course, but she couldn't be expected to make life-changing decisions on a salad and three biscuits, could she? Besides, it was Saturday. It was dinner with a prince, or stay at home with herbal tea and Mr Sexy online.

The prince in question might not be quite as charming as in the fairy tales, but it still wasn't what you'd call a hard choice.

'But you'll never get in on a Saturday,' she added as Philippe took out a super-slim phone and slid it open. 'They get booked up months in advance.'

Ignoring her, Philippe put the phone to his ear. 'Why don't you go and get changed?' was all he said. 'I'm not taking you out in that purple thing.'

The *purple thing* happened to be one of Caro's favourites, and she was still bristling as she pulled it over her head. She hoped the Star and Garter refused him a table and told His Obnoxious Highness that he'd have to wait three months like everyone else.

On the other *hand*, she reminded herself, the food was reputed to be fabulous. Way out of her price range, but no doubt peanuts to Philippe. It wouldn't be *so* bad if he got a table after all.

Now, what to wear? The Star and Garter—if that was where they were going, and Caro had the feeling that Philippe usually got what he wanted—deserved one of her best dresses. Caro ran her eye over her collection of vintage clothes and picked a pale blue cocktail dress made of flocked chiffon. Perhaps the neckline was a *little* low, but she loved the way the pleated skirt swished around her legs when she sashayed her hips.

Sucking in her breath to do up the side zip, Caro tugged up the neckline as far as she could and sauntered back downstairs with a confidence she was far from feeling. Philippe was still on the sofa, looking utterly incongruous. Unaware of her arrival—she could have spared herself the sauntering—he was leaning forward, reading something on the laptop she had abandoned earlier when she had gone in search of biscuits.

Her laptop! Too late, Caro remembered what she had been doing when depression had sent her to the kitchen. Shooting across the room, she banged the laptop closed, narrowing missing Philippe's fingers.

'What are you *doing*?'

Not at all perturbed, Philippe sat back and looked up at her.

'You know, I'm not sure Mr Sexy is the right guy for you.'

'You shouldn't look at other people's computers.' Caro was mortified that he had witnessed how she had been spending her Saturday night. She glared at him. 'It's very rude.'

'It was open on the table,' Philippe pointed out, unfazed. 'I couldn't help but see what you'd been doing. It was quite an eye-opener, I must say. I've never looked at a dating site before.'

Well, there was a surprise. Young, rich, handsome, a prince, and he'd never had to resort to internet dating. Incredible, thought Caro.

'I don't see you finding Mr Right amongst that lot, though,' he said. 'They're not exactly oozing charisma, are they?'

'They can't all be princes,' snapped Caro, pushing him out

of the way so she could shut the computer down. 'That's not what I'm looking for either. I just want an ordinary life with an ordinary guy, which is not something *you'd* be able to understand.'

Philippe shook his head. 'You know, I don't think you've been entirely honest in your profile,' he said, nodding at the computer. 'You didn't say anything about how prickly you are.'

'You read my profile?'

'Of course,' he said. 'It's called research. If we're going to be spending time together, I need to know what I'm going to be dealing with. I must say, I don't think that picture does you justice,' he went on.

He eyed Caro's dress, unimpressed. 'You might want to warn any prospective matches about your odd taste in clothes before you meet,' he added with unnecessary provocation. 'What are you wearing now?'

'I'll have you know this is one of my best dresses,' she said, too cross with him to care what he thought about her clothes. 'It's an original cocktail dress from the Fifties. I had to save up to buy it online.'

'You mean you handed over money for that?' Philippe unfolded himself from the sofa. 'Extraordinary.'

'I love vintage clothes,' said Caro. She held out the skirts and twirled. 'I wonder who bought this dress when it was new. Did she buy it for a special occasion? Was she excited? Did she meet someone when she was wearing it? A dress like this has a history.'

I like that.’

Philippe blinked at the swirl of chiffon and the tantalising glimpse of a really excellent pair of legs. The dress was an improvement on the purple cheesecloth, there was no doubt about that, but he wished that she had put on something a little less ... eccentric. A little less *provoking*. Only Caroline Cartwright would choose to wear a sixty-year-old dress!

Maybe it did suit those luscious curves, but it still looked odd to Philippe, and he scowled as he sat in the back of the limousine next to Caro. He had decided to ignore—loftily—her fashion faux pas, and was annoyed to discover that the wretched dress kept snagging at his attention anyway. He blamed Caro, who kept tugging surreptitiously at the neckline, which only drew his eyes to the deep cleavage. Or she was crossing those legs so that the chiffon skirt slithered over her thighs. Philippe shifted uneasily, adjusting his seat belt. He was sure he could hear the material whispering silkily against her bare skin. She had twisted up the mass of nut-brown hair and fixed it with a clip so obviously casually shoved in that he expected any moment that it would all tumble free.

It was very distracting. Caro wasn’t supposed to be distracting. She was supposed to be convenient. That was all.

‘I can’t believe you got a table!’ Caro looked as if she couldn’t decide whether to be delighted or aggrieved when the limousine pulled up outside the Star and Garter.

‘I didn’t. Yan did.’ Philippe nodded at an impassive giant who

sat next to the driver in the front seat.

Caro lowered her voice and leant closer, giving Philippe a whiff of a clean fresh scent. 'Is he your bodyguard?'

'He prefers to be known as my personal protection officer,' said Philippe. 'He's a very handy man to have around, especially when it comes to getting tables.'

'Everyone else has to wait months. I suppose he dropped your title?' she said disapprovingly.

'I'm sure he did. What else is it for?'

'We can go somewhere else if you object to Yan pulling rank,' he said, but Caro shook her head quickly, so that more strands escaped from the clip. She smoothed them from her face.

'I've always wanted to eat here,' she confessed. 'It's horrendously expensive and most people only come for special occasions. I wanted to come with George when we got engaged, but he didn't think it was worth the money.' She sighed a little and the generous mouth curved downwards. 'We had pizza instead.'

To Philippe, who had eaten at some of the world's top restaurants, there was nothing special about the Star and Garter. It was pleasant enough, he allowed, simply decorated with subtle lighting and enough tables for the place to feel lively without being so close together you were forced to listen to anyone else's conversation.

He was used to the way the buzz of conversation paused when he walked into a restaurant, used to ignoring it while the manager came to greet him personally, used to exchanging pleasantries on

automatic pilot, but all the time he could *feel* Caro beside him as clearly as if she were touching him. He kept his eyes courteously on the manager, but he didn't need to look at Caro to know that she was looking eagerly around her, practically humming with anticipation, careless of the fact that her fashion sense was fifty years out of date. Her eyes would be bright, that wretched, tantalising hair escaping from its clip.

And then, abruptly, he felt her stiffen and inhale sharply, and he broke off in mid-sentence to glance at her. She was rigid, her face white and frozen. Philippe followed her stricken gaze across the restaurant to where a couple were staring incredulously back at her.

It wasn't his problem, Philippe told himself, but somehow his arm went round Caro and he pulled her into his side in a possessive gesture. 'I hope you're hungry, *chérie*?' he said, trying not to notice how the dress slipped over her skin beneath his hand.

Caro looked blindly up at him. 'Wh... What?'

'Do you want to go straight to the table or would you rather have a drink at the bar first?' He kept a firm hold on her until the blankness faded from her eyes and understanding dawned.

'Oh.' She moistened her lips. 'Let's go to the table.'

'Excellent.' Philippe turned to the manager. 'We'll have a bottle of your best champagne.'

'Certainly, Your Highness.'

Caro was tense within the circle of his arm as they followed

the waiter to their table. She didn't look again at the couple, but her lips were pressed tightly together in distress or anger, Philippe couldn't tell.

'All right?' he asked, when the waiter had gone.

'Yes, I ... yes.' Caro shook out her napkin and smoothed it on her lap with hands that were not quite steady. 'It was just a shock to see them here.'

'That was your ex, I take it?'

'George, yes, and his new fiancée.' Her voice vibrated with suppressed anger. 'I can't *believe* he brought Melanie here. She doesn't even *eat!* That's how she looks like a stick insect.'

Philippe glanced over at the table. As far as he could see, Melanie was slim and pretty and blonde, but she would look muted next to Caro.

'I wonder if they're celebrating their engagement?' Caro went on, but he was glad to see the colour back in her face. Shock, it seemed, had been superseded by fury. 'Clearly, Melanie's too good for *pizza!*' She practically spat out the word.

'Maybe she'll wish that they'd gone for pizza instead now that you've arrived,' said Philippe, picking up the menu. 'It can't be much fun trying to celebrate your engagement when your fiancé's ex is on the other side of the room and he can't take his eyes off her.'

'Oh, he's not looking at me,' said Caro bitterly. 'He's looking at *you* and wondering what on earth a guy like you is doing with a boring frump like me!'

Philippe's dark brows shot up. 'Boring? *You?*'

His surprise was some consolation, Caro supposed. She opened the menu and pretended to read it, but the words were a blur and all she saw instead was George's face the day he'd told her it was over. He'd waited until she came back from the supermarket, and told her while she was unpacking the bags. Now Caro couldn't look at a carton of orange juice without feeling queasy.

'George thinks I'm boring.' She pressed her lips together against the jab of memory. 'He always said that he wanted to marry someone like me, but then he fell in love with Melanie because she was sexy and fun and everything I'm not, apparently.'

Turning a page unseeingly, she went on, 'There's a certain irony in that. I spent five years being careful and dressing conventionally, and deliberately *not* being fun or obvious, just so that I would fit into his world. I'd have done anything for him.'

Whenever she thought about how much she had loved George, her voice would crack like that. It was mortifying because she was over him now. Pretty much.

'Lotty said you'd been engaged, but that it was over,' Philippe said in that cool, couldn't-give-a-damn voice. 'It's one of the reasons she thought you might like to come to Montluce. A chance to get away for a while.'

'It *would* be nice.' Caro hadn't thought of that aspect of things before. She'd been too busy thinking what it would be like to spend two months with Philippe, who was sitting opposite her

looking remote and gorgeous and totally out of reach in spite of being only a matter of inches away.

‘Ellerby’s a small town,’ she said, ‘and I spend a lot of time dreading that I’m going to bump into George, like just now.’

Although this time it hadn’t been so bad, after all, she realised. There’d been that horrible moment when she’d seen George there with Melanie, and she’d been gripped by that old mixture of misery and rage and humiliation. They were a cosy twosome and she was left alone ... and then, suddenly, she hadn’t been on her own. Philippe had put his arm around her and made it look as if they were a couple, and she’d seen the astonishment flash in George’s face.

Caro looked at Philippe. The dark brows were drawn together as he studied the menu and, with those piercing eyes shielded for once, she could let her gaze travel down his straight nose to the cool set of his mouth, where it snagged in spite of her efforts to tear her eyes away. Looking at it made her feel quite ... funny.

He hadn’t hesitated to step in and rescue her, while she had been floundering.

‘Thank you for earlier,’ she said.

‘Earlier?’

‘You know, making George think we were a couple.’ He’d been so quick, seeing instantly what was needed, before she’d even thought about how to react. ‘They always see me looking lonely and miserable and pathetic,’ she said, laying down the menu so that he could see how grateful she was. ‘I don’t look like

that when I'm with you.'

CHAPTER THREE

‘ARE you still in love with him?’ Philippe asked and then looked as if the question had caught him unawares. ‘I mean, it would be difficult for you to act as my girlfriend if you were,’ he added.

‘No.’ She didn’t sound quite as sure as she should have done, Caro realised. ‘No,’ she said again. ‘I adored George. When he broke off our engagement, it broke my heart. For a long time I told myself that I wanted him back, that I still loved him, but now ... now I think maybe I love the idea of him more than the reality.’

She saw Philippe flick a brief, uncomprehending glance at George. No, he wouldn’t understand.

‘I know he’s not particularly good-looking or glamorous, but he was everything I’ve ever wanted. He belongs.’

Philippe looked mystified.

‘I never belonged anywhere,’ she tried to explain. ‘My dad was a mechanical engineer, and when I was small we moved around from project to project overseas. Then he got ill, and we moved to St Wulfrida’s.’

‘That was Lotty’s school,’ he remembered, and Caro nodded.

‘That’s where we met. My mother got a teaching post there, Dad applied to be the handyman so they could be together, and I got a free education as part of the deal. Except I was never

going to belong in a school like that, where all the other girls had titles or triple-bar-rellied names. I wasn't nearly posh enough for them. Lotty was my only friend, and I wouldn't have got through it without her.'

'Funny,' said Philippe, 'that's what she said about you.'

Caro smiled. 'We got each other through, I think. Neither of us could wait to leave. St Wulfrida's doesn't exactly excel in academic achievement, so after GCSEs Lotty went to finishing school, and I went to the local college to do A levels. I thought that would be better, but of course I didn't fit in there either. I was *too* posh for them!'

'What's the big deal about belonging, anyway?' asked Philippe. 'You're lucky. You can go wherever you like, do what you like. That's what most of us want.'

'I don't,' said Caro. 'Dad died when I was fifteen, and my mother five years later, so I don't have any family left.'

She smiled wistfully. 'I suppose I've been looking for a home ever since. When I came to Ellerby and met George, I really thought I'd found a place to belong at last,' she went on. 'George's family have been here for generations. He's the third generation of solicitors, and he's *part* of Ellerby.' Caro searched her mind for an example. 'He's on the committee at the golf club.'

Philippe raised his brows.

'I know,' she said, even though he hadn't said a word, 'it doesn't sound very exciting. But being with George made me feel safe. He had a house, and it felt like being part of the community. I

think that's what I miss more than anything else.'

The wine waiter arrived with the bottle of champagne just then, and they went through the whole palaver of showing Philippe the label, opening the bottle with a flourish, pouring the glasses.

Caro concentrated on the menu while all that was going on, a little embarrassed by how much she'd blurted out to Philippe. He was surprisingly easy to talk to, she realised. Perhaps it was because he so clearly didn't care. Or maybe it was knowing that he was so far out of her league she didn't even need to try and impress him with her coolness or her success. She wasn't here to be clever or witty or interesting. It didn't matter what he thought of George, or of her.

The realisation was strangely exhilarating.

When they'd ordered, Philippe picked up his glass and chinked it against hers. 'Shall we drink to our plan?'

Anything for you, Lotty, she had said once. Still in the grip of that odd sense of liberation, Caro touched his glass back with the air of one making an irrevocable decision. 'To our plan,' she agreed. 'And to Lotty's escape.'

Philippe sat back in his chair and eyed her thoughtfully across the table. 'You're good friends, aren't you?'

'Lotty was wonderful to me when my father died.' Caro turned the stem of her champagne glass between her thumb and fingers. 'He'd been ill for months, and there was no question of us going on holiday, so Lotty asked me if I wanted to spend part of the

summer with her, in her family villa in the south of France.'

She lifted her eyes and met Philippe's cool ones. 'You were there.'

'Lotty said that we'd met once,' he said. 'I vaguely remember that she had a friend who was around and then suddenly gone. Was that you?'

'Yes. I hung around with Lotty until my mother rang to say that Dad had had a relapse and was in hospital again. She said there was nothing I could do, and that I should stay in France and enjoy myself. She said that was what Dad wanted, but I couldn't bear it. I was desperate to see him.'

The glass winked in the candlelight as Caro turned it round, round, round.

'I didn't have any money, and Mum was too worried about Dad to think of changing my ticket,' she went on after a moment. 'Lotty was only fifteen too, and she was so shy that she still stammered when she was anxious, but she didn't even hesitate. She knew I needed to go home. She talked to people she would normally be too nervous to talk to, and she sorted everything out for me. She made sure I was booked onto a flight the next day. I've no idea how she did it, but she arranged for someone to pick me up at the airport in London and take me straight to the hospital.'

'Dad died the next day.' Caro swallowed. Even after all that time, the thought of her beloved father made her throat tight. 'If it hadn't been for Lotty, I'd never have seen him again.' She

lifted her eyes to Philippe's again. 'I'll always be grateful to her for that. I've often wished there was something I could do for her in return, and now I can. If spending two months pretending to be in love with you helps her escape, even if just for a little while, then I'll do that.'

'It must have been a hard time for you,' said Philippe after a moment. 'I know how I felt when my brother died. I wanted everything to just ... stop. And I wasn't a child, like you.'

He set his glass carefully on the table. 'Lotty was good to me then, too. Everyone understood how tragic it was for my father to lose his perfect son, but Lotty was the only one who thought about what it might be like for me to lose a brother. She's a very special person,' he said. 'She deserves a chance to live life on her own terms for a change. I know this is a mad plan,' he went on, deliberately lightening the tone, 'but it's worth a shot, don't you think?'

'I do.' Caro was happy to follow his lead. 'If nothing else, it will convince George and Melanie that I've moved on to much bigger and better things!'

She shot George a victorious look, but Philippe shook his head. 'Stop that,' he said.

'Stop what?'

'Stop looking at him.' He tutted. 'When I take a girl out to dinner, I don't expect her to spend her whole time thinking about another man!'

'I'm not!'

‘You’re supposed to be thinking about me,’ said Philippe, ignoring her protest. ‘George is never going to believe we’re having a wild and passionate affair if he sees you sneaking glances at him.’

‘He’s never going to believe we’re having a wild and passionate affair anyway,’ said Caro, ruffled. ‘He thinks I’m too boring for that.’

‘Then why don’t you show him just how wrong he is?’ Philippe leant forward over the table and fixed Caro with his silver gaze. He really had extraordinary eyes, she found herself thinking irrelevantly. Wolf’s eyes, their lightness accentuated by the darkness of his features and the fringe of black lashes. It was easier to think about that than about the way her heart was thudding in her throat at his nearness.

‘How do you suggest I do that?’ she said, struggling to hold on to her composure. ‘We can hardly get down and dirty under the table!’

A faint contemptuous smile curled the corners of Philippe’s mouth. ‘Well, that would certainly make the point, but I was thinking of rather subtle ways of suggesting that we can’t keep our hands off each other. For a start, you could keep your attention fixed on me, rather than on him! If we were really sleeping together, we’d be absorbed in each other.’

‘It doesn’t always have to be about you, you know,’ grumbled Caro. ‘Anyway, I *am* looking at you.’ She fixed her eyes at him. ‘There. Satisfied?’

‘You could make it look as if you adore me and can’t wait for me to drag you back to bed.’

‘Oh, that’s easy.’ Caro summoned a suitably besotted expression and batted her lashes at him.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Philippe.

‘Nothing’s the matter! I’m looking adoring!’

‘You look constipated,’ he said frankly. ‘Come on, you must be able to do better than that.’

‘You’re the expert on seduction,’ said Caro, sulking. ‘You do it.’

‘OK.’ Philippe reached across the table for her hand, turned it over and lifted it. ‘Watch and learn,’ he said, pressing a kiss into her palm.

Caro sucked in a breath as a current of warmth shot up her arm and washed through her. Her scalp was actually tingling with it. Bad sign. Willing the heat to fade, she struggled to keep her voice even.

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