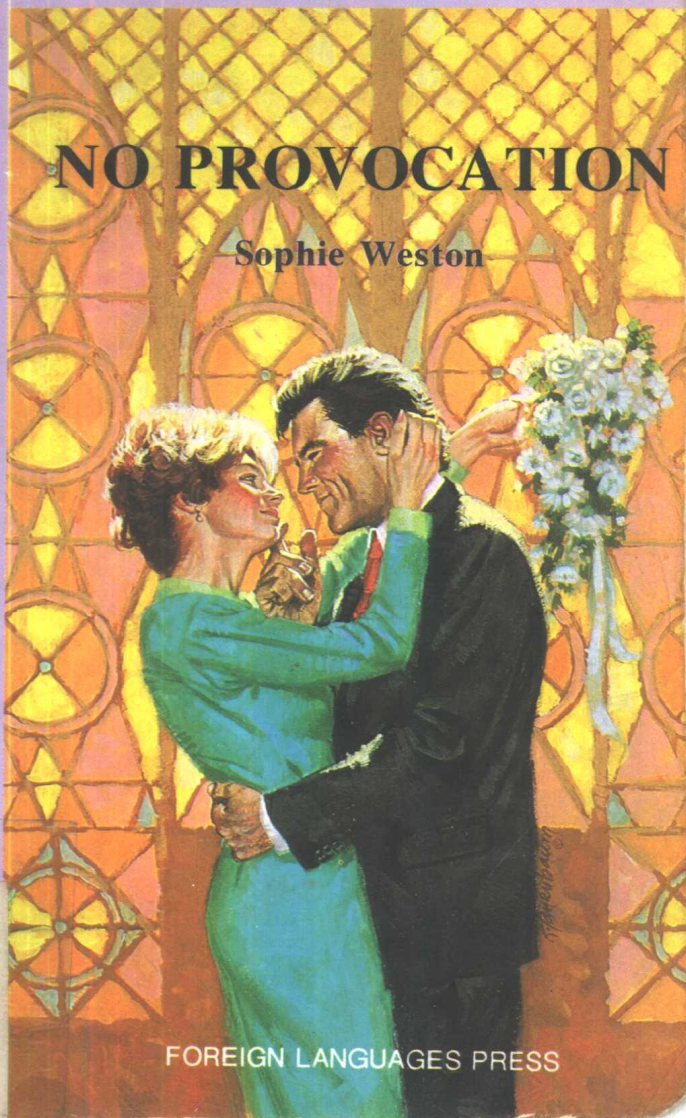


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“It’s my mother.”

Candy continued. “One of your—” she sought for an appropriate word, knowing scandal sheets wouldn’t do “—papers has got a story about her. My—my father is...” She found she could not go on.

“And you were going to offer me a bargain, so the paper wouldn’t print the story.”

Candy flushed. “It sounds bad, put like that.”

“What were you going to offer?”

“You wouldn’t settle for my undying gratitude, I suppose?” she said, trying for a lightness she didn’t feel.

“That would depend on how it was expressed.”

There was a long silence in which Candy felt as if she were being slowly stretched until she snapped.

“I don’t believe you said that. Do you think you’re some kind of movie mogul with a casting couch?”

Justin seemed amused. “I was thinking of marriage.”

Sophie Weston wrote and illustrated her first book at the age of five. After university she decided on a career in international finance, which was tremendously stimulating and demanding, but it was not enough. Something was missing in her life, and that something turned out to be writing. These days her life is complete. She loves exciting travel and adventures, yet hates to stray too long from her homey cottage in Chelsea, where she writes.

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CHAPTER ONE

CANDY NEILSON drew a deep breath. Someone was watching her.

Cautiously, she looked round her mother's drawing-room. Nobody met her eyes. Nobody seemed to be staring at her out of the crowd.

If only Dave had come with her. But when she had tried, shyly, to suggest it he had looked at her with blank incomprehension. (Said she deserved an evening off.) Said she would enjoy it, Candy remembered bitterly.

She smoothed the velvet skirt she was so reluctantly wearing. Sophisticated make-up disguised the pallor of her oval face. Her red hair was piled on the top of her head with deceptive casualness. Artless curling tendrils drifted against her cheek and the graceful length of her neck. She looked cool and poised and she knew it. She felt sick.

She could still feel those unseen eyes on her. She began to shake. After all this time, she thought despairingly, I ought to be able to walk into a cocktail party without collapsing. What's wrong with me?

Her mother saw her at once and came over, weaving expertly through the chattering groups. She too wore her make-up as if it were armour. Candy, who loved her, could see the strain in the lovely eyes.

'Darling, you're here. How nice.'

A scented cheek was pressed against her own.

'I said I would,' Candy said steadily.

Judith Neilson's eyes skidded away from hers. There had been a major fight about it, but Lady Neilson was

not in the business of remembering battles when they were over.

'Have you seen your father?' she asked, looking round the room casually.

The groups were very nearly as tightly packed as a rush-hour underground train, Candy thought drily. The only difference was that they were drinking expensive alcohol and a good half of them were in dinner-jackets.

She said, 'It's not easy to see anyone in this crush.'

Even ~~as she~~ said it, she realised sharply that it wasn't true. Across the room a tall, dark man was watching her. Candy had no trouble in seeing him at all. In fact, as their eyes met, she realised that it was he watching her from the first.

He was tall and slim, with a fierce profile. Attraction blazed out of him like a death-ray. You could see it in the faces of the women round him, even though he was ignoring them.

'The familiar shivery feeling she so despised began. But she would not let herself give in to it. She lifted her chin and glared straight back at him. His eyebrows rose. He looked amused. The shivers got worse.

Beside her Judith was saying distractedly, 'He promised he'd come. He promised.'

She had never seen the stranger before, Candy thought positively. She would have remembered those laughing eyes. She tried and failed to tear her own away.

'He?' she said vaguely.

'Your father. Are you sure you haven't seen him?'

With an effort Candy brought her attention back to her mother.

'Pops? You mean he isn't here?'

That alone was enough to account for the strain. Though Judith was determinedly ignoring it, Candy knew that the fragile marriage was as rocky as she could remember.

She wondered briefly if all only children were in the same position. She felt like a small nation caught between two warring empires. She couldn't remember a time when she hadn't felt like that: tentative, careful, her every feeling policed in case it gave rise to a declaration of hostilities. What would it be like to be spontaneous? She sighed.

Judith said, 'I don't know.' In the crowded room she kept her voice level and her expression casual. But Candy could feel the panic fluttering just below the surface. 'He's in a strange mood. We had an argument last night. When you were out. I would have told you but you came in so late.'

She could not quite banish the note of reproach. Candy skirted it cautiously. At some point her parents were going to have to find out that she was working at the Homeless Centre. Her father was not at home often enough to notice, but her mother was beginning to complain about the hours she had started to keep. She would have to tell them. But she would choose her moment carefully.

And in her heart of hearts she still hoped that Dave Tresilian would be with her when she did. Though that was more a dream than a hope, and she knew it.

With or without Dave's support, however, she was not going to be able to break the unwelcome news about her future in the middle of a cocktail party.

So she said, 'What sort of argument?'

For the tiniest fraction of a second Judith looked sick. The expression was banished immediately.

'We can't talk about it now. He won't let me down. I'm sure he won't. He must have been held up at the office. This take-over,' she murmured. She gave a bright smile to a new arrival. 'Wonderful to see you. Get together later. Find yourself a drink.' She looked suddenly at Candy. 'Darling, you haven't got a drink either.'

She gestured at one of the hired waiters who was circulating with a tray of canapés. 'Would you fetch my daughter a glass of champagne, please?'

Candy didn't like champagne but she didn't protest. She knew there was no point. It was part of one's duty at a cocktail party to circulate carrying a glass. You could quite often get away without drinking from it, she had found.

Judith scanned the room. 'You'll talk to Megan, won't you? Her son's back from Brazil. And Tom Langton. You were a bit abrupt with him last week, darling...'

Across the room the tall stranger was still watching her, his expression quizzical. He was nominally part of a group gathered round a vivacious friend of Lady Neilson's. But he was not even pretending to listen to the lively conversation. As Candy watched, he left them without a word. He began to shoulder his way through the crowd on a steady course that would bring him to her side. He did not take his eyes off her.

'Mother,' Candy said urgently.

'Here's your drink, darling.' Judith took it from the waiter with her charming smile and pressed it into Candy's hand. 'There you are, darling, it'll make you feel livelier. You can look a bit *grim*, you know.'

'Mother, who's that man?' Candy demanded, unheeding.

Judith's brows rose at this unusual display of interest from her only child. Pleased, she turned.

'The Spellborough man? Or the American that Sally——' She broke off. All the careful social poise fell away from her like a dropped bath-towel, Candy thought, shocked at the sight. 'Oh, my God. What's he doing here?'

Judith was looking straight at the dark stranger. He had been intercepted by a plump matron with her hand

on his chest. But there was no doubt at all that his progress was only temporarily delayed.

'Who is he?' said Candy.

'Drink your champagne. I must...' Judith was distracted.

'Who?'

Her mother sent her a harried glance.

'He's a man called Justin Richmond. He runs the Richmond group. Your father has regarded him as a personal sort of enemy ever since he poached that woman's editor from the *Gaze*—Lizbeth Lamont. And now your father and he—well, to be honest, darling, he's the man your father thinks is behind the resistance to his bid for Richmonds. He'll be *furious* if he gets here and finds Justin Richmond at my party.'

Candy whistled. 'Too right.'

It was a measure of Judith's agitation that she did not reprimand her.

Justin Richmond had detached himself, and was making straight towards them.

Judith looked at Candy sharply. 'Are you sure you don't know him?'

Candy shook her head. 'Never seen him before in my life.'

'Well, he seems to know you.'

Agitation flickered. Oh, if only Dave were here. She calmed herself deliberately.

'I know. He's been looking at me ever since I came in.'

Judith looked even more worried. 'What's he up to? If your father... We'll have to get rid of him *quickly*.'

But Justin Richmond had reached them.

'Lady Neilson,' he said, though he was looking at Candy.

His eyes, she saw, were a strange, deep colour, so it looked as if he was looking at you with his whole heart

and mind. The impression of intensity was disturbing. It certainly seemed to unsettle Judith's practised poise.

'Mr Richmond. I didn't realise you... that is...'

'No, I'm not on your guest list,' he agreed, amused. 'Polly Davent asked me to bring her.'

Mrs Davent's husband had walked out on her in a spectacular scene at a nightclub just before Christmas. She was putting a brave face on it—and turning up to social occasions with a range of surprising escorts. She was also an old friend of Judith's. Candy looked at her mother curiously. It was a nice social dilemma.

Judith did not have time to react, however. The alarming man had already turned to Candy.

'We haven't met. I'm Justin Richmond.'

As if mesmerised, she put out her hand.

'Candida Neilson.'

For a moment his face went still, the strange eyes going flat as if he was looking inwards instead of out. Then he smiled, a small private smile that made Candy even more uneasy than she was already.

'Delighted,' he murmured.

She had the feeling he meant it—and for no kindly reason. She cast her mother a quick imploring look. It went unanswered.

Judith said swiftly, 'Darling, why don't you show Mr Richmond the picture gallery? I believe he's a collector, too.'

The dark eyes crinkled with amusement. 'Not in the same class as Sir Leslie,' he demurred.

But Judith, with one eye on the door for her husband's arrival, virtually hustled them out. 'Show him the Kokoschka your father's just bought,' she said. 'It's said to be one of his finest.' And under her breath she hissed in Candy's ear, 'Get rid of him, for God's sake.'

Candy was almost certain that Justin Richmond heard. Anyway, he couldn't be in much doubt about the effect

his uninvited presence was having on her mother, she thought, horribly embarrassed. Not knowing what to say, she led the way to the gallery.

It was an L-shaped room under the roof that spanned the entire ground-plan of the house. Lights were on and refreshments set out in readiness for any of the guests who proved to be art-lovers. The room was unoccupied. Justin Richmond looked round.

'Impressive.'

He went over to a small painting in an alcove. His shoes clipped on the polished wooden floor. Candy cast desperately around for something to say. *Oh, Dave, why aren't you here?*

She cleared her throat. 'What do you collect, Mr Richmond?'

He swung neatly round to face her. 'Oh, I wouldn't say I collect,' he drawled. 'Not like this. I just sometimes see something special, something very beautiful. Or moving.'

His eyes on her were like a caress and yet not: like a collector running a possessive hand down one of his acquisitions, Candy thought. She remembered that feeling from when she'd walked into the drawing-room this evening. He must have been watching her even then. She wanted to turn and run.

Instead she found herself saying huskily, 'And when you do?'

He shrugged. But there was nothing casual about him. That strange intensity was still there, in the tall frame, the handsome face.

'Oh, then I go after it.'

To Candy, still off balance, it sounded like a warning. She stared at him, her brows flying up.

'Are you saying you're going after one of my father's pictures? Should I warn him?' she said, trying to sound amused.

Justin Richmond chuckled. 'Oh I think I can live without his pictures.'

Candy thought frantically. The take-over, of course. She had paid little attention to it and, since her refusal to go into his publishing empire, Sir Leslie had not discussed his business affairs at home.

She said slowly, 'I'm not sure what there is between you and my father.'

He gave a soft laugh. 'So far, nothing more than harsh words and bad blood.'

'So far?'

'I have a presentiment that things just changed.'

She was bewildered. 'I don't understand. I'm afraid I don't take much interest in business,' she said carefully.

He didn't answer her. Instead he subjected her to a long, thoughtful inspection which set her teeth on edge.)

Then he said easily, 'That suits me fine.'

Candy's slow-burning fuse ignited. It was not often that she lost her temper. She could not remember having done it since she was six or seven. But there was something about this man—his ease, his amusement, above all that intent, intense study of her ever since she arrived at the party—that added up to insolence.

She said in a voice like a whiplash, 'Did you come to my mother's party intending to be insulting? Or is it a spur-of-the-moment thing?'

'Insulting?' He sounded genuinely taken aback. Then, unforgivably, he looked amused. Amused and intrigued. 'How have I insulted you?'

Candy was furious. 'Saying I suited you. Suited you.'

He chuckled. 'That wasn't quite what I meant.' He came over to her. 'But I'm sorry you consider it an insult, anyway.'

And he bent and kissed her.

Candy's first reaction was outrage. In fact she was so angry that she forgot to be afraid, as she usually was.

She pushed hard at his chest. The forgotten champagne tipped, spilling on to his immaculate jacket. He released her a little, but only to take the champagne flute out of her hand.

'Why don't we put this down?' he said gently. 'You know you're not going to drink it. And it is in the way, wouldn't you agree?'

Candy spluttered. Justin Richmond leaned back a little and put the intrusive glass down on a convenient table. He looked down into her face, those strange eyes dancing.

'And now——'

She tensed. But this was nothing like the brisk brutality her experience had taught her to expect. His mouth just brushed hers, lightly, coolly. His fingertips rested along the rigid line of her spine, without pressure. There was no demand, just a gentle, infinitely courteous savouring of their closeness. All Candy's senses seemed to come alive. With a sigh she felt herself relax against him.

She completely forgot why she had been angry with him. Or even that she had been angry at all.

'Mm. I knew it.' Justin said it softly, not taking his lips from hers.

Her eyes drifted open. She did not remember closing them.

'Knew what?' She hardly recognised her voice.

But his answer was another of those tantalising kisses. Candy locked her arms round his neck and drowned in sensation.

She was vaguely aware that no one she knew would have recognised quiet Candy Neilson in the sensuous woman responding to Justin's lightest touch. She hardly recognised her herself. It was mildly alarming. But there was also satisfaction in leaping the barriers of good be-

haviour and acquired caution. So this was what it felt like to give in to your impulses, she thought, exhilarated.

At last Justin raised his head. She thought he did it reluctantly, and felt a queer surge of triumph.

'Temptress.' The laughing voice was husky.

He tucked a straying lock of hair back into the sculptured swirls. To the dazed Candy it felt incredibly tender. He held her away from him.

'Where do you want to go?'

'What?' Bewildered, she stared at him.

He touched her mouth with a gentle fingertip.

'We need to talk, I think. But *not* surrounded by your father's neglected Monets. Will you have dinner with me?'

Candy stared harder.

'Dinner? Now? This evening? But what about Mrs Davent?'

'A lower priority. She'll understand.'

'But——'

'Your mother told you to get rid of me,' he reminded her gently. 'How better?'

Candy flushed. He held her face between his hands.

'Trust me.'

So she went with him.

She half expected a discreetly lit fashionable restaurant. But he took her to a smoky cellar. In one corner a band was producing complicated, muffled rhythms while an ebony-skinned man danced a flugelhorn through a range of sounds Candy had never even imagined.

It was crowded, but a cheerful girl directed them to a corner table. She clearly knew Justin. Justin equally clearly knew the menu.

'The burgers are nearly as good as the music,' he said, leaning back in his chair and watching Candy. His eyes were warm. 'But have what you want.'