



Too Proud to Be Bought

By Sharon Kendrick



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The humble waitress and the Russian billionaire...

Waitress Zara Evans doesn't belong in glittering high society. That is until she finds herself unexpectedly at an exclusive party, and manages to captivate the most sought-after man in the room—Russian oligarch Nikolai Komarov.

For Nikolai, there's something about Zara's beauty that makes her stand out from the first-class crowd. Experience has taught him all women have their price, but he has never encountered anyone like Zara—a young woman who is too proud, too independent, too willful to be bought...



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Editorial Review

About the Author

Sharon Kendrick started story-telling at the age of eleven and has never stopped. She likes to write fast-paced, feel-good romances with heroes who are so sexy they'll make your toes curl! She lives in the beautiful city of Winchester – where she can see the cathedral from her window (when standing on tip-toe!). She has two children, Celia and Patrick and her passions include music, books, cooking and eating – and drifting into daydreams while working out new plots.

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It was like looking at a stranger.

A glamorous, sexy stranger.

Zara blinked in disbelief at the image which gleamed back at her from the long mirror— all curves and shadows and expanses of unaccustomed bare flesh. How long since she had looked like this—like a real woman instead of a drudge? Though come to think of it, she could never remember looking quite like *this* before.

The acid-green satin dress clung to her body like syrup, delicate fabric pooling to the floor in a silken stream. It was light years away from her usual jeans and sloppy T-shirts—but the differences didn't stop there. Her eyes looked huge and sooty above carefully highlighted cheekbones and her usual ponytail had been replaced with a slick and grown-up chignon, leaving her bare neck feeling curiously vulnerable. Fake diamonds sparkled at her throat and hung in glittering waterfalls from her ears. She narrowed her eyes. Didn't she look just a little.... *ostentatious*?

Resisting the urge to chew on her carefully manicured nails, she looked down at her friend, who was kneeling on the floor at her feet. 'Emma, I can't,' she croaked.

'Can't what?' Emma gave the silken hem of the dress a final tug.

'I can't gatecrash this party—I'm a waitress, not a socialite! I can't target some mystery Russian billionaire because you think he'd be good for your business. And I can't carry off wearing the kind of outfit which makes me feel as if I'm not wearing anything at all. Shall I go on?'

Emma took the pin out of her mouth. 'Rubbish! Of course you can. You'll be doing us both a favour. *I* get to showcase one of my dresses to one of the world's richest men—and *you* get your first night out since heaven only knows when. Believe me, Zara, chances like this don't come along very often. Nikolai Komarov owns department stores in every major city in the world and he's a connoisseur of beautiful women. He's itching to have me design a collection for him or to clothe his latest mistress—he just doesn't know it yet!'

Zara glanced down at the gossip magazine which was open to reveal a black and white photo of the Russian oligarch and more doubts pricked over her skin as his pale and strangely intense eyes seemed to bore straight into her like twin laser beams. 'And I'm supposed to give him your business card?'

'Why not?'

'Because...because it's like I'm going to be touting for trade at a social occasion.'

'Nonsense. They'll all be doing it. It's what's known in the business world as networking. It isn't as if you're hurting anybody, is it? And anyway, *you* could do with something like this. How long is it since you had any real enjoyment?'

Enjoyment? Zara's fingers tightened around the little feathered concoction of a handbag she was holding because her friend's question had touched a nerve. And maybe the nerve was rawer than she'd thought. It *did* seem an eternity since she had been out anywhere—unless it was to the grocery store or pharmacy at the end of the road. Her beloved godmother's final illness had dragged on and on until death had seemed like a release from all the little indignities and sadnesses she had borne along the way.

For months, Zara's life had been dominated by the sickroom while she had nursed the woman who hadn't even been a blood relative. But her loyalty to the lady who'd taken her in after the death of her parents meant that she'd dropped her studies to care for her without a second thought. Day and night she had juggled meals, care, bills and medicines—and wait-ressing for Emma's mother's catering company whenever she could squeeze it in.

And when it had all been over, and the last of the all-too-few sympathy cards had been read, Zara had felt lonely and bereft. As if too much had happened for her to ever contemplate returning to the carefree student life she'd known before. There were still debts to be settled, too—and her grim determination not to lose the little house she'd been bequeathed seemed to dominate her thoughts. An unknown future lay ahead of her, and it was scary.

'So why not *have* a little fun, Zara? Why not be a Cinderella for the night and dance all your cares away? You know you'll be doing me a huge favour.'

Zara gave a wry smile as Emma's voice butted into her thoughts. Could she? If only cares could simply be danced away—how much simpler the world would be. Yet maybe her friend was right. What *was* stopping her from having a little light-hearted diversion? Unless she was secretly yearning for the alternative scenario of yet another night spent worrying about the stack of unpaid bills, which wouldn't seem to go away...

'Okay,' she said, drawing her shoulders back and taking one last look at her reflection. 'I'll go. I'll enjoy wearing this exquisite gown you've created and try to enjoy being on the other side of a tray for once—drinking the champagne instead of handing it out! And I'll walk up to this Russian oligarch of yours and give him your card. How's that?'

'Perfect! I've primed the other waitresses about it and they think it's a wonderful idea. I guess they can't really object, since my mum is the one who's employing them and she's not even in the country! Now go! Go on—go!'

Clutching the crumpled money her friend had thrust at her, Zara walked out of the small studio in too-high heels and hailed the welcoming light of a black cab before she had time to change her mind about a scheme which seemed to be growing crazier by the second.

The summer evening was still light and every flower in the capital seemed to be in bloom, but as the taxi drew up outside the Embassy her heart began to race. What if she was discovered—a humble waitress masquerading as a bonafide guest? An *imposter* who had no right to be there. Wouldn't they throw her out and kick up the most tremendous fuss in the process? Yet the man who collected her ticket at the door did nothing other than flick her a quick, admiring glance and Zara drew a deep breath as she walked into the gleaming ballroom.

The vast room looked spectacular. Glittering chandeliers threw diamond lights over tall vases of scarlet roses

and a string quartet was playing on a raised dais in front of a shiny, bare dance-floor. She glanced at the other guests and thought how amazing they looked. Especially the female guests. *Their* diamonds were the real thing and surely that stood out by a mile. Was the rich Russian really going to be impressed by what she was wearing—a hand-crafted gown made by an ambitious young fashion student—when there was so much screamingly expensive couture in this room?

She could see a couple of men turning round to glance at her and their women partners following suit. Could they guess that she was operating outside her comfort zone—that she was actually *trespassing*? Suddenly, Emma's mad scheme seemed destined to fail and, nervously, Zara grabbed a glass of champagne from a girl she'd worked with on countless occasions and took a mouthful of cold wine. The alcohol relaxed her a little—especially when a couple of the other waitresses she knew winked and murmured hello in passing.

But something was making her feel uncomfortable—some sixth sense, which told her she was being watched.

Now you're just being paranoid, she told herself.

Yet the sensation persisted as she moved through the glamorous throng until she found her eyes being drawn unwillingly to a man who was standing at the far end of the ballroom.

And suddenly, she couldn't stop looking.

It was like seeing a drop of blood on virgin snow—because he stood out from everyone else in the room. His hair was the colour of beaten gold, his eyes were glacially blue and he possessed a hard and arrogant mouth, which spoke of experience and sensuality. Zara realised that the man's high, sculpted cheekbones and piercing eyes were oddly familiar—and then she realised why. She felt a shiver whisper over her skin. It was Nikolai Komarov—the Russian oligarch, and the man she was supposed to be targeting.

Her first thought was that his photo hadn't done him justice—on the page he had been appealing but in the flesh he was perfect. And her second thought was that he was the most intimidating man she had ever seen. His face made her think of a diamond—with its hard, sculpted angles and those cold, glittering eyes. And as for the rest of him.

Zara swallowed down an unfamiliar kind of hunger. Powerful, wealthy tycoon he might be, but, more than anything, he was pure and unbridled masculinity.

A beautifully cut suit moulded his body, emphasising wide shoulders, solid torso and narrow hips, which tapered down to long, muscular legs. He held himself tall and very straight, and stood so still that for a moment Zara thought he might almost have been made from wax, rather than from flesh and blood. But waxen eyes did not gleam like that, did they? And nor did they focus with unmoving scrutiny on their subject—the way he was doing with her. It felt like having all the breath punched from her body as she found herself captured in his cold yet searing gaze.

From his position at the far end of the room, Nikolai saw the woman glance over at him and felt his body tense, although a woman looking at him was nothing new. Women looked at him all the time. Though not usually like that, he conceded. Like a startled little deer who'd just spied the big, bad hunter deep in the forest.

Who the hell *was* she? He'd noticed her the moment she'd walked into the ballroom in that clinging green gown and he had been watching her ever since. His expression grew thoughtful. Something about her made her stand out from the crowd of overdressed women and he couldn't work out what it was. How ...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Tara Carlson:

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