

Excerpt  
PRINCE OF FROGS  
by Barbara Plum

"Molly has a pool." Jason settled onto the picnic bench.

Finished setting the table, Molly crawled up next to him. "My mommy swam in it 'most every day."

A lump clogged Risa's throat. She looked directly into the sun. Narrowing her eyes against the brightness, she saw, too clearly, the mask come down over Ben Macdonald's features.

His mouth set, making Risa wince, as he removed foil from a plastic bowl, leaned forward and sniffed the contents.

He said, "Now serving two first-class table setters."

Despite the sun, Risa felt a chill. She rubbed the puppy's ears. He stopped gnawing her shoestrings and nipped her little finger.

She welcomed the sting. It helped clear her head. Ben Macdonald's praise for the four-year-olds' table-setting skill rang with sincerity. Under other circumstances, she'd reconsider her concerns about his neglect. But hadn't she just witnessed the classic emotional withdrawal of a Silicon Valley engineer-dad?

A flock of crows perched on a nearby telephone line cawed loudly, like a Greek chorus, reminding her it wasn't the first time he'd changed the subject as soon as Molly mentioned her mother.

"For adults only." He passed the thermos under Risa's nose. "Want to hazard a guess?"

What Risa wanted was to sit on the other side of the table. Or better, to go home. Before she lost her mind under the brilliant sun and forgot she didn't like him.

"No idea." She managed not to gasp at the rich sinful aroma floating up from the thermos.

"Enough cream and butter to scare a cardiologist to death," he said.

Nose twitching, Risa ignored her stomach's sudden contraction.

"Kelsy knows me too well. Must be something special."

"Verrry special." Jason swiped at his mouth with the back of his hand,

cupped both hands around Molly's ear and rolled his eyes back at Risa. "C'mere, Molly. I'll tell you."

Uh-oh. Risa almost stepped in, but couldn't think of a good reason for censoring free speech since Père Macdonald didn't act worried.

Jason's raspy whisper came out a buzz. Molly slapped her hand over her mouth. A wild giggle got away from her anyway, and the crows joined the cackle.

Risa felt a flash of envy. Kids' secrets were such fun.

"Ummm." Oblivious, Molly's father inhaled deeply. "Oyster stew." He poured out two steaming cups, setting one in front of Risa, and inhaled again.

Praise Jupiter, he set the mug in front of her. There was no way she could risk their hands brushing.

"Mommy told Daddy oyster stew is one sexy dish," Jason said, parroting Kelsy's intonation perfectly.

A light breeze blew through the branches, cooling Risa's cheeks, but her mind went into a tailspin. She risked a glance at Ben Macdonald under her lashes. His lip, puffy and purple, probably accounted for why his jaw hadn't hit the table.

As if on cue, Molly asked, "What's sexy, Daddy?"

Ben looked as if he'd bitten into road kill, and Risa had to look away to avoid giggling insanely.

"Sexy is--" His face went blank and his eyes glazed over.

Laying her fork on her plate, Molly asked, "What's wrong, Daddy? Does your lip hurt?"

Coward that he was, he nodded. His eyes begged Risa to throw him a lifeline. Given the choice, she'd throw him overboard. When did he plan on telling Molly the facts of life?

Probably a year or two after she graduates from college.

Poor kid. Smiling, Risa smothered the temptation to talk about the puffy clouds and went instead with the first thing that came to mind.

"Sexy is how Cinderella and the Prince felt the first time they saw each other."

Molly chewed her spaghetti. Her father rolled his eyes, daring Risa to kill him in front of two witnesses.

Molly asked, "But why are oysters sexy? They're not people."

A noise came from the coward that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. Blushing, Risa stared him down with four words. "Careful you don't choke."

"Yeah, La Ti Da might have to give you mouth-to-mouth rustation." Jason slurped a spaghetti strand off his fork.

"No," Risa cooed sweetly. "With the size of Mr. Macdonald's lip, we'd have to call the fire department."

"Cool," Jason said.

"Shhh, Jason." Molly wagged her little finger. "I want to know why oysters are sexy."

Distraction doesn't work every time, Risa thought, blanking.

"They aren't really," she began.

"But Jason said his mommy said--"

"Some people, like Jason's mommy," Risa said quickly, "think oysters make a man and woman feel like Cinderella and the Prince."

"Did Cinderella and the Prince eat oysters at the ball?"

"No, they ate ice cream." The coward father dropped a kiss on his daughter's tomato-stained mouth, and Risa's heart beat high in her chest.

Suddenly dizzy, she closed her eyes, listening to him from a long way off.

"This stew's too hot," he said. "I think I'll pass."

Anyone with a grain of sense would've kept her eyes shut.

Taking his remark personally, Risa opened hers. Molly patted her father's hand.

"If your lip hurts too much, Daddy, you don't have to kiss me till tonight."

"Sweetheart, my lip will never hurt that much." He dropped another kiss on her cheek.

"Tickles." Molly giggled.

Oh yes, Risa thought. The man is cold as ice.