

ROBIN WELLS

PRINCE
CHARMING



CINDERELLA AT THE BALL

He danced smoothly, moving in perfect sync with her body. When the last note floated into the air, he didn't loosen his hold on her, even though the song had clearly ended.

The nearness, the warmth, the sheer maleness of him made her dizzy. Her palms felt damp and her brain felt fuzzy, as if she weren't getting enough oxygen.

His voice sounded in her ear, low and rumbling, sending a shiver down her spine. "Do you have any idea what you make me want to do?"

He pulled back enough to look down at her. His eyes were hot. The heat burned its way through her, making her feel as if her bones were melting. Against all wisdom, she found herself breathing the irresistible question. "What?"

The soft warmth of his breath against her ear sent a quiver of pleasure coursing up her spine. "For starters, I want to kiss you."

She looked up at him, unable to speak.

"And unless you tell me you don't want me to, that's exactly what I'm going to do."

"I—" Her lips parted, but no further words came out.

His mouth brushed her ear again as he rocked her to the rhythm. The slow strains of another sultry song reverberated in the night air.

"That didn't sound like a no."

She didn't know if it was the rising notes of the painfully beautiful music or the feel of his breath on her neck that raised goosebumps on her skin. She only knew that she felt helpless to deny the aching need to feel his lips on hers.

"It . . . wasn't."

P RINCE
CHARMING
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LOVE SPELL BOOKS



NEW YORK CITY

LOVE SPELL®

November 1999

Published by

Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.

276 Fifth Avenue

New York, NY 10001

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ISBN 0-505-52344-2

The name “Love Spell” and its logo are trademarks of Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.

Printed in the United States of America.

To Ken, my personal Prince Charming.

With thanks to Bill Kinzeler, Gordon Jackson and Gene Giles at American Commercial Barge Line for the towboat tour; Bill McNeal for sharing his many years of accumulated wisdom, lore and life-on-the-river literature; and Captain Jim Calhoun, USCG, ret., for his invaluable information.

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Chapter One

Josephine Evans scrambled out of her gray Mercedes, her legs wobbling from the shock of the accident, and stared at the smashed front end of her vehicle. Uptown-bound traffic, already thick in this part of New Orleans at rush hour, clotted behind her like Creole cottage cheese, but Josephine was too worried about her damaged car to care.

Oh, dear—the hood looked like an accordion, one of the front tires slanted in at a crazy angle and a puddle of gooey liquid oozed from under the crumpled engine. The car was undrivable—probably even unrepairable. Which meant it was most likely unsalable.

Josephine's spirits sank to the soles of her navy Givenchy pumps. Great, just great—just what she needed on top of all her other money troubles. And since she'd struck the pickup from the rear, the accident was clearly her fault.

“You hurt, lady?”

The late-afternoon sun glared in her eyes so brightly she could barely make out the man climbing out of the black

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pickup with the dark, tinted windows. He was tall—she could tell that—and muscular. His shoulders were as broad as a linebacker's in full uniform, and his arms were brawny, but his chest tapered to a flat stomach and narrow hips.

"I'm fine. Are you all right?"

"Hell, no, I'm not all right." His voice was a deep, gravelly rumble, as low and ominous as thunder. He stalked to the rear of his vehicle and stared at the bumper. "What in Christ's name have you done to my truck?"

Josephine squinted at him, the light still in her eyes. Backlit by the low-riding sun, he looked like he was on fire. A chill chased through her, despite the unseasonably warm March air. He reminded her of the fiery demons her father used to preach against. His black eyebrows curled like gargoyle wings above coal black eyes, his blue-black hair looked like it hadn't seen a comb in weeks and his face was grizzled with what looked like a week's worth of stubble. The effect was altogether disreputable, completely intimidating and more than a little dangerous.

Josephine backed against the smashed fender of her Mercedes as he moved along the rear of his truck, running his hand along the fender. His palms were large and square and his fingers were long and tanned, and the sight of them made her distinctly uneasy. So did the message emblazoned on the back of his dirty gray T-shirt under the picture of a crawfish: *Suck the Head and Eat the Tail*.

When he turned toward her, his scowl made her grateful for the swarm of Magazine Street traffic slowly surging around them. This was not the kind of man she'd want to encounter on a deserted road.

Not that this location had much to recommend it. She cast an uneasy glance around, taking in the sleazy second-hand clothing shop on the sidewalk behind her, the dingy tavern on the corner and the boarded-up buildings across the street. She was about a mile shy of the upscale antique shops and restaurants the tourists liked to frequent, in a

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seedy, broken-down neighborhood that smelled of old garbage.

Josephine lifted her chin and pulled herself to her straightest posture, the way she always did whenever she was nervous. *Poise and a gracious manner can overcome any obstacle.* The phrase had been drummed into her at finishing school, and it was one she'd often repeated to her own charm school students. She repeated it silently to herself now, forcing a practiced expression of composure onto her face.

"I'm very sorry I hit you, but you pulled in front of me so suddenly that I didn't have time to stop."

"Like hell! You speeded up when I tried to pass you!"

The venom in his voice made her jump. She inched closer to her bumper as he took a menacing step toward her.

"I know your type," he said with a snarl. "You hoity-toity society broads all think it's your God-given right to barge ahead of everyone else."

Josephine nervously smoothed the jacket of her navy wool suit, trying to smooth her nerves as well, and mentally recited another finishing school axiom: *The more dire the situation, the greater the need to remain calm.* She carefully modulated her voice to a low but firm level. "I'm afraid that you're mistaken. I was trying to hit the brake, and I accidentally hit the accelerator instead."

"Jesus Christ! What's the matter with you? Don't you have the sense God gave a goose?"

Irritation shot through her. He had every right to be upset, but there was no need for him to be insulting. And there was certainly no need for him to take the Lord's name in vain. "I'll thank you to kindly keep God's name out of this. It was an accident, not a deliberate act, I assure you. Besides, it looks like your truck is barely scratched."

"Barely scratched? Hell, lady, it's more scratched than a rat's ass. The bumper's all dented in and the paint job's ruined."

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She'd been considering giving him the benefit of the doubt—after all, everyone dressed down on occasion—but this man was clearly every bit as uncouth as he looked. “It’s so covered with dirt that I don’t see how you can tell,” she said stiffly. “But in any event, there’s no need to curse at me.”

“Oh, no?” He leaned toward her, a vein bulging in his forehead. His eyes were bloodshot, his breath smelled of stale beer and his mouth was curled into what could only be described as a sneer. “What the hell do you think I should be doing? Strangling your scrawny neck?”

Her gaze inadvertently flew to his immense hands, and another shiver chased up her spine. She forced herself to look him in the eye. “There’s no need to threaten me, either.”

A malevolent gleam lit his face. His lip pulled back in an awful smile. “Sweetheart, that wasn’t a threat. If I told you I was going to cart you off to the swamp, snatch the hide right off your sorry, no-driving self, then feed the curly side of your south end to the gators, well, now, *that* might be a threat. Which, come to think of it, isn’t a half-bad idea.”

Josephine stared at him, aghast. She’d never been talked to so crudely in her entire life. He wasn’t hurt, for heaven’s sake. It wasn’t like the accident thirteen years ago, the accident where . . .

The unbidden memory made her shudder. With long-practiced determination, she thrust it from her mind. She couldn’t allow herself to think about that now or she would surely fall to pieces. Her whole world was already falling apart as it was. If she hadn’t been so preoccupied with her current troubles, she never would have hit this cretin in the first place—even though he *had* rudely swerved directly into her path.

He was glaring at her belligerently. She glared back, channeling all of her distress into indignation. “You, sir,

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are the most foulmouthed, ill-tempered, uncouth man I've ever had the displeasure of meeting."

His scowl deepened and his eyes narrowed. "Yeah, well, I'm not exactly charmed to make your acquaintance, either. So what the hell are you going to do about my truck?"

"Your truck? *My* car's the one that's totaled!"

"Yeah, and whose fault is that, huh? Maybe next time you'll be a little more careful about which pedal you're stomping on."

He stormed back to his pickup, extracted a cellular phone and started to punch in a number.

Alarmed, Josephine ran toward him. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm calling the police."

"What for?"

"To get you ticketed."

"Oh, please, sir—please don't do that!"

His mouth twisted into an expression of disdain. "For some strange reason, my insurance company prefers a police report to just taking my word on these things."

"You don't need to report it. I mean, I'll—I'll pay for the damages." Though how she'd manage, she didn't know. She didn't even know how she was going to pay the phone bill. Or the electric bill. Or buy food, once she'd eaten the last of the Budget Gourmet frozen entrées in the refrigerator that was about to be repossessed.

"Damn right you'll pay."

"Of course I will. Just—please, sir, please don't call the police."

He glared at her, the phone dwarfed by his enormous hand. "What's the matter? Is there a warrant out for your arrest?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, then, why are you so scared of the law?"

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"I'm not. It's just that—well . . ." She was embarrassed to say it aloud. It was so irresponsible, and so unlike her. She just hadn't had the 590 dollars last month when the premium was due, but there was no point in telling all that to this man. She swallowed nervously. "I'm—I'm afraid my insurance is expired."

"Oh, good Lord!"

Josephine winced. "Please, sir—don't use the Lord's name in vain like that."

He stared at her, the trace of a smirk playing on his mouth. "Why the hell not?"

She steeled herself against rising to his bait. "Because it's one of the Ten Commandments. 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.' Besides, it's offensive, and being offensive breaks the rules of polite society."

"Oh, Christ. What are you, some kinda friggin' church lady?"

"Well, no, but if you must know, my father was a missionary and it offends me to hear language like that."

"Oh, so you're offended, are you?"

"Yes."

"Well, now, ain't that too dorkin' damn bad."

He seemed to be waiting for her reaction. She tried her best not to give him one, but she must have failed, judging from the mocking smile on his face.

Oh, dear—how she wished she were more like some of her former students! If only she knew how to flirt and smile, to cajole and flatter, she could probably persuade this man to see things her way. But she'd never had the chance to learn those things. She'd wanted to, but her father had never approved of frivolous behavior. The one time she'd behaved indiscreetly, the consequences had been so horrible that she'd never dared try it again.

No, flirtation wasn't an option. She'd have to try appealing to this man's sympathetic side. "Look, sir, if you call

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the police, they'll take my license for not having any insurance."

"Sounds like a personal problem to me." He raised the phone again.

She should have guessed that he'd have all the sympathy of a serial murderer. The only way to change the mind of a brute like this was to appeal to his self-interest. "If I have to pay for a ticket, it'll only delay my being able to pay for your car repairs."

One of his dark eyebrows lifted. "Are you telling me you're broke?"

Josephine shifted uncomfortably from one high-heeled pump to the other. "I'm saying my financial situation is temporarily a little . . . under the weather." *To put it mildly.* She nervously twisted the strap of her navy Coach handbag. "I always pay my debts, though. It may take me a few weeks, but I'll get you your money."

He eyed her derisively. "Believe it or not, most body shops these days take credit cards."

"I can't use one."

"Why not? Is credit against your daddy's religion?"

"No." *Oh, dear.* She was humiliated beyond words, but she couldn't think of a single explanation to give him other than the truth. "I-I'm afraid my cards are all maxed out."

The information seemed to startle him. His eyes narrowed, and he scanned her from head to toe. Something about the way he looked at her made her think he was not only estimating the cost of her navy suit, but seeing all the way through it to approximate the price of her bra and panties. "Looks like you're dressed for work. You got a job?"

"Well . . . yes." She'd quit her paying job at the public library when Aunt Prudie had gotten sick, but that didn't mean she was unemployed.

"So I'll give you a break. I'll wait till your next paycheck to collect."

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"I don't get a paycheck. I'm self-employed."

"Doing what?"

"I operate the New Orleans Academy for Etiquette and Social Graces."

"What the hell is that?"

"Some people refer to it as charm school."

"Charm school." He repeated the words incredulously, his mouth curling into a jeering grin. He shoved his hand in his pocket and extracted a small round can labeled *Red-man*. "You mean you teach manners and how to act all la-di-da?"

She watched him open the tin and stuff a wad of what looked like dirt in his mouth. *A lady remains civil under all circumstances*, Josephine reminded herself. She was quivering with the effort to do so now. She lifted her chin. "As the name describes, it's a school for etiquette and social graces. And if I might make an observation, you could do with a few lessons yourself."

His loud bark of a laugh caught her by surprise. "Don't know what makes ya say that."

An enormous brown spit wad narrowly missed her shoe, surprising her even more. She jumped aside, nearly tripping over her own heels in horror. He wiped his mouth with the back of his enormous hand, his chest rumbling with amusement.

"So, Teach, how do ya propose to pay me?" His gaze rolled over her in a lascivious manner. She folded her arms against her chest, alarm surging through her.

Was it her imagination, or had his accent just slipped from a Harry Connick Jr.-sounding New Orleans drawl to a low-class ninth-ward brogue? He was making her more nervous by the minute. "How . . . how much do you suppose it'll cost?"

"I dunno. It's a brand-new truck. Dependin' on what has to be done, I'd guess anywhere from eight to fifteen hundred dollars."