

LISA CATCH

The  
CHANGELLING  
BRIDE



Heartspell



## THE WISH

The perfect marriage, Elle mused, was an arranged marriage. No emotional agonies, just a commitment to a partnership with a firm basis in financial stability. The divorce rate was proof enough that marriage based solely on love led primarily to misery.

She stopped again and thrust the slip of paper the strange woman had given her into the air. "I'm redeeming my coupon!" she said to the towering Douglas firs. "I want my free husband. Give me a man who is civilized, owns a very big house, and doesn't expect me to dote on him." The trees dripped in response. She tilted her head back, looking up into the dark, greenish-black branches, the hood of her parka sliding off. "Do you hear me?"

Drops plopped on her face, making her blink. She lowered her head and pulled the hood back up. She gave the paper another little shake at the forested gloom. Nothing happened. Quiet and solitude surrounded her. The trees appeared unimpressed.



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ISAAC

LOVE SPELL BOOKS



NEW YORK CITY

*To Mom and Dad.*

**LOVE SPELL®**

**October 1999**

**Published by**

**Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.**

**276 Fifth Avenue**

**New York, NY 10001**

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**ISBN 0-505-52342-6**

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**Printed in the United States of America.**

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## *Prologue*

*England, 1790s*

“I do not think I can go through with it.”

She gave him no answer. He had not expected one.

“The entire arrangement galls me. I feel like a bull on the auction block, going to the highest bidder. A man should not be reduced to such a thing.” Henry paced in front of his great-grandmother, who sat like a shrivelled gnome under layers of shawls. He was not certain she remained capable of either seeing or hearing him, and it had been at least two years since she had spoken. She had always been a good listener, though, and he liked to think some part of her listened still.

“I should not balk, I know. A marriage of convenience has never been a dishonourable arrangement.”

He dropped into the chair across from her, the wooden joints creaking under his weight. “But I wonder what Grandfather would have thought if he had seen the new



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Earl of Allsbrook going hat in hand to a merchant, bartering his title for cash?" He paused, considering that idea.

"Perhaps he would not have disapproved. He always, after all, put duty before all other considerations, pride included. Pity Father did not share his view."

He looked at his great-grandmother, at the wrinkled face and the half-closed eyes that never seemed to blink. Even when he was a child, she had been old and mysterious, and had spent all her time in her suite of rooms, doing he knew not what.

"Of course, there are the girl's sentiments to be considered as well—not that I think she is old enough to know her own mind on the matter. She is not in the least bit eager for this marriage."

He briefly lost himself in the recollection of the shouting match he had been unable to avoid overhearing between father and daughter. It had been during his first and only visit to his betrothed, and although the sliding doors to the drawing room had been closed, his fiancée's voice had carried through the wood with piercing stridency. "I will not have him! He will spend all my money on his stupid farms and stick me away in his decrepit old house, where I will never see my friends and never have new clothes, and the air will smell of sheep."

A bellow of rage from her father had drowned out any further complaints. When Henry was introduced to his betrothed half an hour later, she was white-faced and red-eyed, but outwardly compliant. That was, until her father had left them alone together.

"If you insist on this marriage," she had warned him, her lips tight over the words, "I will do everything in my power to make your life a living hell."

Henry tried to shake the memory from his mind. "She is perhaps not as bad as she seems," he said, more to himself than to the silent figure in front of him. "She is pleasing in form and face. She has an eye for fashion.

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She has been taught proper behavior, and her father assures me that she knows well the running of a house. And I cannot forget the money.”

A silence lengthened, broken finally by a log shifting in the fire. As if the thought were dislodged from some hidden depth by that falling piece of wood, he added softly, “And yet, I could have wished for a happy marriage.”

# *Chapter One*

## *Present Day*

Elle had the uncomfortable feeling that eyes were following her as she made her hasty way up the wet sidewalk. She was not late for work, but the sense of being watched made her feel exposed and vulnerable, and she hurried through the rain to reach her building.

This wasn't the first time this week that she had felt as if she was being followed when she came downtown, as if someone hidden from view was tracking her every step. She wanted to laugh at the foolishness of the idea, but couldn't. Either someone really was stalking her or some essential part of her personality was cracking and falling apart. Neither conclusion was reassuring.

"Hey, lady, spare a quarter?"

Elle almost tripped, surprised by the slurred demand. She'd been so busy checking over her shoulder for the unseen pursuer that she hadn't noticed the derelict

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hunched in the doorway. She sidestepped quickly, averting her eyes from the stick figure in ragged clothes.

“Lady, lady! Spare a quarter for a veteran?” he called, accusation in his voice.

Elle hurried her step. She hated being harassed by street people.

She had made it to the end of the block and was waiting for the walk signal when she felt a tug on her sleeve. Startled, she turned quickly, jerking her arm away from the unknown hand. It was the derelict from the doorway, staring at her with wide green eyes that were incongruously beautiful. Those eyes locked her in place, drowning her in shades of pale green and gold.

“Wanna come with me?” he asked.

She hardly heard what he said, too engrossed in wondering how he had eyes so clear and perfect, when his face was ravaged by age and life on the streets.

His proposition finally broke through the spell his eyes had cast on her, and Elle stepped back in disgust. He started to laugh, the remaining teeth in his mouth yellow and rotting, his tongue sliding over them in a parody of lasciviousness.

The signal changed, and she dashed across the street, not looking back until two blocks later, when she reached the building where she worked. There was no sign of him.

Wilhelmina Regina March—Elle or Ellie to those with half a hope of becoming her friend—decided that this day that had started so badly with the transient was showing no signs of improvement. Not that it was a day any worse than the one before, or more dispiriting than she anticipated tomorrow being.

She thought this as she sat at her desk, which itself sat like a coral atoll in a sea of burgundy carpeting. It was alone in the reception room but for a hunter green couch

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and a brass spittoon that pretended to be a planter. The silence of the room buzzed in her ears.

She swiveled at the hub of the circular station, her ergonomically correct chair rolling easily across the sheet of plastic beneath her feet, making a quiet clickety-click. She reached up and adjusted the delicate black headset she wore, its tiny microphone hanging near the corner of her mouth.

She pressed a button next to the blinking light on her phone. "Conner, Conner, and Polanski," she said, her diction perfect, her tone pleasant yet impersonal. "How may I direct your call?" She stared at the empty couch as she transferred the call, then swiveled to look through the windows at the gray, heavy sky. The high walls of her circular pen cut off half the view, so all she saw were the tops of cranes in the industrial district near the river, silhouetted against the ever-present bank of clouds. It would rain again by the time she left for the day.

There came another softly blinking light on the phone. "Conner, Conner, and Polanski," she said for the hundredth time today, her phone voice carrying the conversation without conscious thought. "How may I direct your call?"

When she had taken this job she'd told all her friends that it was just for the money, and for no more than a year. She had said it was only to support herself and pay off some of those student loans until she got on her feet with a *real* career.

Three years later and she had a small collection of cheap business suits appropriate for the lobby of an investment firm. She was running out of excuses in her own mind for staying on and didn't know herself what it was that kept her locked in her padded chair.

"Conner, Conner, and Polanski." Two and a half more hours and she could go home. Tatiana would be waiting for her. At least that was one bright spot she could count on. "How may I direct your call?"

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Elle shuffled down the aisle behind the others as the bus came to a halt at her stop, and had to leap from the bottom step to the curb to avoid a deep puddle with oily sludge floating on the surface. She had taken but a few steps into the rain when she heard a splash behind her. She turned and saw an old woman, wearing the layered clothing of the homeless, sprawled half in the puddle, half on the sidewalk, her pant legs askew and raised to show bare withered calves veined like marble.

Fellow passengers stepped around her and hurried on their way as if she were invisible, and behind her the door to the bus closed with a hydraulic hiss as the driver pulled back into traffic. Elle bit her lip, then returned to the woman and squatted down beside her, reaching out a hand to touch her.

“Are you okay? Can I help you up?”

The woman didn’t answer, just rocked awkwardly on her back like a stranded turtle and made little grunting sounds.

“Let me help you up.”

Elle got behind her and grabbed her under the arms, pulling her as gently as she could up onto the curb into a sitting position. The woman was light, despite her bulky appearance. It felt like she had more clothing than flesh under her ragged jacket.

“Are you okay?” Elle asked again. The woman was breathing heavily, but seemed disinclined to move. Her feet were still in the puddle, mud splattered up her ankles. Her knit cap had fallen off, and Elle picked it up and held it out to her.

“Here, you’d better put this back on. You’re getting wet.” The woman made no move to take it, so Elle set it in her lap.

The woman suddenly leaned away from Elle, groping along the sidewalk with one gnarled hand until she found the cane that had skittered away from her when she fell.



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She took her hat and shoved it inside the front of her jacket, then with a surprising burst of strength stood up, leaning heavily on the cane. Elle stepped back, then reached out again to steady the woman, who swayed and seemed ready to fall.

“Ma’am, are you sure you’re okay? Do you want me to help you get somewhere? Can I call someone for you?” Elle chewed her lip, uncertain. She didn’t feel comfortable leaving the old woman, but she didn’t know what to do with her, either.

“Do you want to come to my apartment?” Elle found herself asking, not believing those words were coming out of her mouth. She thought of the carpets she only walked on shoeless in hope of keeping them clean, the sofa she vacuumed weekly. She didn’t have much money, but she had Lysol disinfectant, by God. “I can make you something to eat, maybe some tea, and you can use my phone.”

The woman ignored her and reached an arthritis-warped hand into a pocket, fumbling around, searching for something. She drew out some old tissues that dropped to the ground and melted on the wet sidewalk, then poked through a handful of gum wrappers, lint, and bent paper clips. She found what she wanted, a piece of heavily folded pink paper, and carefully lifted it in her twisted fingers, holding it out to Elle.

The old woman obviously wanted her to take it, so she did. The woman wrapped her cold hands around Elle’s and squeezed. For the first time she looked directly at her, and Elle realized that the woman’s eyes were the same yellow-green of the morning transient’s, and their eerie intensity held her spellbound. The old woman smiled, as if with a secret, then turned and hobbled off, staggering from side to side every few steps but covering ground with unexpected speed.

Elle frowned after her, her lips parted in puzzlement. When the woman had disappeared into the slanting rain,

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Elle looked down at the folded paper, then put it into her pocket. She'd throw it away when she got home.

"Tatiana darling, I'm home!" she called, opening the door to her apartment. It was hardly necessary, as Tatiana had heard her key in the door and was bounding down the hall even as she stepped inside. A smile curled her lips, her wet feet and the rain trickling down her scalp momentarily forgotten at the sight of her princess running to greet her.

She knelt down and opened her arms, burying her face in Tatiana's neck, rubbing her hands up and down Tatiana's lower spine in the way she knew the dog loved. She got her ear washed in returned, and then the big Samoyed wriggled out of her grasp and raced back down the hall, pouncing on a squeaky toy.

Tatiana had been a surprise birthday gift from her brother, Jeff, a testament to both his thoughtlessness and his clumsy affection for her. At first sight of the uncoordinated ball of fur, she had been in love, forcefully restraining herself from dribbling out all the nauseating endearments that immediately sprang to mind. "Darling. Precious. Widdle snookie-wookie-ums." She had said them all in her heart, but had refused to so debase herself as to utter them aloud.

What she had said instead, as she had cuddled the puppy to her chest and allowed it to chew her finger, was, "You know, don't you, that this means I'll have to find an apartment that allows dogs? And that I'll have to housebreak her, and walk her, and make sure she gets enough exercise, and pay for shots at the vet and spaying, not to mention a dog license and dog food?"

"Aw, but, Ellie, how could you refuse that face? Huh? Just look at her, she loves you already," Jeff had answered, a fatuous grin on his face as he snuggled his pregnant wife closer under his arm.

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“Lemmee hold ’er, Aunt Ellie,” three-and-a-half-year-old Clarence begged, tugging at her pants.

“Not right now, Clarence,” she said, pulling away from his grasping little hands. She loved her nephew, but she wouldn’t put her heavenly angel in a child’s care. She summoned greater peevishness into her tone and continued, “And I’ll have to take her to obedience school and groom her, and I’ll get fleas in my carpet, and white hair all over everything I own. A dog is a big responsibility. Don’t you listen to the Humane Society ads?”

She had kept her, though, and rearranged her life to suit Tatiana. She had found an apartment she could barely afford, one that not only allowed dogs but was right next to a forested park where Tatiana could run off the leash. Her consequently reduced finances had meant taking the bus to work and no cable television, but she admitted those changes were probably for the best. She also now got exercise whether she wanted it or not; mornings and late afternoons found her outside with a Frisbee or ball, doing anything to help Tatiana burn off energy.

She shed her parka and shoes, and walked through the apartment to the sliding glass doors that looked out on the forested park. Tatiana shoved rudely at her legs, wanting out, and when Elle slid open the door the dog squeezed past her, zipping off down the narrow apartment complex lawn and back again. Elle stood and watched, a smile on her lips that had been in absence most of the day.

The phone just inside the door rang, making her jump. Her face scrunched in annoyance as she went back inside to answer it. It was probably either Jeff or a telemarketer, neither of whom she wanted to talk to.

“Hello?”

“Ellie! Glad I caught you,” Jeff’s persistently cheerful voice was dulled by the buzz of a car phone. “Tina wanted me to call and ask you over to dinner tonight. I