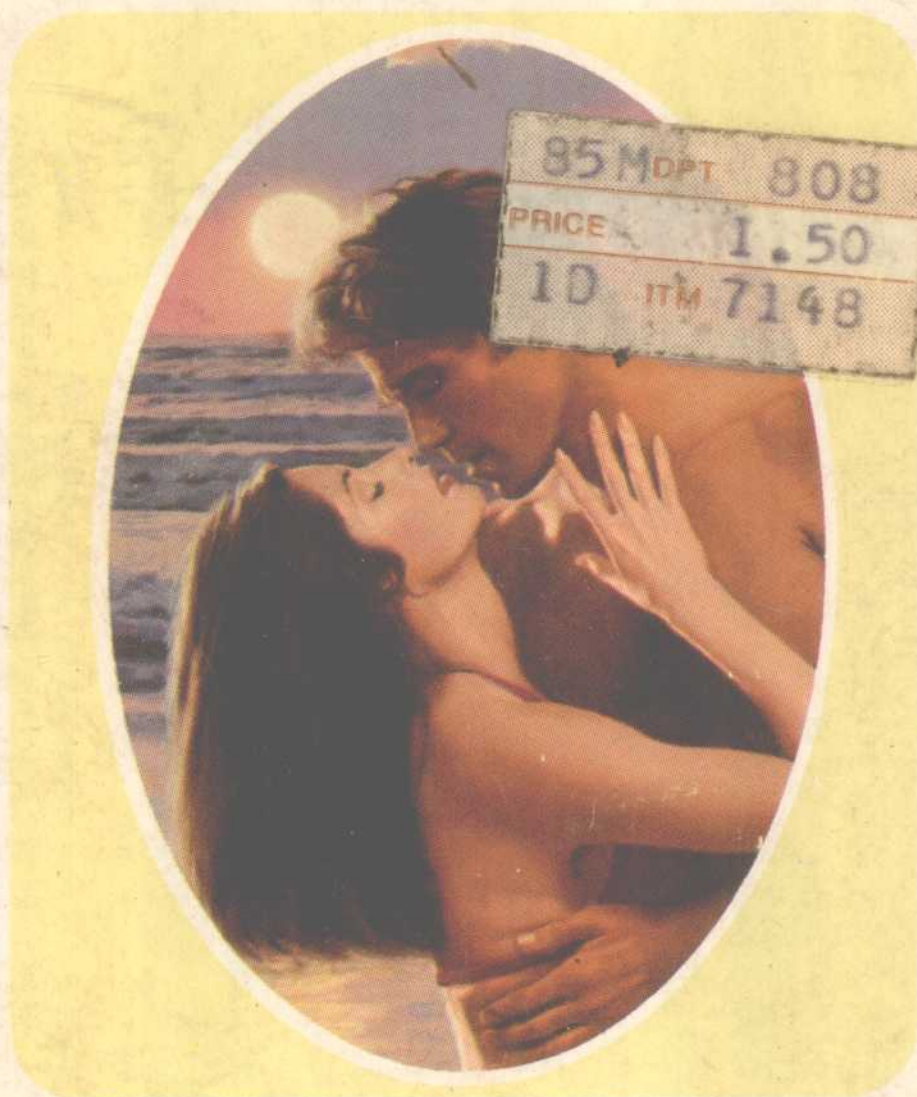


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Surrender by Moonlight

Bonnie Drake

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A CANDLELIGHT ECSTASY ROMANCE

Published by
Dell Publishing Co., Inc.
1 Dag Hammarskjold Plaza
New York, New York 10017

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Dell ® TM 681510, Dell Publishing Co., Inc.

ISBN: 0-440-18426-6

Printed in the United States of America
First printing—April 1981

Surrender by Moonlight

CHAPTER ONE

The telephone continued to ring as Cynthia looked up from her papers. Five . . . six . . . seven . . . *when will whoever that is decide that I'm not home*, she asked herself angrily. Eight . . . nine . . . *oh, hell*, she swore under her breath as she slammed down her pencil and crossed the room to yield to the persistent caller. The phone had been ringing on and off all day, preventing her from reaching the deadline she had set for herself. But letting it ring endlessly was almost as distracting as answering it, she was quick to discover.

"Hello!" she barked in frustration into the receiver, the brunt of her annoyance to be borne by this one unfortunate soul. There was a brief pause at the other end before the deep, unsure voice began.

"Ah . . . is Professor Blake there?"

Instant recognition lit up Cynthia's face. "Uncle William? It's I!" she exclaimed, her tone reflecting the smile which suddenly warmed her features.

"Cindy? It didn't sound like you at all! Are you all right?" William Thorpe's concern was obvious and Cynthia chided herself for having answered the phone as she had.

"I'm fine, Uncle William, just busy. I can't seem to get any of this work done. If it isn't one thing, it's the next, between the phone and the doorbell and . . . well, you know how it is. You're busy enough yourself." She sprawled out on the sofa for a much needed stretch after maintaining the tense position at her desk for so long.

"Busy is putting it mildly, Cindy! But I haven't spoken to you in so long, I thought I'd give you a call. How've you been?" His voice had regained the confident boom that Cynthia knew and loved so well. She warmed as she heard it, sensing the security that Uncle William always held for her.

"Everything's great here, just hectic. I'm trying to make up my final exam to get it to the secretary for typing by Wednesday; at the same time, I've got fifty papers to grade and more figures to compile for my dissertation. If I make it to commencement exercises, it'll be a miracle!" she laughed, knowing full well that she had always managed to get everything done on time in the past and would do so again this semester.

"When is commencement this year?" he asked, with a pointedness which made Cynthia wonder.

"May twenty-fourth!" she exclaimed, entranced with the sound of it. The date held a magical charm for her, as had each commencement since she'd been teaching these three years, as when she'd been a student herself. While the rest of the world divided the calendar year either by the seasons, the major holidays, the paycheck, or the fiscal year, the world of academia saw it from vacation to vacation—from Labor Day to Thanksgiving to Christmas to inter-session to April vacation to commencement—with a paper or exam to be ground out before each break.

The booming voice returned, "May twenty-fourth? That's only a few weeks off! I guess you've got your work cut out for you between now and then!" He laughed, knowing that Cynthia loved her work, despite its steady

demands. "What are your plans after that, Cindy? Any ideas for the summer?" Again, she had the feeling that he was leading up to something.

Cynthia did not see or talk with her uncle all that often, but when she did it was always a warm, gratifying, and reassuring contact, usually with a definite objective in the mind of at least one of them. And she loved him for it, as one can only love someone who is there when you need him, in the background when you don't.

Hugging her knees to her chest as a substitute for her uncle, she giggled affectionately. "What are you getting at, Uncle William? I smell a scheme brewing in that devious lawyer's brain of yours. What's up your sleeve?"

He joined her with an amused chuckle. "Thank goodness the prosecution cannot see through me as easily as you do." They both laughed, before he continued. "Actually, this particular scheme was hatched by the other side itself!"

"OK, let's have it!" she urged, her curiosity aroused to hear Uncle William's latest. Over the years, she had learned to appreciate his schemes, which had taken her, among other places, to London as a companion to one of his elderly clients, to the West Coast as the chaperone to the teenaged daughter of another, to South America as his own personal secretary on a particular case, and so on. Now that she thought of it, he had managed to provide a trip for her almost every year since her mother's death had made him her closest living relative.

As though in the courtroom, Uncle William cleared his throat and launched his opening argument. "My dear Cynthia, the school year is just about over and you could use a rest. A perfect solution was just offered to me . . . er, you. How does three months on an isolated island off the coast of Maine strike you? No telephone. No doorbell. No distractions. Lots of peace and quiet . . ."

"I'll take it! Where do I sign?" blurted Cynthia, immedi-

ately adoring the thought of solitude and escape from the city sounds that serenaded her apartment day and night.

Typically, Uncle William was not yet finished with his address. His powerful voice continued over the line as though she had never interrupted it. "There's a small island five miles offshore which has two cottages on it. The owner of the island lives in one, the other is vacant. Just waiting for you, Cindy!"

She was quickly becoming suspicious, as she realized that the offer was legitimate. "Waiting for me to do what, Uncle William?"

"House-sit, my dear! It seems this gentleman who owns the place will be on and off it himself all summer, but wants someone to keep an eye on things while he's not there."

A possibility suddenly dawned on Cynthia. "You mean, he wants a house-sitter or a housekeeper?" she asked skeptically. "I have enough trouble remembering to make my own bed each day, with all the other work I've got, let alone having to make someone else's!"

"No, no, house-sitting is all . . . no cleaning . . . no cooking . . . no housekeeping at all. Just being there and, as I was told, keeping your eyes open." he elaborated patiently, well used to Cynthia's indignant outburst against custodial work.

"Sounds very suspicious," she murmured, her forefinger tapping her lower lip, as she tried to put the puzzle pieces together. "Where did you hear about this, Uncle William?"

His voice lowered in mock mystery. "The other side," he drawled slowly, then proceeded at a normal pace to show her that it was an honest offer. "Through the years, I have become friendly with John Cummings over at the DEA. As a matter of fact, didn't you meet him once with me—yes, when I was defending that Stanton boy against drug smuggling charges? Do you remember?"

Cynthia pulled herself upright on the sofa, becoming

more serious as the conversation had. She drew her brown eyebrows together as she searched her memory, then her eyes lit up in recognition. "Sure! He was the agent on the case. Kind of an easygoing fellow, as I recall. I liked him, even though he was your opponent," she smiled. "But what does the Drug Enforcement Administration have to do with my summer?" she added, perplexed.

"Nothing at all, Cindy. I just happened to be talking to John and he mentioned this fellow—the owner of the island—who was looking for someone responsible and did I know of any law student or somebody like that who would be free for the summer." He sounded slightly leading, and Cynthia couldn't stifle the chuckle that his suggestiveness inspired.

"And what did my good uncle tell him?"

William was not one to be daunted by her smugness, as he went on boldly. "I told him that I had just the right person for the job. A Professor Blake, from the Community College, who was working on a doctoral dissertation and would appreciate the opportunity for the uninterrupted peace which the island could promise. I even said that I would personally vouch for the Professor's background and reliability."

"Thank you, sir," she replied affectionately. "Obviously you informed him neither that Professor Blake was your niece nor that Professor Blake was a woman?" she asked, relatively confident of the answer.

Cynthia knew that her uncle's usually ruddy complexion would be even more pink by now; he always blushed when being found out. Confirming her suspicion, he cleared his throat again and murmured softly, "No need. No need, my dear. Everything I told him was the truth. He never asked about the other details." Always the stickler for technicalities, her Uncle William was! "At any rate," he continued, "he thinks highly enough of me to take my recommendation. The job is yours if you want it . . . but

they want someone installed on the island by the first of June. Any problem?"

Cynthia laughed at his command of the situation, though it was another of his traits she loved. As independent as she was, she did enjoy—once in a while—to have a decision made for her, especially by someone she trusted as much as she did her uncle.

"I guess not!" She shrugged her shoulders, amazed that the solution to her problem had been so simple. "I was just going to stay around here working all summer. But with the noise and the interruptions, it could have been a real problem!"

She paused, an odd unsureness gnawing at her. "Uncle William," she began tentatively, "this whole thing sounds very mysterious. Are you sure it's on the level? I mean, it sounds too good to be true. But why did John Cummings approach you? Who is this nameless landowner? What am I supposed to be on the lookout for? It all sounds very fishy . . . literally and figuratively," she laughed, as though to dispel her own qualms with a bit of humor.

"You know everything I do, Cindy. The details will all be forthcoming. But I do trust John. Anyway, he knows what a big mouth I have and I'm sure he'd hesitate to pull the wool over my eyes for that reason. I have a certain amount of pull higher up, you know." The attorney's tone was so confident that Cynthia couldn't help but absorb some of his assurance.

"Ah! Of course you're right! I don't know why I'm being so dramatic. Must be too much television!" she laughed heartily, knowing, as did Uncle William, that she didn't own a set. "Tell John that he's got his man . . . er; sitter," she joked again.

The practical side of the lawyer emerged now. "Do you have the papers and books you'll need? Can you do without a library?"

His questions brought a momentary frown to Cynthia's

gentle features and she subconsciously twirled her stick-straight brown hair around her finger as she pondered the answer. "I don't know . . . I have all the research done and the raw data are gathered. I can run the comparisons on the computer before I go . . ." Then she brightened as the solution appeared before her. "I know! I've got most of what I need. But I'm sure that this mysterious island-owner won't mind if I take a day off here and there to go to a library. Even Maine must have a good library somewhere!"

Now William was in his element again, the traveler, knowledgeable about all trivia such as local schools and libraries. "Orono! Not far inland from where you'll be. That's where the university is. Perfect! Why don't you contact them before you go?"

One last time, Cynthia grew pensive. She spoke more slowly, reluctant to let the excitement carry her away. "Yes . . . I suppose I could . . . but, Uncle William . . . where is the hitch? I keep feeling there must be one. How much rent does the old miser want?" Her eyes narrowed at the last.

A low chuckle echoed across the telephone line. "Tut, tut, Cindy. I thought you were a liberal thinker. No unfair judgments, remember? No one said anything about an 'old miser.' And the rent is minimal, much less than you're paying now. You're doing a job, simple as it may be. Low rent. No pay. A fairly even deal. You supply your own food, but that's about it." He hesitated for an instant, wondering if she would find some other kink to iron out. At her silence, he pushed on. "What do you say, Cynthia? It would really be good for you! The timing is perfect . . . everything." He paused again.

Cynthia struggled to find some logical reason to refuse the offer, but other than the illogical gut suspicion she had, she could find none, particularly when her uncle's voice came low and mischievous over the wire. "Do you think

you can manage without Professor Wittson for the summer?"

"Uncle William, you're impossible!" she shot back at him, then grinned. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you have your detectives following me around. They may see me dating Geoffrey, but they don't know what happens during those dates . . .," she teased.

Stricken by shyness at this turn in the conversation, William cleared his throat again before venturing softly, "Are you serious about him, Cindy?"

Her answer was quick, forceful, and completely honest. "No! He's a good friend of mine. Oh, I think he'd like it a little differently, but that's the way it is. And his phone calls are interrupting my work as much as everyone else's . . . present company excluded, of course!" she added generously.

"Cindy, you really should slow down. You should date more, you know. The right man would be good for you." His concern touched her, although they'd been through the discussion many times before and he knew not to pursue it further.

"I know, Uncle William. I really don't have time right now for that. Soon enough!" She pacified him subtly, without lying too blatantly. The truth was that she hadn't found a male companion who interested her more than her work, and until that day came, she was content to spend her nights alone. Geoffrey fascinated her in some ways. A Professor of English, he was constantly challenging her intellectually, taking her to the theater, suggesting books for her to read, and then discussing them with her. He was eager to study when she did, providing her with companionship, silent and patient, at the library or at one of their apartments. But she felt no physical attraction to him, and as timid as his overtures were in that respect, she was unable to respond.

Ever the expert at bringing the conversation full circle,

William did so again. "Well, my dear, you will have more time if I let you get off this phone. So it's settled, is it? Can I tell John that his 'old miser' has a house-sitter?" He chuckled good-naturedly and she found herself laughing along with him.

"Yes, Uncle William. The 'old miser' has his house-sitter. And you are a dear for thinking of me! What would I ever do without you?" She meant every word and hoped that her uncle knew that.

"Without me, my dear, you would be forced to find yourself some other debonair bachelor to take over! But," he continued gently, "you know I'll always be here, Cindy."

A sudden tightness formed at the back of Cynthia's throat as the strength of the affection she felt for her uncle surged upward. "I love you, Uncle William," she managed to croak, before she regained her control. Suddenly a thought hit her like a bolt out of the blue. "But where do I go from here? Details . . . where is this island? How do I get there? Shouldn't I speak to someone?"

William's calmness soothed her sudden excitement. "No, no. I'll take care of everything from my end. I'm leaving tomorrow to handle a case in Miami. Probably be gone for three or four days. We'll get together for dinner one evening before you go. I can give you all the instructions then. That is," his voice lowered a notch or two, "if you can spare some time for *this* debonair bachelor . . ."

"Any time, Uncle William. You know that!" she chided, then added with a giggle, "As long as it's after May twenty-fourth!"

Cynthia remained deep in thought about her uncle long after she had hung up the phone. *What a wonderful man,* she thought. *He always comes through for me, doesn't he?* Yes, William Thorpe had indeed come through for her many times during the past nine years. Her own father had died when she was ten, and even then Uncle William