

Sandra
Hill

Love
Me
Tender

BY THE BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF
THE LAST VIKING



SANDRA HILL

Humor has become a trademark of my novels. As the wife of a stockbroker and mother of four sons, I learned long ago that laughter is a necessary survival skill in the all-male bastion I call home. And as a former newspaper journalist dealing with serious issues, I discovered the merits of seeking the lighter side of even the darkest stories.

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LOVE SPELL BOOKS



NEW YORK CITY

A LEISURE BOOK®

December 1998

Published by

**Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.
276 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10001**

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Cover Art by John Ennis

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ISBN 0-8439-4457-9

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Printed in the United States of America.

**CRITICS ARE RAVING ABOUT
SANDRA HILL, WINNER OF A
ROMANTIC TIMES CAREER
ACHIEVEMENT AWARD**

"I always know I'm in for a treat even before I open any book by Sandra Hill."

—*Rendezvous*

"Sandra Hill has style and flair! She writes with witty, flowing humor—so real I can see and hear her delightful characters!"

—*The Literary Times*

"A fast-paced, sensual yet tongue-in-cheek story peppered with plenty of dynamite dumb-men jokes and riddles. This funny and uplifting read will brighten any day!"

—*Romantic Times*, for *Sweeter Savage Love*

"Filled with engaging humor, poignant emotions, lusty romance and stirring adventure; *The Tarnished Lady* is a jewel of a read."

—*Affaire de Coeur*

"This infuriatingly independent beekeeper heroine and handsome, but unpolished, tenth-century nobleman provide plenty of sparks and conflict in a passionate story that will keep readers involved to the end."

—*Library Journal*, for *The Tarnished Lady*

A MAGIC KISS

"Are you saying I sissy-kiss?" His dark eyes lit up at the challenge. "Now you've done it, Cynthia. I'm probably going to regret this . . . you're probably going to regret this, but I have no choice now. Nope. Dare a prince and you dare the devil. *Que sera sera.*"

P. T. was acting purely on reflex now, and his reflexes were being fueled by two zillion pounds of raging testosterone.

A sissy-kiss, huh? I'll show her. If there was one thing a Spaniard—well, okay, a Puerto Rican—knew how to do, it was kiss. He put his heart and soul into his kisses. He savored them, like fine wine and good sex.

He released her hands and advised in a husky voice he scarcely recognized, "Hold on tight, Cynthia."

Other *Leisure and Love Spell* books by Sandra Hill:

THE RELUCTANT VIKING

THE OUTLAW VIKING

THE LAST VIKING

SWEETER SAVAGE LOVE

DESPERADO

FRANKLY, MY DEAR...

THE TARNISHED LADY

And finally, a book dedicated to my best friend . . . my sister, Flora Cluston Drapalski.

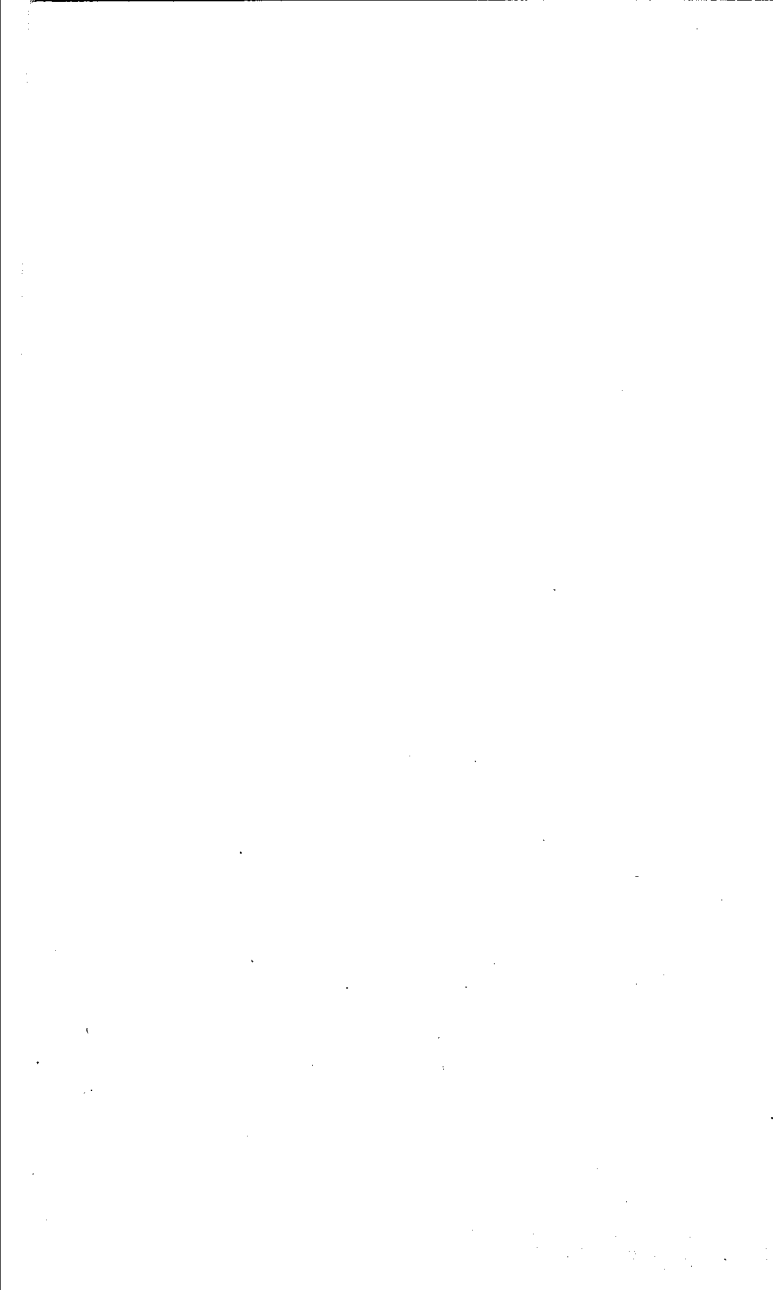
It is especially appropriate that Flora get a book which centers around dreams and a young woman's fancy. She was there when both of our dreams first sparked . . . in the old house in the poor neighborhood, in the disciplined atmosphere of St. Agnes School, along the wide Susquehanna, which swept through the center of our town, in the nooks and crannies of a creaking Victorian library. Oh, the tears and laughter we shared these many years . . . over dreams!

How apropos to this book, which focuses on dreams, that Flora once wrote:

*Snowflakes
and silent tears
long frozen by the howling wind
sent out to lonely lovers' ears
who wait.*

*In dreams,
my heart and soul
join in a minuet
and dance to the tune of time
in loneliness.*

Please enjoy *Love Me Tender*, Flora, dear. There's a little bit of this Cinderella in both of us.



Dear Reader:

Once upon a time, in a magic kingdom, there lived a handsome prince. Prince Charming, he was called by one and all.

And to this land came a gentle princess. You could say she was Cinderella.

Magic kingdom?

Well, okay, if you're going to be a stickler for accuracy, in this fairy tale the kingdom is Manhattan. But there's magic in the Big Apple, isn't there?

Prince Charming?

Oh, boy! You've heard the rumors, I suppose. So this fantasy calls for a little imagination. So he's Prince Not-So-Charming on occasion. So he sells shoes, not glass slippers. So he drives a pick-up truck, not a pumpkin coach. Big deal! He *is* handsome.

A gentle princess?

Picky, picky, picky! Who says a woman has to be soft and fluffy all the time? Haven't you ever heard of a royal case of PMS? And just because this princess is called "The Shark" doesn't mean she can't harbor some tender emotions inside.

Cinderella?

Geesh! Who's telling this story? She *is* Cinderella, all right . . . Wall Street Cinderella. This is the nineties, people. The feminist movement, I-am-woman-hear-me-roar, and all that affirmative-action business. Remember, even Grace Kelly had a career before her prince came galloping down Sunset Boulevard.

And, no, no, no, my lips are sealed over the glass slipper not fitting incident. You didn't hear it from me that the princess has a corn.

Now, dear reader, if you will open your eyes and ears and heart to all the enchantment awash in this earthly realm, I hereby present to you a most fantastical story.

Elmer Presley, fairy godfather

Chapter One

THE PRINCE IS A ROYAL PAIN IN THE . . . FOOT.

Prince Perico Tomas de la Ferrama had just shimmied out of his jeans and was pulling up his gray silk Armani slacks when he glanced out the shaded side window of the limousine and saw the sign wielded by a female picketer. He did a double take.

A long-legged strawberry blonde on crutches brandished the ignominious placard. Although she leaned against a telephone pole, she was clearly the ringleader of the line of chanting women—at least a dozen—who paraded in front of the skyscraper housing his sixteenth-floor offices. They carried similar messages: FERRAMA IS ANTI-WOMAN. WHAT'S SEXY ABOUT CORNS? PRINCE FERRAMA IS A FROG. THE VAMP = CORNS. DOWN

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WITH FERRAMA SHOES. CORNS, BUNIONS, CAL-LUSES . . . WHAT NEXT? WARTS?

"*Maldito!*" he muttered and leaned forward to speak into the intercom. "Circle the block, Jake." With the usual noontime traffic congestion, that could take half an hour.

"Sure thing, boss," his head designer, Jacob Beaunare, replied with childlike glee. Due to their ongoing financial crunch, Jake had been forced to double as chauffeur, but it was a role he enjoyed. The former MIT whiz kid whipped the leased stretch limo, with its detachable imperial crests, out into the bustling Manhattan street, oblivious to the honking horns and curses of cab drivers, not to mention the WBOT news van.

Oh, great! Is that Diane Sawyer coming up the street, flanked by two ABC cameramen?

"What the hell's going on, Dick?" he snarled, turning to his lawyer and figurehead CEO, Enrique Alvarez, who sat beside him on the other side of the limo's wide bench seat, sipping a Scotch and perusing the file of papers in his open briefcase with calculated coolness. Dick prided himself on his smooth composure under pressure.

He was about to give Dick some *real* pressure . . . like a fist in his too-pretty face. He was sick to death of all the PR games Dick orchestrated, although, to be fair, he didn't know if Dick was responsible for this latest travesty.

Peering up at him over a pair of wire-rimmed

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reading spectacles, Dick smoothed a hand over his long, slicked-back hair, which was gathered into a ponytail at his nape. "Relax, P.T. I told you when I picked you up at La Guardia that we have a minor crisis. *No problema.*"

Uh-oh! Every time Dick said *no problema*, he could be sure they had lots of problems. P.T. mentally fortified himself for the worst, then said, "*No problema?* You call a herd of . . . of femi-Nazis circling my headquarters *no problema?* You call that "Hard Copy" vehicle on our tail *no problema?* You call this kind of publicity just before the Ferrama stock offering *no problema?*"

"Don't get your laces in a knot, *mi amigo*. I'll handle it."

"*Carramba!* Were articles of incorporation filed today with the Securities and Exchange Commission?" he asked stonily.

"Sí . . . of course. Now we have three weeks before Ferrama goes public on August sixteenth. Next starts the road show, taking our presentations to the brokerage institutions in the selling group. The lawyers are proofing the final prospectus as we speak."

"And the opening price?"

"Five dollars per unit." Dick beamed with satisfaction. He'd been afraid the initial offering would be set at a lower price; anything under five dollars smacked of penny stocks, which he'd wanted to avoid.

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"So, with two million shares, we'll raise ten million in equity, as we'd hoped."

"Yep. Man oh man, we landed in a pile of gold dust when we chose Donaldson & Donaldson for the managing underwriters. The fifteen securities firms they invited into the initial selling group are primo . . . the best in the business."

"It was more of a coup that Donaldson chose us," P.T. pointed out dryly, but he couldn't help smiling at Dick's enthusiasm.

"*Dios*, I'm so anxious, I wish we could hit the boards today, but the SEC demands this twenty-one-day 'cooling off' period. I can see that you're wired, too, P.T. So, why don't you take this time to cool off yourself. You're entirely too uptight."

P.T. realized that Dick had managed to divert his attention from the problem at hand . . . the picketers. He released a long sigh of exasperation. "Ah, Dick, you know that this is a delicate stage. News of our stock offering will surely hit the financial news by tomorrow."

"Yeah. In fact, you have an appointment this afternoon with a *Wall Street Journal* reporter. And the tombstone ads to be run in the financial pages of all the major newspapers on the big day are ready to be sent out. They just need your final stamp of approval."

P.T. groaned. "So why are those women picketing our offices?"

"We had no idea the crackpot would go this far. She and her cohorts weren't here when I left the building two hours ago."

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"You *knew* there was a problem? And didn't nip it in the bud?"

"Hey, I had my hands full with your stepsisters. Those two bloodsuckers would put Cinderella's wicked stepsisters to shame."

P.T. winced. "What are Naomi and Ruth up to now?"

"Same old, same old. Money, money, money . . . they just can't get enough. They're driving everybody at the office bonkers. Wait till the accountant gets a hold of you. Naomi bought five thousand dollars' worth of power tools and fifty gallons of paint last week. And Ruth ordered three Bob Mackie sequin jumpsuits for her boyfriend, Elmer Presley, for a cool ten grand."

"Elmer Presley? He's still hanging around?" P.T. groaned, then waved a hand dismissively. "I can't deal with Naomi and Ruth now. Back to the picketers . . . what can we do to avert a disaster?"

"Don't overreact. I'm sure it's just a tiny blip in the scheme of things."

"Are you *loco*? I smell a lawsuit waiting to happen. Any negative publicity could deflate our opening stock price."

"I said I'd handle it, man."

That was the problem. He probably would. The question was how.

Lifting his butt off the seat, P.T. tucked his black T-shirt into the pleated slacks, then buttoned, zipped and belted himself in, the whole time scowling his displeasure at his colleague.