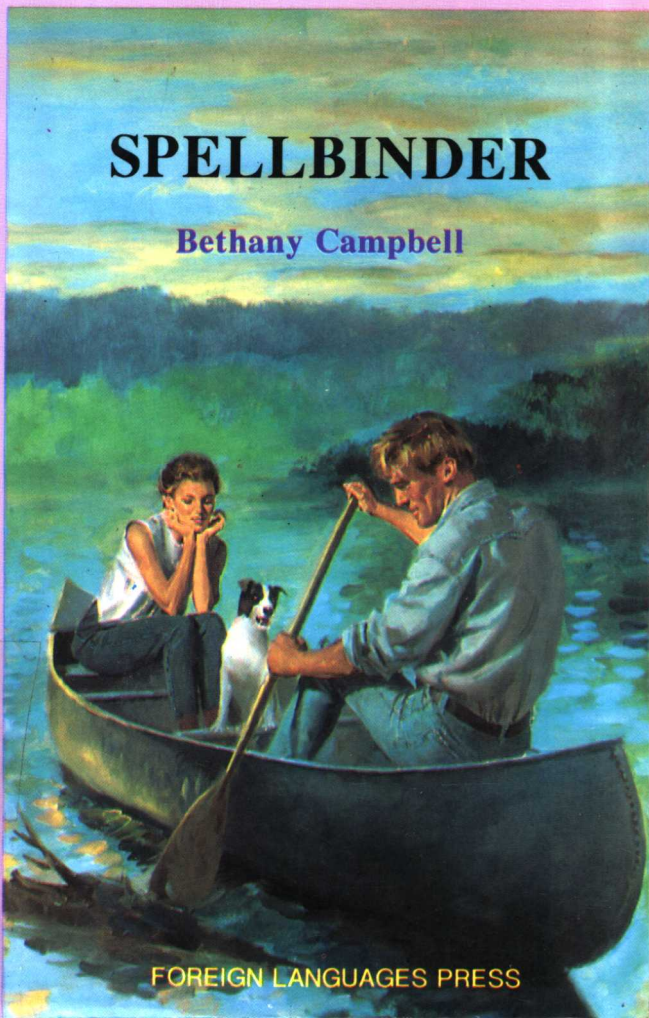




*Silhouette*®

# SPELLBINDER

Bethany Campbell



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

**图书在版编目(CIP)数据**

魔鬼情人:英文/(美)甘佩尔(Campbell, B.)  
著. —北京:外文出版社, 1995. 7  
(禾林英文言情小说丛书)  
ISBN 7-119-01785-3

I. 魔… II. 甘… III. 言情小说:中篇小说—美国—现代—英文 IV. I712.45

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(95)第 07892 号  
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**魔 鬼 情 人**

贝塔妮·甘佩尔 著

责任编辑 王蕊

外文出版社出版

(中国北京百万庄路 24 号)

邮政编码 100037

煤炭工业出版社印刷厂印刷

1995 年(36 开)第一版

(英)

ISBN 7-119-01785-3/I·382(外)

著作权合同登记图字:01-95-087

00620

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**“You don’t frighten me.”**

“Don’t I?” Zane asked, his voice dangerously soft.

“Then allow me to try again. Because it’s easy to see that it’s the most basic of things that scares you.”

He reached out and grasped her upper arm.

Kelly gasped at his touch, at the intensity of his voice. Reluctantly she raised her eyes to his.

“Brace yourself, Miss Cordiner,” he warned in a silky whisper. “You’re about to be terrified. By an expert.”

Then he took her in his arms and stared into her eyes. Kelly gazed back, her heart beating against her ribs like an imprisoned bird. She felt paralyzed, hypnotized.

When she didn’t resist Zane lowered his face to hers and kissed her with a ferocity that would have been terrifying had it not been so achingly sweet.

**Bethany Campbell**, an English major and textbook consultant, calls her writing world her "hidey-hole," that marvelous place where true love always wins out. Her hobbies include writing poetry and thinking about that little scar on Harrison Ford's chin. She laughingly admits that her husband, who produces videos and writes comedy, approves of the first one only.

Bethany received the 1990 Maggie Award for her Harlequin Romance #3062 *Dancing Sky*. It's just one of this talented author's many romances to have delighted readers around the world.

**SPELLBINDER**  
**Bethany Campbell**

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

This edition 1995

Spellbinder

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ISBN 7-119-01785-3

This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Enterprises Limited

Reprinted in the People's Republic of China in 1995 by Foreign Languages Press, 24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China

Not for sale outside the People's Republic of China

*Printed in the People's Republic of China*

## CHAPTER ONE

THE ROAD, red and dusty, wound tortuously between trees so thick that their limbs arched above it in a ragged canopy. Although the June day was hot and the Arkansas sun blazed at its zenith, little sunlight filtered through the thick foliage.

Tall ferns flourished at the road's edge, and once Kelly had to brake sharply—a white-tailed deer sprang out of the woods, bounded in front of the Jeep, then disappeared into the forested ravine on the road's other side. Kelly's heart had pounded wildly for a moment. She was a city person. She had never seen a deer in the wild.

The road climbed laboriously upward for a time, then twisted down at an angle just as steep. At last, near the bottom, she spotted a rusted metal gate with a sign that said Keep Out—Private Property. Kelly stopped the Jeep, although the gate stood wide open.

How like Jimmie, she thought, shaking her head in wry affection, to post a Keep Out sign, but not to close the gate. She knew he had a new watchdog, but it was overly friendly and never barked.

Jimmie had found the pup abandoned and taken it home because he was softhearted. And that was just like Jimmie, too, to keep a watchdog that wouldn't bark, only wag. Some neighbor had been feeding the dog, as well as the myriad stray cats Jimmie had adopted; she would have to find the neighbor and thank him.



And she would have the somber task of explaining what had happened to Jimmie. Kelly's smile faded and the tightness of grief choked her throat.

Jimmie was her uncle. He had been visiting Kelly and her mother, Cissie, in Cleveland. Jimmie was a strange, lovable but feckless man, and he had a problem—he drank. He had come to Cleveland in yet another effort to get *and stay* sober, and he had been doing well. Kelly and Cissie had been proud of him, hopeful for him.

But one night while he slept, Jimmie's generous, complicated heart, always so easily touched and so easily hurt, stopped beating. He was forty-four years old and he was dead.

Now Kelly Cordiner had come to Arkansas to settle Jimmie's small estate. Cissie couldn't face the task, and besides, she could not take the time off from her job in the children's department of the downtown public library. Kelly, who taught first grade, had the summer off. It was logical that she be the one to go, although her emotions were just as shaken as her mother's.

Jimmie's house on the lake would be in shambles; Cissie had almost guaranteed that. But if Kelly could sort through Jimmie's things, clean the place up and get it ready to sell, she could also stay in the house until school started again. It would cost her very little, she could enjoy the beauty of the lake, instead of the concrete of Cleveland, and she could use the peace and privacy to work on her book.

*My book*, Kelly thought almost fearfully. She was twenty-six years old and had already sold two children's books. It should seem a promising start, but nobody had paid much attention to either, and they had sunk out of sight as quickly as pebbles dropped into the sea. She hoped her third effort, a book of animal fables, would be different. The third try, she hoped, would be acclaimed. Her writing was the dream that sustained her, kept her strong.

Kelly stepped on the gas again and passed through the open gate. There, beyond a last stand of pines, was Jimmie's beloved lake, shining blue and serene in the sun. She drew in her breath with pleasure. Jimmie always swore it was the prettiest lake in God's beautiful green world, and perhaps he had been right.

Beyond the pines, tall grasses and wild flowers led to the pebbled shore, shaded here and there by flowering mimosas, magnolias and tulip trees. The lake was narrow at this point, and on its opposite side soared magnificent cliffs of pale limestone.

Three or four small buildings stood scattered along the shore. They looked like weekend or vacation houses, and all seemed empty at the moment. But Jimmie had lived there year-round and she had no trouble picking out his house.

Unfinished projects littered the yard: an old car that was not quite restored, a rusted boat that needed repainting, a half-built henhouse without hens, a small dock that needed to be repaired before it could be put in the water.

The shrubs were untended, the garden neglected; the clothesline drooped because one pole had fallen down. In the midst of the mess stood a small brown-and-white dog. The little animal watched Kelly's approaching vehicle with so much joy that it seemed she might actually wag her hind end off. Here and there cats lounged—two grays, two yellows and a black-and-white spotted one.

No question, Kelly thought—it had to be Jimmie's house. It was small, gray with dark red trim, but in spite of the surrounding clutter, it seemed to be in good repair.

She wondered if the gyrating dog wagged so happily because it recognized the sound of Jimmie's old Jeep. Her mother knew little about Arkansas because Jimmie had always gone north to visit; he'd never invited anyone south. In Cissie's mind, Arkansas was a mountainous southern jungle, not suitable terrain for Kelly's tiny Sprint compact.

She insisted Kelly take the Jeep so she could traverse the wild country.

But when Kelly parked and got out of the Jeep, the dog greeted her with such contortions of tail wagging that it seemed it was welcoming the long-lost great love of its life.

Some watchdog, Kelly thought scornfully, but she scratched the dog's ears, which made the animal nearly dance her heart out with bliss. She was an ugly little thing, mostly fox terrier, but she had an infectiously happy nature.

*Jimmie, Jimmie.* Kelly felt tears of affection sting her eyes. Who but Jimmie would adopt this dancing clown of a dog and try to pass it off as a guard? No one. She shook her head ruefully.

The five cats regarded Kelly's arrival with boredom or ignored it altogether. One lay on the unfinished henhouse and yawned daintily.

So this was where and how Jimmie had lived, Kelly thought. He had spent most of his adult life as far as he could from Cleveland and all other cities. He had fallen in love with Arkansas when he was in the army, in basic training.

After Vietnam, it was to Arkansas that he returned to forget the horrors of war. Jimmie's drinking had begun on a tour of duty and so had most of his other problems. He'd been wounded badly, losing one leg, much of the use of one hand and part of the sight of one eye. He'd lived on his disability pay and learned to make a decent living—when he was sober and the weather was good—as a fishing guide.

Kelly swallowed hard as she looked out over the blue water toward the towering cliffs. This was where he had lived his final years and it was where he wanted always to remain. In the back of the Jeep, in a small, square box were Jimmie's ashes.

He had always told Cissie that he wanted to be cremated when he died, and that he wanted his ashes to rest in the

clean, blue Arkansas water he'd loved so well. That was going to be another of Kelly's tasks, and it would be the hardest, loneliest one. She strained to keep her emotions under control. She had always felt things too hard, too deeply, always struggled to remain in command of her feelings.

She stepped up the two cement steps that led to the long porch. The dog gamboled about her feet, maintaining a frenzy of mindless joy. "Well," Kelly said to her with a sigh, "I wish everybody were as happy as you. A fine world it'd be."

The dog actually seemed to grin. Kelly blinked in surprise. She'd heard of dogs that could smile, but this was the first time she'd seen one. The creature stretched her lips, baring a friendly flash of whiteness.

"Oh, Jimmie," Kelly said, shaking her head again, "only you could find a smiling watchdog. Only you." She tried to ignore the dart of pain that pierced her heart.

She thrust the key into the lock and opened the door. The west wall of the living room was a row of windows that overlooked the lake and cliffs. Furnishings were sparse, but there was a desk in front of one window where she could set her typewriter once she cleaned the place.

Cleaning, she saw with sinking heart, was going to take some doing. The decor of Jimmie's home could best be described as "advanced bachelor squalor."

Heaps of newspapers cluttered every corner. Discarded clothing was strewn about as if just thrown. Cardboard boxes towered with cans that Jimmie must have intended to recycle, and most of them were beer cans.

Old magazines and paperback books lay scattered everywhere, for Jimmie, like the rest of his small family, was an inveterate reader. He was not exactly the family's black sheep, more aptly its stray sheep, but like Cissie and Kelly, he never felt complete unless surrounded by books.

But such books, Kelly thought with distaste, picking up one. *The Bloodletting* by Farley Collins. She turned over

another, *Tales of Mystery and Horror*, edited by somebody named Talon. She picked up a third, *Werewolf Moon*, again by Farley Collins. She dropped it back onto the tabletop in disgust, as if it were dirty—and perhaps smelly. Collins was the most popular writer of supernatural suspense in the country. Both Kelly and Cissie hated such books.

Poor Jimmie had seen enough real horror in war, Kelly thought. What demons had possessed him to read of still more? No wonder he drank, if he sat out here all alone and read such depressing trash.

Besides, she mused resentfully, Farley Collins was precisely the sort of writer who made hardworking aspiring writers such as her want to give up in disgust and despair.

Not only did he write these tasteless tales of terror, he wrote them with no apparent effort. There was a new Farley Collins novel every year, and for several years he had somehow produced two of the vile things.

What made the whole phenomenon more painful was how well such rubbish *sold*. Kelly had barely made a thousand dollars on both her children's books combined. Farley Collins's books sold at such a colossal rate he probably made a thousand dollars a day. It was outrageous.

She tried to shake away her negative thoughts. Both she and her mother had loved fantasy to be beautiful and to end happily. How could Jimmie, who had been a kind and sensitive man, love horror so much? It had always mystified them.

However, his housekeeping, or lack of it, was not in the least mystifying to Kelly. She knew what must be done. She had to make the house sparkle, ready to be listed on the market as soon as possible. She must do this for Cissie, and in a strange way as an act of love for Jimmie, one of the last she could perform for him.

There was a tiny kitchen area with a cupboard full of mismatched plates, cups and utensils. The bathroom held an old fashioned claw-footed tub but no shower. There was a

large, screened-in deck she loved immediately, for it, too, had a view of the lake, and a gentle breeze wafted through it, bearing the sweet scent of the flowering mimosa trees.

The bedroom was large, airy—and scandalously unkempt. The bed lay unmade; a small television sat on a cluttered dresser, but its cord was so frayed she would be afraid to plug it in. A clock radio had stopped running, although it was plugged in and the electricity was still on.

She shook her head again and ran her hand through her thick brown hair. Squaring her shoulders, she stepped up to Jimmie's smudged bureau mirror and looked herself in the eye, trying to steel herself for the emotional job ahead.

Kelly was tall, as her uncle had been, but too slim. Her slenderness and long legs gave her a slightly coltish, almost boyish figure.

She did not consider her face beautiful. Her chin was too strong, her eyes too deep set, her nose too snub. If she had any prettiness, she supposed it was only in her coloring, for she had a complexion that was the natural blushing gold of a peach. The blue-gray of her eyes contrasted dramatically with the gold of her skin and the gleaming chestnut of her hair.

She was the kind of woman that other women called "striking." She believed they were saying tactfully that her looks were unusual, but not pretty.

Her face looked dreamy when she read or when she wrote. It could be compassionate when her first-grade students needed compassion, stonily stern when they needed discipline, or warm and smiling when they needed love. Right now, looking at the reflection of disorder of Jimmie's house, she had a determined face, her firm jaw set at a deliberate angle.

She wore cut-off denim shorts and a pale blue T-shirt so she wouldn't have to change clothes before getting to work. She would unload Jimmie's Jeep, then pitch into this mess. The sooner she got it cleaned up, the sooner she could get to

her own work, to her book of fables. She had such high hopes for the book that the prospect of its failure deeply frightened her.

Kelly liked teaching, knew she was altogether too fond of her students, but she loved her writing with the same passion she reserved for her small family.

*To work*, she told herself, pulling back her hair and twisting it into a bun, fastening it in place with the few pins she always carried in her pocket. She almost smiled at her image. With her hair pulled back so severely and with no makeup, she looked every inch the teacher she was—a young woman who meant business and who would tolerate no nonsense.

She spent the next three hours launching her first assault against the house on behalf of neatness. It filled her with wrenching regret to gather Jimmie's discarded clothes, but she did, stuffing them into empty bags she had found in a kitchen cupboard.

The dog curled up contentedly on the rug, watching, wagging and occasionally giving herself a ladylike scratch. Forcing herself to be businesslike, Kelly methodically stripped the bed, gathered all the towels, took the spattered cloth from the kitchen table and put them in the bags, as well.

She intended to drive to the nearest town, where her first stop would be for supplies, especially cleaning supplies. Her second stop would be at a repair shop to see if the television and clock radio could be fixed. Her third would be at the Laundromat.

Last, she would stop at a Salvation Army or thrift store to give away Jimmie's cleaned clothes. It would not be easy. She'd also give away his collection of horrible books, and that would cause her no pang of sorrow at all.

Good grief, she thought in distaste. Jimmie must have bought every novel Farley Collins ever wrote, and a grisly collection of work it was. She shuddered delicately as she

filled two bags with the things. After touching them, she washed her hands because they made her feel creepy, as if she'd touched something unclean.

She made her last trip to the Jeep, balancing a bag of books in either arm. The dog followed her, wagging her tail rapidly, prancing in excitement, apparently hoping for a ride.

Just as Kelly bent to set the second sack of books in the Jeep's back seat, a pair of strong hands seized her roughly by the waist.

"Not so fast," thundered a harsh voice.

Terrified, Kelly felt herself being jerked backward from the Jeep. She dropped the bag of novels, and it split when it struck the ground, scattering books over the grass.

*I'm being attacked!* she thought wildly. Her most primitive instincts leaped to life. She slammed her elbow backward as hard as she could, jabbing into the man's rib cage. When she heard his muffled grunt of pain she hit him again, this time harder. He only clutched her more tightly and swore.

"Hellcat," he almost spat from between his teeth, spinning her around, imprisoning her in his arms. "Even stealing his books? That's a new low."

Kelly looked up into the rugged face of a large man who wore a blue chambray workshirt. An escaped convict, she thought, dazed with terror. Clean-shaven and almost clean-cut, but most certainly a dangerous man.

She drew back her fist to smash it against his stubborn-looking jaw, but he laughed bitterly and pinned her against the Jeep so hard that she couldn't move.

He brought his face nearer to hers. His eyes, she saw, were dark gray and flashed with anger.

"My God," he said in disgust. "You're even taking his clothes? And the TV? And the Jeep? Where is he, passed out in there?"



Kelly, hardly hearing what he said, tried to kick him. He pinned her more firmly against the side of the Jeep, his long thighs pinioning hers, immobilizing her. His hands gripped her more roughly still, and he gave her a quick shake, so hard it momentarily jarred all rational thought from her head.

"Steady," he warned, lifting an eloquent eyebrow. "Don't make me hurt you. Just put everything back where you found it. You can start by picking up his books."

The dark gray eyes studied her in anger. They were astoundingly cold eyes. "I'll give him credit. At least he got a young and pretty one this time. But why you're sinking to this, kid, is beyond me."

He gave her another shake, the kind an adult might give a particularly fractious child.

"Don't try to hit me, don't try to kick and don't try to run. Just pick up the books. Put everything back where it belongs. The poor devil's drunk again, isn't he?" His nostrils flared, and he shook his head in frustration. "I didn't even know he was home again. This always happens. He always manages to meet a woman. And she's always the wrong one." He swore again, but he released her.

Kelly stared up at him in outrage and slowly growing comprehension. "Do you think I'm *stealing*?" she asked in disbelief. She rubbed her arms where he had gripped her. He had been none too gentle.

"He gets drunk," the man said, his disgust with her clear. "He picks up women. Then they steal him blind. It's always happening. You weren't the first to think of it, kid. Now pick up his books. Pick them *up*."

"I wasn't stealing this trash," she almost snarled, and she gave the nearest book a savage kick to show her contempt for it. "I was taking it into town to give it away."

"That's no way to treat a book," he growled, real threat in his voice. "I suppose you're going to give away his tele-