

Priceless  
*Priceless Love Book One*

by

Carolyn Faulkner

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Priceless  
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## **Carolyn Faulkner**

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Writing started as a way to explore her feelings. Soon short stories flowed from her  
pen featuring reluctant heroes taking the leading lady in hand, but always for her own  
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Today Carolyn is the author of dozens of books. She writes from her home in Maine,  
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## Chapter One

Frances Rose Spencer fiddled impatiently with her gloves, and then checked her watch for the thousandth time. How dare he summon her to his office like some servant girl who was paid to dance attendance on him, and then have the unmitigated gall to keep her waiting in his outer office for twenty minutes! Frances was incensed – yet again – at his shabby treatment of her, but her mouth twisted in a wry smile. Why she should think each time that things might be different, she'd never know. Uncouth cowboy!

Even though he got under her skin more quickly and consistently than any person she'd ever met, there was something about William Genrette, something Frances recognized deep within her, but steadfastly refused to acknowledge consciously. When he was in the room, her heart beat a little faster; she compulsively wanted to check that her hair and clothes and makeup were at their best, and her stomach clenched like he held it in his big fist, all of which merely added to how annoyed he made her by his mere existence. Worst of all, though, he made her nervous; Frances was no sixteen-year-old schoolgirl to shake and shiver in the presence of a man, although she knew a lot of younger – and older – women who practically drooled after Genrette. Not her. She detested the man. And even if she had fancied him, which she didn't, she was not about to become part of that crowd.

To cover her nervous reaction, she was often sarcastic and downright belligerent towards him, which was in direct contrast to the good-natured, open, warm disposition she presented to everyone else. He was quite likely never to see that side of her personality, unless he suddenly became a eunuch. Somehow, Frances thought with a wry smile, even if that unlikely event happened, he would still probably exude more sex appeal than any ten men.

It would help things enormously, she mused, if he wasn't always looking at her – even in the middle of a heated debate in front of ten old fuddy-duddy board members – as if she was an oasis in the desert and he'd been without water for a month. It would also help if he weren't so blasted polite, unfailingly treating her to that smug, almost-smile as if he were laughing at her but couldn't quite bring himself to do it out loud. As long as she remained basically civil and respectful, that lazy half-smile never wavered.

But when she crossed the line – his line – into anything that he considered to be even mildly disrespectful, the smile disappeared as if it had never been, his jaw set to granite, and he would lower his chin to peer out at her from under dark, black, frowning eyebrows, saying just one firm, low word of warning.

“Frances.”

She knew from experience that that was all the notice she would get before he took matters into his own hands in a most undignified, humiliating, and downright painful way that didn't bear thinking of, to say nothing of ever repeating. Fran was admittedly stubborn and she didn't back down easily, not even to him, but she was not stupid. She never intended to offer him the tiniest opportunity to demonstrate that particular lesson again.

Sighing heavily in exasperation, she got up, grabbed her bag and stalked over to where his secretary was typing diligently. “Nancy, please tell Mr. Genrette – whenever it is that he deigns to crawl out of his office,” she commented caustically, “ – that I waited for twenty minutes after the time of our appointment before leaving, and that I have better things to do with my time than wait for that pompous, arrogant man to decide to remember his manners and attend the meeting at which he demanded my presence regarding a ‘most urgent’ matter.” Her tone cast considerable doubt as to exactly how urgent the matter was.

Poor Nancy looked like she’d swallowed a mackerel whole; her eyes were bugged out and she flushed, probably at the mere idea of relaying that nasty speech to her stern, cool boss. Personally, Nancy thought the sun rose and set at Mr. Genrette’s command, just like the rest of his simpering pack of female admirers, but everyone in the company knew of the animosity that existed between Clarence Spencer’s daughter and his hand-picked successor. The two got along like the Hatfields and McCoys, if that well, and innocent bystanders were smart to either duck out or duck under the furniture whenever they were in the same room together. Board meetings dragged on interminably since the two of them inevitably ended up on opposite sides of any argument, and neither was ever of a mind to back down to the other.

“Never mind, Nancy,” the scoundrel in question said mildly from his stance leaning against the doorjamb to his office. “I got the message.”

There was a time, when Fran was much younger and had just met her father’s darkly handsome new assistant, that she might have blushed at the idea that he had heard what she’d said, but that time was long gone. She completely repressed any shred of embarrassment in favor of not revealing any weaknesses to someone she considered to be the enemy.

Will’s face showed none of his feelings, either, as usual. Frances believed peevishly that was a direct result of the fact that he didn’t have any emotions to show. When he spoke, his tone was low and even, devoid of any human feeling. “I’m sorry for the wait, Frances. I had an overseas call that went on longer than I’d planned.” He stepped towards her, reaching for her elbow as if to guide her into his office.

Frances snatched her arm away from him well before he touched her, as if his hand would contaminate her with some particularly unpleasant disease. She watched his face harden at the insult, but brushed off the niggling trace of fear at his reaction. “I’m sorry, Mr. Genrette, but I have another appointment. Perhaps we can attend to your ‘emergency’ another time.”

She turned to go, but was brought up short by that very same hand clenching her upper arm in a firm, no-nonsense grip that was nonetheless completely painless. Will spun her around and guided her ahead of him into his office without another word.

Truly, he didn’t trust himself to speak civilly at this moment. Frances Spencer pushed his buttons faster and more accurately than any person alive, but only part of his reaction to her was annoyance. The rest of it was sweet, aching sexual pleasure, pure and simple, and there was nothing on God’s green Earth that he could do about the fact that every time he saw her, every time he smelled her familiar scents of lilac and lavender, every time she argued with him nose to nose without backing down an inch, he became fully, painfully erect.

Correction, he brought himself up short in his own mind. There was nothing he could do about it – until now.

As he made his way around the massive, ornately carved dark walnut desk, he almost smiled to himself. Will was a realist above all else. He wasn't handsome, but was pleasant enough looking, in a rugged sort of way. At six-four and about two hundred fifty pounds of solid muscle, he was used to attracting women effortlessly. Will had a full head of thick, raven black hair, even, white teeth, and dark gray eyes, but despite all of his physical attributes, it was more likely the aura of unrelenting masculinity surrounding him that drew women to him like a lodestone. He'd been a cowboy, and women tended to romanticize that profession for some reason; he was a man's man who made no apologies for it, and whatever advantage it was, real or imagined, he ruthlessly used it to its fullest extent to get whatever – or whomever – he wanted. He'd never encountered a woman he couldn't have . . .

Until Frances Spencer.

She'd been a young thing when he first came into the company, seventeen or so, if he remembered correctly, all soft and round and wide-eyed, but smart as a whip and already used to her place as her father's right-hand man. He had wanted her since they were first introduced, when she was a shier, more reticent version of her current self, still budding into womanhood. Will didn't know exactly what it was about Frances that made him want her with such a relentless intensity, but he had a hard time concentrating when she was around. He wanted her, and he would have her. That decision had been made the instant he'd laid eyes on her.

Will had seen to it that, although he had been hired to take Fran's place, Clarence did not immediately dismiss Frances. Instead, at Will's seemingly innocent insistence, Frances was included – indeed was a huge help – in his indoctrination into the company. As a result, they spent nearly every day together for almost six months after he was first hired, and the time only cemented his resolve to have her for himself – she was quick-witted, but chose her words carefully and was not overly chatty. She was a known entity to the entire staff, from the lowliest janitor on up, and could call them by name and often inquired after their wives or children. It was obvious that Frances truly cared about the people who worked for her, and they adored her in return.

She would be the perfect wife for him; a bright counterpoint to his often dark, cold-hard-facts personality – not that he was necessarily in the market for a wife. But one must seize opportunities when they are presented, and he intended to make Frances Spencer his wife, one way or the other.

But then he'd slowly, over several years, replaced Frances in the office, despite her rather loud and vociferous objections. Her father wanted her to have a life of leisure, like other young women of her class, but Fran was furious that she'd been phased out of her job, and all of that anger was aimed unerringly at him. Her active dislike of him had worsened, he supposed, when he'd laid down the law on her bottom one evening, after warning her about watching her tone with him, and she'd sassed right back. It was mostly fueled by her sense of having to compete with him for her father's attention and affection, which couldn't have been further from the truth. Clarence, like the rest of the planet, seemed to think the world of his little girl, who was rapidly descending into spinsterhood, although nothing and no one could seem to entice her to the alter.

Will supposed that if he'd been her place, he wouldn't have been any too happy with the turn of events, either, but then she was a woman, and didn't belong in the office. Instead, bored and frustrated, she was in danger of becoming an out and out rabble-rouser, running around with



a group of single, high-society women of whom she was the undisputed ringleader, dabbling in artsy things and spending entirely too much time with one particular milquetoast painter who smacked to Will of a smooth-talking grifter.

Frances, at twenty-five, should have been long-since married, with several children at her skirts and an infant in her arms. He knew if he were her husband, he'd be at her so often she'd be constantly full with his child. The image of Frances's already well-rounded breasts full of milk, and her slender belly swollen with his baby, was so powerful he had to grasp at something, anything, else to think of. He snatched a folder off his desk and came back around to lean his butt against the front edge, finally noticing that she hadn't moved from where he'd left her, in the middle of the room.

"Sit," he commanded quietly.

Frances humphed, nervous as usual under his unwavering gaze. "I'll have you know, Mr. Genrette, I do not appreciate being kept waiting, particularly since you were the one who insisted that you had to see me. I especially do not appreciate being manhandled into your office."

Will didn't move a muscle, didn't change facial expressions, nothing. But the next order was given in such a tone as to alert her that an intelligent person wouldn't want to make him say it again. "Sit down." Slowly, with obvious reluctance, she grabbed one of the two chairs from in front of his desk, pointedly moved it well away from where he was positioned, and sat down primly, her mouth pinched into a tight, openly disapproving frown.

Will paused for a moment of uncharacteristic uncertainty. The information he was about to show her, and the subsequent offer he was about to make, would change both of their lives forever. He looked at her closely as she busied herself by removing her white gloves and putting them in her purse, then laced her pale, delicate fingers over her lap. He had to move the folder he was holding inconspicuously over his lower belly to hide his usual reaction, although she was looking everywhere around the room but at him, so he didn't know exactly what he was worrying about. It would have been just one more log to add to the fire of her dislike, he supposed. After she heard what he was going to say this afternoon, she'd have a helluva lot more to hate him for than just "manhandling" and tardiness and whatever other real or imagined slights he had perpetrated on her person in the past seven or eight years.

If he could just get her to see the practicalities of what he was going to suggest . . . Will sighed, then plunged ahead. His idea was the best for everyone involved . . . except, perhaps, for her.

Frances had been studiously avoiding the tall, imposing figure to her left, although he was so damned big it was hard not to end up simply staring at the hands in her lap in order not to see some part of him out of the corner of her eye. She'd never been a hang-your-head, cowardly type of person, so she stared straight out at the budding Knoxville landscape, still checking her watch furtively every once in a while, although she truly had no hope of getting out of the office until the despot decided to let her leave. Despite what he might have thought – that she had created a previous appointment out of thin air – she did have a standing date with Albert at three for tea, and it didn't look like she was going to make it.

A thick folder landed unceremoniously in her lap. Since there really was no gentle way to say this, Will came right out with it. "Your father is broke."

That got her to look at him, square in the eye, however disbelievingly, her lips slightly agape until she snapped her mouth shut with a click of straight, white teeth.

Fran blustered while she quickly scanned through the papers in the folder.

“But – you – he – we –”

Will cut through her words. “It’s all there in black and white,” he said baldly, wanting to get this part over with and his offer on the table as soon as possible, so that he would finally have an end to all this indecision, one way or the other.

He was right. There was literally nothing left. They owed literally everyone. The company her father had spent his life’s blood building had ceased to exist with an ignominious whimper, succumbing to the financial epidemic of the times. “What happened?” The question was completely inane; she could see what had happened for herself, yet she couldn’t stop the utterance.

The desolation in her tone wrenched his gut involuntarily, but he knew she’d accept no sympathy from him, so he didn’t offer any. Will had to hand it to her. She knew what she was looking at in those papers, having been her father’s probable successor until he’d come along. She could see the red on a balance sheet as well as he could, maybe better, since he hadn’t been born to it as she had. But she wasn’t weeping or moaning or wailing or even tearful.

The file hit his desktop with a plop when she bolted out of her chair and started to pace. “What can be done?”

He shrugged, watching her avidly. “Nothing. We’re in a depression, as I’m sure you know. People made bad investments and lost their shirts. Your father, unfortunately, was one of them.” Will knew his solution could only be presented to her – had its only hope of success – if it was presented as the only possible solution to her problem. If she thought there was any other way out, she’d crawl naked on her hands and knees over shards of glass to it before agreeing to his admittedly somewhat unconventional idea.

The vision of her naked on all fours made his already swollen member contract painfully, as if seeking the envisioned warmth of her soft, womanly passage as it would be inevitably presented in that position. Will dragged his lurid imagination back into line with ruthless control. There would be time for that later. Much later. Maybe. If she didn’t kill him first.

“What about the bank?” Fran asked, already knowing the answer. Since Black Thursday, four months ago, when the New York Stock Exchange crashed, banks had been going under right and left. There was no one left to borrow money from.

He shook his head gently.

Fran felt herself getting more desperate and anxious, and she did not like it, not one bit, especially not in front of this man. “The Monroes? The Swansons?”

He saw her swallow hard and begin to wring her hands as he continued to shake his head. “There’s no one else left with any money, either, Frances.” Will’s voice was soft. He had no desire to grind her pride into the dirt.

Will could tell the exact moment when she thought of him; she became utterly still and wary, turning to face him with a speculative look. God, she was magnificent! The thought came unbidden into his mind. Now here was a woman truly fit to be his mate – unafraid, shrewd, intelligent, with a backbone, whose first resource was neither her looks – as lovely as she was, she was not Miss America material – nor charm, nor that usual feminine crutch – tears.

She took a few steps towards him, one of the few times he could remember her ever voluntarily coming near him. Her eyes were narrow, calculating. “So, if Father is bankrupt, that must mean you are, also, correct?”

Will folded his arms over his broad chest and met her eyes levelly. “I tried to advise your father in regard to his investments. He didn’t see fit to take my advice . . . “

She was like a terrier smelling a rat. “I repeat: are you also bankrupt, Mr. Genrette?”

A small smile flitted across his face. They’d known each other for nigh onto ten years, but she’d staunchly refused to use his first name, although he regularly flaunted convention and used hers, distinctly without her permission.

“By way of answering you, Frances, let me show you an idea I had that I think would benefit everyone.” He twisted around and grabbed a second file, which he extended to her.

Frances was naturally wary – the last stack of papers he’d handed her had destroyed her cozy little world. Well, she thought, reaching for the folder. The worst was done already . . . so she thought.

If the first file was devastating, the second was obscene. Before she’d gotten more than three-quarters of the way down the first page, she snapped the cover closed and threw the papers on the ground at his feet.

She was in high dudgeon, he thought, as he literally watched her back come up, her face flush, and her breathing became heavy with anger. An intriguing image flashed through his mind that she’d probably look much the same in the throes of passion, but he squelched the thought ruthlessly. If he was going to get what he wanted from her, he could not be distracted by his rampant libido.

“I will not even finish reading that piece of filth you just handed me, Mr. Genrette.” He thought he had heard her voice ice cold before. That was nothing compared to now.

Will bent and picked up the file, putting it behind him on the desk. When he turned back around, she was still huffing and puffing, staring straight at him, but he could plainly see that her eyes were filled almost to overflowing with tears that she was trying desperately to blink back. He didn’t mention it, knowing that it would humiliate her to realize that he had noticed.

“How old’s your father, Fran?”

She was so confused by the non sequitur that she forgot to reprimand him for being familiar enough with her to use her nickname. “Fifty-seven.”

“And Junior – he’s in his sophomore year at Harvard, isn’t he?”

Frances didn’t have to be hit over the head with his point. If her lips turned down any further, the corners would hit her knees, but she’d be damned if she’d cry in front of him. So she bit her full lower lip to keep it from quivering and ruthlessly suppressed the tears that had flooded her eyes as she read that – that thing he’d given her. Will extended his hand to her, wishing – not for the first time – that she felt differently about him, but knowing in his heart that she’d accept no help from him, especially not in this situation.

She looked about to faint, although he figured there was so much starch in her backbone that she’d never fall. Still, he didn’t want to have to make a grab for her that she would inevitably interpret as something nefarious on his part. Sometimes coddling and sympathy were the worst things for a person, and he tended to think this was one of those times. So, before she

had time to think or react, he grasped her by the shoulders and steered her non-too-gently into a chair before she dropped, then poured her a neat shot of whiskey and pressed it to her lips.

She was too surprised by his quick movements to react until she began to choke on the fiery liquid. Will put the still half-full shot glass on the edge of his desk and resumed his former position, but this time he was almost directly in front of her.

Frances coughed and sputtered, accusing loudly, “What the hell are you trying to do, kill me?”

“You looked a mite peak-ed for a minute, there, Miss Frances,” he teased with a small smile. “I didn’t want you to go faintin’ on me.” He couldn’t prevent the countrified twang of his tone.

The acerbic look she gave him let him know that he’d been right about the unlikelihood of Frances Rose Spencer fainting in his presence. At least he’d gotten her mind off her plight for a moment or two.

“You’ve been dealt a major shock today, Honey.”

Fran’s ever-present sarcasm rose to the occasion. “Yes, it’s not every day I get propositioned by a man I hate the sight of.”

Will frowned darkly. “I was thinking more in the direction of not having any money.”

To his complete surprise, she appeared to relax a little. “I’m fairly certain we can get along, Mr. Genrette. Oh, I’m not saying it will be easy. But we’ll get by somehow.”

His brows drew together over his eyes at her nonchalance. He hadn’t expected her to take the loss of her family’s fortune with such aplomb. “Do you think your father, who worked his tail off all his life to build this company is going to be as cavalier about its demise as you are? Didn’t he have some heart trouble a couple years back? Don’t you think that having to start over – hell, being pretty much unable to even do that in today’s economy – will negatively effect his health?”

He was hitting her hard, right where she lived. Her family – her father and her brother – were everything to Frances since her mother had died when she was eleven. Will had always been on the outside looking in on her little family. She was the quintessential daughter to her father, and a wonderful, loving older sister and mother figure to Clarence Jr. Why, both of them looked on her with nearly as much reverence as they would have Mrs. Spencer herself, had she lived, and probably depended on her even more. Frances had blossomed with the responsibilities of taking her mother’s place, even at such a young age, mothering her younger brother naturally – as well as any stray animals she could find along the way.

Her father had left the running of the household to his daughter and the servants, and had also included Frances in business discussions, just the same as he would have his wife. Clarence Junior, only three when his mother died, was raised exclusively by his doting older sister.

It was that more than anything that had led her to being an old maid of twenty-five and unmarried, with no real possibility of matrimony in the future. Not that she was necessarily looking to get married. She had no suitors that he knew of, unless one considered Albert Conroy, the artist friend that she spent entirely too much time alone with. Albert was afraid of his own shadow, and Will didn’t see much coming out of that pairing.

Marriage looked, to Frances, like a step down, into matrimonial bondage. She was already the undisputed mistress of her house, her time was largely her own to do with as she

pleased, and until she'd walked into this room, she'd been an heiress to a considerable family fortune. Why would she want to trade all of that lovely freedom to become subject to some overgrown Neanderthal's relentless pawing? If she got married, everything she owned would legally become her husband's. She'd have nothing – even less than she was ending up with now. At least she still had her self-respect.

Will watched her through narrowed eyes as she sorted through what he'd said. Frances was a strong woman who sometimes verged on brattiness but was never maliciously or blatantly disrespectful – except perhaps towards him. He had only had to address one such naughty incident in the time he'd known her; dealing with it in the most effective way he knew how by paddling her bare bottom. Until that point, when she was just eighteen, she had remained fairly neutral towards him. He had never had to repeat the punishment; Frances was too smart for that. Instead she'd frozen him out, barely deigning to acknowledge his existence beyond excruciatingly polite niceties, at best.

As she matured, though, she began to challenge him, arguing passionately with him about things that meant a lot to her regarding the company – usually workers' rights issues, like the forty-hour work week, working conditions in the plants, and paid sick leave. He enjoyed their debates enormously, although he knew instinctively that she thought because she had become an adult that she would no longer be subject to his particular brand of discipline.

She was very, very wrong, but had not pushed him to that point – yet. Lately, though, she was getting closer and closer to it.

She was just too used to having too much liberty to do exactly as she pleased, like dining unchaperoned with that anemic little whelp, Conroy. Will was of a mind that a strong woman needed the gentle but firm guidance of a strong man, and that Frances's headstrong nature needed to be reigned in occasionally; not broken or crushed, just dampened a little with the knowledge that if she stepped over the line of propriety into disrespect, vulgarity, or shrewishness, her lovely round bottom would pay the price. And he was just the man to collect that fee, as often as was necessary to keep her safe and in line.

He continued. “And that's not saying anything about Junior having to drop out of Harvard in the middle of his second year to come home and help support the family.” Will knew his barb had struck home when she looked down for a moment.

Then her head snapped back up. “I'd work in the sewers for the Devil himself before I'd prostitute myself to you.” For a split second, she regretted saying that. Will's face had never been quite that hard, and she knew from experience that if he thought she'd gotten too sassy with him, he'd tip her over his lap and paddle her bottom good, with absolutely no hesitation at all. Damn the man! He was standing there all self-satisfied and glib – he had it all planned out, and it all worked in his favor. Hell, it worked in everyone's favor but her own!

When he spoke, his voice was glacial. “I could have kept it on that level, you know. Just offered to keep your Dad in comfort until he passes, never knowing that he'd lost his fortune and his company, paying your brother's way through school while you warmed my bed each night without the benefit of my ring on your finger.”

Her face blanched white, as frozen as his tone. “You forgot the land and the shares I hold in the railroad that Grandmamma left me, that you wouldn't get if you didn't marry me.”

He went on as if she hadn't spoken. Let her think that the land and shares were his primary reason for his unusual proposal. It was easier on both of them. " – but I wanted it all to be above board and legal, respectable for you, so that you could still hold your head up in town."

How unlike him to think of someone else for a change, she thought nastily. The bastard! Fran whispered hoarsely around the aching lump in her throat, "At least if I were merely your mistress I could leave you once Junior was out of college and – and Daddy was g-gone. If I married you, I'd be stuck in hell with you forever." Barely able to collect herself, bursting with anger and humiliation, she rose and quickly stalked to the door.

Just as her hand grasped the doorknob, his deep voice floated to her. "I need to move fast on this. The offer will only be open until Monday night at six." That gave her just the weekend, but he was stretching it down to the wire at that if the company was still going to be recoverable. "Don't decide with your heart, Fran. Think of your father and your brother and do the right thing – the best thing for them."

He barely heard her plaintive, stifled sob, "But what about me?" and was halfway across the room to her before she darted out the door with her hand over her mouth.

"Dammit!" Will spat fiercely, starting to storm after her, but thinking better of it in mid-stride. He wanted to hold her stiff little body against his and rub her back while she cried, soothing her and reassuring her that everything would be all right, that he'd gladly take the burdens off her shoulder so that she didn't have to be Junior's surrogate mother or her father's unpaid social and business assistant, as well as housekeeper and daughter. But she'd have none of that tenderness from him, especially now.

Did she really think that he'd let her go once her father had passed and Junior took his place in the business? He snorted. He kept what was his – and soon, very soon, Frances would be his, one way or the other.

Will had to satisfy his pent-up anger in a more civilized way than chasing her down the hall and sweeping her off her feet and into his arms. He closed the door to his office a lot more loudly than was necessary, and although it wasn't much, it felt damned good.

Monday at six, he'd told her.

How the hell was he going to wait complacently until then to find out his future? And what was he going to do if she told him in excruciating detail exactly what he could do with his proposal?