



Midnight Showcase

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Spellfire Moons



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Trouble Brews by Mae Powers
The Grand Design
by Melanie Gilbreath
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In The Hot Zone by C.D. Reese
High Chairs and High Stakes
by Jenna Leigh

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Spellfire Collection

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**WELCOME TO
SPELLFIRE, TEXAS**

*Where things aren't what they seem, no—
they are so much hotter!*

The Fourth of the Spellfire Collections

The moon often plays an important role in a town, where fairies and demvirs roam the woods searching for passion, and all manner of folk from human to unusual beings can feel the flares of its cosmic presence heating up their summer days and nights in the town of Spellfire, Texas.

Spellfire Moons

Moonshyne, Jewel Adams

Being the last moonbeam faery in existence makes Shyne lonely, until she meets Sheriff Malachi Spellfire, a shape-shifting demvir, who fills her emptiness with passion.

Trouble Brews, Mae Powers

When Jeff and Marion Trinkets learn she's pregnant, they didn't expect troubled brews of an eerie kind to happen within Spellfire, Texas.

The Grand Design, Melanie Gilbreath

Artist Stephen McClintock has lost his inspiration. It's interior decorator and witch Amy Pettibone to the rescue to salvage his unharmonious habitat.

Clothes Minded, Karen Rose

When car trouble brings runaway bride Cosmina del Costa to Quantum Mechanics, will this fashion designer find love in the arms of an ancient warrior?

In The Hot Zone, C. D. Reese

Heaven and Hell collide when a sharpshooter falls for a half demon. Can this 'petite ange' aim true to win her lover's very soul back?

High Chairs and High Stakes, Jenna Leigh

When Erin MacKenzie meets Matthias Gregory, a vampire raising his daughter alone, the witch-nanny finds that she's bitten off more than she can chew.

Moonshyne by Jewel Adams

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Visit Jewel's Website...

<http://www.jeweladams.midnightshowcase.com/>

Moonshyne

By

Jewel Adams

She smiled as her skin tingled to life when she stepped into the circle of moonlight. Her delicate wings began to expand as the translucent fibers bathed in the shimmering moon dust. They swayed under a breathless breeze until they glowed in renewing energy. She raised her face to partake of the moon's rich light, thankful for another clear night in Spellfire Woods.

Her soft laughter vibrated with her wings as they lifted her in a seductive dance in the moonbeams. But, Shyne's pleasure in the moon's beauty refused to reach her heart. She was entering another season and still her illusive lover failed to make himself known.

Memories of the beast she ran with that first night in these woods came back to her again. She never even saw an animal like this in the city, the thought made her laugh. Spellfire held one surprise after another for Shyne. She didn't have any difficulty in remembering the animal, dangerously dark, his long thick coat of black and garnet fur moved like small waves on a lake, and his fangs glowed in the moonlight much like her skin did. She caught the sharp golden light in his eyes when he looked up at her as they raced through the wood. She could swear he smiled at her, testing her. Shyne never felt the kind of freedom she did when running with him.

She looked for him every night, even sensed his presence, but he never showed himself to her again. Faer Folk were known for their imagination, but she still believed he was as real as herself.

Shyne pushed the memory away, to think on more pressing problems.

Spellfire Moons

She refused to acknowledge the failure of the love spell her friend Lillia made for her. As Lillia said, spells have a way of working when they are meant to find love. Of all people, Lillia and her new husband Georgiano would know about spells. *Oh to be so in love with another.* Lillia said that if Shyne believed then the spell could still bring her lover to her. Yet, Shyne failed to see anyone or feel any love sparks.

Maybe she should speak with Electra, Alex told her that his wife knew more about magic than most witches, but they didn't really know each other. When Alex offered Shyne the job as his hostess at the couple's new restaurant Garnet Moon, she almost turned him down. The idea of moving to a new place terrified her. Shyne was happy managing the small Bistro for him in Houston. She'd learned years ago how to hide her identity, though Alex and his mother knew her heritage. Change always affected her in strange ways until she could once again control her emotions and halt the side effects.

Shyne did a giggling somersault over the memory of her move here. Alex told her that Spellfire was different and she would love it here, she often wondered if he knew how much she cherish her new life at Spellfire. To be free to be herself, without fear, what a new and thrilling experience and one reason this upheaval over her *season* became so disruptive to her.

The other Faeries actually teased her today at Sinful Sundaes, calling her a prude and saying she was no fun. Over the years, hiding became Shyne's specialty and focus. Since coming to Spellfire, she still didn't join in with their foolery so they usually stayed clear of her. They learned how painful her Faer sparks could be when crossed. None of them let her explain that they were a self defense mechanism like points on a star. But all Faeries could tell when it was safe to play tricks and tease, especially one of their own. Shyne left Sinful without finishing the special Stardust Sundae that Electra made just for her. She was so upset that she nearly disappeared in the crowd because of her sadness, something she must never let happen.

Moon-Faeries were rare, Shyne being the only one in Spellfire, but she remembered her mother's warnings that she must never let her moon energy fall below a certain limit or she could disappear for life!

Sadness could be a Moon-Faer's most dangerous enemy and being loveless suddenly became Shyne's largest danger. If only she

Spellfire Moons

could ask another Moon-Faer about her dilemma, but even in such a special place as Spellfire no other Moon-Faeries ever appeared. Her own family was lost to her many years ago.

In a swirling blaze of light, she threw off the thoughts of her family, knowing she mustn't relive the pain that could cost her, her life. No, Shyne prided herself on being a survivor, she just hoped she wasn't the only Moon-Faer left in the world.

Malaci watched as waves of silver mist flew out from the iridescent beauty in the moonlight. As she slowed her wings down, a million specks of the moon's silvery light clung to every seductive curve the woman possessed, and as if each tiny jewel could be felt, the beauty moved in an erotic dance to capture the energizing light.

Her magic reached beyond the luminescent circle, Malaci felt himself lean forward, the desire to join her clawed at him. Shyne's power could be very strong and he reminded himself not to give in to her allure. Yet, for just a moment, he wondered how she would react if he did show himself, un-camouflage his presence from the underbrush. How could any Demvir be proud of hiding in the bushes!

A slight noise to her left slowed her air twirling, her wings moved so fast that she hovered in mid-air as if standing on land. Titling her head, she listened to see what might have made the noise. More than once she felt someone watching her here in her secret place, not even her best friend in Spellfire, Harpy Collins, knew that she came here to replenish her strength with each full moon. Multiple full moons were an added bonus for Shyne since moving to Spellfire.

There, she heard it again, her nose twitched as it caught the scent of man, no, animal. "Both..." the whispered truth barely passed her lips as she spun about to confront the intruder. Her beast came back, she couldn't understand why he refused to show himself. "Come out beast. Show yourself, it is not polite to take sneak peeks of others."

Her sharp sight scanned the area for movement. Whoever stayed hidden seemed to know she could see the slightest of movement in the moonlight. Unlike most normals or other residents of Spellfire, Shyne did all things better at night. Give her a full moon and her powers were at their fullest.

Right now, she didn't like the idea of having someone watching her, even her beast, and stay hidden. Most Moon-Faeries, her parents included, were lost forever to those that coveted their powers.

Spellfire Moons

Her fingertips sparked in warning just before she shot up into the night sky, deciding to play it safe and escape. She should report the incident to the Spellfire Sheriff, but what could he do without a description. He couldn't very well arrest an animal.

She stayed over the clearing for a while to see if anyone came out of hiding. When all remained still, she left to head home, knowing that she would need to be more cautious. The thought of hiding again sent a violent shiver through her wings.

* * * *

Malaci watched as Shyne flew off leaving a trail of sparks in her wake. Her warning well taken, even if he knew she couldn't truly hurt him. He watched her come here many times over the last few months. Tonight being the first time she sensed him. He knew better than to come this close when her powers were so fresh.

At first, he came to see what the new resident might be up to at night in Spellfire Woods, as the Sheriff it was his job. Then he told himself he came to protect her from any other seeing eyes. The truth hit Malaci from the first moment he saw the bewitching Shyne. He wanted the demure, fragile Faer like no other female. No woman made his Demvir blood boil out of control like Shyne. Every delicate move, each enchanting flight she took in the moonlight became his undoing.

He stretched out of his cramped position, shaking away the stiffness of remaining in one place too long. He'd do it again to see Shyne, knowing she would never let him get close to her any other way. Demvir and Faeries rarely mixed company, even in Spellfire.

The thought of keeping company with the likes of Shai and her cohorts made his fur bristle and until now he didn't understand his brother Damien's fondness for the troublesome Shai. But Shyne was a Moon-Faer and not like most Faer folk. He'd never once witnessed her playing tricks on anyone, or use her powers to seduce an unknowing date. Malaci couldn't say if she'd even been on a date with anyone since arriving in Spellfire.

Electra proved little help in finding out anything about Shyne. His sister actually teased him the other day over his off-handed question about her.

"Does she interest you little brother?"

Spellfire Moons

“I’m always curious about new residents of Spellfire, Electra, you know that.”

“Oh right, the job and all.”

Her laughter made his shoulder fur bristle beneath his uniform. “Forget I asked, okay.”

“Oh little brother, you know I love you.” She stayed his leave from Sinful with her sisterly smile. “She is beautiful isn’t she?”

Malaci couldn’t swallow the rumbling growl low in his chest. He could tell by the lift of Electra’s right eyebrow that she heard it. He left the shop on the lilt of his sister’s laughter.

He felt his blood begin to drum over his thoughts of Shyne’s beauty. Every opportunity he could find he watched her. Knowing she turned away any male advances didn’t ease his torture and she received too damn many at the Garnet! Malaci decided not to try, he would rather hold to hope that she wouldn’t reject him than to have it happen.

Many times, he tried to understand his attraction to the whimsical creature. Since her arrival, he noticed that her moonlight skin practically shimmered, now. When she walked down the sidewalks, every male head would turn her way to watch the beautiful exotic Moon-Faer. Once, when he saw her laughing at something his brother-in-law Alex said she began to glow in an unbelievable welcoming light that begged him to come closer and touch her erotic essence. Still, he kept his distance, even when Alex wanted to introduce him to her at Garnet Moon’s opening, Malaci managed to avoid coming face to face with Shyne.

They did have one major part of their lives in common. Malaci looked up at the brilliant moon now high in the night sky. Yes, both their lives revolved around the cycle of the moon. The moon actual led him to Shyne. He smiled over the cherished memory of that night.

His Demvir blood rose to a fever pitch on that night with the first full moon. Malaci shed his clothing and let the himself shift to run free in the woods. To his surprise, he soon had company in Spellfire Woods running with him, only above him in the night sky!

Every turn he made she whisked through the air, racing with him on the ground as if they were in a great race. He took her on a wild ride that went on for miles and she matched his pace without tiring. As he slowed, he could hear the soft beat of her wings dropping in

Spellfire Moons

speed that kept her right above him. She glowed a soft rose color that teased his hot blood in a peculiar way. If she'd come closer, he would have caught the wild Faer and shown her how a Demvir tamed a Faer. As if she could sense his desire her lyrical laughter rustled through the pines as she twirled through the night sky and away from Malaci in his wild form.

He growled over the memory and licked his fangs, wishing he could catch the illusive Shyne.

Chapter 2

“You really need to talk to the sheriff, Shyne.”

“Oh Harpy, what could I say ‘oh sheriff I heard this noise, smelled this beast, just know that someone was watching me’ like the sheriff could do anything with that.”

“You don’t know Malaci Spellfire, if anyone could track your peeping tom it would be our sheriff.”

Harpy held the door to Sinful for Shyne to follow her inside. It was still early and the shop only had a couple customers. Shyne rarely came to Sinful’s this time of the afternoon, but Electra gave her the night off from Garnet’s.

“Shyne, you really need to speak with Malaci. I’ll be right back, I need to go clock in and get my apron.”

Acknowledging her friend, she scooted up on the stool at the counter.

The threatening growl behind Shyne made her stiffen, she could feel the heat in her hands increase, ready to spark if necessary.

Malaci’s senses were alive with her, he could smell her fear and sense the invisible fire shimmering around her like a shield. What he wanted to know is why Harpy felt she needed to speak to him. If anyone dared to hurt Shyne...

She watched the man in the mirror that stood at her back. Shyne never heard such a dangerous growl as the one coming from him. But her attention went beyond the danger he posed to her feminine senses. Her Faer heart beat in her chest as fast as a hummingbird wings over the red-gold sparks glittering in his hard gaze, one that seemed very interested in her hips.

As she watched him, his gaze traveled up the length of her back until he looked over her head and their gazes locked in the mirror. If a man’s smile could be heaven Shyne knew she’d fly until her wings flamed and burn to reach him. Those red-golden embers behind his

Spellfire Moons

dark lashes sparked as if he could read her thoughts, sending a shimmer over her flesh that nearly roused her wings.

His hand rose to touch his hat in a polite nod at her in the mirror before his hand reached out and turned her around on the stool to face him. He leaned towards her as if he might kiss her and Shyne had all she could do not to close her eyes in anticipation.

“I heard Miss Collins say that you needed to speak to me, Miss...” Malaci flexed his shoulders to push down his Demvir stirrings. Being so close to her, having her scent invade his being as if marking him, brought out the animal in him.

She gave herself a shimmer to get control of her emotions, visions of rolling naked with mister fire eyes made her insides flutter. “Shyne, Moonshyne Holiday.”

His fangs showed through his lopsided smile and she wondered if she should fear what he revealed. Shyne deliberately sniffed his scent *both man and beast* Awareness shimmered through her like a warm summer breeze. The fact that she actually gave this man, her watcher, her real name would have had her running just months before. However, something told Shyne the danger this man held for her wasn't life threatening.

“Miss Holiday, I'm Sheriff Malaci Spellfire.”

“Sheriff?” Her gaze dropped to his shirt, then his gun belt and what laid beneath it. His low sexual growl vibrated through her bringing her attention back up to his knowing smile.

“Yes, the Sheriff. Are you having a problem Miss Holiday?”

“No, no problem, everything is fine.”

“It is not Shyne, tell him what happened.” Harpy slapped the counter with the dishrag, looking at her as if she were crazy. When no one said anything, “Someone is stalking her!”

“No, not really, Sheriff Spellfire. Harpy misunderstood.” Her friend's mouth dropped, but Shyne didn't know what else to do. She couldn't very well tell the man that she knew *he* was her watcher from last night!

She scooted off the stool, out and under his arm to stand beside him as she inched toward the door. “I really need to fly, err run.”

Harpy looked at her, “I thought you were going to eat here tonight?”

“I...I think I better not.”

Spellfire Moons

“Actually Harpy, I asked her to go to dinner with me to discuss her problem.”

With Malaci Spellfire’s announcement, she felt him take hold of her arm in a way that didn’t allow for arguments. They were out of Sinful and walking down the sidewalk before Shyne could think of objecting. He escorted her to his car. She watched her beast man walk around the car, just seeing his tight backside wet her sex with need.

“Harpy is right you know, you should tell me about this stalker.”

Was he serious? She stole a look at him as he started the car and the angry set of his jaw made her question what her senses told her.

Malaci knew he needed to do something and fast before she let loose with the sparks he saw coming from her tightly held fist. He decided to ignore her rising temper and drove out of town.

“This is Garnet Moon.” Shyne looked at him as if he were the crazy one.

“Right, I said we were going to dinner.”

“But...”

* * * *

“Hi Malaci and...Shyne, I see you two have finally met.”

Shyne could hear the surprise in Electra’s voice over their entry in the restaurant.

“We’d like a table Electra.”

Electra didn’t move for a minute, then turned into the hostess that Shyne usually would be. “Yes, of course, I have a lovely table right this way.”

Shyne didn’t move until Malaci’s hand pressed into her back directing her to follow Electra. The table his sister led them to was the one they always gave to romantic couples that wanted to be alone. Shyne clamped her lips down and just smiled as they were seated.

She suspected that Malaci knew he held the upper hand, unless of course she wanted to make a scene in front of her boss. Of course, there was no harm in letting Mr. Sheriff know that she would get even for this.

Before he realized what she was up to her hand covered his as she smiled sweetly across the table at him. The electric bolt that went through the back of his hand and up his arm made Malaci stiffen in pain. He never dropped his gaze from hers until she finally stopped shocking him.

Spellfire Moons

“The special is excellent Sheriff.” She took her hand away, rubbing her fingers together.

With that, she picked up the menu and held it up in front of her so that he couldn't see her face any longer. He slowly pulled his hand under the table, an uncontrollable growl escaped and she looked at him over the menu.

“Did you say something?”

All he could do, past his clenched teeth, was shake his head no.

Shyne lifted the menu back up and smiled. So, Malaci Spellfire was her watcher, she wasn't sure how she felt about the turn of events, but she knew he was the sexiest man she'd ever met. She saw those well developed muscles press in full regalia against his shirt as she shocked him. He barely flinched, to her surprise.

Still hiding behind the menu, she brought her fingertips up to her nose taking in his scent. Yes, he was definitely her beast, her watcher.

“Did you want the special Shyne?”

She took a steadying breath before facing him. “Actually, I'd like the Atlantis dish.” If he wanted dinner with her than he would pay, the dish came with the rare Atlantis Starfish and lobster tail, a Faer delicacy that she loved.

Malaci order a very rare steak to soothe the animal coming to life inside him. Shyne's shock may have numbed his hand, but it lit a fire in his cock that her cold shoulder act wouldn't cool.

She made it clear that she wasn't going to make small talk with him and Malaci smiled, knowing how he loved the challenge she posed. He proceeded to tell her all about his job and Spellfire. Once he stopped when telling her about the curse on Spellfire men from the Havoc women, she couldn't help but ask him what happened. He smiled then told her how the curse was lifted, and then laughed softly over her relief that he could reach his fulfillment during sex. Her bright eyes half closed in the sexiest, most enticing, dreamy look as she stared at his chest.

She loved the way his eyes became animated when he spoke of Spellfire. Their gold depths turn all coppery as his love for this place shined in his features. The dark sable and bronze curl that fell onto his brow made her want to reach out and twirl the dark satin between her fingers. But it was the dark patch of thick hair showing just above the edge of the open vee of his shirt that drove her crazy. Thoughts of

Spellfire Moons

how his course wildness would feel against her tender breasts made the cream flow in her sex.

Low and lustful, Malaci growled over the scent he caught from her. Did she realize he could sense her body's readiness for him? Of all his brothers and cousins, at least the ones that inherited the Demvir gene, Malaci prided himself on being able to control his Demvir side the best. Caging the beast inside of him where Shyne was concerned broke all the rules.

Her beautiful eyes glowed with their large irises, she started to get that soft rose glimmer about half way through the dinner, telling him that her guard finally dropped. He didn't think she would like it if he told her how relaxed she became in his presence. He often wished he couldn't read people so well, everyone said that is what made him such a good sheriff. Well that side of his being, which he took from his mother, said the Faer was hiding something. Malaci not only wanted to know what she feared, but he wanted to know every facet of Moonshyne Holiday.

The touch of his finger tracing her palm made breathing difficult for Shyne. She couldn't say when he first touched her, but at that moment every fiber of her being came alive to his essence. She could feel the beast that lay just beneath the surface. He could be wild and dangerous, but she instinctively knew he would never hurt her. Shyne had never felt so certain of anything in her life as Malaci.

When they left Garnets, as Garnet Moon was sometimes referred to, his arm came about her shoulder bringing her up beside him, she didn't object. Her own arm went around his waist feeling the leashed power beneath her touch.

Malaci walked with her out of town and into the woods. Shyne smiled knowing exactly where he was taking her.

"You are so beautiful in the moonlight Shyne, but when you raced with me, now that is wondrous."

She stopped and looked at him, earning his laughter. "Oh you! It was the first time I'd done anything like that."

He just nodded, "I'm a Demvir."

She shook her head slightly not sure what he meant. "And I'm a Moon-Faer."

"Ahh..." Malaci wasn't sure how to explain himself to her. "You really are new to Spellfire."

Spellfire Moons

“I am, but I love it here.”

“I shape shift.”

“Yes, and you do it so well, Malaci.” Feeling more at ease with him now, Shyne couldn’t help but flirt with him, hoping to bring the beast to the surface. “I glimmer.”

It was the most she’d said all evening and he wanted to hear more and took the chance. “Where were you before you moved here?”

He thought he’d blown it when she didn’t say anything, but then she turned and looked at him.

“Is this the sheriff, the beast, or the man asking?”

Her voice didn’t sound as serious as he felt the question meant to her. “All of the above, Shyne.” Malaci moved closer to her, tucking a stray wave of her nearly white hair behind her elegant ear. “I want you Shyne, I have since I first saw you in these woods.”

“But,” she moved her head to look into his eyes, “Why have you hid from me Malaci?”

His head fell back and looked up at the moon wishing it could help him answer her. Instead, his lips came down and captured hers, first asking then demanding entrance to her sweetness.

Shyne opened to Malaci moving into his embrace as his kiss explored the delicacy of her tempting mouth. His large hands framed her head, burying his fingers into her hair. Her own pulled at his shirt. She wanted to touch him and as her hands slid under his shirt her groan joined his growl and his chest muscles rippled beneath her palms.

“You are so beautiful, Shyne.”

He was pulling away from her. She wanted to cry, not sure how to stop him. “I want you, Malaci.”

The truth silenced the forest around them. Hesitant, but needing to know how he took her declaration she looked up at him. “Malaci?”

“I’m a Demvir.”

“Yes, you are the beast I fly with, the one that has watched me from the shadows.”

“Yes, but Shyne, you are a Faer.”

“Moon-Faer Malaci, but why should that matter?”

How could he tell her, he lowered his forehead to rest against hers. “I could hurt you Shyne.” She tried to move and his hands held

Spellfire Moons

her still, knowing he may only get this one chance to tell her. “When I shift I am...well, I can be wild.”

Her soft laughter broke through to him and he pulled back and looked at her. “Shyne?”

“Malaci, I’m a Moon-Faer, you are a shifter under the same moon that I get my essence from, I’d say we are nearly the same.” She took hold of his hand that started to shift during their kiss. “You have claws,” she placed her palm against the bottom of his paw “I have sparks.”

He smiled at her, marveling over the woman before him. “I’ve wasted too much time, haven’t I?”

“Oh my yes.” Her laughter filled him with hope.

She started undoing the buttons of his shirt. “We won’t know unless we see what happens, Malaci.”

As they helped one another to get their clothes off, they explored each other until Shyne shimmied up against him and moved over him with the most erotic movements. Malaci realized that she was glimmering and it was the hugest turn on he’d ever experienced. Like a thousand tiny electric shocks she moved her body over his, bringing his alive until his cock pressed against her in the most male way possible.

He didn’t fight the effect she wielded over him and let himself shift before her, which excited her even more.

Shyne felt her wing unfurl and shake under her sexual arousal. She couldn’t have imagined how perfect it would feel to have his body touch her. When the full length of his cock push against her mound she wanted to jump him, anything to make him put his power inside her ready sex. “Malaci, I want to feel you buried inside me, touching that part of me no man has come close to. Love me, Malaci!”

Her needful eyes looked wild and shy in the same glance as they swept over him, coaxing him closer in all his animal glory. All thoughts of being careful fell away under the fire she called from him.

“Fill me, Malaci. Drive your beast into me, let me hold you and love you under our moon.”

Shyne took his paw and pressed it into her breast causing her head to roll back as he kneaded the pearl nipples. When his mouth covered the sweet sensations, her wings lifted her off the ground and

Spellfire Moons

he wrapped his arm around her to keep her with him. She buried her fingers into his hair and pushed his head down past her breasts, moaning in pleasure as his lips and teeth explored her stomach, then lower until Malaci's tongue plunged between the hot lips of her sex to tantalize her swollen clit. He licked and sucked her sweet sex until she bucked in his arms and her flesh turned a rosy pink.

Malaci lowered them both down onto the carpet of grass. He spread her thigh to receive him, each touch of her flesh against his created a fire that ran through his Demvir blood. Malaci never felt the beast part of him meld with his man form and be as fierce as he did at that moment. His hands held her hips, positioning her to take him and he howled at the moon that watched their magical union as he drove into her willing folds, sheathed himself where no man ever touched and no one but Malaci would ever enter!

The glory rose inside her and she feared she would explode as he filled her and she held onto to him learning the breadth and depth of the man that now claimed her. She moved over him in the way that only a Moon-Faer can love her mate, shimmering and glimmering with all the energy of the moonbeams. Stardust circled them, holding them in that silver globe of sensations that sent their cries up to the night sky and together they rode the horizon of ecstasy!

Chapter 3

“I don’t know Malaci...”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” his growl of displeasure didn’t help the tension between them.

“It is just too soon, I need time.”

The hold he pulled her into forbade any argument. “You are mine, Shyne. I love you, I know you love me.”

She could see how deeply he meant his vow, her own love for him tore at her heart. “Yes, I do love you.”

His kiss nearly ended the argument that she didn’t want to have, but Shyne needed to be sure...sure that it truly was love that Malaci felt for her. “Malaci, please, just give me some time.”

His body felt like a tight spring under her hands and she feared he was losing the battle with his temper.

“How long Shyne? How long do you need before we get married?”

“A couple months.”

“Too long, Electra and Alex already said we could have the reception at the Garnet Moon. We can hold the service in the woods and ...”

“Stop it Malaci!” Shyne pulled out of his arms and moved away, needing the distance to think. “A month then.”

He stalked around her as if he were hunting down prey and she knew she pushed him too far with her evasion.

“Please, Malaci, it is all so fast, I need to catch my breath.” She could feel the change rush through her body as her rose stardust took over. Malaci saw it too and knew she wanted him.

“I love it when you glow like this for me.” His tongue ran over her lips tasting her and the touch of fear she couldn’t hide from him. One thing he learned about Shyne was that she glowed a sexy rose

Spellfire Moons

color when she became aroused, but even that alluring trait couldn't vanquish the fear he sensed. "What is the real problem Shyne?"

After a week of loving Shyne every chance they could be together, he knew she wanted to be with him. He felt the delay might have more to do with her past and he wanted answers.

"I just need to plan things, that's all." Before he could interrupt, she held up her sparking hand. "Sorry, see this is what happens when I can't control myself. I spark and change moods. I sparked a patron last night because my thoughts drifted to you!"

His laughter didn't make her feel any better.

"Alex had to comp that horrible Perry Normil's meal."

Malaci pulled her to him, rubbing his hands over her back and soothing her ruffled wings. "He'll get over it Shyne."

"He hates me."

"He hates Faeries of all kinds."

"Then he should move!"

He felt her snuggle into his chest and he wished they were back in the woods. She needed to replenish her energy tonight, he saw how tired she was even if she refused to admit it. "We will go to our spot tonight. After you gather your moonbeams we can go for a run."

"I'd like that, Malaci."

"Maybe you could tell me then what is really bothering you, Shyne."

She took a deep breath and stepped back to look at this wonderful man. "I will try, honest."

He knew she meant it, but he wished she could be more open with him. "I'll come by and pick you up after work."

Shyne waved as he drove off before she entered Garnet Moon. When Alex saw her enter, he motioned for her to come over to the bar. She was glad he was back from his business trip.

"How are you Shyne? Electra told me the wonderful news about you and Malaci. He's a good man Shyne."

"He is wonderful, Alex, and I love him."

Those intense eyes of his studied her over his glasses. "So what is the problem Shyne?"

A Faer couldn't hide much from a Vamperian, the fact Alex knew her since she was a child gave him special knowledge. She

Spellfire Moons

could feel the tears pricking at her eyelids, "I've done something very wrong, Alex."

Before he could question her further his French, ghostly wine steward came up through the floor from the wine cellar with a problem. Shyne used the interruption as an excuse to escape. However, the look Alex gave her said he wouldn't let it drop.

Shyne managed to avoid Alex, and when Electra offered to hostess that evening Shyne jumped at the chance to leave. She needed to find Lillia and speak with her about the spell she cast. She loved Malaci with all her being, she needed to know that he loved her and it wasn't just the results of the love spell. She never should have messed with magik!

Not willing to take the long walk back to town, Shyne unfurled her wings. She rarely risked exposing her true self, but this was too important.

The flight to the library nearly took the last of her energy. When she reached to open the door, she groaned and she shook her hand to stop it from fading. She needed to replenish her energy tonight, loving Malaci took a lot out of her, but how she cherished their times together.

* * * *

Lillia wondered who could be casting such a radiant light in the library until she saw her new friend Shyne walking towards her.

"Shyne how nice to see you." They hugged and Lillia could feel how tense her friend was. "What's wrong Shyne?"

"Can we go somewhere to talk?"

"Of course, will my office do?" With her nod of agreement, they entered the book-lined room. The door barely shut before the pretty Faer started pacing. Lillia noticed that Shyne was casting a rose hue about her today.

"Lillia, I'm in so much trouble."

"Calm down and tell me what has you in such a state."

"I'm in love."

Lillia smiled, so the news Georgiano heard is true. "That is wonderful Shyne, I'm so happy for you."

"Don't be, I need your help. Oh Lillia everything is ruined!"

Silver tears ran down Shyne's flushed cheeks, but what concerned Lillia was the fact her friend seemed to be fading right

Spellfire Moons

before her eyes. When she met Shyne and they became fast friends, Lillia took it upon herself to do some research on Moon-Faers. She found very little information about them. An old newspaper article did mention the suspicious disappearance of a couple, Holly and Austin Holiday. The *Witchard Gazette* stated that the Moon-Faer couple were believed to be abducted for their power to turn moonlight into silver. The article didn't mention any children but Lillia suspected they were Shyne's parents. A later article did mention the Moon-Faer's dangerous propensity for fading away. Most reports said it could occur from sadness or pain, so Lillia never mentioned her parents to Shyne. It was also the reasons Lillia agreed to do the love spell for Shyne.

"Talk to me Shyne. What happened to have you in such a state?"

"The spell Lillia, he loves me because of the spell!"

"Oh no, Shyne, that just isn't true." The girl's eyes grew large as she tried to still her hiccups over Lillia's announcement.

"But you said it was a Love Spell." Shyne could feel herself fading once more.

"Yes, but it was a spell to bring your lover to you, nothing more." She could see the questions filling the girl's distressed features. "Shyne, he had to love you to find you. So you see he already loved you before he actually met you. Without loving you he couldn't have found you."

As Lillia's words sunk in she could see the tension leaving her friend's features, once again she glowed in her luminescent rose stardust. "You haven't told me who this fortunate man is, Shyne."

She smiled, "Malaci Spellfire."

"Oh my, he is the town catch! You will be envied by every single girl in Spellfire."

Their combined laughter filled the small room as Shyne proceeded to tell her friend all about Malaci.

Shyne's steps barely touched the ground as she left the library. The sun was beginning to set and she realized she needed to get back to the Garnet and meet Malaci. Her wings itched to take flight, but the town was alive with people and she didn't want to bring attention to herself.

Spellfire Moons

Many people said hello to her as she walked down the sidewalks. Working at Garnet Moon helped her to meet many of Spellfire's residents.

She noticed Perry Normil and the horrible woman that was always with him, watching her. She walked across the street just to avoid getting closer to them. Shyne refused to let either of them spoil the joy in her heart. As she reached the outskirts of town she almost exposed her wings until she heard a car approaching.

The vehicle must have been going very slow and she thought they were afraid to pass her, so Shyne moved off the pavement and onto the shoulder to let them pass. As the dark car came up beside her, Shyne refused to let the old fears overtake her, but the hands grabbing her arms and yanking her back off her feet were only too real!

Chapter 4

“What do mean she isn’t here?”

“Calm down Malaci, I gave her the night off. Alex is back and I wanted to be here tonight, no sense keeping Shyne on duty when I can do the job.”

He growled at his sister, unable to keep his worry in check. “If she comes back here, tell her to stay put!”

Electra watched her brother storm off. She felt Alex behind her before his lips kissed her shoulder.

“There is something wrong between them, Electra.”

“I know, but they will need to find their own answers my love.”

He spun his wife around in arms, “As we did?”

“Hmm, and wasn’t it a thrilling ride Alex.”

He kissed her seductive smile, “It still is...”

* * * *

Darkness enveloped her as she slowly regained her senses. Whoever grabbed her did a good job of tying her up and gagging her. The pain in her cramped wings became unbearable. Shyne tried to concentrate and hear what was happening around her. She could feel the cold floor beneath her, deciding it might be better to play unconscious to see if she could learn something about her abductors. Shyne refused to let fear overwhelm her, knowing that in her weakened state it could possibly kill her.

“Are you sure we have the right fairy?”

“This is the one that, that creep of a mayor pointed out.”

“But how can you tell if she is the one?”

She wanted to groan over the argument going on between the two men.

“We will know soon enough, when she starts crying silver!”

So, they wanted her for the moon’s silver. She wished the normals didn’t have that old saying about “silver linings” if they

Spellfire Moons

couldn't tell if she were a Faer than how could they possibly see her silver? The fact she knew they wouldn't became a greater threat than being tied up.

Malaci, my dear sweet love, if you can sense me, please find me. I don't think I can survive for long.

Shyne concentrated on Malaci and only him, she blocked out the horrible voices in the room and what they had planned for her. She kept her thoughts on her love for one special Demvir.

* * * *

"Lillia, calm down, just tell me when Shyne left." Malaci used his voice to soothe his mate's best friend. Yes, they didn't need a wedding, they were already bound by their love for each other and as the truth entered his troubled thoughts, Malaci could sense Shyne's presence. He heard what Lillia said, but all of his concentration turned to what he felt from Shyne.

He raised his hand to silence the room and listen harder because she sounded so very weak. Malaci's heart squeezed over the pain he felt from her. "Talk to me love, let me know where you are."

Lillia looked at her husband, Georgiano and their gazes locked in understanding for what Malaci was experiencing.

It was Georgiano that spoke up to Malaci, "Go to her, let her lead you to her, all you need to do is listen."

Malaci nodded in understanding just before he ran out of the room to follow Shyne's call.

Once outside he wasn't sure which direction to take, he turned left and her voice instantly faded from his head. Turning and running through town Malaci focused on Shyne and their love speaking to her through his thoughts just as she spoke to him. *I'm coming sweet Shyne, keep talking to me, think about our woods and how we made love in the moonlight, tell me how it felt Shyne, speak to me.*

Malaci nearly choked on the love she filled him with, every whispered word spoke of her love for him. With each step in the right direction, he shed another piece of clothing and shifted until the beast inside him came through and broke into a run at Slither Swamp!

Chapter 5

More than one clump of his fur hung from the thick growth of briars, the cuts did little to slow Malaci down.

Shyne's voice still spoke to him but he sensed her pain and the weakness she fought not to succumb to. He didn't miss Lillia's earlier frightful statement about Moon-Faer, how they could fade from existence!

"You stay with me, Shyne. Keep talking to me so I can reach you." Time was running out and Malaci's rage increased over the truth.

There! He stopped in mid-stride and listened. Her scream came to him through the darkness and he leaped in the direction. It only took a minute for him to come upon the lit cabin at the edge of Snake Marsh. He hadn't been in the swamp since a high school dare and his skin crawled over the memory.

As soundless as possible he came up under the window to plan his attack to save the woman of his heart.

"I said give me your silver, bitch!"

Another hard fist connected with Shyne's jaw, nearly beheading her. Tears filled with the silver they wanted sprayed across the man's shirt from the force of his attack. She could barely keep her swollen eyes open from her loss of strength.

I love you Shyne!

Malaci's enraged voice echoed in her head. She saw his beast form burst threw the window, sending glass and wood everywhere.

The man holding her let her go and the two men scattered, but Malaci moved with a speed she knew him capable of maintaining for great distances and a power that only rage could spawn!

Shyne gave up her fight, Malaci found her and that is all that mattered now.

Spellfire Moons

When he saw her fall to the floor in an unmoving heap, the fires of pure wrath filled his body and he caught the vile objects of his rage, venting more force on them than Malaci ever thought he could possibly possess. Bones cracked and the scum that dared to harm Shyne fell in useless heaps on the floor. No movement came from either man when he kicked them once again before moving to Shyne.

With a gentleness he never would have expected moments ago, he lifted her in his arms. He could barely see his beautiful Shyne, her rose hue now barely resembled blotches of dust from the ground. “No Shyne, I’ll not loose you!”

As carefully as possible, he gathered her up in his hold and with a renewed burst of strength Malaci raced with her out of the cabin and through the horrible swamp.

When they broke free of the darkness he didn’t slow his gait knowing exactly where he needed to take her.

With infinite care Malaci laid Shyne out in the circle of moonlight. He straightened out her battered wings so they could capture the moonbeams, his growls turned to whimpers of pain for what she suffered. His claw traced the bloody bruise on her lip, tearing a wretched howl of pain for her to the moon. He called on their moon’s power to heal his love. As he waited he slowly shifted back to his man side, his own energy spent on the rage that filled him.

Trembling fingers smoothed down her tangled hair as his tears fell. Malaci rocked back and forth on his heels as he waited for the moon to heal all her pain and bring his Shyne back to him.

* * * *

Past hurt made her fear the opening of her eyes, but Shyne sensed his nearness and wanted so much to see Malaci. But would those men be there in place of him?

Terror filled her once again, preventing her from trying.

“Shyne.”

Did she hear his voice? She tried to move towards his direction.

“Moonshyne Holiday, you listen to me right now! I won’t loose you to fear, we can face it together. Do you hear me?” Malaci waited as he had throughout most the night as the moonbeams bathed Shyne in their healing light and he watched as she healed within their circle. Still she refused to open her eyes, her movement told him she heard him and he wasn’t going to let her slip away once again. “I love you

Spellfire Moons

Shyne, more than I ever thought a man could love another! You are my life, my desire, dear Shyne. I couldn't go on without you at my side."

His fingertip caught the silver tear that slipped from the corner of her closed lashes. "I can see your silver, Shyne, and it is beautiful just as you are. I love how you glow in rose stardust for me and glimmer with moonbeams. Our children will be striking with my darkness and your light combined. I want many children Shyne. Faer or Demvir, I want them all."

Her lips closed over the tip of his finger as he traced her bottom lip while he told her of his desire. She couldn't tell if she drew her strength through the moon or Malaci's love.

A shuddering breath of relief passed through Malaci as he watched her delicate eyelids flutter open and she looked up at him.

"Malaci..."

"Oh yes Shyne, I'm here. Right where I'll always be, at your side."

"Love me my beast."

"Oh woman, I already do."

If a smile could hold substance Malaci knew he just captured hers and placed it in his heart. His laughter rang out as he watched her glimmer into a deep rose red that cast their world into a heady glow of sexual desire.

"I want you, Malaci."

Between his kisses across her cheek he vibrated in answer. "I can see that Shyne."

When his lips covered hers they battled for dominance and for the first time Malaci let his lady win. She shimmered beneath his exploring hands as she drove her tongue deep into his mouth showing him exactly what she wanted him to do to her.

But before Malaci could respond he found himself on his back and Shyne sitting astride his hips smiling down at him. "I think it is my turn my beast."

With a look of triumph, she wasted no time in devouring his flesh. Her touch electrified his body and each lick or kiss intensified the experience until he was breathless.

She called his Demvir blood to the forefront, refusing to let him tame his wild side, for she wanted it all. Shyne laughed when he tried

Spellfire Moons

to slide her under him and she used her wings to complete the roll and end up back on top.

Her laughter sounded like a thousand birds singing against his deep growls of pleasure and frustration. When she rolled her hips over his growing need, his savage roar turned her on even more. Her fingers wrapped around the thick size of his cock, guiding it to her hot entrance. Warm and tight, she took him in, holding him, caressing the full length of his sex.

“Hmm, such a wild beast my love. Shall we see how well I can tame it.”

If he didn't know her, he might have worried over the look of devilment in her eyes for him. He watched as her wings spread out in full regalia, and with each marvelous movement of them she came down over his shaft with a stroke that tingled and sparked, something he never expected.

Each time she rose up the sparks would flow up and when she rushed down they flew over him in all the excitement they garnered. He matched her glint of pleasure with his own, just as he matched her thrusts until all the emotions of the night drove them into each other, claiming what they each feared they almost lost.

When they reached that pinnacle of pure feeling, Malaci held Shyne up to take his explosion and he prayed he buried his seed in her womb, deeper, ever deeper, and her sex wrapped around him, quivering against his shaft until they both cried out into the rays of the moon.

Chapter 6

“Oh Shyne I can hardly wait, this is going to be such a beautiful wedding for my girl!”

Malaci watched Alex’s mother gush over Shyne’s invitations before leaving them to find Electra.

Shyne smiled up at him as she walked into his arms. His warm breath tickled the point of her ear, sending sparks down her spine.

“Why don’t you stop her, Shyne? We don’t need all this.”

Her warm hands cupped his jaw bringing his attention back to her and away from the arousal he wanted to continue.

“She needs this, Malaci, she’s practically been my mother since I was 8. Let her have her day.”

She let him nuzzle her neck again. “Alright my love, but do we need to invite the whole town?”

Her laughter floated over him.

“No we don’t, in fact I think I’ll do a little list trimming right now.”

Shyne moved out of his arms faster than he could react. Malaci turned to see her scoot out of Sinful Sundaes and head straight for Perry Normil and Frightful Frieda out on the sidewalk.

Electra stayed him by the hold on his arm, “She needs to do this, brother.”

They, and every patron in the shop, turned to watch as Shyne let her sparks fly at the running Frieda and Perry! Each of them kept jumping each time she hit their backsides with one of her well-aimed lightning bolts! Shyne was giving Frieda and Perry their comeuppance, and he was glad for this, since he couldn't throw them in jail with no proof they were actually connected with his beloved Faer's kidnapping.

Laughter filled the shop, the Faer Folk cheered. Malaci relaxed when Shyne stopped her payback and brushed her hands off, taking a

Spellfire Moons

bow before her clapping audience. He almost regretted telling her that he found out that the terrible couple actually pointed Shyne out to her kidnappers, who were now behind bars.

It took a moment for Malaci to shake off the horror of the memory.

“Not to worry little brother, I’ve placed a spell on your lovely bride, no one that means her harm will ever know her secrets again.”

Malaci turned and hugged his sister. “Thank you.”

“Hey, I can’t have the mother of my nephew in danger.”

He looked at his sister and almost asked how she could know if Shyne was pregnant and with a boy no less! Then he just smiled as Electra laughed and pointed at Shyne and the barely noticeable blue glow that started to surround his beautiful Moon-Faer!

Trouble Brews by Mae Powers

When Jeff and Marion Trinkets learn she's pregnant, they didn't expect troubled brews of an eerie kind to happen within Spellfire, Texas.

Visit Mae's website...

<http://www.maepowers.com>

Troubled Brews

by

Mae Powers

Spellfire, present day, July.

Chapter One

Katspell Callaway-Trinkets left the tri-bedroom, upper story townhouse above the *Trinkets Book Shop* and headed down the stairs that led to the main floor, a small box of books carried in her hands. She walked by the drinking area for morning espresso at the small café near the back of the store, some regulars mingled over newspapers, mail, and their daily schedule books before they took off to work. A few waved hi to her, and she nodded and smiled faintly in their directions, before going back behind the main, semi-circular counter at the front of the store.

She immediately put the books down on a shelf along the wall behind the mystical symbol, decorated checkout counter. Afterwards, she turned to help her summer clerk with the small line of people at the counter ready to have their books, potions or gifts rung up. The sales went quickly and Chissie left to go take her morning break. The eighteen year old senior was the niece of the town librarian Lillia West-Giovanni. She worked until early afternoon, long enough for Katspell or her husband Jeff to get a break. Like her studious aunt, the girl worked hard.

Thankfully, the girl took after Lillia, she bounced back pretty well when her boyfriend dumped her earlier that year. Just the same way that Lillia bounced back from her demotion of town head

Spellfire Moons

librarian to junior librarian. Of course, Lillia quit and she and her husband Geo went to work for the Witch's Academy in their extensive library. The town was still in an uproar that Mayor Perry Normil put Frieda Faraday in Lillia's place. Stupid bozo had been tripping over himself lately. Definitely, the Dead Librarians Society wouldn't vote for him another term.

She started emptying the box in between helping people around the shop. Ereus came in to help her, by bringing down some other boxes of books for her to go through. After a few hours, Katspell put out the last shipment of books on the shelves. When Chissie returned to work, Katspell went over to Sinful Sundaes for a break and a shake. She didn't worry about the shop, since her other new employees, the wizard Takor and his wife Devina were watching the shop so she could take the much-needed break. She sat at one of the booths after getting her order from Harpy, and sipped on the cool Vanilla Cinnamon creamy concoction while her eyes wondered to look outside the shop's big window.

The window overlooked the newer and older ends of the town square, and the additions the Goblin and Gremlin construction crew did to improve the town and its outer laying areas. The group from the Troll Bridge and Builder's Association were talented, hardworking individuals and dwelling within Spellfire for a very long time. They built buildings that lasted. Just after Takor and Devina's magic work-lab zapped into Trinkets, Katspell called on the Troll Bridge Group to help spell-build the old enchanted lab into a basement. They efficiently synchronized it with the rest of the upper house, melding all the necessary walls ceilings and such that needed doing.

No matter what someone or a group wanted built, the Trolls mastered the plans of having it done. The Gremlins and Goblins made sure the job came to a satisfying completion for all concerned, under the Trolls guidance. All anyone needed to get a place constructed consisted of a bit of patience, some extra charm, and a lot of currency or bargaining power. Fortunately, the Association owed the Trinkets a favor and the cost wasn't astronomical in magic coins or standard American currency, for improving the new basement-lab addition. Of course, she no longer had her 12th century compendium on the history of European Trolls and their kindred. But then Jeth said it needed to be with the main Troll boss and his family.

Spellfire Moons

Though she could sense and talk to a book with her powers of empathy, her husband of over twenty years, Jeth, inherited an uncanny affinity for knowing where certain books were meant to be or who should own them. She found it often amusing that Jeth could talk to books because they'd sometimes follow him around if they desperately sought their owner. Or in their niece Jaleena's case, someone needed uncursing in connection with the book. Katspell had been fond of the Troll history book, but it willingly went to the Trolls. Eventually it would come out why the book needed to go to the Trolls. So along with giving up the prized book and having them return the favor, neither she nor Jeth or any of their family owed the Troll Association anything for their work on the shop's recent repairs and additions.

Blowing her red-gold bangs out of her face, she tilted her head in thought as something caught her eye. The Wizards and Witches singles night came just after the Fourth of July, and she saw one of the group's longest members putting up the signs around town. When a special event took place they liked putting the signs about town. This time, they planned more than just singles mixing or friends gathering for an evening social. They were all gathering to give her niece Jaleena, and nephew-in-law-to-be Ereus, a gen-witch, a celebration party. The two were getting married the following weekend.

Trinkets and Nightshades would be crowded that night. Nightshades, the erotic boutique and unusual potion shop that she and Jeth opened just before Valentine's Day, became a quick favorite. Jaleena and Ereus would run it for them, along with the ghost wizard Synkor, who put up the signs about the shindig. Even after death, that hunk stayed a confirmed bachelor. She shrugged, sipped her thick shake, and chuckled as she saw people flying by the shops across the street, some flew right through Synkor until he fussed at them and made himself corporeal.

She saw Horrible Henry zip-flying pass the ghost wizard, making some of the posters fly away. In the years before Jaleena was born, Henry didn't hang out much at Trinkets, except on Wednesdays when the singles first started gathering there. Or to get some free Mothy Molasses bars, she and Jeth ordered from Sinful Sundaes for the Wednesday social. That's the day Trinkets had its weekly sales

Spellfire Moons

presentation socials, but during the afternoon and not at night like the singles gala.

Both places were booming. Marion, her sister-in-law came home with her husband early in January. Rafe, as they all called Marion's husband Jeffery Rafe Trinkets, oversaw the opening and construction of Nightshades, along with Marion. It was one of the few lingerie, gift, and love potion places in town. Jaleena and her fiancée moved on the top floor of Nightshades just after Valentine's Day, so that they could have their own place and be closer to work; not that living next door at Trinkets wasn't close. Of course, there were books there too and a few other potions, over flows from Trinkets for various lovemaking potions and such, as well as books, gifts and a line of clothing that Marion designed.

Marion became quite a collector of sassy and sexy apparel during hers and Rafe's travels. Sparks still flew between those two, even after well over twenty-five years of marriage. They were getting tired of the traveling and talked with her and Jeth about opening the sister shop. It would be good to have the family back. Long ago, Katspell knew that it had been very hard at times for Rafe and Marion personally, until the day the two found out that Marion was finally expecting a child, one the couple never thought they would have.

Katspell often wished she and Jeth could have a child, but it didn't happen, yet the two of them were very happy with each other and their lives. Now that Marion and Rafe were coming back to stay this summer for good, it would give Jeth and her some time to take longer vacations and travel outside of Spellfire more often. It's what the two of them were hoping to do one day, once Marion and Rafe came back to stay. With Jaleena getting married and hopefully having kids eventually, Rafe and Marion couldn't wait to get back into Spellfire.

At one time, Katspell grew wistful about the situation, but Jaleena seemed like a daughter to her and Jeth. She took after her father in with the blue eyes instead of olive green like Marion's, but she had her mother's dark blonde hair and angelic appearance. She'd stayed with them during school holidays or summer vacation when she was little or didn't want to travel with her parents. Jaleena gave them many hours of joy and filled a niche in their lives.

Spellfire Moons

As Katspell sipped leisurely on the last of her shake, thinking about her niece, she smiled and reflected on past events. Jaleena had been a joy not only to her and Jeth, but also to her parents. It wasn't always easy on Marion and Rafe. On the day that Marion found out she became pregnant, troubled brews happened all over town, but her mind dwelled on a few of the most memorable ones, such as when Frightful Frieda's broom shop burnt down...

Chapter Two

Spellfire, early 80's

Marion McFae-Trinkets stood behind the counter of the main area of *Trinkets*, glazing over the small crowd of people there that afternoon. She felt out of sorts lately and needed a break soon. She promised her friend Katspell they'd have a shake break at Sins this very afternoon. Her brother-in-law Jeth would be coming by soon with Katspell. Both had been at the Library's annual sale to pick up a few books for the shop. Jeth would then relieve her for a while. Jeth, fresh out of the Witch's Academy here in Spellfire, liked to spend most of his free time in the shop, so he often took the night shift at the family shop, along with his fiancée Katspell. Her husband Rafe, a wizard, loved to fly at night with her, when they could. He was across the way getting their order of Mothy Molasses Bars from Sinful Sundaes for the social tonight.

Since college they'd wanted to travel, but hadn't been able to. She worked for *Trinkets* during high school, as a part time job, which is how she met Rafe. They'd hit it off well. They dated through college and were married shortly after that. Even after ten years of marriage, she still found him hot. He made every bone and more in her body sizzle. And being a halfling Fairy and lots of witch in her bloodline, she sizzled when things happened to her, but in a good way. There was almost no time Rafe couldn't make her sizzle with those strong arms of his and that wide devilish smile that lit up his handsome face. With his dreamy blue eyes and cropped black hair, he'd been a catch from day one. Still, he chose her out of any woman in the world and had been faithful and loving to her since. She'd given him her all and never regretted any of her time with him.

Spellfire Moons

She sighed, wishing there for the one thing they could have had together though, besides traveling, their dreams, and working in the store. A baby would have been nice. Boy or girl, it didn't matter. But they were still happy and did have time to make it happen. It just wasn't in the taro cards yet. She thought about the times they tried, but gave up worrying over it some time ago. They were still happy. Right now, she turned her mind to the task at hand, getting ready for the new shipment of spell books that would be coming in from France near the Fourth of July. She liked the fact that one of her favorite holidays was coming up.

Rafe and she usually made the Independence Day Picnic. There were a few they missed, but far and few in between. The other holiday Spellfire held that she liked a lot was the Spring Festival, which all paranormals really catered to, since Spellfire was first brought to Texas back in the spring of 1450, before any non-magical person ever set foot in the town. A huge group of the town's founders, those that were powerful enough to do magic and fly at the same time, made sure that Spellfire and its residents escaped the brutal witch-hunts of old and made it to a safe, predestined place.

Trinkets carried one of the oldest books of Spellfire History in the whole town. The text told about the long travel here to Spellfire by its original residents and founding brethren. Trinkets, Havocs, Spellfires, Mayhems, McFaes, LeStorms and Santinas families were some of the more prominent ones at the time. They all left their homes to avoid not only persecution, but also death at the hands of bad witches, demons, and other paranormal beings who wanted control of all magic, and used the Church and human fanatical religious beliefs to try and wipe out what good witches and magical beings were around then.

This special town, where unusual stayed the norm, was once called Spellfyre in the old country, but the names changed to modernize it as well as give it a new name, since the town and its inhabitants also had a new start. Spellfire had some unique and unusual history associated with it, even up to present day.

The doors chimed and opened. She thought it was Rafe on his way in, but a small breeze filtered in, then she saw her brother-in-law Jeth coming in with a small box of books and Katspell, his college

Spellfire Moons

sweetheart, at his side. They waved to her and went back to the far end of the shelves, beginning to put away the carton of tomes.

She figured Rafe would be along any moment, and went about finishing up her sales at the counter, while waiting for him, so she and Katspell could go for a shake break while the men watched the store for an hour or maybe a little longer.

* * * *

Leaving Sinful Sundaes with a tray of goodies for the night's social, Rafe Trinkets sidestepped approaching traffic to hurry across the street to Trinkets Shop. Some cars were parked in front of the store, and people strolled along the sidewalks, some walking into Trinkets, others just passing by. He always admired the three-story building that made up his family business. Besides the weather, it withstood time and all sorts of impediments. The solidly built structure, much like Sinful Sundaes, had been a staple in town for a long time.

He opened one of the double doors and the bells on the outside tingled. Upon entering, he heard people talking and mystical eastern music flowing soothingly throughout the large main room. It stood tall and gothic looking in its rustic, surreal splendor. The long windows were decorated by tapestries on each side and tapered, glowing candles offered a mystic decor. Display cases, chairs for reading and a few Bistro tables and chairs lay situated towards the back of the room for small gatherings of socializing customers. Long tall rows of shelved books, potions in bottles and other mystical gift items, as well as non-magical gifts adorned the rest of the big room. It all gave an odd but pleasant atmosphere to the shop.

On his way to the back, he waved hi to a few customers he recognized and his kin. Rafe put the tray of goodies away in the back room kitchenette, where they kept things for the customers and special events. He picked up a few stray books that were on a small counter there and thought he'd put them away as he went back into the main room of the shop. Though he grew up loving books, his brother Jeth felt more of an affinity for them. The man could even talk with them. And his empathic fiancée Katspell could sense things about them. The two adored the books and Rafe couldn't blame them. There were all kinds of spell books and some non-spell books for every type of consumer that ever visited Trinkets.

Spellfire Moons

Some of the new-age occult and spiritual books and items came from all over the world and big towns across the United States. Some books, like those on the reference shelf behind the old counter, had been in Trinkets since his grandfather started the business more than a hundred years ago. Just like Sinful Sundaes, Trinkets came with its share of paranormal and non-paranormal history and secrets. In fact, the whole town had many odd stories about it. One never faced a dull day in Spellfire, Texas, he thought, amused as he made his way through the rows of shelves.

He finally went down one row of books and looked at the title of the last book he had to put away. Love Spells, circa 1969, glowed in his hands. He chuckled as he recalled that he'd first proposed to Marion in this particular section of books. Or as they referred to it as a sextion of books, since under the cover of a spell, the two made some wild love right here along these columns of books just a couple of months back.

The Sex Spell area literally held tomes whose covers radiated steam at times, depending on how frisky the couples standing next to them were. Of course the books sometimes seemed to know when a couple might need a nudge into romance and hot caresses. The Cloak and Dagger sex volume were the ones they always watched out for the most, when their customers strolled through the rows. The books were quirky sometimes, especially when some of the impish spirits in the books caught unsuspecting by passers. These books allowed couples to have sex anywhere without any one being detected or bothered by intruding, curious parties. Sometimes they hit persons not really in love, but for the most part they delighted more in catching those that were in the throes of happiness. The spirited books caught him and Marion.

Just after the Spring Festival, they came back to the closed shop and cleaned up the place before the next day's opening. They'd both been in the same row when steam rose and phonemes flowered the air. One book slid itself off the top shelf and both of them bent to pick it up at the same time. The two were zapped with a wickedly delightful heat spell. Their clothes were off in no time, and Rafe couldn't seem to get enough of sliding his shaft in Marion's heated, moist depths. He recalled that day, a few months back with very fond

Spellfire Moons

memories. Of course, the two still had no problem getting that hot in each other's arms.

With her lush body and angelic appearance, she'd been a favorite with all their clientele, but mostly she felt right in his arms. Her olive green eyes shone like rare jade when they made love and the world revolved solely around their passions and their affection for each other. He couldn't wait to have her in his arms again, when they flew together tonight after the Wednesday social.

A speeding tray of Mothy Molasses bars zoomed passed him, some falling on the counter. One zinged across the room and ricochet back, hitting him on the chin. It didn't take much for him to come out of his revelry and jump to a quick conclusion.

"Damn you, Henry! Bring back those snacks you wretch!"

He jumped out from behind the counter and quickly ran after the flying tray. A roaring chuckle vibrated from around the room. Horrible Henry struck again, invisible in his menacing mischief. *Damn troublesome ghost.* Rafe ran towards the front door. The tray of goodies slammed into the door and an eerie laughter filled the room.

"Damn you, Henry. I hope someone finds your body and burns it!"

Marion came running from behind the counter to help him pick up the tray and the fallen goodies. Jeth and Katspell ran up and stopped just before Jeth nearly trampled over Rafe stooping down to pick up the fallen bars. Rafe shoed them away, frustrated, but the minute he glanced up into his wife's lovely green eyes, he felt a calming sensation coming over him. Marion's natural charm soothed a lot of people instantly. He really loved the effects she had on him, no matter the situation.

"Thanks, hon. I'll go get some more." He smiled down at her then turned to his brother and fiancée. "Thanks, you two. Damn Henry loves to irritate me every chance he gets."

"Listen, why don't Katspell and I just bring some more back? I so need a break." Marion suggested.

"Hey that sounds good to me!" Katspell agreed, her blue-gray eyes lighting up with laughter. "I'll tell Mr. Spellfire what happened. Maybe he can have a word with Henry."

"I doubt that will help." Rafe stated, trying not to get frustrated again.

Spellfire Moons

“Come on, big bro. I’ll toss those and help you while the girls go take a shake break.” Jeth chuckle and snatched the tray from Rafe. “Get behind the counter and think of ways to get even with a wily ghost. That book glowing over there on the back counter is just dying to give you some ideas.”

Katspell giggled. “It sure is. Hmm, *Party Favors made of Ghost Glows*. I think that would be a good place to start.”

“Might as well, sweetie.” Her smile melted him and he smiled, nodding.

“Ok, you two go. Jeth and I can handle the shop for an hour or so.” How that woman really calmed him.

Marion hugged him tightly after Jeth took the tray. Rafe wrapped his arms around the beauty who captured his heart. “Get, you two. And bring back some more goodies when you’re done.” He kissed her head and after the two left, he turned to watch his brother whistling cheerily as he went to the back room.

The small chuckles coming from the back of the room let him know that the whole floating tray scene had pretty much been seen by everyone in the shop. He rolled his eyes, determined to go look through that book and find a way to play the mischief on Horrible Henry that the ghost played on him. *One way or another, Henry would learn not to mess with Rafe Trinkets!*

CHAPTER THREE

Marion and Katspell sat at one of the booths in Sinful Sundaes near the large storefront window. It still had some leftovers and dishes there, making it evident someone had just been in the seat. Young Electra Spellfire came over to their table quickly.

“I’ll have your table cleaned soon, Mrs. Trinkets, and then take your order. Hi, Katspell.” The girls golden brown curls bounced as she actively started cleaning the table. Then when they were at the edge of the table, she shook one finger at the leftovers and dishes and they instantly disappeared and reappeared into a nearby bussing trolley.

Electra, even at the tender age of twelve, carried a lot of magic in her talented hands. Her mother had been a great sorceress and Marion took magic spells from the woman. Electra, unlike her brother Malaci and her cousin Adam, didn’t get the demvir shifting ability from Electra’s father’s side of the Spellfire clan. Her youngest brother Derek was turning into a fine elemental sorcerer, while Electra’s twin Damien had the witch gene in him.

“Electra stop wasting time and take their order!” Came a loud voice from the main counter. Marion looked up and saw Zathan Spellfire, Electra and her brothers’ current guardian, looking their way frowning.

“Hi, Zathan. Electra’s taking our orders now.” The man only nodded and Marion smiled up at Electra.

“Thanks, Mrs. Trinkets.” The girl would be a beauty one day.

“Don’t worry about it, Lectra. How’s lessons at the Alchemy Academy coming?”

Electra shifted from one foot to the other. “Ok, I guess.”

Spellfire Moons

“Can’t be that bad, kiddo.” Katspell said. “I enjoyed my lessons there myself. And you’re in an advanced class.”

“I want to go to the Wizard’s academy in Paris, France this year. But Uncle Zathan says I need to finish junior high school first. He says it’s what my parents would have wanted.”

Marion reached over and patted her hand that was resting on the table edge. “Don’t you worry, hon, you’ll get to go. And if I remember correctly, I’m sure your mom would have wanted you to go there too.”

“I so agree, Lectra.” Katspell chimed in grinning impishly. “Hey how’s that new ice cream recipe coming? Didn’t you say you were gonna call it Strawberry vein something?”

Her face brightened. “Thanks, Mrs. Trinkets. Strawberry Veinilla, Katspell. Silly. Now what can I get you two?”

“I’ll have Goblin Ghoulash, with those mozzarella meatballs on the side and a vanilla shake.” Marion said.

“Not me, ain’t no telling what kinda Goblins have been swimming around in your uncle’s concoctions.” Katspell clucked.

Electra giggled, her face brightening even more. Marion was glad that Katspell had such camaraderie with the girl. But then Katspell had a way with kids. She let out a sigh and hoped that Katspell and Jeth would be able to have kids some day. Witches married to wizards often had them later on, but in some cases, like her and Rafe, that didn’t always happen.

“I’ll have a chili dog and cola, some bbq chips on the side.”

“Cheese and onions on that dog?” Electra asked and then Marion looked up at that moment, her eyes locking with the child sorceress’ amber eyes. “You know it’s gonna happen don’t you?”

“I beg your pardon, Electra. What are you talking about?”

The girl-woman just grinned that mischievous smile she was known for and her eyes became almost a golden brown topaz. Sparkles lit up her hair causing it to look almost reddish brown. But then most people that knew Electra closely were aware of the fact that her hair sometimes changes color with her mercurial moods.

Her eyes crinkled with more mischief and Marion received the uncanny feeling that Electra was seeing something only meant for her. Marion shivered slightly and tried not to feel nauseous, but that sudden feeling kept fighting its way up. She didn’t know what to

Spellfire Moons

make of it, but it just stayed there. She knew too that Electra had sporadic prophetic words that often came true to the “T”. She could sometimes see into your very soul, and one day that unusual power of hers would be even more powerful, of that Marion had no doubt.

“What you’ve been wanting. But I’m not saying. It’s a surprise.” Electra stopped smiling as her uncle shouted again. “I’ll be back with your orders or Damien will. He’s working today too since there is no school. Be back soon.”

“Whatever was that all about, Marion? Do you think Lectra was *seeing* something?”

“No telling, Katspell.” Marion felt less queasy, but the feeling still nagged at her that Electra did see something, and like the child she still was, refused to tell her secret. She changed the subject quickly. “Never mind that, tell me about you and Jeth. Have you two set a date yet?”

“Not yet, Marion. Jeth just finished college and Alchemy Academy. I think he wants to run Trinkets shop for a while before he decides what else to do. He’s a talented wizard, but you know he loves books more than anything.”

“Except you.”

Katspell blushed slightly. “Yeah, I know that. He’s been asking me to set one though. I’m not sure just yet, Marion. I want to marry Jeth and he knows that. I love him just as deeply as you and Rafe care for each other. I’m going to visit my parents in England this coming summer and Jeth and I will set a date then.”

“Sounds good. Don’t rush on anyone’s account.” Marion knew the two were meant for each other, but Katspell was right to wait until the idea of being permanently binded to a man was right for her.

She was about to say something else, when Electra came back with a tray in her hand, that held their orders. “I just stuck the condiments on the side that you like Mrs. Trinkets, Katspell. Oh didn’t let Uncle put too much Gremlin herb spices in there this time. I don’t think it would set well with you and Jaleena.”

She plopped the tray down and whisked herself off to another table before either Marion or Katspell could ask what she meant by that last remark. Marion shrugged as Katspell looked at her with questioning eyes.

Spellfire Moons

“Who knows what goes on in the minds of twelve year olds. Smells good. I’m so glad to get away from the shop for a bit.”

“Books hollering too much? Jeth says they fuss a lot at Rafe these days. Maybe the two of you should start traveling, like you told me you wanted to since you two were in college together.”

She sighed wistfully. “Maybe one day soon. That would be marvelous. For now, I’m content to work in Trinkets. One day though, maybe I’ll do something with those design courses I took. Who knows.”

Katspell’s eyes followed Electra as the young girl went around Sins. “Perhaps someone might.”

Marion caught the drift her friend spoke of. “I don’t think I want to know the future, Katspell. We’ll just have to see what comes. Now do you suppose Rafe has found a spell that will give Horrible Henry his comeuppance for once?”

“If Jeth says that book held answers, then you can bet it does.” Marion chuckled with Katspell and knew this would be very true. Jeth knew his books.

She hoped indeed that her husband found a way to get back at Horrible Henry for all the times the meddlesome ghost stole their Mothy Molasses treats or aggravated their customers. Perhaps when lunch was done, and they returned to the shop, Rafe would have discovered a way to do unto Henry as the rotten ghost had done to others over the last half century here in Spellfire.

* * * *

Rafe looked over the open book not even touching its pages. *Party Favors Made of Ghost Glows*. It flipped open for him the moment he went behind the counter to read it after Jeth’s suggestion. That brother of his was so talented. The man should be running Trinkets and not him. The books loved Jeth, and by the looks of it, Katspell too.

Both he and his brother were wizards, but he flew more than Jeth did and Jeth could do things like talk to books, which Rafe couldn’t do though he had the empathy with them as his younger brother did. Still he was glad for Jeth, because one day, if Jeth ever wanted to take over the running of Trinkets, then he and Marion could go traveling more often, as was their dream. At one time, he’d wanted to work for the Wizard’s Guild as a traveling professor and representative of the

Spellfire Moons

Guild in their rare books trading program, but that didn't come into play, when his parents retired to another realm, leaving him the shop.

Still he was happy, and even now, he got a thrill from being able to have books communicate with him. Such as this one opened before him, showing him page after page of what to do with meddling ghosts that wouldn't quit playing pranks on people. Horrible Henry stole one too many Mothy Molasses from the store and made too much mischief in Trinkets and other stores. Someone needed to give the old bastard a taste of his own medicine. And Rafe was determined to do just that!

He read more of the book. *Hmm, this looked interesting, how to make a ghost unghostly. It could work for a short while anyway.* Some ghosts could actually hold down food, like a humanoid wizard could, he chuckled. Namely Horrible Henry. The man ghost ate whether he still had his corporeal tastes or not. But he must like those Mothy Molasses Bars. That's all he seemed to recall the ghostly being ever eating. Maybe that's what he was eating when Henry's wife killed him for cheating on her. She got sentenced to prison of course and died there. Still if Henry became physical for too long a time it would cause him trouble. Legend says she'd come back and beat him with a flaming broomstick if he stayed substantial for more than fifteen minutes at a time. It would be worth it to find out if that legend was true.

So all he needed to do was repeat a spell and do it during a fire? No that didn't sound right. Sometimes he didn't read these old dialects right. Ok, take a favorite food or thing a ghost likes and hold it while saying the words. Then light a fire to that. Yeah that was the correct translation of the spell.

Rafe looked around the room, most of the afternoon crowd had dissipated, and Jeth was talking with a few that were left. It was quiet in Trinkets for the present, so what better time to recite the spell while making Mothy Molasses Flambé?

He found a tin lid under the counter and got one of the Mothy bars, placing the confection inside it. Then he repeated the spell.

"Gather and be whole, from thy past, this magical spell for a half hour will last." Then Rafe took a match book, which laid near a candle holder on the counter, and lit it. He put it on the sweet treat and started to chuckle as the Molasses Bar started to catch the heat from

Spellfire Moons

the match. It melted halfway down into the brown nutty treat before the flame went out. Then to his delightful surprise, Rafe heard an eerie howl and the smoke snapped out of his site, flashing around the room until it went into the storeroom.

Horrible Henry had been sneaking back in to get the rest of the Mothy Molasses Bars! Henry came running wide-eyed out from the back, screaming and startling the others in the room. His beady black eyes stared accusingly at Rafe.

“Why you worm-infested wizard, you did this! You’re despicable!”

“I could say the same about you, Henry, coming in here and other establishments and making mischief one too many times. Now get out of my shop!”

Henry, all 5 ft 6 inches of his meaty self, straightened his pinstripe suit and plopped his derby on his bald head. “See if I ever grace your dump again.”

“It would snow in Texas during July if I really thought that could happen, you washed up excuse for a poltergeist! Now get out of here before your wife comes back to haunt you!”

Laughter came from the back of the room and Henry’s face got ghastly red with fear and embarrassment. He shook his pudgy fist at Rafe before running quickly as he could out the front door of Trinkets. Rafe just joined the others in laughing over Henry’s predicament. He was going to have to thank Jeth for that tip about the book.

* * * *

Shai and Thunder waited until Frightful Frieda Farthington Faraday closed up her shop for the day. The young-looking blond witch always closed it up early afternoon. Most people in Spellfire didn’t buy brooms anyway during that time of day and the harridan liked going over to Sinful Sundaes on Wednesday afternoons to find out the latest gossip she could from her long time friend Councilman Perry Normil. Just as soon as they saw her leave the culprits went around the side alley.

The one-story shop was located on the west side of the town square several doors down from Trinkets Book and Novelty Shop. They were careful to make sure no one saw them before the two quickly went to the back of the store. Shai gave Thunder a

Spellfire Moons

conspiratorial smile and the fire fairy winked at her as they saw that Frieda left one window partially open in the back. Not many people in Spellfire worried about their doors being locked, though some did. Since Frieda was not the best shopkeeper around as many knew, Shai and her date in mischief knew that they would find a way in, even if she had to shimmer the two inside the broom store.

Shai however didn't open the window further, but turned herself into a wisp of smoke and seeped in through the tiny opening. Minutes later Thunder did the same. They found themselves in a back room, lit only by the afternoon sun. Quietly, incase a spell alarm went off, Shai tiptoed on air through the back room to the front of the shop, Thunder doing likewise.

From a front window, she saw some light coming in the dark store, which gave it some illumination, enough for Thunder and her to poke around without tripping. She, along with Thunder, looked around the small front room of the place. Brooms of various sizes lay around, some standing asleep on their on, and some hung up on the walls. One of the brooms peered at her, but lazily went to sleep. She felt even the brooms didn't like Frieda much.

Thunder pulled her to the counter and motioned behind it. Shai chuckled. That'd be a good place for them to make out. She followed him behind the counter and as soon as they were behind it she stripped off her thin shift as he did his short tunic. She let him pull her into his arms and then started returning his hungry kisses.

They dropped to the floor on their knees, kissing and petting each other swiftly. Shai felt the moisture build up between her thighs. She reached out to touch his shaft and felt heat rising up from it. He was overly excited.

"Easy, Thunder. Watch the sparks. We don't' wanna set the place on fire." She whispered.

He snickered. "Oh I won't. Not to worry. We fire fairies can contain our sexual heat. Now where were we? Oh yeah, that feels good."

Shai started stroking his long erection and it grew harder and heavier within her hands. He reached and slid a couple of fingers into her wet channel. Shai groaned and began her movements over his cock more rapidly. He shoved back and forth through her hands. His hair lighted. Shai felt a quick rush of liquid desire shiver through her

Spellfire Moons

body. *Oh his hands were so good.* They fell to the floor, she on top of him. Shai took her hands off him and he placed his on her hips, helping to guide her over him. She straddled him and started moving up and down over his erection.

“Oooh yeah, sweet Shai! Oh gosh yes!”

“Shhhh, Thunder, you’ll wake some of the brooms.”

He grumbled and the hair on his coppery head lit up even more as he groaned his pleasure out loud. He bucked in rhythm with her and as she felt his orgasm culminating with her own, his mane of red gold started sparking. Shai cried out just as they orgasmed and Thunder’s whole body came instantly alive with sparks of fire. Shai jumped off of him, grabbing her shift.

“Crap, Thunder stop! Oh no, one of the brooms caught on fire. Quick get up.”

But thunder lay there in his sweet release for a moment before her words pierced his lust fogged mind. He had his arms behind him and looked at her whimsically. Then he felt the flames around him grow suddenly higher and catch some of the pieces of broom behind his head on fire.

“Oh crap, what have I done!” He jumped up, and grabbed his tunic before it too caught on fire. “What are we gonna do? Fire fairy flames spread faster than regular fire flames.”

“Shit, Thunder I told you to control it. Oh hell lets’ find a fire extinguisher!”

Shai saw that they were too late. The flames went rampant. They ran for the door shouting, but the front door wouldn’t open when they got there. It was spell locked. The two shouted at the brooms to wake up and they did. Most that could start flying through the glass and some felt the wind from the back window. Shai looked at Thunder and the two thought the same thing. Get the hell out the back window!

The two rushed for the back room. Brooms flew pass them nearly knocking them over and hitting their heads. The dying sparks from thunders long lit up mane got a few of them before it completely went out. The glass of the window shattered with the brooms all-vying to get out and Shai and Thunder had to duck behind a crate. The flames were everywhere by now cornering the two behind the crate. Shai tried to shimmer out with Thunder, but the smoke was affecting her shimmering abilities to transport. And Fire Fairies couldn’t shimmer.

Spellfire Moons

Fear of dying in Thunders heat flames made her panic as much as the Fire Fairy was. In fact, his hair was twirling as if it had a life of its own and it started lighting again. *Oh shit, they were gonners now!*

CHAPTER FOUR

Halfway through her Gremlin Ghoulash, Marion clanked her spoon down in her plate as she saw Frightful Frieda Farthington Faraday stroll into Sins. Although the plump blonde didn't look a day over 25, the witch was really well over 50 years old. Not many in town liked her, but they put up with her for various reasons. Still, Marion didn't like the wicked witch of the west. Evidently neither did Electra Spellfire, for the girl's hair turned a shade of crimson red when Frieda walked into Sinful Sundaes.

Though her uncle wasn't mean, he kept a tight watch on the Spellfire kids, until their parents returned someday. That was a mystery in itself, not many spoke about. Frieda only nodded in disdain towards Marion and Katspell, but sat near them at a table near the rows of booths. It was Electra that came up and took the woman's order.

"I'll be joined shortly by Councilman Normil so make sure you bring him his usual, child. I don't want your brother's clumsy feet bringing it to me."

"My brother isn't clumsy you old biddy!"

Marion couldn't believe the words coming out of Electra's mouth. Not many stood up to Frieda, one of the most powerful witches in Spellfire. She glanced briefly at Katspell whose eyes were wide at first with disbelief and then amusement took over.

"Don't you take that tone with me, Electra Spellfire. I'll turn you into a heifer in a split second if you don't apologize." Frieda's oak brown eyes were sparking red and narrowing. "I'll have your uncle tan your hide for being so disrespectful."

"I'll make your hide tanned if you try." Electra snarled. "This is gonna be my shop one day and you'll regret all those bad things you do..."

Spellfire Moons

Any further arguments were cut off just as then fire alarms were heard outside by everyone. Heads turned towards the window as Rain Fairies and the Spellfire Fire Department rushed down the road to a building not far away.

“There’s a fire in your stupid broom closet, Frieda.” Electra spit out.

“Oh my gosh, people are pouring out of Trinkets.” Katspell said.

Frieda jumped out of her seat after giving Electra an angry look. “Oh hell they’re going towards my broom store.”

Marion and Katspell jumped out of their seats, but not before Marion saw Electra trans-flashed out of Sins and disappear. Oh dear the child knew something of what was going on. She was sure Katspell would find out later on and tell her. The two rushed like others did out the double doors of Sinful Sundaes Ice Cream Shoppe.

Marion, or anyone ran up the north end of the street to see what was going on diagonally across the way from Sinful Sundaes. The streets were blocked with fire trucks and Rain Faeries putting out the fire blazing through Frieda’s Broom Store. Brooms were flying and screaming all over the place, as were wizard seats and a few flying carpets. Most of the magical objects became heavily soaked from fairy rain, and soon fell around and on top of the roof tops of some of the other establishments. She saw Rafe and Jeth waving to her and Katspell. Jeth gave her the ok sign, which made her know that Trinkets and those inside were fine.

She started to weave around traffic and the people on the streets to get to the other side. She and Katspell barely got across when Horrible Henry in corporeal form came rushing down the sidewalk being chased by none other than his ghostly wife of long ago, who was whacking him on the backside and head with a lightweight broom. She chuckled loudly and was about to go meet up with Rafe when she saw something in the alley that lay between Frieda’s burned up building and the empty shop next to Trinkets. There was Electra appearing out from the back of the building with Shai, a mixed-blood fairy and Thunder, a notorious Fire Fairy, both looking guilty and soaked as sin.

She had a good idea who started the fire. Electra nodded at her and Katspell and then disappeared again, leaving the guilty couple standing alone. They flapped their soaked and smoked stained wings,

Spellfire Moons

the minute they espied Frieda nearby. Marion saw them quiver with guilt and fear. The pair flew away as fast as they could. Marion sighed and saw the flames finally die out. The store look like a piece of charred, soaked debris of varying hues of charcoal black and rusty gray.

Well Frieda's shop wouldn't be used for a long time to come. The Troll Bridge Association didn't like her. Marion half hoped the bitch witch had insurance or things would not set well for the town if Frieda didn't get her way or recompense. She was sure that somehow Shai and Thunder would be finding a way to recompense Frieda for their misdeed. Fairies were often fickle and mischievous, but the good at heart ones made amends when they were in the wrong. And by the looks, she'd seen on their faces, they had been *very* in the wrong.

Marion rushed to Rafe who opened his arms to her. "I'm so glad that didn't spread any further or no one was injured."

He hugged her fiercely. "We're all fine love. Sorry your lunch time got interrupted. Shall we go home, it's too wild out here, and I'd hate for one of those upset brooms to hit any one, us in particular."

She smiled up at him as he wrapped an arm around her waist and they started back towards Trinkets. "It's been a most peculiar day, Rafe. I just saw Henry corporeal and his wife's ghost hitting him with one of the brooms. That spell must have worked. And to top things off, Electra rescued two fairies from out of the pile of mess back there, and Electra Spellfire said the darnest things to me."

Jeth and Katspell walked hand in hand before them, into Trinkets. Rafe opened the door and she entered, followed by her husband. Once there she relaxed to see that all really was okay in the store and with her family.

"What was it she said now, Marion?" Katspell asked.

Jeth and Katspell were standing near the corner of the main counter. Jeth looked amused. "Well Lectra is a puzzling girl, but I know even if her words are sometimes cryptic, there's something to them. What did she say?"

"Something about *it will come*. And she mentioned a very pretty but unusual name. Jaleena, I think it was." Marion shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh I remember, Marion. She said the one thing you wanted the most will happen."

Spellfire Moons

Marion looked from her friend to her husband. “I can’t understand, there’s nothing much I could want for right now.”

“Well there are two things you two have wanted very badly,” Jeth put in, an impish smile playing on his mouth and in his eyes. He glanced briefly at Katspell conspiratorially, it seemed to Marion, before he spoke up again. “Traveling and having kids.”

“Jeth and I have talked things over, but didn’t have a chance to discuss it with you really, not even today, Marion. We would like to take over more of running Trinkets while you two travel like you’ve always wanted to do.”

Rafe chuckled and picked her up by the waist and swung her around. “Well I’ll be danged. Sweetie that could only mean one thing that Electra spoke about then.”

It suddenly dawned on her what indeed Electra Spellfire was talking about. And she had been feeling queasy earlier in the day, and quite moody. “I’m pregnant? Oh my gosh, Rafe. That’s got to be what she meant!”

“We can find out quick enough,” Jeth stated and ran to get a book from a nearby shelf. The book fairly glowed in his hands. “Spell the Ailment. It says it could tell.”

He held the book close to Marion and it glowed with pink neon sparks of light, then it chimed. “Congratulations, it’s a girl.” Then the book stopped glowing, quieted, and flew out of Rafe’s hand and onto the shelf it had been stacked on before.

Rafe swung her around again. “I’m going to be a father.”

Tears welled in her eyes. A mother, she was finally going to have a baby. Life couldn’t get any better than this.

* * * *

Katspell leaned back in her chair, knowing it was time to get back to the shop. She took a last airy slurp of her warmed shake then put it to one side. She was about to get up when she saw Electra Spellfire coming her way. The proprietress of one of the most frequented spots in Spellfire slid into the booth next to her.

“Hey Katspell. I see you’ve been woolgathering. You know it was this same spot here over twenty years ago that Marion and you sat the day she found out she was pregnant with Jaleena. Time flies. How was your shake?”

Spellfire Moons

“You know, you still often talk in riddles, Lectra, just like when you were a snot nose kid.” Katspell chuckled. “You are looking good. Marriage agrees with you...”

“Again, you were about to say. No don’t apologize. I’m ecstatic being married to Jeth. He’s all I could ever want. And life seems to be putting a rosiness in your cheeks these days too.”

Katspell tilted her head as Electra’s dark curls deepened and glowed faintly with amber sparks. “I don’t think it’s rosiness I’ve been feeling lately. Why I ...” Katspell suddenly had an odd feeling something was about to change for her. The twinkle in her friend’s eyes confirmed something unexpected would come about. “You’ve got that same look in your eyes that you had back then, when you first cryptically told Marion she was pregnant with Jaleena. Don’t do that to me.”

Electra chuckled. “I wouldn’t. You’ll know what names to call them. And do send me a post card. France is lovely this time of year. Well there’s your hubby coming across. I better get those Mothy Molasses for you.”

“Electra, stop that! I can’t be. I had my period last month...”

But Electra waved a hand at Katspell, cutting off her words. “Yeah, but you went to the doctor for some tests. And I think Jeth is coming in with the results. See ya later.”

She jumped out of the chair just as Jeth came into the diner looking for her. He waved a quick hi to Electra and Katspell was pleased to see the look of joy on his face.

“You’ll never guess. Doctor Witchman called about the tests you took. He said it wasn’t a stomach ailment.” He pulled her up to her feet. “You’re pregnant!”

“Oh my gosh, Lectra just said the same thing.”

They both looked at Electra, where she stood grinning behind the counter. She smiled at them then turned to another customer. “Well I’ll be damned. Just like she did with Marion. Did she give a name. Is it a boy or girl?”

“Oh dear. She said I’d know what names to call them.” She felt her eyes widen. “Jeth, don’t tell me we are going to have twins? Oh my!

He took her hand in his. “Let’s get out of here. There’s something else I need to tell you.”

Spellfire Moons

“More news? Tell me now. Please, I don’t think I can take the suspense.”

“Rafe phoned and said he and Marion were on their way here. They wanted to know if we would like to take care of their place until they found a buyer for it.”

“You mean we could go and stay for a few months in Paris? I’ll be damn. Electra said send her a post card from there, and that it was nice this time of year.”

Both of them looked up at her again, but Electra was nowhere in sight. Harpy now stood behind the counters waiting on customers. The new Sins manager waved at them and they habitually waved back.

“Come on, I don’t want to leave Chrissie alone too long.”

“You are happy right, Jeth? No matter the baby’s gender?”

He grinned and looked down at her with so much love in his eyes, she wanted to melt right there and then. “Honey, it doesn’t matter if they are one of each or both the same gender. I’d love them as much as you. Now let’s get home. We’ve got a lot of good news to tell Jaleena and the others.”

“Well at least today there won’t be any troubled brews happening around town, like it did the day that Marion found out she was pregnant.”

“Well don’t speak too soon. Henry pulled the same stunt today that he did with Rafe back then.”

“So you were coming to get Mothy Molasses bars too?”

He nodded. “Yeah, but I’m glad you reminded me. I’ll need to order them from Electra.”

“I don’t think so. Here she comes with the tray.”

Electra met them at the door to Sins. “On the house. I hope I didn’t ruin your day.”

“Not at all, Lectra. Hope your day is great as ours has become.” Jeth and Katspell said in unison.

Her lovely smile got even wider as the door tinkled and Alex, Electra’s vampish husband, entered the establishment. “Oh it’s definitely getting better already. Later you, two.”

The End

The Grand Design by Melanie Gilbreath

Artist Stephen McClintock has lost his inspiration. It's interior decorator and witch Amy Pettibone to the rescue to salvage his unharmonious habitat.

Grand Design

By

Melanie Gilbreath

Chapter One

Xerxes Vervain Samhianwine III did not consider himself evil. True, as an insomnia fairy, he did deprive others of their sleep. But that was business, and as his grandfather, Xerxes Vervain Samhianwine the first always said; “Insomnia is a serious business.” It was an adage Xerxes the third lived by.

He adjusted the cuff of his bespoke shirt and straightened his tastefully striped tie. He’d run off a tribe of dust bunnies that took up residence in his summer home, making him peevish and ill-tempered. He fought the same thing every year. It must be the Texas heat that made the things breed like, well, bunnies.

He blamed *People* of course. No one ever sweeps under the bed anymore.

Which reminded him, there was a new person staying here he wanted to take a gander at. As a card carrying member of the National Organization of Sleep Loss Providers or NO SLP, Xerxes felt it behooved him to take every opportunity. He did have a quota to fill after all.

Slipping out from under the bed and adjusting the dust ruffle fastidiously behind him, he sniffed disdainfully at the mess. Half unpacked boxes were everywhere, clothing piled in haphazardly on the dresser. Books in untidy stacks. *Honestly, it was a disgrace!* He adjusted the rims of his glasses and strode through the maze of items tut-tutting and clucking his tongue in dismay. Reaching the threshold

Spellfire Moons

of the bedroom he unfurled his wings with a crisp snap. He refused to risk scuffing his Italian loafers in this mess!

He fluttered through the house, finally making his way into what appeared to be a studio of some sort. Wonderful...an artist. Xerxes heaved an exasperated sigh, artists were the worst! They hardly slept as it was, how was he supposed to get any kind of quality deprivation with an artist? He flitted closer, there he stood, the Artist, in front of a giant slab of rock, chipping away at it with a chisel and hammer.

“NO, no, no! You are not doing it right! You stupid dipwad! I said here and here, not there and there!!!”

A female fairy darted around the man’s head. “You are going to ruin the whole thing!!!”

Xerxes stopped cold. What a vision, what a delicate flower, what a rack! His eyes roamed lustily over the plump curves of her bottom as she bent to screech something about being an ham fisted idiot in the man’s ear. Xerxes sighed blissfully, she was absolutely perfect. Screw his quota, he was on vacation for the love of the gods! He drifted closer wanting a better view.

At that moment the fairy turned and spied him. Her brilliant green eyes narrowed. “What do you want? Can you not see I am working here?”

“My most humble apologies, I have come for the summer and your dulcet tones beckoned. Allow me to introduce myself, I am Xerxes Vervain Samhianwine III, at your service.

“I am Dazzle Honeydew-Gentlepuff. I am an inspiration fairy,” she informed him loftily. “Now scram, I have to watch him every second or he screws up.”

Xerxes nodded in understanding. “Yes, of course, I was wondering if perhaps later we might meet for a drink? I know a lovely little grove of moonflowers that have the sweetest nectar.”

This gave Dazzle pause, given that she was especially fond of moonflower nectar. It had been a while since she danced in the daisies, since she landed this assignment, in fact. She gave him a thorough once over, he was actually very handsome, in a buttoned-down-stick-up-my-ass kind of way. Her tastes usually ran to bad boys like that mudwump she dated last year, bad boys that almost always broke her heart. Maybe it was time to trade up. “Alright.”

Spellfire Moons

“Wonderful, I shall meet you in front of the humming bird feeder at moonrise.” Xerxies fluttered closer and kissed her dainty hand.

Dazzle giggled and her wings turned a delicate shade of pink. She waved and returned to her task of berating the human male.

Xerxies flew back to his bachelor pad under the bed, wanting to make sure he had plenty of time to set the proper mood. *Romance is in the air. And soon to be in his bed, bwahahahahah!*

* * * *

One week later

Stephen Mackenzie tossed his chisel to the floor and kicked the slab of granite that had become the bane of his existence. He just could not understand what the problem was, last week he woke each morning with a fire in his belly, as if his art were screaming at him to create, and now, nothing. Silence.

He sighed and looked at the clock, his mother would be here any moment. Great. Stephen loved his mother, he really did. But every time she visited she treated him to a in-depth report on her relationship with Trevor, the twenty-two year old college dropout his mother was currently seeing. He understood his mother’s need for companionship, Stephen’s father passed away five years ago, but he did not want to know how good Trevor’s ass looked in a pair of jeans. It gave him the willies.

He bent and picked up his chisel carefully examining the edge to make sure he didn’t damage it when he threw it. If he failed to get his shit together soon he would be screwed. His show was in less than a month, and this piece was to cap off the theme of the show. He laid the chisel on his work bench and propped his butt on a high stool. The sculpture was half done, fluid and graceful arches and hollows gave way to rough stone and shapelessness. It felt so strange, the piece spoke to him so clearly until just a few days ago. He snorted at that understatement. The piece screamed, nagged and berated him every waking moment and most of his sleeping ones. He ran his hand through his hair tiredly. Maybe if he managed more than a couple hours of sleep a night he would be able to focus. But sleep was eluding him as thoroughly as his inspiration seemed to be.

He padded through his house on bare feet Stephen needed to get cleaned up and find something to wear. Mother would surely insist on

Spellfire Moons

having lunch out considering the meager offerings in his refrigerator he was in whole-hearted agreement.

He grimaced at his reflection in the bathroom mirror and scratched his week old beard, *that has to go*. If Mother caught him looking this unkempt he'd never hear the end of it. He shucked his clothing and stepped into the shower, turning the cold water on full blast. The icy shock usually served to clear the cobwebs from his brain and got him in the creative mindset. Lately, not even that worked.

Shivering he adjusted the temperature to something more comfortable and took care of business. Drying himself off he admitted he felt much better. Tucking the towel around his waist he walked into his bedroom

“Mother!” He screamed like a girl.

The woman sitting on the edge of his bed jumped and gave a little squeak. “Honestly, Stephen, you don't have to yell, I am sitting right here!”

“I know, that is why I am yelling. What are you doing here? I might have been naked!” Stephen's hand went to the precarious knot that held the towel at his hips.

She waved her hand airily. “Please, it's nothing I have not seen before. I pushed you out of my birth canal, you were naked then you know.”

“Gah!” Stephen felt his left eyelid twitch in the familiar tic that accompanied visits from Magnolia. “Mother, please!”

“Oh all right,” she stood and smoothed the skirt of her elegant linen suit. “I shall wait in the living room for you to get dressed. If I can find it. You have nothing to sit on except this bed. When are you going to unpack?”

Stephen opened his closet door and used it as a shield. He still held a death grip on his towel, he was not taking any chances. Too many strange and weird things happen around his mother. Right now he had enough on his shoulders without adding the trauma of flashing the old jolly roger at his mother.

“Mom, go into the studio, there are some seats there. Let me get dressed in peace.”

“Very well, I know when I am not wanted.” With an injured sniff she sashayed out of the room.

Spellfire Moons

Stephen banged his head against the doorjamb. *Great, just great!* Not only was he a no-talent hack, he turned into a terrible son as well, and one without any clean underwear. This week just got better and better.

Chapter Two

Magnolia dusted off a stool and shook her head, a little moue of distaste puckering her mouth. She considered the piece of stone in front of her. It appeared that little or no progress was made since last week. This worried her, Stephen needed to create, his art was the key to his happiness. While Magnolia would have preferred architecture or advertising, beggars could not be choosers. At least Stephen proved to be a successful artist. His show at that major gallery in Houston would be in a few weeks. It didn't take an art critic to see he wasn't ready for it.

She left the studio and wandered from room to room, her mouth growing tighter in a frown.

"This house is a mess." Stephen tended to have tunnel vision when he worked so she expected some sort of disorder. Stephen's live-in girlfriend of six years had kept his loft in immaculate condition. That was the only thing Magnolia liked about the girl. Their breakup had been amicable, but Lisa wanted the loft and Stephen, being the nice boy she raised him to be, moved.

Spellfire, Texas seemed an interesting choice. Magnolia was well aware of the more interesting populace, seeing how she grew up here. Of course, when she met Stephen's father in college she left all that behind her and now...well she enjoyed being a wealthy widow with no desire to dust off her broom and take a ride.

However, she did have her talents, and she refused to be shy about making use of them when she needed. Wrinkling her nose at the empty pizza boxes sitting on her son's kitchen countertops convinced her that this was a great need.

Stepping out of her elegant pumps she raised her hands above her head and took a deep breath, releasing it slowly, she pressed her palms together and drew them down to her chest. Feet braced against

Spellfire Moons

the wood floor Magnolia opened her inner sight to the energy around her.

Chaotic and unkempt ruled the incorporeal surroundings she stood in. *No wonder Stephen could not get any work done! This was unacceptable!* Something must be done immediately.

“Mom, where are you?”

Magnolia’s eyes snapped open and she quickly straightened her appearance, Stephen didn’t know she was a witch and somehow she felt he wasn’t in any condition to take the news with anything short of a complete breakdown. The boy was just like his father. Stephen Sr. had a hard time dealing with her otherworldliness. It had almost ruined their marriage and they decided to keep the information from their son.

The decision was fine with her, Stephen never needed to know she would meddle in his life by magical means. Just as soon as she could sneak out a call on her mobile.

Chapter Three

Amy Pettibone stepped out of her little car and surveyed her latest job. From the outside the place looked calm and peaceful, charming even. But after seven years of doing this gig, Amy knew looks could be deceiving.

Bending at the waist she gripped the enormous tattered bag that sat on the passenger seat. The bag became her best friend, as it had been her mother's best friend. Inside it held every thing a witch would need to take care of almost every problem that she might encounter. Of course, finding whatever it was in there was another thing. Amy slung the enormous bag over her shoulder and headed for the front door.

Normally she did not do pro bono work, she was an interior designer, not a lawyer. But she owed Magnolia McClintock a favor and Amy made it a point to always pay her debts. She knocked briskly and waited.

The door opened to reveal a disheveled, irritated, and in Amy's opinion, red hot-hottie of a man. Thick, shoulder length golden brown hair framed a face that fell somewhere between rugged and pretty. She liked the strong stubborn curve of his jaw softened by his sensually full mouth. Those full lips were bracketed by fine laugh lines beneath his straight nose. But it was his eyes that drew her. The rich, deep chocolate brown were snapping at her with ire.

"What?" he demanded.

Amy blinked, *wow*, Magnolia never mentioned her son was hotter than a New York sidewalk in July. Completely distracted by the vision of masculine splendor in front of her, she blurted. "You have the most amazing eyes."

"And you just interrupted my work to tell me this?" his eyebrow arched sardonically. "Gee, thanks."

Spellfire Moons

Amy felt her face flush red. “Erm...Sorry. I am Amy Pettibone, from Ley Line Designs, your mother, Magnolia hired me to help you with your house.” She handed him her business card.

Taking it, he opened the door wider, propping his shoulder against it. Amy watched the irritation on his face change to skepticism. He looked her up and down, Amy took the time to regard him in the same manner, he had a runner’s build, lean lithe. He flipped the card in his fingers, drawing her attention to strong, well defined forearms and long fingered graceful hands. *An artist’s hands.*

“Amy Pettibone, designing witch. Elemental alignments and domain harmonizing,” he read from the card. “This is a shame, You’re too pretty to be a crackpot.”

Amy drew up to her full height, which, in her three inch pumps, just happened to be near eyelevel with his slouched self. “I beg your pardon?”

He shrugged and straightened. A tiny half smile twisted his mouth and he stepped back into the foyer. “Never mind, you coming in or do you need an invitation or something?”

Amy shot him a dour look, in her profession, she met plenty of skeptics. Oddly enough each one of them thought they were a comedian too, “Ha, ha, you are too funny for words,” she said in a dry tone, stepping across the threshold and into chaos.

She sucked in a breath, years of training were the only thing that kept her from staggering under the weight of so much misdirected elemental energy. She did sway slightly and was surprised when a strong hand clasped her elbow.

“Hey, are you alright? You look pale, I was only teasing you know.”

“I’m fine. Must be the heat.” she replied absently, most of her concentration centered on making a shield against the conflicting forces dominating the area. It wasn’t a complicated undertaking and she became insulated by a comforting cocoon. She took a step away from his supporting hand. “I’m fine, really.”

The look on his face could not have been plainer. Well fine, let him think she was totally nutters. He would come around in the end, they all did.

He stuck his hands in the pockets of his worn jeans. “So, Mom sent you to what? Clean the aura?”

Spellfire Moons

“Sort of, look, do you really want to stand in your foyer and discuss this, or is there some place we can sit and talk?”

He looked startled then a bit sheepish. “Actually, to be honest, I don’t have any furniture.”

“None at all?”

“Well, there is the bed, and I have a couple of stools in my studio.”

“Stools are fine.”

Giving her another one of those careless shrugs, he turned and walked down the hall, Amy shifted her bag on her shoulder and followed. Wow, if she could guarantee all her clients would look like Stephen McClintock, she’d work for free more often. A tiny grin formed on her lips as she ogled his backside.

He led her into his studio and indicated the two worn, battered stools. “Have a seat Ms. Pettibone.”

“Amy.” she corrected absently setting her bag on the floor and gazing at the dubious cleanliness of the seat. Sparing a thought for her favorite green St. John suit, gingerly perched on the edge of the stool.

“Now then,” she started briskly, “it does not surprise me that you are not able to work in this place, and I don’t mean the physical clutter here Mr. McClintock,” she held up her hand to halt any interruption. “Before you say anything let me explain. Every building has a energy to it, have you ever heard the phrase “A happy home”? This simply means that the energies in that house are balanced and harmonious. Something you do not have here. Magnolia tells me you have only been here for a few months and that the house sat empty for some time before that. The last owners set the flow of energy here, and that flow remained undisturbed for the time the house remained vacant. Energy likes its patterns, Mr. McClintock, and your sudden invasion, for lack of a better word, has disrupted it. Severely, I might add, I’d be surprised if you could sleep in this mess.”

He looked startled, then sheepish, then once again skeptical. He wagged a finger at her. “Oh, you are good, you almost had me there. Except, I was working fine up until a couple of weeks ago.”

Vexed at his disbelieving attitude but unwilling to show it, Amy decided it was his turn to get a careless shrug. “I am not in charge of your inspiration Mr. McClintock, perhaps you have lost it in all this clutter.” She slid off the stool and dusted off her bottom. “Your

Spellfire Moons

mother is a good friend and she asked me decorate your living space and correct the problem, Mr. McClintock. This is exactly what I intend to do, and you will thank me later. Now, if you will excuse me, I really should get started.”

She reached in her bag and pulled out her wand, the familiar weight of the poppy jasper felt comforting. Amy preferred to use her wand when starting a new project and the red and black stone was perfect for grounding and promoting harmony and balance.

When she straightened she noticed two things, one; Mr. McClintock’s eyes were glued to her ass, and two; she really liked it. As surreptitiously as she could manage, she tucked the wand up her sleeve and cleared her throat primly. “If you are quite through Mr. McClintock?”

His eyes roamed up her body to settle on her chest and then her lips for a moment before meeting her eyes with a wicked gleam of his own. “What can I say? I admire the female form, I am an artist you know.” he grinned unrepentantly. “You can call me Stephen, by the way.”

“I bet you use that line on all the girls.”

“Nope, just the cute ones.”

“Hmmp!” she sniffed disdainfully and swept from the room, or would have if she didn’t trip over a stack of slate tiles and stumbled out the door.

Chapter Four

Stephen watched her lurch out of the studio and could not restrain a chuckle. Amy Pettibone proved an interesting distraction. And at this point a rather welcome one.

He had not been overly shocked to see her on his doorstep. His mother had been too quiet over lunch yesterday and only attempted to set him up with one of her friend's daughters. Now, if Magnolia tried to set him up with Amy, well then, he might have gone along with it.

He'd meant what he said, he did admire the female form, but not the idea that was fashionable now. Women should have intriguing curves and mysterious hollows, not look like bobble head dolls with scrawny chicken necks ready to snap at any moment. Amy Pettibone, with her too serious gray eyes and pert little nose was right up his alley. All ample curves and long legs.

He shook his head and rose from the stool to circle restlessly around the large slab of marble that he wanted to be the crown jewel of his gallery showing. He rested his hands on the cool, smooth curves of the stone, if he didn't get his ass in gear there would be no showing. Closing his eyes he ran his hands over the familiar slopes and curves of the sculpture, waiting to see the shape take form in his mind's eye. Instead, Amy lusciously plump ass popped into his brain. He wondered what she would look like with all that honey blond hair tousled from his fingers. He'd like to feel her rosebud mouth swollen and trembling from his kisses. His hands continued to stroke the stone, but in his mind he was touching her, stroking her soft, silky skin and hearing the low moans and soft cries she'd make as he made slow, sweet love to her.

Stephen opened his eyes, feeling the familiar need to create heat his belly. He reached for his chisel and hammer and he began to work.

* * * *

Spellfire Moons

Amy started in the kitchen, flicking her wand here and there as she corrected the unbalanced energies. The kitchen was obviously an earthy area. She thought that the salmon walls, though pretty, did not support that and she made a note to change to a nice brick red with maize trim. The hardwood floors needed to be stripped and re-stained a warmer color.

Digging in her bag time and again, Amy withdrew a seeming endless array of fabric swatches and paint chips. Making a selection from these, she wrote comments on the furniture and ideas regarding object de art. These she would discuss with her client later, as she could hear the sounds of steel hitting stone echo down the hall and did not wish to interrupt him again.

As the hours passed, Amy made her way from room to room, she hardly made a dent in the elemental chaos. With a sigh she stood in the middle of what she thought was a spare bedroom and propped her hands on her hips.

The house was much more than just a routine make over, this mess required a full-blown realignment. She was going to have to move in. She hated live-in projects, her plants got grouchy when she was not home to talk to them. Perhaps her new neighbor Erin would look in on them for her.

Worse, she felt fairly sure the owner of the home would not be very receptive to her staying here. She frowned and heaved a sigh, wishing for all the world she could quit this job and spend the rest of the afternoon shopping at *Bella Vestiti*, but no, she just owed Magnolia McClintock a favor. Amy was honest enough to admit more than a casual interest in Steven, but it was plain that he was utterly Mundane. *'Danes were always a hassle to work with simply because they did not believe in magic.'*

This was going to be a long job.

Chapter Five

Stephen could not believe how much progress he made on the sculpture. With a tired, yet pleased smile, he stood back and surveyed his work. His smile faded into a frown. That woman stayed on his mind most of the day, in a peripheral sort of way and it showed, the figure took on a decidedly sensual tone.

This did not please him. He really didn't have anything against Amy, except that she invaded his space and was a crackpot to boot. If it were not for the mention of his mother's name, Stephen would have hustled her out of his house posthaste.

Now that his focus shifted from the all too consuming statue to his unwitting muse for the day, he realized with a jolt that hours passed and he had not heard a peep out of her. Was she still here? And what exactly had she been doing? Curious despite himself, he laid down his chisel and went in search of her.

* * * *

"Ew, well, no doubts the man is a bachelor, no woman would tolerate that!" Amy exited the bathroom, her notes in one hand and the well used can of Lysol in the other. She shuddered. "Gah, I think something winked at me from behind the toilet. How on earth does he use that commode?" She asked herself as she returned her can of Lysol to her bag. Bacteria could hide anywhere, and one could not be too careful when traipsing about strange men's bathrooms.

"I beg your pardon?"

Amy wrinkled her nose at her host. "Your bathroom is a disgrace. Don't you ever clean?"

"Been kind of busy here, you know, show deadline, must work," he shrugged, "some things fall by the wayside."

"Cleanliness should never fall by the wayside, Mr. McIntock," she lectured primly.

Spellfire Moons

His lips twitched. “So, how is the psychic re-do going? Have you tapped into the aura or whatever it is. Whooooo.” he waved his fingers in the air in front of him.

She arched a brow. She thought to break the news gently, however his snide sarcasm rubbed her the wrong way. Rising to her full height she stared at him. “Actually no. I am afraid the situation requires my round the clock attention.” her smile deliberately held a touch of malice as she dropped the bomb. “I shall be staying here for the next few days.”

Chapter Six

Stephen stared at her, gaping like a landed trout. “What?” he shook his head violently. “No. OH, no, no, absolutely not, under any circumstances are you moving in here.”

While he continued to rant her calm expression did not change, but she did reach for her mobile phone. Flipping it open she quickly selected a number and dialed, bringing the phone up to her ear.

Stephen halted in mid tirade. “What are you doing?”

“Calling your mother.”

He actually felt the color drain from his face. “Don’t...”

She held up her finger. “Magnolia? Hi darling, yes, yes I am here. Well no it is worse than you thought. I am going to have to stay here a bit,” she cast him a thoughtful look from under her lashes. “No he is not, not at all.”

She held the phone out to him. “Your mother wants to speak to you, dear.”

Stephen hesitated just a moment before taking the phone. “Mother, I cannot have her traipsing about the place while I am working.” He started immediately, thinking to get his point of view in before she could start.

“Gracious Stephen, would it hurt you to say hello to your mother first.” Magnolia tised.

He winced, why is it that his mother always made him feel like a five year old with dirty hands? “Sorry Mom, but...”

“Yes, I heard you clearly the first time, darling. How is your sculpture coming along Stephen?”

He thought a minute, today had been the first day in two weeks that he got anything done. “I actually have done some work to it today..”

“See there, Amy is already helping you!” Magnolia cooed. Stephen knew that tone, it meant that no matter what argument he

Spellfire Moons

had, no matter how illogical his mother would find some way around it. And there is the fact he did work on the statue. He cast Amy a thoughtful look, aside for the few minutes he spent with her this morning, she had been so quiet he hardly knew she was there. Still she was the only difference in his environment. Perhaps there was something to this harmony aura thing. Then again perhaps not. He did not have time to play ‘pick the paint swatch’ and he knew how women worked, they crept up on you like kudzu and before he knew it his walls would be puce and he would be tripping over kidney shaped end tables.

“Stephen dear?”

“Mother you can’t be sure she had anything to do with it.” He argued doggedly, ignoring the injured sniff Amy gave.

“Nonsense. Look darling, mommy has spent a lot of time setting this up for you. You need help sweetie, just like that time when you were five years old and had the chicken pox.”

And here comes the guilt, not only did he manage to infect the entire kindergarten class he managed to give the illness to his mother as well. “But I...”

“Stephen.”

Well crap, there was no way to get around his mother when she took that no nonsense tone. He was stuck. Glowering at Amy he heaved a sigh and accepted defeat. “Yes Mother.”

“Excellent! It is for the best my darling, you shall see. Muah.” she made a kissy noise in the phone. “Now be a dear and let me talk to Amy again.”

Grudgingly Stephen handed the woman her phone and stomped to the kitchen for a drink. He could hear Amy chatting pleasantly and laughing. She had a nice laugh, sort of husky and he found himself straining to hear more of it. *Get a grip!* He ordered himself shaking his head to clear it. That woman is merely to be tolerated until he could figure out some way to get rid of her.

“I am sorry I had to resort to that Stephen, but as our time is valuable I thought it best to cut through the doodie and get this settled now.” Amy said apologetically, leaning in the doorway of the kitchen. “I know you don’t believe me, but there really is a lot of work to be done here.”

Spellfire Moons

“I agreed didn’t I? I’m going to speak plain here. I don’t have time for this, I have a show in a few weeks and a piece to complete. I don’t want you in my way. Stay out of my room and stay out of my studio.” He knew he was being rude, under normal circumstances he would find her company pleasant. There was something steady and down-to-earth about Ms. Amy Pettibone, and she wasn’t hard on the eyes either.

She folded her arms under her ample breasts and returned his glower with a mild look. “Of course Stephen, your studio is your space and it is quite functional as it is.” She tilted her head and gave him a considering look. “Is that uncomfortable?”

He blinked. “What?”

“The stick you have shoved up your ass, is it uncomfortable or do you like it up in there?” Profanity was normally not something Amy used but like he said, time was short and Stephen looked like he was winding up for a long tirade.

Stephen stared at her for a moment then began to chuckle ruefully. “I’m sorry. I’m not sleeping well, and I am under a huge amount of pressure here.”

She smiled sweetly. “It’s quite alright, I do understand. I had another job lined up for this week that I rescheduled, your mother is like a force of nature. One must bow to the force of her personality or be flattened by it.”

“Truer words were never spoken,” Stephen agreed. He shifted restlessly. “Look, Um, I really need to get back to work.”

“Oh, of course.” Her smile widened and she moved away from the door. “Please, go right ahead, I shall be as quiet as I can.”

Stephen flashed her a grateful smile. “Thanks,” he walked past her, breathing in her sweet scent. It seemed to travel straight from his nostrils to his crotch where his cock twitched in interest. Hastening to his studio he shut the door and leaned against it. Grimacing he adjusted the now snug fit of his jeans, never in his life did he get hard by just smelling a woman. It’s official, he was losing his ever loving mind.

His gaze landed on his sculpture, and he stared for a moment. It was shaping up nicely, with the work he finished it promised to be unlike any of the other pieces he had created. The smooth curves of marble reminded him of the curves of Amy’s ample breasts when she

Spellfire Moons

folded her arms under them. He wondered about her nipples, would they be a delicate pink or a tawny shade? Large ripe berries or tiny little nubs that begged to be nibbled? And the taste, would they be as sweet as that scent she wore?"

The erotic turn of his thoughts made his cock throb, but the heat that burned in his belly grew stronger and as if drawn by a magnet he picked up his tools and resumed his work.

Chapter Seven

Stephen exited the shower well past midnight, having worked nonstop since his brief encounter with Amy. He wandered into the kitchen to forage for a bite to eat, intending to go straight back to work. Much to his surprise, not only had his refrigerator been cleaned, he could clearly smell the bleach that she used, but there was a large plate of sandwiches as well as a jug of sweet tea waiting for him.

This was unexpected. He scratched the back of his head and tried to remember when exactly was the last time a woman prepared food for him. Linda certainly hadn't, she kept the place clean but the woman was a disaster in the kitchen. Picking up a sandwich he took a mammoth bite and helped himself to a glass of tea. He made an appreciative noise, Amy made a damn good sandwich!

He turned and leaned his butt against the counter as he ate, his eyes wandering around the kitchen. It looked different but he could not detect anything had been changed. He finished his sandwich and started on a second before he realized what it was, the place was clean, so clean it sparkled. Come to think of it, the bathroom had been spotless as well. He chewed thoughtfully, mulling this interesting fact over. From the living room he heard a creak and a mutter.

Frowning he crossed the kitchen and walked into the living room. Amy lay on her side, asleep in a lawn chair. She had obviously dragged the thing in from the deck and bedded down for the night. His frown deepened. The thin sheet she used as cover had fallen to the floor and the simple cotton shift she wore rode up almost to her waist, exposing a pair of long, curvy and silky looking legs. Her lush behind was encased in plain cotton panties. Moonlight shone over her pale skin, giving it a luminous sheen, almost like polished marble.

Stephen felt momentarily dizzy as the blood in his body rushed south, his cock hardened so quickly it ached like a sore tooth, tenting out the fabric of the comfortable sweats he wore. He drifted closer,

Spellfire Moons

drawn to her much like the way he had been drawn to his sculpture earlier this evening. Kneeling, he reached for the sheet intending to cover her with it. Instead his fingers skimmed over the supple skin of her thigh. Unlike the cold marble he worked with all day, the skin under his hand felt warm, smooth and full of life, the contrast beckoned him to explore further. His hand moved higher, slipping up her thigh to wiggle gently under the elastic of her panties, stroking the silky skin there.

She shifted and made a small noise in her throat, Stephen's gaze went to her face to find her watching him, her gray eyes wide and questioning.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you." he murmured, starting to draw his hand from her hip. Her hand came up and stroked the line of his jaw, her cool slender fingers tracing the shape of his mouth.

The response to that simple touch was immediate, lust rose hotly to settle in his groin, with a groan Stephen nipped lightly at her fingers, watching her eyes turn dark and stormy. Amy leaned up on her elbow, her long hair cascading over her shoulder and bathing him in her sweet scent. Her fingers trailed down, over his jaw, skimming his throat to rest on his shoulder and he felt the light pressure of her hand there like a brand burning into his skin. Feeling the same desire seeping from her, his hand tightened on her hip.

Stephen would never be sure which one of them moved first, their lips met, just a taste, a tease. She drew back slightly and he could not allow it. He wanted more. His hand left her hip to snake up, threading through her hair to hold her still. He leaned over her pressing her down on the lounge and took her mouth the way he'd wanted to since he'd first seen her on his threshold.

He drank down her startled gasp, his tongue slipping into her honeyed sweetness to explore, her tongue tangled with his, and her arms came up around his neck drawing him closer, deeper into the kiss.

Stephen settled over her, his chest pressed to hers, his throbbing erection snug against the damp heat radiating from her core. His hand stroked down her side. She felt so soft, each curve and arc supple and giving, cushioning the hard angles and planes of his body. He rocked his hips against hers, driving against her yielding softness.

* * * *

Spellfire Moons

Amy's eyes slid closed when Stephen's thick cock rolled against her swollen clit. Never in all her days did she get so aroused so fast. With just a kiss and some petting she was ready to cream her panties. Stephen's desire seared her delicate skin. But, while the energy of his aura was sexual, there was also something else, something... understanding dawned. Amy gave a yelp and tore her mouth from his.

"Wait, wait!" her hands came up to press against his chest. "I can't do this Stephen, it's not the time."

"What?" his voice was heavy and lustful.

"We can't do this now, Stephen." The words stuck in her throat, but she understood now what was happening, that this heat between them should not be wasted on sex. He needed it to create.

He stared down at her for a long moment before he sat up and moved away from her. She mourned the loss of that wonderful heat.

"Are you sure Amy?"

Regretfully she nodded. "I'm so sorry Stephen."

He rubbed his hands over his face. "So am I, baby. So am I."

He got to his feet "Look, forget what I said this afternoon, take the bed. I won't be needing it for a while."

Sitting up, she shook her head. "I don't think I could sleep in there Stephen, it's your space."

"Suit yourself." with a careless shrug Stephen started from the room pausing at the door way. "Amy, you know it will happen, don't you?" his voice was a low seductive caress.

Desire rushed through her so quickly Amy could feel her entire body flush. "Yes. I know."

His eyes flashed with satisfied triumph. He nodded once and walked out of the room.

Chapter Eight

They settled into a routine of sorts.

Amy, an early riser by nature and cheerful with it., quickly learned Stephen was not. She would make a pot of coffee and sit at the newly acquired kitchen table and go over her plans for the day waiting for Stephen to stagger in, growling a reply to her perky “Good Morning!”, pouring himself a cup of coffee and sit staring into space until the caffeine worked its magic.

They would engage in what Amy liked to think of as the *Morning Debate*. Where she would show Stephen her ideas for his home and he would argue with each one, heatedly and at great length, before giving in and telling her to do whatever she wanted as he did not have the time to deal with her. Stephen would then stomp into the studio and not emerge until late evening, where he would devour all the food he could lay his hands on before returning to his art.

Something Amy was both disappointed and relieved about. However, after a couple of days Amy realized Stephen was getting next to no sleep. He looked haggard and unkempt and she began waylaying him during his nightly forage for food. She quickly discovered that if she could lure him out onto the deck, he would quickly fall asleep in one of the lounge chairs. Amy took full advantage of the knowledge. Taking time to set his dinner out on the deck. After nearly three weeks she was getting tired of grilled food

Since her first night here he never tried to touch her but there was a sensual undertone to their conversations, especially in the evenings. She would catch him watching her. Stephen’s eyes would darken and he would watch her body in a hungry, speculative way that made her feel stripped to the skin no matter how many clothes she wore.

Amy responded to those looks with hot feverish desire she had never experienced before. When he looked at her that way she wanted to go to him and offer him her body to do with as he pleased. Once

Spellfire Moons

she finished the guest room she slept there, so there were no more midnight romps, but her sleep turned restless, more than once she dreamt of how his lips felt against hers and the spicy, smoky-sweet taste of him. She would wake achy and wet, wanting to feel those long, elegant and slightly callused hands on her skin again.

Shaking her head to clear it of her day dreams, Amy gathered up her bag and notes and headed down the kitchen, to the last room she needed to see to; Stephen's bedroom. She was well pleased with the way the house turned out. By virtue of daily calls from Magnolia and Stephen's artistic style, which she visited the gallery to examine, she designed his home in clean lines, warm masculine furnishings and a distinctly earthy feel, which she felt would go a long way to balance and compliment the airy and fiery aspects of his nature.

She pushed the door to the master suite open and toed aside a pair of stained jeans wrinkling her nose. The mess, as well as the cosmic clutter seemed to pool the most thickly here.

After debating for a moment she picked her way through the mess and stood in the middle of the room to survey the damage.

Muttering under her breath, Amy set her bag down and started rummaging in it when a soft tinkling noise reached her ears. Startled, she looked around the room, she could have sworn she heard a giggle, but then again maybe not. Shrugging the incident off she returned to her bag.

* * * *

Under the bed Dazzle sat up, clutching the handkerchief that served as a quilt to her chest and tilted her head listening intently. "Did you hear something?"

"No," a hand came up to tangle in her lavender colored hair. "Come here my naughty little butterfly."

Dazzle giggled and allowed Xerxes to draw her down into his embrace, quite forgetting what had disturbed her in the first place.

* * * *

Stephen breathed a weary sigh and set his buffer down. It was done. He stepped back and surveyed the piece. This was possibly the best work he ever created. Circling the figure he examined it from all angles, his face breaking into a huge grin. He ached in exhaustion, but he did not have the wrung out hollow feeling that usually accompanied the completion of a piece. Excitement bubbled up in

Spellfire Moons

him and with it a sweetly sensual yearning to wrap his arms around a warm, curvy body. Amy's warm curvy body specifically.

He ached for her in a way he'd never ached for another woman. It did not go unnoticed by him how she looked after him while he stayed in his creative zone. Most of the women he became involved with tended to nag and bitch about the way he disappeared when he was working. Not Amy, in her practical, quietly determined way, she managed to make sure he ate and slept without being invasive.

Surprising too was what she did to his house. He chose the place for the size of the room he used for the studio and gave no thought to the rest of the house, but now he could see himself in those rooms, relaxing and enjoying the space. And in his minds eye, Amy would be right there, snuggled up against his side.

Suddenly the urge to do just that, and more with Amy seized him. He decided to get cleaned up, find Amy, show her the completed sculpture then spend the rest of the day in one of his newly decorated rooms, seducing his little interior designer.

* * * *

There it was again, she clearly heard a giggle, only this time it was followed by a lusty moan and a throaty groan. Amy stepped off the step stool she used to measure the windows. Her eyebrow rose and she stepped closer to the bed, wrinkling her nose at the untidy sheets. Going to her knees, butt in the air, she cautiously raised her wand, lifted the edge of the dust ruffle and shrieked; "Oh, my Goddess!"

Amy gazed at the lusty pair of fairies, currently bent in some position of sexual excess she was sure could only be seen in the pages of the Karma Sutra. They stared back, obviously displeased to be having their fuck-fest disturbed.

"Do you mind?" The male squeaked haughtily in what sounded suspiciously like a British accent. While the female appeared too shocked to say a word.

"Yes, actually I do! Is that her foot? Never mind, I don't want to know. What are you doing under there?"

"I might ask you the same thing," came Stephen's voice from behind her. "Not that I care, really, the view is awesome."

Amy shot him a glare over her shoulders and with as much dignity as she could manage, completely unaware that her skirt slid up high enough to expose about an inch of the soft rounded curves of her

Spellfire Moons

bottom, she got to her feet. “You have an infestation of fairies, Stephen.”

“I have a infestation of what?” he asked absently, too distracted by the enticing glimpse of her ass to pay close attention.

“I *said*, you have an infestation of Fairies.”

Stephen took a step back. “O-Kay.” he said in a tone most people reserve for building jumpers and wild dogs.

“Stephen...”

“Of all the nerve! Infestation, bah! My good witch, I shall have you know that this summer cottage has been in my family for half a century! I am Xerxes Vervain Samhianwine the Third from the Samhainwine fairies of Shivinghamshire, and I deeply resent your referring to me as a ‘infestation’.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “Oh put a sock in it.” She batted ineffectually at the fairy fluttering in the air and turned her attention to Stephen.

He turned chalk white and he stared at Xerxes in a sort of horrified fascination. “That’s- it’s a.. a...a...”

“Good God! ” Xerxies propped his hands on his hips and glared. “Yes, I am a fairy, spit it out man!”

“F-F-F-FAIRY?!?” Stephen stuttered, just a millisecond before his eyes rolled up in the back of his head and he collapsed full length in a dead faint.

Amy and Xerxies stared down at him in surprise. “Well, I certainly did not see that coming.” Xerxies said mildly.

“Me either.” Amy agreed.

A streak of rainbow colors shot out from under the bed. The female fairy, who apparently took the time to dress, got one look at Stephen and shrieked in a voice that would do a banshee proud “What have you done?”

“Nothing, Dazzle my dearest, he’s...well...” Xerxies looked helplessly at Amy, who shrugged.

Dazzle fluttered above Stephen wringing her hands. “Oh, this is so bad, I am so in for it. Can’t a girl slip away for a little nookie without something like this happening?”

“Now my little summer blossom,” Xerxies began

“Don’t you ‘summer blossom’ me. You killed him!” Dazzle grabbed Xerxies by the lapels and shook the hapless fairy scattering

Spellfire Moons

silver dust around the room. “Do you have any idea how many car keys I had to steal to get this gig?”

“Erm, look Dizzle,”

“Dazzle!” the small creature glared at Amy. “I am Dazzle Honeydew-Gentlepuff. I am his inspiration fairy -or was anyway,” she looked sadly at his charge. “I wonder how many points killing your charge gets you? I bet *They* will probably revoke my *License to Inspire*.”

“Get a grip. He’s not dead, he just fainted, and if you don’t mind my saying, you were doing a pretty poor job of inspiring him up under that bed.”

Dazzle had the grace to look embarrassed. Xerxies put a cautious arm around her and looked down at the still prone Stephen. “What are we going to do about him?”

“Hang on.” Amy stripped off her sweater and rummaged in her bag for a minute. Pulling out a bottle she knelt next to him, uncorked it and held it under Stephen’s nose for a second.

The man coughed sputtered and sat up. “What the hell?” he croaked.

“Oh thank the gods! It’s alive!” Dazzle screamed clapping her tiny hands in joy at the prospect of keeping her job. She danced a little happy dance on the air in front of Stephen.

“Stephen, honey, are you alright?” Amy asked worriedly. The man’s eyes were crossed and glazed, with a slightly wild look to them. He looked at her and smiled weakly “Gark.” he said clearly, seconds before passing out for a second time.

Chapter Nine

“You really are handling this better than I thought you would, Stephen.”

Stephen sat back and shook his head, saying for the hundredth time; “I can’t believe all this time, I had no idea.”

Amy smiled indulgently. She spent the last two hours giving Stephen a crash course in the otherworld, specifically Spellfire, Texas. They were sitting in lounge chairs on his deck, looking over his back yard watching the sun set. “Humans have a wonderful capacity to ignore the things they don’t want to see, Stephen.”

“I guess that is true.” He rested his head in his hand and looked out into his back field, watching the fireflies, only now he wondered how many of those bright flickering lights were fairies like Dazzle and Xerxies, in fact two of those tiny lights could be them. The fairies left for the night to attend a fairy circle. Dazzle promised to return in the morning and resume her duties, something Stephen felt rather ambivalent about. “I guess this explains mother too.”

Amy nodded, “Yes. But your mother gave up that part of her life a long time ago for the most part. And you can’t tell her you know. She never wanted you to find out.”

He said nothing for a moment. Wanting to change the subject, he asked. “Look, are you hungry? I can order something if you want.”

“Sure.”

He stood and stretched his arms over his head flashing her one of those half smiles of his that Amy found so attractive and went inside.

* * * *

Stephen ordered a pizza and took a quick shower, examining how he felt about his newly acquired knowledge and surprised to find, after the initial shock, he’s okay with it. Pleased even, especially with the fact that Amy was everything she claimed to be and not a fruit-loop. *Not that it mattered*, he thought as he dressed in comfortable

Spellfire Moons

jeans and an old t-shirt. At this point, he wanted her any way he could get her.

He got a couple of cans of soda out of the fridge and looked out the window at Amy. She sat with her knees drawn up, looking out onto the field, unconscious or uncaring that her skirt slid up her thighs and was becoming hopelessly wrinkled. She possessed the sexiest legs this side of heaven and fairly soon Stephen planned on having them clasped around his waist.

The knock at his front door drew him away from the window and he returned a moment later with the pizza. Gathering up the sodas and a couple of plates and napkins he headed back for the deck.

Stepping over the threshold his foot kicked something, surprised, he looked down to see a bottle by the door. "Hey, what's this?"

"What's what?"

"This," setting the pizza box and sodas down he picked up the bottle. "It's tequila."

He looked at the bottle and gave a low whistle. "Someone has expensive taste, this stuff goes for over a hundred dollars a bottle."

There was a note attached to the bottle that said;

Stephen,

Dazzle and I feel simply horrible about this afternoon's dustup. Dazzle has mentioned a fondness you have for tequila and we hope you accept this as a token of our regret!

Have a lovely evening!

With sincere apologies,

Xerxes Vervain Samhianwine III

And

Dazzle Honeydew-Gentlepuff

Fairies

"That is rather nice of them you know," Amy remarked.

"I guess it is."

Stephen returned to the kitchen for more glasses and some ice. When he came back to the deck he poured them both a shot and handed her one, setting the bottle in the bucket of ice he brought.

"I don't suppose you have any lemon and salt?" she inquired.

"Amy, expensive tequila should never be downed in one shot, but sipped like fine cognac."

Spellfire Moons

She smiled up at him. "I did not know that," she took a cautious sip and exclaimed in surprise. "It's sweet."

He nodded and sipped at his own.

They dug into the pizza eating with gusto and in a companionable silence. Finally Amy sat back with a smile and a satisfied sigh. "Oh, I ate too much!"

Stephen smiled and poured her some more tequila. They sipped the liquor watching the darkening sky. Stephen spoke suddenly. "I finished the piece today, it's nothing like I have ever done before, and I think that has something to do with you."

She blushed prettily. "Well I am flattered," she took a sip of her drink. "But I don't think I can take the credit here Stephen. That sculpture was always inside you, you just needed to find a way to let it out."

His hand reached out and touched hers, Amy turned her head and found him watching her with sleepy, sexy eyes. She licked her suddenly dry lips and he tracked the movement, mimicking her by running his tongue over his bottom lip. Amy swallowed, she wanted to feel those lips against hers again.

"Amy, are you sober enough?"

"Sober enough for what?"

"Sober enough for me to kiss you."

She tilted her head to the side and considered for a long moment. "Yes. I do believe I am sober enough for you to kiss me," her eyes softened. "I'd like for you to kiss me Stephen."

Stephen leaned in and brushed his lips against hers, feathering his tongue against the seam of her mouth, her lips parted slightly, her tongue flicking against his, she tasted of tequila and a honeyed sweetness Stephen knew was hers alone. A sweetness he wanted more of.

Deepening the kiss he shifted, slipping one hand around her waist and pulled her from her seat onto his lap so that she straddled him, Stephen could feel the heat of her against his groin, damp and beckoning. He groaned into her mouth, Amy's plump, juicy curves pressed against him stirring a deep hunger inside. One he had every intention of satisfying.

His hands stroked down to the wrinkled hem of her skirt and pushed it higher. She wore no hose and his fingers dragged along her

Spellfire Moons

silky skin until he could grip a handful of her lush ass, he squeezed and she cried out softly against his mouth.

He pulled back and looked at her with a lust glazed expression. “Amy, sweetheart, if you don’t want this to happen, you better say something.”

Looking rather lusty as well Amy curled her fingers into the neck of his t-shirt and growled. “Shut up and kiss me again, honey.”

“Yes, ma’am,” his hand tangled in her hair, bringing her pouty mouth back to his, swallowing her gasp. Their tongues tangled and twisted heatedly, his hands began to roam restlessly over her.

His hand closed over her breast, palming the soft mound through the thin silk of her blouse, his long fingers stroked and plucked at her nipple, the small bud swelled and tightened. She moaned low, the husky sound teasing his already inflamed libido. He leaned back. “Take off your top Amy.”

Her fingers trembled as she lifted the hem and pulled the garment over her head, letting it fall unheeded to the deck.

“So pretty.” He circled the areola through the thin fabric of her bra. She sighed softly, arching back offering herself to him.

Amy felt his fingers fumble with the hooks of her bra and the sudden loosening of it. His fingers swept up her back and brushed the straps down, exposing her breasts to his avid gaze.

His head dipped and he seized a nipple between his lips drawing on the bud. Amy tangled her hands in his hair, a soft sigh slipping from her lips. He wrapped an arm around her waist arching her back so her full breasts pushed up and out. His other hand traveled up her thigh to cup her through the damp fabric of her panties.

He pressed his palm against her firmly for a moment then slipped his fingers under the silk, stroking between the delicate seam that guarded the heart of her. “You’re wet Amy. I like that,” he purred against her nipple and her eyes drifted shut with the pleasure of his hands and mouth on her body. His fingers stroked her inner lips open and rimmed the entrance of her body, his thumb curving up to tease her clit.

Shamelessly, she spread her thighs wider, begging for more of his touch. Two fingers slid into her drenched passage, drawing a soft moan from her. His mouth traveled to her neglected nipple and he nipped it gently, pushing a third finger into her. The faint smarting

Spellfire Moons

stretch felt maddening, driving her higher but not high enough. She wanted him inside her and she wanted him now.

“Stephen, please.”

“Please what, baby?” he smiled sexily, raising his head. His fingers worked her, twisting and stroking deep inside her.

She growled at his teasing and yanked his t-shirt up, he obliged her, ceasing his stroking long enough to tug the garment off and toss it to the deck to join her blouse and shoes. Hungrily she swept her hands over his muscled chest. Down over the ripples of his abdomen to the waist band of his jeans. Her fingers slipped the button free from its mooring and his breath hitched, her fingers dipped inside to stroke the crisp hair of his groin. She drew the zipper down, the backs of her fingers brushing the heat of his erection and he groaned. When Amy’s hand curled around the head of his cock he gave a low growl and began to yank at the fastening to her skirt.

Stephen’s eyes glowed as he finally stripped the last shred of fabric from her. Softly rounded and lush curves, his mouth watered for a taste of her. He held back, just barely, from falling on her like a ravaging beast. Tangling one hand in her hair, the other gripping her hip he pulled back so he could look at her face. His eyes locked with hers. “Tell me you want this baby, tell me you want me inside you,” he rumbled.

Her gaze met his steadily and she answered him quietly. “I want you Stephen, all of you.” She pulled him close, tangling her tongue with his, she pushed her hand between their bodies again to free him from the confines of his jeans. Her soft fingers danced over the length of him and he shuddered.

“Stephen honey, take all you need from me,” she murmured against his lips.

With another shudder and a harsh groan Stephen surrendered, tumbling her to the lounge chair, covering her with his lean body, he gripped her silky thighs in his hands, sinking into her wet, welcoming flesh.

He paused just for a second to savor the feel of her, revel in being inside her before his desperate lust took over. Pulling back he lunged into her; gratified by her cry of pleasure. Driving in again he seized one engorged nipple between his teeth, giving it a sharp nip before drawing it into his mouth.

Spellfire Moons

Her fingers pressed his head closer to her breast and she moaned his name.

He obliged her for a moment, moving from one breast to the other before raising to his knees. He gripped her thighs in his hands and spread her wider, he wanted to watch her as he fucked her, watch the way her body moved as he pummeled her. Her skin glowed in the moonlight, the sweet pink flesh between her thighs glistened with moisture. He watched hungrily as his body moved in and out of hers. The air perfumed with the musk of their mating, and she looked so beautiful as she writhed in her pleasure. He wanted to see her face when she came, hear her cry out his name into the night.

Amy tossed her head restlessly, “Stephen!” She cried out when his long graceful fingers dipped between her legs, stroking the sensitive bundle of nerves at the top of her sex, spurring her higher. Amy could hardly breathe for the bliss of it. She opened her eyes, Stephen loomed over her watching her with an intensity that became almost as intimate as the hard press of his body inside hers.

“You feel so good Amy, so tight and wet. I want to feel your pussy ripple around my cock when you come. Do it now for me, baby.”

Those fingers pinched lightly and she could not bear it, throwing her arms above her head she grabbed the edge of the lounge and came with a wild cry.

“Good baby,” he praised. “More. Again.” Flipping her onto her stomach he drove into her fiercely. She screamed again, her cries mixing with the sound of his own harsh groans. This was sex unlike she had ever experienced before, Stephen’s hands roamed her flesh, stroking, shaping it as if he could not get enough of her.

Sweat beaded on his forehead as he drove into her, her slick tight heat gripped him tightly, drawing him closer and closer to his own climax, milking him from tip to base. His balls drew tight against his body and he growled with each frantic thrust. Pleasure shot up his spine, spreading out to all his limbs, then rushed back the way it came, pooling in the base of his cock to shoot out with the rush of his seed. He groaned low and sunk down into her lush, welcoming body, exhausted and spent.

Chapter Seven

“Oh My GODS! What are you still doing in bed. Get up!” A shrill voice shrieked in Stephen’s ear. He bolted upright and came face to fairy with Dazzle, who fluttered in the air and was regarding him with a disgruntled expression.

“Look,” she shrilled, “I am all for sleeping in once in a while, but we don’t have a lot of time here. Get your lazy ass up and keep that witch from leaving!”

“What?”

“The. Witch. Is. Leaving. You. Moron!” Dazzle spaced each word evenly. “And if you let her go and then drop into a blue funk like that Van Gough person and try to chop off an appendage, I will make sure that it’s not your ear!” She glared at his crotch, thankfully covered by the bedclothes.

He shook his head to clear it. “Dazzle what are you talking about and for God’s sake stop shouting! I can hear you perfectly well.”

“Oh you can, can you?” The tiny fairy stopped fluttering around and hovered in front of his face, propping her hands on her slim hips and tapping a toe on air. “Then it is as I have suspected all along. You are a ham fisted idiot. I suppose you are going to let her walk out the door and take all that lovely inspiration with her hmm?”

“Leaving? Amy is leaving?”

“Yes, you dolt.”

A wave of hurt washed over him. He’d thought there was something between them. Something more than the sexual heat that rose up between them and fueled his work. Was it just sex for her? Or worse, was this part of the job? He dismissed that thought as soon as it formed. Living with Amy for the last three weeks taught him that she was plainspoken and honest to a fault. If sex was part of the job she would have informed him immediately. Whatever the problem, it was not that.

Spellfire Moons

He regarded the fairy in front of him, took a deep breath and prayed for patience. “Dazzle, do you know why she leaving?”

“Because, the house is done, the piece is done and you had sex. She thinks you don’t need her anymore.”

“That’s bullshit!” Stephen all but leapt from the bed grabbing the jeans he dropped on the floor the night before. “Of all the stubborn, harebrained reasons, ” he snarled, yanking the pants on. It hurt like hell that she’d think something so stupid, but he’d deal with that later, right now he knew without a shadow of a doubt that if he let her set one foot out his front door, he would never create again.

* * * *

Amy woke with a heavy feeling of sorrow. Stephen’s bedroom was the last room she needed to set to rights, and sometime in the night, when they were making love, the energies came together and balanced perfectly. She’d felt it when she woke up and rolled to her side, watching him sleep for a long while before leaving his bed and coming to pack.

It was time for her to go, her work was done, and she could not bear the awkward morning after scene she sensed would happen as soon as Stephen woke up and remembered how they spent the night.

With a tired sigh she zipped her small suitcase and reached for her bag.

“Were you even going to say good bye?”

She inhaled sharply, turning to face the very person she wanted to avoid. “Stephen, I...”

“Are leaving, yeah I can see that. Don’t”

“Don’t?”

“Don’t leave, at least not until you see my sculpture.” He came forward and held out his hand. “Please, I want you to see it. I need you to see it.”

Amy stared at him, looking so deliciously sleep rumped and she could see the hurt and disappointment in his eyes. A tiny seed of hope began to stir. She placed her hand in his and nodded. “Okay.”

His shoulders relaxed just a bit. His hand closed around hers and he led her from the guest room to his studio. Opening the door he waited for her to walk in before following her.

Amy’s breath left her in a startled sigh. She saw his pieces before, abstract angles and lines. Clean, simple and minimal. The

Spellfire Moons

figure that stood before her looked nothing like those pieces. This was lush, sensual, stone shaped into fluid curves and sinuous arcs, of elegance that flowed in erotic grace. The statue looked stunning, so beautiful.

“It’s wonderful Stephen. I am proud of you.”

“Are you?” he sounded doubtful, she turned to look at him. The hurt and disappointment were still there, but there was something else, something she could not quite decipher in his eyes. The moment spun out between them, becoming heavy and brittle in its silence. This is what Amy wanted to avoid when she had decided to sneak off like a thief in the night. She did not want the lovely memory of their lovemaking ruined.

“I should go.”

“Don’t.”

“I have to. You don’t need me here anymore Stephen. The house is balanced and you have your inspiration back.” She gestured at Dazzle who was zipping here and there inspecting the work Stephen did in her absence.

He came closer to her. “I do need you Amy, look.” He took her hands and pulled her closer to the figure. “Look at it. Really look.”

She complied. “It is lovely Stephen, but,”

“There is no ‘buts’ here, this is the best piece I have ever done. Let me tell you why,” his breath warm in her ear, his voice a low and seductive purr. “It’s you Amy. I thought of you the entire time I worked it. You, your smile, your eyes, your smart mouth and generous nature, your breasts and hips, how beautiful your body is and how I wanted to touch it.” He turned her once again to the sculpture. “Look at it Amy, look and see how much I want and need you. Look and see how deeply I have fallen in love with you,” he turned her to face him. “What do I need an inspiration fairy for when I have my very own earth goddess to worship?”

The tears that threatened all morning spilled over and he cupped her face in his hands using his thumbs to wipe them away. “I’ve never been completely satisfied a piece, baby. Until now. I look at that figure and I think it’s perfect in every way. Just like the woman that inspired me.”

Leaning down he brushed her lips with his, “Say you’ll stay with me Amy, say you’ll stay and inspire me for the rest of my life.”

Spellfire Moons

“Are you sure Stephen?”

“Hell yes, baby.”

Her kiss was all the answer he needed. He swept her up in his arms and carried her down the hall of their house to their bedroom where Amy was pleased to inspire him passionately for the rest of the day.

As for Dazzle and Xerxies, well they moved on. But now, if by chance inspiration starts shouting in your ear and you cannot sleep, you might just want to check under your bed. You never know...

Clothes Minded by Karen Rose

When car trouble brings runaway bride Cosmina del Costa to Quantum Mechanics, will this fashion designer find love in the arms of an ancient warrior?

Clothes Minded

By

Karen Rose

“Cosmina. Your guests are waiting.” Luca del Costa stood in the doorway of the small room, arms folded across her chest. Making an impatient sound under her breath, she crossed to where her daughter was standing. “What is the problem?”

“Nothing, Mother,” she lied, avoiding her gaze by turning to look in the full-length mirror. “I just need a moment to myself, that’s all.” *Yes, just a moment before spending eternity with a bland, weak-willed man who couldn’t find her clitoris with a state-of-the-art GPS.* Her hands began to shake again and she balled them into tight fists. God, why had she let her mother talk her into this? She took a deep, relaxing breath, unclenching her hands to run them over the smooth silk of her custom-made Carolina Herrera wedding gown. There was nothing like couture to soothe the savage bride.

The thin line of her mother’s mouth tightened, and Cosmina was certain that, if not for the Botox, the rest of her face would be fixed in that formidable glare she remembered from her childhood. “I will tell Paul to be here in five minutes to walk you down the aisle. I assume you will be ready at that time.” It wasn’t a question. Her mother never asked questions; she simply issued directives and expected those around her to follow them.

Luca’s pale blue eyes swept over Cosmina, giving her a critical once-over. “Pull up your gown in the front. You are getting married, not auditioning to be a Las Vegas showgirl.” That said, she turned on her heel and walked out of the room. As soon as the door closed behind her,

Spellfire Moons

Cosmina breathed a deep sigh of relief. Her mother always had this effect on her. The Wicked Witch of the South in a St. John suit and Chanel heels, that was Luca del Costa. As a small child, Cosmina's dearest wish was that a house would fall on her mother. In a town like Spellfire, Texas, that was not out of the realm of possibility.

A glance at her watch told her there were only four minutes left before her stepfather would be there. Four minutes of freedom. She looked in the mirror again. The hairdresser, hired by her mother, fixed her hair in a classically elegant updo, which didn't suit her at all. It looked awful and she hated it. With the seconds ticking away, she pulled the ornate headpiece out of her hair and began dismantling the ridiculous tower that was her hair. What could Luca do, tackle her as she walked down the aisle and demand that the hairdresser put it back the way it was? It was her hair, damn it, and she was going to wear it the way she always wore it.

Finally, all the hairpins and clips were out, and her hair was free. It tumbled in soft waves past her shoulders, just the way she liked it. A slight breeze came in from the open window, blowing several errant strands back from her face. The need to breathe fresh air took her over to the window. She stuck her head out, feeling the hot Texas sun on her face. Less than a minute left. Her always punctual stepfather would be knocking at the door any second now. Paul was even more terrified of Luca and wouldn't risk displeasing her by giving Cosmina even a nanosecond of extra time.

She pushed the window all the way up, leaning out even farther. Hundreds of cars dotted the church grounds, all these people were here to see her marry John Worthington of *the* Dallas Worthingtons. Her stomach churned at the thought. Oh, he was a nice enough guy, but there was nothing to him. No fire, no passion, no juice! A carbon copy of Paul, he jumped when she said jump, and never argued with her. Cosmina was sure that there were many women who would love a complacent, malleable man like that, but she wasn't one of them.

In her opinion, they just didn't make men the way they used to. Men who would walk through fire for their women, or at the very least, not be able to iron a pair of pants better than she could. John's idea of a perfect day was picking out curtains for the guest room, or something equally dull.

Spellfire Moons

A timid knock at the door broke into her thoughts. *Oh God, it was time.* “Just a second!” she called out frantically.

Her eyes darted around like a pinball before alighting on something familiar. *Holy shit, it was her car!* She forgot that John drove it to the church. There it sat, parked by the side entrance, strangely not blocked in by the fleet of vehicles her guests arrived in.

“Cosmina? Your mother’s getting anxious,” came Paul’s muffled voice. She heard the door handle turning, and breathed a prayer of thanks for the ancient mechanism. The door had been sticking all day; only her mother seemed to be able to open it at will. Even inanimate objects obeyed Luca del Costa, she thought.

Before she could stop herself, Cosmina grabbed the small overnight bag that held a change of clothes, her makeup case, and most importantly, her car keys. A split second of hesitation and then she did it. Dress and all, she climbed out the window. Her beautiful white satin Manolo Blahnik heels sank into the grass, making it difficult to run, but she moved as fast as she could, holding her voluminous dress up with one hand. Even in her rush, she knew better than to let the custom-made couture drag on the ground.

The last thing she heard as she gunned the engine was the sound of her stepfather’s high-pitched whine. “Cosmina! Wait! Your mother will be furious!”

Too bad.

* * * *

She took the long route to the highway that led out of town, reveling in her freedom. After she drove well away from the church, she pressed the button that turned on her six-disc CD changer.

“What the hell?” Instead of her Snoop Dogg and Jay Z tunes, the lilting sounds of Italian opera assaulted her ears.

“What the hell?” she yelled again, nearly driving her car into a tree. Apparently, in the ten-minute drive to the church from her mother’s house, John took it upon himself to change out her rap music for his opera CD’s.

With one eye on the road, she ejected the CD drawer and one by one, plucked the offending music from their trays. Once she had all six, she hurled them out the open window, Frisbee style. Still speeding down the one-lane country road, she began rifling through her own music collection, which was currently scattered all over the

Spellfire Moons

passenger seat floor. The DMX CD was out of her reach, so she bent down to get it. Just as her hand closed over the jewel case, she felt the car veering to the left. Cosmina popped back up, shrieking at the sight of a giant pothole on the side of the road. She jerked the wheel, but it was too late.

“Shit!” she yelled, as the car slammed into the pothole and came to an abrupt stop. “Great! Just great!”

Grabbing her bag, she got out of the car and surveyed the damage, holding the folds of her gown well out of range. What she knew about cars could be engraved on the click wheel of an iPod Nano, but even she knew it didn’t look good. Smoke was billowing up from under the hood and the entire front end looked dented. One tire was flat, and the other kept spinning at an odd angle. At least nothing had happened to her or to her five thousand dollar Carolina Herrera wedding gown. Unbelievably, not even one seed pearl was missing from the bodice, which was still an immaculate white. She stepped away from the vehicle now belching black clouds of smoke. Although this road wasn’t one of Spellfire’s main thoroughfares, she felt certain that if she remained here much longer, somebody would find her. That’s the way of it in a small town, especially one like Spellfire. It was time to call for help.

She moved to the other side of the road, cleared her throat, and called out, “Mappa mundi!” Feeling slightly ridiculous, she repeated the phrase two more times.

Semaphoros fairies were awfully particular about their work, and if you didn’t summon them just right, they often refused to show themselves. Looking around anxiously, she wondered if she shouldn’t find somewhere less conspicuous to wait. But that would mean venturing off the blacktop and onto the dusty, tumbleweed-covered ground. Her Manolos could not withstand such treatment.

Suddenly, there was a flash of pink light, and the *semaphoros* fairy appeared, looking none too pleased. Clad in a light pink skirt made of delicate tulle and a tiny halter top that read, “Baby Phat Jeans” in rhinestones across the front, she fluttered in the air, looking like a tricked-out butterfly. Bubble-gum colored hair billowed around her, falling past her gossamer wings to her little ankles. “You bellowed?” she asked dryly. *Semaphoros* fairies were always female, for who in their right mind would go to a man for directions?

Spellfire Moons

“I need help.” Cosmina drew herself up to her full height of 5’9” and brushed off the skirt of her gown.

The fairy sighed. “Dear. I am a *semaphoros* fairy. We do not help. We give directions to lost travelers when those directions are asked for in the form of a question. Are you new at this or what?” Her pink and silver wings beat against the air in frustration.

Cosmina ran a hand through her hair and took a deep breath. Negotiating with fairies was a delicate matter. “Is there a garage around here?” She’d lived in Spellfire all her life, but dealing with the vagaries of automobiles was not something she ever did herself.

“Approximately five hundred of them. You really need to be more specific.” She shook her head, causing clouds of pink glitter to fall from her hair.

“Is there a place where a person could go to get her car fixed within walking distance of where I am currently standing?” she asked through gritted teeth. Magical creature or no, there would be hell to pay if any of that pink glittery crap got on her dress.

“Quantum Mechanics. Just down the road a piece. You can’t miss it.” The fairy pointed straight ahead, and a flash of pink light illuminated the path. “You see? Follow the yellow brick road, to coin a phrase.” She tittered with laughter.

Hoisting her duffle bag over her shoulder, Cosmina thanked the fairy and tracked the pink light on the route that would take her to Quantum Mechanics.

* * * *

The busty blonde smiled and then pulled off her top in one smooth motion. “I don’t have enough money to pay for the repairs,” she said in a breathy voice, displaying a luscious set of perfect 36 DD’s. “Maybe we could work out another kind of deal?” Pert nipples stood at attention, making Cade’s mouth water.

“I think we can come to some sort of agreement.” He set down his toolbox and stood, brushing off his coveralls. “But first, I need to see everything you’ve got to offer.” His eyes trailed downward to her skimpy denim shorts, which she quickly unzipped and stepped out of, leaving her completely naked. “Oh, yeah, I can work with that.” His cock hardened instantly; a shaven pussy did that to him every time.

He shucked off his cable uniform and the girl immediately sank to her knees, taking his hard cock into her mouth. Her tongue moved in

Spellfire Moons

slow circles up and down his shaft, making him moan with pleasure. Then she moved lower, licking his balls lightly as her hands kneaded his cock. Cade pushed with his hips, butting gently against her mouth, making his intention clear. She smiled up at him, then took his entire cock into her mouth, sucking it hard. Christ, it had been a long time since he'd been with a girl that knew how to give a good blow job. He felt his balls tighten up and closed his eyes, putting one hand on the back of the girl's neck to guide her. "That's it, baby, take it all." Shit, maybe this one deserved an extra month of free premium channels.

Reaching down, he massaged the girl's full breasts, rubbing his thumbs against her rigid peaks. He felt her moan reverberate around his cock as she increased the frenzy of her movements. Cade felt his release building, his breath coming in harsh pants. In the back of his mind, a sudden banging noise made him frown in confusion. What the hell was that? Shaking his head to clear it, he pushed himself farther into the wet confines of the girl's mouth. But the banging noise didn't stop. "Shit!"

The girl sat back on her haunches, letting him slide out of her mouth. She opened her mouth, her lips forming the words, "What's wrong?" but all Cade heard was, "Hey! Open the door!" Confused, he shook his head again. The girl, the room, the cable uniform, all faded away.

He opened his eyes and found himself on the sofa, in his own apartment. The busty blonde and her broken television set were nowhere to be seen. His television, however, was still blaring. On the screen was a scene very similar to the one he had just played out in his mind, only this cable guy was currently bringing the money shot. Damn Spellfire and their magical crap! All that supernatural energy was constantly wreaking havoc on his electrical system. Recently, the only stations that played on his television were of the soft porn variety, which made for some extremely interesting daydreams. Just yesterday, as he napped on the couch, he'd dreamt he was the principal of an elite girls' private school. The nubile student body gave a whole new meaning to the term, 'headmaster.' He grinned at the memory, even though his cock still throbbed with need. If only that blasted knocking hadn't started up just as he'd been about to come. Speaking of which, there it was again.

Spellfire Moons

“Damn!” It was a Saturday evening, for crying out loud. Didn’t people know he was closed?

“This better be a serious fucking emergency,” he growled, stomping down the stairs to the door. Most people around here knew better than to bother him, especially after business hours. Clad only in a pair of faded jeans, he flung open the door to see a gorgeous brunette wearing a wedding dress. A very low-cut wedding dress at that.

“I don’t remember ordering a stripper,” he said, his eyes on the creamy swells of her breasts. Was he still dreaming? He pinched himself under the arm, just to be sure, but she was still standing there, looking pissed. *Too bad.*

The woman’s blue eyes narrowed. “Excuse you? Who in the hell do you think you are?”

“A man whose Saturday evening you just interrupted,” he replied, a dark scowl decorating his hard features. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a sheaf of bills. “Unless, of course, you’re interested in earning fifty dollars the hard way.” With a harsh laugh, he moved out of the way just in time to avoid being kicked by one of her ridiculous, pointy-toed shoes. “Easy, lady, I’m only kidding.”

“My name is Cosmina, not ‘lady’. And my eyes are up here,” she informed him with a glare. “Well? Are you just going to stand there with your mouth hanging open or are you going to fix my car?”

Beautiful or not, Cade Valeray didn’t put up with attitude like that from any woman. Dragging his eyes up to her face, he glowered at her for a long moment. Then he did what no man had ever done to Cosmina del Costa. He slammed the door in her face.

* * * *

Was it possible that a man just slammed a door in her face? Cosmina stood there, dumbfounded. Perhaps she’d wandered into an alternate universe, one where a man would mistake a five thousand dollar designer gown for stripper’s garb. She blew on her knuckles and then resumed banging.

After a moment, the door opened again. “We. Are. Closed.” He spoke through gritted teeth, regarding her with a decidedly unfriendly expression.

Wow. How had she missed that bare chest of his? It was positively rippling with muscle and there were some intriguing tattoos

Spellfire Moons

winding around one of the sexiest biceps she'd ever laid eyes on. And those abs, oh my. Talk about a six-pack. With a washboard like that, she might consider learning how to do laundry. Her gaze drifted upward to the cluster of wicked-looking thorns inked over his heart. Cosmina felt her heart flutter; in spite of his obnoxious behavior, he was one hell of a hot man. She looked up into his eyes, letting her lids fall to half-mast. Arching her back slightly, she murmured, "Please?" pushing her lips out into a tiny but effective pout. It wasn't a word she used often, but when she did, she knew how to work it to full advantage.

He huffed out an annoyed breath. "Where is it?"

She waved a hand in the general direction of her vehicle. "Just follow the pink light." It was still there, albeit nearly faded in the dying light.

Grabbing a shirt from a hook by the door, he picked up the keys to the tow truck and pushed past her. "Wait here." He strode off, muttering under his breath about fairies and pink lights. "Don't go upstairs," he added as an afterthought.

"Don't mind if I do!" she called after him, but the truck already pulled out of the gravel drive. Gathering the folds of her dress to her, she walked through the doorway into his house. Yikes. Talk about sterile. An operating room had more charm. She considered calling her friend Amy Pettibone, who was an interior designer, right away. There was a serious design emergency happening here, that was for sure. For one thing, the place was practically colorless. White walls, hardwood floors, and a complete lack of personal touches. Would it kill him to put up a picture or throw down an area rug?

And what was all that about not going upstairs? Was he hiding something up there? Bodies? There was an aura of danger coming off him, strong and spicy like John Varvatos cologne. Cosmina had half a mind to check his refrigerator and make sure he wasn't storing body parts in there. Her brain whirred and clicked, doing what it always did whenever she encountered someone new. For as long as she could remember, whenever she met an unfamiliar person, she immediately began planning outfits for them, visualizing in her mind exactly what looks would suit them best. Customers who frequented her clothing store, *Bella Vestiti*, in downtown Spellfire, loved this quirky aspect of

Spellfire Moons

her personality, and she had to admit, her instincts were unerring. It was an odd sort of gift, to be sure, but it was rarely wrong.

Nosy being her middle name, she wandered around his place for a while; everything looked tidy to the point of obsessive control. Even his mail was stacked in labeled trays, categorized according to their subject. It was a trait that was at odds with his raw, dark good looks.

Interesting.

The pictures in her mind changed to an impeccably cut Armani suit with creases that could slice through iron. Dark gray maybe, or classic black. Yes, in spite of his deviant, caveman-like personality and large size, he was definitely made for Armani. At the very least, those faded jeans had to go. In fact, she wouldn't mind ripping them off him herself. With an upper body like that, she could only imagine what the rest of him looked like. Cosmina shivered in her wedding dress, thinking about the dusty trail of dark hair that started at his belly button and led down into his jeans.

It had been a long time since she'd felt something sexual for a man. John Worthington was as useless in bed as he was changing a light bulb. But then, at least he knew how to *find* the damn light bulb. His sexual prowess left much to be desired. A seventeen-year-old boy had more staying power than him. And God forbid if she tried anything new!

She giggled, remembering the one time she'd climbed on top of him. The look on his face! It was a good thing he never knew about the mink handcuffs hidden in her closet. No, John was the definition of a missionary man, that was for sure. After a while, she'd given up and simply lain silently beneath him, waiting out his ten pumps until he was finished.

Sex with Mechanic Guy, or whatever his name was, would most definitely not be like that. He looked like the type of man that would ride a woman until she was bowlegged. A rush of heat suffused her at the thought, making her feel a bit faint in the heavy layers of the gown. Picking up her duffle bag, she looked around for a bathroom where she could change. Nothing. And he'd been most adamant that she not go upstairs. Normally, Cosmina would ignore that dictate and do whatever she pleased, but something about this guy gave her pause. If he was hiding bodies up there, she didn't want to join them.

Spellfire Moons

Cocking her head to the side, she listened for the sound of the tow truck. Satisfied that he wasn't going to pull up anytime soon, she reached behind her and began undoing the tiny row of buttons that went down the back of the dress.

* * * *

The thought of that woman, Cosmina, roving about his space, unattended, didn't sit well with him. And just what in the hell kind of name was Cosmina, anyway? Cade swore angrily under his breath; he didn't like anyone in his home, let alone a strange woman. Even one with a great rack and gorgeous blue eyes. He didn't care for anyone disturbing his solitude. Ever since he'd come to Spellfire ten years ago, he kept to himself, working long hours in his auto body shop during the day, and spending his evenings quietly in his adjoining two-story home. It was better that way, better that he not get involved with anyone. Especially women.

In his opinion, women were nothing but trouble, faithless creatures ruled by their emotions. Take this Cosmina, for instance. He'd be willing to bet there was some poor sucker waiting at the end of that long aisle, wondering where in the hell his sweet little bride had gotten off to. Shit, if he'd had a heart, he might actually feel sorry for the guy, who was probably just some average Joe whose head had been turned as soon she'd batted those pretty blue eyes at him. All his common sense went south the moment she'd given him a piece and from there on out, Mr. Johnson had been calling the shots.

Cade shook his head in disgust. He'd be damned if he'd ever let a woman get her claws into him like that. In fact, it was times like this that he didn't mind the fact that he'd been cursed by the Morrigan, fated to spend the long years of eternal life alone. The hope of finding his soul mate, the one woman who could break the curse, was something he'd given up as a lost cause centuries ago.

He found her car - a top-of-the-line luxury SUV, just as he'd suspected - stuck in a massive pothole on the side of the road. The interior of the vehicle was a mess: empty Diet Coke cans and CD's littered the sumptuous leather seats, and a jumble of sketch pads, pencils, and fabric swatches fought for space in the back seat. Cade scowled at the disarray; a sloppy space was the sign of a sloppy mind, and that was something he couldn't abide. This Cosmina probably

Spellfire Moons

never did a lick of housekeeping in her short, spoiled existence. The sooner he got her out of his life, the better.

With that thought in mind, he quickly hitched her car up to his truck. It was going to be tricky work to pull it out of the pothole; he didn't even want to know how she'd accomplished such a thing. With a heavy sigh, he set to the job at hand with the same single-minded determination that ruled every aspect of his life. Sweat rolled off him as he toiled in the early evening heat, using the powerful strength of his body to ease the car into position for towing. After about forty-five minutes, he checked the wheel straps, and, satisfied that they were secure, he got behind the wheel of his truck and slowly pulled the car out of the hole. "I wonder how much cash she's got in that tiny little purse of hers," he grumbled aloud as he carefully maneuvered the truck and its cargo back to his garage.

The entrance to his garage was separate from the one that led to his house, something he'd done deliberately to keep the two halves of his life as much apart as possible. Plus, it was never a smart idea to let customers know where you lived; the last thing he wanted was some jerk showing up in the middle of the night, begging for help. That *semaphoros* fairy must have gotten her wires crossed, dumb luck that brought Miss Spoiled Brat Cosmina straight to his front door. If she'd rung the bell at the garage entrance, he'd never have heard her. Instead of working his ass off pulling her car out of the pothole, he'd be giving it to the busty blonde while her curvaceous brunette roommate watched. *Crap.*

He got out of the truck and opened the garage door manually, then pulled inside. Later on, he'd take the car down and give it a thorough examination, but right now he needed to get rid of that woman. And a shower, too, he thought after getting a whiff of himself.

Cade wiped off his brow with the back of his shirt and entered his house through the side door. The shirt was damp with sweat and stained with grease, so he pulled it off and dropped it into the hamper by the door. Bare-chested, he grabbed a cold beer out of the fridge and rolled the icy bottle against his heated forehead. "Cosmina?" he yelled, her name sounding odd and foreign on his tongue. He heard a startled gasp in response and went to investigate.

Spellfire Moons

When he saw what prompted the gasp, it was thanks to his superior reflexes that the glass bottle didn't drop right out of his hand and shatter on the hardwood floor. "Jesus Christ," he breathed, taking in the sight of her nearly naked form. Her full breasts were barely contained by a lacy white bra and her lower half even less covered by a matching thong. Silky white thigh-high stockings were held in place by a garter belt that encircled her tiny waist. The voluminous folds of her wedding dress lay pooled at her feet, reminding him of Botticelli's Venus standing motionless on her shell. He hardened instantly as a need that was almost painful swept through him. "Uh, your car's out back," he said stupidly, his gaze solidly fastened on the barely hidden triangle in between her long, well-shaped legs. "There's a phone...somewhere. You can call a -" he broke off, unable to think of the word. So this was what it felt like to lose one's faculties.

"A cab?" she supplied helpfully, grinning widely at his consternation. She doubted that there were many women that had been able to flummox him so. In spite of her mother's aspiration to teach her that the body was something to be ashamed of, she'd never adhered to that particular dictate. Standing practically naked before a hot man didn't bother her in the least; she worked hard to maintain her figure and she was proud of her shape. It didn't hurt that this man was gaping at her like a landed trout, either. "No, I'm afraid I can't do that."

His amber eyes pinned her in place as he frowned in confusion. She glanced at the front of his jeans; the man was hard as a rock. *Oh, scratch that.* A rock was too small for what he had hidden away in there. More like a boulder. Cosmina felt her nipples grow stiff in response and flushed slightly when she saw the quick flare in his gaze that told her he noticed. It was extremely erotic, standing here in her La Perla lingerie before a man whose name she didn't even know.

"Can't do what?" The words came out in a low growl, making goose bumps rise on the backs of her arms.

"Call a cab. Leave. Go back to my house. Take your pick." She leaned over to unzip her duffle bag, feeling his gaze follow her as she did. Would it be too obvious if she swiveled around? He had to let her stay here, she wasn't ready to face either Mother's wrath or her jilted groom's disappointment. She needed to buy herself a little time. Her mind raced, trying to come up with a plausible reason for him to

Spellfire Moons

allow her to stay here. “Look, uh, Mister,” she waved a hand helplessly, “whoever you are -”

“Cade. Cade Valeray,” he cut in sharply.

“OK, Cade, Cade Valeray,” she repeated with a teasing grin. “I’m in a little bit of a bind, here. Maybe you can help me out?” Cosmina arched her back slightly, running her hands up through her long, dark hair.

She watched as his mouth worked, but no sound came out. Satisfied that she captured his undivided attention, she continued. “You see, my fiancé, he’s, well...” she trailed off, not sure how to go on. Boring? Bland? Dull as dishwater? She doubted any of those adjectives would garner a positive response from him. Damn! His slack-jawed expression was starting to give way to a scowl. Soon, the lust-induced haze would wear off and he would be shoving her straight out the door. “Abusive!” she cried out finally.

He snapped to attention, the heavy lids of his eyes opening fully. “He hits you?” he asked in a fierce tone. The sleepy look on his face turned predatory, almost animal-like in its vicious intent. For the first time, she saw that this was a man capable of serious violence.

“No, no, nothing like that.” She had to backtrack, or poor, pathetic John would end up buried in his backyard. What was the term she’d heard on that silly talk show last week? “Emotionally, not physically. He demeans me, you know, makes me feel like I’m worthless. I just couldn’t marry him, not after all the horrible things he said to me, day in and day out. You see, don’t you? I can’t face him, not yet. Just a day or two, that’s all I need. Three at the most.”

For the first time since he’d come upon her in her half-dressed state, he looked directly into her eyes. She tried not to squirm under his relentless gaze, which she was sure was burning directly into her lying little soul. Finally, he spoke. “Two days.” Another searing once-over, and he turned away. “I’m going to take a shower. Don’t touch anything.”

Cosmina grinned triumphantly. She’d bet her snakeskin Manolo Blahnik slingbacks that Cade, Cade Valeray was going to be taking a very cold, cold shower. Tiptoeing around the corner, she watched him run up the stairs, checking out the fit of those faded jeans. Maybe while he was in the shower, she could sneak upstairs and snatch them; a darker wash would suit his fine ass so much better. Faded denim

Spellfire Moons

was a little too Fabio for a strapping, masculine guy like him to get away with.

Grabbing a pair of her own jeans out of the duffle, she stepped over the puddle of white satin and dressed quickly, pulling a wine-colored halter with tiny, beaded straps over the low-slung jeans. Just then, her stomach rumbled, replacing thoughts of naked Cade with thoughts of food. Time to check out what the big man had in his fridge.

* * * *

Cooking was the only domestic task that Cosmina truly excelled at, thanks to her Nona Sadie, who'd taught her the basics of Italian cooking before she'd passed away five years ago. As a little girl, she'd adored spending time with her grandmother, who always smelled of dried flowers and kept all of the furniture in her house covered in clear plastic. She had taught Cosmina that a savvy woman need only know how to prepare a maximum of eight dishes. As long as they were expertly prepared and elegantly presented, her reputation as a gourmet would be sealed.

To her surprise, she found some excellent quality prosciutto, along with a package of defrosted chicken cutlets, both of which made her consider making Nona's chicken saltimbocca. All she needed was spinach, and since the man possessed muscles like Popeye, it went to reason that he would have some in stock. She checked the freezer and then the cabinets, coming up empty both times. "Damn," she swore, tapping manicured fingers against the immaculate countertop. OK, well, she could still do something with the chicken, she realized, finding a nice supply of herbs and spices in a small cabinet. She picked out salt, coarse-ground pepper, rosemary, and thyme, setting the bottles next to the chicken. If he had the right cheeses, she could whip up a nice chicken parmesan.

A further search showed that, not only did he have the rest of the necessary ingredients, but also that his kitchen was organized with military-like precision. As she stirred the herbs in with the olive oil, she hoped he wouldn't freak out too much when he saw the mess she made when she cooked. It was a good thing he didn't have everything she needed to make her homemade red sauce. The white-tiled counter would surely not survive her marinara. Neatness had never been her forte. Humming to herself, she heated a large skillet, and then brushed

Spellfire Moons

both sides of the cutlets with the herb oil mixture. It went against her grain as a self-respecting Sicilian woman, but she popped the top on a jar of store-bought sauce nonetheless. Soon, the cutlets were browning up nicely, and she took them off the heat, transferring them to a casserole pan. She topped the chicken with the sauce and a generous helping of mozzarella and parmesan cheeses. A few chunks of butter here and there, and it was ready for a preheated oven. Cosmina had just closed the oven door when she heard his heavy footsteps coming down the stairs. “You’re just in time for Chicken Cosmina,” she announced brightly.

Instead of a pleasant reply, he scowled angrily at her. “What the hell are you doing? My kitchen’s a freaking mess! It looks like a hurricane hit in here, for fuck’s sake!” Pushing past her, he went to the pantry and brought forth a roll of paper towels. “Here.”

She backed away as though they were live grenades. “I don’t know what you expect me to do with those. I cook. I do not clean. Besides, dinner will be ready in exactly three minutes. Why don’t you make yourself useful and set the table or something? And I don’t suppose you have any decent red wine?” White went better with poultry, but she’d never developed a taste for it. It was a sissy wine; John had practically lived on Pinot Grigio.

Cosmina blanched as Cade shot her a murderous look. “I don’t set tables, lady. And I sure as hell don’t drink wine. Christ, you’re a pain in my ass.” He shook his head in disgust.

“Ha! That’s not what your eyes were telling me twenty minutes ago,” she crowed, pulling on a pair of oven mitts. She was surprised he didn’t just pull burning hot food out of the oven bare-handed. “You were looking at me like I was a filet mignon and you had been starving in the desert for ten years.”

He snorted. “Whatever. You sure think of lot of yourself, don’t you?” Setting down the paper towels, he took two plates out of the cabinet and handed them to her. “Here. You’ll have to clean off the table. Usually I just eat in front of the television or out in my shop while I’m working.”

A funny look came into his eyes just after he mentioned the television. Cosmina was about to press him on it, but the oven dinged instead. “Dinner’s ready,” she said, pulling out the steaming dish. “And just so you know, I am an amazing cook. Trust me when I tell

Spellfire Moons

you this chicken is better than sex.” *Not that you deserve it, you ill-tempered cretin*, she thought.

His amber eyes darkened and his thick lips curved into a sardonic smile. “Nothing’s better than sex, Cosmina,” he murmured, her name rolling off his tongue like smooth cognac. “Unless, of course, you ain’t been doin’ it right.”

Her tongue darted out nervously, licking dry lips. Good God, he was sexy. She felt herself grow damp as he stared into her eyes, holding her gaze for a moment longer than necessary. “Uh, I would have made a salad, but you didn’t have any, um -” she trailed off, completely flustered.

What the hell was wrong with her? She was Cosmina del Costa, Spellfire’s most cutting edge designer! No man alive had the power to turn her knees to jelly like this! She caught a glimpse of herself in the glass door of the cabinet. Christ! Was it possible that she was blushing? *Pull yourself together, girl*, she chided herself silently. “Lettuce. You didn’t have any lettuce,” she said firmly.

His low, amused chuckle sent another wave of heat through her. “Real men don’t nibble on rabbit food, baby. We need something we can sink our teeth into, you know?” Amber eyes drifted to her lower half, then moved slightly upward to the slice of bare skin revealed by her skimpy halter, leaving no mistake as to his meaning.

All her usual extroverted bravado vanished in the face of his animal masculinity. Feeling like a startled schoolgirl, she bit the inside of her cheek, trying to come up with an appropriately loaded response. Nothing came to mind, so she simply grasped the casserole dish more tightly. Without daring to look at him, she took the chicken into the living room, feeling his eyes on her the entire way.

* * * *

He watched her walk away, the firm globes of her well-shaped derriere in the tight denim making his cock sit up and take notice. It was really too bad she was such a pain in the ass, otherwise there was a thing or two he’d like to do to it. Cade grinned, thinking of how easily she’d grown flustered, all stammering and red-faced. Long ago, he’d slept with a woman whose entire body blushed whenever she did. He wondered if Cosmina del Costa suffered from that same affliction. If she would ever stop all that damn talking, maybe he

Spellfire Moons

would get a chance to find out. With a wide grin on his face, he followed her into the living room.

It turned out that the spoiled, sexy diva was a damn good cook, as advertised. Never in a million years would he have guessed that. In fact, he thought, forking up another bite of chicken, he would have put money on the fact that she didn't know a frying pan from a food processor. "There any more?" he asked finally, after having put away the better part of the meal.

"You already had four pieces," she replied with that annoying little smirk curving her lips. He could think of several things he could do to her mouth to wipe that expression away permanently.

With a shrug, he pushed his plate away. "I've got an insatiable appetite," he said, raising his head to look directly in her eyes. "For food, and for other things." Cade watched as interest flared in her blue eyes, only to be replaced by something else. Nervousness, maybe? At first glance, she was anything but timid; the bold way she stood before him nearly naked was testament to that. There was nothing sexier than a woman who was truly comfortable with her body, and Cosmina del Costa had that in spades. No, this was something else.

"And here I would have guessed you didn't even know how to spell 'insatiable,'" she teased, using her fork and the flat end of her knife to transfer the rest of her chicken to his plate. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you?"

He stared at her through heavy lidded eyes. "Baby, you have no idea." Holding the gaze for a long moment, he waited until the telltale flush stained her cheeks again before dropping his head back down to devour the chicken. It really was damn good. After polishing it off in three massive bites, he said, "Your car's in pretty bad shape. I'll take a closer look at it in the morning. What the hell were you thinking, anyway, driving into that pothole?"

She gave an imperious sniff. "Well, it's not as though I did it deliberately. I did have a thing or two on my mind, you know." Her frustrated shrug made her breasts rise and fall in the flimsy top. Did women know what they were doing when they dressed like that? It was an age-old question, and one that Cade never could quite find the answer to, no matter how many centuries he lived through.

"Right. The emotionally abusive fiancé who ran out on you at your wedding," he replied dryly. She hadn't said that the man left her,

Spellfire Moons

but why else would she have been driving like a crazy woman, fleeing Spellfire in her wedding dress? As far as Cade knew, woman planned their wedding day with the military precision of a seasoned general. Nothing short of a natural disaster would stand in the way of hooking some poor sucker on the line 'til death did they part.

Thanks to the curse put on him by the Morrigan, that shit would never happen to him. And after years of fruitlessly searching for his soul mate, he'd come to the realization that it was for the best. Pussy made a man weak, made him start feeling and caring and the rest of that Mars/Venus crap. Cosmina was sexy to look at, and he wouldn't mind sampling her charms, but that would be the extent of it. No female was getting her hooks into him. Although, he thought, dropping his eyes down to her chest again, he wouldn't mind if this female wrapped her legs around him for an hour or two. Three at the most.

"You know, I feel like a broken record, but for the millionth time, my eyes are up here." She raised her eyebrows in mock indignation.

Cade held his hands out to the side, palms up. "Hey, I can't help it, not when you've got them on display like that. Gets a man wondering whether they're all you, if you get my meaning." He grinned wolfishly, wagging his eyebrows up and down.

Putting a hand to her heart, she feigned outrage. "I'll have you know, Cade Valeray, that these are all me. No silicone, no push-up bra. Just smooth, silky flesh."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

Her blue eyes darkened to almost navy as they stared at one another across the table. Then he deliberately dropped his gaze back to the front of her halter. "Not sure I can take your word for it, Ms. del Costa."

She grinned. "Maybe if you're real nice, I'll let you take a closer look."

Now there was an invitation he wasn't about to turn down. "Is that a fact?" He pretended to consider it, then stood and took one long stride to bring him to her side. Without giving her time to respond, he pulled her to her feet, holding her flush against him. Looking down into her startled face, he said, "I'm a lot of things, but nice is definitely not one of them."

Spellfire Moons

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Cosmina gasped as he pulled her body to his. My goodness, he was forceful, a throwback to the age when men simply took women, with or without their say-so. Her blood heated at the thought that he might do that to her, just have his way with her whether she wanted it or not. Cade Valeray was no bland John Worthington, whose furtive, tentative touches left her ice cold.

As his hands pressed against her back, she felt the proof of his arousal, thick and hard on her lower belly. She tilted her head up, and before she had time to give him her patented, doe-eyed gaze, his mouth came down on hers. His hot, spicy scent assailed her senses and she moaned softly, allowing him full access to her lips and tongue. Fiery hot need burned deep within her; with John she always kept a firm lid on her naturally passionate nature, but Cade's strong hands and hot, wet tongue was bringing it to the forefront with a vengeance. Cosmina slid her hands down his back to cup his ass, using them to pull him even closer. Their bodies were fused together so tightly already, she didn't know where she ended and he began. How could she be feeling so strongly for a man she'd practically just met? Suddenly frightened, she wedged both her hands up and pushed against his chest. Now she knew how poor Sisyphus felt, straining against that boulder of his. Dragging her mouth away from his, she gasped, "Wait. Just...stop." Truly, she just needed a moment to catch her breath before she did something rash, like sweep the dinner dishes away and hop up on the table. With his obvious penchant for cleanliness, he may not take kindly to such an impetuous act.

He looked down at her, amber eyes boiling with a fierce lust that nearly took her breath away. "I don't think I can," he growled roughly against her ear, making her go weak in the knees. Keeping his gaze locked on hers, he drew one hand across her breast, wringing another gasp from her. "I haven't wanted a woman like this in a long, long time."

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Damn, with just a few kisses, the man reduced her to a weak-willed twit. His hand on her breast turned more forceful, kneading and squeezing until she thought she'd melt all over the floor in an orgasmic puddle. The raw heat from his stare, along with the aggressive tone in his voice, burned away her lingering doubts. She wanted him too. "Yes," she

Spellfire Moons

whispered, her heart beating like a spastic super-ball in her chest. As soon as the word left her lips, his strong hands snaked down to grip her ass, lifting her up. Cosmina wrapped her legs around his back and held on for dear life as he carried her up the stairs.

* * * *

Still holding her in her arms, Cade kicked open the bedroom door and brought her to his bed. It had been years since he'd reacted to a female this way, and his lust threatened to overtake him completely. His only thought was to get her naked as quickly as possible. Blood raced in his veins; his cock was already so hard it was throbbing painfully in the prison of his jeans.

"I need you naked, Cosmina," he rasped in a low tone. "Now." Leaning over slightly, he let her fall onto his bed before pulling at the zipper to his jeans. He stripped quickly, his eyes never leaving his prey as she took off the skimpy halter and then her own jeans.

Her hands were clumsy, taking too long to release her breasts from the lacy bra, so he did it himself, nearly ripping the delicate item in his haste. Christ, she was sexy! His eyes feasted on her, taking in the golden, olive toned skin, the large, full breasts and taut muscles of her abdomen. As she tugged off her thong and let it drop to the floor, his gaze went directly to the triangle between her legs. She smiled wickedly, then let her fingers trail downward, rubbing herself until he could smell her musky scent. His nostrils flared, like a stallion sensing a mare, then he came down on her, covering her naked body with his own.

She moaned as he knitted two of his fingers together, replacing hers to push deep inside her heated core. Her body bucked upward as he eased them in and out, feeling her grow wetter each time he thrust home. "Are you ready for me, baby?" he whispered roughly, nipping at the stiffened peak of her nipple. He teased her clit gently as he sucked at her breast, grazing slightly with his teeth. She spread her legs wider, pushing higher with her hips, using her body to tell him what she needed.

Her head lolled backward as another moan escaped her. "Yes, please, now," she gasped, writhing beneath him. Reaching down, she grasped his shaft tightly, running her hand up and down its hard length. "Now, Cade!"

Spellfire Moons

Pushing her legs farther apart, he removed his fingers to brush them against her lips. The scent of her own arousal made her eyes widen, and he saw a faint blush stain her cheeks. Lowering his head, he used the tip of his tongue to lick at the juices, his eyes never leaving hers. “Your pussy’s like candy, Cosmina, I can’t get enough of it.”

She cried out as he settled himself against her, using his fingers to spread her wider for his entry. Unable to wait any longer, he thrust himself inside her in one long push. God, she was tight! He wondered what kind of men she had been with before him, then frowned at the thought of any other man enjoying her slick wetness. Then she wrapped one hand around the back of his head, bringing his lips down to hers, and he stopped thinking altogether.

Their frenetic rhythm increased as he reached down to cup the round cheeks of her ass, lifting her higher. He felt her nails press into his back and knew her release was coming. Cade sat back on his haunches, using one hand to press her into the mattress and the other to stimulate her most sensitive spot. The combination of his hard cock thrusting into her and his finger teasing her made her scream aloud. Her muscles of her inner walls tightened as she came, crying out her release.

Watching her in the throes of orgasm put him over the edge, and he grunted sharply, pulling out to spill his seed all over her belly. It was centuries of habit that made him do this; a man under a curse had to be extra vigilant not to impregnate a woman. His breath coming in heavy pants, he stretched himself out beside her, keeping one leg across her lower half. “You all right?” he asked, nuzzling against her shoulder.

He felt her nod. “Uh huh,” she replied in a sleepy tone. “That was, I mean, just, wow.”

His laughter came out in a short bark. “Lady, you ain’t seen nothing yet. We just barely took the edge off.”

“Wow.” They chuckled together in the darkness of his room before sleep took them.

* * * *

Cosmina woke several hours later to find him watching her with those odd, amber eyes of his. “What?” She rolled over onto her side to face him, her gaze dropping to the strange tattoo directly over his

Spellfire Moons

heart. “That had to hurt,” she commented, tracing one of the wicked-looking thorns with her index finger.

He jerked back as if she’d burned him. “It was nothing.” There was an awkward pause and then he said, “So, tell me about this fiancé that ran out on you. I can’t believe there’s a man in Spellfire that you couldn’t have under your thumb if you wanted.”

Shit. She chewed at her lower lip, knowing this was the time to correct his assumption and come clean. But really, was it such a terrible lie? Besides, for the first time in her life, she’d met a man that didn’t kowtow to her, didn’t rush to do her bidding with slaving, slack jawed haste. It was rather refreshing, as well as extremely sexy. And then there was the sex. No, she decided, now was definitely not the time to fess up. “Well, he always said I wasn’t feminine enough for him. Too strong-minded for a woman, not sexy enough, you know, the usual.” She shrugged, careful to avoid his heat-seeking gaze.

“Was he blind?” he muttered, his hand coming up to grasp her breast. “Because believe me, Cosmina del Costa, you are one hell of a sexy ass woman.” He paused to kiss her briefly. “And as soon as you make me some breakfast, I’m gonna prove it to you all over again.”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “There’s still the matter of you slamming the door in my face.” Slinging her leg over his body, she moved to sit astride him. His eyes glittered with sudden need, and she could feel him harden against her sex. “I think there’s still a few things you can do to make that up to me. Then we’ll see about breakfast.”

“Tit for tat?” he asked with a wicked grin, running his hand up her legs to cup her ass. “And here I thought a fancy girl like yourself couldn’t ride without a saddle.” Using the flat of his hand, he gave her ass a solid smack.

“It has been a while since I’ve ridden bareback,” she replied, leaning over to tease his mouth with the stiff peaks of her nipples. Just as his tongue darted out to capture one, she pulled back, wringing a groan from him. She came up on her knees, using one hand to guide him inside her. Slowly, she sank back down, sheathing him one agonizing inch at a time. “I’m sure it’ll all come back to me, though.”

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Spellfire Moons

She emerged from the shower ready to use some of that excellent proscuitto to make an omelet, but Cade was nowhere to be found. Wrapping her wet hair in a towel, she padded downstairs in her jeans and one of Cade's shirts she'd found neatly folded on top of the hamper. There was coffee brewing in the pot, and a note taped to the refrigerator. Apparently, her car needed a part that he didn't have in stock, so he'd gone into town to get it. She found a mug in the cabinet and poured herself a cup, taking it with her into the living room. Using the remote, she turned on the television, nearly spitting out the bitter brew when she saw what was on the screen. Hastily, she flipped through the channels, only to find that every station was running soft-core porn movies. No wonder he'd told her not to turn on the television. So the big man had a secret fetish, did he? She turned off the set, giggling to herself. First the freaky tattoo he wouldn't talk about, and now this. Setting down the coffee cup, she gathered up a handful of his shirt, breathing in his spicy, masculine scent. Now this was what a man was supposed to smell like, all hot and woodsy. Cosmina sighed with pleasure, her mind returning to their morning activities. Finally, after years of kissing bland, vanilla frogs, she had found her prince. As cliché as that was, she knew it in her heart to be the truth. Cade Valeray was going to be hers.

Picking up her mug, she walked back into the kitchen for a refill. There was a woman in there, standing with her back to Cosmina as she scribbled something on a piece of paper. "Can I help you?" Cosmina asked.

"Oh!" The woman jumped about a foot before turning around. She was blonde, with a wide, freckled face and bright green eyes, like a spokes model for an Irish beer. "Sorry, I didn't know anyone was here. I was just leaving a note for Cade. I'm Sandee, by the way. With two 'e's," she added. A smile curved a generous pair of lips as she took in Cosmina's attire. "Let me guess. You fell for it too, right?"

Cosmina crossed her arms in front of her. "Fell for what, exactly?" she replied coolly, although privately she was wondering why any woman would wear tapered jeans in this day and age. And that off-the-shoulder look had run its course at least a decade ago. No style at all, she decided, visualizing her in a pair of True Religion destroyed jeans that would suit her figure far better than the cut-rate ones she was currently wearing. The desire to invite this woman to

Spellfire Moons

her store was almost overwhelming; it was always painful for her to see people in unflattering clothing.

“He got me too, you know,” the woman went on. “Practically ripped my clothes off as soon as he found out that I had divine blood. On my father’s side, you know. Anyway, after one night of searing hot sex, he kicked me straight to the curb.”

The thought of Cade running his hands over ’80’s Barbie’s massive breasts made the coffee roil in Cosmina’s stomach. She walked over to the sink and set down the empty mug. “You don’t say,” she said between clenched teeth. For God’s sake, the woman was carrying a copy of a Fendi baguette, another trend that had gone the way of the Ugg boot. She would not get the best of Cosmina del Costa.

St. Pauli Girl smiled. “Gosh, I’m sorry. I just assumed that he told you. About the curse and all that.” She tugged at a lock of golden hair, biting her lip in consternation.

Cosmina shrugged. “You know what they say about assuming.”

“Uh, no,” the girl said with a confused frown. “Anyway, I didn’t mean to come in here and burst your bubble, I was just dropping off the keys to my car. Got a flat this morning and I was hoping he’d be here to fix it. You know when he’ll be back?”

She was tempted to ask whether the girl had a key or whether the door had been unlocked. Instead, she just shook her head. Sandee-with-two-e’s turned to go. “Wait!” Cosmina took a deep breath. “Tell me about this curse.”

* * * *

Cade walked through downtown Spellfire feeling better than he had in centuries. The hot sun beat down on his broad shoulders as he pondered the reason for his unusually cheery mood. It was Cosmina del Costa, she of the smart mouth and sexy smile. He nodded to a passing couple, not noticing when their eyebrows jumped skyward. Around Spellfire, most folks gave Cade Valeray a wide berth. A welcoming smile from him was about as rare as Horrible Henry passing up a chance to play a prank on a tourist.

The part he needed was stuck in the warehouse, so he settled down at Sinful Sundaes to wait. As always, there was a great crowd in the place, all clamoring for their favorite treats. Cade found a seat in the back and hid behind a newspaper. Old habits die hard, and being

Spellfire Moons

around large groups of people always made him uneasy. A trio of elderly ladies in Sunday clothes and brightly colored hats took the table next to him. Caught up in the latest gossip, they didn't hear his growl of displeasure.

"I declare, do you ever recall seeing Luca so wrought up?" came the soft-spoken drawl of a woman in Sunday clothes. "I suppose a daughter like that would try any mother's patience."

A zaftig lady working her way through a massive plate of treats nodded in agreement. "And that poor young man, bless his jilted little heart." She nibbled at the edge of a Caramel Carnivore Cupcake. "I read somewhere that caramel is fat-free, you know," she confided with a grin.

"I don't know what you're all so up in arms about. That Cosmina's always had a wild streak, ever since she was knee-high to a grasshopper." The first woman's indignant tone caught Cade's attention and he leaned in closer upon hearing Cosmina's name.

The third woman spoke up. "Ladies, please. That John Worthington was drier than the gin my grandpappy used to sneak from great-uncle Zachariah's stash. I don't care who his people are." Reaching out, she gave the larger woman's hand a stinging slap. "Stop eating all that sugar, Bernice. I swear if I have to let your choir robe out one more time!"

"Still and all," cut in the first woman, "there was no call to leave the poor man cooling his heels at the altar, was there? Decent folk just don't do that."

Bernice's triple chins jiggled as she nodded. "You're right as usual, Gladice. Young women these days have no sense of duty, stringing a man on like that. And to think I sent her a lovely set of steak knives as a wedding gift. Why, I couldn't eat a thing last night, thinking of all that wasted money!"

"Well, you're certainly making up for lost calories now, Bernice," said the third woman dryly.

The women went on speaking, but Cade was no longer listening. She'd lied to him, about everything. He balled up the newspaper into a tight sphere and threw it into the trashcan. This was exactly what he deserved, he told himself. What a fool he'd been to trust her. Women like her were all the same, lying and cheating to get what they wanted.

Spellfire Moons

And to think he'd thought she was different. Pushing back his chair, he stormed out of Sinful Sundaes without a second look.

* * * *

Gravel sprayed in his truck's wake as he pulled into the drive, screeching to a halt. Cade slammed the door hard enough to make the windows rattle, taking the steps to his front door at a fast clip. Once inside, he took a deep breath, tamping down all the emotions that were wreaking havoc on his state of mind. "Cosmina?" he hollered, the single word coming out in a hard-edged bark.

"Upstairs," came her reply.

With an angry grunt, he took the stairs two at a time to find her in his bedroom, shoving her fancy wedding gown into her duffle bag.

The dress was far too large for its container, but she was making a Herculean effort nonetheless. She stuffed in a bit more, then looked up with a glare. "What?"

Christ, this woman had a hell of a nerve. If he wasn't so fucking furious, he'd almost have to admire the way she didn't back down in the face of his obvious rage.

"I should have known, that's what." Hands clenched, he moved closer to her, fighting the urge to shake her until she rattled. But no, this was an age where it was considered a crime to strike a female, whether she deserved it or not.

"Should have known what?" she asked.

"That you were a damn liar, a spoiled brat bent on getting hers no matter who gets hurt. That's what." His harsh growl came out in a boiling rush that made her push the bag aside and give him her full attention.

With a short laugh, she replied, "I'm a liar, am I? That's a good one." A cold, calculating look came over her face. "You mind pulling up your shirt?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" He scowled down at her, mouth twisted in disgust.

"I'm talking about your damn curse, that's what I'm talking about," she hissed. "I'm sure you meant to tell me all about it, after we'd fucked a few more times. Probably as you were kicking my ass out the door, am I right?" A harsh laugh escaped her. "Sorry, baby, but you're just not the one I'm meant to be with," she said in a passable imitation of his rough growl. "Must be a tough life, all those

Spellfire Moons

long years of eternity fucking scores of women with the perfect out clause. Cursed to walk alone, and by the Morrigan, no less. Nice.” Cosmina punched a section of white silk into the bag with vicious force.

Subconsciously, his hand went to the nest of thorns tattooed on his chest. “I thought you might be the one to break the curse,” he rasped in a low, angry whisper. It was true. That morning, while she’d slept, he’d gone to the mirror, hoping against hope that the marking had disappeared. The aching disappointment he’d felt upon seeing it still etched into his skin had been almost unbearable. There’d been other women over the centuries, but never had he felt such a searing sense of loss as he had that morning. But none of that mattered now.

“I suppose it’s meant to be,” he continued. “After all, I wouldn’t want to end up like that pathetic sucker you left at the altar. From what I heard about him, the only abusive thing he ever did to you was forget to open Her Majesty’s car door one time. What a bastard.”

Cosmina yanked on the duffle’s zipper, managing to close it a little more than halfway. A yard of white satin hung out, trailing on the floor like a child’s blanket. “I don’t have to justify a damn thing to you. You don’t know shit about my life.” Hoisting the bag over her shoulder, she pushed past him to the door. “My cab should be here in about five minutes. I’ll wait outside.” She stopped at the foot of the stairs, speaking with her back to him. “And just so you know, since you didn’t think to ask before you got me naked, I’m 100% human. There’s nothing divine about me at all.”

Her breath caught on the last words, and he winced, knowing that she was crying.

His heart, which laid dormant in his chest all these years, squeezed painfully. Part of him longed to go after her, to tell her that she was the very definition of divine, whether the blood of the gods ran in her veins or not. But he couldn’t. He stood in his bedroom and listened to the click-clack of her heels as she strode through the kitchen, banging the door shut behind her. She lied to him, and that was something he couldn’t abide. *‘But didn’t you lie to her, too?’* whispered a small voice in his head. Angrily, he shook his head. It didn’t matter, not anymore. The tattoo was still there, which meant that, even if they did manage to work things out, the Morrigan’s curse wouldn’t allow them to be together.

Spellfire Moons

Long ago, his father, the Celtic warrior known as Cuchulain, he shared one night of passion with the goddess, Fand, choosing her demure beauty over that of the Morrigan, the war goddess who watched over him all his life. The Morrigan, not known for her benevolent nature, had been most displeased. Cade had been the result of that affair, an unwelcome burden bandied about by the gods in their endless games of trickery. His very existence to be hidden from the war goddess, whose vengeful fury was already driving his father into madness. Fand threw herself on the mercy of her former husband, Manannon Mac Lir, god of the sea. Although he had set her aside, his male pride was roused at the idea of her sharing her body with the human war chief. However, Manannon was something of a trickster god, and he hit upon an idea that would both solve the problem of the child and appease his male dignity.

Fand had no choice but to agree with his dictate. She allowed him to shake his cloak over her, Cuchulain, and the infant, erasing the parents' memories both of their child, and of their one night together. With his ex-wife thus appeased, Manannon took the child to the Morrigan. He told the war goddess that both of the child's parents denounced her in favor of another god. Furious, the Morrigan laid her curse upon the baby. *"For eternity he shall walk alone, unable to share his heart with another. The curse can only be broken should he discover a female of divine ancestry who can love him with a pure, unselfish heart."* With that, she placed a hand on the child's tiny chest, marking him over the heart with a winding mass of lethal-looking thorns. They would remain inked into his skin for life, disappearing only if he managed to find a woman like the Morrigan described. Satisfied in the knowledge that no goddess could love with an unselfish heart, she handed the child back to Manannon. The sea god found the child a home far from his birthplace, turning him over to a childless couple who would raise him until he was fifteen. After that, he would be on his own to carve out a life for himself wherever he chose. It was a lonely existence, carrying the albatross of his curse throughout the years, pushing away anyone who showed even a shred of emotion for him. He could not afford to put anyone in danger; the last thing Manannon told his foster parents was that anything that exceeded casual contact with the 'wrong' woman would result in grievous retribution. Not sure if that was directed at himself or the

Spellfire Moons

female, he kept everyone at arm's length. He would not be responsible for harm coming to anyone.

Cade sighed heavily and sank down on his bed. The connection he'd felt with Cosmina del Costa sparked off emotions in him that he'd thought were long buried. It would take time to douse their flames and build up the walls of unwavering stoicism that had been his companion all these years. It was ironic that time was the one thing that he always had.

* * * *

The cab dropped Cosmina off at her store, *Bella Vestiti*. Her living quarters were directly above it, but she felt no desire to go up there. Now that the excitement of the past twenty-four hours was wearing off, she was going to have to deal with the fallout caused by her behavior. Even worse, she was going to have to deal with her mother. "Speak of the devil," she murmured, as Luca stepped out from behind a rack of Zac Posen sundresses. "Mother, I'm really not in the mood."

Luca del Costa sniffed. "Well, if it isn't the runaway bride. Do you have any idea how humiliated I was? You've disgraced this entire family with your utter disregard for anyone's feelings but your own. What do you have to say for yourself, Cosmina?" Arms crossed, she stood there like a modern-day Amazon in her impeccable Oscar de la Renta suit.

Cosmina felt her temper rise. She tolerated her mother's domineering ways for far too long. "You're right. I accept full responsibility for my actions." She smiled at the look of shocked surprise in her mother's eyes; showing any sort of emotion was something Luca considered a weakness. "After all, I allowed you to push me into marrying John Worthington. I knew he was wrong for me, and I certainly never loved him. But I let you dictate my life to me, and for that, I am sorry. Believe me when I say it will never happen again."

Her mother took two quick steps toward her, eyes blazing with fury. "How dare you speak to me this way? After all I've done for you, all I've sacrificed?" Fists clenched, she advanced another step.

She held her ground, refusing to allow her mother to gain the advantage. "You've never done a damn thing for me that didn't have direct benefit on you. The only time you ever come to my store is

Spellfire Moons

when you need free clothes or want to bitch at me about something. So don't go talking to me about sacrifice. My entire life has been a sacrifice!" Her voice rose in a shrill scream, making Luca blink in shock.

"Well." Luca fussed with the ruffled front of her silk shirt, her eyes wide and unfocused. "I'm just going to leave now, and let you get a hold of yourself. It's unseemly for a lady to holler like a field hand. Call me when you're ready to discuss this like a civilized person."

"Hell will freeze over before you get that call," she muttered, moving to the side as Luca swept past her to the door. Closing it behind her, she turned the lock before blowing out a long breath of relief. Talk about family dysfunction! Shaking her head, she picked up the duffle and headed upstairs for a shower.

* * * *

It had been three days since she'd stormed out of Cade's place, but to her heart, it felt like only three seconds had passed. A sense of loss dogged her every movement; no matter how hard she tried, every time she closed her eyes, she saw his face. The bell at the front door jangled, signaling a customer. Squaring her shoulders, she went to help her find the outfit of her dreams.

Thirty minutes later, she had found the woman a pair of Robert Rodriguez cropped pants with a matching crocheted camisole that was perfect for the sultry summer heat. She'd also talked her into buying an adorable Joie drop-waist skirt that flattered her curves as though it had been made for her. "My husband will love it!" the woman cried happily, unknowingly causing a twinge of pain in Cosmina's heart. She smiled flatly, ringing up the woman's purchases with as much bravado as she could muster.

The rest of the day passed quickly and soon it was closing time. All her customers would go home to their families, their husbands, their children, and she would be alone. Cosmina sat down at the register and began totaling up the day's receipts. At least she was making a profit, she told herself glumly. It wasn't as though she'd be reduced to living in a trailer. God. Broken-hearted and poor would be far too much for her to handle. The bell jangled. Without looking up, she said, "We're closed."

Spellfire Moons

“That’s too bad,” came a rough, masculine voice. “I could use a new - whatever the hell this is.”

Her heart in her throat, she looked up to see Cade holding a Jill Stuart feather-trim dress.

“I’ll have you know that dress killed on the runway this season. Every celebrity in Hollywood tried to get her hands on it.” A wide grin split her face as she walked over to him, drawn like a magnet to his glowing amber eyes.

“Then it’s a good thing I live in Spellfire,” he replied, hanging the dress back on the rack. “Because that thing is uglier than sin.”

Cosmina did a little twirl in the white lace Michael Kors dress she was wearing. “Oh? And what’s your expert opinion on this thing?” she asked.

His gaze ran up and down her body, making her feel naked in the gauzy dress. “Beautiful.” If that one gruffly spoken word was music to her ears, then the next ones made her heart sing. “I’ve missed you, baby.”

She could tell it wasn’t an easy admission for him. The Sicilian side of her still wanted to give him a hard time, but the woman in her wouldn’t allow it. “I’ve missed you too,” she said softly, trailing a hand down his chest. Just that one simple touch made her temperature rise. “I wish we could be together.”

“I do too,” he responded, so quietly that she barely heard him. Cade pulled her close, his hands running down the length of her body. Suddenly, he jerked back with a frown. “Did you hear that?”

Before she could reply, the air shimmered with a strange golden light. An amorphous shape formed out of the glow. Cade turned his body so that Cosmina was safely behind him. If the Morrigan was going to make an appearance, he would go to Hell and back to make sure Cosmina didn’t come to harm.

A woman with hair that held all the colors of a brightly burning sun smiled benevolently at him, her eyes glowing with a fire that was oddly calming. “You have nothing to fear from me, Cayden Valeray, son of Cuchulain. Nor does your lady,” she added, giving Cosmina a nod of acknowledgement.

Still keeping Cosmina tucked behind him, he asked, “Who are you?”

Spellfire Moons

“I am Aine, daughter of Eogabail, granddaughter of Manannan Mac Lir. I have come to right a wrong that has been done to you many centuries ago.”

She was so beautiful that it was difficult to look upon her, just as one shield their eyes from the burning sun. Aine opened her hand to reveal a shining, thimble-sized cup. “She is the one you have searched for, pure of heart, a true soul mate. All that she lacks is the divine blood.” Holding out the cup in her glowing hand, she offered it to Cosmina. “Drink this.”

Without so much as a thought, Cosmina took the tiny cup and did as the goddess bid. A tingle of heat went through her, but otherwise she felt exactly the same. The cup disappeared as soon as it was empty.

Aine waved her hand, causing Cade’s shirt to disappear. “The marking is gone. You may join your lives together without fear of reprisal from the gods.” One blinding smile and she was gone, leaving dozens of gold flecks shimmering in her wake.

Hardly able to believe it, Cade stared down at the unblemished expanse of skin over his heart. He’d lived so long with loneliness as his constant companion, and now it was gone. Finally, a chance for a normal life. “I can’t believe it,” he murmured, his hand still tracing the spot where the thorns had been. “What do we do now?”

Cosmina grinned wickedly. “Well, there is the matter of those awful jeans. Faded is so not a good look for you. If you’ll follow me back into the dressing room, I’m sure I have just the thing.” She shrieked as he picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder. “What? You don’t believe me? I have a pair of dark wash Diesel jeans that will change your *life!*”

His life was already changed, but he didn’t tell her that. Instead, he carried her back to the dressing room. They had a lot of catching up to do, and all of it entailed the removing of clothes, not trying them on.

The End

In The Hot Zone by C. D. Reese

Heaven and Hell collide when a sharpshooter falls for a half demon.
Can this 'petite ange' aim true to win her lover's very soul back?

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In The Hot Zone

by

C. D. Reese

She wanted a beer. *No, strike that*, she told herself. She wanted something strong to scald her pipes as it went down, while she lay in a vat of ice. Alex kicked the tire of her pick up truck and limped toward the front door of the juke joint looking establishment. At least her pain in the ass Ford had the decency to break down in front of a bar.

Given the way her life turned out over the past 6 months, having her radiator fry up on her in a Texas town, in the middle of summer, seemed par for the course. The only consolation came knowing the heat didn't make her hip burn like a *sunuvabitch*. The delay would cost her more than money. She had enough of that. She didn't have time to cancel a hard to get appointment with the orthopedic specialist in Houston. If push came to shove...

Casting the law breaking thoughts from her mind, she walked into the bar called Mischief Mike's and felt the atmosphere smack her hard, head to toe. She could feel every sound wave from the thrashing speed metal song. Smoke from cigars and cigarettes wrapped around her like a cloak. The smell of stale beer and crushed peanut shells assailed her senses.

The biggest shock came when she did a sweep of the joint with her eyes. She blinked hard and curled her hands into fists, grinding them over her closed eye lids. When she peeked again, the same sights were there, and most of the patrons were looking at her like she was on some sort of menu.

Alex felt like she stepped into a sci-fi/paranormal convention. No sign outside the establishment heralded costume night. Blue skinned women lining the stage where the band performed wore indecent clothes that flowed like water over their bodies. They undulated like

Spellfire Moons

waves rolling in and drawing back on a sandy beach. They were enraptured by the four band members who looked like they were all auditioning for the role of the big bad wolf.

The bizarre sights refused to stop. Little gnomish creatures dressed in biker leather and sporting long grey braids down the middle of their backs looked up at her grinning lecherously. Spectral figures floated over to her and queried her with their translucent faces. The strangest sight to her were the three hulk sized men decorated in glittering green scales over their bare flesh, licking their lips and elongated canines with forked red tongues.

Nudging forward, she planted herself on a stool at the bar. The man behind the long oak barrier seemed to be the only human looking person there. Normalcy, she thought as she asked for a beer. He looked like the grizzled, grey haired epitome of a cowboy straight from a Louis L'Amour novel.

When he returned, she asked if there was any garage open that could take a look at her truck, or if there might be someplace she could pick up a rental car. She needed to get to Houston. He shook his head no as he looked over her shoulder. The subsequent frown on his face set her on edge.

“We ain’t lookin’ for no trouble here, boys. Don’t even think about it.” Alex turned as the bartender spoke and saw the painted up green men standing in front of her with slick smiles on their faces.

Trouble exploded a moment later. The tallest of the trio decided to hit on her and she clobbered him back. She never liked her personal space being invaded. When it came with a foot long pencil thin flickering tongue, sweeping up her cheek, she let instinct and training take over.

Taking Alex’s lead, the rest of the patrons in the place jumped in, starting their own sort of bar room blitz. While she did her best to get free of forked tongues and frisky hands, fists flew and chairs were smashed all around the place.

She managed to get off a few good blows, clipping the underside of one lizard boy’s jaw, evoking a howl from him as he bit his tongue nearly clean through. Another she caught behind the knees with a leg sweep. When he went down, she stomped on his man bits leaving him writhing in agony. The last proved to be the greatest amount of

Spellfire Moons

trouble. He tagged her injured hip and caught her in his arms when she started going down.

Just as her mind began to process ways to escape the iron grip her captor held her in, an unholy roar resounded through the entire bar, rattling more than just the glass bottles on the shelves behind the bartender. Motion ceased in everyone but Alex. She took the opportunity that left the majority of the people stunned into stillness to bite down on the man's arm and get free.

When everyone started moving again, it was more to make way for the source of the eerie sound than anything else. The crowd parted and Alex saw darkness and every sensual sort of sin stomping toward her, his solid black eyes glinting with anger and something else she didn't dare put a finger to. The look stirred heat inside her that pooled low in her belly and sparked the beginnings of a hunger she never bargained for.

"Close up the bar, Sam. We're done for the night." His voice, laced with a seductive Cajun baritone lilt, lifted and filled the area. She heard groans and protests and ignored them. He didn't look away to see if his order would be met. For a moment, he stared her down with his piercing onyx gaze, then swept her off her feet. Literally. As if she were a sack of flour, he tossed her over his shoulder and carried her out a back door to the hoots and cheers of the brawlers inside.

* * * *

Alex *knew* she should have been swinging, or at the very least protesting. It was pure insanity swirling in her mind to be so passive. Rarely one to indulge in frivolous, romantic notions, delight instead replaced the urge to smack down as she hung loosely over heated flesh covered granite. The man felt like he was made of stone. Every inch her body came in contact met with well honed, muscular resistance. There was not an ounce of give.

Betrayer that her starved libido became, the idea of being ravished in an alleyway by tall, dark and dangerous set tingles coursing through her body. When he slid her down the length of his body to set her on her feet again, she made no sudden move to step back from him. He felt too damn good, and looked even better. For a long moment, she stared up at him, studying the raw, planes of his face. He bore rough angles, the slight crook to his nose, a small scar splitting an eyebrow. Thick, lashes framed his bottomless, dark gaze.

Spellfire Moons

Raising a hand up, she brushed fingers over his hard set lips. When was the last time she even wanted to kiss a man? She couldn't recall any time in her life that a man made her shove logic aside to be replaced by a desire to be stirred into a wild, wanton creature needing to be fucked. Not made love to, not pet softly; she wanted to be screwed into oblivion, screaming out as she was shot into orbit on the power of a mind blowing orgasm.

Her fingers lingered on his mouth and she watched as his eyes narrowed slightly, the slightest hint of flames starting to flicker in the depths of his odd eyes. Danger. She stood flirting with barely leashed danger.

“Careful what you do, ‘tite ange. I don’ like being toyed with.” His whisky rough, deep south baritone vibrated against her finger tips and the sensations spiraled down her arm and through her entire body.

Little angel. Devilish urges swelled inside her with her body still pressed against his, She aroused him. The proof pressed against her belly, long and hard. Alex tried to rouse her voice of reason, but it refused to pipe up. After three years of going without even the slightest hint of real sex, her focus narrowed to one thing, one person.

“I don’t plan on it.” Her voice sounded odd in her ears. Husky and low, she fought a smile at the sex kitten purr she suddenly developed. Caution and any other reservation she might have thrown to the wind, she stood on tip toe and replaced her fingers with her lips, her kiss a clear invitation in its force.

The world blurred. He took control and dominated. She felt the roughness of heated brick against her back when he spun them around and backed her to a wall. His body pinned her there with his, leaving enough space for his strong hands to reach up and cup her breasts roughly. In unison, he pinched her aching erect nipples and earned a surge of her body against his.

To a tempo set by the heavy pounding of her heart, she rocked her hips against his. A feverish, illogical need overwhelmed her. Wetness began to pool between her thighs, the heat grew, threatening to consume her. Each rough kiss, each touch laid to her breasts, every grinding thrust of his hips, stoked her until whispers of what she wanted began to spill from her.

Her softly spoken, explicit demands made him step back and look at her with an arched brow. “What are you doing? Don’t you dare

Spellfire Moons

stop now.” A thread of panic laced her words. He couldn’t stop, he couldn’t leave her. Primed to relinquish all measure of control she possessed, she needed him to be the catalyst.

A lazy smile touched his lips, reflecting the wicked amusement glinting in his eyes. “Here, chere? Be sure.”

“Here, anywhere.” She nodded rapidly, resisting the desperate urge to reach out and yank him back. Her body was cooling. She wanted to be incinerated by the carnal offerings he hinted at with his bruising kisses. “Now. I don’t care.”

She shivered as he reached up and grasped a lock of her shoulder length blonde hair between his fingertips. On a tug, he bared her neck and laid a softly biting kiss at the notch of her shoulder to the notch of her neck. “Be sure,” he repeated against her skin. “Once it starts, ain’t gone finish til I say so.” His warning shot straight to her throbbing core, threatening to splinter her into her first orgasm.

Grabbing onto the closely cropped cap of hair on his head, she forced his head up. “Put up, or shut up.” She moaned in pure pleasure when he answered her back with a breath stealing kiss. A rough embrace enveloped her and she felt herself lifted off her feet, carried from their spot back inside to a staircase.

Breaking the kiss, leaving her panting for air, he issued a single command as he lowered her down. “Strip.”

The word sent a flicker of doubt through her for the first time since laying eyes on him. She watched a frown begin to start on his face and he took another step backward. Her conscience piped up at that moment and reminded her of everything she reasoned in a matter of seconds feeling that first kiss. There was no turning back, no walking away. What she started, he would finish and she’d like it.

Alex shot him a sexy, defiant look. She tugged her plain white cotton tee-shirt off and tossed it at him. Her legs nearly gave way when she watched him press the material to his nose and inhale deeply. The fire that danced more wildly in his eyes spurred her on and her sandals and jeans were next to go. She offered him no finesse, no sultry strip tease act. When she finally stood nude before him, she merely crooked her finger and waited.

Time blurred, sensations spilled one on top of the other as he descended on her. His roughly growled issue to remain still became the hardest order of her life to follow. The roaming of his hands

Spellfire Moons

started with her breasts and slid downward until he cupped the vee between her legs and ground his palm against her clit. His demanding touch shoved her over the edge into her first release. Allowing no reprieve, he plunged three fingers into her pussy and stroked her to another.

Her third teetered on the edge of fulfillment just watching him slowly lick her juices off his fingers with his tongue. "Spread your legs, chere. I want more." Past the point of caring that anyone could walk by and see them, she moved her feet further apart and groaned softly as he sank to his knees. His mouth latched onto her and his tongue pierced as deeply as his fingers. Alex grabbed onto his hair, rocking her hips back and forth, riding the mirroring sensation of what she hoped his thick cock would be doing to her soon. A nip of her clit and the predatory growl he released against her highly sensitized core, rocketed her to another orgasm.

Backing away and rising to his feet, she obeyed his order to lick his face clean. She greedily lapped up the mingled flavors, suckling his tongue to take in as much as she could. Having enough to satisfy herself, Alex finished her little feast and looked up at him, her newly discovered eagerness to please blatantly evident on her face. During her little feast, he'd undone the zipper to his jeans. Not a word was spoken. He pointed down to his thick, jutting cock and she obliged him with a willingness she'd think on later.

Alex studied it for a moment, deciding where to start first. She ran her fingertips over his full length, tracing the veins, toying with the slit at the tip already dotted with a glistening drop of pre come. The tip of her tongue lapped it up and she sighed at the tangy taste. Parting her lips, she tested how much of him she could take before he set the tempo. A moment later, he took complete control and drove his cock in and out of the hot depths of her mouth until he shuddered and spilled his seed down the back of her throat.

Pulling her to her feet, he slid his hands over her bottom and lifted her up. "Hang on, chere." he warned before impaling her on his still rigid cock. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on for dear life as he impaled her over and over again, each powerful thrust evoking mewling sounds from her that grew in pitch until she cried out through another release. Relentlessly, he drove on, refusing her a reprieve.

Spellfire Moons

The more she demanded, the higher her keening sounds, the more he gave her. Her body became one live wire, one constant sensation that shook her and made her juices flow. He was merciless and she reveled in it. Never before had she been taken to such a pinnacle of pleasurable painful bliss. No thoughts ran through her mind, only feeling. Colors danced wildly behind her tightly closed eyes. She imagined her body as nothing more than a mass of raw sexual energy held together only by the force of his grip on her hips.

She gave up her entire being to the myriad of sensory stimulation. The feeling of being dominated so thoroughly set more than just her body free. She found a man worthy of the gift of submission zealously guarded inside her and let him take her where he waned.

An eerie, unearthly growl close to her ear drew her back to a smattering of focus. She felt him swelling inside her, the impending sign he neared his own release. Digging her nails into his back for a tenuous hold, she opened her eyes, wanting to watch him as he came inside her. For a split second, she saw his true nature and as his teeth sank into the flesh of her shoulder, she knew what had enticed her to such a sacrificing depth.

Unable to fight the maelstrom, she rode out the last of the sensations her human body could bear, and saw shimmering mahogany skin and elongated incisors before his supernatural bite sent her into complete and total oblivion.

* * * *

Never claiming to be a morning person, Alex growled forcefully when a solid kick to the bed she lay in woke her from a deep dreamless sleep. The southern accented demand for her to get her ass up and moving was met with one hand venturing out from under a heavy quilt and a certain finger raising in reply. Burrowing further under the covers, Alex shut out the chill of the blasting air conditioning threatening to turn her to ice. A pillow over her head shut out the sunlight streaming in making her eyes throb behind their closed lids.

Sleep wouldn't return to her. She accepted that based on the fact her entire body throbbed with an ache she hadn't felt since *The Inferno*, a week of pure hellish training she survived during her military sniper training. Head to toe, her muscles burned and her hip protested vehemently when she risked sitting up.

Spellfire Moons

Realization of what put her in the state she woke to began to trickle into her fuzzy consciousness and her chilled body heated instantly. She let a man completely and thoroughly ravish her into oblivion. She had no name to go with the flesh covered granite body that drove her to sexual peaks she had no clue existed. She just let him pound inside her and feel soul shattering orgasms.

Glancing around the room, she took in her resting place. She lost all recollection of how she got there or if anything further happened after the staircase. Alex struggled to put together a full replay of the events and came up short. She recalled the bar brawl, her being hauled out of the place and then...She let out a tiny squeak as shame and humiliation took over. She willingly stripped for a total stranger. She graciously got down on her knees and sucked him off and drank him down.

The events that slammed through her mind provided her with vivid snapshots of how she handed over complete control to the stranger from the bar. She opened wide and let him take his fill of her and she begged him to.

Tears began to flood her vision. She never begged. The pride her grandparents instilled in her from an early age prevented her from debasing herself in such a manner. He, whoever he was, nullified it from the first soul searing kiss.

Sliding gingerly from under the covers, she hobbled over to the only piece of furniture in his bedroom, besides his bed. Opening the drawers of the dresser, she pulled out a tee-shirt and a pair of drawstring shorts. They engulfed her smaller frame, but she needed clothes. She saw no sign of her own and wondered if they still lay on the stairs.

Limping to the bathroom, she washed up as best she could before hazarding a look in the mirror. She didn't want to face her reflection for fear of what she might see. The person she was every other day of her life was not the one the bar bouncer took with a greedy vengeance. Finally turning her gaze to her reflection, she found herself oddly surprised.

No guilt or shame staring back at her. Her honey gold skin shimmered with the proof of a woman utterly sated. Her cheeks were slightly pink and her lips puffy from his bruising kisses. Her conscience griped, but her libido chimed in to tell her she finally drew

Spellfire Moons

a man out and got well serviced for it. It had been too long and she deserved every burning hot memory that stirred heat inside her once more the longer she looked at herself. No regrets, her mind told her. Leave knowing you had the best sex of your life and you deserved it.

Concurring liberated her from any possible guilt that threatened to ruin the moment. She actually attracted a man who was worth the ache she woke to. She finger combed her hair, licked her lips to gloss them slightly then attempted her best swagger as she made her way into the living room. For the time being, she knew her body couldn't handle another round or four of his kind of sex, but she hoped a little hip swaying and a pouting smile convinced him at the very least give her a cup of coffee before sending her off.

She found him in his tiny kitchen, sitting at the café style table further crowding the little space. Hunched over his own cup of dark brew, he didn't acknowledge her presence until she cleared her throat loudly. He looked up and she shivered as tingles of arousal spread through her entire body. His eyes were different as they stared hard and cold up at her.

Undeterred, she sat herself on the empty chair across from him and pointed to his coffee mug. "Think you can spare me a cup before I go?"

He said nothing as he rose and Alex chalked it up to him not being a morning glory either. If he was a full time bouncer, seeing high noon meant not enough sleep and that would make even the nicest of people unsociable. Putting his silence aside, she studied his backside appreciatively instead. He wore only a pair of faded and thread bare jeans that clung to him, making her fingers itch to feel the hardness underneath once more. There wasn't an ounce of body fat on his chiseled physique.

"Cut it out." His gruff words cut through the reverie and drew her focus back to the situation she was in.

"Cut what out?"

He turned and faced her, coffee extended to her as he kept a small distance between them. "Thinkin' and feelin' what you are. I can smell it and it ain't happenin' again."

Her brows knit together in a frown. "What makes you think I'm thinking and feeling as you put it. And what the heck does smelling it mean?"

Spellfire Moons

He slammed the coffee mug down in front of her. "I can smell you, chere. You smell like peaches and sex. Plain as that. Juicy as you are, one bite of you did enough damage. Ain't gonna be no more." Shoving his hands deep in the front pockets of his jeans, he walked over to the couch near by and dropped his body onto it. "Drink up and get movin'. I know you didn't plan on lingerin' here."

"Did damage? What? Ruined your sterling rep as a choir boy or something?" His cryptic words confounded her, adding to the measure of anger starting to grow in her. She didn't expect him to profess undying love and devotion after one night of wild sex, but she refused to be the bad person in the equation.

She limped over and faced him, planting her feet in a confident set, a throwback to her commanding military days that seemed a lifetime ago. "I'd like a name and an explanation before I leave you to brood or whatever it is you plan on doing."

"Kiran and what you want? To justify what happened? Dat gonna make your pretty conscience feel better for up and fuckin a stranger behind a bar?" he shot back acidly.

"My name is Alex and I just want to know what was going on in the bar when I got there? I want to think it was a sci fi freak and geek gathering, but those lizard things." The brawl returned to the forefront of her thoughts and she shuddered hard.

"Tite, when a woman lookin like you wanders into a bar filled with our kind, tings like what happened just gonna happen. Angels like you," he paused to rake his black gaze over her golden haired, golden skinned, well honed body. "Women like you don go takin' trips to hell."

"It's a damn bar, for pete's sake. I've been in plenty like that ramshackle juke joint you work at, but none of them had things with forked tongues in them."

He let out a flat, rusty laugh. "Welcome to Spellfire den, 'tite ange."

* * * *

His earlier comment sank in and made perfect sense once he explained the wild, magical world that was the town of Spellfire Texas. In Mischief Mike's she'd seen first hand the less refined of the town's inhabitants from werewolves to wyverns, from gnomes to

ghosts. She accepted what he told her. Her eyes and her gut instincts never lied to her.

“So, bouncer boy. What breed are you?” She curled herself up tighter on the chair she sat in, waiting for incredible explanation like a living breathing gargoyle she likened his body to.

“Breed? Cute, chere. Non, I ain’t no sort of breed, just damned.” She watched him grind his hands over his face, rubbing away a little of the illusion of rock solid resolve he cloaked himself with. The expression she saw next became a far cry from the devil that seduced her in the night.

“Damned? How?” He clamped his lips tightly together, refusing to talk any further for the time being. Emotions she couldn’t decipher warred in his eyes. She gave them both a reprieve, standing and asking where her clothes were so she could shower and leave. He muttered something about a trash bin and told her where to find the towels.

Pulling comments from tall, dark and stony pushed her from ill tempered without coffee to wake her up, to down right angry. She needed answers. She wanted some sort of validation that he pounced on her because he wanted to, not because she was put under a spell and turned into a horny bitch in heat.

A part of her still felt highly aroused. Everything about him appealed to her. Having spent the past 11 years of her life being beaten down and built up by thick necked, bullheaded men in military uniforms, who made it crystal clear they didn’t like her invading their territory and proving she could do the job better than they could, Kiran’s dominance over her lit her soul.

She stepped into steaming water and let it spill over her body as she scrubbed away the aches lingering everywhere but in her hip. She knew the pain there was a permanent fixture. Her last assignment nearly killed her and the jagged scar atop a deep dip next to her hip socket served as a constant reminder that life could end in the blink of an eye.

That’s why you let him do it, her mind whispered in affirmation as Alex trailed her fingers over the injury. She agreed. Too much of her life had been spent following a set path, never deviating, never enjoying anything, just obeying orders. The commands Kiran delivered, she carried out willingly and wanted more. She stepped out

Spellfire Moons

of the safety parameters and into the ‘hot zone’ being with Kiran. The shower water washed the last of her anger away and she stepped out smiling. Captain Alex Westin got tagged and she liked it.

Wiping the steamy residue off the medicine cabinet mirror, she looked at her reflection and liked what she saw. She never imagined one wild and confusing night with a total stranger would have the power to start altering her life for the better.

Or so she thought. Her gaze trailed downward and the reflection showed her something that mortified her. On her shoulder, a hideous bruise surrounded by the perfect oval shape of teeth marks, rested in stark contrast to her creamy colored skin. Not knowing what he was, with her brain still trying to process the weird notions of paranormal creatures existing, panic and rage flooded her. She didn’t want to be a vampire or a werewolf or something other than human.

She roared out his name and waited for him to join her in the bathroom. She needed the answers she put aside for her shower and she planned to beat them out of him if necessary.

A blast of frigid air rushed into the bathroom and chilled her body. He stood there in the doorway, his face expressionless, dark eyes doing a long sweep over her unclothed body. “You yelled?” he asked drolly.

For a moment, she stood, silently seething and oddly confused. On his bare chest lay a marking she didn’t notice earlier. The branding was shaped in the form of a serpent coiled over his sternum. Dragging her gaze back to meet his placid one, she charged him. A torrent of pent up fury spilled out as she beat on him, the air filling with the ugly things she called him.

He stood motionless, taking every blow she delivered until one in particular hit a mark that sent them both to their knees. Her fist connected with the brand and she witnessed her hand sinking deep into his chest, straight to his very soul. The contact became a conduit between her mind and his. For what seemed like an eternity, she watched the events of Kiran’s cursed life play out in fast forward speed through her own brain.

Loneliness, hatred, jealousy, rage; the emotions were all too familiar to her. She saw her life echoed in his, simply different circumstances, but the results were the same. They were so much alike it made her heart break under the weight. Both killers, both

Spellfire Moons

outcasts, both loners. They were used and abused and left to fend with the fallout on their own.

The connection ended and she fell against him, fighting nausea and tears as she clung to him. "Wish you wouldn't have done that, 'tite ange." she heard him whisper and she couldn't agree more.

* * * *

He wrapped them both in the quilt on his bed, but Alex couldn't stop shivering. His body heat, searing and seductive crept into her chilled body, but her soul caused the trembling and he struggled to make it stop. She listened to him with an open mind as he began to tell his tale.

He was half demon, half human, payment for a betrayal not of his doing. He told her it was a woman who did him in over a century and a half ago. The woman wrapped in his arms did it again, and she wished to weep for him even with pity having no place between them. They learned from their hardships, grew and did their best to prevent it from happening again.

"So your bite did this to me? To us?" Nestling closer, she sought out any comfort he kept inside him. The part of Kiran holding her wasn't the demon. The troubled man inside him, the part which knew the damage done warred with tossing her out and letting her fend for herself and protecting her from what surely waited outside the spelled sanctuary of his meager domain.

"Oui, chere." He blew out a ragged sigh. "He warned me. Could fuck anything in sight long as I din't take anything from her." She felt him shift and raise a hand, running it over his closely cropped dark hair. She saw vulnerability etched onto a face that saw entirely too much in his long life.

"My energy. What we stirred up banging each other mad in the alleyway." She managed a short laugh. "Never thought sex would ever get me in trouble. The few I've slept with have told me I'm a cold fish, not food for a demon."

"Mais non, Alex. Cold you never be. Damn, woman, you turned the demon loose so fierce I thought he'd eat us both alive." His embrace grew tighter, pressing her hard against his body and she reveled in the feel. Danger lurked outside the door yet her mind focused on how damn good they fit together.

Spellfire Moons

She needed a distraction. The longer she sat nestled on his lap, the stronger the desire grew to shift and welcome the thick cock back inside her. “How old are you?” He delayed his answer, nuzzling his face against the bruised mark on her shoulder. A soft swipe of his tongue drew her nipples to hard, tingling peaks.

“126 years old. Born 1879 in Nawlins.” Lifting his head, he rested his chin on the top of her head and began to tell the tale she already witnessed the moment she connected with his soul. His life read like a Dickens novel, bleak and chock full of trials and tribulations. The youngest of 5 boys in his family, all he did gave him the hope that one day he would escape the squalor his family abided in.

“Learned me to read and write, do numbers, try to turn a good coin.” Alex felt him tense beneath her and she looked up at his face. “Got me a job doin’ ledgers for a shippin line and dat, chere, began the madness.” He met his employers daughter, fell in love with her at first sight and nearly died when her treacherous nature pitted him against a town don who sought to lay claim to her.

“Five of ‘em. Beat me ‘til der weren’t nothin’ to be recognized. Only reason I lived was the mojo woman needin her a body for one of her spirits to abide in. Das how I got the demon in me.” He shuddered hard recalling the cacophony of sound, the acrid smells, the frenetic pounding of supernatural energy around him as he lay helpless to stop any of it. He passed out half way through the ritual and woke a new man, controlled by the demon and its master.

“Different sorta master, but you and me, chere? We alike, ain’t we.” Alex nodded against his chest. She understood what he meant. The voodoo priestess used him until the day she died to deal death to those she perceived the enemy. Alex followed orders and with a single shot, she did the same. They were puppets for those who held power. She found freedom, but Kiran remained bound to his master.

“Is there a way out for you?” She turned and straddled his lap, searching his face for any sort of hope. She wanted him out of the bleak, damned life he remained chained to. The slight shake of his head made her heart sink. “There has to be something, Kiran. Everything has an out clause, a loophole somewhere.”

He sighed his endearment for her. “Dey don’t give up the damned. I stay here, locked up and safe and das all there is to it. I step

Spellfire Moons

outside the boundaries of this place and he'll snatch me up and I'll be doin his biddin' again." His face clouded over with anger and regret. "Seen too much blood on my hands. Here, Spellfire? I got my peace after too long a wanderin and killin'."

Alex glared back at him, resisting the urge to rattle him hard. "Peace? You're a prisoner in this place. There is no such thing as peace locked up and unable to be free."

"What you suggest I do, ange?" he snarled back. "I may be locked up, but keeps me from murderin cause I'm ordered to. You tink I like dis? Merde, non! I still got human in me, but every time I take a life, bit more of it dies off. I can't do it anymore."

She kicked the quilt away and slid off the bed. As she paced, she plotted. "Spellfire is chock full of all kinds of magical people right? Plenty of mojo here? Ask one of them to help you."

Kiran let out an angry snort. "And be beholden to someone else? Look what gratitude got me already."

"Surely there is one person here that will step up and not obligate you to servitude like that demon bastard is doing to you."

"Ain't gonna happen, chere. Why you care anyways? You should be gone 'bout your own business already, not fretting in front of me with no clothes on." He gave her a long once over with heat in his dark gaze.

She flipped him off and resumed her limped striding. "It's because I know how you feel and I can't stand by and not do anything."

Kiran slid off the bed and stilled her. "I appreciate the gesture, petite ange, but nothin an angel like you can do for a demon like me," he said quietly. He trailed his fingers over her lips and down her neck, resting his hands on her shoulders. "I'm sorry I got you tangled in my life."

"I'm not." She batted his hands away and shot him a defiant look. "There's a reason all this happened and I think I'll stick around until I figure it out." She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, a simple gesture he read as her steeling herself to do something reckless. "I want to see your other form."

His brows shot upward and he barked out a cold laugh.

"I'm serious. I prefer to face down anything that might scare me. I caught a glimpse last night. Let me see the other side of you."

Spellfire Moons

He grabbed her roughly by the shoulders and lifted her with practiced ease. “I barely got a leash on him as is, Alex. You naked and smellin so damn good gonna get you in trouble if I let him out,” he warned.

Alex swallowed hard, but repeated her request. She knew he could hear her heart pounding, smell the fear carried on the rush of adrenaline building inside her. She saw it on his face as his nostrils flared and his eyes began to bleed to complete blackness.

He set her back down and took a step back. His lips twisted in a slow, wicked smile. “Very well.” His cajun lilt turned whisky rough. “You want to court danger, you call him out.”

The way his onyx gaze raked over her caused Alex to shiver and instantly grow wet. The blatant way he inhaled then licked his lips turned her on. Once again, with a look, with a gesture, he drove all thoughts of sexual inadequacy from her mind and turned her wanting and willing. She closed the distance between them and captured his lips in a fierce kiss, offering him no fear, only desire and acknowledgment of what was to come.

He took command of the kiss, sliding his tongue between her parted lips, sweeping in, devouring, conquering. He plundered and Alex set her hands roaming over every inch of bared flesh she could reach. Desperation drove her to roughly undo his jeans and shove them down his hips releasing what she wanted pounding in and out of her. Grabbing the heavy fullness of his cock, she began to stroke it slowly with the tight grip she held around it. Each growl he panted met with another firm caress.

Breaking away from his skilled lips and tongue, she took the final few moments of her waning control to back him up to the bed and gently nudge him down against the mattress. The shape of his mouth began to change, accommodating the lengthening teeth behind them. His skin, slowly grew darker, from its light golden color to a deeper mahogany. Twinges of fear flashed through her system, but he laid there with a smug grin, his cock jutting up in a challenge. Familiar flames danced in his black gaze and Alex gave into the urgent need to be consumed by everything he was, everything he offered.

She slid up the length of his body, pressing hers down against it, his heat searing her on contact. “I won’t be afraid of you anymore. I can’t be.” She whispered her words on a shaky breath. His reply was

Spellfire Moons

primal in its demand and Alex more than willingly obeyed. She straddled his hips and lowered herself inch by blissfully full inch over him until he filled her. A shaky sigh escaped her. This was heaven on earth no matter Kiran laid there bleeding into the demon who triumphed over her only hours before.

“Likin’ this, ‘tite?” His husky drawl grew rougher the further the change took place. She nodded and drew her hips up until only the thick tip of him remained inside her. An animalistic growl preceded his impatient grip on her bottom and he shoved her back down as he surged upward.

The keening sound of pleasure that erupted from her snapped the tether on Kiran’s control. In the blink of an eye, Alex found herself beneath him, her legs spread wide, gripped by hands no longer human. “Do you fear me now?” Alex forced herself to focus on him and saw the traces of his humanity that still remained despite the change that overtook him. “No.”

Until the moment where she reached the pinnacle of complete, all consuming pleasure, Alex kept her focus on the half man, half demon who drew out the passion and carnal abandon inside her. In the bright of day, she rode out the waves of ecstasy he drew her over and collapsed in exhausted defeat only when his bite branded her once more. Alex drifted off to sleep with him, still deeply embedded inside her, a smile on her face. She faced down the demon and found a truth Kiran didn’t recognize anymore. He deserved saving and she would help him find a way.

* * * *

“Oh, Crawfish,” a voice sounded in a sing song tone. “Come out, come out and play with me, boy!”

Alex jerked awake at the abrupt chill that overtook her. Kiran pulled away leaving her without his warmth and comforting embrace. “What’s going on?” She forced her sated body up and watched Kiran throw clothes on hastily. “Where are you going?” When he wheeled around to look at her, an icy cold sense of dread skittered through her soul.

“Do not go down stairs. He can’t reach you here. Stay where it’s safe.” His tone left no room for debate and blasting from the room, he afforded her no chance to protest. Gathering up the quilt, she wrapped

Spellfire Moons

it around herself and shuffled to the window overlooking the area the voice sounded from.

“Kiran Crawford! Don’t you make me wait! I get cranky when disobeyed.” The maliciousness with which the stranger in the back parking lot spoke stirred a nauseous feeling deep inside Alex. He didn’t look like a demon, but the moment she whispered the name Kiran told her, the short, portly man looked up and showed her his true form.

Darting backward, she stumbled over the edge of the blanket and went down hard, her bad hip taking the brunt of her weight. Through the pain, she brought herself back to her feet and staggered into the bathroom where her change of clothes lay. After surviving the truth from Kiran and accepting him part and parcel, the thought of the demon master Mathriel keeping his claws in the man she cared entirely too much for, drove her to ignore Kiran’s direct order.

“*There’s always an out clause*”, she reminded herself gingerly hobbling down the narrow staircase that took her to the door leading to the parking lot. For the first time in her life, she found something truly worth fighting for and she planned to show them both just that. Mustering every ounce of pride and courage both her grandparents and the military instilled in her, she marched outside, head held high, determination in each uneven step she took.

She locked eyes with Kiran’s master, a blatant refusal to cower as all semblance of human form peeled away revealing a twisted beast, red eyes blazing, yellowed, rotting teeth bared. He towered above her in height, but her resolve made her feel his equal.

“Seeing this tasty bitch in person is even more appealing than I thought. I can’t wait to have a few good bites of her myself, Crawford.” He leered at her and drew his long pointed tongue over his deformed mouth, licking at her imaginary flavor there.

“I thought I told you....Merde, woman! Go back inside.” Kiran reached for her, but she stepped aside and walked closer to the spelled boundary’s edge. “Don’ go no further, Alex!” She stopped and folded her arms over her chest, her expression a full out challenge.

“The only one getting a taste of me anytime in the near future is Kiran. What do you want?”

“Found yourself a fighter, did you, Kiran? I thought it was just the fact she’s a pretty thing for you to fuck for a change.” Mathriel

Spellfire Moons

countered before bursting into hearty laughter at the expletives that spilled quietly from Kiran. Looking back at Alex, the demon master grinned, bearing more razor sharp teeth.

“He calls you his little angel. More like fallen angel, right, Miss Westin. Or should I say Captain Westin, lapdog assassin for your government. How is your hip doing? You tell Kiran how you got the limp?”

“What is your business here, Mathriel.” Alex kept her tone calm. Years of brutal psychological abuse in the military gave her a thick skin. His taunts did little to affect her.

“Just rehashing old memories with you. They wanted you dead, didn’t they. Sending you and your friend into a hot zone from where there would be no return. Suicide mission. They expected filled body bags. The little bitch forced on them needed to die.” Mathriel continued on with his recollection until Alex screamed for him to stop. “Not so strong after all, are you Captain Westin. Go back to bed and wait with your legs spread. I’ve got business to tend to with my favorite toy.”

Composed once more, Alex shook off the tremors coursing through her body and kept her ground. “Guess they didn’t succeed did they? We both got out. Now it’s Kiran’s turn.” Shoulders squared, chin held high once more, she refused to cower any longer in the demon’s presence.

Kiran stepped up behind her and brought his head low to her ear. “Don’t do this. Whatever you got goin’ in that brain of yours, don’t. I ain’t worth no one’s help.” Despite his whispered protest, she felt the encouragement in his touch as he slid his hands up her back, resting them over the marks on her shoulders.

“I want Kiran. All of him, all that you took from him.” Her declaration drew raised brows on the beast before he shifted to his innocuous looking human form. “He doesn’t think he’s worth it, but I know better.”

Mathriel clutched his stomach as he laughed mockingly. “That street rat isn’t good for anything but what I want.” Sobering slightly, he cocked a brow and rubbed his chubby chin. “However, I can be an equitable man when I want to, so do tell me what you have in mind. He seems to be taken with you. What are you willing to do for me to relinquish his soul back to him?”

Spellfire Moons

“Just about anything that doesn’t involve sex with you.” She crinkled her nose at the very thought. Neither form held any appeal to her, not like Kiran’s did.

“I don’t need to have sex with you. My direct line to Kiran gets me off anytime he fucks something willing to part her legs for him. He’s right, little angel, you do taste like peaches.” He smacked his lips together and sighed contentedly.

Alex looked up at Kiran and saw the impossible. His neck and cheeks were a dark shade of pink from blushing. “Well at least you know how to stir a woman to a mind blowing performance,” she whispered and kissed his heated cheek.

Mathriel rolled his eyes and made a wretching noise. “If you two are done being sickeningly sweet, I have a deal to make.”

Alex practically melted against Kiran when he drew her into a protective embrace. His touch strengthened her fortitude. She knew at that moment, he was indeed worth it. “What do you have in mind?”

The demon bowed and smiled grandly. “I’ll make it easy on you. We’ll have a shoot off. You beat me, Kiran gets the rest of his soul back. I beat you and I get all of yours.”

A serene smile touched her face. The deal sounded too easy, but he picked an arena she reigned champion in. Supernatural being or not, Mathriel didn’t have the power in him to beat her at the one thing she did best. “You have a deal. I hope you’re not a sore loser type. I think the sight of a demon of all things throwing a hissy fit because he got beat would be pretty damn embarrassing.”

He flashed into his demon form and charged the magical barrier she stood behind. “I hope you like pain with your pleasure. When I said bite, I meant it literally.” The beast snarled at her.

Alex merely rolled her eyes at Mathriel and left him to rant and curse as she and Kiran went back inside. At the top of the stairs, she nearly toppled them sagging back against him feeling the sudden drain in her system as the adrenaline wore off.

“I should fan your hide for you just done, chere.” Kiran gathered her up in his arms and carried her the rest of the way back to the bedroom. “You shouldn’t have made the deal.”

She sagged back after he lay her onto the mattress and smiled wickedly. “Maybe, maybe not. You going to punish me for disobeying a direct order?”

Spellfire Moons

He shook his head no, hiding the grin growing inside him. “Nope. Gonna let you lay there and stew over what you did. Mathriel’s a full blown demon not some half breed like me. ‘Tite ange you are, Wonder Woman you ain’t.” Kiran turned on his heels and walked out, leaving that little bit of knowledge hanging in the air.

* * * *

Alex looked up at him, anger flashing in their depths. “May I repeat for the hard of hearing, do not touch anything.” She took the red dot spotting scope from him and placed it gingerly beside the rest of the gun parts she laid out methodically.

“Am I messin with your mojo?” Kiran asked impatiently. He’d honored for the most part her wish for silence so she could concentrate, but just watching her move at a snail’s pace began to drive him a little stir crazy.

“This is a functional piece of equipment as a whole. In individual parts, there are a select few, if damaged in any sort of way that can hinder a perfect performance.” She picked up what looked like a thick coil the length of her slender hand. “I can’t afford anything less than perfection.”

He growled low and shoved his hands in his jeans pockets. “I’m still flamin’ over dis ya know, chere. You shouldn’t have done it.”

“Yes, I know. You aren’t worth the trouble. Please tell me again so I don’t forget you’ve said it five times already.” She pressed back her sarcasm and returned to her focus. She hadn’t fired her Springfield M1 since that fateful day in Columbia. Alex made sure it was in top performance condition. She wagered her soul and his on her skills.

“Why you do it, anyways?”

“Because I like being around you annoying the hell out of me while I try and work here. Call me a glutton for punishment,” Alex snapped.

“Answer me true, ‘tite. Our souls are on da line.” He stopped her hands from working and dragged her over to his lap garnering her full attention. “Not like I done gave you a reason to do it.”

Alex settled on his lap in a way to accommodate her aching hip. Sex with him covered a myriad of positions, and not all made her hip happy. “You did the moment we met and you keep giving me reasons, Kiran.” She felt one of the clichéd womanly emotional moments

Spellfire Moons

rising up, but he sat too stubborn to admit anything to her. She took point on the matter.

“Like what?” Kiran ran his hands over the mirroring bite marks on her shoulders. “I tied you to me by force. I made you have to stay wit me, chere. I put these der and they a homin beacon for any demon who wants a bite of angel flesh. Why ain’t you mad at me?”

She leaned in and kissed him softly. “The sex alone is worth it,” she whispered against his lips. Settling back once more, she continued on. “Then there is the fact I met a kindred spirit in you. We both know what it feels like to be alone, to be an outcast because of what we are. We’ve been hated, shunned, neglected, used, abused...shall I go on?” The twist of his dark, handsome features stopped her. “I have a feeling you felt that understanding the minute I walked into the bar. Just took me a little longer to get it.”

Sliding off his lap, she returned to her seat and picked up the stock of the barrel of her gun to clean again. “This can last all of fifteen minutes more after you get your soul back, or it could lead to something more. Call me stupid, but I’m curious to see just what else lurks behind the demon facade you cling to.”

“It ain’t no facade, Alex. It’s more of my soul den I care to admit.” He dropped his head and growled low. “You deserve better. Period.”

“So you keep reminding me.” Alex sighed and returned her attention to reassembling her weapon. Taking it through functional paces, she put it aside and asked Kiran if he could get her bow case for her.

“You always travel loaded for bear, ‘tite?” She amused him when he brought her things up from the truck and caught him off guard when she told him the contents of the two long hard cases.

“I’m in transition right now. I haven’t found any place to settle since they kicked me out, so they travel with me. I’d never dream of putting them in storage.”

Kiran flipped the bow case open and Alex bellowed at him to freeze. She tossed the rifle aside and hobbled over. “Don’t. Just don’t touch that. I’ll give you my rifle and my first born if you want, but...” She trailed off, a sheepish look on her face.

“It mean that much to you?” He toed the case and watched her yank it up into her arms. “I s’pose so. Why?”

Spellfire Moons

Alex settled on the couch and laid the lid back. For a moment, she merely ran her fingers over the aged, polished ash wood with a reverence that surprised Kiran.

“This is all I have left of my grandparents.” She explained that they died shortly after she turned eighteen. “I’ve been using this bow since I was 6 years old. It’s just...I didn’t mean to snap at you like I did. Some people have talismans they wear to make them feel safe. I take this with me.” A soft chuckle escaped her. “Well, and this too.” She pointed to the bow and arrow tattoo on her forearm.

She smiled at the goose bumps that rose when he placed a kiss on the image drawn into her flesh. “Lil on the intimidating side, ain’t it?” He traced the part of the tattoo resembling a toe tag on the fletching of the arrow. “D.O.A.”

Laughter erupted from Alex. “Well, gotta look the part. It was either this design or I’d be wearing a naked girl that dances when my muscles flex.” She refused to tell him what D.O.A. truly stood for. Dead on Arrival served it’s purpose well enough.

“Do you know what a hot zone is, Kiran?” Alex explained when he drew a confused look. “In the military, it’s a specified area around a given target.”

“And?”

“And I want you far away from it. In fact, don’t step outside your little barrier here until the zone has been neutralized. You got that?”

For a moment, the stony tone, so proper and military sounding turned him on. Then his human ego reared it’s head to him. A woman of all people fought the one battle he never got the chance to. The reminder set him to growling and he stormed into his bedroom, kicking the door closed.

Mathriel didn’t lie when he mentioned Kiran’s feelings for the woman polishing up her bow and crafting her arrows for the challenge. With the exception of Sam, she was the only person he bore his human soul to and risked caring for. He liked her. The sex was great, but her prickly personality and her brassy attitude appealed to him in a myriad of ways. His petite ange, his little angel possessed the tenacity of the Devil himself.

That made the bitter pill of jealousy and inadequacy harder for him to swallow. He should have been the one accepting the challenge, but he had no skills that would even remotely assist him in achieving

victory. His soul now relied on a woman who planned to free him and leave him be. She wasn't staying. Win or lose, he knew he lost her regardless.

The sound of a yelp and an order to get down on the ground broke Kiran from his dark thoughts and forced him back to the living room. He found Alex on her feet, bow drawn, arrow at the ready to let fly into the heart of a strange man in the living room. The murderous determination in her eyes both chilled him and made his cock harden instantly.

"Your lady has one hell of a quick reaction time." The stranger chuckled, but never took his eyes off the tip of the arrow leveled at his chest.

"Who are you?" Kiran began to lower the divide between his human and demon side. Holding the weapon or not, he still felt the urge to protect what he indeed claimed the moment he touched her. The dark haired, olive skinned man clad in ancient warriors garb bothered him and stood close enough to attack Alex regardless if her bow met its intended target.

"Permit me to introduce myself. I am the judge in this competition Captain Westin and your master agreed to. Ares, God of War at your service." He brought his fist to his chest and bowed slightly to both of them.

Alex snickered. "Okay, I'd say pull the other leg, but you'd aggravate my hip. The truth and now, or you're dead."

Kiran walked over and put a hand on her right shoulder, leaving her left free to keep her balanced hold on the taut string. "He's telling the truth. Leave it to Mathriel to summon an ally," he said grimly.

The tension let up on the bowstring and Alex lowered the bow. "Really?" She flushed when she squeaked out the word.

"Yes, really. And no, Kiran, I would not consider Mathriel an ally. Merely a means to an end in my line of work. I like the trouble he stirs. Feeds my warmongering appetite and well, Captain Alex Westin is a soldier of the finest caliber. His offer seemed like a fun way to take a break from stirring chaos and bloodshed around the world." A sly grin lit his darkly handsome visage and Alex shivered slightly from its potency.

"Captain Westin, Mathriel has agreed to let you prepare as you see fit for this encounter, which will take place this evening. Time

Spellfire Moons

will be the witching hour, when this full moon's power will be at its most intense. Do take that into consideration." He held out a manila envelope to her and explained it contained maps of the terrain and the targets planned for the evening.

Before she could take them, he moved them out of reach. "Do you fully understand the magnitude of what you are about to undertake?"

Kiran's heart nearly beat out of his chest when she looked up at him, beaming with a smile that registered more than love ever could hope to exude. "Yes I do." Ares relinquished the envelope to her.

"Be assured of your talent. Mathriel will not make this easy and he will use all his resources to win this match. Do not be afraid to draw from your own. Faith, acceptance and clarity." Taking a step back from her, he gave her a soldier's salute then vanished as mysteriously as he appeared.

Kiran looked down at Alex and waited for the awestruck expression to fade from her face. "He impressed you didn't he?"

"He's real. That was really Ares?" She dropped the bow and did a happy little dance when he confirmed it once more.

"This pleases you?"

"You better believe it." Turning and facing him square on, she threw the file over her shoulder and grabbed Kiran by his teeshirt. "I've got this one in the bag. Now, I think a little reaffirmation that you're worth the trouble is in order." She rose on her tip toes and planted a hungry kiss firmly on his lips. Kiran gladly obliged her request.

* * * *

"Trust me?" She asked him that simple request as she walked out the door, bow and arrows in tow, through the barrier surrounding the bar. He assured her he did and it carried her from the outskirts Spellfire to her first target, hope strong in her heart. With him secured safely inside the spelled area, she focused on getting herself through the night's events.

The challenge wouldn't be easy. She needed to track down her target, using only the light of the full moon to guide her and provide the view of what she must hit accurately. She had a laundry list of survival training courses under her belt, compliments of the military,

Spellfire Moons

but the one thing that mattered was focus. One false step, one slack moment and it would be over for both her and Kiran.

At the starting point, Mathriel and two minions waited along side Ares. A glance at her watch let her know she wasn't late. Both hands stood straight up the moment she stopped before them.

"All rules but one have been written out and by accepting them from my hand, you have agreed to all terms. Is this understood?" Ares bypassed the formalities of introductions. He waited for both to nod. "Very well. You have your three targets. The final rule is you have one hour to reach them and make your mark on them."

Ares turned to face Alex. "Mathriel has brought two to assist him in his tasks. Do you have any you wish to call on?"

She found herself smiling, studying the expression on his face. When they met earlier in the day, something he said struck her familiar and satisfied her. "For now, no." She wondered if he read her mind, or went deeper—into her very soul. "May I reserve that option?" He dipped his head slightly in agreement and walked away.

"You may begin." Ares said nothing more to the competitors and disappeared as quickly as her demon challenger.

Alex took a long moment to look up at the stars in the sky and search for a specific constellation. "You never steered me wrong before. I'm counting on you two to guide me through this one. Faith, acceptance, clarity." She closed her eyes, focused on the mantra her grandparents taught her and filled her mind with every life lesson they instilled deep inside. She knew she'd do fine.

By the time she left the second target with her shot registered, she began to feel more pain than determination raging in her body. Mathriel's minions were along to run as much interference as possible. She'd stumbled through a dust storm, swarms of marsh bugs, a run in with a cactus and delays facing down a few snakes and frogs. Her clothes were crusted with dirt, blood and sweat, and her body felt as tattered as her garments.

With only twelve minutes left in the challenge, she stumbled onward, ignoring the searing misery of her hip, reminding herself of the consequences from failure. It was not an option. She wanted her soul, she wanted his freedom. Pressing ahead, she also wanted a cold beer, a long shower and a nice slow round of lovemaking from Kiran as a way to say thanks for the effort.

Spellfire Moons

Kiran. She wanted and needed that man more than life itself. The longer she thought on it, the more she knew it. Having his understanding, feeling his body curled up against hers, knowing there was someone on planet Earth that actually appreciated her unique nature—it meant everything to her.

She traversed the obstacles in her path hanging onto his image and her blossoming hunger. In the middle of the earth bound hell, she felt herself getting horny. She knew it was just exhaustion kicking in, but her laughter rang out in the dark of the night, earning her a coyote's howl and the screech of a blackbird in reply.

* * * *

Nothing stood in her way except the natural terrain. That bothered her. The minions were no where in sight. The night felt too still. She was down to her last five minutes and it gave the demon the perfect opportunity to rise up in full force and stop her dead in her tracks. If she didn't take her shot in time, she forfeited the last target and would lose.

Every step closer increased the chill inside her. If something felt too easy, it meant it was. A trap wait for her somewhere and paranoia slowly began to creep inside her mind. Echoing in her head, each single tick of the second hand on her watch. Listening to the sound, she slowed her rapid heart rate and focused on the annoying tick.

As a sniper, she trained herself to slip in to a zen like state, narrowing her world to her target and her talent. Time stood still, her breathing ceased, her mind cleared. One shot, one kill. There was no alternative. One. Shot. One. Kill. Step, step, step, step. She timed the cadence of her walk to the mantra repeating in her head until she stood only 50 yards away from her target. What she saw brought her to her knees, crying out in a mix of anger and disappointment.

Each target placed had been a trick, playing on her human sympathies. It was her own fault. She said no living targets. They granted her that. Simple paper bulls eyes were taped up, but she never bargained for them being attached to living creatures. She'd been forced to kill a coyote and a jackrabbit. In any other circumstance, she'd have felt no remorse. They were just animals. That night, they were innocent pawns in a lethal game for two souls. She did her damage and moved on, whispering her apologies to whatever God seemed willing to listen.

Spellfire Moons

The third target shattered her heart and her hard won resolve. The paper objective flapped lazily against the chest of the one bearing it. At that moment, she understood why Mathriel offered no resistance to reach the final point. He had it waiting for her to arrive.

“Why?” Hoisting herself to her feet using her bow as leverage, she blinked back stinging tears that blurred her vision. “Why didn’t you stay put?”

She watched Kiran’s composure break. “All you had to do was stay put! Damn it all, Kiran! Why couldn’t you trust me!” She screamed her words, raging against the sharp pain tearing at her soul. Realizing he didn’t truly accept and understand her nearly brought her to her knees again. His leaving the sanctuary of the bar put both their lives in jeopardy. She hated him at that moment, but not nearly enough to shoot him with an arrow that knew no room for error.

“Quell the melodrama, Captain Westin.” Ares moved closer, a soft tsking sound made with every step he took. “True soldiers don’t have wailing meltdowns come crunch time.” Before she could reply, he raised a hand and clarified the situation she faced. “I set this final target. Kiran did put up quite the fight, but necessary evils are required in circumstances such as these.”

He waited until Alex’s composure returned, smiling at the result. “This entire match came about to see who was more determined to fight for what is most important here.”

“By making me kill him? That’s hardly fair,” Alex hissed.

“Ah, there in lies the rub. Mathriel will kill Kiran. He will be most eager to have his turn and win this contest. He refuses to lose. Can you say the same? With both your souls on the line, is that enough to make you take your final shot and aim true?”

“It is and Alexandra won’t disagree with that.” From the shadowy distance behind Kiran emerged Alex’s grandparents walking hand in hand, both bearing confident smiles.

“Now is not the time!” Alex turned her head heavenward and let out an angry screech. “I don’t need two ghosts here making matters worse!”

Ares stepped out of the shadows around them laughing hard. “Ghosts. Damn, sister dear, I told you a long time ago to tell her the truth. Should I get you a white sheet and break out a Halloween soundtrack for mood music?” he teased.

Spellfire Moons

“Enough from the peanut gallery, Ares. Do you accept us joining her in the capacity the demon’s minions did for him?” Alex watched gobsmacked as the ghost of her grandmother reached out and swatted the God of War’s head hard.

“I did fifty eight minutes ago. You want to deal on formality or let your granddaughter take her shot.”

“I’m not shooting Kiran,” Alex protested vehemently. “He is worth risking everything, but I refuse to shoot an innocent man.”

Her grandfather strolled over to Alex side and pressed a loving kiss on her cheek. “Take your shot and we’ll explain everything in a moment.”

“I’d be shooting...” Her words died off when her grandmother looked at her and reiterated her grandfather’s order.

Mathriel spoke up voicing his disdain over the gushy family reunion. “Fire it off so I can take my last one. I knew you wouldn’t hit your target, but damn if I have a problem with it. He’s mine and I can fix him up before I have the pleasure of skinning him alive or something as colorful,” he said acidly.

“Fifty eight seconds, Alex.” Ares prompted.

Alex looked at her grandparents, then Kiran. “I hope to the Goddess this is meant to work out, Kiran.” She raised her bow and pulled back on the string, her arrow aimed for center mass on the paper target. As she exhaled, she closed her eyes and let loose her arrow. She couldn’t bear watching Kiran die, but through death, she reasoned there would be freedom. He would have what he truly deserved.

She winced at the soft thunk of her arrow meeting the target and melted into the comforting embrace her grandmother provided.

Seconds ticked by like hours until she heard the distinctive sound of Mathriel’s arrow shot from his own bow. Kiran’s ear piercing scream and the one from the demon master that followed sent Alex to her knees, hands over her ears to stifle the agonizing sounds. Her mind swam dizzily from the screeching cacophony around her. The match ended, but she fought to discern who won.

The terrifying sounds came to an abrupt end when Alex heard her grandmother speak up. “This will teach you to challenge a child of the Gods, worthless creature.” With a struggle, Alex lifted her head and spied Kiran’s demon master pinned to the earth by a single arrow

Spellfire Moons

through his sternum. “Release the other half of the human’s soul and return to the pit you crawled out from.”

Alex cleared away the throbbing sensation in her head, looking to Kiran who lay on the ground, his body contorted, the demon inside him rippling just under the surface struggling to tear itself free from the fleshy confined. Her grandmother repeated the order and Alex watched in horror as the demon burst free from the spot of the serpent branding on Kiran’s chest. Fully coherent, Alex saw the true form, unfettered by any semblance of humanity once cloaking it.

A deeper, inky, oozing blackness filled the night air and on a symphony of raucous howls and fear evoking screams, the demons vanished. The fall out left Kiran on the damp ground, eyes closed and his body stilled. Alex summoned the last of her strength and crawled to him, hefting his upper body and cradling it against her. In the oppressive heat of the Texas summer night, she felt cold skin against hers and saw no rise and fall of his chest.

Looking to her grandparents and Ares, she said not a word. Her tear filled look spoke volumes. Her grandmother’s reply broke her heart. “The rest is up to him now, Alexandra.” With every second that ticked by feeling the dead weight of Kiran’s body against her, Alex had a distinct feeling the decision was already made.

* * * *

Towel wrapped around her hair, fresh and dressed in clean clothes, Alex made her way down to the bar where the a few of the players in the deadly game waited on her. A single statement Ares made niggled at the back of her brain and demanded resolution. Sister, dear? It meant only one thing, but affirmation from the woman she called grandmother would be necessary.

She smiled briefly as she watched Kiran stand, his lips quirked in a seductive way. The searing kiss they shared the moment his eyes opened again out on the battlefield came to the fore of her thoughts and Alex’s cheeks warmed. If her grandparents hadn’t returned with them to Mischief Mike’s, her shower wouldn’t have been spent alone.

Alex looked away from Kiran to her grandparents cuddled close, flirty banter passing between them in hushed tones. “Start talking.” The demand broke the couple from the tender moment and her grandmother ushered her over to the table.

Spellfire Moons

“Seems Ryan and I do have a bit of explaining to do, don’t we dear.” Diana looked over at her soul mate and smiled.

“Yes you do, so if you don’t mind stopping the lovey dovey stuff with Granddad, start talking.” Alex folded her arms across her chest, striking a stern pose that didn’t relax when Kiran snuggled up behind her.

“Direct route, dear?” Diana got a nod from Ryan in reply. With a casual smile on her face, Diana began. “You have no idea how right you have been with that tattoo on your forearm, Alexandra.” She stood up and walked over, tugging Alex arm loose and smiling at the permanent ink design there. “Very succinct, sweetheart.”

“What Ares said?” Alex asked carefully.

“Oh, he is my brother. Well, half brother. Apollo, the twit is my only full brother, but I did teach you enough mythology to sort all that out.” Diana waved her hand breezily then settled on Ryan’s lap. “And you are our daughter, not granddaughter.”

Alex’s brows shot up and she sagged back against Kiran. “Ryan is indeed Orion, and yes, baby girl, we did screw with the history books on this one. Being that cranky virgin for so long got real old, real quick and I’ve loved this guy since the moment he had the balls to face me.” Diana added, furthering the leg weakening effect Alex felt.

“I’d explain the politics behind everything, but you’re still in your mortal phase and it would leave you old and grey by the time Ryan and I finished.” Ryan chuckled and Diana giggled. “Suffice it to say, we had to keep everything about your parentage quiet until it was an absolute necessity.”

Alex sputtered and squirmed. The information overload left her barely able to breathe. Ryan explained the reason why she had such unerring accuracy with her rifle and her bow. They were both gifts from Hephaestus made for her on the sly to piss Hera off. Diana asked to be called Artemis from that moment on. She hated her Roman personification.

“And now, with all of this said, you both have a choice to make. Alexandra, your powers have been held back from you to a great extent, as has your immortality from your birthright. If you choose to take it, now is the time.” Artemis looked from Alex to Kiran. “And you Kiran have to decide if my daughter has proven herself worthy

Spellfire Moons

enough for you to keep her and make us very happy for the rest of both your lives.” She laughed seeing his eyes widen slightly. “That means forever if she decides and grandchildren for us.”

Alex turned and looked up at Kiran, hoping he hadn’t slipped into a state of panic. Enough happened already that night. The news the Goddess and her lover dropped only added to the mess. He looked down at her with his piercing, sapphire blue eyes and began to smile. “Forever, oui?”

“Yes, Kiran, forever.” Artemis said with a stern warning in her voice.

Alex fought a little shiver of delight as he dipped his head and whispered to her how much he liked the idea. She felt the same way. When she held him as he lay so still against her out in the field earlier, she thought of a life without him and panic gripped her. The feeling was so wretched to face again. “I do too, Kiran.” she whispered back to him.

“Then it’s settled. Let’s toast on it, shall we?” Artemis waved a hand and four shot glasses appeared on the table in front of Orion.

“Um, one thing, Artemis?” Kiran asked. Alex stiffened in his gentle hold, fearing what he wanted to ask.

“What is it, Kiran?”

“Do we have to leave Spellfire? I ain’t much keen on the idea of marble palaces and all dat.” Both Alex and Artemis shared a little laugh over the discomfort in his expression.

“No. I have a feeling this bar is the perfect place for you two to be at, but might I suggest you getting a bigger place to live? After all, you go through with this and I expect lots of babies to spoil rotten.” Diana countered and Alex assured them it would happen soon enough.

“That toast then.” Orion passed out the glasses filled with a shimmering light green liquid in them. “To faith, acceptance and clarity,” he said raising his shot glass high. All agreed and Alex and Kiran sealed the toast with a kiss to last eternity.

* * * *

Alex nudged Sam playfully as she walked by. He teased her back, calling to everyone that a wide load was coming through. She tugged his ear and smacked his chest playfully. Such was another night at the bar.

Spellfire Moons

The truth having been told, Artemis and Orion left Alex and Kiran soon after the toast, granting them immortality with the ambrosia they drank. Alex came into her full gifts soon after, but felt little difference. She paid more attention to Kiran than the fact she became a shorter, blonde version of her mother.

When they came up for air and left Kiran's apartment a few days later, they started more than just their personal lives together. Kiran asked the owner of Mischief Mike's if he could buy the bar outright from him. A handshake and a simple contract later, the couple had more to call their own besides each other.

Along with a facelift to the place, they renamed the bar to Rage and reinvented the look and feel. Hephaestus sent 6 of his lackeys to build unbreakable furniture and Ares delivered, for his niece's sake, one of his lieutenants to serve as both bodyguard and head of security.

Resting her elbows on the bar and settling her chin on her hands, Alex surveyed everything around her. "Hard to believe it's been a year already, eh, Sam?" She smiled as Kiran got to a skirmish, breaking it up faster than Lycius could. The former half demon and the put upon soldier from Ares realm made it a contest to see who could tally the most in a week, a night, an hour. She shook her head, chuckling.

"Time still flies even when it don't matter to you, Alex." Sam replied sagely.

She peeked over at the weathered, still so very handsome grey haired fixture behind the bar. He hadn't shared his story with her yet. All she did know is he was a corporeal soul and the Battle of the Alamo was part of his sordid history.

"I know what you're thinkin, Alex." His chiding tone left her chuckling.

"Do ya now? So you don't mind redheads?" She blew him a kiss then pushed herself back from the bar and began rubbing her swollen belly. Sam was next. She fixed hers and Kiran's life. She couldn't wait to help Kiran's best friend.

"Just take care of the one growing inside you," he countered with a wink and smile, then a long suffering sigh leaving him. "Go break those two up. Worse than a sandbox fight with them."

Seeing Kiran and Lycius on the floor wrestling each other since no other fights needed to be broken up, Alex let out a sharp whistle

Spellfire Moons

and both men jumped to their feet, smiling sheepishly as they dabbed bloodied patches on their bodies.

She gave Lycius a friendly smile then crooked a finger at Kiran. “Lapdog,” she heard Lycius say. “At least I’m gettin’ some, gator bait.” Kiran shot back with his flying fist to the immortal warrior’s face before joining Alex at the bar.

“You two really do need to stop.” Alex laughed when Sam snorted as his way of agreeing.

“And ‘tite, you need to be restin’.” Almost possessively, she felt Kiran’s hands rest over the spot where the life they created continued to grow by the second. One more month and just one more product of the love they found would be in their arms.

Any nagging Kiran sought to continue with, Alex banished with a kiss and a whispered suggestion in his ear. A slow, seductive smile spread across Kiran’s face. “Time for me to show you again just how good my aim is.” he whispered back and Alex readily agreed.

High Chairs and High Stakes by Jenna Leigh

When Erin MacKenzie meets Matthias Gregory, a vampire raising his daughter alone, the witch-nanny finds that she's bitten off more than she can chew.

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High Chairs and High Stakes

By

Jenna Leigh

Chapter One

Erin looked down at the paper, then looked at it again to make sure of the address. She'd just received it this morning. A trailer? With a long sigh, she hefted her canvas tote and grumbled as she walked up the long gravel drive. Her broom sputtered out right at the old rusted mailbox, so she was hoofing it.

The stars were bright in the clear Texas sky. She breathed in the scent of the warm summer night and smiled. Spellfire with all its assorted magical beings was her favorite place in the world.

The man opening the door hardly fit the role of Reinfield. Instead, there stood a luscious slab of beefcake if ever she ever saw one. Her fingers itched to touch the raven black hair that just reached a pair of broad shoulders. The security lights surrounding the door threw his face into shadow, highlighting a pair of cheekbones so sharp they could cut glass. Full lips set off his square jaw to perfection. Then she noticed his eyes, the color of beaten silver, shining out from under straight black brows and felt herself sinking into them. Oh yeah, a hunka burning sex.

“Hi there, I’m Erin. I’m here to see–.” She looked down at the paper.

Spellfire Moons

“Matthias Gregory.” His voice came deep and rough with a faint British accent.

Shivers ran up and down her spine, some of them snuck down into her undies, making her clamp her thighs together.

“Yeah, that’s him.” She smiled brightly, walking closer to the door. “Do you know him? Is he here?” She moved in for the kill, intending to make her moves on this stud muffin before word got out about him around town.

“I am Matthias Gregory.”

Well, crap, wasn’t that always the way? Here stood Mr. Beefcake Deluxe—her new employer. Fate carried one hell of a long memory, she wasn’t the only one that TP’d their yard that time.

“Sheeit.” She sighed, her shoulders slumping dejectedly.

* * * *

“Pardon me?” His brow quirked in disbelief. Who was this frumpy little woman with hair that looked as if she’d stuck her finger in an electric socket? Surely she wasn’t the nanny. Another thought occurred to him. “How did you get here? I didn’t hear a car.”

“I flew.”

“You what?” He didn’t mean to yell, but this really started to be too much. “What are you?”

“I’m a witch, what the heck do you think?” She put her hands on her hips, drawing his eye to the waist he didn’t think existed up until now.

The dark blue dress she wore hung sack-like on her small frame. It wasn’t a good choice, but then again, what did he of all people know about women’s fashions? Her waist was small, and when she drew in her breath to speak again, her breasts swelled. So did his cock. She snapped her fingers in front of his face and he jerked back.

“I said, can I come in?” She tapped her toe on the doorstep impatient for his answer..

Automatically, Matthias bowed low from the waist and swept his hand out. “Please.”

Belatedly what she said registered and he started to shut the door on her.

“Hey!” She slid inside and glared at him. “What’s the big idea?”

“You’re a witch, get out.” He jerked the door back open and pointed in case she didn’t understand what he meant.

Spellfire Moons

She ignored his command and stood looking at the wall hanging that depicted a large dark castle illuminated by a big yellow moon. “I like it, the early torture chamber look is all the rage this year.” She kept walking down the hall, her backside twitching back and forth beneath the dress. “More tapestries, cool. Where in the hell is the T.V.?” The last shouted in a voice filled with outrage.

There was a burbling noise and her voice went from angry to delighted in a split second. “Hi there, you’re a cutie.”

Matthias growled before he hurried after her. “You, woman! Come here, I said to get out. What are you doing? Oh.”

She sat on the rug in front of the hearth of the small fireplace and smiled at the small lump beneath the blanket. The woman leaned down and picked up the edge. ‘Boo!’ There was an answering squeal of delight.

Matthias’ eyelid twitched. What was it she said again? Oh yes, *sheeit*. How apropos.

Chapter Two

A pair of bright silver eyes peered out at her before quickly disappearing with a muffled giggle. This must be her charge. A little girl, ten months old, bright, inquisitive and precocious had been words used to describe her. She was no fool, that meant a little bad egg too cute to be considered a brat. Erin had been precocious too, so they should get along.

The father was a vampire, the mother an unknown, which she didn't understand at all. She intended to find out, though. After all, she would be taking care of the baby, she needed to know her genetic background. What if she decided to go back to her roots and start eating people, beginning with her sweet and helpless nanny?

For now all she only wanted to get acquainted. With that in mind, Erin plopped down on the rug near enough to the blanket without crowding her. She waited, but the baby lay completely still, either too shy to come out or taking a nap.

After another minute, during which time, she heard the father making noises out in the hall, she lifted the blanket and played the peek-a-boo game. The little girl squealed and grabbed her hair, jerking her half under the blanket with her. The baby looked like a little angel with black curls and shining silver eyes framed by black lashes so thick that jealousy instantly sprang up in Erin's heart.

The baby pursed her lips and blew a few spit bubbles before grinning to show off her four front teeth and a dimple in each cheek.

"My name's Erin." She stroked the soft skin of the baby's face.

The tot looked up at her with solemn eyes before bursting into giggles once more. "Dada." At that moment, the blanket flew off and the very angelic face of Mr. Gregory filled their vision. He fit the more fallen variety though.

Spellfire Moons

“Excuse me, madam.” He began, but the baby had other ideas. She crawled over to him and held up her hands. He reached down and picked her up before continuing. “I am sorry to say I must ask you to leave my house and never return.”

“Why? You haven’t even done my interview yet.” Erin stood up, straightening her dress. This was the last time she took her mother’s fashion advice. She looked like a frumpy dumpling. Being voluptuous meant she needed less material and more tailoring to bring out her best features. Why did she worry about this, when he apparently detested her on the merits of her way of life. Nevertheless, she still fluffed the twins because you just never knew.

“I won’t have a witch in my home, attracting evil spirits and ill humors.” His upper lip curled into a sneer, showing off his fangs. However, his gaze slid down to her breasts before coming back up to her face.

She snorted and shook her head. “You have room to talk, Fangolicious.”

His eyes narrowed and he took a step forward. He gave a low menacing growl. “What did you call me, witch?”

“Fangolicious? Don’t you like it?”

He shook his head.

“How about, Caped Wonder, Blood Stud, Too Sexy for Your Fangs—”

“I’m not going to stand here and be insulted by the likes of you.” His roar interrupted her litany of nicknames. The baby whimpered and he immediately tried to comfort her. “Aurora, it’s all right. The witch won’t hurt you.”

“Well, I never!” Erin put her hands on her hips.

“I’m sure you have, many times.”

Was that an aspiration on her sorted and varied sex life? She thought about it for a minute. Yes, it was! She opened her mouth to give him what for and met the big eyes of her new charge only to smile instead.

Aurora gave her father a glare that made him visibly quail. “Dada.” She took a deep breath through her nose then smacked him on the cheek with her chubby and yes, slobbery fingers. “Eerie.”

Spellfire Moons

He opened his mouth then shut it, looking like a guppy. Erin rethought that analogy when she spotted the fangs. Ok, make that a shark.

* * * *

He clenched his jaws together to keep from growling. This woman irritated him and she'd only been here ten minutes. "I will not have my child exposed to the," he waved his hand back and forth, "folderol that comes with your sort."

"Mr. Gregory, just what sort of person did you expect to come out here? You did apply for a nanny at the Paranormal Tot's Agency. Did you think some straight-laced schoolmarm would show up? I'm good at my job. I know how they tick."

"No witches, I believe I specified that." He scowled down at her, trying to avoid looking at her neck. Spirals of dark red curls cascading out of the fat braid hung over her shoulder drawing his attention to the pulse beating beneath soft creamy skin of her neck.

"Obviously not. I'm a witch, but I'm a good one." She didn't look like she would hurt a fly, but he knew differently.

His thoughts skittered away from the recent happenings that resulted in the squirming bundle in his arms.

Aurora held her arms out to Erin, who took her with ease. "Mr. Gregory, please give me a chance. You won't be disappointed."

He heaved a sigh and looked her over for a long moment. "Fine. I have to go and pick up my blood supply in any case. You can keep her until I get back. If nothing happens in that time, I will agree to take you on."

She bounced on her toes with a grin. The baby giggled with each subsequent bounce.

"However," he held up his hand. "I will agree for a trial basis only. Then, we shall see."

"Yes, we shall." With that, they twirled away in one of those strange dances the people of this area liked to do. She wore boots, for heaven's sakes. What sort of witch wore cowboy boots?

Chapter Three

After she put the baby down for the night, Erin decided to enjoy the peace and quiet. She tried to read a book, but gave up after reading one page three different times. With nothing to occupy her, the hours ticked by slowly. The crickets were hitting their high notes, a fit accompaniment to her loss of sanity.

She heard a scraping noise, then another. Her hair rose on the back of her neck and she shoved the covers aside to scurry down toward the front door. She didn't turn on the hall light so of course, tripped and fell flat on her face. "Ow, that's gonna leave a mark." With a muttered curse, she lifted her hand to what she thought was the wall.

Just her luck, the walls here didn't have ears, instead, they talked, in prissy British accents too. "Madam, I'd appreciate you taking your hands off that."

Erin closed her eyes with a sigh, then opened them again and looked up into Matthias' face. His eyes were glowing with anger, again. In the space of a few hours, she'd ticked this man off more than she had anyone else in her whole entire life. People usually loved her. Not this guy.

"Off what?" She looked down and saw that her fingers curled into his waistband. "Oh, jeez, I'm sorry." She blushed when she noticed the bulge pressing against the fly of his jeans, and coincidentally right in front of her nose.

"It's fine."

Heck yeah it was! More than fine. *Wow.*

He raked his hand through his hair and helped her to stand up. "I'm not fit company tonight." He tried to smile, but failed.

"That's ok." She wiped her suddenly sweaty palms on her pajama pants and looked anywhere but his erection. Which, she noticed, despite her attempts not to, was still there. She settled on looking into

Spellfire Moons

his eyes instead, a big mistake. He looked positively ravenous. “Mr. Gregory,” she took a step back, “is something wrong?”

She suddenly grew conscious of the fact that they were all alone, miles from anyone else save a sleeping baby with only her natural immunity against the demonic elements as protection. Did vampires qualify as demonic? His eyes glowed red in the dark hallway, so she made an educated guess that they weren’t far off the mark.

“Yesss.” He hissed and put his hand on the wall. His dark hair slid across his face, obscuring his eyes. “I’m hungry.” He seemed to be trying control himself, so she relaxed.

“Didn’t you get your blood? I thought that’s where you were going.” She took another step back, trying to look as if she wasn’t running. Running from a predator insured that he was going to chase you, and catch you and eat you.

Her heart sped up at the connotations of the last. Now, that could be interesting.

* * * *

“I did.” He took a deep breath and then another not that it helped. He could smell her skin, he could practically taste her blood in his mouth. Hungry, he felt so very hungry. “I was on my way back, almost home, when I saw a lady stranded on the side of the road. I stopped to help her.”

“And you were set upon by bandits?” Her eyes filled with excitement at the very possibility.

“No.” He gave her a quelling look. “I helped her and left. I didn’t notice that my blood wasn’t in the car until I got home. It takes two hours both ways to my supplier. It will be dawn soon, and I get very sleepy when the dawn comes.”

“Should we call the cops?”

“Who, the blood patrol?” He pushed away from the wall and stumbled slightly.

She rushed to put her arm around his waist to steady him. He almost groaned aloud. He could hear her heart beating a rapid tattoo in her chest. The steady thrum of her pulse made his fangs slide out of his gums. He wanted a taste, just a small one.

She led him toward the living room and helped him onto the couch. “Why do you get sleepy in the daytime? I know vampires that don’t.”

Spellfire Moons

“I think it’s from being interred so long.” He shrugged, and then patted the couch beside him. “Come, sit.” He smiled at her, like a drunken sot. His blood sugar plummeted dangerously low. Dangerous for her, anyway.

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m not an idiot. I know what you want.”

“You have no idea what I want, Erin.” Her name rolled off his tongue, echoing in the room.

“You want blood, right?” She put her hands on her hips and tapped her toes on the floor. Her bare toes. She’d discarded the boots along with the dress. Instead, she wore a pair of pajama bottoms with little cows on them and a tank top. His night vision enabled him to see the dark circles of her nipples behind the thin material. As he watched, they hardened into stiff peaks that begged him to suck and nibble.

“Yes.” He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “I need it. Please, only this one time. I will go and get more tomorrow.” His thirst raged on, not helped at all by her near naked form standing over him like an avenging angel. Her hair fell in wild loose curls almost to her waist. He wanted to run his fingers through it, tangle his hands in the strands and hold her still for his kiss. The frumpy little termagant disappeared replaced by a beautiful siren. She should have one of those bright, yellow signs that warned about dangerous curves ahead.

Erin thought it over. “It is late.” She sighed and flopped down on the couch beside him. “I guess this one time is ok.” She held up her arm, and then just as quickly snatched it back. “Wait. How much do you need?”

“Only a few swallows. That will do me until tomorrow night.”

“Fine, bite me.” She held her arm out and squeezed her eyes shut.

For a long moment, he just sat there looking at her. “Erin?” He finally got out past the laughter.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t do arms. I’m a neck man.” And slightly lower, but she didn’t need to know that and he knew better than to ask. “Come here.” He slid his arm around her and tugged her upper body over his legs. “Sit like this, I’ll hold you up.” He heard the guttural tone in his voice and winced.

Spellfire Moons

She didn't seem to mind, in fact, she shivered and her nipples hardened further against the soft fabric of her shirt. Trustingly, she laid her head on his shoulder, exposing the long slim column of her neck to his gaze. He licked his lips and leaned down, laving the spot where her pulse throbbed. She squirmed, her breasts brushing against his chest again.

"Be still." He gripped her hair in his fist, holding her in place. With a groan of need, he opened his mouth and sank his fangs into her neck with a soft popping. She gasped but made no other sound.

At first he only tasted, but then unable to help himself, he drew long and deep. There was a roaring in his ears, his heart thundered in time with hers. She tasted like honeyed wine, refreshing as cold lemonade on a hot summer day.

As if from a distance he saw that he'd dragged her body tighter against his chest. His free hand slid under the hem of her shirt, he cupped the weight of her breast in his hand before rubbing his palm over the hard peak.

She arched up into his touch, her backside pressed firmly against his aching cock. She mewed and wound her arms around his neck. Her body shuddered, and he felt her pulse skip erratically.

He knew he must stop. With an effort, he pulled his fangs free, but kept his hand over her breast. Her heart slowly went back to its own rhythm, no longer in time with his. But the silky mound still rested beneath his palm, he couldn't resist squeezing it.

She said his name in a soft breathy whisper that made his cock twitch. Her breathing was coming in fast gulping sobs. She was crying. Dear God, he'd violated his child's nanny on her first night on the job!

He moved his hand down her ribs, back to the safety of her waist. "Are you all right?"

One hand pressed her face into his shoulder, and the other remained tangled in her hair. She took a shuddering breath then another but didn't move her head even when he let go. She only nodded jerkily. He stroked her back, soothing her.

After a few minutes, she got herself under control. At least, he thought so until she raised her head to look at him with those wide green eyes, filled with desire. He smelled it on her skin. "Can you do that again, please?"

Spellfire Moons

Matthias thought about it for at least half a second before he grinned. “Why yes I believe that I can manage that.”

Chapter Four

“I can’t believe I’m doing this.” Erin said for about the fiftieth time. She stood in his bedroom, not really sure of how she got there. One minute he’d given her the best orgasm of her life, with his fangs no less. Who knew that you had a g-spot on your neck? And in the next minute, she was in his room standing beside the bed.

“I can’t either, take off the shirt.” Matthias pulled at the bottom of her shirt, tugging it over her head. He tossed it over his shoulder and stared for a long moment.

“Stop that.” She snapped when he kept staring. “What is it with men and boobs?”

“This.” His hands slid up her rib cage, cupping her breasts. He squeezed them, lifting them up for a quick kiss on the top of each before he pinched her nipples. He gave each a tug, then stepped back. “Off with the pants too.”

His hands were busy unfastening his shirt so he missed her glare. Too bad, she’d used her special one. With a shrug, she slid her pajama pants off and folded her arms over her chest trying to ignore the fact that she stood there in a pair of lacy white panties that showed more than they covered. “I’m not taking off anything else until you do.”

He slid the shirt off and then went to work on his jeans. She watched his hands slowly undoing the buttons. Tortuously slow.

“You’re doing that on purpose.” She batted his hands away and undid the remaining two before she jerked them down past his knees in one smooth motion and almost put her eye out. Man, what a tent that pole would make! She jerked her gaze away from Mr. Happy Camper and stared back up into his heated eyes.

He grabbed her elbows and pulled her up from her girl’s eye view of his penis. With a very hungry smile, he spread his big hand across her lower back. Tingles ran up and down her spine at that small

Spellfire Moons

amount of contact. He pushed her back until her knees made contact with the edge of the bed.

She fell, bouncing slightly before he followed her down. His hands slid up her ribs, cupping her breasts. He took a meandering path up her arms until he laced his fingers with hers.

His tongue plunged inside her mouth, taking possession of it, darting in and then retreating in an imitation of what she wanted him to be doing with his cock. He broke the kiss to look down at her. "Erin? Are you sure?"

"About what?" Her voice sounded breathless and wispy even to her own ears. She could be forgiven for not thinking clearly, he'd given her some of the best sex ever, well, without actually using the cock some lovely and benevolent goddess blessed him with that was. And it was a goddess, she knew, as a god wouldn't have given away a penis like the one Matthias was sporting. Nice thick and even now poking her in the thigh. No, a god would have kept it all to his divine self. "This." He wedged himself between her thighs, sliding the head of his shaft up and down her slit. He squeezed her butt and she felt the slow slide of heat pooling in her belly. She bit her lip and moaned when his thumb caressed the bottom curve of her ass. His fingers skimmed under the crotch of her panties, all while he watched her with those bright silver eyes, waiting.

"Yes." She finally stuttered out. Her body went up in flames and the man hadn't even gotten started. What was wrong with her? She didn't know, but she refused to play the passive role.

* * * *

He circled the entrance to her sex before thrusting his fingers inside her. The wetness of her arousal greeted him. He slid another finger inside her heat; she opened her legs wider and pushed back against his hand. He watched her come apart, and then her ragged breathing drew his attention to the ripe curves of her breasts. With a groan, he leaned down to feast.

He laved first one nipple then the other with his tongue, allowing them to cool between each time before starting again. His squeezed their silky weight in both hands, his hips pressing her to the mattress. He circled her nipples with his fingers, then pinched them, just until it stung. With each touch of his hands and mouth, she whimpered in the

Spellfire Moons

back of her throat. Her response to him almost pushed him over the edge.

"I want you." She told him with a sexy little growl.

"Yes, but what do you want me to do?"

"Everything!" She commanded.

Matthias laughed and conceded easily enough, nibbling at her throat, starting over just to tease. He finally reached the top of her breast and stopped, sucking on the skin there.

She wiggled, pressing herself against him, her fingers digging into his shoulders. She looked down at the mark he'd made, and tugged his hair.

Then he moved, his mouth fastening on her breast and sucking hard. She gasped and her hips lifted in reaction, but he just moved from one breast to the other and back again.

"Matthias." Her hands tugged at him, but he twisted away and moved down, slicking his tongue between her breasts before taking a fast track to her navel. He paused and nibbled the soft flesh of her belly. He raked his teeth down further, stopping to tug at the top of her panties.

He pushed her thighs apart. She wiggled, but he only held her a little tighter, lightly caressing the soft skin of her inner thighs, barely edging his thumbs beneath the sides of her underwear. He could smell the spicy feminine scent of her arousal. He wanted to taste her, to lick her until she writhed and screamed his name.

She made a small mewling sound, and he answered with a growl. The fabric tore beneath his hands. He stroked his fingers up and down the strip of curls that covered her pussy.

"Watch me." He said, his mouth so close to her she could feel the vibrations from his voice. She looked down, leaning up on her elbows. When her eyes met his, he slowly parted the folds of her sex, finding the little pearl of her clit with his mouth. His tongue circled it, flicking back and forth and with each movement she jerked, her mouth opening, her breath coming in soft pants.

She clutched her fingers in the sheets, her arms began to shake. He smiled when she bobbed, almost falling back. He pulled her to the edge of the bed, kneeling between her thighs. "Matthias." She said his name in a soft husky whisper. "Come up here with me."

Spellfire Moons

In answer, he lifted her legs and pulled her half off the bed. She muffled a scream when his mouth found her again.

He laved the tiny peak, spearing it with his tongue. He sucked hard, then nibbled, his fingers thrusting in time with each caress of his mouth until she exploded, flooding his hand and his mouth with her essence. He pulled his fingers out of her and licked them clean. "Sweet."

"Please." Her voice was deep and throaty.

He moved quickly, up and over her. He braced himself with his hands on either side of her head and thrust home, burying himself to the hilt in that one move. Reveling in the tightening of her inner muscles.

"Yes." The breathless sound of her voice made his cock swell. He wanted to conquer her, but held back, just barely. He pulled her hips to meet his with each thrust, taming his lust just enough to keep from hurting her.

She scratched her nails down his back, digging her fingers into hips to make him move, take, give.

He moved back, pulling almost out of her, before he plunged inside again. Each smooth stroke pushing her higher than before. She tossed her head back and forth on the sheets. Her hair fanned out in a crimson halo of silk. He buried his face in the soft strands and inhaled her scent.

She sighed and arched beneath him, her legs slid up and down his flanks. He canted his hips, angling them to reach the spot behind her clit. Her eyes went wide and her mouth opened. He captured her face in his hands and slid his tongue inside her mouth, thrusting in time with the movement of his hips. He groaned when she sucked on it.

Drawing her body up against his, he cradled her to his chest. Each time she clenched around him he fought for control, wanting to make it last as long as possible. It was a battle, one he would eventually lose, not that he minded in the least.

He moved his hand between their bodies, finding her clit and stroking it, pinching it. She made a high-pitched keening sound. Her pussy gripped his cock harder with each successive wave of her orgasm.

"Erin." He snarled her name, his lips curled back, exposing his fangs. He tangled his fingers in her hair and bit her neck.

Spellfire Moons

She didn't try and stop him but arched her body up closer to his own, this time his target was the blue vein of her breast. His fangs sank into her flesh again and her body jerked and quivered beneath his. "Oh, God, don't stop." She whimpered.

He growled, his hips moved in a frenzied dance. The rhythmic sound of her heart thundered in his ears, pressing him onward. Her muscles clenched around him like a warm wet fist, milking his cock. His balls tightened and he shuddered. His cock jerked, spewing his hot seed into her. He heard her gasp his name out on a shaky sigh. With one final thrust, he fell, fast and hard only to drift, soft and sweet into oblivion.

Chapter Five

Matthias opened his eyes and immediately shut them against the glare of the sun. What time was it? He glanced at the clock and jumped out of the bed. “Bloody hell, it’s noon! Where is Aurora?” She usually woke him up with her warbling and gibberish.

“Aurora!” He bellowed, jerking on his pants as he ran, hoping that she’d only escaped from her crib. He reached the back of the house and stopped to stare out the window.

Erin and Aurora were outside sitting in that horrendously pink kiddie pool he’d bought from the local department store. Aurora had on a sun hat and a pair of shades. A blue streak graced her tiny nose, which wrinkled with her grin. As he watched, she splashed the woman. “Eerie!”

Erin shrieked with feigned horror, sputtering and falling over in the pool. She sat up and raked her hair out of her eyes. His gaze dipped down to the top of her suit. Basically, two bits of turquoise material were held together by straps and good wishes. A small silver clasp glinted between the firm swell of her breasts. He licked his lips and hoped for the best.

“Rory, you little dickens! You are tryin to drown me.”

The baby laughed and slipped, falling beneath the surface before popping back up with a gasp. He tensed, waiting for her wails of distress. Instead, she glared, her glasses askew enough to show her silvery eyes, even from this distance. It didn’t seem to affect the woman one bit if her howls of laughter were anything go by. He grinned despite his unease that still carried over about her.

She was still a witch. Witches came into his crypt and disturbed his slumber, stole his seed in some strange ritual and made this child. Witches almost took what he treasured the most. He shook his head

Spellfire Moons

and cut off the thought before he could complete it. It didn't matter now, they were both safe here in Spellfire.

And then there was last night, or early this morning rather, with *her*. As if she sensed his stare, Erin looked up and caught sight of his face at the window. She waved at him.

Aurora began to chant dada singsong voice. Like a sailor lured to death on the rocky shores, he put on a pair of shades and followed the siren call outside into the bright sunlight.

The ability to walk out in the broad open day befuddled him. He always thought vampires were creatures of darkness, cursed to spend their lives in an endless succession of nights.

Another myth was their inability to father children. Apparently, that Vlad person suffered from impotence. Maybe the man had been so pasty that he was unlucky with the ladies.

"Come out and play with her. She's been asking for you all morning." Erin's voice broke into his musings. "What do you do when you're here alone with her?"

"I get up when she does, usually." He scowled at her for making him go on the defensive. But he saw only curiosity, so he tried for a smile, instead. It must have worked because she blushed. His smile widened and he sauntered down the steps to sit beside the pool beneath the umbrella.

"About what happened last night." She handed the baby a pail to distract her.

"Which time?" He loaded the word with as much innuendo as possible. She blushed again. *Interesting*.

"I don't usually do that sort of thing." She looked down, twisting her hands together in her lap.

"I'm sure you don't." He sighed and leaned back in the chair.

* * * *

At that, she jerked her head up and glared at him. "What's that supposed to mean?" Either he meant she did do that sort of thing all the time and was good at it, or he insinuated that she didn't and therefore sucked at it. One way or another she felt highly insulted. Ok, maybe not the good at it part.

One black brow rose above his shades and he smiled, showing her those even teeth again. "It means I believe you."

Spellfire Moons

She bit back the retort that sprang to her lips. She doubted it highly. That was fine; hell would freeze over before he so much as got near her again.

“Erin?”

“What?”

“Will you go with me and Aurora tonight?” His smooth velvety voice made her want to say yes. But she was made of sterner stuff. She wouldn’t succumb just because the sound of her name on his lips made her belly ache and her nipples harden. She wouldn’t. “I have to go back for more blood. Unless you’re willing to donate again.” He made it sound as if it didn’t really matter at all.

“No.” Erin tried to ignore the heat that low voiced comment caused in her belly and much lower. “But, I should probably stay here.”

“Come now, there’s no reason for you to stay here all alone.”

“Peas?” Aurora put her hand on Erin’s knee and showed her dimples. Unfortunately, even she couldn’t conjure up a spell to combat the child’s charm.

Erin used the baby as her excuse as she dressed that evening. Earlier today, she’d done a bit of magic, moving her things out here with a mere wave of her hand and a well-chanted spell. Being a witch had its perks.

Other times, like now, it sucked, because she could practically smell the plot that baby was cooking up in her tiny little brain. ‘Peas’ indeed. That little word, accompanied by the batting of lashes and the dimples was a deadly combination. The fact that the father added his own to the mix hadn’t helped her at all.

She intended to use the time in the car with Matthias to grill him on his past, and the incident from last night. She had a bad feeling about it. It didn’t take precognitive abilities to figure out that there was more to that than met the eye. And another thing, why in the hell was a British vamp living in a trailer in the middle of Texas?

Chapter Six

Matthias knew Erin had questions. He wanted to trust her, but feared of letting someone get too close to him. As the day waned to evening, he stayed out of her way. He and the baby went into her room and played before getting dressed to go out. Soon, he found himself trapped in the car with the most inquisitive female he'd ever had the misfortune to come across. About ten miles out of the city limits, Erin began to talk. And talk, and did she ever shut up?

“So, Matt, can I call you Matt?”

“No. I am Matthias, you may call me that.”

“I don't like it, it's so, formal.” She waved her hand back and forth. In the back, the baby slowly nodded her head to the music Erin wanted to listen to. Who cared who made honky tonk angels, and what in the hell was a honky tonk?

“It sounds like something you wipe your feet on.” He started to pass a slow-moving truck. He tensed and held his breath until they made it.

“You don't like driving?” When he felt it safe to look at her, he found her watching him.

“No.”

“You do it well.” Her fingers played with her seatbelt. She fidgeted when nervous or embarrassed. She also bit her bottom lip, which he found highly arousing for some reason. He wanted to bite it too.

“Da!” The soft voice from the back jolted him out of his lustful thoughts.

“What is it Aurora?”

She let loose a string of indecipherable babbling that passed for words.

Spellfire Moons

“Yes, that’s nice. I’m glad you told me.” He caught Erin watching him. “What?” He prompted when she said nothing.

“You do that well too.”

His chest tightened, and he felt the pride swell inside him. “Thank you, it’s nice to hear.”

“So, how did it happen? Her? Where’s her mom?”

The weight of her stare loosened his tongue. “I was in my crypt, asleep. I’d been in hibernation for almost a century when one night chanting awakened me. They stole my seed and used it for their own purposes.” His skin burned with embarrassment when he told that part. How bloody embarrassing to admit that someone stole your sperm.

“Ew. You mean someone,” she paused and made motions with her hands. “You know.”

“No. They did some magic and it was er... collected, and then they used it on this young woman.”

“Ok, even more, ew. She was artificially inseminated with the sperm of a corpse?”

“I’m not a corpse! If you will recall, you didn’t seem to mind my—” He lowered his voice. “Seed last night.”

“That’s different.” Her lips were set into a firm line. “We were both awake, and you were willing.” She glanced down at his lap. “More than willing.”

“You weren’t hard to convince, woman.”

“Ah, I’m a woman, now? I suppose that’s better than witch.” She sounded severe but her lips twitched and her eyes twinkled.

His body heated and his fangs began to emerge. But he continued on, with a highly censored version of the rest. “My rest was disturbed, but only briefly. I grumbled about women in general and witches in particular but went back to sleep. Or so I thought. About 13 months later, I began to be plagued by these dreams.”

He took a deep breath, trying to stop the panic from closing in again. “I woke with a sense of certain death in my future. What I didn’t know was that Aurora was calling me, she was afraid. Her mother and the others intended to use her for their own ends, and then more than likely,” he stopped and looked in the rearview mirror, noting that the baby now slept, so he continued. “They were going to

Spellfire Moons

kill her. I swept in, stole her from beneath their noses and we've been together since."

"But a trailer? I thought all vamps were rich." Erin wrinkled her nose.

"A trailer is what I could afford on the little bit of gold I secreted beneath my body in the coffin. I bought plane tickets and passports in false names, traveled here on the advice of a friend and then, put in a request with your agency. I should have been more specific."

"Are you that disappointed in who you got, Matt?"

"Matthias," he corrected without much heat. "No, I'm not."

She rewarded him with a smile, then snuck in another question. "When they took your blood last night, where did you have it?"

His eyes widened in alarm. "The smaller bags come in a thermal carrier, to keep it fresh. I just put it in the baby seat." He turned to look at her. "You don't think they were after--"

"Rory? Probably." Erin's eyes narrowed and she had her teeth set in her lip again. This time, he didn't feel arousal at all. Instead, he felt fear for his child's safety and anger at those that dared to threaten her.

Chapter Seven

The trip to his supplier was uneventful, but as the trio got about a mile from their home, two things happened at once. The baby woke up and screamed and a car pulled out of a side road blocking their way. Matthias cursed and slammed on the brakes, coming to a screeching halt only inches from the passenger side door.

None other than Aurora's mother sat in the seat watching with wide blue eyes. A woman that went by the unlikely name of Vixienne. It sounded like those eye drops for heaven's sakes. Her blonde hair was long, dirty and unkempt looking. Dear, lord, she was a sight.

Erin poked her head out the window, "Get that damn car out the way, or I'll move it and then you'll be sorry!" She screeched in anger. Aurora echoed it from the back seat. It changed to a whimper when a shadow fell across Matthias' window.

He looked up into the face that haunted Aurora's and subsequently his own, nightmares. The tall bony frame of the monster sidled even closer. His cheekbones protruded making stark shadows on his sallow face. The fires of madness glowed within the dark depths of his eyes.

"Zeb." Matthias whispered his name in a voice filled with hate.

Suddenly, the man struck the window beside the baby with his massive fist. It held but the baby howled and Erin reacted. She stood in her seat, popping her head out of the sunroof. "Hey ugly! Back away from the car."

Matthias' mouth hung open and he stared up at her in shock. "Get down, I will go around them." Before he got the words out of his mouth, she let loose with a string of strange words that made his scalp tingle.

Spellfire Moons

“I said, back up, final warning.” Erin nudged him with her toe. Matthias looked down and saw that her toenail was a pretty purple shade, it was also pointing at his door.

She lifted her arms and pointed at the car with both of her index fingers. “Encima de!” Light shot from her hands and hit the car.

Matthias opened his car door and hit the man in the belly with satisfying thud. At that moment, the car that blocked the road, rose up and slid off into the ditch.

Erin sat down and punched him on the shoulder. “Put the pedal to the metal, and let’s get the hell out of here!”

The car left a trail of smoking rubber on the highway. The sound of her rebel yell set his ears to throbbing, but he grinned when she kissed his cheek with a loud smack before sliding into the back to comfort Aurora.

They wheeled into the drive, the tires crunching on the gravel as he sped toward the house. He jumped out and grabbed the baby. “Get my blood and come on.” They ran into the house and slammed the door.

Erin moved her hands in a pattern and strange glowing symbols flashed in their wake.

“What are you doing?” He followed her as she did the same at all the windows and the back door as well. Finally, he stopped her with his hand on her arm. “I asked a question.”

“I am warding this house.” She snapped, shrugging his hand off. “Stupid man.” She went and sat in front of the window that faced the road.

He joined her, and they didn’t have long to wait before the same car drove past the driveway. It didn’t stop which for some reason made her snicker.

He hitched the now snuffling baby up higher in his arms and glared at her. “What’s so funny? They know where we are, this isn’t a fortress by any means.”

“It is for now.” She giggled, looking young enough to make his heart pang in regret. She shouldn’t be involved in this, despite his feelings about witches; this woman was innocent of any wrongdoing.

“Please explain.”

“I warded the house. But, being the lovely wonderful witch I am, I also put a spell on it. All they saw was an old dilapidated barn, so,

Spellfire Moons

we're safe for now." She stood and walked toward the back of the house.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to bed. Spell casting takes a lot out of a girl." She wobbled slightly but righted herself and kept going. He noticed that she was heading toward his room. He also couldn't help but notice that it made his heart warm to think of her sleeping in his bed.

He turned his head and looked at Aurora, who slept peacefully as if the whole night hadn't happened. She even snored. He kissed her forehead before putting her in her crib. "Goodnight, princess." He stroked her cheek and left her to dream.

When he walked into his room, he stopped and stared. Erin lay on her side with her back to the door. She wasn't kidding about being tired. All she'd removed were her shoes. She still wore the jeans and t-shirt that hugged her curves and drew his eye more than he cared to admit.

He sighed and tucked the blanket around her, before he booted up the computer he'd finally learned to use. He hated the blasted things, but they provided him with an income that he and his child needed to survive here.

Falsified documents were expensive, but what else was he to do? He was over 100 years old but he couldn't very well put that on his driver's license. Learning to drive had been a horrifying experience, he missed the horse and carriage of yesteryear. The monitor blinked to life and he put the headphones on, adjusting them to fit.

Chapter Eight

Erin was having the best dream. Matthias spoke in that deep sexy voice of his. Just the sound of it made her tingle, the things he said didn't hurt. "You are the most beautiful woman in the world. I want to devour the dew from your rose petal lips. "

Aw, how sweet, she smiled in her sleep and pressed her thighs together to help ease the ache in her pussy at his words. Wait, he wanted to suck her spit?

"Your breasts are like firm ivory pillows on which to rest my head."

Eh? She furrowed her brow, but he continued to speak.

"Your soft, plump buttocks feel like silk to my rough workman's hands."

Hey! She snapped fully awake and glared at him. "Matthias?" Her voice dipped down into a dangerous zone that made all men quail in terror.

He was no exception, he hunched his shoulders before turning to look back at her. "What is it?"

"Did you just say I had a fat ass?" Ice dripped off her words.

"What are you talking about, woman?"

"You said my ass was fat. I heard you, clear as day."

"I wasn't talking to you." He spoke quickly out of a sense of self-preservation brought about by the fact that she looked like the gorgon rising from her nest.

"Then, who the hell were you speaking to?"

"I-." He closed his lips firmly.

She put her hands on her hips and scowled at him for a minute then looked at his computer screen. After rubbing her eyes and squinting, she smiled. "What is this? Do you write romances? That is so cool. Lemme read it!" She tried to shove him out of the way, but he didn't budge, she may as well try to move a tree.

Spellfire Moons

“I do not write romances.” Matthias’ eyes flashed in ire. “I read them aloud for an audio book company.”

“Really?” She loved romances, but not the overly sweet ones. Her favorites always involved some smartass heroine that basically aggravated the poor hero until he screwed her brains out to shut her up. She stopped and thought of the ramifications of that for a full thirty seconds before she grinned down at her victi-, hero. She nudged him until he scooted back then she sat on his knee. “Read it to me.”

“No.” He grunted when she poked him, but otherwise sat there with a blush staining his cheeks.

“Are you embarrassed?”

“Perhaps.”

“Aw, don’t be. It’s because you have such a beautiful voice, I like it.” She kissed his cheek. “Read it to me?”

“Fine. But don’t look at me.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I won’t.” She let him settle back into his reading, then proceeded to give him some motivation.

* * * *

Matthias’ voice hitched when she whipped off her shirt and jeans. When she undid the bra and threw it aside, he paused and just stared. She wasn’t skinny, instead she curved, dangerously from the full mounds of her pink tipped breasts to her trim waist before her hips flared out to a pair of long legs that he wanted wrapped around his waist or over his shoulders right now.

She seemed to have other ideas because she slid between his thighs motioning for him to keep reading. She skimmed her fingers under his shirt and leaned forward to lick the exposed skin of his abdomen. Running her tongue into the well of his navel, she bit down right when he came to a stopping point in his narrative.

“Erin.” His growl carried a note of warning, but she ignored it, instead she looked up the long line of his body and arched her brow in challenge. “Minx.”

“Minx.” She snickered. “You read too many romance novels.”

She began to unbutton his fly, but he manfully kept up his end of the bargain. His cock sprang free of his jeans and she ran her fingers up and down the length of it. He obligingly lifted his hips for her to

Spellfire Moons

pull his jeans down and off. The feel of her smooth skin against the insides of his thighs made his balls tighten and his shaft jump.

She giggled and leaned forward, gripping the base of him. "You're beautiful." She whispered, her mouth grazing the flared tip. "Keep reading." She flicked it once with her tongue and he lurched toward her mouth.

He shuddered, but continued his narrative with a voice gone rough with need. At least a century passed since he'd last felt the warmth of a woman's mouth on him.

He wanted to grab and hold but she avoided his embrace. Her nails raked up his thighs, circling but not quite touching his cock. She ran her fingers over his lips. With each movement, her breasts rubbed against him. She moved closer when he hissed out a breath. Erin's mouth caressed his throat then she bit him. She leaned up on her knees and kissed his mouth again.

She distracted him so he never knew how she really did it. She pressed her breasts together around his cock moving up and down slightly. He muffled a groan.

Erin laughed huskily, the sound crawling up his spine. Her tongue touched the tip of him while she surrounded his shaft with her breasts. It was almost too much but he held on, he wanted inside her. "If you don't stop I won't make it."

She just took him into her mouth, sucking him harder. When he was all the way inside, her fingers cupped his sac. She tugged slightly and skimmed her teeth gently around the flared head of his cock. Matthias growled and pushed his fingers into her hair. He thrust against her mouth helpless to stop.

She took him, all of him it felt like she was trying to devour him now.

"Sweetheart, I- ." He started to warn her, tried to pull her away.

She growled, nipping him with her teeth and he stiffened, his body coming off the bench. Her arms wrapped around his waist and she stopped.

"I want to taste you." Her breath was warm. She hummed slightly as she took him back in her mouth, her fingers circling the base and squeezing.

His head fell back and he bit his lip until it bled. His balls ached, his nerve endings crackled and with a shout, he spilled his seed. Stars

Spellfire Moons

exploded behind his closed lids as his hips jerked up in the chair. His hands fisted in her long curly hair as Erin gave a husky little growl and drank him down.

She sat there between his thighs, her head on his thigh while he ran a shaky hand through her tangled tresses.

“You shall pay for taking me away from my work.” He filled his voice with menace.

"Promises, promises." She didn't sound at all convinced.

He tugged on her hair making her look up at him. His hand cupped her cheek as he leaned down and kissed her. He pulled her into his lap and held her close. Forever, he wanted her with him forever.

He opened his mouth to tell her just that when they heard it, a sound coming from the back of the house. It wasn't loud, which made it even more frightening because it meant someone wanted to be quiet. A person only tried that if they were up to something.

“Get dressed.” He set her on her feet and stood to pull his pants up. By the time he headed to the door, she was dressed as well.

“I'll go get Aurora.” She ran the short distance down the hall.

He moved to look out the window at the back lawn, illuminated by the almost full moon. He didn't see anything out of place, maybe it had just been a wild animal.

Soon she padded back down the hall toward him. He turned and smiled at her. She held Aurora in her arms. The baby blinked owlishly at them both. Her brows snapped down in a grumpy frown. He held out his arms to take her from Erin. “I think it was one of those armadillos.”

“Oh, did you see it?” She craned her neck to look around his shoulder. At just that moment, hell broke loose. A rock crashed through the window. “Shit!”

Matthias turned his body to protect both of them from the flying glass. “Get into the bathroom, it doesn't have windows.” He pushed her into his room and slammed the door in place before he ran back to the now broken window.

He went out onto the back porch and used every enhanced sense he possessed to root out the danger to his family. That thought stopped him. Since when did Erin qualify as family? When she ignored him and played with the baby that first day? When she told

Spellfire Moons

him to bite her and held out her arm? Or when she sweetly surrendered her body to him?

He shook off his introspection and with one last glare, he stalked back into his house, slamming the door and locking it behind him.

He pulled one of the closet doors off in the spare bedroom and shoved it over the broken window. With a growl, he slammed nails into it with his bare fist, quickly securing it into place. Then he stood in the hall with his head bowed, taking deep breaths to calm his rage.

They'd come for him, he'd known they would. He didn't think they'd find him this soon, but they had. Now his child was in danger, and so was Erin. That would never do, he had to get them out of harm's way as soon as possible.

He reached his room and stopped to take in the sight of them curled on one side of his bed. Erin lay with the baby's head snuggled beneath her chin. The child had her fingers in her mouth.

He recalled the night he took her. She'd been so small, but so beautiful, her eyes were the same as his own, her hair was as black as sin, but there the similarities ended, for Aurora was a sunny child. Like her name, she recreated the dawn in his life. The sun that brightened the endless night he'd been cursed with for longer than he cared to remember.

Now, Erin was here, and if nothing else, she brought the fire, finding the coldest of corners warming them. He aimed to keep them both safe. No matter what. With that in mind, he settled down to wait.

Chapter Nine

Why did people always pick the middle of the night to do things? This thought rambled through Matthias' mind while he moved with the utmost stealth through his home. He slid close to the wall and listened.

The sound came again, a small creak from the direction of the kitchen. As quietly as possible, he ran toward the sound. He arrived just in time to see the door burst inward.

And there he stood, the man from his child's nightmares. His long menacing shadow slid into the room first, spreading to all the corners of the formerly cozy kitchen, leaving an oily residue behind. "Hello, Matthias." He stood at the threshold, smiling that rictus smile.

"Zeb." Matthias curled his lip; the name itself filled him with distaste.

"Bring us the child and we will leave you in peace." Zeb's lips quirked. "You and your new friend can always make more." He tilted his head to one side and looked beyond Matthias' shoulder.

The other man didn't turn, just held his hand out behind him. Despite her attempts to be quiet, he heard Erin the minute she left the bedroom. "Stay back."

"Nice to see a fellow follower of the way." Zeb bowed his head to Erin.

Apparently, this made Erin angry, as she positively bristled with her reply. "I take it you're the idiot that's been giving all witches a bad name." She made shooin' motions with her hands. "Poof, begone!"

Matthias frowned at her. "Did you think that would actually work?"

"No." Her lips curled in a smile. "But the warding spell I put on the threshold sure has."

Spellfire Moons

“She is unfortunately, correct.” Zeb spread his fingers wide and pushed but couldn’t enter the house. “What conditions did you put on this ward, little witch?”

“If I told you, then I’d have to kill you.” Erin’s sweet smile didn’t fool either man one bit.

“I’m quite sure I can figure it out.” Zeb stroked his long fingers down his chin and pretended to contemplate it. “You’re a good little girl, taught all that ‘harm none’ propaganda.”

Erin leaned against the doorframe, standing beside Matthias. “Yeah, so what if I was, Zeb?” She drawled his name, adding insult to it just by the tone.

“Then, one who intends no harm could get in, at least logic would suggest so.” His smile widened, showing off his crooked teeth.

The tinkling of glass sent them running back toward Aurora. Zeb’s laughter echoed hollowly in their ears when they reached the bedroom to find her gone. The curtains billowed through the broken window. Matthias let out a wordless howl and leapt out of the window without even pausing.

* * * *

Erin, didn’t possess this talent so she made her way toward the door just in time to see a woman with long blonde hair disappear into the woods. “Well, damn.” She sighed and grabbed her broom, hoping it would work.

She picked up her tote bag and pulled out her spell belt. It was really a modified tool-belt, but who was to know? It held pockets for ready-made spells and potions and a spot that held her wand. She slid it into place, adjusting it so it hung low on her hips. “Well, Pilgrim,” she drawled and tipped her imaginary hat, “It’s time to do that voodoo we do so well,” before she sauntered out the door.

She took a deep breath and held her broom out beside her parallel to the ground. She used the first two fingers of her right hand to hold it up as she concentrated. Then, she let out her breath at the same time as she released the handle. The thump as it hit the ground made her jump.

Damn. She grumbled and muttered, picking up the broom and stalking towards the woods. “How undignified. I’m the dumb witch walking!”

Spellfire Moons

She tripped over a root in the gloom and cursed when she hit the ground. The broom quivered in her hand. “What on earth?” She stood and took another step, and it jumped to life, practically humming. “Hot dawg!” She crowed in triumph and hopped on. “Up!”

With that, she was off, zooming just over the treetops, following the softly glittering ‘path’ before her. Nothing made a sound, no feeling of anyone or anything else alive in the woods. In a rural area like this, the animals should be out but not even a mosquito seemed to stir. The latter was a blessing but not natural by any stretch of the imagination.

She let her own ‘senses’ guide her. Magic was a heady thing, dark magic was even more so, it was like rich, dark chocolate to her senses, sweet, and bitter and rich enough to make her belly ache if she had too much. Dark and Light were not necessarily evil and good, she knew this. But there were those that used their magic for evil. This Zeb person fell into that type, if she didn’t miss her guess.

Erin came to a stop so sudden that she almost fell off her broom. She bent over at the waist and bit her lip to keep from crying out. Pain, there was pain here, she couldn’t tell if it was the baby or Matthias, but she aimed to find out. She finally straightened back up and continued onward.

Flying became an agonizing process. She wanted to turn tail and head back to town. But, she couldn’t do that. Aurora’s sweet face flickered into her mind not to mention the sexy piece of beefcake’s handsome visage. These two helped to spur her along, and gave her strength. She was a MacKenzie. They invented the word stubborn.

Chapter Ten

A small tug at the edge of her awareness made her look down. Right behind a small copse of trees on a rise, flames flickered. As she circled, the fire sent sparks into the air, barely missing the straw on her broom. “How rude.” She banked left and landed out of sight of the fire and the people milling about in front of it.

Erin peered over the top of an out-of-control crepe myrtle bush, ducking back quickly when the tall one named Zeb looked her way. With another more cautious peek, she spied Aurora sitting on a blanket beside a little blonde woman. This must be the sperm-stealing mother. What had the leader of this bit of foreign freakiness said about her warding?

She thought back for a second. Then, she figured it out. Her ward specified that none with evil intent could enter the house. Therefore, this Vixienne person didn’t have any. She looked at the woman’s eyes and saw blankness. Ah, brainwashing, magical or otherwise cleared this girl’s databanks. She hoped it wasn’t permanent, but she had a feeling it was. Old Zeb didn’t seem the type to care about undoing his damage, he reveled in the chaos. With a smile that would have done her mother proud, Erin slid down to the ground and moved stealthily around the brush until she was right behind Aurora. She wondered why the baby didn’t seem unduly frightened, until Aurora turned her head and stared at the place where Erin sat. She smiled at her, and in that smile, Erin saw her chance. She also saw something else, which she’d be saving for later if they all got out of this alive.

“Come on out, I know you’re there.” Zeb’s deep voice echoed into the dark.

Erin’s hand itched to go for her wand, but she would only have the one shot and she didn’t want to waste it.

“Are you going to make this difficult? We can bring you out.” He turned and motioned for the others to gather around.

Spellfire Moons

For the first time, Erin saw the coven, such as it was, up close. Thirteen members, if you counted Vixienne. The others got more actively involved. While it contained an equal amount of men and women, she could tell that Zeb held the real power involved.

What lengths would they go to in gaining that power? Erin didn't really want to know.

"You were warned that the child belonged to us, yet, you still took her. You have brought this on yourself." As Zeb spoke, he turned toward her hiding spot and glared into the bushes. "Come out!"

Then he began to chant, "Blood will tell, Wicked Prevail, Come to Me, So Mote it Be."

She frowned and lifted her brow. "What a suck ass spell. It doesn't even rhyme. Clearly he is an amateur. I don't feel a thing." She sat on her butt with her legs crossed tailor fashion and waited for him to give up.

He repeated the same stupid spell three times and she still felt nothing. "He's on crack or something. I may as well just get up and take the baby." She could trump these twits with a nursery rhyme. Maybe Three Blind Mice for starters, then she'd move up to Jack be Nimble.

She sat feeling all smug in her superior spell crafting when a long leg appeared over her shoulder. She squeaked and hunched down, her eyes traveling up the denim clad thighs to their meeting point. Her brows snapped down into a frown. That crotch looked familiar. Matthias! She grabbed his leg and hissed. "Stop! What the heck are you doing?"

He kept walking forward, dragging her along for the ride until she let go and scrambled back to her hiding spot. Fortunately, they didn't seem to notice her, keeping all their attention on the tall dark dummy that walked straight into their clutches. Surely, that stupid spell didn't work on him, unless. Erin looked over the brush again, focusing her attention on Zeb. "Aha."

The man held a pouch in his hand. From this distance it was impossible to see it clearly, but she hazarded a guess that it contained something personal of Matthias', whether nail parings, hair or even a piece of his clothing, any of these made it easier to control him.

He moved toward the fire on autopilot, his steps stilted and slow. Erin shivered at the sight. Though terrified, sitting here like a twit was

Spellfire Moons

not an option. As a proactive sort of witch, she felt it time to show these foreigners what a Texan could do.

“Now that we have them both, our powers will be even greater.” Zeb’s voice dripped with satisfaction.

Matthias stood motionless in front of the fire as if awaiting further instructions. The coven leader gathered everyone around in a circle large enough to encompass both Aurora and her father.

Zeb raised his hands, palms out with both pinkies raised. “Oh Dark Master, please accept our paltry offerings and reward us with your presence.”

Erin rolled her eyes and got ready to make her move. She hitched her belt a little higher and stood up. “Hello, ya’ll.” With the best cowboy strut she could muster, she stepped out into the open.

Some of the witches didn’t react, and those that did just stared at her with glassy expressions on their faces. Were they high? She stalked over until she stood opposite of Zeb. She glared at him while poking the arm of the nearest witch. “Move it.”

“Let her in, by all means. Good evening, fellow—.” The circle broke and she came storming through.

Erin held up her hand. “First off, I ain’t your fellow anything. We’re not all pagans beneath the skin, lovers of the earth, yadda yadda.”

“Nothing has prepared you for this, little hedge witch, watch and learn.”

He had nerve. Hedge witch, her right eye. She’d trained at her gran’s knee for years. She’d made her first wand at the age of ten, she didn’t think of herself as a hedge witch. Or did she? That could work. “I may be a hedge witch, but I’m the best one you’ll ever meet.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “The Master comes now, and he will be pleased that you’ve agreed to be dessert.” Flames shot up twenty feet into the air, making her flinch. The others in the ring moaned and sighed out the word master in tones of reverence. The fire shot up twice more and then there was utter blackness.

A darkness so vast and great that it had no beginning, no end fell all around them. She was but a speck of light in an ocean of black. “No!” She screamed, and to her surprise, the blackness receded to the very edges of the clearing where it sat waiting.

Spellfire Moons

With a great effort, she suppressed her shock. She looked to her left and winked at the true culprit before she put on her game face. She doubted she made an imposing figure standing in her bare feet with a carpenter's belt on her hips. But she'd be damned if they figured it out soon enough to best her.

"You!" Zeb's voice thundered. "I've had enough of your interference."

"What are you gonna do about it?" She shot back.

"I'm not going to do anything." He smiled and she shivered. What was he up to?

She got her answer seconds later when Matthias grabbed her from behind, pinning her arms to her sides. He growled and squeezed a little tighter when she struggled. She couldn't breathe at all, and kicking him didn't do any good either.

"Now, then, Erin." Zeb's voice turned soft, he made the others close the circle so he could come and gloat in her face, she supposed. "Will you save the babe, or the lover?" He reached out to touch her cheek, snatching his hand away when she snapped her teeth at him. "Kill her." He waved his hand at Matthias.

Erin felt his arms twitch, the muscles quivered. He gave a low tortured groan before he pressed his teeth to her neck. "Erin." He spoke, barely above a whisper. "Help me."

"I'm trying." She gritted out, her hand slid into the pouch over her right hip. Now she had to wait for the right moment to act. Preferably before her new boyfriend sucked all the blood from her veins and left her a spent husk on the ground.

"Kill her!" Zeb roared.

Matthias pressed harder with his fangs. The skin in her neck dimpled, but he stopped, his jaws quivering with the effort of trying to hold back. She felt it in him, the resistance. Now was her chance.

A good witch always prepared for any eventuality. And she was, if nothing else, a damn good witch. With effort, she reached into the small pouch at her hip and retrieved one of the pre-prepared spell-bombs. Contained within a simple bag made of cheese cloth, tied with a bit of string, were some of the more flammable protective herbs. However, the cloth was treated with a resin made from sweet mhyrr, or Opoponax, which protected against something else, vampires.

Spellfire Moons

With a whispered apology, she flung it into the fire. The flammable properties of the resin made the fire flare. But, the smell that permeated the immediate area carried the desired result. Matthias immediately released her and fell on the ground in a coughing fit.

With a move that would have done The Duke proud, she whipped her wand out of its ‘holster’ and pointed it at him. “Reach for the sky, Zeb.”

He smirked. “What will you do with your little toothpick, give me a splinter?”

Her little toothpick was actually a small wand made of almond wood with a tiny piece of fire quartz set in the end. She waved it right, then left and grinned as the sparks began to fly from the tip. “I don’t know anything that rhymes, but as I’m a modern witch, I’ll wing it.”

Her body trembled once then aligned itself with the earth, her gaze moved to the crescent moon, sitting on the horizon like a cradle in the sky. Erin smiled and fancied that *She* smiled back at her. “Protect, prepare, purify.” She spoke only three words, but the power that flowed behind them was something much more.

Spells are not rhymes, not herbs, not ritual, though all of these help the caster to focus. What Erin knew was that she learned that true power came from the very earth on which she stood. That power would help her defeat whatever this abomination called up to take the baby.

“Choose your poison Zeb. We’re about to have a spell-off.” She pushed him back, easily dodging the fingers now slack with surprise. “Go on.” She waved her hands at him.

He frowned and walked to the edge of the circle only to come back with a wand as big as her forearm.

“Ooh, someone’s compensating for something with that big boy.” Snickers met her comment mostly from the female contingent in his coven.

His face twisted with rage. “You were going to die anyway, but now, you will die slow.”

“Aint you heard?” Her smile went sharp. “I’m gonna live forever, ‘cause only the good die young.” She slid her wand back in its sleeve shaking her hands to loosen them. “On the count of three, shoot.”

He narrowed his eyes, trying to figure out her next move.

Spellfire Moons

“One, two, three.” With lightening fast reflexes she jerked the wand out of the slip so fast, smoke boiled up from her fingertips. “Freeze.” The sparks shot out, white hot. Faster than the speed of light, they moved and hit Zeb, ricocheting off to hit each member of the coven in turn. It worked, none of them moved a muscle. It would wear off in a minute or so, but that’s all the time that she needed.

She hurried over to Matthias and helped him to stand. “Take the baby and get back to the house. Don’t stop.” He shook his head to clear it and finally gasped out a clear breath. She pushed him toward Aurora. Already the coven showed signs of life. She watched as he left. She couldn’t believe he actually left. Damn.

* * * *

Matthias ran with Aurora in his arms. He had no choice, no choice but to do what she said, but his heart was shriveling with each step he took until, he stopped. “Aurora, we can’t leave her.”

The baby frowned at him with a pout on her tiny lips. “Duh.”

He could bloody well guess where she learned that. “You’ll have to hide.”

She nodded and curled up into a tiny ball beneath the scrub watching with wide eyes full of fear.

“I love you.” He stroked her cheek with one finger then ran back toward the clearing as fast as his legs could carry him.

The scene that met his eyes when he reached the clearing made him stumble. Erin was chanting and sparks flew out of her wand with unerring accuracy. She’d disabled most of the coven and now advanced on Zeb. But that stumble cost him. As he twisted his body to break his fall, Zeb turned and spotted him.

With a strangely echoing laugh, the witch threw his wand. It whirled through the air, time slowed, stretched and warped. The wand transformed into stake, long and wickedly sharp and headed right at Matthias. He heard Erin scream, and then there was a deep wrenching pain in his chest.

Time sped back up, and he hit the ground with a bone-jarring thud. He lay there, stunned and spilling his lifeblood onto the ground and looked up at the stars and the crescent shining down on him. He didn’t know why but he thought *she* was smiling at him. Fancy that, all this time, he thought it was a man in the moon.

Chapter 12

Erin stood rooted to the spot for an eternity. Then, she blinked and turned her wrath on the man that killed the love of her life. “You bastard, you’ll pay dearly for that.”

Zeb leapt at her, his hands curved into claws aiming for her throat. She dodged, but he caught her by the hair, wrapping his hand in the long strands. She hissed at the sting then jabbed her elbow into the softness of his belly.

He grunted and his grip loosened on her hair enough so she could turn. With everything she had, all the love, all the hate and pain, she kneed him right between the legs. He bent over and she jerked her knee up again this time she hit him in the nose. He fell on the ground with blood spurting between his fingers.

She raised her wand, intending to end his life.

“Wait.” The darkness spoke.

Erin whirled and stared. This was their master?

“This one belongs to me and mine,” The demon known as Temptation sauntered out. Long hard and lean, dressed all in leather, and as this was Texas, he wore a black hat low over his glowing red eyes. “Unless you want to come with me in his place?” He waited for her answer, and for one brief moment, she did.

In his eyes, she could see if not the promise of salvation then at least a distraction from the pain. He could make her forget what she just lost, but his methods would be even worse. He smiled and her belly clenched then again, maybe not. Finally, she lowered her arm and shook her head. “You take him, he isn’t worth the effort.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He drawled and grinned, showing bright white teeth that were needle sharp, like looking into a shark’s mouth.

He circled like a shark too, taking his time, meandering up to his prey. “Now, Zebidiah. What were you thinking? I said I wanted your soul, and you tried to give me that tiny lil baby’s instead. For shame.”

Spellfire Moons

Despite his good old boy act, Erin backed away, slowly. Temptation represented evil incarnate, sex on a stick, nightmares, wet dreams and the most sinfully decadent dessert you've ever imagined. But like all things that feel and taste so good, he came with a high price.

Even now, her body ached to lean toward him and take the mindlessness he could give her. But she gripped her wand tighter in her hand and waited for whatever would happen next. She didn't have long to wait.

In a trice, Temptation put Zeb on his feet. He snapped his fingers and the landscape shifted, becoming hazy. When it cleared again, Zeb stood transformed into a white horse. It trembled and snorted, but the demon held him easily enough.

"Now lil lady, you ever feel a hankering for a real man you call on me, I'll come a runnin'." His drawl was deep and slow, like molasses, but she sensed the trap. He put his foot in the stirrup and his spurs jingled. The silver spokes barbed tips sparkled wickedly in the light of the dying fire.

For once in her life, she didn't let her mockingbird mouth overload her humming bird ass as her gran used to say.

Temptation wheeled Zeb around, then made a strange sign in the air that glowed with green fire and in the blink of an eye all of the coven were changed into cattle. Longhorns with glowing red eyes.

"Yip! Get on lil doggie!" He yelled and cracked a whip over their heads. He gouged Zeb in the sides, the horse whinnied and leapt forward, herding the cattle that moments ago had been a coven of witches.

They circled the clearing three times before the fire again grew bright and hot. With another crack of the whip he drove the whole herd into the flames. One by one, they disappeared. Just before he followed, he turned and tipped his hat at her with a wink. Then, he too disappeared, leaving her alone in the clearing with her dead vampire boyfriend and the mosquitoes that returned with a vengeance.

Chapter Thirteen

At the sound of a small whimper, she jerked her head up to peer into the darkness. She spied Aurora sitting beside her father's head. As she watched, the baby patted his cheek. "Dada."

Erin ran over to them and turned Matthias over on his back. The stake jutted obscenely out of his chest, blood was everywhere. She clamped her mouth shut to prevent a scream from escaping. She needed to be calm for the baby. "Rory, I'm so sorry."

Aurora just sat there patting his face, looking at him. "Up." When nothing happened, she sniffed. "Eerie?"

"He's not going to get up, honey." She whispered and leaned down to kiss his cheek. Her eyes flooded with tears and she didn't even bother to wipe them away. "Matthias, you have my heart, wherever you are, keep it safe for me. I'll do the same for Aurora."

Erin closed her eyes and let her grief overtake her. Surely, she was entitled, she'd never love again. She cried, with great hiccupping sobs. She couldn't help herself. Finally, she looked up at his face for one last time and froze.

Matthias glared back at her. "Woman, what are you crying about?"

"You're not dead?" She wiped her eyes and straightened.

"Obviously not." He snapped and started to sit up, only to grunt and flop back onto the ground. Aurora took this as an invitation to kiss him and pinch his nose. "Oh, hello, my love." His smile was strained. "Why don't you close your eyes?"

One tiny black brow quirked and it looked so much like his that Erin had to bite back a smile, despite the situation.

"I thought that was how you killed a vampire, a stake in the heart." Erin moved to put his head on her thigh.

He lay there for a second, then bit his lip. His hands wrapped around the stake and he pulled. "Damn."

Spellfire Moons

“Damn.” Aurora repeated. Then, since she liked the word, she sang it.

While she was distracted, Erin took a deep breath and braced herself. “Let me.” She changed her grip on the stake three different times.

“Just get the bloody thing out!”

“No need to get all pissy. On the count of three. One...” She jerked the thing cleanly out of his chest.

“Ow! What happened to two and three?”

“You know, for a powerful, ancient being, you’re just a big old baby.”

“Woman.”

“I was only trying to help.”

“Erin.” He put his hand over her mouth. “Shut your infernal yapping.” The hole in his chest began to close. Slowly, it shrank until nothing remained but the blood and the tear in his shirt where the stake went in. He took his hand away and she tried to ignore the tingling sensation just that contact left behind.

“Why,” she licked her lips, “why didn’t it kill you?”

Had he heard her spouting her love for him? She hoped not. If he thought she had real feelings for him, he’d kick her out ‘for her own good.’

“My bloodthirsty little witch, it’s a stake to the heart that kills a vampire.” He sat up and lifted the baby into his lap. He kissed the top of her curly head and whispered something in her ear.

“I could say that Zeb doesn’t know anatomy, and he missed my heart by about that much.” He pinched his fingers together. “And that would be the truth.” He scooted a little closer to her, tipping her chin up with the fingers of his free hand. “But in all fairness, my heart was a hard target, what with it being safely in your hands, Erin Mackenzie.”

Erin tried to process what he said. She almost got it when he decided now would be the time to scatter her wits.

His lips slid across her cheek and zeroed in on her mouth. The heat of him, the very fact that he lived and breathed made her shudder and open for him. He lost no time in deepening the kiss, delving in to taste her before retreating.

Spellfire Moons

She kept her eyes closed, wondering if it was a dream, maybe she'd gone with Temptation after all. Finally, she managed the courage to open them and face her future. Man and child waited for her to make her decision.

"So, witch. You've enchanted me. I'm yours to command. Are you happy?" He was teasing, she could tell by the light in his eyes.

"If I command you, tell me you love me as much as I love you."

"No." He shook his head. "I'm older and wiser, have the ability to love you much more than you could ever think of loving me."

Her heart leapt in her chest at his words. "Oh really?" She arched her brow. "I think, as a woman, and a witch, I am much more capable of loving you the most."

He stood up and held out his hand to her, belying the fact that he'd just sustained an injury that would have killed a normal man. He wasn't a normal man though, thank goodness.

Erin took his hand and let him help her up off the ground. Matthias put his arm around her shoulder and they walked back the way they'd come at the beginning of this horrible night, this wonderful night.

When they passed her hiding spot, she simply said, "Come." Her broom zipped into her hand and they kept moving.

Silence broken only the crickets and frogs followed in their wake. Finally, the moment she knew would come, happened. "If you ever dose me with another potion, I will tan your backside." His voice was low and gravelly. "What was it anyway?"

"It's a secret recipe, handed down to me by my grandmother. She said to remember it, and always carry it with me, one day I'd need it. She was right."

"When will you put away all your witchy spells and nonsense?"

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Matt, but Rory is also a witch."

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Matthias felt the jolt at her words; he stopped in the middle of the path and just stared, first at her then the baby. Aurora snickered and wiggled in his arms.

"She made the dark recede tonight, not me. Plus she's had a magic barrier around the house, but not inside it."

"You're sure?"

Spellfire Moons

“From the moment I came in the door, I knew.” She shrugged. “I stayed because of that. And because I loved her and you at first sight. A witch knows when she’s met the man for her. Mine just happens to have fangs.”

“I knew I loved you too, Erin. Even though I didn’t want to, I love the witch, the woman, and the,” he rolled his eyes, “Texan.”

“I love you too, fangs, the attitude, the British.” She giggled and slid her arm around his waist. “But I want a dang T.V.”

“Fine, anything you want.” He saw the years stretching out with these two ganging up on him. Maybe if he got lucky, they’d have a boy to even out the odds, but until then, he’d be happy with his two girls.

“One thing I really want can wait until Rory goes to sleep.” Her eyes were shining with promise. He snorted, but felt the smile creeping across his face. They made their way back home and if Erin sang *Deep in the Heart of Texas* all the way home and taught Rory to hum it, then that was no more than Matthias deserved.