

HOME SCHOOLING

The Fire Night Ball

A STEAMY, DARKLY COMIC SPELLBINDER

Anne Carlisle



This steamy, funny, spine-tingling debut in the hot sub-genre of paranormal romantic suspense blends titillating sex and an insightful view into contemporary women's issues. It's a spellbinder about the moral dilemma of a beautiful, successful architect blessed with exceptional gifts who puts herself into mortal danger when her obsession with a powerful married client awakens a ghost and an ancestral curse. Set in a small Western town during the sexual revolution.

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Prologue
Alta, Wyoming
October 28, 1900

The young woman who was the focus of all eyes sat down in the first row of the unadorned church. She bowed her head, clasped her gloved hands, and prayed for the one thing she wanted most.

She longed for desire's epiphany, passion as bright and all-consuming as the bonfires the natives had lit last evening on the first Fire Night of the new century.

Instinctively, though she was only an orphan now living atop a desolate mountain, she knew a blaze is better than a weak lantern lasting for many years. She missed the gay life she had known in Saratoga with her aunt, the theater, and the military men. But she wasn't without God-given powers to achieve her desires.

She had special gifts: perfect recall of all she'd witnessed or read and a siren's trick of focusing her will to stop a horse or fascinate a man. What she wanted was simple, one great love, and because of that wish she was exerting the force of her will every night on Curly Drake.

If tepid love was all fate had in store for her, then she would prefer the safe, solitary life she had with her grandfather, a retired sea captain out of Gloucester who'd retired to a stone home in the most blustery part of Wyoming.

Cassandra's prayer ran something like this: "O Lord, deliver me from the sadness and the loneliness I feel in the vast spaces of this awful place. Grant me a great love, or I shall die."

When the services were over, she was surprised to find her way was blocked when she stepped out into the aisle.

Standing there with folded arms was Goody Brown, who looked as if she might spit in her eye. The beauty with the flaming red-gold hair and the heavy-set matron stared at each other.

Goody felt she had every reason to object to the scarlet woman's being in church. Her carnal presence was a mark of sheer blasphemy that would bring the wrath of the Lord down on all, including the new

baby in Goody's family who was about to be baptized. Goody couldn't afford any chances of the Lord's wrath being piqued.

The story she had heard, the gossip that was running like wildfire through the village, was reverberating in her pipes like a gong, and she felt compelled to speak.

Last evening, when the innkeeper and Miss Brighton were supposed to have been celebrating their nuptials, Curly Drake and Cassandra were meeting on Hatter's Field, Drake having been lured there by Cassandra's signal fire. The story confirmed Goody's darkest suspicions.

A Salem witch was in Cassandra's family tree; the sea captain had admitted as much.

And now the red-headed hussy was in church, acting out hypocritical piety. She'd been able to entice a bridegroom away from the pious widow's daughter, using witchcraft to carry on clandestinely on the very night he was to bed his bride. Surely this was Satan's work, and yet here she was, brazenly parading before them all in the Lord's own house!

If Cassandra Vye could cast a spell so strong as that, there was no telling what else she might do. The waters of the baptismal fount would surely be fouled as she walked past, endangering the soul of Goody's grand-daughter.

Anticipating the danger to her family, Goody had put a hex on the witch with a soap doll, as she'd been taught by a Lakota Sioux witch-doctor. There was nothing she could do that was powerful enough to kill the witch herself. But there might be a way to scare her off by afflicting the witch with a curse. The men who fell into the siren's clutches--also the sweethearts of her descendants--these unfortunate sinners would suffer untimely deaths, so the hexing went.

And now, while the eye of the Lord was upon her, Goody would show Him the stalwart loyalty of His servant by publicly exposing Cassandra as Satan's legion.

"Hu-sssss-y," Goody hissed, spraying spittle from her thick lips. "I know how to defend the natives against your wickedness. Thou art accursed, Satan's whore. Be gone, witch! Or else I predict two deaths on your head once the bonfires are extinguished."

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Cassandra wiped her face with her gloved hand. Captain Vye now pushed forward and grabbed his grand-daughter out of harm's way. Her face was dead white, and her exotic cat's eyes blazed like burning coals as she marched down the aisle.

While the churchgoers gathered outside gawked and whispered among themselves, Cassandra stopped at the church door, flung off her bonnet, and let her shimmering mane of fiery-gold curls blow with the wind. Without a word, she got into the buggy.

No crazy hag is going to determine my fate. Damn the natives' opinions, and damn Goody Brown's curse.

Chapter One
Alta, Wyoming
December 20, 1977

The January issue of Playboy was in her hands. Marlena Bellum shuddered with anticipation as she opened it and began to thumb through the slick pages. There it was, a blurb under "Traveler's Report."

Her eyes raced through the first sentence:

"The place where the rich, the famous, and the wannabe depraved go to get fucked up these days is (drum roll) B. L. Zebub's Poolhall Saloon in Alta, Wyoming, where chic bordello meets devils' hideaway on the coldest, remotest mountain top of the Old West."

A smile of pure joy crossed her Cupid's bow lips, and her long-lashed, wide-set eyes sparkled. They were an alluring, blue-green hue, like the waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

"One enters through a secret door in the grand, castle-like, five-diamond Alta Hotel, the Xanadu of real estate mogul Harry Drake and brainchild of Pioneer Architectural Designs (PAD). Once inside, you'll hobnob with Hollywood, East Coast saloon society, and oil refinery executives dandling young playgirls."

Permeating the stale doctor's office air was the scent of jasmine. Marlena flipped back her shimmering mane of fiery-gold curls, crinkly as corn silk and rippling to the curve of her backside. She read on:

"If excess is your bag, a diamond-studded card can hold your place, or you may sit your butt on a vintage saddle stool for the price of a Maserati. No streakers reported; it's too freaking cold! Check your power ties at the door, gentlemen. Ladies (the term is loosely applied), bras and girdles are optional."

Now there's advertising you can't buy, she thought happily.

The 1978 promotional campaign was her most ambitious yet. And, if the numbers held up through the holidays, 1977 would be another record-breaking year for Drake Enterprises.

B. L. Zebub's was their baby, hers and Harry's. Since December, 1972, when the secret door first opened to a select few, any traveler of

note passing through northeastern Wyoming was sure to turn up at what GQ dubbed "the sexiest private gentleman's club in America."

Its centerpiece, an oak bar she had nicknamed "B. L. Zebub" because of its intensely dark history, was an English colossus bought for only 40,000 pounds from the ancient proprietor of a dusty antique shop in the Cotswolds. Even the cherry bar in Cody's Irma Hotel, a gift Queen Victoria had sent Buffalo Bill, couldn't hold a candle to B. L. Zebub. Its woodcarver, so the story went, was a gifted young woman of 17th century England who was stoned to death in the public square of her Puritan village for crimes of adultery and witchcraft.

Marlena put aside the blurb that had taken her a year to secure and wondered how long she'd have to wait before she was called in to see the doctor.

Picking up an older issue of Cosmo from a side table, she glanced through the cover article, which offered advice to young women on how to marry a millionaire by becoming an expert on the great man's interests, ala Pamela Harriman. *How do I stack up?*

Chapter Two

At first, she'd taken Harry Drake for a limp-wristed fop. He was dressed in an Italian silk suit tailored at Savile Row; his cuff links were Cartier. His high forehead was feathered with luxuriant black curls, Napoleon style; his small nose was almost girlishly attractive; and his smile was sheepishly self-effacing. He was on the short side, though a long-waisted torso and upright posture made him appear taller than he was.

However, as Harry entered the reception room at the back of Bottomly's Cafe, where Drake Enterprises was hosting a soiree for the Alta community in advance of ground-breaking for the hotel project, Marlena's initial impression changed. His signature stroll exuded male power and authority, as did the cold, light-brown eyes that were peering appraisingly into hers.

"Mrs. Dimmer, you have the most amazing eyes I've ever seen. What's that color called?"

"Cerulean. I've been looking forward to meeting you, Mr. Drake."

As their fingers met and held, she felt a pulsating, tingling sensation. His hands were graceful, the fingers long and slim, a trait she found sexually attractive. His grip, firm and lingering, conveyed sensuality and grace under pressure.

"Are we family? I always ask," said Harry. "Most folks in this town are related."

His disarming smile, along with a slight hesitation in his tenor voice, made her wonder if she was supposed to feel at ease. But at ease was not her reaction. Her heart was thumping like a drum, and much to her dismay, she began to blush furiously, like a schoolgirl.

"Well, uh, sort of," she fumbled. *Where, oh where, was her practiced gift of gab?*

"Yes?" His eyes were roving over the curves of her body, taking them in.

"I, uh, believe my grandmother was the niece of your father's stepfather."

"Her name?"

“Sarah Bellum.”

“Ho, ho. You’re making that up.”

“Grandpa was a mind adrift until he met his Sarah Bellum. That was my dad's line.”

She joined in Drake's laughter, recovering some composure. But the way he was staring deeply into her eyes, his sensual mouth twitching humorously at the corners, made it difficult to get her lines out.

Clumsily, she burst out, "Granny's maiden name was Scattergood." Then she pulled her eyes away from his, so as to interrupt the embarrassingly loud current buzzing between them. *Surely others can hear it!*

He pursed his lips, nodding.

“A native name, like mine. There are a few others--the Brightons, of course. My grandmother married Caleb Scattergood after my grandfather died. I gather your grandmother was Caleb's niece. As for Bellum, I can't say that name rings any bells. But you certainly do.”

He leaned over and kissed her with vigor on her Cupid's bow lips. “There,” he said, looking her full in the eyes again. “Now we’re kissing cousins.”

Her earlobes were vibrating and her lips felt numb. Even more than his kiss, the intense gleam of interest in his light brown eyes was making her feel, in a room swarming with people, as if no one were there but the two of them.



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