



Hex Appeal (Kate Daniels)

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Fall under the intoxicating spell of their hex appeal...

In the magical world that lies hidden beneath our own, witches and conjurers play deadly games. They know just the right spell to kill a man with one kiss—or raise him back again. And they're not afraid to exact sweet revenge on those who dare to cross them. But what if you're the unlucky soul who falls victim to a conjurer's curse? And if you had the power to cast a magic spell of your own, would you use it?

In this bewitching collection, nine of today's hottest paranormal authors tell all-new, otherworldly tales. Spellbinding stories featuring bigfoot, albino vampires, professional wizards, resurrected boyfriends and even a sex droid from the twenty-third century named Silicon Lily. But as our conjurers are about to discover, it's all fun and games until someone gets hexed. And sometimes, even the best spun spells can lead to complete and utter mayhem.

Includes Stories From:

Ilona Andrews

Jim Butcher

Rachel Caine

Carole Nelson Douglas

P. N. Elrod

Simon R. Green

Lori Handeland

Erica Hayes

Carrier Vaughn

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Editorial Review

Review

“Heavy hitters serve up sharp, dark, witty urban fantasy.... Fans of Elrod's *Strange Brew*, which included many of the same authors, will find plenty more to enjoy in this strong anthology.” *Publishers Weekly*

“Elrod has a real gift for gathering great authors and terrific stories for the anthologies she edits. That is certainly true of *Hex Appeal*, which boasts a stellar cast of nine storytellers providing their take on menacing magic and hazardous hexes!” *RT Book Reviews*

“A solid collection for lovers of urban fantasy and wizards in the modern world.” *Library Journal*

About the Author

No Bio

No Bio

A martial arts enthusiast whose resume includes a long list of skills rendered obsolete at least two hundred years ago, Jim Butcher turned to writing as a career because anything else probably would have driven him insane. He lives with his wife, his son and a ferocious guard dog.

No Bio

Ilona Andrews is the pseudonym for a husband-and-wife writing team. Together, Andrew and Ilona are the co-authors of the New York Times bestselling Kate Daniels urban fantasy series and the romantic urban fantasy novels of *The Edge*. They currently reside in Texas with their two children and numerous pets.

No Bio

No Bio

No Bio

No Bio

No Bio

JENNIFER VAN DYCK has appeared on *Law & Order*, the miniseries *Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis* (as Caroline Kennedy), and the movie *Bullets Over Broadway*.

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RETRIBUTION CLAUSE

by ILONA ANDREWS

Adam Talford closed his eyes and wished he were somewhere else. Somewhere warm. Where cool waves lapped hot yellow sand, where strange flowers bloomed, and birdsong filled the air.

“Take off the watch! Now!” a male voice barked into his ear. “You think I am fucking with you? You think I am playing? I’ll rip your flesh off your body and make myself a skin suit.”

Adam opened his eyes. The three thugs who pinned him to the brick wall looked half-starved, like mongrel dogs who’d been prowling the alley, feeding on garbage.

He should never have wandered into this side of Philadelphia, not in the evening, and especially not while the magic was up. This was Firefern Road, a place where the refuse of the city hid out among the ruins of the ravaged buildings, gnawed by magic to ugly nubs of brick and concrete. The real predators stalked their prey elsewhere, looking for bigger and meatier scores. Firefern Road sheltered scavengers, desperate and savage, eager to bite, but only when the odds were on their side.

Unfortunately, he had no choice.

“You have the cash,” Adam said, keeping his voice low. “Take it and go. It’s a cheap watch. You won’t get any money for it.”

The larger of the thugs pulled him from the wall and slammed him back into the bricks. The man bent over him, folding his six-foot-two frame down to Adam’s five feet five inches, so their faces were level, forcing Adam to stare straight into his eyes. Adam looked into their blue depths and glimpsed a spark of vicious glee. It wasn’t about the money anymore. It was about domination, humiliation, and inflicting pain. They would beat him just for the fun of it.

“The watch, you little bitch,” the thug ordered.

“No,” Adam said quietly.

A muscular forearm smashed into his neck, cutting off his air. Bodies pressed against him. He felt fingers prying at the metal band on his narrow wrist. His heart hammered. His chest constricted.

Think of elsewhere. Think of blue waves and yellow sand ...

Someone yanked at the band. The world was turning darker—his lungs demanded air. Pain shot through his limbs in sharp, burning spikes.

Blue waves ... Azure ... Calm ... Just need to stay calm ...

Cold metal broke his skin. They were trying to cut the watch off his wrist. He jerked and heard the crunch of broken glass. Two tiny watch gears flew before his eyes, sparking with residual traces of magic.

Imbeciles. They’d broken it.

The magic chain that held his body in check vanished. The calming visions of the ocean vanished, swept away by an avalanche of fury. His magic roared inside him, ancient, primal, and cold as a glacier. Frost clamped his eyebrows, falling off in tiny snowflakes. The short blond hairs rained down from his head, and pale blue strands grew in their place, falling down to his shoulders. His body surged, up and out, stretching, spilling out into its natural shape. His outer clothes tore under the pressure as his new form stretched the thick spandex suit he wore underneath to its limit. His feet ripped the cheap cloth Converse sneakers. The three small humans in front of him froze like frightened rabbits.

With a guttural roar, Adam grasped the leader by his shoulder and yanked him up. The man’s fragile collarbone broke under the pressure of his pale fingers, and the man screamed, kicking his feet. Adam brought him close, their eyes once again level. The thug trembled and fell silent, his face a terrified rigid mask. Adam knew exactly what he saw: a creature, an eight-foot-tall giant in the shape of a man, with a mane of blue hair and eyes like submerged ice.

Inside him, the rational, human part of Adam Talbot sighed and faded. Only cold and rage drove him now.

“Do you know why I wear the watch?” he snarled into the man’s face.

The thug shook his head.

“I wear it so I can keep my body in my tracking form. Because when I’m small, I don’t draw attention. I can go anywhere. Nobody pays me any notice. I’ve been tracking a man for nine days. His trail led me here. I

was so close, I could smell his sweat, and the three of you ruined it for me. I can't follow him now, can I?" He shook the man like a wet rag. "I told you to walk away. No. You didn't listen."

"I'll listen," the thug promised. "I'll listen now."

"Too late. You wanted to feel big and bad. Now I'll show you what big and bad is."

Adam hurled the human across the alley. The thug flew. Before he crashed into a brick ruin with a bone-snapping crunch, his two sidekicks turned and fled, running full speed. Adam vaulted over a garbage Dumpster to his right and gave chase.

Ten minutes later, he returned to the alley, crouched, dug through the refuse with bloody fingers, and fished out his watch. The glass and the top plate were gone, displaying the delicate innards of gears and magic.

Hopelessly mangled. Just like the thug who still sagged motionless against the ruin.

The alley reeked with the scavenger stench: fear, sweat, a hint of urine, garbage. Adam rose, stretching to his full height, and raised his face to the wind. The hint of Morowitz's scent teased him, slightly sweet and distant. The chase was over.

Dean Morowitz was a thief, and, like all thieves, he would do anything for the right price. He'd stolen a priceless necklace in a feat of outrageous luck, but he didn't do it on his own. No, someone had hired him, and Adam was interested in the buyer much more than in the tool he had used. Breaking Morowitz's legs would probably shed some light on his employment arrangements, but it would inevitably alarm the buyer, who'd vanish into thin air. Following the thief was a much better course of action.

Adam sighed. He had failed. Tracking the thief now would be like carrying a neon sign above his head that read, POM INSURANCE ADJUSTER. He'd have to give Morowitz a day or two to cool off, then arrange for a replacement watch to hide his true form before trying to find the man again.

A mild headache scraped at the inside of Adam's head, insistent, like a knock on his door.

He concentrated, sending a focused thought in its direction. "Yes?"

"You're needed at the office, Mr. Talford," a familiar female voice murmured directly into his mind.

"I'll be right there," he promised, rose to his full height, and began to jog, breaking into the long-legged distance-devouring gait that thousands of years ago carried his ancestors across the frozen wastes of the old North.

Night was falling. Anyone with a crumb of sense cleared from the streets or hurried to get home, behind the protection of four walls, barred windows, and a sturdy door. The rare passersby scattered out of his way. Even in post-Shift Philadelphia, the sight of an eight-foot-tall human running full speed in skin-tight black spandex wasn't a common occurrence. He drew the eye, Adam reflected, leaping over a ten-foot gap in the asphalt. He pounded up the wooden ramp onto the newly built Pine Bridge, spanning the vast sea of crushed concrete and twisted steel that used to be the downtown.

The bridge turned south, carrying him deeper into the city. Far in the distance, the sunset burned out, couched in long orange clouds. The weak light of the dying sun glinted from the heaps of broken glass that used to be hundreds of windows. The cemetery of human ambition.

Human beings had always believed in apocalypse, but they expected the end of the world to come in a furious flash of nuclear cloud, or in environmental disaster, or perhaps even on a stray rock falling from the universe beyond. Nobody expected the magic. It came during one sunny afternoon, in broad daylight, and raged through the world—pulling planes from the sky, stealing electricity, giving birth to monsters. And three days later, when it vanished, and humanity reeled, thousands were dead. Survivors mourned and breathed a sigh of relief, but two weeks later the magic came again.

It flooded the world in waves now, unpredictable and moody, coming back and disappearing on its own mysterious schedule. Slowly but surely, it tore down the tall buildings, feeding on the carcass of technology and molding humanity in its own image. Adam smiled. He took to it better than most.

The latest magic shift took place about half an hour ago, just before he got jumped. While unpredictable, the magic waves rarely lasted less than twelve hours. He was in for a long, magic-filled night.

The bridge split into four different branches. He took the second to the left. It brought him deep into the heart of the city, past the ruins, to the older streets. He cleared the next couple of intersections and turned into the

courtyard of a large Georgian-style mansion, a redbrick box, rectangular in shape and three stories high. Anything taller didn't survive in the new Philadelphia unless it was really old. The POM Mansion, as the house came to be known, had been built at the end of the eighteenth century. Its age and the simplicity of its construction afforded it some immunity against magic.

Adam jogged to the doors. Pressure clutched him for a brief moment, then released him—the defensive spell on the building recognizing his right to enter. Adam stepped through the doors and walked into the foyer. Luxurious by any standards, after his run through the ruined city, the inside of the building looked almost surreal. A hand-knotted blue Persian rug rested on the floor of polished marble. Cream-colored walls were adorned by graceful glass bells of fey lanterns, glowing pale blue as the charged air inside their tubes reacted with magic. A marble staircase veered left and up, leading to the second floor. Adam paused for a moment to admire the rug. He'd once survived in a ...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sarah Fernandez:

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