

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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FIRE AND WATER

Kate Pavelle

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

FIRE AND WATER

By Kate Pavelle

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A mostly black and white photo of a man partially obscured in shadow. The collar of his pinstriped shirt is turned up and his hand is in front of his face with orange flames flowing from his index finger and thumb. Those flames are reflected in his eye.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I met him at a magic show in Vegas. I'd won a free meet and greet and he was the main act. He was beautiful and mysterious and how the hell had I never known how sexy eyeliner could be on a guy. In other words, he's way out of my league.

To my surprise, he asked me out, then we went on one "date". It was just a simple dinner, a kiss on the cheek at the door, and "poof" he was gone. He texted me later and said our connection was almost too much for him to control himself and he'd really like to see me again, but... there were some things he needed to tell me and show me about himself before we could proceed. I'm scared to death to go... but even more scared not to.

What do you think he's hiding? Should I take the chance or let this beautiful man disappear from my life?

Sincerely,

K-lee

Story Info

Genre: urban fantasy, contemporary

Tags: magic users, mermen, entertainers, masseuse, sweet no sex, elementals, Las Vegas, paranormal

Word count: 8,129

FIRE AND WATER

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The stage glowed with the light of his own making, and the music drowned out the *ooohs* and *ahhhs* of the audience. Eldrid released another fireball from his hand—yet this one was larger than he anticipated. Instead of rolling off his hand like it should have, it almost exploded into the air. He quickly forced the fireball to split into five, with residual flames dancing on his fingertips.

His ballet background made easy work of the showmanship needed to simulate what the audience knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, to be just another illusion—he even added imperfections to make his fire seem “real.”

Almost too real. Eldrid suppressed a concerned frown, and focused on the pressure that kept building within him instead. He felt fire press out of his skin, through his very eyes—and the only safe way to release all that destructive force was one fire sculpture at a time. His sister Syf, the lovely assistant, circled around him in her long gown, handing him props, giving quiet, verbal feedback in her ventriloquist’s voice.

“Too high up,” she said. “Ceiling.”

He gave her a nod. Better drain off his excess energy some other way. Eldrid directed a look laden with mystery and foreboding at his audience, swirled his cape, and disappeared. Only a tower of fire remained on the stage. As soon as he slipped through the hidden trap door in the floorboards, he let out a deep exhale of physical relief. He could maintain the fire pillar from under the open trap door and not burn the stage down. His black hair almost rose on his head as he let the barely contained, elemental power pour out his raised fingertips. The pressure in his head subsided, and after a minute or so, his skin tingled a lot less. When the grand finale was done, he walked back on the stage from the wings and took his bow. Tonight he could rest well, secure in the knowledge that he wouldn’t let his control slip and incinerate the hotel in his sleep.

Vodun Novak was an ordinary man. He sat in the audience, surrounded by couples and tourist groups, and he did not appear remarkable whatsoever with his light brown hair and hazel eyes. The sense of fatigue that had plagued him ever since he could remember did not dissipate as he sat in the padded seat and watched the amazing, one and only Eldrid Thorsen ply his craft of illusion and fire-play. Vodun got the ticket in lieu of a tip from one of his massage clients. Normally he would have preferred cash, but this ticket included a meet-and-greet after the show. Vodun was thrilled for the opportunity to spice up his boring and ordinary life by shaking the hands of the world-class jugglers that performed earlier. He planned to pay special compliments to the contortionist, a slight woman who managed to defy the laws of both physics and physiology. If he was any judge of what she put her body through, he might even have a steady massage client down the line.

Las Vegas was loud and boring. Vodun's unassuming, low-energy personality was under constant assault from the flashing lights, the pinging slot machines, the traffic, and the heat. He still recalled his shock when he deplaned at the airport just a year ago, only to find slot machines right outside the gate. Yet, the money was good, a lot better than it would have been in Cleveland. He missed the friendly rivers and streams, the storms off the lake, the seasonal downpours of sweet rain. Too much water never bothered him. Here in Vegas, when he wanted to go swimming, Hoover Dam held back the only body of open water that could tackle his thirst with its smooth and peaceful touch. And he did go on his days off, and swam for hours in his easy, long-distance style that didn't splash and didn't wear the body down. Had it not been for Lake Meade, Vodun would have left Las Vegas within a month due to the sensory onslaught that so many others were willing to pay for.

Now he sat in the audience and the illusionist disappeared, causing a holographic image of a fire pillar to take his place. He wondered how that was accomplished. The trick was without a flaw—seamless—as though it were real. Then the show was over, and Vodun stood with the rest of the audience in an enthusiastic ovation. The backstage ticket was in his pocket. He'd meet the artist, have a complimentary drink, and go to his small apartment on the east side of town.

Syf was Eldrid's front, his protector. His older sister didn't understand where all that fire came from, but she accepted it and did her best to shelter her brother from the masses. So many people wanted to shake his hand. Eldrid appreciated that she offered her slender hand in his stead. He wore his black, fire-retardant gloves now, lest a flicker of a flame escape and hurt someone while giving his true nature away. He had a bottle of water in one hand and a tumbler of whiskey in the other. There was no ice—there was never any ice. It would have melted in his proximity even now, despite the massive release of raw power during the show. He nodded and answered questions, fending off proffered hands with an apologetic shrug and an infectious grin.

"I'm parched and exhausted—if you'll excuse me..." And they always excused him, especially when Syf offered a pre-autographed poster or program. He was almost done. One more guy to go, and he could take a shower as cold as the water tank provided, and catch some sleep.

The closer Vodun approached the illusionist, the less tired he felt. The countless massages that he gave to his eager clients in the spas of various hotels drained the mind, the body, and especially the spirit. He walked into the green room backstage tired, almost shuffling, yet now that he was in the proximity of the fire illusionist, he felt energized. The petite blonde offered him a glass of red wine. Behind her stood her partner.

He wore the same fitted black trousers and the same dark shirt he'd worn on stage, but his hands were now sheathed in black gloves. Vodun approached him to offer his words of appreciation. He wouldn't get to shake his hand, as the illusionist's hands were full. Conveniently so. Vodun smirked, recognizing the trick for what it was. So the illusionist, an extrovert onstage, liked to keep people at an arm's length.

"Nice show," Vodun said, nodding at Eldrid.

"Thanks," Eldrid replied and raised his eyes to Vodun, ready to reward his compliment with an easy grin.

Vodun's calm hazel eyes met Eldrid's dark ones. He noticed the way Eldrid stilled, as though they were the only two people in the room. At that moment, Vodun was seized with a desire to take this man in and understand him, the way he understood the desert, or the sun, or the water in the deep and vast lake not too far away. Eldrid was shorter by half a hand, but Vodun felt the man was barely contained within the confines of his skin. He was the dark and handsome type. Black hair, a heavy five-o'clock shadow, kohl around his eyes. Vodun had always thought that kohl on men was only stage makeup, but now he felt himself stir at the sight. Far beyond just attractive, the man looked sexy. Hot, even. He was fascinated by Eldrid's eyes.

Black eyes.

Vodun felt as though the illusion of flames, extant from the stage, licked the outline of the other man's irises.

Impossible.

Vodun blinked. There was a sense of gentle heat that spanned the space between the dark illusionist and himself, the sort of heat that he was eager to soak up like a cat sprawling in the sun. He shook his head, not knowing what came over him. "Why the gloves?" Vodun asked instead in an effort to banish his tongue-tied feeling.

"So you don't get burned," Eldrid said with a smile that was supposed to convey a faux sense of mystery. Except this time, when it was directed at Vodun, it failed to mask an undercurrent of fear.

"I am willing to chance it," Vodun said, his words slow and deliberate. Never had he been as intrigued by another man's presence, and Eldrid's physical beauty had little to do with it. As a masseuse, Vodun had seen it all: young and old, fat and trim, ugly and gorgeous and everything in between. He was inured to the physical, but this—this was different. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he felt something extra, something unusual, an... aura? He realized he felt as though he was looking at a raging torrent of water, assessing its strengths and patterns, before he plunged in to merge with it and enjoy its tender mercies. Yet this was different, too, because his sense-memory

impressions were different. Other. He could not explain it, but it intrigued him. Buoyed by an excitement and enthusiasm he rarely displayed, he flashed the performer an inviting smile. "I would like to take you out. Just a drink. Or... are you too tired to socialize?"

What began as a harmless interaction with the last member of his adoring audience turned his world upside down. As soon as Eldrid met the other man's eyes, he couldn't look away. There was such acceptance, such calm compassion. He was beautiful. *Did he just ask me out?*

"What's your name?" Eldrid said, trying to buy some time and regain his equilibrium.

"Vodun Novak. And I already know who you are." Eldrid startled at the words, because Vodun spoke them as though he really knew who, and what, Eldrid was. Yet Syf stood by the drinks tray on the other side of the room, and failed to interfere. He looked at the other man—really looked—and found a sandy-haired specimen of an average height and build. His shoulders were wide, like a swimmer's rather than a weightlifter's, and his eyes were pools of calm. The more Eldrid met that hazel gaze, the more at peace he felt. There was something going on, something other and uncanny and unprecedented. He realized Vodun was waiting for his answer.

"Yeah," he whispered on an exhale. "I could have a drink. Sure." He flashed a glance toward his sister, surprised to see her hiding a small smile.

"Oh, go ahead. I'll tidy up," she said. "See you at breakfast!"

Eldrid nodded at the door and Vodun led the way. He held the door for him and they headed out of the theater complex of the casino and toward the bar.

"I hate the way they make you walk through the gambling parts all the time," Vodun said, shying away from the flashing lights and gaudy colors.

"It's good for business," Eldrid said. "Annoying, but it pays the bills for the likes of us. Speaking of which, what do you do?"

"I'm a masseuse."

“Really?” Eldrid was intrigued. “Does it feel weird, touching people all the time?”

“Not really,” Vodun said. “It’s all very professional. Lots of people like to leave some clothes on. It... I... I like to help them with their knotted muscles and such. It’s like an energy exchange. Tiring for me, but it’s good for business. Pays the bills for the likes of me.” He echoed Eldrid’s earlier words with a quiet smile, and Eldrid felt a jolt of desire to please this man and do for him what Vodun did for others. Not massage—he didn’t dare touch another person—but he wanted to help him relax. His company was, after all, pleasant. Almost peaceful enough not to worry about the fires banked within the core of his being.

“I know of a little place, it’s nice and quiet,” Eldrid said. “Better than this. Would you like to try it?”

“I’d love to,” Vodun said with a relief so obvious Eldrid felt like he’d done a good deed right then and there.

They got a booth in a small bar that was tucked into a corridor between the casino floor and the hotel. The theme was global and the Asian décor included a tall slab of slate with water sheeting over it, all the way from the ceiling to the small basin on the floor. Vodun homed in right toward it as they entered.

“Do you always drink your scotch neat?” Vodun asked, eyeing Eldrid’s drink.

“Yes, with water on the side.” Eldrid gazed at Vodun’s frozen margarita with obvious longing. A frozen drink would melt in his hand within minutes, even with his gloves on.

“Here, have some,” Vodun smiled and pushed the straw in Eldrid’s direction.

“Thanks.” Eldrid wrapped his lips around the straw and sucked some of the frozen slush into his mouth. He never got “brain freeze” from ice cream and slushies. It all melted upon contact. The margarita did, too, but it was cool and

soothing, just like Vodun's eyes. He took care not to touch the glass itself. "That was nice. Thank you."

They talked of little things, and the ebb and flow of the conversation felt natural, almost effortless. They covered the realities of living in Las Vegas. They talked about the desert, the heat and the throngs they serviced and entertained. Eldrid realized he had never felt as comfortable in a stranger's company as he had with this man.

He sipped his scotch, noting the way its heat felt different after the soothing touch of Vodun's frozen drink. Watching the other man was fascinating, almost hypnotizing. The bright green of the margarita brought out the green highlights of his hazel eyes, and the touch of those eyes felt soothing and cool. His lips looked moist and cool, and the olive and navy stripes of his shirt looked cool as well.

Eldrid was torn. He wanted to touch the other man. Yet he wore his gloves, and he wore them for a good reason.

As though he could read his mind, Vodun broke the silence. "Your gloves. If they were off, would you let me touch your hand?"

Suddenly bold, Eldrid ripped the black glove off his right hand. "Well then." His voice rasped with tension. "If you wish. But... you may not like what you find."

Vodun held his breath as he reached his fingers out toward the fine-boned, bare hand of the illusionist. His own hands were broader and strengthened by the work they did, and they were tired. Always ever so tired, like the rest of him.

When their fingertips touched, he jolted upright as though a spark jumped between them. Vodun took a sharp inhale, but didn't pull away. There was warmth, and strength, and—he observed this with an almost clinical and detached interest—the fatigue in his hand was being slowly replaced by a warm glow that spread up his arm, toward his elbow, and into his shoulder.

“I like this just fine,” Vodun whispered.

Their eyes met again, intrigued, assessing. Eldrid was entering uncharted waters. The other man did not flinch—on the contrary, by now their palms were pressed together and their fingers were aligned. He watched Vodun sit across the table from him, eyes closed and his drink forgotten.

“Vodun.” Eldrid felt a stab of sudden anxiety. The man was not burned, his intense heat did not repel him, he showed no sense of alarm—yet Eldrid feared hurting him with a power he himself understood but poorly. As good as that touch felt, full of peace and calm with his internal pressure receding, he felt he could not allow this unscheduled experiment to continue. “Are you all right?”

Vodun opened his eyes. They seemed greener than before, warm and happy. Before Eldrid could force himself to draw his hand away, Vodun stood and leaned toward him. His light brown hair fell into his eyes in unruly waves as he bent forward and pressed his lips against Eldrid’s.

The contact was electrifying. A sudden vertigo made Eldrid feel like his stomach was full of butterflies and he felt his energy pour out of him, hot and eager. Happy. Uncontrollable. The other man couldn’t possibly bear it—there was no way he could survive the onslaught of elemental fire—Eldrid broke the kiss, his breath rasping and his chest heaving.

“You okay?” He asked.

There was no answer for a while. It looked like Vodun was taking an internal inventory of some kind. “Never better,” he said.

“Look, you don’t understand. I can’t do this. I... I cannot.”

I can’t hurt you. I’d rather die, if I knew how, than to hurt anyone.

“Sorry. I am so very sorry.” Eldrid whispered his apology before he shimmied from behind the table in the booth. He threw a twenty on the table, and ran out.

Vodun succeeded in scheduling the contortionist from the previous night for an introductory special. It should have felt like a victory: a good, professional client who might become a repeat customer. Yet his mind kept returning to the way Eldrid ran out the night before. It stung. His pride was injured more than anything. The kiss had been amazing. Better than any he had ever experienced before.

He was flooded with a feeling of an instant connection and a fated meeting all at once, like they were meant to be. His heart soared, his eyes were shut. He focused on the incredible contact with Eldrid's thin, firm lips, the rasp of his scruffy cheeks, the tickle of his black curls, and the touch of his warm, kind palm against the paw of Vodun's hand. It was perfect for Vodun, but not so for Eldrid, apparently, or else he wouldn't have left. They had exchanged phone numbers earlier that evening, though, and knowing that he could call Eldrid remained his consolation.

Had Vodun been feeling tired that day, he could have ascribed his downcast emotions to a hard work schedule, except his energy level was uncommonly high. Gone was the chronic fatigue and the feeling of borderline chill that came from the constant switching between the desert heat and the air-conditioned spaces inside all buildings. He felt like he could swim across Lake Meade, if he chose to do so, and back again. He felt great. Except, of course, for the fact that the handsome illusionist walked out on him. He told himself that there were many fish in the sea, but the words felt like cold comfort that day, and Vodun focused on his work instead.

Zephira came into the spa tired, sore, and her joints ached from repetitive abuse. Her tendons were chronically overstretched, and her age was such that healing didn't occur as fast as in her early twenties.

"Even massages don't work really well," the contortionist sighed. "I tried all kinds of stuff, supplements, juicing, acupuncture—but you know how it is."

He knew how it was, and he focused on his work thoroughly and gave it his all. He did the same with the next client, and the next, and the one after that. By the end of the day, the feeling of ebullient energy waned somewhat, replaced by a feeling of quiet satisfaction that came with a job well done. He

helped several people feel a lot better. If that was a measure of any kind, today was a good day.

He tried not to think about Eldrid, but his thoughts drifted in that general direction every so often. Vodun was attracted, interested, and confused all at once. He didn't know what he'd done wrong to chase the man away. Despite his best intentions of not dwelling on what could have been, his thoughts would drift to Eldrid's warmth, and the mischievous, almost incredible hint of playful fire in his eyes. That, surely, had been an illusion as well.

Only a good swim could relax him after a day full of massage. Just before Vodun packed up his swim bag and headed up to the lake, his cell phone rang. The number was unlisted. Figuring it was just an out-of-town tourist in need of fluffing up, Vodun considered letting the call go to his voice mail, but long-ingrained habit of not letting a client slip by forced him to take the call after all.

"Vodun?"

He recognized Eldrid's voice immediately. The uncertainty in the other man's voice bordered on shyness, something that Vodun found difficult to imagine in a seasoned entertainer.

"Yes, this is he."

"Listen, I am sorry for leaving so rapidly, but... I can't explain. I can only show you." Eldrid's pleading tone of voice stopped Vodun in his tracks. He set his swim bag back on the floor again.

"Show me?" he asked.

"Well. There is this thing about me. I think you and I... we could work out, but first, I... there is this thing you need to know." The words sounded as though Eldrid had to force them out of his mouth by sheer power of will. This was important, then.

Vodun paused to consider that perhaps there was an issue on Eldrid's part, and maybe he didn't do anything wrong after all. "Okay," he said. "Give me your address."

Vodun drove to a small by-the-week hotel that sat alone in the middle of a large parking lot. Eldrid was standing out in the sun of the early evening, not seeming to mind the heat that rose from the pavement. Vodun pulled his Jeep over and leaned to open the door.

“Hey... so, what’s the plan? Would you like to join me?”

Eldrid approached the vehicle. “That depends. Where are you going?”

“The lake. I brought my swimming gear.”

Eldrid nodded. “All right. As long as we’re going somewhere with a bit of privacy. I don’t swim, though.”

“There’s this rocky beach where nobody seems to go,” Vodun said with a faint smile. “It may not have the sand people expect, but it’s nice all the same. Hop in!” He saw Eldrid hesitate before he seated himself in the passenger seat.

“Hey... if I say I need to get out of the car, I need you to pull over and let me out, okay?” Eldrid’s tone of voice was serious, and the edge of apprehension prompted Vodun to turn and face him. There was fear in Eldrid’s eyes—those enchanting, dark eyes—and there was just a hint of a flame that licked around the edge of the iris. Yesterday, Vodun dismissed it as mere imagination. It might have been just a reflection from the candles that decorated the green room behind the stage. Now, though, he had no such explanation. He nodded acknowledgment, however, and put the car in gear.

Their drive was quiet and uneventful, and the setting sun was at their back, which made the trip easier on Vodun’s eyes. He navigated up the service road, entering an area Las Vegas natives seldom visited. It was dry and rocky, lacking obvious signs of vegetation. Yet Vodun felt water underfoot. He knew that he only had to dig ten feet down in order to find moist sand. He had always had this water sense. His uncle and his grandfather were both dowzers, and although Vodun knew how to dowse, he had no interest making his living that way. He was more citified and wanted to be closer to people and music.

“Our kind is always close to water,” his grandmother had said years ago. She used to be a fisherwoman before she died, guiding tourists to good places on the river where she knew they would catch their fill. Vodun’s grandfather

worked for the local sewage cleaning station, taking the filth out and making water clean again. His dad volunteered with the river police. Vodun was the only holdout. He only knew that the element had a certain affinity for him. Or was it vice versa?

“So this is where you swim?” Eldrid said. His voice pulled Vodun out of his musings.

“Yeah.” He heard the taller man reply. “Every so often I have to get in.” As he looked at Vodun, his own shoulders got so tight he feared they would end up hunched up by his ears.

Vodun flashed him a smile as he replied. “But we didn’t come here to discuss where I swim. We came here because we needed privacy. What did you need to tell me?”

Eldrid tightened his jaw. His eyes reflected the brilliant sunset as though they had flames of their own. “That kiss... It should have never happened and I am sorry.”

“Did I object?” Vodun quipped.

Eldrid was relieved to see a hint of a grin on his face, and forged on. “No. But there is this thing you don’t know about me. I don’t know where it comes from or what to do about it, but that’s just who I am, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

He saw Vodun stop digging in his swim bag. He set it down and sat on one of the bigger rocks. “What is it, then?” he asked, as dug his toes into the pebbles of the rocky beach.

“I can’t tell you. I can only show you.” Eldrid looked around once more. “We are alone, so it’s okay. If anyone shows up, I need you to cover for me. We’ll tell them I’m just practicing.”

“Practicing what?”

“This.” Eldrid took five steps back from where Vodun was perched on his rock, removed his gloves, and stuffed them in the pockets of his jeans. He

stretched his hands far to the sides, palms up, and let go of the iron control that had taken him a lifetime to attain. Flames sprang from his hands with a violent outburst of energy. They shot up a foot, then increased in height. Eldrid raised his hands above his head and touched his wrists together. His palms now formed a platform, and the two flames joined into one. He glanced at Vodun. The other man sat still, with his eyes wide and incredulous. Eldrid looked for a sign of fear, but there was no judgment whatsoever in Vodun's stunned face. With great effort, Eldrid stopped the energy from flowing out. It felt so good, letting it go, not having to control it for just a little while. That was all he could afford to do for now. Time has come to face his critical audience.

Vodun saw what happened. He knew he did, he was right there and he wasn't delusional or crazy. He knew that Eldrid had no props on him. The white T-shirt and jeans could hardly hide a hologram setup, or a fire source akin to a welding torch. It was impossible, yet he saw what Eldrid did with his very own eyes.

The silence between them stretched, until Eldrid looked down at the rocks under his leather boots. He put his gloves back on. Then he looked around, found another rock big enough, and sat on it. His shoulders slumped and he ran a gloved hand over his face.

"Can you do it again?" Vodun blurted out.

Eldrid lifted his head in slow motion. "Yeah. Unfortunately." He ripped his right glove off, and hurled a massive fireball away from them. Its light reflected off the smooth water surface before it fizzled and dissipated into a shower of sparks.

"So that show you did," Vodun said, keeping his words slow and deliberate, as though he had to think extra hard about every one. "All that wasn't just a show. It was for real." He looked at Eldrid, and was surprised to see a wan smile tug at the man's mouth.

"Every show is a real show. It all depends on what the illusionist is hiding."

Vodun nodded. “Okay, good point. But you can do this by summoning fire with your hands?” Again, the words were slow, as though Vodun had trouble articulating the concept of what he had just seen.

“Not just my hands. The hands are the easiest to control, and that way I don’t burn the hair off my head.”

“What do you mean?” Vodun asked.

“I can envelop my whole body in flames.”

Vodun rubbed his hands together and cracked his knuckles in a habitual gesture. “That’s neat, although I can see how it would be... dangerous.”

“Yeah. So, even though I like you a lot, now you understand why I can’t date anyone. Not anyone, not ever.”

Vodun gave him an odd look. “So if someone tries to take you out on a date, you take them to a remote location and scare the shit out of them?”

Eldrid lifted his eyes and met Vodun’s gaze. “You look amused,” he said, surprised. “I didn’t expect that. And no. I have never been on a date in my life. Only my sister Syf knows. And my parents—but they can’t do what I do. I had to start sleeping outside when I was fourteen. I set my bed on fire twice. It got excused as smoking in bed, but we had to move. And when Syf was eighteen and I was sixteen, we decided to start the show circuit, and ended up here.”

“Can she do what you do?” Vodun asked.

“No—but she can feel when I’m about to blow up. Like, if I don’t make fire for a while, my whole body will burst into flames, and burn off my clothes and hair. Apparently, it looks pretty damn scary. I pulled that trick on Halloween once. The fire department showed up and kept looking for the body for days, but... I couldn’t just tell them what really happened. I’m a freak. They would lock me up, or worse. As long as I can control it so I don’t hurt anyone, I’m fine.”

“And the gloves?” Vodun asked.

“They are fireproof. They protect others. And I don’t scorch papers, and shit.”

“Fascinating.” Vodun looked Eldrid up and down once again. “Let me try and touch your hand again, okay? It felt really awesome last time.”

“You are playing with fire,” Eldrid said, but there was a smile on his face.

“I know I am. I have a theory and I need to test it out.”

It got dark. Las Vegas gleamed in the distance like a jewel in the desert and the water was a contrasting void, gaping black to Vodun’s left. He sat opposite Eldrid, who took his gloves off and amused him by making flickering flames dance at the ends of his fingertips. It looked eerie in the darkness, the way Eldrid’s fire swirled and merged into one large flame only to separate again, the way the tongues of tiny flames licked Vodun’s hands. They were no hotter than a flame of a candle, and Vodun could bear their warmth easily.

“Let me touch your hand,” Vodun said. The flames disappeared. Eldrid fumbled a bit, trying to position his hand this way and that and it occurred to Vodun that he acted nothing like the graceful fire dancer he saw on the stage only two nights ago. Eldrid didn’t know how to touch. “Like this,” Vodun said, and put his hand out, palm facing Eldrid. “Let’s touch palms like that. I want to try something.”

The warmth of Eldrid’s skin soaked into Vodun’s hand as soon as their skin made contact. He felt heat, but there was more than just that. He set out his left hand. “Do the same thing on the other side.”

Eldrid hesitated. “I can feel my power pouring into you. I don’t want to hurt you. I’ve never done this before.”

“I know. I have... in yoga. I think this will be pretty awesome,” Vodun said in the most confident voice he could summon, and kept his other palm up and out, waiting.

It took a while for Eldrid to overcome his misgivings. Yet he did lift his hand, palm out, and he allowed for the briefest of contact before he pulled back again.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes.” Vodun nodded. “Do it again.”

Eldrid’s small, hot palm touched Vodun’s larger one and stayed there. Vodun held Eldrid’s questioning gaze.

“Yes, I feel your heat,” Vodun said. “It feels good.”

Eldrid lifted his eyebrows in surprise.

“Oh yeah,” Vodun chuckled. “You’re like a little power plant.” He closed his eyes and centered his attention to right below his navel.

“I want you to push power with one hand, and take it back with the other. I’ll do the same. It will be like a circuit, see?” Vodun used his quiet, meditative voice, trying not to scare Eldrid away.

“Which hand should I push with?” Eldrid asked. His voice sounded tremulous.

“Use the side that feels more comfortable. I’ll adapt.” Vodun remained calm. He suppressed how excited he was that Eldrid was actually willing to try this simple thing. Sure enough, Vodun felt a surge of power enter his left hand and flow like water up his arm. He allowed it in, transmuting the orange-hot energy into the calmer yellows and greens. Right before his body felt entirely full, he pushed the quieted force out his right hand and into Eldrid’s open palm.

He heard Eldrid sigh. It was a low sound that spoke of relief, as though a long thirst was being quenched. As power flowed through Vodun, and as he changed its frequency from the one of vibrant fire to soothing water and air, he felt his own energy centers swell. Fatigue fell from him, as though he just woke up after a good night’s sleep. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised to find Eldrid’s eyelids shut. The other man’s brow was furrowed in concentration.

“Are you okay?” Vodun whispered.

“Yeah.” Eldrid’s voice was a dry croak.

“I want you to stop pushing power with your left, and stop taking with your right. Yeah... like that. And now we put our hands down.”

Eldrid let his hands drop onto his knees. He opened his eyes, not looking at anything specific. He had that easy, peaceful feeling within him again. He felt different. Not as out of control, not prone to incinerate his companion by sheer accident.

“How does it feel?” He heard Vodun’s words as though from far away.

“Different,” he said. “Calmer. A lot calmer. What did you do?”

Vodun gave a deferential shrug. “Oh, it’s nothing special. Just a little exercise. Your chakras are seriously out of whack. If you want, I can teach you to rebalance your own energy... but a lot of people don’t believe in it working.”

“I just felt it work,” Eldrid said, anchoring himself in the present. “I felt it, whatever you did. You took my fire and you cooled it. It was amazing. Here, let me see.”

Eldrid stood up and faced the lake. “Let’s see the size of my fireball now,” he said. Small flames danced on his fingertips, coalescing into a tight ball of energy. Yet, there wasn’t the wild, explosive increase in its size and ferocity he always expected. Eldrid threw it away, over the water, and it looked much like a fiery softball before it touched the lake surface and disappeared.

Eldrid whirled at Vodun. “That’s all? That’s all I can do? That little fireball actually took work on my part. It was... shit, man, it was hard to do!”

Vodun gave him an uncertain glance. “So is that good or bad?”

Eldrid sat back down with his legs outstretched. He made a few lazy flames lick his fingertips. “It’s good in that I feel like my control is better than before. Like, I could go back and visit Mom and Dad and not be scared that I’ll kill them by accident.”

“I hear a ‘but’ in the tone of your voice,” Vodun said.

“But my living is doing awesome fire shows. I’ll have to change everything. I’ll have to do illusions, like other people do, instead of making it all easy.” He grinned. “I’m so spoiled!”

“Your wild energy level will come back,” Vodun cautioned. “This is just a quick fix. I feel all energized right now, but that excess energy came from you. Do you know, after last time, when we touched our fingers together and there was that kiss...” he let his voice trail off. “Anyway, I always used to be tired. Like, totally wiped out. I’m a masseuse, so I figured it was the physical aspect of my job. Except when I do massage, I also use this invisible power. People call it prana or ki or chi, but they mostly figure it’s make-believe. Well, I use that during massage, and after last time, I was really able to help people. I had lame clients walk away like they were healthy again. I have more appointments booked than I know what to do with. And it’s all because of you.” Vodun gave Eldrid a sly look, his features illuminated only by the dancing flickers on Eldrid’s fingertips. “You recharged me.”

“So now what?” Eldrid asked. “You have this amazing skill to take what I can’t use and turn it to good. What would you like to do with it?”

“First, I want to go for a swim. I suggest you come in the water with me. It won’t evaporate from you right now, I don’t think.”

“I don’t want to get my clothes wet,” Eldrid said.

“Let’s skinny dip,” Vodun suggested. “I’ll share my towel. Or, wait, you’ll probably dry on your own, anyway.”

They entered the water, step-by-step, feeling their way over the rocks in the still darkness. Eldrid grinned; the water felt much like Vodun’s energy did as it had poured into him, except it was on the outside of his body now. He said as much.

“I’ve always been a water baby,” Vodun said, but he sounded a bit wistful. “Not as much as the rest of my family, though.”

“Why not?”

Eldrid’s question stopped him where he stood, hip-deep in the water.

“Hold my hands,” Vodun requested, and Eldrid didn’t hesitate. Yet this time, he didn’t feel the amazing power exchange from before. Now he felt the cool slickness of Vodun’s wet skin. He heard Vodun breathe hard in the dark,

as though he was attempting a feat of great strength, and Eldrid felt the large, strong hands of the masseuse tighten in his grip. He braced himself, ready to support Vodun in whatever new exercise he was about to attempt. Then he heard the water part with a gentle splash, and felt his hands being dragged under the cool surface.

Eldrid knew that people did bathe in water, even though he had never attempted it before tonight. He knew that they did go under, holding their breath. There were people on the Las Vegas show circuit who specialized in wild escape acts. Knowing that Vodun probably couldn't last longer than a minute or two, Eldrid began to count seconds.

Thirty... Sixty... Ninety... Minute and a half.

Concerned, Eldrid pulled on Vodun's hands and yanked him up to the surface. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." Vodun's voice sounded different, as though his sinuses were full.

Eldrid tried to help him stand up, but found himself being almost dragged down. A large, soft fin slithered against his shin.

"I felt a fish!" Eldrid cried out in alarm.

"No. That was just my leg."

Eldrid frowned. He let go of one of Vodun's hands and focused. Soon, the flames on his hand gave off as much fire as a torch. The flickering light reflected off the water surface and illuminated Vodun's face. He looked pale and his face seemed distorted. Eldrid lowered the light to take a closer look. Vodun's mouth was stretched wide, from side to side, resembling a large catfish. His ears were gone, showing gills instead. He still had hands, and a body, and his eyes were human. Eldrid saw fear reflect in the flickers of his firelight.

"Show me your legs," he said, keeping his voice low and free of judgment. Vodun did, letting his trunk and legs float up to the surface. He looked all man down to his knees, but under his knees, his legs and feet were gone. Eldrid saw two graceful fins instead. Like a split tail of a fish. He extinguished his flame

and reached down to touch the thin membranes. The fins felt soft, covered with fish slime.

“That’s so cool,” Eldrid said. “That was just you.”

“Just me,” Vodun said in that nasal voice of his. “I’ll go swim a bit, try my gills out. I’ll be back soon. Can you, um, get out of the water?”

“Why?” Eldrid said.

“You don’t know how to swim. It’s dark. You could drown.” The concern in Vodun’s face was real.

“I’ll be okay.”

“Please, go. I don’t know if I can trust my own nature.”

The note of desperation in Vodun’s voice reminded Eldrid of his own fear. He feared hurting others with who he was. He didn’t know why Vodun thought that Eldrid could get hurt by his transformation, but he relented. “Okay,” he said. “I’m getting out. Be back soon.”

Soon was a relative term. Two hours later, Vodun splashed his way out of the lake. He was fully human and entirely exhausted.

“Are you okay?” Eldrid asked as he made his way down the rocks to meet his new friend. He would have paced back and forth while waiting had the terrain allowed for it.

“Yeah.” Vodun gasped. “Shit, man. I was two miles out and thirty feet under when my transformation gave out.”

“What happened?” Eldrid asked, rubbing Vodun’s wet shoulders.

“Ran out of power. I’ve always been weak. My family just about gave up on me. I have enough mojo to do awesome healing massages, but I haven’t been able to do a transformation in years. Hell, I’m the only waterman that almost drowned when I was a kid.”

“Waterman?”

“Yeah. ‘Vodnik’, in Czech. My kind keeps the rivers and lakes healthy. It also drowns the unwary and feasts on the power of their souls, so... well...”

“So you wanted me out of reach when you were in your waterman form?” Eldrid hazarded a guess.

“Yeah. Especially since you have power to spare. I’d never want to hurt you.”

Eldrid was quiet while they got dressed again. They walked up to the car. “I’d offer to drive, since you’re so tired, but I don’t know how,” he said with a note of embarrassment. “With my fire control issues, I’ve always stayed away from anything with a gasoline tank.”

“But now you can learn, because you and I can help each other out,” Vodun said as he slid behind the wheel. “Give me your hand, please,” he requested.

Eldrid reached his hand out, and felt Vodun interlace his fingers with his. Their touch felt smooth and comforting, and Eldrid realized that his gloves were still in his pockets. Then he felt Vodun bring their hands toward his mouth, and he felt the dry brush of fully human lips excite the nerves of his fingertips.

“I don’t want to tap you out too much,” Vodun said with a note of apology. “If you could give me a wee little energy boost, though, it would make me a safer driver.”

“I think I can do that,” Eldrid said. He turned in his seat and leaned into Vodun’s space, bringing their lips together.

They both gasped. There was the delicious brush and slide of lips and tongues, sure, but once again they were taken aback by the intimate flow of energy between them.

This time, Vodun broke the kiss. “I... wow.”

“Better?” Eldrid teased.

“Yeah. Thank you. I don’t want to drain you, though.”

“You won’t,” Eldrid said with confidence. “If I get to kiss you like this, and if I get to act like a normal person around other people, having to learn ordinary illusions is a small price to pay. You can have all the power you want.”

The city sparkled like a jewel far in the distance. Its glow blotted out the stars overhead, but both men’s attention was turned to the constellations that glowed within their own beings, meshing their disparate energies together into a stronger whole.

THE END

Author Bio

Kate Pavelle writes m/m romance (along with spy thrillers and family stories) and you can catch up with her on her blog via Twitter. Her first novel-length book, Wild Horses, is the first in the Steel City Stories and came out on July 1st with Dreamspinner Press. The second book of the series, Zipper Fall, is scheduled for release in late August.

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