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## Hell Fire: A Corine Solomon Novel



Par Ann Aguirre  
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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurView our feature on Ann Aguirres Hell Fire.The second in the thrilling national bestselling series As a handler, Corine Solomon can touch any object and know its history. It's too bad she can't seem to forget her own. With her ex-boyfriend Chance in tow-lending his own supernatural brand of luck-Corine journeys back home to Kilmer, Georgia, in order to discover the truth behind her mother's death and the origins of "gift". But while trying to uncover the secrets in her past, Corine and Chance find that something is rotten in the state of Georgia. Inside Kilmer's borders there are signs of a dark curse affecting the town and all its residents-and it can only be satisfied with death...ExtraitI'm still a redhead. Before we

left Texas, I touched up the roots with Garnier Nutrisse 64-R, and then I had some tawny apricot highlights put in. I guessed that meant I intended to keep this color for a while. Symbolic I'd made a commitment, at least to my hair. Too bad I couldn't do the same with Chance. I didn't trust him entirely, and what was more, he didn't trust me either. He secretly thought I'd leave, which I had done, die, which I'd nearly done, or break his heart. I just hoped I wouldn't combine the three. Until we resolved the conflict between us such as his gift, which might kill me like it did his former lover I couldn't be more than a friend to him. He knew it too. I think he'd known as much even when he pressed the point on Chuch's couch, back in Laredo. Chuch is a friend who helped us out of a dangerous situation, where we managed to piss off a warlock and the head of a cartel, who had a score to settle with Chance's mom. Two days ago, Min took the bus to Tampa ; she's safe at her homeopathy store. There's nothing to link her new life to old, and if she hadn't gone back to Texas, Montoya would've never found her. But we'll call her daily, just to make sure. If Montoya managed to replace his pet practitioner, then it might be possible for him to track Min. I didn't know how much talent she had in the Art, so I could only hope she knew how to cook a charm to block scrying from her store. Me? I had no aptitude at all. That was ironic, considering my mother was a witch. I was a little worried about reprisals. Chance's mother made the Montoyas agree to a pact preventing them from striking at her son, but I had no such guarantees. But it would take a little while for Montoya to find someone to replace the warlock we killed. So I banished the dark thoughts and focused on the road. We were almost there. The Mustang purred along, underlining Chance's silence. He wasn't happy about this trip to Kilmer, Georgia, but he'd promised, and I wanted answers. He owed me. When he showed up at my pawnshop in Mexico, asking for my help after our breakup eighteen months before, I agreed because he swore to turn his luck toward helping me find out what happened the night my mother died. This point was non-negotiable. I had to understand why it happened, and who was responsible. I wanted justice for her death. We passed the wood that encircled the town. Sometimes, as a kid, it had seemed to me that someone simply burned a patch out of the forbidding forest, and there, Kilmer had been built. The trees grew back in around it, overhanging the rutted road. With the windows open, I could smell dank vegetation heavy in the air, and pallid sunlight filtering through the canopy overhead threw a sickly green glow over the car as Chance drove. McIntosh county didn't get snow, didn't get earthquakes, and the median temperature was sixty-six degrees. It was also deeply historical, containing forty-two markers. I knew all about local history : how old King George Fort was built nearby in 1721, how Highlanders voted against slavery in 1739, not that it did them any good in the long run, and how the War of Jenkins' Ear motivated early settlers to attack Spanish forts. There were still ruins on Sapelo Island. Just a piece up the road, there lived the only known band of Shouters, a Gullah music group. I'd seen them perform the shout-ring once at Mount Calvary Baptist Church. I couldn't remember which foster parent had taken me ; there had been so many, and most of them had thought I could benefit from religion in some form or another. On paper, this seemed like the perfect place to live, steeped in cultural heritage and tradition. On paper. The rules of the Deep South lasted here long after laws and social expectations changed in the wider world. White men did as they pleased, and everyone else kept their mouths shut. I couldn't rightly say I'd missed it. "This place has a weird feel," Chance said, breaking the silence at last. "You're getting it too?" I'd always thought it was the trees, but we'd passed beyond them. Now only scrubby grass lay between the weathered buildings of town and us. Overhead, the sky glowed blue and white, a pretty, partly sunny day that should've warmed me a lot more than it did. "Yeah." Before he could say more, a dark shape darted in front of the cherry red car. Chance slammed on the brakes, and only the seatbelt kept my head from kissing the dash. The car fishtailed to a stop. Butch whined and popped his head out of my handbag. He was a little blond Chihuahua we'd picked up along the way; I'd sort of resigned myself to keeping him, but I hoped we hadn't scared the shit out of him. I had important stuff in my purse. I soothed him with an absent touch on his head, my heart still going like a jackhammer. "What the" Chance motioned me to silence as he got out of the car. Hands shaking, it took me two tries to do the same. I checked the back, staring into the dead air beneath the tunnel of trees. Black skid marks smeared the pavement behind us. He knelt and peered under the Mustang. Despite my better judgment, I joined him. Butch hopped down and backed up three steps, yapping ferociously. A low animal growl answered him. Near the tires, a big black dog lay dying, a Doberman. We hadn't hit him, but all the blood oozing out of his ragged wounds told me he wasn't long for this world. He'd come from the tall grass that lined the road, or maybe from the trees beyond the field. A hard shudder rocked through me, and the air turned as cold as a northern winter night. "Something got at him," Chance said finally. "Are there bears here? Wolves?" I had no idea. It sounded unlikely, but possible. I wasn't a wildlife expert under any circumstances, and I hadn't been

to Kilmer in nine years. Things changed; habitats evolved. But times must be tough if wild animals had been forced to resort to hunting dogs. I couldn't seem to look away from the shadow-dark flesh. The animal gave one final whine, as if it understood we couldn't help, and then it died. I saw the moment its eyes went liquid still, living tissue reverting to dead meat. Never one to miss an opportunity, Butch scampered into the weeds and did his business. I exhaled in a long unsteady sound, and then pulled myself to my feet using the Mustang's hood. If I believed in omens, we were off to a hell of a start. Chance went to the trunk and wrapped his hands in rags he used to check the oil. Yeah, Chuch had taught him how, threatening to kill him if he didn't look after this car better than others had fared under his ownership. So far he was doing okay. Wordlessly, he reached under the chassis and towed the carcass to the side of the road. Without a shovel, that was really all we could do, but I appreciated the kindness. Otherwise, that poor animal would be splattered all over the road when the next car came, and I thought it had suffered enough. Even if we did have digging tools in the car for some unlikely reason, I wouldn't be interested in hanging around here. My intestines coiled into knots over the idea of losing the light out here within a stone's throw of those dark trees. The whorls on the bark looked like nothing so much as demonic sigils in the wicked half-light, and the long, skeletal limbs stirred in the breeze in a way I simply couldn't like. There was a reason I hated these trees. I'd hid among them while my mother died. While Chance took care of the dead dog, I gave Butch a drink and tried to reassure him that he wasn't doomed to suffer the same fate. His bulging brown eyes glistened with what I'd call a skeptical light as I hopped back in the Mustang. Chance joined us shortly, working the manual transmission with dexterity I couldn't help but admire. "What a welcome." He shook his head. "Tell me about it." As I said that, we passed a faded white sign that I knew read, Welcome to Kilmer, Home of the Red Devils and the World's Best Peach Pie. "Think anyone will recognize you?" I shook my head absently, taking in the familiar sights. It was bizarre. The road into town hadn't changed at all. Ma's Kitchen, an old white clapboard restaurant, still sat just outside the city limits. The strip mall on the left had been given a facelift, fresh paint and new lines in the parking lot, but the general store, the dry cleaners, the Kilmer bank, and a coffee shop still occupied it. The names on the dry cleaner's and coffee shop had changed, but otherwise, the town seemed just as I'd left it. If we stayed on this street, we'd wind up in the town square, where the old courthouse reigned like an aging duchess who refused to admit her day had passed. The clock on the tower hadn't worked since before I moved away, and I couldn't imagine, given the faded air, that they'd come into the money to fix it since. The 'historical' district simply contained the oldest houses; most hadn't been restored. I confirmed that with a glance as we drove through. Faded siding covered the houses in the neighborhoods beyond, a tiny suburban sprawl laid out in a neat grid. Kilmer had a population of nearly 1200 souls. There wasn't a lot here in terms of thriving industry. "It seems sadder," I said at last. "Smaller." "Well, you're older now." To his credit, he didn't say I was bigger. That would've earned him a slap upside the head. Anyway, I wasn't bigger. I still needed to lose a few pounds, but I'd been pretty chunky at eighteen when I climbed on that Greyhound bus. At the gas station cum video store, I'd begged a lift from a farmer headed into Brunswick. I knew buses ran from there, so I used my school ID to get a discount ticket and I rode all night. The next morning, I got off in Atlanta with just a backpack and a few dollars in my pocket. My chest felt tight, remembering. I'd gotten work at a used bookstore the following day. The owner felt sorry for me, I think, but I loved that job. I rented a room in a boarding house, and I was happier than I'd ever been in Kilmer. I was sadder than Roy to see the bookstore go under. By that time, I'd saved enough to move on. And so I did. By the time Chance met me, I'd held eight different jobs in half as many years, and I seldom stayed in one place for long. There was nothing like running from your memories while trying to fit in, though I never made it. People always seemed to suss out that I wasn't quite like them. It was more than the scars on my palms that came from a gift I didn't want. My mother's death stayed with me in the form of the pain that subsumed me each time I read a charged object. There's a name for what I do; people call it psychometry. I call it a curse. For years, I tried to forget. When Chance came into my life, he changed everything. But I wouldn't think about that either. Sometimes the past needed to stay buried; it was the only way you could move on. And sometimes you had to dig it up, because that too was the only way. For my mother's sake, I had to deal with what'd happened in Kilmer. I'd find answers about the men who came by night to our house and burned the place with her trapped inside. I'd discover why. Maybe then the dreams would stop. Maybe then, she could rest. In the twilight, the town looked so quiet, almost peaceful, but to me, it hid a fetid air. Corruption fed in the stillness, like a pretty corpse that, when split open, spilled out a host of maggots. I'd be the knife that cut this place wide and the fire that burned it clean.

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