



ILONA

ANDREWS

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Magic Slays*

GUNMETAL
MAGIC

A NOVEL IN THE WORLD OF KATE DANIELS

"The world Kate inhabits is a blend of gritty magic and dangerous mystery."
—*The Parkersburg News and Sentinel*

MAGIC SLAYS

“Delivers nonstop action and a few surprises while adding considerable background and depth to Kate’s character as she begins stretching her magic usage...top-notch urban fantasy.”

—*Monsters and Criti*

“Fast, witty, and descriptive. Kate is a strong female lead and Curran is perfect for her.”

—*LoveVampir*

“Simply amazing. The Kate Daniels series honestly gets better with each new release. I had high hopes for this book, and the authors simply blew me away with the quality and depth of this story.”

—*Night Owl Review*

“It takes both talent and hard work to keep a series consistently high quality...Andrews’s intricately detailed world-building provides such a rich backdrop for the story that it nearly becomes a character itself. Add in clearly defined and layered characters, not to mention amazing kick-butt action, and you’ve got one unbeatable series. No one does it better!”

—*RT Book Reviews* (4½ stars, Top Pick)

“The conclusion is heart-stopping as Kate fights to secure Atlanta’s survival in a dramatic finale that left me satisfied but ready for book six. Ilona Andrews once again hits a game-winning home run with *Magic Slays*.”

—*Smexy Boo*

MAGIC BLEEDS

“At times I felt like I needed to take a break from the book due to [its] just being too engrossing, to brilliant for my little heart... *Magic Bleeds* is the best yet of this series!”

—*Night Owl Review*

“Ilona Andrews is one of the few authors whose books just keep getting better...It’s books like *Magic Bleeds* that make television and movies seem like an inferior form of entertainment.”

—*Romance Reviews Today*

“I have read and reread this book, and it’s perfect. The action, the romance, the plot and suspense...cannot wait for the fifth in the series.”

—*Smexy Boo*

“Balancing petrifying danger with biting humor is an Andrews specialty, leaving readers both grinning and gasping. Put this on your auto-buy list immediately!”

—*RT Book Review*

“Delivers on the promise of ‘One hell of a good read.’ You will not be disappointed!”

—ParaNormal [Romance.o](#)

MAGIC STRIKES

“Andrews’s crisp dialogue and layered characterization make the gut-wrenching action of this first person thrill ride all the more intense...mesmerizing.”

—*RT Book Reviews* (4½ stars, Top Pick)

“Andrews blends action-packed fantasy with myth and legend, keeping readers enthralled. *Magic Strikes* introduces fascinating characters, provides a plethora of paranormal skirmishes, and teases fans with romantic chemistry.”

—*Darque Review*

“Ilona Andrews’s best novel to date, cranking up the action, danger, and magic...Gritty sword-clashing action and flawless characterizations will bewitch fans, old and new alike.”

—*Sacramento Book Review*

“Doses of humor serve to lighten the suspense and taut action of this vividly drawn, kick-butt series.”

—*Monsters and Criticism*

“From the first page to the last, *Magic Strikes* was a riveting, heart-pounding ride. Story line advance, truths are admitted, intriguing characters are introduced, and the romance between Kate and Curran develops a sweetness that is simply delightful.”

—*Dear Author*

“Write faster...I absolutely love the relationship between Curran and Kate—I laugh out loud with the witty sarcasm and one-liners, and the sexual tension building between the couples drives me to my knees, knowing I’ll have to wait for another book.”

—*SFReview*

MAGIC BURNS

“Fans of Carrie Vaughn and Patricia Briggs will appreciate this fast-paced, action-packed urban fantasy full of magic, vampires, werebeasties, and things that go bump in the night.”

—*Monsters and Criticism*

“With all her problems, secrets, and prowess both martial and magical, Kate is a great kick-ass heroine, a tough girl with a heart, and her adventures...are definitely worth checking out.”

—*Local*

“With a fascinating, compelling plot, a witty, intelligent heroine, a demonic villain, and clever, witty humor throughout, this story has it all.”

—*Fresh Fiction*

“A new take on the urban fantasy genre, the world Kate inhabits is a blend of gritty magic and dangerous mystery.”

—*The Parkersburg News and Sentinel*

“If you enjoy Laurell K. Hamilton’s early Anita Blake or the works of Patricia Briggs and Kim Harrison, you need to add Ilona Andrews to your reading list.”

“Andrews...demonstrates her mastery at balancing dark humor, clever mystery, and supernatural jeopardy. Andrews is the total package!”

—*RT Book Reviews* (4½ stars, Top Pick)

MAGIC BITES

“Treat yourself to a splendid new urban fantasy...I am looking forward to the next book in the series or anything else Ilona Andrews writes.”

—Patricia Briggs, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Fair Game*

“Andrews shows a great deal of promise. Readers fond of Laurell K. Hamilton and Patricia Briggs may find her work a new source of reading pleasure.”

—*SFRev*

“Andrews’s edgy series stands apart from similar fantasies...owing to its complex world-building and skilled characterizations.”

—*Library Journal*

Ace Books by Ilona Andrews

The Kate Daniels Novels

MAGIC BITES

MAGIC BURNS

MAGIC STRIKES

MAGIC BLEEDS

MAGIC SLAYS

The World of Kate Daniels

GUNMETAL MAGIC

The Edge Novels

ON THE EDGE

BAYOU MOON

FATE'S EDGE

eSpecials

MAGIC MOURNS

MAGIC DREAMS

**GUNMETAL
MAGIC**



ILONA ANDREWS



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To the fine people of Texas,
who have taken us in and treated us as their own

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

At the core, *Gunmetal Magic* is a book about a deeply damaged person finding her place in life, and in the beginning stages, it was also a very damaged book in need of help. We would like to thank Ann Sowards, our editor, for once again making it better, and our agent, Nancy Yost, for invaluable advice and friendship.

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GUNMETAL MAGIC



The world has suffered a magic apocalypse. We pushed the technological progress too far, and now magic has returned with a vengeance. It came like an invisible tide, ripping planes out of the sky, dropping monsters onto crowded streets, sucking the power plants dry, and jamming firearms. Some people awoke and found themselves shapeshifters. Others died, cut down by a magic-fueled disease, and rose again as mindless undead, robbed of their ability to reason and driven only by their all-consuming hunger. Gods became real, curses gained power, and telekinesis and telepathy were no longer the products of illusion and special effects.

For three days the magic raged and then it vanished without warning, leaving the world reeling, its population decimated, its cities in tatters.

Since that day, the day of the Shift, the magic comes and goes as it pleases. It floods the planet like a wave crashing on the shoreline, hissing and boiling, leaving its dangerous gifts, and then recedes once again. Sometimes a wave lasts half an hour, sometimes three days. Nobody can predict it and nobody knows what our future holds.

But we are resilient. We will survive.

*“40th Anniversary of the Shift
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution”*

CHAPTER 1



Thud!

My head hit the sidewalk. Candy jerked me up by my hair and slammed my face into the asphalt.

Thud!

“Hit her again!” Michelle squeaked, her teenage voice shrill.

I knew it was a dream, because it didn’t hurt. The fear was still there, that sharp, hot terror, mixed with helpless rage, the kind of fear that turns you from a human being into an animal. Things become distilled to simple concepts: I was small, they were big; I was weak, they were strong. They hurt me and I endured.

Thud.

My skull bounced off the pavement. Blood stained my blond hair. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sarah take a running start like a kicker before a field goal. The flesh on her body boiled. Bones grew, muscles wound around them like cotton candy over a stick, hair sprouted, sheathing the new body, half human, half animal, in a coat of pale sandy fur dappled with telltale hyena spots. The bouncer grinned at me, her malformed mouth full of fangs. I clenched up, curling my ten-year-old self into a ball. The clawed foot crashed into my ribs. The three-inch claws scraped a bone and it crunched inside me like a snapped chopstick. She kept kicking me.

Thud, thud, thud!

This was a dream. A dream grown from my memories, but still just a dream. I knew this, because ten years after my mother took eleven-year-old me and fled halfway across the country, I came back and put two bullets through Sarah’s eyes. I had emptied a clip into Candy’s left ear. I still remembered the way her skull had blossomed with red when the bullets tore out the other side. I had killed the entire werehyena clan. I wiped those bouda bitches off the face of the planet, because the world was a better place with them gone. Michelle was the only one who had escaped.

I sat up and grinned at them. “I’m waking up, ladies. Go fuck yourselves.”

My eyes snapped open. I lay in my closet, wrapped in a blanket and holding a butcher knife. The door of the closet stood slightly ajar, and the gray light of early morning slipped through the narrow gap.

Fantastic. Andrea Nash, decorated veteran of the Order, hiding in her closet with her knife and blanket. I should’ve held on to the dream long enough to beat them into bloody pulp. At least then I wouldn’t feel so completely pathetic.

I inhaled, sampling the air. The normal scents of my apartment floated to me, the hint of synthetic apple from the soap in the bathroom, the fragrance of vanilla from the candle by my bed, and stronger than all of them, the stench of dog fur, a leftover from when my friend Kate’s poodle Grendel had kept me company. That freak of nature had slept at the foot of my bed, and his distinctive reek was permanently imprinted on my rug.

No intruders.

The scents were muted, which meant the magic was down.

Thud-thud-thud!

What in the world?

Thud!

Someone was pounding on my door.

I kicked off my blanket, rolled to my feet, and ran out of the closet. My bedroom greeted me: my big bed, intruder-free; the crumpled mess of the blanket on the rug; my jeans and bra, discarded last night by the bed, next to a Lorna Sterling paperback with a pirate in a poofy shirt on the cover; a bookcase, stuffed to the brim; pale blue curtains on the barred window, undisturbed.

I dropped the butcher knife onto my side table, pulled on my pajamas pants, grabbed my Sig-Sauer P226 from under the pillow, and ran to the door. Waking up with a gun in my hand would've made a lot more sense, but no, I'd woken up clutching a knife. That meant I must've gotten up in the middle of the night, run into the kitchen, taken a knife from the butcher block, run back into the bedroom, grabbed a blanket, and hidden in the closet. All without realizing where I was or what I was doing. That wasn't crazy, I didn't know what was.

I hadn't slept with a knife since I was a teenager. This blast from the past wasn't welcome and needed to go away real fast.

Thud-thud!

I reached the door and stood on my toes to look through the peephole. A tall black woman in her fifties stood on the other side. Her gray hair stuck out from her head in a mess, she was wearing a nightgown, and her face was so twisted by worry, I barely recognized her. Mrs. Haffey. She and her husband lived in an apartment right below me.

Normally Mrs. Haffey viewed her appearance as serious business. In terms of battle readiness, she was my hero—I've never seen her without her makeup and hair perfectly done. Something was really wrong.

I unlocked the door.

"Andrea!" Mrs. Haffey gasped. Behind her, long white strands covered the landing and the stairwell. I was one hundred percent sure they hadn't been there when I'd dragged myself into my apartment last night.

"What's wrong?"

"Darin's missing!"

I pulled her into my apartment and shut the door. "I need you to tell me from the beginning, slow and clearly: what happened?"

Mrs. Haffey took a deep breath. She had been a cop's wife for twenty-five years and her experience from dealing with a lifetime of emergencies kicked in. Her voice was almost steady. "I woke up and made coffee. Darin got up to take Chief outside. I took a shower. When I came out, Darin wasn't back. I went out on the balcony, but he wasn't in his usual spot."

I knew exactly where the usual spot was: two stories under my bedroom window, where the Haffey's bulldog, Chief, preferred to mark his territory. I smelled it on my way to work every morning. Of course, Chief smelled my scent and it only made him more determined to pee his way to territorial supremacy.

"I called and called Darin, and nothing. I tried to go downstairs. There's blood all over the landing and a white substance on the stairs and it's blocking the way."

"Did Mr. Haffey take his gun with him?"

Mr. Haffey had retired from the Paranormal Activity Division of the Atlanta Police Department. PAD cops took their guns seriously. As far as I knew, Darin Haffey never left the house without his Smith & Wesson M&P340 snub-nosed revolver.

"He always takes his gun with him," Mrs. Haffey said.

And he hadn't fired it, because his revolver ate .357 Magnum cartridges. When he pulled the

trigger, the shot sounded like a small cannon going off. I would've heard the gunshot and recognized even through the dream. Whatever happened, happened fast.

The mysterious "white substance" must've appeared as a result of the magic wave last night. Kat, my best friend, had warded my apartment months ago. Invisible spells shielded my place in a protective barrier. She'd covered the perimeter walls, the ceiling, and the floor. Anything magic would have a hard time breaking in, which probably explained why I'd slept safe and secure through the night.

"You know Darin's blind as a bat." Mrs. Haffey twisted her hands. "He can't even see what he's shooting at. The other day he comes running out of the bathroom, screaming and foaming at the mouth. He'd brushed his teeth with Aspercreme instead of toothpaste..."

A note of hysteria slipped into her voice. At five ten, she had eight inches of height on me and she was leaning over. "I called down to the station, but they say it will be twenty minutes or longer. I thought since you were with the Order..."

I used to be with the Order. When I was a Knight of Merciful Aid, it was my job to help people when the cops wouldn't or couldn't assist them with the magic hazmat. I had decorations and a stellar service record, but none of it mattered when the Order found out that I was a shapeshifter. They branded me mentally disturbed and unfit for duty and "retired" me.

But they didn't take away my training or my skills.

I pressed a latch in my wall. A panel slid aside, revealing a small niche that used to be a hallway closet and which I had converted into my own personal armory. A row of gun barrels gleamed in the morning light.

Mrs. Haffey clicked her mouth shut.

Let's see. I'd be bringing my Sigs, but I needed something with more power. The AA-12, an Automatic Assault 12-gauge shotgun with a 32-round clip was always a good choice. It fired 30 rounds per minute with minimal recoil. I filled mine with steel slugs. Squeeze the trigger once, and you get a single shot that would punch through a car door. Hold the trigger, and anything on the other end, no matter how much hard body armor it wore, would become a smoking pile of meat in six and a half seconds. I'd paid a fortune for it and it was worth every dollar.

I grabbed the AA-12 and put on a hip holster, into which I stuck my Sig and its twin. "Mrs. Haffey, I need you to stay here." I gave her a nice big smile. "Lock the door behind me and don't open it until I come back. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Haffey nodded.

"Thank you, ma'am."

I stepped onto the landing and heard the deadbolt slide shut behind me.

The "white substance" stretched in long pale strands over the walls. It resembled a spiderweb, if the spider was the size of a bowling ball and instead of working in a spiral had decided to weave only in the vertical direction. I crossed the landing and inhaled. Usually there was an up-draft here, the air rising from the front entrance to the top of the building. Today no movement troubled the stairway, but I smelled the sharp metallic odor of fresh blood all the same. Tiny hairs on the back of my neck stood up. The predator in me, the other me sleeping deep inside, opened her eyes.

I padded down the stairs, moving silently on the concrete steps, my shotgun ready. Even though magic made my existence possible, it didn't mean that magic and I played nice. Give me guns over spells any day.

The web grew thicker. At the Haffeyes' landing, it swallowed the walls and the wooden stair rail. I turned, heading down. The stench of blood assaulted my nostrils and I tasted it on my tongue. All of my senses went into overdrive. My heart beat faster. My pupils dilated, improving my vision. My breathing sped up. My hearing sharpened and I caught a distant noise, muffled, but unmistakable: the

deep, throaty bark of a bulldog.

~~I took a few more steps down. Blood stained the stairs. A large amount, at least a couple of pints possibly more, all in big round drops. Either someone bled and walked, or someone bled and was carried. Please don't be Darin. I liked Darin and I liked his wife. Mrs. Haffey was always kind to me.~~

The first floor landing was a narrow tunnel within the web. The door to apartment 1A was intact but buried in white strands. The same solid wall of white sealed the way downstairs, and none of it was torn. No sign of Darin going that way. The door to 1B lay in a splintered wreck. Bloody marks stretched across the threshold, pointing into the apartment. Someone had been dragged inside.

I stepped into the hallway. A new scent tugged at me, a slightly sour, prickly odor that set off instinctual alarms in my head. Not good.

The apartment had the exact same layout as mine: a narrow hallway, opening into the kitchen on the right, the living room on the left, then the first bedroom, and then a short perpendicular hallway leading to the utility room and guest bathroom, and finally to the master bedroom with a bathroom en suite.

I moved in, nice and easy, slicing the pie around the corner: starting at the wall and moving at a ninety degree angle away from it, leaning slightly away from the wall to see the threat around the corner before it saw me. Jumping around the corners was very dramatic but would get your head blown off.

Kitchen—clear.

I moved into the living room.

On the left, by a coffee table, sat a large wicker basket full of yarn. Two long wooden needles stuck out of it at an angle. Next to the basket lay a severed human arm. The blood had pooled from it, soaking the beige wall-to-wall carpet in a dark red stain.

Pale skin. Not Darin Haffey. No, this was likely Mrs. Truman who lived in this apartment with her two cats. She liked to play bridge with her knitting club and collected yarn for “special” projects, which she never did anything. Now her torn-off arm lay next to the basket with her knitting stash. No time to absorb and deal with it. I still had Darin to find.

I moved on. The sour prickly scent grew stronger.

Bedroom—clear. Bathroom—clear.

A huge hole gaped in the floor of the utility room. Something had smashed through the floor and tile from below.

I circled the hole, shotgun pointing down.

No movement. The floor below me looked clear.

A muffled noise cut through the quiet.

My ears twitched.

Woof! Woof!

Chief was still alive somewhere in there. I jumped into the hole, landed on the concrete floor of the basement, and moved away from the light streaming through the hole. No need to present a clear target.

Gloom filled the basement, dripping from the web into dark corners. The walls no longer existed. There was only web, white and endless.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness. Shapeshifter vision guaranteed that as long as there was some light, I wouldn't bump into things.

Wet dark smears marred the concrete. Blood. I followed it.

Ahead the concrete split. A long fissure ran through the floor, at least three feet wide. The apartment building was already none too sturdy. The magic hated tall buildings and gnawed on them, pulverizing brick and mortar until the structure crashed down. The bigger the building, the faster

fell. Ours was too short and too small and so far we had escaped unscathed, but giant holes in the basement didn't exactly inspire confidence.

A snorting noise came from inside the gap. I leaned over it. A whiff of dog-fur stink washed over me. *Chief, you silly knucklehead.*

I crouched by the hole. The bulldog squirmed below, snorting up a storm. He must've fallen into the fissure, and the drop was too sheer for him to jump out.

I put my shotgun on the ground and leaned in, grabbing Chief by the scruff of his neck. The bulldog weighed eighty pounds at least. What in the world were the Haffeys feeding him, small elephants? I yanked him out and jumped to my feet, shotgun in my hands. The whole thing took half a second.

Chief pressed against my leg. He was an Olde English Bulldogge, a throwback to the times when the English Bulldog was used for bull-baiting. A powerful, agile dog, Chief feared neither garbage trucks nor stray dogs or horses. Yet here he was, rubbing against my calf, freaked out.

I took a second to bend down and pet his big head. *It will be okay, boy. You're with me now.*

We started forward, moving slowly out of the first narrow room into a wider chamber. The webs spanned the walls, creating hiding spots in the corners. Creepy as hell.

I carefully rounded the corner. At the far wall to my right, two furnaces sat side by side: the electric for the times when technology had the upper hand and the old-fashioned coal-burning monstrosity for use during the waves, when the magic robbed us of electric current. To the right of the coal furnace stood a large coal bin, a four-foot-high wooden enclosure filled with coal. On the coal, half-buried, lay Mr. Haffey.

Two creatures crawled on the concrete in front of the bin. About thirty inches tall and at least five feet long, they resembled huge wingless wasps, with a wide thorax-chest slimming down before flaring into thick abdomen. Stiff brown bristles covered their beige, nearly translucent bodies. Their heads, bigger than Chief's massive skull, bore mandibles the size of garden shears. Their claws scraped the concrete as they moved—an eerie, nasty sound.

The left creature stopped and planted its six chitin-sheathed legs. Its tail end tilted up and a stream of viscous liquid shot out, adhering to the wall. The creature scrubbed its butt on the floor, anchoring the stream, and moved away as the secretions hardened into pale web.

Ew. Ew, ew, ew.

Mr. Haffey raised his head.

The creatures stopped, fixated on the movement.

I fired.

The shotgun barked, spitting thunder. The first steel slug punched into the right creature, cutting through the chitin like it was paper-thin plywood. The insect broke in half. Wet innards spilled onto the floor, like a bunch of swim bladders strung together. Without a pause, I turned and put a second shot into its buddy. Chief barked next to me, snapping his jaws. The creatures jerked and flailed, dragging their body chunks. The sour, spike-studded odor filled the air.

Darin Haffey sat up in the bin. "I see Kayla dragged you into this."

I smiled at him. "No, sir, I just came to borrow a cup of sugar."

"Heh."

The web obscuring the rest of the room to my left tore.

"Incoming," Mr. Haffey snapped, raising his firearm.

The first insect burst into the open. I fired. *Boom!*

Two more. *Boom, boom!*

Boom!

Boom, boom, boom!

The broken chitin bodies crashed into each other, making a pile of jerking legs and vomit-inducing

entrails.

Boom, boom, boom! Boom!

An insect leaped over the pile, aiming for me. I swung the shotgun up. The impact exploded the creature's gut, spraying foul liquid over me. Bug juice burned my lips. Ugh.

A smaller insect dashed toward me. Sharp mandibles sliced at my leg. You bastard! Chief rammed the creature, ripping into the thing before I could sink a slug into it.

Boom! Boom!

I kept firing. Finally the revolting flood stopped. I waited, listening, but no more skittering came. My calf burned. The pain didn't bother me too much, but I'd be leaving a blood trail, which would make me ridiculously easy to track. I had five shots left in the AA-12. No way to know if I had killed them all or if this was the calm before the second wave of insects. I had to get Mr. Haffey out of here.

He was sitting in the coal bin, staring at the pile of insect parts. "Damn. That's some shooting."

"We aim to please," I told him.

"You aim like you mean business."

Funny thing, praise. I knew I was a great shot, but hearing it from the PAD veteran made me a little warm and fuzzy anyway. "Have you seen Mrs. Truman?"

"I saw her body. They ripped her to pieces, the assholes."

Poor Mrs. Truman. "Can you walk?"

"The fuckers got me in the leg. I'm bleeding like a stuck pig."

That's why he'd hidden in the coal. He'd buried his leg in the coal dust to smother the scent. Smart. "Time to go, then."

"You listen to me." Mr. Haffey put some cop hardness into his gruff voice. "There's no way for you to get me out. Even if I lean on you, I'm two hundred and twenty pounds and my weight will just talk you down with me. Leave me a gun, and you get out of here. Kayla must've called over to the station. I'll hold them off until..."

I swung the shotgun over my shoulder and picked him up out of the coal. I wasn't as strong as a normal shapeshifter, although I was faster and more agile, but a two-hundred-pound man still wasn't a challenge.

I double-timed it to the hole, Chief at my heels. The bulldog had a death grip on a chitinous leg as long as he was. He had to lean his head back to carry it, but the look in his eyes said no army in the world could take it away.

"This is embarrassing," Mr. Haffey informed me.

I winked at him. "What, Mrs. Haffey never carried you over the threshold on your wedding night?"

His eyes bulged. "That's just ridiculous. What are you?"

I'd spent most of my life pretending to be human. But now the hyena was out of the bag, and soon or later I had to start owning up to it. "A shapeshifter."

"Wolf?"

"A bouda." Well, not exactly. The truth was more complicated, but I wasn't ready for those explanations yet.

We reached the hole. If I were a regular bouda, I could've jumped out of the hole with Mr. Haffey in my arms. But I knew my limits and that wasn't happening. Throwing him out would injure his dignity beyond repair. "I'm going to lift you. Can you pull yourself up?"

"Is the Pope Catholic?"

I lowered him down, grabbed him by the hips, and heaved. Mr. Haffey pulled himself over the ledge and I got a real close look at that wound. It was a four-inch rip down his leg and touching his sweatpants left my palm bloody. He needed an ambulance yesterday.

I tossed Chief and his prize out of the hole, jumped, caught the edge, and hopped up.

“Will you at least carry me fireman-style?” Mr. Haffey huffed.

“No can do, sir. I’m trying to keep your blood from dripping out of your leg.”

He growled deep under his breath.

I picked him up and started out. “It will all be over soon.”

He guffawed.

I caught the familiar scuttling sound behind me, coming from the master bedroom.

“I thought the Order didn’t allow shapeshifters.”

“They don’t. When they figured me out, they fired me.”

The scuttling chased us.

“That’s bullshit right there.” Mr. Haffey shook his head. “And discrimination. You talk to your union rep?”

“Yes, I did. I fought it as long as I could. Anyway, they retired me with full pension. I can’t appeal.”

Mr. Haffey gave me an appraising look. “You took it?”

“Nope. Told them to shove it.”

I dropped him to the floor as gently as I could and spun, shotgun ready.

A huge pale insect lunged at us. I pumped two slugs into it and it thrashed on the floor. I gathered

Mr. Haffey up and double-timed it to the door.

“Listen, most of my contacts have retired, but a few of us have kids in the department. If you need a job, I can probably fix up something. The PAD will be glad to have you. You’re a hell of a shot. Shouldn’t let that go to waste.”

“Much appreciated.” I smiled. “But I’ve got a job. I work for a business. My best friend owns it.”

I started up the stairs.

“What sort of business?”

“Magic hazmat removal. Protection. That type of thing.”

Mr. Haffey opened his eyes. “Private cop? You went private?”

That’s cop mentality for you. I tell him I’m a shapeshifter and he doesn’t blink an eye. But private cop, oh no, that’s not okay.

“So how’s business?” Mr. Haffey squinted at me.

“Business is fine.” If by fine, one meant lousy. Between Kate Daniels and me, we had a wealth of skills, a small sea of experience, and enough smears on our reputation to kill a dozen careers. All our clients were desperate, because by the time they came to us, everybody else had turned them down.

“What does your man think about that?”

Raphael Medrano. The memory of him was so raw, I could conjure his scent by just thinking about him. The strong male healthy scent that drove me crazy...

“It didn’t work out,” I said.

Mr. Haffey shifted, uncomfortable. “You need to drop that silliness and get back in uniform. We’re talking retirement, benefits, advance in rank and pay...”

I ran up to my door. “Mrs. Haffey!”

The door swung open. Mrs. Haffey’s face went slack. “Oh my God, Darin. Oh God.”

In the distance the familiar sirens blared.

The cavalry arrived with guns and in large numbers. They loaded Mr. Haffey into an ambulance, thanked me for my help, and told me that since I was a civilian, I needed to keep the hell out of the way. I didn’t mind. I’d killed most of what was down there and they had gotten all dressed up and gone through the trouble of bringing flamethrowers. It was only fair to let them have some fun.

I tended the cut on my leg. There wasn't much to do about it. Lyc-V, the virus responsible for shapeshifters' existence, repaired injuries at an accelerated rate, and by the time I got to it, the gas had sealed itself. In a couple of days, the leg would be like new, without scars. Some Lyc-V gifts were useful. Some, like berserker rage, I could live without.

I was scrubbing the bug juice off my face with my makeup removal washcloth, when the phone rang. I wiped the soap off my face and sprinted into the kitchen to pick it up.

"Hello?"

"Nash?" a smooth voice said into the phone.

The smooth voice belonged to Jim, a werejaguar and the Pack's security chief. He usually went by Jim Black, if you didn't know him well. I'd dug through his background during my tenure with the Order. His real name was James Damael Shrapshire, a fact I kept to myself, since he didn't advertise it.

Atlanta's Shapeshifter Pack was the strongest in the nation, and my relationship with it was complicated. But the Pack backed Cutting Edge, the business Kate owned and for which I now worked. They had supplied the seed money and they were our first priority client.

"Hey, Jim. What can I do for you?" Jim wasn't a bad guy. Paranoid and secretive, but then cats were odd creatures.

"One of our businesses got hit last night," Jim said. "Four people are dead."

Someone obviously had a death wish and that someone wasn't very bright, because there were much easier ways of committing suicide. The Pack took care of their own and if you hurt their own, they made it a point to take care of you. "Anybody I know?"

"No. Two jackals, a bouda, and a fox from Clan Nimble. I need you to go down there and check it out."

I headed into the bedroom. "No problem. But why me?"

Jim sighed into the phone. "Andrea, how many years did you spend as a knight?"

"Eight." I began pulling my clothes onto the bed: socks, work boots, jeans...

"How many of those did you spend on active cases?"

"Seven." I added a box of ammo to the clothes pile on the bed.

"That's why. You're the most experienced investigator I've got who's not tied up in something, and I can't ask the Consort to look into it, because A) she and Curran are working on something else and B) when the Consort gets involved, half of the world blows up."

Kate the Consort. The title still made me grin. Every time someone used it, she got this martyred look on her face.

"This mess looks to be complicated and the cops are in up to their elbows. I need you to go down there and untangle it."

Finally. Something I could actually sink my teeth into.

I held the phone between my shoulder and my ear and took a pencil and a notepad off the nightstand. "You've got an address?"

"Fourteen-twelve Griffin."

Griffin Street ran through SoNo, one of the former financial districts, sandwiched between Midtown and Downtown. The name came from "South of North Avenue." It was a bad, unstable area, with office buildings crashing down left and right.

"What were the shapeshifters doing there?"

"Working," Jim said. "It's a reclamation site."

Reclamations. Oh no. No. He wouldn't do that to me. I kept my voice even. "Who was in charge of the site?"

Please don't be Raphael, please don't be Raphael, please don't...

“Medrano Reclamations,” Jim said.

Damn it.

“Raphael is being questioned by some cops, but I’ve sent some lawyers down to make sure they don’t keep him. He’ll join you as soon as they spring him out of there. Look, I know things aren’t good between you and Raphael, but we all have to do things we don’t want to do.”

“Jim,” I cut him off. “I’ve got it. A job is a job. I’m on it.”

CHAPTER 2



It took me forty-five minutes to make my way through the twisted wreck of the city to SoNo. The magic had really done a number on Atlanta. Downtown had suffered the most, but both Midtown and Buckhead had taken a beating. Once-stately skyscrapers lay in ruins, like the gravestones of human hopes, toppled on their sides. Overpasses crumbled into dust and new wooden bridges spanned the asphalt canyons. Debris choked the streets. Atlanta was still alive and kicking and the city was rebuilding little by little, but the sheer weight and volume of the fallen concrete made it problematic to make a wide circle north around the wreckage.

On the corner of Monroe and 10th Street, something fluorescent had exploded, drenching the walls of the new houses in electric orange that smelled like day-old vomit. The city Biohazard crew narrowed the traffic to a single lane guarded by two guys with stop signs, who let the vehicles and riders through a few at a time, while the rest of the Biohazard team washed the orange pus down with fire hoses.

Around me, the morning traffic neighed, brayed, and defecated on the street. Gasoline vehicles failed during magic. My Jeep had two engines, one gas and the other enchanted water, so even when the technology was down, my car still got me where I needed to go, reliably but not very fast. Buying a reconditioned car like mine was expensive, so most people opted for horses, camels, and mules. They worked whenever. They just didn't smell very good. It was the middle of May, and a hot one at that, and the reek rising from the pavement would have sent anyone running for cover.

To my left a man atop a white horse leveled a crossbow at the stop sign. The string twanged and the bolt punched through metal, right into the *O. Bull's-eye*.

The Biohazard guy thrust the injured sign against the Biohazard service truck, pulled a shotgun from the truck bed, and leveled it at the crossbowman.

"Make my day, bitch! Make my day!"

"Fuck you and your sign!"

"Hey," a woman yelled. "There are children here!"

"Piss off!" the rider told her and pointed the crossbow at the Biohazard dude. "Let me through."

"No. Wait your turn like everybody else."

I could tell by their faces that neither of them would shoot. They'd just talk shit and waste everyone's time and as long as the Biohazard guy bickered with the moron on the horse, he wasn't waving the traffic through. At this rate I would never make it to my crime scene.

"Hey, dickhead!" one of the other drivers yelled. "Get off the road!"

"This here is a Falcon Seven," the rider told him. "I can put a bolt through your windshield and pop you to your seat like a bug."

A direct threat, huh? Okay.

I pulled down my sunglasses a bit so the rider would see my eyes. "That's a nice crossbow."

He glanced in my direction. He saw a friendly blond girl with a big smile and a light Texas accent and didn't get alarmed.

"You've got what, a seventy-five-pound draw on it? Takes you about four seconds to reload?"

“Three,” he said.

I gave him my Order smile: sweet grin, hard eyes, reached over to my passenger seat, and pulled out my submachine gun. About twenty-seven inches long, the HK was my favorite toy for close-quarter combat. The rider’s eyes went wide.

“This is an HK UMP submachine gun. Renowned for its stopping power and reliability. Cyclic rate of fire: eight hundred rounds per minute. That means I can empty this thirty-round clip into you in less than three seconds. At this range, I’ll cut you in half.” It wasn’t strictly true but it sounded good. “You see what it says on the barrel?”

On the barrel, pretty white letters spelled out PARTY STARTER.

“You open your mouth again, and I’ll get the party started.”

The rider clamped his jaws shut.

I looked at the Biohazard guy. “Appreciate the job you’re doing for the city, sir. Please carry on.”

Ten seconds later, I got through the roadblock, steered the Jeep down Monroe Street, and turned right onto North Avenue. I made it two blocks before the street ended in a mountain of crushed glass. This intrepid adventure would have to continue on foot. I parked, checked my guns, took my crime scene kit out of the trunk, and jogged down the street.

Maybe Raphael wouldn’t be there.

Sooner or later I would have to interview him. My heart rate sped up at the thought. I took deep breaths until it slowed. I had a job to do. The Order might not think I was worth much, but the Pac obviously did. I would be professional about it.

Professional. Just the facts, ma’am. Move along, there is nothing to see here. No need to panic.

This wasn’t my first case and this wasn’t my first murder. It was a chance at work that mattered and I would not blow it by making a spectacle of myself.

Fourteen-twelve Griffin resembled a small hill of twisted metal, decorated with chunks of concrete mixed with dirty marble, piles of shattered bluish glass, and fine gray dust, the result of magic’s fancy grinding at the substance of the building. A backhoe and some other heavy-duty construction vehicle, the name of which I didn’t know sat across the street, next to a tent.

A reinforced tunnel led inside the hill, with two shapeshifters standing guard. The one on the left, in dark jeans and a black T-shirt, was a male bouda in his late thirties, lean, dark, with an easy smile. I’d met him before—his name was Stefan and he and I had no problems. Like most boudas, he was good with a knife and occasionally, if his opponents really pissed him off, he would scalp them after he’d killed them.

The other shapeshifter, on the right, was larger, younger, and dark-eyed, with chestnut hair cropped short. I inhaled his scent. A werejackal.

I came to a halt before the tunnel. Stefan’s eyes widened. “Hey, you.”

“Hey, yourself.”

The jackal gave me a long look. I wore a white long-sleeved shirt, brown pants, and a leather vest over it. The vest’s main advantage was its million pockets. My two Sigs rested in twin shoulder holsters. The jackal’s nose wrinkled. That’s right, I don’t smell like a normal bouda.

“Jim sent me,” I told Stefan.

Stefan raised his eyebrows. “That Jim?”

“Yup. Did Raphael make it back from the cops?” My insides clenched up.

“Nope.”

Thank God. I was a coward. A terrible, sad coward. “I need to examine the scene.”

The jackal finally identified the scent. “You’re...”

Stefan sidestepped, casually stomping on the jackal’s foot with his steel-toed work boot. “She’s the point on this case. Come on, Andrea, I’ll show you around.”

He ducked into the tunnel. I took off my shades, tucked them into a vest pocket, and followed him. ~~A dry stone odor greeted us, mixed with something else. The secondary scent coated my tongue and~~ recognized it: it was the faint, barely perceptible reek of early decomposition.

When magic attacked a tall building, it gnawed on the concrete first, attacking it in random places until it turned into dust. Eventually the building crashed like a rotten tree. Concrete and breakables valuables perished, but metal and other valuable scrap endured. Reclamation companies went into the fallen buildings and salvaged the metal and anything else that could be sold.

Fallen wrecks like this one were unstable. It took a special kind of insanity to burrow into a building that could collapse on your head at any moment. Shapeshifters turned out to be well-suited for it: we were all insane to start with, enhanced strength let us work fast, and Lyc-V-fueled regeneration knitted broken bones together in record time.

Whatever other faults Raphael had, he made sure to keep the broken bones to a bare minimum. The passageway was six feet wide. Thick steel beams and stone pillars supported the roof and metal mesh held back the walls. I was five foot two, but Stefan had six inches on me, and he didn't have to duck either. A string of electric lights ran along the ceiling, blinking dimly. Dimly was plenty. We paused, letting our eyes adjust to the gloom, and walked on.

The tunnel angled down.

"Tell me about the building," I asked.

"It fell about seven years after the Shift, right in line with the Georgia Power building behind the Civic Center. Before it crashed, it was a thirty-floor tower of blue glass shaped like a V. Built and owned by Jamar Groves. Jamar was a real estate developer and this baby was his pride and joy. He called it the Blue Heron Building. People told him to evacuate, but he got it into his head that the building wouldn't fall. He's still here somewhere." Stefan nodded at the ceiling. "Or at least his bones are."

"Went down with his ship?" The stench of decomposition was getting stronger, clinging to the walls of the tunnel like a foul patina.

"Yep. Jamar was a weird guy, apparently."

"Only poor people are weird. Rich people are eccentric."

Stefan cracked a grin. "Well, Jamar owned a huge art collection and he had some interesting ideas. For one, he had a Roman-style marble bathhouse on the second floor."

"So you're after the marble?" I asked.

"Screw the marble. We're after the copper plumbing. The whole structure had old-school copper pipes. Copper prices are through the roof right now. Even copper wiring is expensive. Of course, you smelt the plastic off of it, it's worth twice as much, but we won't be doing that. The smoke is toxic as hell, even for us. There is steel, too, but the copper is the real prize. That's why Raphael bought the building."

"He bought the building?" A few months ago when Raphael and I were together, he mostly did work for hire: the owners of various buildings would employ him to reclaim the valuables for a percentage of anything he recovered.

Stefan grinned. "We can do that now. Playing with the big boys."

The tunnel kept going, lower and lower, burrowing down.

"Why dig so deep under the building? Why not come from the side?"

"The Heron is a toppler," Stefan said. "It went over right above the sixth floor. And it never caught fire."

Magic took buildings down in different ways. Sometimes the entire inner structure collapsed and the building imploded in a fountain of dust. More often, the magic weakened parts of the building causing a partial collapse until the whole thing crashed, toppling on its side. Topplers were valuable

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