

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Magic Strikes*

ILONA ANDREWS

"Kate is a great kick-ass heroine, a tough girl with a heart, and her adventures...are definitely worth checking out."

—*Locus*

MAGIC BLEEDS

A KATE DANIELS NOVEL



“Having an already exceptional series exceed your expectations is a rare and wonderful thing, but Andrews unquestionably pulls it off with this astonishing read. Fans invested in this series, the emotional payoff is huge, opening up exciting plotline possibilities. Balancing petrifying danger with biting humor is an Andrews specialty, leaving readers both grinning and gasping. Put [*Magic Bleeds*] on your autobuy list immediately!”

—Romantic Times

PRAISE FOR THE KATE DANIELS NOVELS MAGIC STRIKES

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“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

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

—Dear Author

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“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.”

—SFR

MAGIC BURNS

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—Lo

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—Fresh Fic

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—SFR

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MAGIC BITES

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—SFR

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—Library Jour

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—Lo

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“A unique world laced with a thick plot full of strife, betrayal, and mystery.”

—*Romance Jun*

“The plot moves along at a pleasant clip, and the world-building is interesting and well done.”

—*Romantic Tim*

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The Kate Daniels Novels

MAGIC BITES
MAGIC BURNS
MAGIC STRIKES
MAGIC BLEEDS

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ON THE EDGE

MAGIC BLEEDS



ILONA ANDREWS



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To our children, Anastasia and Helen

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PROLOGUE



NO MATTER HOW CAREFULLY I PATTED THE chopped apples into place, the top crust of my apple pie always looked like I'd tried to bury a dismembered body under it. My pies turned out ugly but they tasted good. This particular pie was rapidly losing the last of its heat.

I surveyed the spread in my kitchen. Venison steaks, marinated in beer, lightly seasoned, sitting in a pan ready to be popped into the oven. I'd saved them for last—they wouldn't take but ten minutes under the broiler. Homemade rolls, now cold. Corn on the cob, also cold. Baked potatoes, yep, very cold. I'd added some sautéed mushrooms and a salad just in case what I had wasn't enough. The butter on the mushrooms was doing its best to congeal into a solid state. At least the salad was supposed to be cold.

I plucked a creased note from the table. Eight weeks ago, Curran, the Beast Lord of Atlanta, the lord and master of fifteen hundred shapeshifters, and my own personal psycho, had sat in the kitchen of my apartment in Atlanta and written out a menu on this piece of paper. I'd lost a bet to him, and according to the terms of our wager, I owed him one naked dinner. He'd added a disclaimer explaining that he'd settle for my wearing a bra and panties, since he wasn't a complete beast—an assertion very open to debate.

He'd set a date, November 15, which was today. I knew this because I had checked the calendar three times already. I had called him at the Keep three weeks ago and set the place, my house near Savannah, and the time, 5 p.m. It was eight thirty now.

He'd said he couldn't wait.

Food—check. My most flattering set of bra and panties—check. Makeup—check. Curran—blank. I drew my finger along the pale blade of my saber, feeling the cold metal under my skin. Where exactly was His Majesty?

Did he get cold feet? Mr. “You'll sleep with me and say please before and thank you after”?

He'd chased a flying palace through an enchanted jungle and carved his way through dozens of rakshasa demons to save me. Dinner was a huge deal to shapeshifters. They never took food for granted, but making a dinner for someone you were romantically interested in took a simple meal to a whole new level. When a shapeshifter made you dinner, he was either pledging to take care of you or he was trying to get into your pants. Most of the time, both. Curran had fed me soup once, when I was half-dead, and the fact that I had eaten it, even without knowing what that meant, amused him to no end. He wouldn't miss this dinner.

Something must've held him up.

I picked up the phone. Then again, he enjoyed screwing with me. I wouldn't put it past him to hide outside in the bushes, watching me squirm. Curran treated women like wonderful toys: he wined them, dined them, took care of their problems, and once they grew completely dependent on him, he became bored. Maybe whatever I perceived to be between us was only in my head. He'd realized he won and had lost interest. Calling him would just give him an opportunity to gloat.

I hung up the phone and looked at my pie some more.

If you opened a dictionary and looked up “control freak,” you'd find Curran's picture. He ruled with steel claws, and when he said, “Jump,” there was hell to pay if you didn't start hopping. He infuriated me and I drove him out of his skin. Even if he wasn't truly interested, he wouldn't miss a chance

see me present this dinner in my underwear. His ego was too big. Something must have happened.

~~Eight forty-four. Curran served as the Pack's first and last line of defense. Any hint of a significant threat, and he'd be out there, roaring and ripping bodies in half. He could be hurt.~~

The thought stopped me cold. It would take a bloody army to bring down Curran. Of the fifteen hundred homicidal maniacs under his command, he was the toughest and most dangerous sonovabitch. If something did happen, it had to be bad. He would've called if he'd been delayed by something minor.

Eight forty-nine.

I took the phone, cleared my throat, and dialed the Keep, the Pack's stronghold on the outskirts of Atlanta. Just keep it professional. Less pathetic that way.

"You've reached the Pack. What do you want?" a female voice said into the phone.

Friendly people, the shapeshifters. "This is Agent Daniels. Can I speak to Curran, please?"

"He isn't taking calls right now. Do you want to leave a message?"

"Is he in the Keep?"

"Yes, he is."

A heavy rock materialized in my chest and made it hard to breathe.

"Message?" the female shapeshifter prompted.

"Just tell him I called, please. As soon as possible."

"Is this urgent?"

Fuck it. "Yes. Yes, it is."

"Hold on."

Silence reigned. Moments dripped by, slowly, stretching thinner and thinner . . .

"He says he's too busy to talk to you right now. In the future, please go through proper channels and direct all your concerns to Jim, our security chief. His number is—"

I heard my voice, oddly flat. "I have the number. Thanks."

"Anytime."

I lowered the phone into the cradle very carefully. A tiny sound popped in my ears, and I had the absurd idea that it was my heart forming hairline cracks.

He stood me up.

He stood me up. I cooked a huge meal. I sat by the phone for the last four hours. I put on make-up for the second time in the past year. I bought a box of condoms. Just in case.

I love you, Kate. I'll always come for you, Kate.

You sonovabitch. Didn't even have the balls to speak to me.

I surged off the chair. If he was going to dump me after all that shit, I'd force him to do it in person.

It took me less than a minute to get dressed and load my wrist guards with silver needles. My saboteur Slayer, had enough silver in it to hurt even Curran, and right now I very much wanted to hurt him. I stalked through the house looking for my boots in a fury-steeped daze, found them in the bathroom, checked all places, and sat down on the floor to put them on. I pulled the left boot on, tapped my heel in the right place, and stopped.

Suppose I did get to the Keep. And then what? If he decided he didn't want to see me, I'd have to cut my way through his people to get to him. No matter how much it hurt, I couldn't do that. Curran knew me well enough to recognize that and use it against me. A vision of me sitting in the lobby of the Keep for hours popped into my head. Hell no.

If the asshole did condescend to make an appearance, what would I say? How dare you dump me on me before the relationship even started? I've traveled six hours to tell you how much I hate you because you meant that much to me? He'd laugh in my face, then I'd slice him to ribbons and then he'd breathe down my neck.

I forced myself to grope for reason in the fog of my rage. I worked for the Order of Knights Merciful Aid, which together with the Paranormal Activity Division, or PAD, and the Military Supernatural Defense Unit, or MSDU, formed the law enforcement defense against magical hazmat of all kinds. I wasn't a knight, but I was a representative of the Order. Worse, I was the only representative of the Order with Friend of the Pack status, meaning that when I attempted to muscle my way into Pack-related problems, the shapeshifters didn't tear me apart right away. Any issues the Pack had with the law usually found their way to me.

The shapeshifters came in two flavors: Free People of the Code, who maintained strict control over Lyc-V, the virus raging in their bodies; and loups, who surrendered to it. Loups murdered indiscriminately, bouncing from atrocity to atrocity until someone did the world a favor and murdered their cannibalistic asses. The Atlanta PAD viewed each shapeshifter as a loup-in-waiting, and the Pack responded by ratcheting up their paranoia and mistrust of outsiders to new and dizzying heights. The position with the authorities was precarious at best, saved from open hostility by their record of cooperation with the Order. If Curran and I got into it, our fight wouldn't be seen as a conflict between two individuals, but as the Beast Lord's assault on an Order representative. Nobody would believe that I was dumb enough to start it.

The shapeshifters' standing would plummet. I had only a few friends, but most of them grew fangs and claws. I'd make their lives hell to soothe my hurt.

For once in my life, I had to do the responsible thing.

I pulled the boot off and threw it across the room. It thudded into the wood panel in the hallway.

For years, first my father and then my guardian, Greg, had warned me to stay away from human relationships. Friends and lovers only brought you trouble. My existence had a purpose, and that purpose—and my blood—left no room for anything else. I had ignored the warnings of the two dead men and dropped my shields. It was time to suck it up and pay for it.

I'd believed him. He was supposed to be different, to be more. He'd made me hope for things I didn't think I'd ever get. When hope broke, it hurt. Mine was a very big, very desperate hope, and it hurt like a sonovabitch.

Magic flooded the world in a silent wave. The electric lamps blinked and died a quiet death, giving way to the blue radiance of the feylanterns on my walls. The enchanted air in the twisted glass tubes luminesced brighter and brighter until an eerie blue light filled the entire house. It was called positive Shift resonance: magic came in waves, negating technology, and then vanished as abruptly and unpredictably as it had appeared. Somewhere, gasoline engines failed and guns choked midbullet. The defensive spells around my house surged up, forming a dome over my roof and hammering home the point: I'd needed protection. I'd dropped my shields and let the lion in. It was time to pay the piper.

I got up off the floor. Sooner or later my job would bring me into contact with the Beast Lord. That was inevitable. I needed to get the hurt out of my system now, so when we met again, all he would get from me would be cold courtesy.

I marched into the kitchen, trashed the dinner, and strode out. I had a date with a heavy punching bag, and I had no trouble imagining Curran's face on it.

An hour later, when I left for my apartment in Atlanta, I was so tired I fell asleep in my car. Moments after I steered my vehicle into the ley line and the magic current dragged it off toward the city.

CHAPTER 1



I RODE THROUGH THE STREETS OF ATLANTA, ROCKING with the hoofbeats of my favorite mule, Marigold, who didn't care for the birdcage attached to her saddle and really didn't care for the globs of lizard spit dripping from my jeans. The birdcage contained a fist-sized clump of gray fuzz which I'd had a devil of a time catching and which might or might not have been a living dust bunny. The jeans contained about a half-gallon of saliva deposited on me by a pair of Trimble County lizards which I'd managed to chase back into their enclosure at the Atlanta Center for Mythological Research. I was eleven hours and thirteen minutes into my shift, I hadn't eaten since that morning, and I wanted a doughnut.

Three weeks had passed since Curran had stood me up. For the first week, I was so angry I couldn't see straight. The anger had subsided now, but the dense heavy stone remained in my chest, weighing me down. Strangely, doughnuts helped. Especially ones drizzled with chocolate. As expensive as chocolate was in our day and age, I couldn't afford a whole chocolate bar, but the drizzle of chocolate syrup on the doughnuts did the job just well enough.

"Hello, dear."

After almost a year of working for the Order, hearing Maxine's voice in my head no longer made me jump. "Hello, Maxine."

The Order's telepathic secretary called everyone "dear," including Richter, a new addition to the Atlanta chapter who was as psychotic as a knight of the Order could get without being stripped of his knighthood. Her "dears" fooled no one. I'd rather run ten miles with a rucksack full of rocks than face a chewing-out from Maxine. Perhaps it was the way she looked: tall, thin, ramrod straight, with a halo of tightly curled silver hair and the mannerisms of a veteran middle school teacher who had seen it all before and would not suffer fools gladly . . .

"Richter is quite sane, dear. And is there any particular reason you keep picturing a dragon with my hair on its head and a chocolate doughnut in its mouth?"

Maxine never read thoughts on purpose, but if you concentrated hard enough while "on call," she couldn't help picking up simple mental images.

I cleared my throat. "Sorry."

"No problem. I always thought of myself as a Chinese dragon, actually. We're out of doughnuts, but I have cookies."

Mmm, cookies. "What do I have to do for a cookie?"

"I know your shift is over, but I have an emergency petition and nobody to handle it."

Argh. "What's the petition?"

"Someone attacked the Steel Horse."

"The Steel Horse? The border bar?"

"Yes."

Post-Shift Atlanta was ruled by factions, each with its own territory. Of all the factions in Atlanta, the People and the Pack were the largest and the two I most wanted to avoid. The Steel Horse sat right on the invisible border between their territories. A neutral spot, it catered to both the People and the shapeshifters, as long as they could keep it civil. For the most part, they did.

"Kate?" Maxine prompted.

“Do you have any details?”

~~“Someone started a fight and departed. They have something cornered in the cellar, and they’re~~
~~afraid to let it out. They’re hysterical. At least one fatality.”~~

A bar full of hysterical necromancers and werebeasts. Why me?

“Will you take it?”

“What kind of cookies?”

“Chocolate chip with bits of walnuts in them. I’ll even give you two.”

I sighed and turned Marigold to the west. “I’ll be there in twenty.”

Marigold sighed heavily and started down the night-drenched street. The Pack members drank little. Staying human required iron discipline, and the shapeshifters avoided substances that altered their grip on reality. A glass of wine with dinner or a single beer after work was pretty much their limit.

The People also drank little, primarily because of the presence of shapeshifters. A bizarre hybrid of a cult, a corporation, and a research institute, they concerned themselves with the study of the undead—primarily vampires. *Vampirus immortuus*, the pathogen responsible for vampirism, eradicated all traces of ego from its victims, turning them into bloodlustcrazed monsters and leaving their minds nice and blank. Masters of the Dead, the People’s premier necromancers, took advantage of this occurrence—they navigated vampires by riding their minds and controlling their every move.

Masters of the Dead weren’t brawlers. Well-educated, lavishly compensated intellectuals, they were ruthless and opportunistic. Masters of the Dead wouldn’t be visiting a bar like the Steel Horse either. Too lowbrow. The Steel Horse catered to the journeymen, navigators-in-training, and since the Red Stalker murders, the People had tightened their grip on their personnel. A couple of drunk and disorderlies, and your study of the undead would come to an untimely end. The journeymen still got roaring drunk—most were too young and made too much money for their own good—but they didn’t do it where they’d get caught and they definitely didn’t do it with the shapeshifters watching.

A shadow scuttled across the street, small, furry, and with too many legs. Marigold snorted and kept on, unfazed.

The People were led by a mysterious figure known as Roland. To most, he was a myth. To me, he was a target. He was also my biological father. Roland had sworn off children—they kept trying to kill him—but my mother really wanted me and he decided that, for her sake, he could suffer to try one more time. Except he changed his mind and tried to kill me in the womb. My mother ran and Roland Warlord, Voron, ran with her. Voron made it, my mother didn’t. I never knew her, but I knew that if my natural father ever found me, he’d move heaven and earth to finish what he started.

Roland was legend. He’d survived for thousands of years. Some thought he was Gilgamesh, some thought he was Merlin. He wielded incredible power and I wasn’t ready to fight him. Not yet. Contact with the People meant the risk of discovery by Roland and so I avoided them like a plague.

Contact with the Pack meant the risk of contact with Curran, and right now that was worse.

Who the hell would attack the Steel Horse anyway? What was the thinking behind that? “Here is a bar full of psychotic killers who grow giant claws and people who pilot the undead for a living. I think I’ll go wreck the place.” Sound reasoning there. Not.

I couldn’t avoid the Pack forever, just because their lord and master made my sword arm ache. Get in. Do my job. Get out. Simple enough.

The Steel Horse occupied an ugly bunker of a building: squat, brick, and reinforced with steel bars over the windows and a metal door about two and a quarter inches thick. I knew how thick the door was because Marigold had just trotted past it. Someone had ripped the door off its hinges and tossed it across the street.

Between the door and the entrance stretched potholed asphalt covered with random patches of blood, liquor, and broken glass, and a few moaning bodies in various stages of inebriation and batt

damage.

Damn, I'd missed all the fun.

A clump of tough guys stood by the tavern's doorway. They didn't exactly look hysterical, since the term was conveniently absent from their vocabulary, but the way they gripped makeshift weapons and broken furniture made one want to approach them slowly, speaking in soothing tones. Judging by the battle scene, they had just gotten beat up in their own bar. You can never lose a fight in your own bar because if you do, it's not your bar anymore.

I slowed my mule to a walk. The temperature had plummeted in the past week, and the night was bitterly, unseasonably cold. The wind cut at my face. Faint clouds of breath fluttered from the guys at the bar. A couple of the larger thuggy-looking citizens sported some hardware: a big, rough-hewn man on the right carried a mace, and his pal on the left wielded a machete. Bouncers. Only bouncers would be allowed to have real weapons in a border bar.

I scanned the crowd, looking for telltale glowing eyes. Nothing. Just the normal human irises. If there had been shapeshifters in the bar tonight, they'd either cleared off or kept their human skin securely on. I didn't sense any vampires nearby either. No familiar faces in the crowd. The journeymen must've taken off, too. Something bad went down and nobody wanted to be tarred by it. And now it was all mine. Oh, goodie.

Marigold carried me past the human wreckage and to the doorway. I pulled out the clear plastic wallet I carried on a cord around my neck, and held it up so they could see the small rectangle of the Order ID.

"Kate Daniels. I work for the Order. Where is the owner?"

A tall man stepped from the inside of the bar and leveled a crossbow at me. It was a decent modern recurve crossbow, with close to two hundred pounds of draw weight. It came equipped with a fiber optic sight and a scope. I doubted he'd need either to hit me at ten feet. At this distance the bolt wouldn't just penetrate; it would go through me, taking my guts for a ride on its fletch.

Of course, at this distance I might kill him before he got off a shot. Hard to miss with a throwing knife at ten feet.

The man fixed me with grim eyes. Middle-aged and thin, he looked as if he'd spent too much time outdoors doing hard labor. Life had melted all the flesh off his bones, leaving only leathery skin, gunpowder, and gristle. A short dark beard hugged his jaw. He nodded to the smaller bouncer. "Vik, check the ID."

Vik sauntered over and looked at my wallet. "It says what she said it did."

I was too tired for this. "You're looking at the wrong thing." I took the card out of the wallet and offered it to him. "See the square in the bottom left corner?"

His gaze flicked to the square of enchanted silver.

"Put your thumb over it and say, 'ID.' "

Vik hesitated, glanced at his boss, and touched the square. "ID."

A burst of light punched his thumb, and the square turned black.

"The card knows you're not its owner. No matter how many of you mess with it, it will stay black until I touch it." I placed my finger over the silver. "ID."

The black vanished, revealing the pale surface.

"That's how you tell a real Order agent from a fake one." I dismounted and tied Marigold to the rail. "Now, where is the corpse?"

The bar owner introduced himself as Cash. Cash didn't strike me as the trusting kind, but at least he kept his crossbow pointed at the ground as he led me behind the building and to the left. Since his choice of Order representatives was limited to me and Marigold, he decided to take his chances with me. Always nice to be judged more competent than a mule.

The crowd of onlookers tagged along as we circled the building. I could've done without an audience, but I didn't feel like arguing. I'd wasted enough time playing magic tricks with my ID.

"We run a tight ship here," Cash said. "Quiet. Our regulars don't want trouble."

The night wind flung the sour stench of decomposing vomit in my face, and a touch of an entirely different scent, syrupy thick, harsh, and cloying. Not good. There was no reason for the body to smell yet. "Tell me what happened."

"A man started trouble with Joshua. Joshua lost," Cash said.

He'd missed his calling. He should've been a saga poet.

We reached the back of the building and stopped. A huge, ragged hole gaped in the side of the building where someone had busted out through the wall. Bricks lay scattered across the asphalt. Whoever that creature was, he could punch through solid walls like a wrecking ball. Too heavy-duty for a shapeshifter, but you never know.

"Did one of your shapeshifter regulars do that?"

"No. They all cleared off once the fight started."

"What about the People's journeymen?"

"Didn't have any tonight." Cash shook his head. "They usually come on Thursdays. We're here."

Cash pointed to the left, where the ground sloped down to a parking lot punctuated by a utility pole in its center. On the pole, pinned by a crowbar thrust through his open mouth, hung Joshua.

Parts of him were covered by shreds of tanned leather and jeans. Everything uncovered no longer looked human. Hard bumps clustered on every inch of his exposed skin, dark red and interrupted by lesions and wet, gaping ulcers, as if the man had become a human barnacle. The crust of sores was so thick on his face I couldn't even distinguish his features, except for the milky eyes, opened wide and staring at the sky.

My stomach sank. All traces of fatigue fled, burned in a flood of adrenaline.

"Did he look like that before the fight started?" Please say yes.

"No," Cash said. "It happened after."

A cluster of bumps over what might have been Joshua's nose shifted, bulged outward, and felt like it was giving space to a new ulcer. The fallen piece of Joshua rolled on the asphalt and stopped. The pavement around it sprouted a narrow ring of flesh-colored fuzz. The same fuzz coated the pole below and slightly above the body. I concentrated on the lower edge of the fuzz line and saw it creep very slowly down the wood.

Fuck.

I kept my voice low. "Did anybody touch the body?"

Cash shook his head. "No."

"Anybody go near it?"

"No."

I looked into his eyes. "I need you to get everyone back into the bar and keep them there. Nobody leaves."

"Why?" he asked.

I had to level with him. "Joshua's diseased."

"He's dead."

"His body's dead, but the disease is alive and magic. It's growing. It's possible that everyone's infected."

Cash swallowed. His eyes widened and he glanced through the hole and into the bar. A dark-haired woman, slight and bird-boned, wiped up the spills on the counter, sliding broken glass into a wastebasket with her rag. I looked back at Cash and saw fear.

If he panicked, the crowd would scatter and infect half the city.

I kept my voice quiet. "If you want her to live, you have to herd everyone back into the bar and keep them from leaving. Tie them up if you have to, because if they take off, we'll have an epidemic. Once the people are secure, call Biohazard. Tell them Kate Daniels says we have a Mary. Give them the address. I know it's hard, but you have to be calm. Don't panic."

"What will you do?"

"I'll try to contain it. I'll need salt, as much as you've got. Wood, kerosene, alcohol, whatever you have that might burn. I have to build a flame barrier. You've got pool tables?"

He stared at me, uncomprehending.

"Do you have pool tables?"

"Yes."

I dropped my cloak on the slope. "Please bring me your pool chalk. All of it."

Cash walked away from me and spoke to the bouncers. "Alright," the bigger bouncer bellowed. "Everybody back into the bar. One round on the house."

The crowd headed into the bar through the hole in the wall. One man hesitated. The bouncers moved in on him. "Into the bar," Vik said.

The guy thrust his chin into the air. "Fuck off."

Vik sank a quick, hard punch into his gut. The man folded in half, and the bigger bouncer slung him over his shoulder and headed back into the Steel Horse.

Two minutes later one of the bouncers trotted out with a large sack of salt and fled back into the bar. I cut the corner of the bag and began drawing a three-inch-wide circle around the pole. Cash emerged from the hole in the tavern carrying some broken crates, followed by the dark-haired woman with a large box. The woman set the box down by the lumber. Filled with blue squares of pool chalk. Good. "Thank you."

She caught a glimpse of Joshua on the pole. The blood drained from her face.

"Did you call Biohazard?" I asked.

"Phone's out," Cash said softly.

Can something go right for me today?

"Does that change things?" Cash asked.

It changed a short-term fix into a long-term defense. "I'll just have to work harder to keep it put."

I finished the salt circle, dumped the bag, and began laying the wood into another circle around the pole. The fire wouldn't hold it indefinitely, but it would buy me some time.

The flesh-colored fuzz tested the salt and found it delicious. Figured. I didn't feel any different, and I was closest to the body, so I'd be the first one to go. A comforting thought.

Cash had brought down some bottles, and I dumped their contents onto the crates, soaking the wood in hard liquor and kerosene. One flick of a match, and the wooden ring flared into flames.

"Is that it?" Cash asked.

"No. The fire will delay it, but not for long."

The two of them looked as though they were at their own funeral.

"It will be okay." Kate Daniels, agent of the Order. We take care of your magic problems, and when we can't, we lie through our teeth. "It will all turn out. You two go inside now. Keep the peace and keep trying the phone."

The woman brushed Cash's sleeve with her fingers. He pivoted to her, patted her hand, and together they went back into the tavern.

The fuzz crawled halfway across the salt. I began to chant, going through the roster of purifying incantations. Magic built around me slowly, like cotton candy winding on the spire of my body and flowing outward, around the flame circle.

The fuzz reached the fire. The first flesh-colored tendrils licked the boards and melted into black

goo with a weak hiss. The flames popped with the sickening stench of burning fat. That's right, you bastard. ~~Stay the hell behind my fire. Now I just had to keep it still until I finished the first wa~~ circle.

Chanting, I grabbed the pool chalk and drew the first glyph.

CHAPTER 2



“HOLY MOTHER OF GOD.” THE TALL, THIN SPIRE OF a woman that was Patrice Laner, Biohazard’s in-house medmage, crossed her arms on her chest. She seemed even taller from where she sat, huddled on the slope under my cloak. The cold seeped through the fabric of my jeans and my boots had turned into a chunk of ice.

The telephone pole had become a mass of flesh-colored fur. Around it the entire parking lot was covered in my glyphs. I had used up all of Cash’s chalk.

The pole slowly rained skin-colored fuzz. The same crap spread in a circle around its base. The fire had died down to mere coals, and the fuzz had spilled over it in several places, pooling against the first ring of glyphs. I’d chopped off the wires going from the pole after completing the second circle of glyphs and threw them into the ward. The fuzz had swallowed them so completely, you’d never know they were there.

Medmages and medtechs swarmed the scene. Biohazard was technically part of PAD, but practically speaking, it had its own separate quarters and its own chain of command, and Patrice was pretty far up that chain.

Patrice raised her arm and I felt a faint pulse of magic. “I can’t feel a thing past the chalk,” she said, her breath escaping in a cloud of pale vapor.

“That’s the idea.”

“Smart-ass.” Patrice surveyed my handiwork and shook her head. “Look at it crawl. Persistence blight, isn’t he?”

That was why I’d made the second circle in case the first failed, and then it occurred to me that the telephone pole could take a dive. The wards of the first two circles extended only about eight feet up and if the pole fell, the disease would land outside the barrier, so I drew the third ward circle. It had been a very wide circle, too, because the pole was painfully tall, about thirty feet. Four medtechs now walked along the outer circle’s perimeter, waving censers which trailed purifying smoke. I’d stuffed everything I had into those wards. Right now a kitten could touch me with her paw and score a total knockout.

A young male medtech crouched by me and raised a small white flower in a pot to my lips. Five white petals streaked with thin green veins leading to a ring of fuzzy stalks, each tipped with a small yellow dot. A bog star. The tech whispered an incantation and said in a practiced cadence, “Take a deep breath and exhale.”

I blew on the flower. The petals remained snow-white. If I had been infected, the bog star would’ve turned brown and withered.

The tech checked the color of the petals against a paper card and chanted low under his breath. “One more time—deep breath and exhale.”

I obediently exhaled.

He took away the bog star. “Look into my eyes.”

I did. He peered deeply into my irises.

“Clear. You have beautiful eyes.”

“And she has a big, sharp sword.” Patrice snorted. “Be gone, creature.”

The medtech rose. “She’s clean,” he called in the direction of the tavern. “You can speak with her now.”

now.”

The dark-haired woman, who'd brought the chalk to me hours earlier, stepped out of the bar and carried a glass of whiskey. "I'm Maggie. Here." She offered the glass to me. "Seagram's Seven Crown."

"Thank you, I don't drink."

"Since when?" Patrice raised her eyebrows.

Maggie held the whiskey to me. "You need it. We watched you crawl around on your hands and knees for hours. It must hurt and you've got to be frozen solid."

The parking lot proved a bit rougher than anticipated. Crawling back and forth drawing glyphs had shredded my already worn-out jeans into nothing. I could see my skin through the holes in the fabric and it was bloody. Normally leaving traces of my blood at the scene would've sent me into panic. Once separated from the body, blood couldn't be masked, and in my case, advertising the magic of my blood-line meant a death sentence. But I knew how tonight would end, and so I didn't worry. Whatever little blood I left on the asphalt would be obliterated very soon.

I took the whiskey and smiled at Maggie, which took some effort since my lips were frozen. "Do you finally get the phone working?"

She shook her head. "It's still out."

"How did you contact Biohazard?"

Maggie pursed her narrow lips. "We didn't."

I turned to Patrice. The medmage frowned at the circle. "Pat, how did you know to come here?"

"An anonymous tipster called it in," she murmured, her eyes fixed on the pole. "Something happening . . ."

With a loud crack, the utility pole snapped. The dark-haired woman gasped. The techs dashed back waving their censers.

The pole spun in place, fuzz swirling around its top, teetered, and plunged. It smashed against the invisible wall of the first two ward circles, toppled over it, and slid down, dumping the flesh-colored shit onto the asphalt. The pole top rammed the third line of glyphs. Magic boomed through my skull. A cloud of fuzz exploded against the ward in an ugly burst and fluttered down harmlessly to settle the chalk line as the pole rolled to a stop.

Patrice let out a breath.

"I made the third circle twelve feet high," I told her. "It isn't going anywhere, even if it really wants to."

"That does it." Patrice rolled up her sleeves. "Did you put anything into those wards that might hurt me if I cross them?"

"Nope. It's just a simple containment ward. Feel free to waltz right in."

"Good." She strode down the slope to the glyphs, waving her hand at the tech team fussing with some equipment on the side. "Never mind. It's too aggressive. We'll do a live probe, it's faster."

She tossed back her blond hair and stepped into the circle. The chalk glyphs ignited with a faint blue glow. The ward masked her magic, and I could feel nothing past it, but whatever Patrice was working up had to be heavy-duty.

The fuzz shivered. Thin tendrils stretched toward Patrice.

I wondered who'd called Biohazard. Somebody called. Maybe it was just a good Samaritan passing by.

And maybe I would sprout wings and fly.

Maggie leaned over to me. "How can she enter but the disease can't leave?"

"Because of the way I made the ward. Wards both keep things in and keep them out. It's basically a barrier and you can rig it several ways. This one has a high magic threshold. The disease that kills

Joshua is very potent. It's heavily saturated with magic, so it can't cross. Patrice is a human, which makes her less magical by definition, and so she can go back and forth as she pleases."

"So couldn't we just wait it out until the magic wave falls and the disease dies?"

"Nobody knows what will happen to the disease once the magic falls. It might die or it might mutate and turn into a plague. Don't worry. Patrice will nuke it."

In the circle, Patrice raised her hands. "It is I, Patrice, who commands you, it is I who demand obedience. Show yourself to me!"

A dark shadow rolled over the fleshy fur, spreading into a mottled patina over the pole and the remnants of the body. Patrice stepped back out of the circle. The techs swarmed her with smoke and flowers.

"Syphilis," I heard her say. "Lots and lots of magically delicious syphilis. It's alive and hungry. We're going to need napalm."

Maggie glanced at the still untouched whiskey in my glass. I raised it to my lips and took a sip to make her happy. Fire rolled down my throat. A few seconds later, I could feel my fingertips again. Woo, back in business.

"Did they clear all of you?" I asked.

She nodded. "Nobody was infected. A few guys had broken bones, but that's all. They let everyone go."

Thank the Universe for small favors.

Maggie shuddered. "I don't understand. Why us? What did we ever do to anybody?"

She was looking for comfort in the wrong place. I was numb and exhausted, and the stone in my chest hurt.

Maggie shook her head. Her shoulders hunched.

"Sometimes there is no reason," I said. "Just a bad roll of the dice."

Her face was drained of all expression. I knew what she was thinking: broken furniture, busted walls, and a bad reputation. The Steel Horse would forever be known as the joint where the plague almost started.

"Look over there."

She glanced in the direction of my nod. Inside the bar, Cash pulled apart a broken table.

"You're alive. He's alive. You're together. Everything else can be fixed. It can always be worse. Much, much worse." *Trust me on this.*

"You're right."

For a while we sat in silence and then Maggie took a deep breath as if she was going to say something and clamped her mouth shut.

"What is it?"

"The thing in the cellar," she said.

"Ah." I pushed upright. I'd rested enough. "Let's go take care of that."

We went in through the hole in the wall. The techs had evaluated and released most of the patrons who were only too happy to clear off. The tavern lay virtually empty. Most of the furniture hadn't survived the brawl. An icy draft swept through the open doors and windows to blow out of the ruined wall. Despite the unplanned but vigorous ventilation, the place stank of vomit.

Cash leaned against the bar. Long shadows lined his haggard face. He looked worn out, like he'd aged a year overnight. Maggie paused by him. He took her hand into his. It must've twisted them into knots to sit there for hours, watching each other's faces for the first signs of infection.

They were killing me. If I could've gotten a hold of Curran right now, I would have punched him in the face for making me think I could have that and then taking it away from me.

At the door, two Biohazard techs packed away an m-scanner. The m-scanner registered residue

magic at the scene and spat it out in various colors: purple for vampire, blue for human, green for shapeshifter. It was imprecise and finicky, but it was the best tool for magic analysis we had. I stopped by the team and flashed my Order ID. "Anything?"

The female tech offered me a stack of printouts. "Patrice said for you to have a copy."

"Thanks." I flipped through them. Every single one showed a bright blue slice streaking across the paper like a lightning bolt, cutting across pale traces of green. The green were the shapeshifters, and judging by the watered-down color of the signatures, they had taken off at the beginning of the fight, leaving behind only weak residual magic. Not surprising. The Pack had a strict policy regarding unlawful behavior, and nothing good ever came from a drunken brawl in a border bar.

I studied the blue. *Human mundane*, basic human magic. Mages registered blue, healers, empaths, and I registered blue. Unless you had a really good scanner.

"Maggie, how many people would you say were here when this happened?"

She shrugged at the bar. "About fifty."

Fifty. But only one human magic signature.

I glanced at Cash. "I need to talk to your people."

He headed behind the bar to a narrow stairway leading down. I followed. At the bottom of the stairway Vik and the bigger bouncer guarded the door secured by a large deadbolt.

I sat at the top of the stairs. "My name's Kate."

"Vik."

"Toby."

"Thank you," I said. "I know it had to be hell to keep everyone put for this long and I appreciate how you've handled it."

"We had a good crowd tonight," Cash said. "Most of them were regulars."

"Yeah," Vik said. "If we'd gotten a lot of out-of-towners, there would've been blood."

"Can you tell me how it started?"

"Someone hit me with a chair," Vik said. "That's when I got into it."

"A man came into the bar," Toby said.

"What did he look like?"

"Tall. Big guy."

Tall was a given. I'd gotten a good look at Joshua's body while I was crawling around the parking lot. Joshua had been five-ten and his feet were about six inches off the ground. Whoever nailed him to that pole probably held him at his own eye level, which made our guy close to six and a half feet tall.

Cash disappeared for a minute and returned with five glasses. More whiskey.

"What did the big guy wear?"

The three men and Maggie knocked back their glasses. There was collective grimacing and clearing of throats. I sipped mine a bit. Like drinking fire spiced with crushed glass.

"A cloak," Toby offered.

"Like this?" I fingered my own long plain dark gray affair. Most fighters wore cloaks. Used properly, the cloak could confuse the attacker by obscuring your movements. It could shield, smother, and kill. It doubled as a blanket in a pinch for the person or for the mule. Unfortunately it also made a dramatic fashion statement and was easy to make. Every two-bit bravo had one.

"His was one of those hooded cloaks, long and brown. And torn up at the bottom," Toby said.

"Did you get a look at his face?"

Toby shook his head. "He kept the hood on the whole time. Didn't see the face or the hair."

Great. I was looking for the proverbial "guy in a cloak." He was as elusive as the legendary "white truck" had been when cars still filled the roadways. All sorts of crazy driving accidents had been blamed on the mysterious white truck, just as all sorts of random crimes had been perpetrated by

“some guy in a cloak” with his hood pulled over his face.

Toby cleared his throat again. “Like I said, I didn’t see his face. I saw his hands, though—they were dark. About this color.” He nodded at the whiskey in my glass. “He came in, stood at the bar, sized up the crowd for a while, and then came up next to Joshua. They said a few words.”

“Did you hear what he said?”

“I did,” Cash said. “He whispered. He said, ‘Do you want to be a god? I have room for two more.’”

Oh boy. “What did Joshua say?”

Cash’s eyes were mournful. “He said, ‘Hell yeah.’ And then the man punched him off his feet and the whole place went to hell.”

Hell yeah. Famous last words. Some guy sidles up to you in a bar and offers you godhood. And you say yes. Dumb. Over thirty years had passed since the Shift. By now every moron should know to watch their mouth and not accept bargains with random strangers, because when you said yes to magic, your word was binding, whether you meant it or not. A life wasted. All I could do now was to find the killer and punish him. Just once I would’ve liked to be there before this sort of shit happened so I could nip it in the bud.

“That’s when all the shapeshifters left,” Maggie said.

“That’s right.” Cash nodded. “They ran out of here like their tails were on fire.”

“These shapeshifters, do they come often?”

“Once a week for about a year now,” Cash said.

“They drink a lot?”

“One beer each,” Maggie said. “They don’t drink much, but they don’t cause any trouble either. They just sit by themselves in the corner and eat barrels of peanuts. We started charging them for it. They don’t seem to care. I think they all work together, because they come in at the same time.”

In times of trouble, shapeshifters snapped into an us-versus-them mentality. The world fractured into Pack and Not Pack. They would fight to the death for one of their own or to protect their territory. This was their hangout, their place. They should have waded into this fight, and in this case, the Pack Law would be on their side. Instead they took off. Odd. Maybe Curran had come up with some new order forbidding fights. No, that didn’t make sense either. They were shapeshifters, not nuns. If they didn’t blow their steam off once in a while, they’d self-destruct. Curran knew that better than anyone.

I filed this tidbit to puzzle over in the future. Right now the guy in the cloak was my primary concern.

Joshua was killed for a specific purpose. The guy had gone through a lot of trouble, starting a fight, busting walls, arranging Joshua to impersonate a human butterfly, and infecting him. It was unlikely he’d done it just for kicks, which meant he had some sort of a plan and he wouldn’t stop until I followed through with it. Nothing good could possibly come from a plan that involved turning a man into a syphilis incubator.

“We run a quiet tavern,” Maggie said. “Usually guys don’t want to fight here. They just want to get a drink, shoot some pool, and go home. If there is a fight brewing, they’ll talk shit for a while and wait for Toby and Vik to break them up. But this . . . I’ve never seen anything like this. That man threw one punch, and the whole crowd exploded. People were screaming and fighting, and growling like wild animals.”

I looked at Vik. “Did you fight?”

“I did.”

“And you?” I turned to Toby.

“Yeah.”

I glanced to Cash. He nodded. I could tell by their faces they weren’t proud of it. The bouncers were paid to keep a cool head, and Cash was the owner.

“Why did you fight?”

They stared at me.

“I was mad,” Vik offered. “Real mad.”

“Angry,” Toby said.

“Why?”

“Hell if I know.” Vik shrugged.

Interesting. “How long did the fight last?”

“Forever,” Toby said.

“About ten minutes,” Maggie answered.

That’s a long time for a fight. Most bar fights were over in a couple of minutes. “Did it get worse with time?”

She nodded.

“Did anybody see Joshua die?”

“It was all a blur,” Toby said. “I remember hitting somebody’s head against the wall and . . . I don’t even know why I did it. It’s like I couldn’t stop.”

“I saw it.” Maggie hugged herself. “The fight broke out.

Joshua was in the middle of it. He was a big man and he knew what he was doing. I was screaming for them to stop fighting. I was afraid they’d bust up the place. Nobody listened to me. Joshua was mowing people down with his fists and then that man grabbed him and they hit the wall. The man dragged Joshua to the pole, grabbed a crowbar, and stabbed. Joshua was wriggling on the crowbar like a fish. That bastard put his hand on Joshua’s face. A red light flashed and then he walked away. I saw Joshua’s eyes. He was gone.”

This just got better and better.

Maggie hugged herself. Cash put his hand on her shoulder. Neither said anything but I watched the haunted expression ease from Maggie’s face, as if she drew strength from him.

One day I’d find someone to lean on as well. It just wouldn’t be Curran. And I really had to stop thinking about him, because it hurt.

“Did you see any part of the man during the fight? Anything at all?”

Maggie shook her head. “Just the cloak.”

Biohazard’s techs would’ve taken statements before they let the brawlers go. I’d bet a chocolate bar nobody had gotten a look at the John Doe in the cloak.

A ten-minute fight, fifty eyewitnesses, and no description. That had to be some kind of record.

“Okay.” I sighed. “What about the critter in the cellar? What do we know about it?”

“Big,” Vik said. “Hairy. Big teeth.” He held his hands apart, demonstrating teeth with his fingers. “He was like the spawn of hell.”

“How did this spawn get into the cellar?”

The smaller bouncer shrugged. “I was trying to make my way to the bar, where the shotgun was, and then some asswipe hits me with a pool cue and I take a tumble down this stair and hit my head a bit. Once the room stops spinning, I try to get up and I see this huge thing coming down. Wicked fanged eyes glowing. I’m thinking I was done for. It jumps right over me and into the cellar. I slam the door shut and that’s that.”

“Did anybody see this beast come in with the man who killed Joshua?”

Nobody said anything. I took it as a no.

“Did it try to get out?”

Both bouncers shook their head.

I rose to my feet and pulled Slayer from my back sheath. The opaque saber caught the blue light from the feylanterns. A light mother-of-pearl shimmer ran along the blade. Everybody took a step back.

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