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Editorial Review

Review
"Fans of urban fantasy will delight in Ilona Andrews' alternate-universe Atlanta." ***-FRESH FICTION***

About the Author
Ilona Andrews is the pseudonym for a husband-and-wife writing team. Together, they are the coauthors of the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Kate Daniels urban-fantasy series, including *Magic Rises*, *Magic Slays*, and *Magic Bleeds* and the romantic urban-fantasy novels of the Edge, including *Steel's Edge*, *Fate's Edge*, and *Bayou Moon*. They currently reside in Texas with their two children and numerous pets.

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Chapter One

The phone rang in the middle of the night. The magic wave was in full swing, and the phone shouldn't have worked, but it rang anyway, again and again, outraged over being ignored, until finally I reached over and picked it up.

"Yehmmm?"

"Rise and shine, Kate." The smooth cultured voice on the line suggested a slender, elegant, handsome man, all things that Jim was not. At least not in his human shape.

I clawed my eyes open long enough to glance at the windup clock across the room. "Two in the morning. Some of us sleep during the night."

"I've got a gig," Jim said.

I sat up in the bed, wide awake. A gig was good—I needed the money. "Half."

"Third."

"Half."

"Thirty-five percent." Jim's voice hardened.

"Half."

The phone went silent as my former Guild partner mulled it over. "Okay, forty."

I hung up. The bedroom lay quiet. My curtains were open and moonlight sifted into the room through the metal grate shielding the window. The moonlight acted as a catalyst and the metal bars glowed with a weak bluish patina where the silver in the alloy interacted with the ward spell. Beyond the bars, Atlanta slept like some hulking beast of legend, dark and deceptively peaceful. When the magic wave ended, as it inevitably would, the beast would awaken in an explosion of electric light and possibly gunfire.

My ward wouldn't stop a bullet, but it kept the magic hazmat out of my bedroom, and that was good enough.

The phone rang. I let it ring twice before I picked it up.

"Fine." Jim's voice had a hint of a snarl in it. "Half."

"Where are you?"

"In the parking lot under your window, Kate."

Calling from a pay phone, which shouldn't have worked, either. I reached for my clothes, left by the bed for just such an occasion. "What's the gig?"

"Some arsonist wacko."

***

Forty-five minutes later, I was winding my way through an underground garage and cursing Jim under my breath. With the lights knocked out by magic, I couldn't see my hand in front of my nose.

A fireball blossomed in the pitch-black depth of the garage. Huge, churning with violent red and yellow, it roared toward me. I jumped behind the concrete support, my throwing knife sweaty in my hands. Heat bathed me. For a moment I couldn't breathe, and then the fire hurtled past me to burst in an explosion of sparks against the wall.

A thin gleeful cackle emanated from the garage depths. I peeked out from behind the support in the direction of the sound. Nothing but darkness. Where was the tech shift when you needed one?

Across from me at the next row of supports Jim raised his hand and touched his fingers to his thumb a few times, imitating an opening and closing beak. Negotiate. He wanted me to engage a lunatic who had already turned four people into smoking meat. Okay. I could do that.

"All right, Jeremy!" I yelled into the night. "Give me the salamander and I won't cut your head off!"

Jim put his hand over his face and did some shaking. I thought he was laughing, but I couldn't be sure. Unlike him I didn't have the benefit of enhanced night vision.

Jeremy's cackle reached a hysterical crescendo. "Stupid bitch!"

Jim peeled himself from the support and melted into the darkness, tracking Jeremy's voice. His vision worked better than mine in low light, but even his sight failed in absolute darkness. He had to hunt by sound, which meant I had to keep Jeremy talking. While Jim stalked Jeremy's melodious voice, Jeremy, in turn, stalked me.

Nothing to worry about, just a homicidal pyromaniac armed with a salamander in a sphere of enchanted glass and intent on setting what was left of Atlanta on fire. The main thing was to keep the salamander's sphere safe. If that thing broke, my name would be more famous than Mrs. O'Leary's cow.

"Damn, Jeremy, you need to work on your vocabulary. So many good names to call me and the best you could come up with is bitch? Give me the salamander before you hurt yourself."

"Suck my dick . . . whore!"

A tiny spark flared into existence to the left of me. It hung suspended in the darkness, illuminating both the scaly outline of the salamander's mouth and Jeremy's hands clutching the glass sphere with white-knuckled need. The enchanted glass parted and belched the spark. The air hit the tiny packet of energy and the spark

exploded into a fireball.

I ducked behind the support just as the fire smashed against concrete. Flames shot past on both sides of me. The acrid stench of sulfur stung my nostrils.

"That last fireball missed me by a mile. You shoot blanks with your other salamander, too, Jeremy?"

"Eat shit and die!"

Jim had to be close to him by now. I stepped into the open. "Come on, you sniveling shit for brains! Can't you do anything right?"

I saw flames, lunged to the side and hit the floor rolling. Above me the fire howled like an enraged animal. The handle of the knife burned my fingers. The air in my lungs turned to heat, and my eyes watered. I pressed my face into the dusty concrete, praying it didn't get any hotter, and then suddenly it was over.

Screw this. I jumped to my feet and charged in Jeremy's direction. The salamander flared within the sphere. I caught a flash of Jeremy's crooked smile above the glass. It wilted as Jim's dark hands closed around Jeremy's throat. The arsonist slumped, ragdoll limp, the sphere rolling from his weakened fingers. . . .

I dived for it, caught it three inches above the cement, and found myself face-to-face with the salamander. Ruby-red eyes regarded me with mild curiosity, black lips parted, and a long, spiderweb-thin filament of a tongue slithered from the salamander's mouth and kissed the sphere's glass in the reflection of my nose. *I love you, too*.

Gingerly I got to my knees and then to my feet. The salamander's presence tugged on my mind, as eager to please as an overly enthusiastic kitten arching her back for a stroke. Visions of flames and heat wavered before me. *Let's burn something*. . . . I slammed my mental shutters closed, locking her out of my mind. *Let's not*.

Jim relaxed his hold on Jeremy and the arsonist sagged to the ground like a wet blanket. The whites of his eyes stared at the ceiling from his slack face, caught by death in a moment of utter surprise. No pulse check needed for this one. Shit. There goes the capture bonus.

"You said it was a live-preferred bounty," I murmured. The living Jeremy was worth a lot more than his corpse. We'd still get paid, but we had just waved a third of the money good-bye.

"It is." Jim twisted the body on its side, exposing Jeremy's back. A thin metal shaft, tipped with three black feathers, protruded from between Jeremy's shoulders blades. Before my mind had the time to digest its significance, I hit the deck, cradling the salamander. Jim somehow got there before me.

We stared into the gloom. Darkness and silence.

Someone had taken out our mark with a crossbow bolt. Could have taken us out as well. We had stood by the body for at least four seconds. More than enough time to squeeze off two shots. I touched Jim and touched my nose. He shook his head. With all the sulfur in the air he probably couldn't smell a skunk if it sprayed him in the face. I lay very still and tried to breathe quietly. Listening was our best bet.

A minute dragged by, long, viscous, and silent. Very slowly Jim shifted into a crouch and nodded to the left. I had a vague feeling the door lay to the right, but in the darkness with some unknown crossbowman waiting, I would trust Jim's senses over mine.

Jim grasped Jeremy's corpse, slung it over his shoulder, and we took off, bending low, running fast, him ahead and me, half-blind in the gloom, slightly behind. Concrete supports flashed by, one, two, three, four. The tech hit, and before I could put down my raised foot, the magic drained from the world, leaving the battered technology in its wake. The fluorescent lamps in the ceiling blinked and snapped into life with a buzz, bathing the garage in a weak man-made glow. The black rectangle of the exit gaped ten feet before us. Jim dived into it. I lunged to the left, behind the nearest support. The salamander in the globe stopped glowing and went to sleep, looking like a harmless black lizard. My long-range weapon was tuckered out.

I set it down on the floor and slid Slayer from its sheath. Salamanders are overrated anyway.

"He's gone," Jim said from the doorway and pointed behind me.

I turned. Far at the back, the concrete wall had crumbled, revealing a narrow passageway probably leading up to the street. He was right. If the bowman wanted to take us out, he had had plenty of time to do it.

"So he sniped our mark and left?"

"Looks that way."

"I don't get it."

Jim shook his head. "Weird shit always happens around you."

"This was your gig, not mine."

A shower of sparks fell from above the door and a green EXIT sign burst into life.

Jim stared at it for a moment, his features twisted in a distinctly feline expression, disgust and fatalism rolled into one, and shook his head again.

"Dibs on the bolt in his back!" I called.

"Be my guest."

Jim's pager went off. He checked it and a familiar neutral mask slid onto his face.

"Oh no, you don't! I can't carry him by myself."

"Pack business." He headed for the exit.

"Jim!"

I killed the urge to throw something at the empty doorway. Served me right for taking a job with a guy who served on the Pack Council. It's not that Jim was a bad friend. It's just that for shapeshifters, Pack business always took precedence. On a scale from one to ten, the Pack was eleven and everything else a one.

I stared at a very dead Jeremy lying like a sack of potatoes on the floor. Probably a hundred and fifty pounds, dead weight. There was no way I could carry him and the salamander at the same time. There was no way I could leave the salamander unattended, either. The magic could hit anytime, setting the little lizard ablaze. Plus, the sniper might still be around. I needed to get out of here, and fast.

Jeremy and the salamander, each worth four grand. I no longer did a lot of work for the Guild, and gigs of

this size didn't come my way too often. Even split in a half with Jim, the bounty would cover my two mortgages for two months. The thought of leaving four grand on the floor made me physically ill.

I looked at Jeremy. I looked at the salamander. Choices, choices.

***

The Mercenary Guild's bounty clerk, a short, trim, dark-haired man, stared at Jeremy's head on the counter. "Where is the rest of him?"

"I had a slight logistics problem."

The clerk's face split in a wide smile. "Jim took off on you, didn't he? That will be one capture ticket then?"

"Two tickets." Jim might be an asshole, but I wouldn't screw him out of his share. He'd get his capture ticket, which entitled him to his half of the bounty.

"Kate, you're a pushover," the clerk said.

I leaned over the counter and offered him my best deranged smile. "Wanna push and see if I fall over?"

"No thanks." The clerk slapped the stack of forms on the counter. "Fill these out."

The inch-thick stack of paperwork promised to occupy me for a good hour. The Guild had pretty lax rules—being an organization of mercenaries, they took keen interest in profit and little else—but death had to be reported to the cops and thus required red tape. The small significance of Jeremy's life was reduced to the price on his head and a lot of carefully framed blank spaces on a piece of paper.

I gave the top form the evil eye. "I don't have to fill out the R20."

"That's right, you work with the Order now." The clerk counted off eight pages from the top of the stack. "There you go, VIP treatment for you."

"Yippee." I swiped my stack.

"Hey, Kate, let me ask you something."

I wanted to fill out my forms, go home and take a nap. "Shoot."

He reached under the counter. The Mercenary Guild occupied an old Sheraton Hotel on the edge of Buckhead and the clerk's counter had been a lobby bar in that previous life. The clerk pulled out a dark brown bottle and set it in front of me with a shot glass.

"Why, no, I won't drink your mysterious love potion."

He guffawed. "Hennessy. The good stuff. I'll pay for the info."

"Thanks, but I don't drink." Not anymore, anyway. I still kept a bottle of Boone's Farm sangria in my cabinet for a dire emergency, but hard liquor was right out. "What's your question?"

"What's it like to work for the Order?"

"Thinking of joining?"

"No, I'm happy where I'm at. But I've got a nephew. He wants to be a knight."

"How old?"

"Sixteen."

Perfect. The Order liked them young. All the easier to brainwash. I pulled up a chair. "I'd take a glass of water."

He brought me water and I sipped it. "Basically the Order does the same thing we do: they clear magic hazmat. Let's say you've got a harpy in a tree after a magic wave. You're going to call the cops first."

"If you're stupid." The clerk smirked.

I shrugged. "The cops tell you that they're busy with a giant worm trying to swallow the federal courthouse, instruct you to stay away from the harpy, and tell you they'll come out when they can. The usual. So you call the Guild. Why wait, when for three hundred bucks a couple of mercs will bag the harpy with no fuss and even give your kid a pretty tail feather for his hat, right?"

"Right."

"Suppose you don't have three hundred bucks. Or suppose the job is code 12, too nasty for the Guild to take it. You still have a harpy and you want her gone. So you call the Order, because you heard they don't charge that much. They ask you to come to their Chapter, where a nice knight talks to you, gets your income assessed and tells you good news: they're charging you fifty bucks because they've determined that's all you can afford. Kismet."

The clerk eyed me. "What's the catch?"

"The catch is, they give you a piece of paper to sign, your plea to the Order. And there in big letters it says that you authorize the Order to remove any threat to humanity that arises in connection with this case."

The Order of Merciful Aid had chosen its name well. They provided merciful aid, usually on the edge of the blade or by the burn of a bullet. Trouble was, sometimes you got more aid than you wanted.

"Let's say you sign the plea. The knights come out and observe the harpy. At the same time, you notice that every time you see the damn thing, your elderly senile aunt disappears. So you watch the old lady and sure enough, the magic wave hits and she turns into a harpy. You tell the knights you want to call the whole thing off—you love your aunt and she does no harm sitting in that tree anyway. The knights tell you that five percent of harpies carry a deadly disease on their claws and they've determined her to be a danger to humanity. You get angry, you yell, you call the cops, but the cops tell you it's all legal, there is nothing they can do, and besides the Order is part of the law enforcement anyway. You promise to lock your aunt up. You try a bribe. You point to your kids and explain how much they love the old lady. You cry. You beg. But nothing helps." I drained my glass. "And that's what it's like working for the Order."

The clerk poured himself a shot and tossed it down his throat. "Did that really happen?"

"Yep."

"Did they kill the old lady?"

"Yep."

"Jesus."

"If your nephew thinks he can do that, tell him to apply to the Academy. He's at a good age for it. It's hard physically and the academic load is pretty big, but if he has the will, he'll make it."

"How do you know?"

I swiped my stack off the counter. "Back when I was a kid, my guardian enrolled me. He was a knight-diviner."

"No shit. How long did you last?"

"Two years. Did well on everything except mental conditioning. I've got authority issues." I waved at the clerk and took my paperwork to one of the tables in the gloom.

Truth was, I didn't do well. I did great. Tested right off the power-scale. Got certified as an electrum-level squire. But I hated it. The Order required absolute dedication, and I already had a cause. I wanted to kill the most powerful man in the world, and that kind of desire leaves little room for anything else. I dropped out and went to work for the Mercenary Guild. It broke Greg's heart.

Greg had been a great guardian, fanatical in his determination to protect me. For Greg, the Order was a place of safety. If my target found out I existed, he'd kill me, and neither Greg nor I had enough power to resist him. Not yet anyway. Had I joined the Order, every last knight would protect me against this threat. But it wasn't worth it, so I parted ways with the Order and never looked back.

And then Greg was murdered. To find his killer, I went to the Order and maneuvered myself into their investigation. I found the murderer and killed him. It was a grisly, nasty affair, now called the Red Point Stalker case. In the process my Academy record came to light and the Order decided they wanted me back. They weren't subtle about it, either. They made up a job—a liaison between themselves and the Mercenary Guild—promised me Greg's office, his files, authority to handle minor cases, and a steady paycheck. I took it. Part of it was guilt: I had shunned Greg after dropping out of the Academy. Part of it was common sense: I had mortgages on both my father's house, near Savannah, and on Greg's place here in Atlanta. To give up either one would be like ripping a chunk out of my body. Guild gigs paid well but I had a small territory near Savannah and a big job happened there maybe once every six months. The lure of steady money proved to be too strong.

My affiliation with the Order wouldn't last. But for now, it worked. I had yet to default on either payment and once I filled out these forms, I'd ensure I could cover my bills for another month or two.

After writing my merc ID number ten times on every imaginable piece of paper, I was treated to a "check yes or no" questionnaire. Yes, I acted in self-defense. No, I didn't believe excessive force was used in subduing the suspect. Yes, I perceived the suspect as presenting imminent threat to myself and others. By the time I reached the "fill in the blank" portion my eyes needed matchsticks to stay open. In the "state the suspect's intent as perceived by you" blank, I wrote down, "Intended to burn down the city due to being a complete crackpot."

When I finally stepped out of the Mercenary Guild's heavy, reinforced steel doors, the sky was pale gray with that particular color that usually meant the sun was rising. At least I had the bolt from Jeremy's back. And I was three hundred bucks richer, thanks to my advance. The rest of the money would have to wait until the cops approved the kill. By the time I got to the intersection, I had the advance divided between various bills. I still had it—if I thrust my hand in my pocket, I would feel the soft paper of four worn fifty-dollar bills

and five twenties, and yet the money was already gone.

The great mystery of the Universe.

***

Two hours later, I stumbled into the Atlanta Chapter of the Order, bleary-eyed and armed with a huge mug of coffee, the mysterious bolt wrapped in a brown paper bag and tucked securely under my elbow. The office greeted me with its plethora of vivid color: a long hallway with gray carpet, gray walls, and gray light fixtures. Ugh.

As I stepped in, the magic hit. The electric lights went out. The bloated tubes of fey lanterns flared a gentle blue as the charged air inside them reacted with magic.

This was the third wave in the last twenty-four hours. The magic had been going crazy the last couple of days. Shifting back and forth like it couldn't make up its mind.

The faint clicking of an ancient typewriter echoed in the empty office, coming from the secretary's nook by the door of the knight-protector. "Good morning, Maxine."

"*Good morning, Kate*," said Maxine's voice in my head. "*Rough night?*"

"You could say that."

I unlocked my office door. The Atlanta Chapter of the Order made an effort to appear as inconspicuous as possible, but my office was small even by their standards. Little more than a cube, it was barely large enough to house a desk, two chairs, a row of filing cabinets, and some bookshelves. The walls showcased another radiant shade of gray paint.

I paused in the doorway, arrested in midstep. I had inherited the office from Greg. It had been almost four months since his death. I should have gotten over it by now, but sometimes, like this morning, I just . . . had a hard time making myself enter. My memory insisted that if I stepped in, Greg would be there, standing with a book in his hand, his dark eyes reproachful but never unkind. Always ready to pull me out of whatever mess I had gotten myself into. But it was a lie. Greg was dead. First my mother, then my father, then Greg. Everyone I ever cared about died violently, in a great deal of pain. If I took a moment to let it sink in, I'd be howling like a Pack wolf during a full moon.

I closed my eyes, trying to clear the memories of the office and Greg within it. Mistake. The image of Greg only got more vivid.

I did a one-eighty and walked down the hall to the armory. So I was a coward. Sue me.

Andrea sat on a bench cleaning a handgun. She was short, built with strength in mind, and had the kind of face that made people want to tell her their life stories in a checkout line. She knew the Order's Charter front to back and could rattle obscure regulations off the top of her head. Her radios never lost contact, her magic scanner never malfunctioned, and if you brought her a broken gadget, she would return it the next day fully operational and clean.

Andrea raised her blond head and gave me a little salute with her hand. I shrugged a little, feeling the reassuring weight of Slayer, my saber, in its sheath on my back and waved in reply. I could understand the metal addiction. After the little adventure that had landed me this job, I was loath to part with Slayer. A few minutes without my blade and I got edgy.

Andrea noticed me still looking at her. "You need something?"

"I need to ID a crossbow bolt."

She made a come-here motion with the fingers of her left hand. "Give."

I gave. Andrea removed the paper, took out the bolt and whistled in appreciation.

"Nice."

Blood-red and fletched with three black feathers, the bolt looked about two feet in length. Three inch-long black lines marked the shaft just before the fletch: nine marks in all.

"This is a carbon shaft. It can't be bent. Very durable and expensive. Looks like a 2216, designed to bring down medium-sized game, deer, some bear. . . ."

"Human." I leaned against the wall and sipped my coffee.

"Yeah." Andrea nodded. "Good power, good trajectory without any significant sacrifice in speed. It's a man-killer. Look at the head—small, three-blade, weighs about a hundred grains. Reminds me a lot of a Wasp Boss series. Some people go for mechanical broadheads, but with a good crossbow the acceleration is so sudden, it opens the blades in flight and there goes your accuracy down the drain. If I were to pick a broadhead, I'd pick something like this." She twisted the bolt, letting the light from the window play on the blades of the head. "Hand sharpened. Where did you get this?"

I told her.

She frowned. "The fact that you didn't hear the bow go off probably means it's a recurve. A compound crossbow ‘twangs' at release. Can I fire it?" She nodded at a man-shaped paper target pinned to the far wall, which was sheathed in several layers of corkboard.

"Sure."

She put on gloves to keep the magic residue to a minimum, took a small crossbow off the bench, loaded, swung it up, and fired, too fast to have aimed. The bolt whistled through the air and bit into the center of the man's forehead. Bull's-eye. And here I was, unable to hit a cow at ten yards with a gun.

The feylanterns flickered and faded. On the wall, a dusty electric fixture flared with soft yellow light. The magic wave had drained and the world had shifted from magic back to tech. Andrea and I looked at each other. Nobody could predict the duration of the shifts: the magic came and went as it pleased. But the waves rarely lasted less than an hour. This one had been what, fifteen minutes?

"Is it me, or is it shifting more than usual?"

"It's not you." Andrea's face looked a bit troubled. She freed the bolt. "Want me to scan it for magic?"

"If it's not too much trouble." Magic had the annoying tendency of dissipating over time. The sooner you could scan your evidence, the better your chances of getting a power print.

"Trouble?" She leaned to me. "I've been off-line for two months. It's killing me. I have cobwebs growing on my brain." She pressed her finger below her right eye, pulling the lower eyelid down. "Look for yourself."

I laughed. Andrea worked for a Chapter out West and had run into some trouble with a pack of loups raiding the cattle farms. Loups, the insane cannibalistic shapeshifters who had lost the internal battle for their humanity, killed, raped, and raged their way from one atrocity to the next, until someone put the world out of their misery.

Unfortunately, loups were also contagious as hell. Andrea's partner knight became infected, went loup, and ended up with two dozen of Andrea's bullets in her brain. There was a limit to how much shapeshifters could heal, and Andrea was a crack shot. They relocated her to Atlanta, and although she didn't have any trace of Lycos virus in her blood and wasn't in any danger of sprouting fur and claws, Ted kept her on the back burner.

Andrea took the bolt to the magic scanner, raised the glass hood, slid the bolt onto the ceramic tray, lowered the cube, and cranked the lever. The cube descended and the m-scanner whirled.

"Andrea?"

"Mmm?"

"The tech's up," I said, feeling stupid.

She grimaced. "Oh, Christ. Probably won't get anything. Well, you never know. Sometimes you can pull some residual magic imprints even during tech."

We looked at the cube. We both knew it was futile. You would have to scan something really saturated with magic to get a good m-scan during tech. Like a body part. The m-scanner analyzed the traces of residual magic left on an object by its owner and printed them in a variety of colors: blue for human, green for shape-shifter, purple for vampire. The tone and vividness of the colors denoted the different types of magic, and reading an m-scan correctly was practically an art form. The traces of magic on a bolt, probably held very briefly, were bound to be miniscule. I knew of only one man in the city who had an m-scanner high-speed enough to register such slight residual magic during tech. His name was Saiman. Trouble was, if I went to him, it would cost me an arm and a leg.

The printer chattered. Andrea pulled the print out and turned to me. Her face had gone a shade whiter. A wide slice of silvery blue cut across the paper. *Human divine*. That in itself was not remarkable. Anybody who drew their power from deity or religion registered as *human divine*: the Pope, Shaolin monks, even Greg, a knight-diviner, had registered silver-blue. The problem was, we shouldn't have been able to get an m-scan at all with the tech up.

"What does this mean? Is the residual magic just incredibly strong on this thing?"

Andrea shook her head. "The magic waves have been really erratic lately."

We looked at each other. We both knew what rapid-fire waves meant: a flare. And I needed that like a hole in the head.

"*You have a petitioner*," Maxine's voice said in my head.

I grabbed my m-scan and went into my office.

Users Review

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