

Bayou Moon (A Novel of the Edge Book 2)

By Ilona Andrews

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Editorial Review

Review
"[Renée Raudman] uses pace and intensity to keep up with the struggles of the characters, who are caught up in old feuds to protect their land and family." ---AudioFile

About the Author
Ilona Andrews is the pseudonym for a husband-and-wife writing team who live in Georgia, where they are currently working on Kate Daniels's next adventure.

Actor and voice-over artist Renee Raudman has performed on film, television, radio, and stage. A multiple Audie Award nominee, she has garnered several AudioFile Earphones Awards, a Publishers Weekly Listen-Up Award, and numerous starred reviews.

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Chapter 1

William sipped some beer from the bottle of Modelo Especial and gave the Green Arrow his hard stare. The Green Arrow, being a chunk of painted plastic, didn't rise to the challenge. The action figure remained impassive, exactly where he'd put it, leaning against the porch post of William's house. Technically it was a shack rather than a house, William reflected, but it was a roof over his head and he wasn't one to complain.

From that vantage point, the Green Arrow had an excellent view of William's action figure army laid out on the porch, and if he were inclined to offer any opinions, he would've been in a great position to do so. William shrugged. Part of him realized that talking to an action figure was bordering on insane, but he had nobody else to converse with at the moment and he needed to talk this out. The whole situation was crazy.

"The boys sent a letter," William said.

The Green Arrow said nothing.

William looked past him to where the Wood rustled just beyond his lawn. Two miles down the road, the Wood would become simply woods, regular Georgia pine and oak. But here, in the Edge, the trees grew vast, fed by magic, and the forest was old. The day had rolled into a lazy, long summer evening, and small nameless critters, found only in the Edge, chased each other through the limbs of the ancient trees before the darkness coaxed predators from their lairs.

The Edge was an odd place, stuck between two worlds. On one side lay the Broken, with no magic but plenty of technology to compensate. And rules. And laws. And paperwork. The damn place ran on paperwork. The Broken was where he made his money nowadays, working construction.

On the other side lay the Weird, a mirror to the Broken, where magic ruled and old blueblood families held power. He was born in that world. In the Weird, he'd been an outcast, a soldier, a convict, and even a noble for a few brief weeks. But the Weird kept kicking him in the teeth the entire time, until he finally turned his back on it and left.

The Edge belonged to neither world. A perfect place for the man who fit in nowhere. That was how he first met the boys, George and Jack. They lived in the Edge, with their sister Rose. Rose was sweet and pretty and

he'd liked her. He'd liked what they had, she and the kids, a warm little family. When William watched them together, a part of him hurt deep inside. He now realized why: he'd known even then that a family like that was forever out of his reach.

Still, he tried with Rose. Might have had a chance, too, but then Declan showed up. Declan, a blueblood and a soldier, with his flawless manners and handsome face. "We used to be friends," William told the Green Arrow. "I did beat the shit out of him before he left."

The joke was on him, because Declan left with Rose and took the boys with him. William let them go. Jack required a lot of careful care and Declan would raise him well. And Rose needed someone like Declan. Someone who had his shit together. She had enough trouble with the boys as it was. She sure as hell didn't need another charity project and he didn't want to be one.

It had been almost two years since they'd left. For two years William had lived in the Edge, where the trickle of magic kept the wild within him alive. He worked his job in the Broken, watched TV on weekends, drank lots of beer, collected action figures, and generally pretended that the previous twenty-six years of his life had not occurred. The Edgers, the few families who lived between the worlds like he did, kept to themselves and left him alone.

Most people from either the Broken or the Weird had no idea the other world existed, but occasionally traders passed through the Edge, traveling between worlds. Three months ago, Nick, one of the traveling traders, mentioned he was heading into the Weird, to the Southern Provinces. William put together a small box of toys on a whim and paid the man to deliver it. He didn't expect an answer. He didn't expect anything at all. The boys had Declan. They would have no interest in him.

Nick came by last night. The boys had written back.

William picked up the letter and looked at it. It was short. George's writing was perfect, with letters neatly placed. Jack's looked like a chicken had written it in the dirt. They said thank you for the action figures. George liked the Weird. He was given plenty of corpses to practice necromancy on and he was taking rapier lessons. Jack complained that there were too many rules and that they weren't letting him hunt enough.

"That's a mistake," William told the Green Arrow. "They need to let him vent. Half of their problems would be solved if they let him have a violent outlet. The kid is a changeling and a predator. He turns into a lynx, not a fluffy bunny." He raised the letter. "Apparently he decided to prove to them that he was good enough. Jack killed himself a deer and left the bloody thing on the dining room table, because he's a cat and he thinks they're lousy hunters. According to him, it didn't go over well. He's trying to feed them and they don't get it."

What Jack needed was some direction to channel all that energy. But William wasn't about to travel to the Weird and show up on Declan's doorstep. *Hi, remember me? We were best friends once, and then I was condemned to death and your uncle adopted me, so I would kill you? You stole Rose from me?* Yeah, right. All he could do was write back and send more action figures.

William pulled the box to him. He'd put in Deathstroke for George—the figure looked a bit like a pirate and George liked pirates, because his grandfather had been one. Next, William had stuck King Grayskull in for Declan. Not that Declan played with action figures—he'd had his childhood, while William spent his in Hawk's Academy, which was little more than a prison. Still, William liked to thumb his nose at him, and King Grayskull with his long blond hair looked a lot like Declan.

"So the real question here is, do we send the purple Wildcat to Jack or the black one?"

The Green Arrow expressed no opinion.

A musky scent drifted down to William. He turned around. Two small glowing eyes stared at him from under the bush on the edge of his lawn.

"You again."

The raccoon bared his small sharp teeth.

"I've warned you, stay out of my trash or I will eat you."

The little beast opened his mouth and hissed like a pissed-off cat.

"That does it."

William shrugged off his T-shirt. His jeans and underwear followed. "We're going to settle this."

The raccoon hissed again, puffing out his fur, trying to look bigger. His eyes glowed like two small coals.

William reached deep inside himself and let the wild off the chain. Pain rocked him, jerking him to and fro, the way a dog shook a rat. His bones softened and bent, his ligaments snapped, his flesh flowed like molten wax. Dense black fur sheathed him. The agony ended and William rolled to his feet.

The raccoon froze.

For a second, William saw his reflection in the little beast's eyes—a hulking dark shape on all fours. The interloper took a step back, whirled about, and fled.

William howled, singing a long sad song about the hunt and the thrill of the chase, and a promise of hot blood pulsing between his teeth. The small critters hid high up in the branches, recognizing a predator in their midst.

The last echoes of the song scurried into the Wood. William bit the air with sharp white fangs and gave chase.

William trotted through the Wood. The raccoon had turned out to be female and in possession of six kits. How the hell he'd missed the female scent, he would never know. Getting rusty in the Edge. His senses weren't quite as sharp here.

He had to let them be. You didn't hunt a female with a litter—that was how species went extinct. He caught a nice juicy rabbit instead. William licked his lips. Mmm, good. He would just have to figure out a way to weigh down the lid on the trashcan. Maybe one of his dumbbells would do the job, or some heavy rocks…;

He caught a glimpse of his house through the trees. A scent floated to him: spicy, reminiscent of cinnamon mixed with a dash of cumin and ginger.

His hackles rose. William went to ground.

This scent didn't belong in this world outside of a bakery. It was the scent of a human from beyond the Edge's boundary, with shreds of the Weird's magic still clinging to them.

Trouble.

He lay in the gloom between the roots and listened. Insects chirping. Squirrels in the tree to the left settling down for the night. A woodpecker hammering in the distance to get the last grub of the day.

Nothing but ordinary Wood noises.

From his hiding spot, he could see the entire porch. Nothing stirred.

The rays of the setting sun slid across the boards. A tiny star winked at him.

Careful. Careful.

William edged forward, a dark soft-pawed ghost in the evening twilight. One yard. Two. Three.

The star winked again. A rectangular wooden box sat on the porch steps, secured with a simple metal latch. The latch shone with reflected sunlight. Someone had left him a present.

William circled the house twice, straining to sample the scents, listening to small noises. He found the trail leading from the house. Whoever delivered the box had come and gone.

He approached the building and looked at the box. Eighteen inches long, a foot wide, three inches tall. Simple unmarked wood. Looked like pine. Smelled like it, too. No sounds came from inside.

His figures were untouched. His letter, pinned down by the heavy Hulk, lay where he'd left it. The scent of the intruder didn't reach it.

William pulled the door open with his paw and slipped inside. He would need fingers for this.

The pain screamed through him, shooting through the marrow in his bones. He growled low, shook, convulsing, and shed his fur. Twenty seconds of agony and William crouched on human legs in the living room. Ten more seconds and he stepped out on the porch, fully dressed and armed with a long knife. Just because the box seemed benign didn't mean it wouldn't blow up when he opened it. He'd seen bombs that were the size of a coaster. They made no noise, gave off no scent, and took your leg off if you stepped on them.

He used the knife to pry the latch open and flip the lid off the box. A stack of paper. Hmm.

William plucked the first sheet off the top of the stack, flipped it over, and froze.

A small mangled body lay in the green grass. The boy was barely ten years old, his skin stark white against the smudges of crimson that spread from a gaping wound in his stomach. Someone had disemboweled him with a single vicious thrust and the kid had bled out. So much blood. It was everywhere, on his skinny stomach, on his hands, on the dandelions around him…; Bright, shockingly red, so vivid, it didn't seem real. The boy's narrow face stared at the sky with milky dead eyes, his mouth opened in a horrified O, short reddish hair sticking up…;

It's Jack. The thought punched William in the stomach. His heart hammered. He peered closely at the face. No, not Jack. A cat like Jack—slit pupils—but Jack had brown hair. The boy was the right age, the right build, but he *was not* Jack.

William exhaled slowly, trying to get a handle on his rage. He knew this. He'd seen this boy before, but not on the picture. He'd seen the body in the flesh, smelled the blood and the raw, unforgettable stench of the gut wound. His memory conjured it for him now, and he almost choked on the phantom bitterness coating his

tongue.

The next picture showed a little girl. Her hair was a mess of blood and brains—her skull had been crushed.

He pulled more pictures from the box, each corresponding to a body in his memory. Eight murdered children lay on his porch. Eight murdered changeling children.

The Weird had little use for changelings like him. The Dukedom of Louisiana killed his kind outright, the moment they were born. In Adrianglia, any mother who'd given birth to a changeling child could surrender her baby to the government, no questions asked. A simple signature on a piece of paper and the woman went on her way, while the child was taken to Hawk's Academy. Hawk's was a prison. A prison with sterile rooms and merciless guards, where toys and play were forbidden; a place designed to hammer every drop of free will out of its students. Only outdoors, the changeling children truly lived. These eight must've been giddy to be let out into the sunshine and grass.

It was supposed to be a simple tracking exercise. The instructors had led the children to the border between Adrianglia and the Dukedom of Louisiana, its chief rival. The border was always hot, with Louisianans and Adrianglians crossing back and forth. The instructors allowed the kids to track a group of border jumpers from Louisiana. When William was a child, he had gone on the same mission a dozen times.

William stared at the pictures. The Louisianans had turned out to be no ordinary border jumpers. They were agents of Louisiana's Hand. Spies, twisted by magic and powerful enough to take out a squad of trained Legionnaires.

They let the children catch them.

When the kids and the instructors failed to report in, a squad of Legionnaires was dispatched to find them. He was the tracker for that squad. He was the one who found them dead in the meadow.

It was a massacre, brutal and cold. The kids didn't go quick. They'd hurt before they died.

The last piece of paper waited in the box. William picked it up. He knew from the first sentence what it would say. The words were burned into his memory.

He read it all the same.

Dumb animals offer little sport. Louisiana kills changelings at birth—it's far more efficient than wasting time and resources to try to turn them into people. I recommend you look into this practice, because next time I'll expect proper compensation for getting rid of your little freaks.

Sincerely yours,Spider

Mindless hot fury flooded William, sweeping away all reason and restraint. He raised his head to the sky and snarled, giving voice to his rage before it tore him apart.

For years he'd tracked Spider as much as the Legion would permit him. He'd found him twice. The first time he'd ripped apart Spider's stomach and Spider broke his legs. The second time, William had shattered the Louisianan's ribs, while Spider nearly drowned him. Both times the Hand's spy slipped through his fingers.

Nobody cared for the changelings. They grew up exiled from society, raised to obey and kill on command for the good of Adrianglia. They were fodder, but to him they were children, just like he had once been a child. Just like Jack.

He had to find Spider. He had to kill him. Child murder had to be punished.

A man stepped out of the Wood. William leapt off the porch. In a breath he pinned the intruder to the trunk of the nearest tree and snarled, his teeth clicking a hair from the man's carotid.

The man made no move to resist. "Do you want to kill me or Spider?"

"Who are you?"

"The name is Erwin." The man nodded at his raised hands. A large ring clamped his middle finger—a plain silver band with a small polished mirror in it. The Mirror—Adrianglian Secret Service—flashed in William's head. The Hand's biggest enemy.

"The Mirror would like a word, Lord Sandine," the man said softly. "Would you be kind enough to favor us with an audience?"

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Irene Forrest:

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