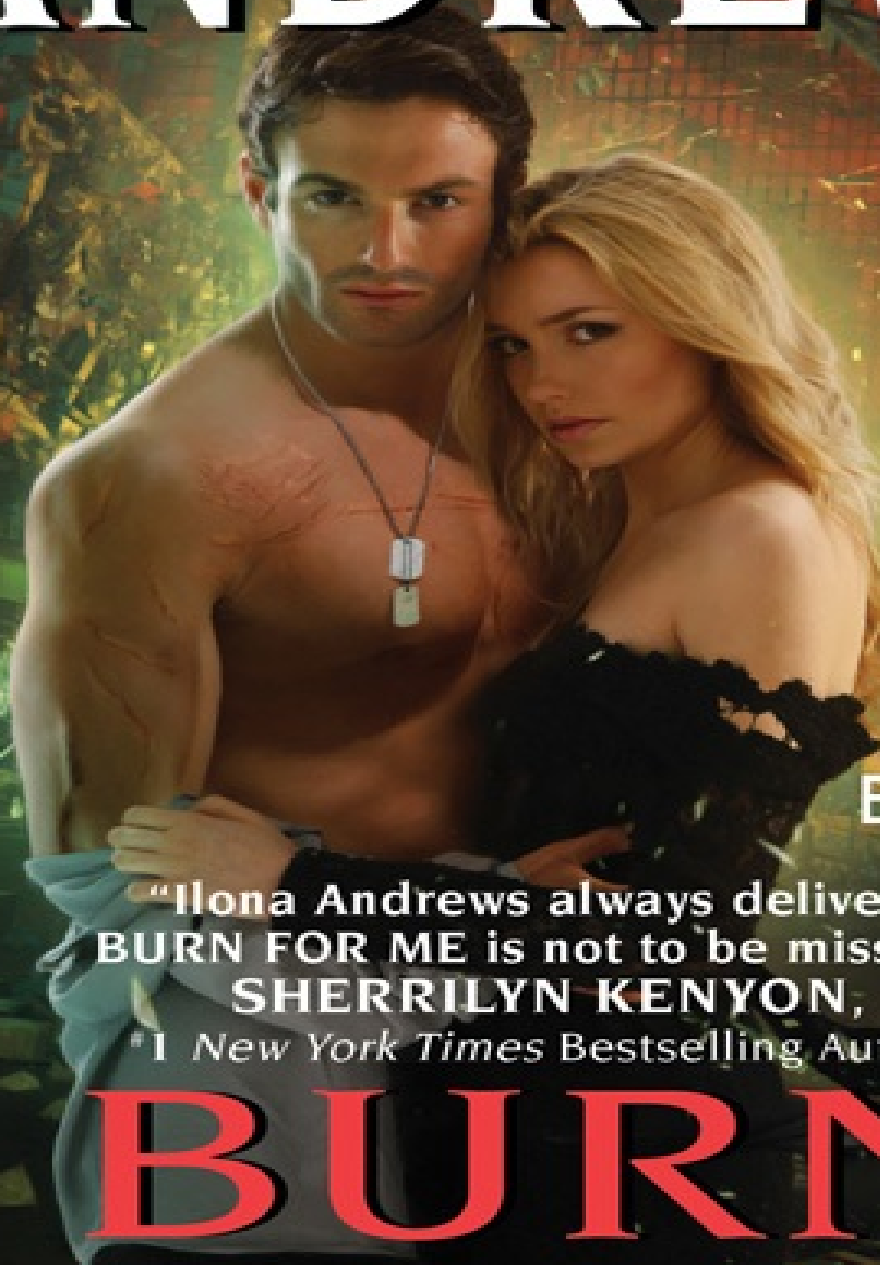


#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

ILONA ANDREWS



AVON
BOOKS

"Ilona Andrews always delivers!
BURN FOR ME is not to be missed."

SHERRILYN KENYON,

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

BURN FOR ME

A HIDDEN LEGACY NOVEL

**ILONA
ANDREWS**

**BURN
FOR ME**
A HIDDEN LEGACY NOVEL



AVON

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Dedication

To our awesome daughters, who make it all worthwhile, and the rest of our family, who drive us crazy.

Contents

Dedication
Acknowledgments

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Epilogue

An Excerpt from Second Hidden Legacy Novel

About the Author
Also by Ilona Andrews
Copyright
About the Publisher

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Well, here it is, our new book. Thank you, dear readers, for taking a chance on it. We hope you will like it.

In 1863, in a world much like our own, European scientists discovered the Osiris serum, a concoction which brought out one's magic talents. These talents were many and varied. Some people gained the ability to command animals, some learned to sense water from miles away, and others suddenly realized they could kill their enemies by generating a burst of lightning between their hands. The serum spread through the world. It was given to soldiers in hopes of making the military forces more deadly. It was obtained by members of fading aristocracy, desperate to hold on to power. It was bought by the rich, who desired to get richer.

Eventually the world realized the consequences of awakening godlike powers in ordinary people. The serum was locked away, but it was too late. The magic talents passed on from parents to their children and changed the course of human history forever. The future of entire nations shifted in the span of a few short decades. Those who previously married for status, money, and power now married for magic, because strong magic would give them everything.

Now, a century and a half later, families with strong hereditary magic have evolved into dynasties. These families—Houses, as they call themselves—own corporations, have their own territories with their own cities, and influence politics. They employ private armies, they feud with each other, and their disputes are deadly. It is a world where the more magic you have, the more powerful, the wealthier, and the more prominent you are. Some magic talents are destructive. Some are subtle. But no magic user should be taken lightly.

Prologue

“I can’t let you do this. I won’t. Kelly, the man is insane.”

Kelly Waller reached over and touched her husband’s hand, looking for reassurance. He took his hand off the wheel and squeezed her fingers. Strange how intimate a touch can be, she thought. That touch, fueled by twenty years of love, had served as her rock in the nightmarish storm of the past forty-eight hours. Without it, she would have been screaming.

“He won’t hurt me. We’re family.”

“You told me yourself he hates his family.”

“I have to try,” she said. “They’ll kill our boy.”

Tom stared straight ahead, glassy eyed, guiding the car up the curve of the driveway. Old Texas oaks spread their wide canopies over the grassy lawn, sprayed with drops of yellow dandelions and pink buttercups. Connor wasn’t taking care of the grounds. His father would’ve had the weeds poisoned . . .

Her stomach churned. A part of her wanted to go back and somehow undo the events of the last two days. A part of her wanted to turn the car around. It’s too late, she told herself. It’s too late for regrets and what ifs. She had to deal with the reality, no matter how terrifying it was. She had to act like a mother.

The driveway brought them to a tall stucco wall. She raked her memory. Sixteen years was a long time, but she was sure the wall hadn’t been there before.

A wrought-iron gate blocked the arched entrance. This was it. No turning back. If Connor decided he wanted her dead, her magic, what little of it there was, wouldn’t be enough to stop him.

Connor was the culmination of three generations of careful marriages aimed at bolstering the family’s magic and connections. He was supposed to have been a worthy successor to the fortune of House Rogan. Much like her, he hadn’t turned out the way his parents had planned.

Tom parked the car. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I do.” The dread that hung over her mugged Kelly, setting off a wave of overwhelming anxiety. Her hands shook. She swallowed, trying to clear her throat. “This is the only way.”

“At least let me come with you.”

“No. He knows me. He might see you as a threat.” She swallowed again, but the clump in her throat refused to disappear. She never knew if Connor could read people’s thoughts, but he was always aware of emotions. She had no doubt they were being watched and probably listened to. “Tom, I don’t think anything bad will happen. If something does, if I don’t come out, I want you to drive away. I want you to go home to the kids. There is a blue folder in the cabinet over the small desk, the one in the kitchen. On the second shelf. Our life insurance policies are in there, and the will . . .”

Tom started the engine. “That’s it. We’re going home. We’ll deal with it ourselves.”

She jerked the car door open, jumped out, and hurried to the gate, her heels clicking on the pavement.

“Kelly!” he called. “Don’t!”

She forced herself to touch the iron gates. "This is Kelly. Connor, please let me in."

~~The iron gate slid open. Kelly raised her head and stepped inside. The gate glided shut behind her.~~ She walked through the arch and up the stone path that wove its way through the picturesque copse of oaks, redbuds, and laurels. The path turned, and she stopped, frozen.

The large colonial beast of a house with white walls and distinguished colonnades was gone. In its place stood a two-story Mediterranean-style mansion, with cream walls and a dark red roof. Had she gone to the wrong property?

"Where is the house?" she whispered.

"I demolished it."

Kelly turned. He stood next to her. She remembered a thin boy with striking pale blue eyes. Sixteen years later, he stood taller than her. His hair, chestnut when he was younger, had turned dark brown, almost black. His face, once angular, had gained a square jaw and hard masculine lines that made him arrestingly handsome. That face, suffused with power, harsh but almost regal . . . It was the kind of face that commanded obedience. He could've ruled the world with that face.

Kelly looked into his eyes and instantly wished she hadn't. Life had iced over the beautiful blue irises. Power stirred deep in their depth. She could feel it just beyond the surface, like a wild, vicious current. It bucked and boiled, a shocking, terrifying power, promising violence and destruction, locked in a cage of iron will. A chill ran from the base of Kelly's neck all the way down her spine.

She had to say something. Anything.

"Dear God, Connor, that was a ten-million-dollar house."

He shrugged. "I found it cathartic. Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes. Thank you."

He led her through the doors into a lobby, up a wooden staircase with an ornate iron rail, to a covered balcony. She followed him, slightly dazed, her surroundings a vague smudge until she sat down on a plush chair. Beyond the rail of the balcony, an orchard stretched, the trees weaving the way around ponds and a picturesque creek. Far at the horizon, the bluish hills rolled, like distant waves.

She smelled coffee. Connor was standing with his back to her, waiting for the coffeemaker to finish their mugs.

Establish a common ground. Remind him who you are. "Where is the swing?" she asked. It had been the favorite hangout of the Rogan kids. That's where they'd gone when he'd had to ask her for advice, back when he was twelve and she'd been the cool older cousin Kelly, twenty and wise in a hundred things teenager.

"It's still there. The oaks grew and you can't see it from the balcony." Connor turned, set her cup in front of her, and sat down.

"There was a time you would've floated the cups over," she said.

"I don't play games anymore. At least not the kind you remember. Why are you here?"

The coffee mug was burning her fingers. She set it down. She hadn't even realized she'd picked it up in the first place. "Have you watched the news?"

"Yes."

"Then you know about the arson at First National."

"Yes."

"A security guard burned to death. His wife and their two children were visiting him. All three are in the hospital. The security guard was an off-duty police officer. The security camera footage identified two arsonists: Adam Pierce and Gavin Waller."

He waited.

~~“Gavin Waller is my son,” she said. The words sounded hollow. “My son is a murderer.”~~

“I know.”

“I love my son. I love Gavin with all my heart. If it was my life against his, I would die for him an instant. He isn’t an evil person. He’s a sixteen-year-old child. He was trying to find himself, but I found Adam Pierce instead. You have to understand, kids idealize Pierce. He is their antihero—the man who walked away from his family and started a motorcycle gang. The bad boy charismatic rebel

Her voice turned bitter and angry, but she couldn’t help it.

“He used Gavin to commit this atrocity, and now a police officer is dead. The officer’s wife and their two children were burned very badly. They will kill Gavin, Connor. Even if my son walks out with his hands in the air, the cops will shoot him. He is a cop killer.”

Connor drank his coffee. His face was perfectly placid. She couldn’t read it.

“You don’t owe me anything. We haven’t spoken in twenty years, not since the family disowned me.”

She swallowed again. She had refused to follow their instructions and marry a stranger with the right set of genes. She’d told them she wanted to be in control of her own life. They’d obliged and thrown her out like a piece of garbage . . . no, don’t think about that. Think about Gavin.

“If there was any other way,” she said, “I wouldn’t bother you. But Tom has no connections. We don’t have power, or money, or great magic. Nobody cares what happens to us. All I have now are our childhood memories. I was always there for you when you got in trouble. Please help me.”

“What is it you want me to do? Do you hope to avoid his arrest?”

She detected a hint of cynical disapproval in his voice. “No. I want my son to be arrested. I want a trial. I want it to be televised, because after Gavin spends ten minutes on the stand, everyone will recognize exactly what he is: a confused, foolish child. His brother and sister deserve to know that he isn’t a monster. I know my son. I know that what he’s done is tearing him apart. I don’t want him to die, gunned down like an animal, without ever having a chance to tell the family of the people he killed how deeply sorry he is.”

Tears wet her cheeks. She didn’t care. “Please, Connor. I’m begging you for my son’s life.”

Connor drank his coffee. “The name is Mad Rogan. They also call me the Butcher and the Scourge, but Mad is the most frequently used moniker.”

“I know you—”

“No, you don’t. You knew me before the war, when I was a child. Tell me, what am I now?”

The pressure of his gaze ground on her.

Her lips trembled and she said the first thing that popped into her mind. “You’re a murderer.”

He smiled, his face cold. No humor, no warmth, just a vicious predator baring his teeth. “It’s been forty-eight hours since the arson, and you are just now here. You must be really desperate. Did you go to everyone else first? Am I your last stop?”

“Yes,” she said.

His irises sparked with electric, bright blue. She looked into them, and for a split second she glimpsed the true power that lay inside him. It was like staring into the face of an avalanche before it swallowed you whole. In that moment she knew that all of the stories were true. He was a killer and a madman.

“I don’t care if you’re the devil himself,” she whispered. “Please bring Gavin back to me.”

“Okay,” he said.

Five minutes later, she stumbled down the driveway. Her eyes watered. She tried to stop crying but couldn't. She had accomplished what she'd come here to do. The relief was overwhelming.

"Kelly, honey!" Tom caught her.

"He'll do it," she whispered, shell-shocked. "He promised he would find Gavin."

Chapter 1

All men are liars. All women are liars, too. I learned that fact when I was two years old and my grandmother told me that if I was a good girl and sat still, the shot the doctor was about to give me wouldn't hurt. It was the first time my young brain connected the unsettling feeling of my magnetic talent detecting a lie to the actions of other people.

People lie for many reasons: to save themselves, to get out of trouble, to avoid hurting someone's feelings. Manipulators lie to get what they want. Narcissists lie to make themselves seem grander than others and themselves. Recovering alcoholics lie to safeguard their tattered reputations. And those who love us most lie to us most of all, because life is a bumpy ride and they want to smooth it out as much as possible.

John Rutger lied because he was a scumbag.

Nothing about his appearance said, Hey, I'm a despicable human being. As he stepped out of the hotel elevator, he seemed like a perfectly pleasant man. Tall and fit, he had brown, slightly wavy hair with just enough grey on his temples to make him look distinguished. His face was the kind of face you would expect a successful, athletic man in his forties to have: masculine, clean-shaven, and confident. He was that handsome, well-dressed dad at the junior football league yelling encouragements at his kid. He was the trusted stockbroker who would never steer his clients wrong. Smart, successful, solid as a rock. And the beautiful redhead holding hands with him was not his wife.

John's wife was named Liz, and two days ago she hired me to find out if he was cheating on her. She had caught him cheating before, ten months ago, and she'd told him that his next one would be his last.

John and the redhead drifted across the hotel lobby.

I sat in the lobby's lounge area, half hidden behind a bushy plant, and pretended to be absorbed in my cell phone, while the small digital camera hidden in my black crocheted purse recorded their lovebirds. The purse had been chosen precisely for its decorative holes.

Rutger and his date stopped a few feet away from me. I furiously shot birds at the snide green pig on my screen. Move along, nothing to see here, just a young blond woman playing with her phone by some shrubbery.

"I love you," the redhead said.

True. Deluded fool.

The pigs laughed at me. I really sucked at this game.

"I love you too," he told her, looking into her eyes.

A familiar irritation built inside me, as if an invisible fly was buzzing around my head. My magnetic talent clicked. John was lying. Surprise, surprise.

I felt so sorry for Liz. They had been married for nine years, with two children, an eight-year-old boy and a four-year-old girl. She showed me the pictures when she hired me. Now their marriage was about to sink like the *Titanic*, and I was watching the iceberg approach.

"Do you mean that?" the redhead asked, looking at him with complete adoration.

“Yes. You know I do.”

Magic buzzed again. Lie.

Most people found lying stressful. Distorting the truth and coming up with a plausible alternative version of reality required a good memory and an agile mind. When John Rutger lied, he did it to your face, looking straight into your eyes. And he seemed really convincing.

“I wish we could be together,” the redhead said. “I’m tired of hiding.”

“I know. But now isn’t the right time. I’m working on it. Don’t worry.”

My cousins had run his lineage. John wasn’t connected to any of the important magical families whose corporations owned Houston. He had no criminal history, but still something about the way he carried himself set me on edge. My instincts said he was dangerous, and I trusted my instincts.

We also ran a credit check. John couldn’t afford a divorce. His record as a stockbroker was acceptable but not stellar. He was mortgaged up to the gills. What wealth he had was tied up in stocks and divvying them up would be expensive. He knew it too and took pains to cover his tracks. He and the redhead had arrived in separate cars twenty minutes apart. He’d probably let her leave first, and judging by the tense line of his back, this open display of affection in the lobby wasn’t part of his plan.

The redhead opened her mouth, and John bent down and dutifully kissed her.

Liz would pay us a thousand dollars when I brought her the proof. It was all she could get her hands on without John knowing about it. It wasn’t much, but we weren’t in a position to turn down the work, and as far as jobs went, this one was simple. Once they walked out of the hotel, I’d leave through the side exit, notify Liz, and collect our fee.

The hotel doors swung open and Liz Rutger walked into the lobby.

All my nerves came to attention. Why? Why don’t people ever listen to me? We had expressly agreed that she wouldn’t do any sleuthing on her own. Nothing good ever came of it.

Liz saw them kissing and went white as a sheet. John let go of his mistress, his face shocked. The redhead stared at Liz, horrified.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” John said.

It was exactly what it looked like.

“Hi!” Liz said, shockingly loud, her voice brittle. “Who are you? Because I’m his wife!”

The redhead turned and fled into the depths of the hotel.

Liz turned to her husband. “You.”

“Let’s not do this here.”

“Now you’re concerned with appearances? Now?”

“Elizabeth.” His voice vibrated with command. Uh-oh.

“You ruined us. You ruined everything.”

“Listen . . .”

She opened her mouth. The words took a second to come out, as if she had to force them. “I want a divorce.”

I’ve been working for the family business since I was seventeen, and I saw the precise moment adrenaline hit John’s system. Some guys get red-faced and start screaming. Some might freeze—those are your fear biters. Push too far and they will go crazy. John Rutger went flat. All emotions drained from his face. His eyes opened wide, and behind them a hard, calculating mind evaluated the situation with icy precision.

“Okay,” John said quietly. “Let’s talk about this. It’s more than us. It’s also the kids. Come, I’ll take you home.” He reached for her arm.

“Don’t touch me,” she hissed.

“Liz,” he said, his voice perfectly reasonable, his eyes focused and predatory, like the hard stare of a sniper sighting his target. “This isn’t a conversation for the hotel lobby. Don’t make a scene. We’d be better than that. I’ll drive.”

There was no way I could let Liz get into his car. His eyes told me that if I let him gain control of her, I would never see her again.

I moved fast and put myself between them.

“Nevada?” Liz blinked, thrown off track.

“Walk away,” I told her.

“Who is this?” John focused on me.

That’s right, look at me, don’t look at her. I’m a bigger threat. I body-blocked Liz, keeping myself between them.

“Liz, go to your car. Don’t drive home. Go to a family member’s house. Now.”

Muscles on John’s jaw bulged as he locked his teeth.

“What?” Liz stared at me.

“You hired her to spy on me.” John shrugged his shoulders and turned his neck like a fighter loosening himself for a fight. “You brought her into our private life.”

“Now!” I barked.

Liz turned and fled.

I raised my hands in the air and backed away toward the exit, making sure the camera in the hotel lobby had me in plain view. Behind me the door hissed as Liz made a break for it.

“It’s over, Mr. Rutger. I’m not a threat.”

“You nosy bitch. You and that harpy are in it together.”

At the desk the concierge frantically mashed buttons on a phone.

If I’d been on my own, I would have turned and run. Some people stand their ground no matter what. In my line of work, a stint at the hospital, coupled with a bill you can’t pay because you’re not working, cures that notion really fast. Given a chance, I’d run like a rabbit, but I had to buy Liz time to get to her car.

John raised his arms, bent at the elbow, palms up, fingers apart, as if he was holding two invisible softballs in his hands. The mage pose. Oh shit.

“Mr. Rutger, don’t do this. Adultery isn’t illegal. You haven’t committed any crimes yet. Please don’t do this.”

His eyes stared at me, cold and hard.

“You can still walk away from this.”

“You thought you could humiliate me. You thought you’d embarrass me.” His face darkened and ghostly magic shadows slid across his skin. Tiny red sparks ignited above his palms and flared. Bright crimson lightning danced, stretching to the tips of his fingers.

Where the hell was the hotel security? I couldn’t take him down first—it would be an assault, and we couldn’t afford to be sued—but they could.

“Let me show you what happens to people who try to humiliate me.”

I dashed to the side.

Thunder pealed. The glass doors of the hotel shattered. The blast wave picked me up off the floor. I saw the chair from the lounge fly at me and I threw my hands up, curling in midair. The wall smashed into my right shoulder. The chair hit my side and face. Ow.

I crashed down next to the shards of a ceramic pot that had held a plant two seconds ago, then scrambled to my feet.

The red sparks ignited again. He was getting ready for Round Two.

~~They say a hundred-and-thirty-pound woman has no chance against an athletic two-hundred-pound man. That's a lie. You just have to make a decision to hurt him and then do it.~~

I grabbed a heavy potsherd and hurled it at him. It crashed against his chest, knocking him off balance. I ran to him, yanking a Taser from my pocket. He swung at me. It was hard and fast, and caught me right in the stomach. Tears welled in my eyes. I lunged forward and jammed the Taser against his neck.

The shock surged through him. His eyes bulged.

Please let him go down. Please.

His mouth gaped open. John went rigid and crashed like a log.

I knelt on his neck, pulled a plastic tie from my pocket, and wrestled his hands together, tying them up.

John growled.

I sat next to him on the floor. My face hurt.

Two men burst from the side doors and ran to us. Their jackets said security. *Well, now they show up. Thank God for the cavalry.*

In the distance police sirens blared.

Sgt. Munoz, a stocky man twice my age, peered at the security footage. He'd watched it twice already.

"I couldn't let him put her into the car," I said from my spot in the chair. My shoulder hurt and the handcuffs on my hands kept me from rubbing it. Being in close proximity to cops filled me with anxiety. I wanted to fidget, but fidgeting would make me look nervous.

"You were right," Munoz said and tapped the screen, pausing on John Rutger reaching for his wife. "That right there is your dead giveaway. The man's caught with his pants down and he doesn't say 'Sorry, I fucked up.' He doesn't beg for forgiveness or get angry. He goes cold and tries to get his wife out of the picture."

"I didn't provoke him. I didn't put my hands on him either, until he tried to kill me."

"I see that." He turned to me. "That's a C2 Taser you've got there. You do know range on those things is fifteen feet?"

"I didn't want to take chances. His magic looked electrical to me, and I thought he might block the current."

Munoz shook his head. "No, he was enerkinetic. Straight magic energy, and trained to use it by the courtesy of the U.S. Army. This guy is a vet."

"Ah." That explained why Rutger went flat. Dealing with adrenaline was nothing new to him. The fact that he was an enerkinetic made sense too. Pyrokinetics manipulated fire, aquakinetics manipulated water, and enerkinetics manipulated raw magical energy. Nobody was quite sure what the nature of that energy was, but it was a relatively common magic. How in the world did Bern miss all this in the background check? When I got home, my cousin and I would have to have words.

A uniformed cop stuck his head in the door and handed my license back to Munoz. "She checked out."

Munoz unlocked my cuffs, took them off, and handed me my purse and camera. My cell and my wallet followed. "We have your statement, and we took your memory card. You'll get it back later. Go home, put some ice on that neck."

I grinned at him. "Are you going to tell me not to leave town, Sarge?"

Munoz gave me a "yet another smart-ass" look. "No. You went up against a military-grade mag for a grand. If you need the money that bad, you probably can't afford the gas."

Three minutes later I climbed into my five-year-old Mazda minivan. The paperwork described the Mazda's color as "gold." Everyone else said it was "kind of champagne" or "sort of beige." Coupled with unmistakable mom car lines, the minivan made for a perfect surveillance vehicle. Nobody paid any mind. I once followed a guy for two hours in it on a nearly deserted highway, and when the insurance company later showed him the footage demonstrating that his knee worked just fine as I shifted gears in his El Camino, he was terribly surprised.

I turned the mirror. A big red welt that would mature into one hell of a purple bruise blossomed on my neck and the top of my right shoulder, like someone took a handful of blueberries and rubbed it all over me. An equally bright red stain marked my jaw on the left side. I sighed, readjusted the mirror, and headed home.

Some easy job this turned out to be. At least I didn't have to go to the hospital. I grimaced. The welt decided it didn't like me grimacing. Ow.

The Baylor Investigative Agency started as a family business. We still were a family business. Technically we were owned by someone else now, but they mostly left us alone to run our affairs as we saw fit. We had only three rules. Rule #1: we stayed bought. Once a client hired us, we were loyal to the client. Rule #2: we didn't break the law. It was a good rule. It kept us out of jail and safe from litigation. And Rule #3, the most important one of all: at the end of the day we still had to be able to look our reflections in the eye. I filed today under Rule #3 day. Maybe I was crazy and John Rutger would've taken his wife home and begged her forgiveness on bended knee. But at the end of the day, I had no regrets, and I didn't have to worry about whether I did the right thing and whether Liz's two children would ever see their mother again.

Their father was a different story, but he was no longer my problem. He made that mess all on his own.

I cleared the evening traffic on I-290, heading northwest, and turned south. A few minutes later I pulled up in front of our warehouse. Bern's beat-up black Civic sat in the parking lot, next to Mom's blue Honda Element. Oh good. Everyone was home.

I parked, went to the door, and punched the code into the security system. The door clicked open, then I let myself in and paused for a second to hear the reassuring clang of the lock sliding home behind me.

When you entered the warehouse from this door, it looked just like an office. We built walls, installed some glass panels, and laid down high-traffic beige carpet. That gave us three office rooms on the left side and a break room and large conference room on the right. The drop ceiling completed the illusion.

I stepped into my office, put the purse and the camera on the desk, and sat in my chair. I really should do a write-up, but I didn't feel like it. I'd do it later.

The office was soundproof. Around me everything was quiet. A familiar, faint scent of grapefruit oil in the oil warmer floated to me. The oils were my favorite little luxury. I inhaled the fragrance. I was home.

I survived. Had I hit my head on the wall when Rutger had thrown me, I could've died today. Right now I could be dead instead of sitting here in my office, twenty feet from my home. My mom could be in the morgue, identifying me on a slab. My heart pounded in my chest. Nausea crept up, squeezing my throat. I leaned forward and concentrated on breathing. Deep, calm breaths. I just had to let myself

work through it.

In and out. In and out.

Slowly the anxiety receded.

In and out.

Okay.

I got up, crossed the office to the break room, opened the door in the back, and stepped into the warehouse. A luxuriously wide hallway stretched left and right, its sealed concrete floor reflecting the light softly. Above me thirty-foot ceilings soared. After we had to sell the house and move into the warehouse, Mom and Dad considered making the inside look just like a real house. Instead we ended up building one large wall separating this section of the warehouse—our living space—from Grandma's garage so we didn't have to heat or air-condition the entire twenty-two thousand square feet of the warehouse. The rest of the walls had occurred organically, which was a gentle euphemism for We put them up as needed with whatever material was handy.

If Mom saw me, I wouldn't get away without a thorough medical exam. All I wanted to do was take a shower and eat some food. This time of the day she was usually with Grandma, helping her work. If I was really quiet, I could just sneak into my room. I padded down the hallway. *Think sneaky thoughts . . . Be invisible . . .* Hopefully, nothing attention-attracting was going on.

"I'll kill you!" a familiar high voice howled from the right.

Damn it. Arabella, of course. My youngest sister was in rare form, judging by the pitch.

"That's real mature!" And that was Catalina, the seventeen-year-old. Two years older than Arabella and eight years younger than me.

I had to break this up before Mom came over to investigate. I sped down the hallway toward the media room.

"At least I'm not a dumb ho who has no friends!"

"At least I'm not fat!"

"At least I am not ugly!"

Neither of them was fat, ugly, or promiscuous. They both were complete drama queens, and if I didn't break this party up fast, Mom would be on us in seconds.

"I hate you!"

I walked into the media room. Catalina, thin and dark-haired, stood on the right, her arms crossed over her chest. On the left Bern very carefully restrained blond Arabella by holding her by her waist above the floor. Arabella was really strong, but Bern had wrestled through high school and went to judo club twice a week. Now nineteen and still growing, he stood an inch over six feet tall and weighed about two hundred pounds, most of it powerful, supple muscle. Holding a hundred-pound Arabella wasn't a problem.

"Let me go!" Arabella snarled.

"Think about what you're doing," Bern said, his deep voice patient. "We agreed—no violence."

"What is it this time?" I asked.

Catalina stabbed her finger in Arabella's direction. "She never put the cap on my liquid foundation. Now it's dried out!"

Figured. They never fought about anything important. They never stole from each other, they never tried to sabotage each other's relationships, and if anyone dared to look at one of them the wrong way, the other one would be the first to charge to her sister's defense. But if one of them took the other's hairbrush and didn't clean it, it was World War III.

"That's not true . . ." Arabella froze. "Neva, what happened to your face?"

Everything stopped. Then everyone said something at once, really loud.

~~“Shush! Calm down, it’s cosmetic. I just need a shower. Also, stop fighting. If you don’t, Mom will come here and I don’t want her to—”~~

“To what?” Mom walked through the door, limping a little. Her leg was bothering her again. Of average height, she used to be lean and muscular, but the injury had grounded her. She was softer now with a rounder face. She had dark eyes like me, but her hair was chestnut brown.

Grandma Frida followed, about my height, thin, with a halo of platinum curls stained with machine grease. The familiar, comforting smell of engine oil, rubber, and gunpowder spread through the room. Grandma Frida saw me and her blue eyes got really big. Oh no.

“Penelope, why is the baby hurt?”

The best defense is vigorous offense. “I’m not a baby. I’m twenty-five years old.” I was Grandma’s first grandchild. If she lived until I turned fifty, with grandchildren of my own, I’d still be “the baby.”

“How did this happen?” Mom asked.

Damn it. “Magic blast wave, wall, and a chair.”

“Blast wave?” Bern asked.

“The Rutger case.”

“I thought he was a dud.”

I shook my head. “Enerkinetic magic. He was a vet.”

Bern’s face fell. He frowned and marched out of the room.

“Arabella, get the first-aid kit,” Mom said. “Nevada, lie down. You may have a concussion.”

Arabella took off running.

“It’s not that bad! I don’t have a concussion.”

My mother turned and looked at me. I knew that look. That was the Sgt. Baylor look. There was no escape.

“Did paramedics look at you at the scene?”

“Yes.”

“What did they say?”

There was no point in lying. “They said I should go to the hospital just in case.”

My mother pinned me down with her stare. “Did you?”

“No.”

“Lie down.”

I sighed and surrendered to my fate.

The next morning I sat in the media room, eating the crepes and sausages Mom made for me. My neck still hurt. My side hurt worse.

Mom sat at the other end of the sectional, sipping her coffee and working on Arabella’s hair. Apparently the latest fashion among high schoolers involved elaborate braids, and Arabella had somehow cajoled Mom into helping her.

On the left side of the screen, a female news anchor with impossibly perfect hair profiled the recent arson at First National, while the right side of the screen showed a tornado of fire engulfing the building. The orange flames billowed out the windows.

“It’s awful,” Mom said.

“Did anybody die?” I asked.

“A security guard. His wife and their two children came by to drop off his dinner and were also burned, but they survived. Apparently Adam Pierce was involved.”

Everyone in Houston knew who Adam Pierce was. Magic users were segregated into five ranks: Minor, Average, Notable, Significant, and Prime. Born with a rare pyrokinetic talent, Pierce had a Stainless Steel classification. A pyrokinetic was considered Average if he could melt a cubic foot of ice under a minute. In the same amount of time, Adam Pierce could conjure a fire that would melt a cubic foot of stainless steel. That made Pierce a Prime, the highest rank of magic user. Everybody wanted him—the military, Home Defense, and the private sector.

A wealthy, established family, the Pierces owned Firebug, Inc., the leading provider of industrial forging products. Adam, handsome and magically spectacular, was the pride and joy of House Pierce. He'd grown up wrapped in tender luxury, had gone to all the right schools, had worn all the right clothes, and his future had had golden sparkles all over it. He'd been a rising star and the most eligible bachelor. Then, at the ripe age of twenty-two, he'd given them all the finger, declared himself radical, and gone off to start a motorcycle gang.

Since then Pierce had been popping up in the news for one thing or another, usually involving cops, crime, and antiestablishment declarations. The media loved him, because his name brought ratings.

As if on cue, Pierce's portrait filled the right side of the screen. He wore his trademark black jeans and unzipped black leather jacket over bare, muscled chest. A Celtic knot-work tattoo covered his left pectoral, and a snarling panther with horns decorated the right side of his six-pack. Longish brown hair spilled over his beautiful face, highlighting the world's best cheekbones and a perfect jaw with just the right amount of stubble to add some scruff. If you cleaned him up, he would look almost angelic. As is, he was a tarnished poseur angel, his wings artfully singed with the perfect camera shot in mind.

I'd seen my share of real biker gangsters. Not the weekend bikers, who were doctors and lawyers in real life, but the real deal, the ones who lived on the road. They were hard, not too well kept, and their eyes were made of lead. Pierce was more like the leading man playing a badass in an action movie. Lucky for him, he could make his own background of billowing flames.

“Hot!” Arabella said.

“Stop it,” Mom told her.

Grandma Frida walked into the room. “Ooh, here is my boy.”

“Mother,” Mom growled.

“What? I can't help it. It's the devil eyes.”

Pierce did have devil eyes. Deep and dark, the rich brown of coffee grinds, they were unpredictable and full of crazy. He was very nice to look at, but all of the images of him looked staged. He always seemed to know where the camera was. And if I ever saw him in person, I'd run the other way like my back was on fire. If I hesitated, it would be.

“He killed a man,” Mom said.

“He was framed,” Grandma Frida said.

“You don't even know the story,” Mom said.

Grandma shrugged. “Framed. A man that pretty can't be a murderer.”

Mother stared at her.

“Penelope, I'm seventy-two years old. You let me enjoy my fantasy.”

“Go Grandma.” Arabella pumped her fist in the air.

“If you insist on being Grandma's little stooge, she can do your hair,” Mom said.

“We will return to the investigation on the arson after the break,” the news anchor announced. “Also, iconic downtown park infested with rats.”

The image of Bridge Park popped on the screen, its life-size bronze statue of a cowboy on a galloping horse front and center.

“Should Harris County officials resort to drastic measures? More after the break.”

Bern walked into the room. “Hey, Nevada, can I borrow you for a moment?”

I got up and followed him out. Without saying a word, we went down the hallway and into the kitchen. It was the closest place where Mom and Grandma wouldn’t overhear us.

“What’s up?”

Bern ran his hand through his short, light brown hair and held out a folder. I opened it and scanned it. John Rutger’s lineage, biography, and background check. A line stood out, highlighted in yellow: Honorable Discharge, Sealed.

I raised my finger. “Aha!”

“Aha,” Bern confirmed.

Usually employers liked hiring ex-servicemen. They were punctual, disciplined, polite, and capable of making quick decisions when needed. But combat mages sent the typical HR manager running in the opposite direction. Nobody wanted a guy stressing out in their office when he had the ability to summon a host of bloodsucking leeches. To circumvent this issue, the Department of Defense started sealing records of some combat-grade personnel. A sealed record didn’t always mean combat-grade magic, but it would’ve given me a nice heads-up. I would’ve approached Rutger’s situation from an entirely different angle.

“I screwed up.” Bern leaned against the counter. His grey eyes were full of remorse. “I had a modern history exam. It’s not my strongest class, and I needed at least a B to keep the scholarship, so I had to cram. I gave it to Leon. He ran the lineage and the background check, but forgot to log in to the DOD database.”

“It’s okay,” I told him. Leon was fifteen. Getting him to sit still for longer than thirty seconds was like trying to herd cats through a shower.

Bern rubbed the bridge of his nose. “No. It’s not okay. You asked me to do it. I should’ve done it. You got hurt. It won’t happen again.”

“Don’t sweat it,” I told him. “I’ve missed stuff before. It happens. Just make it a point from now on to check DOD. Did you get a B?”

He nodded. “It’s kind of interesting, actually. Do you know that story about Mrs. O’Leary’s cow?”

I used to really like history. I even thought of getting a minor in it, but real life got in the way. “Didn’t she knock over a lamp in the barn and start the Great Chicago Fire sometime in the 1860s?”

“In October of 1871,” Bern said. “My professor doesn’t think the cow did it. He thinks it was a mage.”

“In 1871? The Osiris Serum had barely been discovered.”

“It’s a really interesting theory.” Bern shrugged. “You should talk to him sometime. He is a pretty cool guy.”

I smiled. It had taken me four years, including every summer, to limp my way to a criminal justice degree, because I’d had to work. Bern got an academic scholarship because he was smarter than all of us combined, and now he was doing well. He even liked at least one of his classes outside his major.

“There is more,” Bern said. “Montgomery wants to see us.”

My stomach did a pirouette inside me. House Montgomery owned us. When savings and the money from the sale of our home hadn’t been enough to cover Dad’s medical bills, we’d sold the firm

to Montgomery. Technically, it was mortgaged. We had a thirty-year repayment term, and every month we squeaked by with the minimum payment. The terms of our mortgage practically made us a subsidiary of Montgomery International Investigations. Montgomery had taken very little interest in us up to this point. We were too small to be of any use to them, and they had no reason to bother us as long as the check had cleared, and our checks always cleared. I made sure of that.

“They said ASAP,” Bern said.

“Did it sound routine?”

“No.”

Damn it. “Don’t tell Mom or Grandma.”

He nodded. “They’ll just stress.”

“Yes. I’ll call you as soon as I find out what this is about. Hopefully we just forgot to file some form or something.”

I was almost to the door when he called, “Nevada? John Rutger’s wife wired the money. A thousand dollars, as agreed.”

“Good,” I said and escaped. I needed to brush my hair, make myself presentable, and hightail it across town to the glass towers.

Really, how bad could it be?

Chapter 2

The asymmetrical glass tower of Montgomery International Investigations rose above the neighboring office buildings like a shark fin of blue glass. Twenty-five stories tall, it gleamed with hundreds of tinted cobalt windows. It was meant to impress and fill you with awe at Houston Montgomery's magnificence. I tried to scrounge up some awe but got only anxiety instead.

I walked through the door to the gleaming elevator, passing through a metal detector. The message from Montgomery said seventeenth floor, so I entered the elevator when the doors whooshed open, pushed the button with 17 on it, and waited as the car shot upward with a whisper.

What the heck could they possibly want?

The doors opened, revealing a wide space punctuated by a receptionist's desk made of polished stainless steel tubes. At least twenty-five feet separated the glossy dark blue floor and the white ceiling. I stepped out before the elevator closed. The walls were pure white, but the enormous wall of cobalt glass windows behind the receptionist turned the daylight pale blue, as if we were under water. It all felt ultramodern, pristine, and slightly soulless. Even the snow-white orchids on the receptionist's desk did nothing to add any warmth to the space. MII might as well have wallpapered the place with money and been done with it.

The receptionist looked up at me. Her face was flawless, pale brown, with big blue eyes and artfully contoured pale pink lips. Her tomato red hair was wrapped in an impeccable French twist. I could see each one of her long eyelashes, and not one had as much as a hint of a clump. She wore a white dress that really wanted to be a sleeve.

The receptionist blinked at my bruised face. "May I help you?"

"I have an appointment with Augustine Montgomery. My name is Nevada Baylor." I smiled.

The receptionist rose. "Follow me."

I followed. She was probably the same height as me barefoot, but her heels added about six inches. She clicked her way around the curving wall.

"How long does it take?" I asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"How long does it take you to get dressed for work in the morning?"

"Two and a half hours," she said.

"Do they pay you overtime for that?"

She stopped before a wall of frosted glass. The white feathers of frost moved and slid across the surface in hypnotic pattern. Here and there a fine thread of pure gold shone and melted. Wow.

A section of the wall slid aside. The receptionist looked at me. I stepped through the opening into a vast office. We must've been in a corner of the fin, because the wall to the left and straight ahead consisted of blue glass. A white, ultramodern desk grew seamlessly out of the floor. Behind the desk sat a man in a suit. His head was lowered as he read something on a small tablet, and all I could see was a thick head of dark blond hair styled into a short and no doubt expensive haircut.

I approached and stood by a white chair in front of the desk. Good suit, in that color between green

and true black people sometimes call gunmetal.

The man looked up at me. Sometimes people with talent in illusion minimized their physical flaws with their magic. Judging by his face, Augustine Montgomery was a Prime. His features were perfect in the way Greek statues were perfect, the lines of his face masculine and crisp but never brutish. Clean-shaven, with a strong nose and a firm mouth, he had the type of beauty that made you stare. His skin nearly glowed, and his green eyes stabbed at you with sharp intelligence from behind nearly invisible eyeglasses. He probably had to have protective detail when he left the building to fend off all the sculptors who wanted to immortalize him in marble.

The glasses were a masterful touch. Without them, he'd be a god on a cloud, but the hair-thin frames let him keep one foot on the ground with us mere mortals.

"Mr. Montgomery," I said. "My name is Nevada Baylor. You wanted to see me?"

Montgomery valiantly ignored the purple tint of bruises on my face. "Sit down, please." He pointed to the chair.

I sat.

"I have an assignment for you."

In the five years they'd owned us, they had never given us an assignment. Please let it be something minor . . .

"We'd like you to apprehend this man." He slid a photograph across the desk. I leaned forward.

Adam Pierce looked back at me with his crazy eyes.

"Is this a joke?"

"No."

I stared at Montgomery.

"In light of recent events, the Pierce family is concerned about Adam's welfare. They would like us to bring him in. Uninjured. Since you are our subsidiary, we feel you're perfectly suited to this task. Your portion of the fee will amount to fifty thousand dollars."

I couldn't believe it. "We're a tiny family firm. Look at our records. We aren't bounty hunters. We do small-time insurance fraud investigations and cheating spouse cases."

"It's time to expand your repertoire. You're showing a ninety percent success rate with your cases. You have our complete confidence."

We showed a 90 percent success rate because I didn't take a case unless I knew we could handle it. "He's a Prime pyrokinetic. We don't have the manpower."

Montgomery frowned slightly, as if bothered. "I'm showing one full-time and five part-time employees. Call your people in and concentrate on it."

"Have you checked the DOBs on those part-time employees? Let me save you the trouble: three of them are under the age of sixteen, and one is barely nineteen. They are my sisters and cousins. You're asking me to go after Adam Pierce with children."

Montgomery clicked the keys on his keyboard. "It says here your mother is a decorated army veteran."

"My mother was critically injured in 1995 during operations in Bosnia. She was captured and put in a hole in the ground for two months with two other soldiers. She was presumed dead and rescued by pure chance, but she suffered permanent damage to her left leg. Her top speed is five miles per hour."

Montgomery leaned back.

"Her magic talent is in her hand-to-eye coordination," I continued. "She can shoot people in the head from very far away, which will do absolutely nothing, since you want Pierce alive. And my own magic . . ."

Montgomery focused on me. "Your magic?"

Crap. Their records said I was a dud. ". . . is nonexistent. This is suicide. You have twenty times the resources and manpower we do. Why are you doing this to us? Do you think we have any chance at all?"

"Yes."

My magic buzzed. He just lied. The realization hit me like a load of bricks dumped on my head.

"That's it, isn't it? You know bringing Pierce in will be expensive and difficult. You'll lose people, trained, skilled personnel in whom you've invested time and money, and in the end it will cost more than whatever the family is paying you. But you probably can't turn House Pierce down, so you're going to give this to us, and when it ends in disaster, you can show them our records. You can tell the Pierces that you assigned it to your best outfit with six employees and a ninety percent success rate. You've done all you can. You expect us to fail and possibly die to preserve your bottom line and save face."

"There is no need to be dramatic."

"I won't do it." I couldn't. It was impossible.

Montgomery clicked a couple of keys and turned his computer monitor toward me. A document with a section highlighted in yellow filled the screen.

"This is your contract. The highlighted section states that turning down an assignment from M constitutes a breach of contract, with the payment due in full."

I clenched my teeth.

"Can you pay the balance of the loan in full?"

I wished I could reach across the table and strangle him.

"Ms. Baylor." He spoke slowly, as if I were hard of hearing. "Can you pay the balance in full?"

I unlocked my jaws. "No."

Montgomery spread his arms. "Let me be perfectly clear: you do this or we will take your business."

"You're not giving me a choice."

"Of course you have a choice. You can take the assignment or vacate your premises."

We'd lose everything. The warehouse was owned by the business. The cars were owned by the business. We'd be homeless. "We've always been on time with payments. We never caused you any trouble." I pulled my wallet out of my purse, slid out the picture of my family, and put it on the desk. It was taken a couple of months ago, and all of us barely crowded into the shot. "I'm all they have. Our father is dead, our mother is disabled. If something happens to me, they have no means of support."

He glanced at it. A shadow of something crossed his face, then it went blank again. "I require an answer, Ms. Baylor."

Maybe I could just half-ass it. It went against the grain, but I had to do what I could to survive. "What if the cops catch him first?"

"Your business is forfeit. You have to bring him in, alive and before the authorities get their hands on him."

Damn it. "What happens if I die?"

Augustine raised his hand, moving the text up on his screen. "You're the licensed investigator for the firm. When we purchased the firm, we invested in your ability to earn. Without you, we have no interest in your enterprise. Under the terms of your contract, your assets will be written off as a loss. We'll confiscate any cash and liquid assets, those would be stocks, money market instruments, and s

on that the business holds, and write off the loan.”

“What about the agency’s name?”

He shrugged. “I’m sure we can come to an agreement.”

I was carrying a million dollars in personal insurance. I paid for it out of my own paycheck because I was paranoid that if something happened to me, the family would end up destitute. Short term, I was worth more dead than alive. With a million dollars, Bern could stay in school, nobody would be evicted, and if they were, there was enough money to keep the family afloat. Mom could buy out the name and hire an investigator.

“Yes or no?” Augustine asked.

On one end of the seesaw my family, on the other, possibly my life.

“Yes,” I said. “You’re a terrible person.”

“I’ll just have to live with myself.”

“Yes, you will. Write an addendum to the contract that in the event of my death, my family can buy out the agency’s name for a dollar, and I will go after Pierce.”

“A dollar?”

“If I die, my family gets the firm back. Take it or leave it.”

“Very well.” Montgomery’s fingers flew over the keyboard. A piece of paper slid out of the printer. I read it, signed on the line, and watched him write his name in an elegant cursive.

Montgomery tapped his tablet. “I’ve emailed Pierce’s background file to you. Once again: you must apprehend Adam Pierce before the police take him into custody or your loan is forfeit.”

I got up and walked, leaving the picture of the family on his desk. He should have to look at it. My hands shook. I wanted to turn around, march back, and punch him.

I kept walking until I was out of the building. Outside the wind fanned me, pulling at my clothes. I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and dialed Bern.

“Drop whatever you’re doing. I need everything on Adam Pierce.”

“We’re going after Pierce? Are you serious?”

“Look in our inbox.”

“Holy shit.”

“I need his lineage, his full background, his criminal record, who he went to school with—everything. Every scrap of information you can find. The more we know the better.”

“Do you want me to tell Aunt Pen?”

Oh, Mom would just love this development. “No. I’ll do it. Call Mateus for me.”

When I said that all of our part-time employees were children, I didn’t lie. But occasionally, when we needed muscle, we hired free agents on a one-job basis. I had a feeling none of them would touch any job involving Pierce with a ten-foot pole, but it was worth a try.

“How much should I offer?” Bern said into my ear.

“Ten grand.” It was about three times what we normally offered. It was also the entirety of our rainy day fund. We could take a loan if we had to.

“We can’t pay that much.”

“We can if we apprehend Pierce. Tell him payment on delivery.”

The phone clicked as Bern put me on hold. I walked to my car.

Where the hell would I even start?

Another click. “He laughed.”

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