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THIS
KINGDOM
WILL NOT
KILL ME

MAGGIE THE UNDYING

✧ I ✧

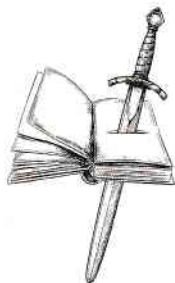
ILONA
ANDREWS



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PART I



BAG OF MONEY



MONTH OF PLANTER, DAY 6

Rain drenched the city, cold and relentless. It leached all color from the medieval-looking buildings, turning the world gray and soaking through the filthy rag in which I had swaddled myself. The sour stench rising from the grimy folds was truly epic. I couldn't feel my toes, and my fingers were going numb.

The three-story buildings towered over the alley like the walls of a stone canyon, boxing me in. Sometime between yesterday evening and this morning, my stomach had turned into a painful bottomless pit. I hadn't eaten in three days. I wasn't even shivering anymore. My body didn't have the energy.

I checked on my rock again. It lay in a puddle by my feet, a cream-colored chunk of building stone about the size of a large grapefruit. Any bigger, and it would be too hard to grip with one hand. I had found it this morning and carried it through the rain for two hours until I found the right bridge.

The rock was still there. I touched it with my foot to make sure. It felt solid and real.

I peeled myself from the wall and leaned a little to glance out of the alley. In front of me a narrow stone bridge spanned the width of a rain-swollen river. Another wall of medieval buildings loomed on the other side. Behind them, a tower soared, a spire rising at least six hundred feet, silhouetted against the storm-choked sky and topped by a huge flower of translucent, milky glass. The flower's petals were shut into a bud, guarding the observation deck in its center from the storm. Every few seconds, bright gold sparks dashed through the enchanted glass.

A dozen dark shapes circled the flower, surfing the wild air currents. My brain expected them to be birds, but birds had only one pair of wings, not two. The feeling of wrongness was overwhelming.

Yep, the Mage Tower and the strange bird-things were still there, too.

I huddled against the wall.

I couldn't touch the Mage Tower, but I knew it was real. For one, I had pictured it differently. In my head it was a flawless pale needle, elegant and almost dainty. If this had been a hallucination, what I saw would've matched the vision in my head, but the reality was nothing like that. This tower jutted up, defiant, its walls worn but strong, as if it had grown from bedrock. And it felt *old*. Like it

had stood there for thousands of years and would stand just like that for another millennium, timeless and indifferent, while the city around it crumbled into dust, rebuilt, and crumbled again.

No, it was real, like this endless rain, like the pain in my freezing bare feet, and like the gnawing ache in my stomach.

In the distance, a bell tolled four times. Four PM.

It wouldn't be too long now.

To say that this was not the way I envisioned spending my Sunday would be a criminal understatement. Today would've been my one day off. I should've spent it watching Netflix, nibbling on a pizza, and reading while lounging on my couch in my tiny apartment, in my soft sweatpants, warm and dry. Not wrapped in a dirty rag, shivering in a grimy alley, while the sky dumped gallons of cold rain on my head.

I wasn't a big reader through most of my childhood, but when I was sixteen, my first serious boyfriend broke up with me, and it was hell. My brain kept rehashing every moment of the relationship in excruciating detail. One afternoon, as I lay on my bed, wallowing in self-pity, my mom handed me a thick fantasy book, and when I turned my nose up at it, she told me, "Maggie, you need to live in someone else's head for a bit."

I'd thought I would read a few pages. When I came up for air, five hours later, my breakup was an afterthought. Some seriously messed-up stuff happened on the first page, and I had to find out how it turned out. Somehow by the end of those five hours, the book had wrung me dry. I could deal with life again.

I'd tried every genre under the sun since, but fantasy was my vice of choice. There was something about blades and magic that did it for me. Deadly sword-masters, thieves prowling through moonlit streets, dark magicians, warrior princesses, ruthless nobles, majestic dragons, hideous monsters, I loved it all. Put a hot dude in armor with a sword on the cover, and my eyes glazed over while my hand crept to the BUY button, budget be damned.

I had read enough fantasy books to fill a library, but that very first series was my special treasure. Set in the city of Kair Toren, capital of the kingdom of Rellas, the story revolved around the power struggles of eight noble families, and it was so full of fantasy tropes, it would be clichéd except that the superb writing moved it right past stereotypical into classic. The characters felt so real, they practically jumped off the page.

The series had two books, *The Thieves of the North* and *The Lords of the East*. The third one had never come out.

I had been rereading those two books for the last ten years. Whenever life got to be too harsh, I would grab them off my bookshelf, and they never failed to pull me out of whatever funk I had going on at the time. I could quote

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passages from memory. I had stalked the author's abandoned website religiously for any hint of a release date. I haunted the fan groups looking for rumors and stewing in collective frustration. Adrian Latour, the author of the series, was always an enigma. He didn't do social media or appearances, and his bio, with a blank square where the author photo should have been, consisted of a single sentence: Adrian Latour, man of dreams and chronicler of stories. After the second book came out, he seemed to vanish. He never wrote anything else, and nobody offered an explanation as to why he stopped working. The story just cut off. One of my favorite characters was left standing on a box with a noose around his neck for a decade.

Three nights ago, after a long day of delivering groceries, I went to sleep in my apartment south of Austin and woke up in Kair Toren.

A hint of movement on my left made me turn. Something small padded through the rain toward me. I brushed the water off my face.

A red furry creature padded out from the rain-soaked alley and stared at me with unblinking dark eyes. Its head was round, with curved marten ears that stood straight up, a button nose, and very long whiskers. It didn't walk, it slunk, its longish body sitting low on four short legs that ended in webbed hand-paws armed with sharp retractable claws. It was as if an otter and a Ragdoll cat had a baby and dyed it red.

A stelka. A female one. Males had tufts on their ears.

Stelkas infested Kair Toren and its five rivers, catching fish and rats, eating garbage, raiding cellars, stealing everything that wasn't nailed down, and generally being a nuisance. Like overly smart foxes, except that normal foxes at least hesitated before they scurried over to take a bite out of someone five times their size. Last night, exhausted and desperate, I'd fallen asleep under some busted crates, and this morning I woke up because one of these red assholes decided to chew on my leg.

The stelka opened her mouth and showed me sharp white teeth.

It couldn't be.

I crouched and tilted my head, trying to get a better look.

There it was, a white patch on the stelka's chest that looked like a lopsided half-moon. I had seen a dozen stelkas in my three days of stumbling around the city, and only one of them had a white patch like that. I must've been really delicious.

"You followed me." My voice creaked like I had crawled out of the grave.

The stelka eyed me.

"Nope. Not happening."

The little creature took a step forward.

I showed her my rock.

Another step.

I gripped the rock and hit the cobblestones with it.

The beast shied back and hissed.

A piercing screech tore through the air above us. I glanced up. One of the weird birds swooped at the tower in a suicidal dive and rammed the petals.

For a moment, the entire flower went dark, barely visible in the rain.

Oh crap.

The bud pulsed with pale light. Tongues of golden lightning erupted from the petals, snaking toward the birds. They tried to flee in a panic, but the lightning chased them, stabbing at their wings.

One of the bird-things cried out, plunged from the sky, and smashed onto the paver stones between me and the stelka with a wet thud. It was about the size of an eagle, with a long whip-like tail tipped with a fan of dark feathers. Its wings were wide, its long hind legs were sheathed in contour feathers, and all four of its appendages ended in paws armed with sharp talons.

A lorse. Those long dinosaur-looking jaws were a dead giveaway. So that's what they looked like. In the books, they came out during storms and were attracted to magic.

The bird-thing clicked its needle teeth and tried to rise.

The stelka lunged forward. Her mouth closed on the creature's neck and bit down. Blood drenched the feathers. The lorse went limp. The stelka growled at me, clamping the neck in her teeth, slung the dead lorse over her back—it was bigger than she was—and took off deeper into the alley, back the way she had come.

That's right. And don't come back.

I slumped against the wall. Kair Toren in a nutshell. One moment you are flying high and screaming at the world, the next someone bites your throat and drags you off into a dark alley. It was unhinged, but I was almost sorry to see the stelka go. In the past three days, that little beast was the only living creature that had acknowledged my existence.

I'd read this type of story before. It was a portal fantasy, a subgenre that had grown really popular in fantasy romance lately. It seemed in every other book some poor office worker woman about my age got hit by a bus or collapsed from overworking and ended up in a fictional world.

I knew exactly how things were supposed to go. I was meant to appear in this new world as a woman of prophecy with magic holy powers so I could assist the kingdom with their blight or curse problem. I would be met by a prince or some high-ranking and stunning noble, and upon heroically demonstrating my abilities, I would become the center of attention, while a gaggle of ridiculously handsome men followed me around, pledged their swords to me, and pleaded with me not to overexert myself.

Failing that, I could wake up in the body of the female lead, usually a

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daughter of a prominent noble house, after she flung herself into a lake in despair over being shunned by a villainous prince and died, conveniently vacating her body for my soul to take it over. I would pretend to suffer from amnesia, while an army of maids waited on me hand and foot, and plot my revenge, during which I would be fawned on by a dangerous and ice-cold male lead, who would turn into a devoted puppy in my vicinity.

Alternatively, I could come to in the body of the villainess, usually another daughter of a prominent noble house, after she flung herself into a lake, etc., etc., despair, death, maids, hand and foot, and then I would convince everyone that I was just misunderstood and win over the dangerous and ice-cold male lead, who would abandon the heroine for me.

If not the heroine or the villainess, I could be their best friend. Their younger sister. A lesser noble. A chamber maid. I would've happily taken the fucking chamber maid.

That's not what I got.

I woke up choking on rainwater in a muddy ditch. Naked. Without any magic powers.

When I'd finally coughed all the sludge out of my mouth, crawled out, and saw the Mage Tower rising above the city with its magical glass petals, I thought I had lost my mind.

The Rise of Kair Toren was not a pretty-princess-rides-a-unicorn kind of fantasy. I'd stumbled on a ragged blanket someone had forgotten in the rain, dug it out of the mud, and wrapped it around me, stench of urine and all. Because if I didn't, I would be assaulted, murdered, sold, or forced to suffer any of the other tragic things that happened to women running around alone and naked in this city. I needed to look like a beggar, and the less attention I drew to myself, the better.

In our world, there were homeless shelters, police stations, and emergency rooms. I could've walked into any one of those and said, "I have amnesia, help me." And I would have been helped.

Kair Toren had none of that. If I were to stumble into a Guard station as I was, wrapped in my nasty rag, they would throw me back out on the street and tell me to thank my lucky stars they hadn't done anything worse.

The city was huge, filled with tall stone buildings that had sturdy doors and barred windows. The pouring rain had chased everyone indoors, and the stores were shuttered. Theft wasn't an option. I couldn't even panhandle, and if I tried, I'd be beaten up. The beggars of Kair Toren were brutal and notoriously territorial. My first evening here, I'd had the bright idea to try one of the temples for charity and ran into a pack of them fighting in front of the entrance. I had never in my life seen people ripping into each other out in the open like that. The last time I'd watched someone fight was in high school and that was mostly

two guys rolling around on the ground. These people were literally beating each other to death with rocks and stomping on prone bodies, and nobody was doing anything about it. I got out of there as fast as I could.

I drank rainwater when I was thirsty and prayed I wouldn't get dysentery. I squatted in alleys when I had to pee. I'd torn two armholes in my blanket and tied it around myself so I could run away fast if I had to. I hid wherever I could to sleep and had only managed a few hours in the last three nights. I had to fight off ravenous magic otter-foxes. The first day I was in denial and expecting the nightmare to end, the second, I was desperate and scared, and now only a grim determination remained. I'd invested weeks of my life into those cursed books. I knew them cover to cover. I would survive. Kair Toren wouldn't kill me. I wouldn't give it the satisfaction.

Last night, I stumbled onto a large plaza with a blue obelisk in the center. In the books it was called Bluestone Square, and there was a signboard by the obelisk where the government posted announcements. When I found it, I learned two things: I could read Rellasian and yesterday was the fifth of Planter, the last month of spring, of the year 3044.

I was at the end of chapter one of the first book. Today after four PM a man called Lecke would cross the Estret Bridge. He was a scummy, sniveling prick, the kind of character that makes you wait an entire book for a rock to fall on his head and crush his skull.

When Lecke was eighteen years old, his parents died in a mill fire. He didn't set it, but it had served his purposes beautifully. He had wanted to get out of the countryside for a while, and now he could sell everything they owned and take off for greener pastures. Unfortunately for him, his two younger brothers, one ten and the other seven, didn't perish with his parents; so Lecke strangled them in their sleep, threw their bodies into the nearest ravine, and told the village that they had gone to live with his nonexistent aunt and uncle. That was only the beginning of his career, and it had gone from bad to worse. Now he made his money as a fence, buying and selling bloodstained jewelry and other valuables brought to his door late at night by people with vicious eyes.

Today, Lecke would be carrying a bag of money from a particularly good haul. I had to get that bag.

I studied my rock. Normally, a man in Lecke's profession would have a bodyguard, but he didn't trust anyone. Instead, he carried a knife and was very good with it. Trying to attack him, with my head swimming from hunger and only a rock as my weapon, was suicide. But I was out of options.

As if on cue, someone walked out from the mouth of the street at the other side of the river and stepped onto the bridge. The Estret was one of the city's narrower bridges, about a hundred feet long but only fifteen feet wide, guarded

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by a hip-high stone rail. Surprise was my best bet. I had to snatch the bag and run, because if he caught me, it would all be over.

I scooped up a handful of mud that had accumulated by the wall of the building next to me and smeared it on my face. If I did manage to get away, no need to be recognized later.

The figure kept walking, unhurried despite the rain.

I grabbed my rock, tugged the ragged blanket into place, and ventured out into the open. My bare toes had turned into icicles long ago. I didn't walk, I lurched like some zombie.

Get the bag. Get the bag. Get the bag . . .

The distance between us shrank, the curtain of rain thinning as we came closer to each other. I could see his cloak now, a deep hunter green. Yes, this was my man.

If worse came to worst, I could grab the bag and jump into the river. I swam in the ocean every summer vacation since I was little.

I glanced over the rail. The waters of the Koreg River churned below, dark brown from silt.

I would probably survive it. Probably.

I stumbled to the other side of the bridge, as if avoiding Lecke. He showed no sign of noticing me.

Twenty feet. Ten. Five.

The world snapped into terrifying clarity.

We passed each other on the opposite sides of the bridge like two ships in the night.

I spun around and charged at him, swinging my rock.

He must've sensed me coming because he turned, but not fast enough. My rock connected with his skull. Lecke stumbled. I leaped at him and thrust my hands under his cloak. My fingers clutched thick canvas, and something inside it made a metallic *clink*.

I yanked the bag away from him with all my strength, throwing the weight of my body into it. It came free.

I did it!

Lecke lunged at me. Something sharp and cold bit into my side, and I saw him up close, deep-set piggish eyes staring at me from a face twisted with rage.

He'd stabbed me.

The cold blade bit into me again and again, slicing through my insides. I tried to back away, but the stone rail of the bridge dug into my butt, and he was so fast.

Lecke grabbed the bag and jerked back. I clung to it.

"Let go!" he snarled.

I had a death grip on that damn bag. No force in the universe could make me let go.

The bloody knife slashed in front of me, drawing an icy line across my neck. Heat wet my skin. Bright, shocking red sprayed Lecke's face and cloak.

He'd cut my throat. He'd killed me. No more curling up in my apartment with a book. No more Netflix. I would never see my parents and my brother again. All my dreams and hopes, all the things I didn't get to do, it was all over. My small comfortable life ended right here.

He wouldn't take this bag even if keeping it was the final thing I did in my short life. I gripped the canvas sack and, with the last of my strength, hurled myself backward over the rail into the river. The gray stormy sky yawned at me, tilted, and then cold dark water fell on my face and swallowed me whole.

CHAPTER 2



I choked on muddy water. Before my brain could process the situation, my body took over. I flipped onto my stomach and retched.

I was still alive and drowning again.

How was I alive?

Every spasm hurt like hell. I felt the pain all the way in my toes.

The last of the water spilled out of me. I coughed, my throat raw, and opened my eyes, half expecting to be back in the same ditch somehow.

No, not a ditch. Above me, high up, was some sort of dark roof or ceiling. I was on my hands and knees in about six inches of water. My left hand was squishing slimy mud. My right was still clutching the money bag, its cord wrapped in a tangle around my wrist.

How . . . ?

I untied the cord and pulled the bag open with shaking fingers. Coins. Handfuls of them.

I hugged the bag to my naked chest and sobbed. For a few moments nothing existed except the bag and overwhelming relief.

Gradually it dawned on me that I was naked again and that what I could see of myself looked unwounded. Lecke had stabbed me. I was sure of it. I closed my eyes, and my memory served up the knife slicing into me in a flash of pain. Yes, he'd definitely stabbed me. And then cut my throat. I checked my neck. No blood. No wound. No scar that I could feel. Nothing on my stomach either.

Even if he hadn't stabbed me, the river should've killed me. I should've drowned.

Where the hell was I?

I looked around. The rain still sifted from the sky, but it was no longer a drenching shower. I had attacked Lecke about thirty minutes after four PM. Now dusk was creeping in. Dark water stretched in front of me and to the sides, flowing around a narrow strip of muddy ground choked with weeds and low bushes wrapped in a thorny vine. A stone column rose behind me, supporting the roof above my head. Far in the distance, the top of the Mage Tower fluoresced weakly against the encroaching darkness. When I'd waited by the bridge, it had jutted almost directly across from me, and now it was much farther away, which meant the river had carried me downstream.

I had washed up on Ogden Island, a small, marshy chunk of solid ground

at the junction of the Koreg and another small river. Ogden was the only island downstream of the Estret Bridge that would still let me view almost all of the Mage Tower. I knew this because one of the characters chose this spot for an ambush and had a whole page of inner monologue about the beauty of the Mage Tower and how this was the only island where so much of it could be seen. On other islands the trees or buildings blocked the view.

I was sitting under Ogden Bridge right by a busy neighborhood. I needed to get the hell out of here before someone noticed me or Lecke came looking for his blood money.

Getting up proved to be a heroic challenge. My stomach didn't have a gash, but my whole body hurt as if someone had pummeled me with a baseball bat. After three tries, I stood and leaned against the column, which was likely a bridge pier, took a short breather, and stumbled forward, keeping my left hand on the stones and my right cradling the money. Every step hurt, but I was losing light and fast.

I rounded the pier and squinted at the narrow stretch of shrub-covered ground. Something rested on the muddy shore, halfway in the water. The air reeked of an unmistakable, slightly sweet stench.

A dead body. I waded through the ankle-deep water toward it.

It was blue-black and bloated. I couldn't even tell if it was a woman or a man. It looked like it would fall apart at any moment.

I retched, but there was nothing in my stomach, so I just dry heaved until I peed myself. I would've cried, but I didn't have the energy for it.

The body wore a cloak and some sort of tunic and pants, ripped and stained. A rope with torn ends wrapped around the corpse's waist. There must've been a weight attached to it. This was a planned drowning, never meant to be discovered. The floodwaters had dislodged the corpse from the riverbed and carried it to the island.

I waited until my eyes stopped watering from the stink, walked over to the body, crouched, and unhooked its cloak. Getting it off the corpse proved a lot easier than expected. I pulled, and it came free.

I had to wash it. The river was cold, muddy, and dark. I gritted my teeth, dragged the cloak into the water, and sloshed it around.

A small shape slunk out of the twilight to the right of me. I turned my head. *You've got to be kidding me.*

The little stelka hugged the ground and showed me her teeth.

My voice came out ragged, like a growl. "I will end you. I mean it."

The stelka hesitated, unsure.

If I ever went back to my world, I would burn every copy of *The Thieves of the North* I could find. I would build a Viking funeral pyre out of them on a raft, push it into Lake Travis, and howl like a wolf while flames consumed it.

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The cloak stank, but not as bad as I expected, so I put it on and staggered around the shore of the small island. The fabric was wool but soaking wet and cold. I could really use some shoes . . . No. Stuffing my feet into boots filled with human sludge was beyond me. Barefoot it was.

The stelka watched me, wary.

The assassin who hid on this island, waiting for his victim to cross the bridge, mentioned that one of the piers had metal handholds for maintenance. I scanned the three piers. The middle pier offered a row of rusty metal brackets. My way out. I tied the bag of money around my neck and took one last look around.

Something was wrong with the river's current ahead. Something odd . . .

There it was, about fifty yards away, a section of the river that seemed unnaturally free of ripples. It was the same color as the rest of the water, a muddy brown, but it was moving at a different speed, slower, as if it were fighting the rushing current.

I had no idea what the hell it was. It wasn't in the books. I was absolutely sure it wasn't. I would've remembered that. Every instinct in me screamed that it was bad and I had to avoid it at all costs.

The translucent mass cut across the current to the left, heading straight for the island.

Fear shot through me like an electric shock. I spun around and sprinted to the pier with the handholds, stumbling over fallen branches and weeds. The shrubs caught my cloak. I ripped it free and kept going, jerking my feet out of the mud.

Behind me something let out a desperate shriek. I looked over my shoulder. The little stelka was flailing in a clump of thorny shrubs, stuck up to her chest in mud.

The dark thing sped toward us. An eerie feeling squirmed along my back, like a clammy, wet hand brushing my skin. The stelka screamed, a pitiful frantic cry.

Damn it.

I reversed, tore back through the shrubs, yanked the little beast free, and heaved her onto my shoulder. She sank her claws into the cloak and my skin, clinging to me for dear life.

I crashed through the bushes, heading for the pier. Mud squelched under my feet. I slid on the sludge, caught myself, slid again, and skidded into stone. My fingers caught the first metal handhold, and I scrambled up. Three breaths, and I had climbed onto the bridge and whipped around.

Below me, a translucent body slid out of the river. It was formless and stretchy, like a ten-foot-wide amoeba swirling with terrifying darkness. It licked the shore of the tiny island, slid over the corpse, and slipped back into the water.