

WHEN MONSTERS ARE REAL,
LOVE IS A MYTH.

HUNTERLAND

A NOVEL

DANA CLAIRE

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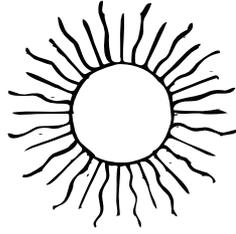
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For my husband,
your support and unconditional love
gives me wings.







1

OLIVIA

Yet another teacher dead.

High-pitched screams and the blare of fire alarms echoed through the school's hallways. The student body stood paralyzed, crammed arm to arm in the main lobby, gaping at our athletic advisor's corpse suspended from the ceiling, the hefty rope used for climbing in gym class snaked around his broken neck.

His cognac-colored shoes dangled several feet from my face. His open eyes, glassy and lifeless, stared at the wall. Bruises dotted his collarbone, and fragmented black-and-blue splotches spread up toward his chin.

Another hanging.

Jessica whimpered as she trembled in my arms. "Your dad, Liv. Call him."

I shook my head. I had no doubt he was already on his way, so I didn't even jump when my cell phone rang in my pocket. I swiped to answer.

"Livy, where are you? Where's Pepper?" my dad asked through the speaker. He tried to hide it, but I could hear the concern in his voice.

“School,” I answered, pulling myself together with a calming breath and rubbing my amethyst stone resting inside my coat pocket.

Principal McKenna and several other teachers had come onto the scene, ushering all the students out the front and side doors. But I just stood there, with Jessica’s arm looped through mine, her other hand holding my forearm in a death grip.

“Another teacher’s dead, Dad. What the hell is going on? There’s no way these are all suicides.”

“Language, Livy. Language,” he said, robotically, as if *now* was the perfect time to impart life lessons.

Three deaths.

The first death, Mr. Camber, our health teacher, had been deemed a suicide. The second, Mrs. Dreyfuss, our school nurse, was still under investigation. And now, here we were, back from winter break, ready for a fresh start, and . . . *this*. Mr. Kline. Why would anyone target the teachers of Falkville Falls High School?

“Ms. Davis, Ms. Packey, please exit the building,” Principal McKenna said. The creases around her lips and eyes belied her calm, in-charge tone.

“I have to find Pepper.” My voice finally caught up with my brain.

My sister was challenging, but she and Dad were all I had. I was four when Mom died giving birth to Pepper. Dad rarely talked about Mom, and my memories of her were fuzzy.

“All the students have been asked to exit the school. You can find her outside,” Principal McKenna said through clenched jaws.

I’d almost forgotten I was on the phone until I heard my father’s command. “Go outside. I’m one block away. I’ll find Pepper.” Directions given, he hung up.

Jessica hauled me by the elbow. “Come on, Liv. Let’s look for her outside.”

I slipped out of Jessica’s grasp, zipped up my jacket, and shoved through the herd of students pushing out the front doors we’d entered

minutes earlier. Falkville Falls High School hosted less than five hundred students, but with everyone crammed on the lawn, it resembled a rock-concert venue.

I played with my soothing stone, flipping it between my fingers, as I searched the crowd for Pepper. Amethyst was supposed to relieve stress and bring balance to my mind and body, but when it came to my little sister, no crystal or stone would help. I'd saged her room so many times, the strong earthy scent had been absorbed into the furniture.

I heaved a sigh of relief when I found her, glued to Dustin's towering frame. Once I'd woven my way through the crowd, I let my backpack drop to the snow-dusted ground at their feet.

"I got her," Dustin said, squeezing Pepper into his side.

I released the breath I had been holding and stopped rubbing my stone. What would I do without Dustin and Jessica?

He retrieved my bag while maintaining his grip on a wriggling Pepper. She grunted like a bull, but he didn't even break a sweat.

"You'll love this," Dustin continued. "Your adorable kid sister was smoking behind the dumpsters, where she, along with her felonious friends, Billy Lyons and crew, decided to deface the brick wall."

Pepper let out an irritable breath like a toddler.

Dustin raised his bushy brows while securing the bag strap back over my shoulder. "But don't worry. She's *extremely* intelligent; it's not like she left her tag so the cops know exactly who did it or anything."

Pepper used the outline of our mother's wedding band—a gorgeous series of white gold circlets, one for every letter of her name—as her signature. Other than her nose ring, it was the only jewelry Pepper wore. A regular rebel without a cause. Literally—without any cause whatsoever.

"Why, Pepper?" I demanded, not that I expected an answer. The girl was the queen of eye rolls and tight lips.

Ignoring me, she turned on Dustin. "Get off me, you oversized pain in the ass! Go find your own girl to grope." With a final yank, she tore

her arm free and glared in my direction. “Seriously, your friends are as annoying as you are. Why can’t you all leave me the hell alone?”

“We’ll leave you alone when you start making better decisions.” I folded my arms to keep my hands from shaking her. A lump formed in my throat, but I swallowed it down. “You continue getting in trouble like this, you’re gonna end up in juvenile detention. Dad and I can’t act as a shield for you forever.”

“Sounds like a picnic compared to getting policed by you.” She swung her backpack over her shoulder, hitting Dustin in the side. He didn’t flinch.

“Does it?” I said, raising a brow. “We love you. We don’t want you to end up in jail.”

“Oh, please,” she said, waving me off. “You wouldn’t even miss me. Besides, making poor decisions is my strong suit. It’s an art form I’ve perfected over the years.”

“Not really something I’d be proud of,” Jessica mumbled.

Pepper flipped her vibrant blue hair over her shoulder. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d seen her with her natural chestnut color—hair once just like our mother’s. “I’m leaving this dumpster dive of a town the second I turn eighteen.”

“Well, it’s unfortunate you feel that way. I hope you end up changing—”

Sirens made me pivot midsentence. Fire trucks, police cars, and an ambulance barreled into the lot. Kids scattered like mice to get out of the way.

Most of the seniors hurried to their cars while buses arrived to take the underclassmen home. Dad stepped out of one of the police vehicles that pulled onto the grass. He jogged toward us without shutting off the engine.

Concern flooded his eyes as he raked them over Pepper and me.

“We’re fine,” I answered his unspoken question. “Mr. Kline, not so much.”

I motioned to the school's main doors, now guarded by two doughy security guards. They probably couldn't defend us from clawing kittens, but at least they'd deter unsolicited social-media pictures.

"What did you guys witness in there?" Dad asked. Anyone else would probably just see the town sheriff collecting information for his case, but I knew him better. He wanted to know how screwed up we were from what we'd seen.

Dustin took a step forward like he was reporting for duty. "At approximately seven oh five am, Mr. Kline was found hanging from the lobby ceiling in front of the trophy case. Jacob and I were two of the first to see him. The halls were empty at the time."

My father nodded with appreciation at such a thorough report. Dustin, my dad's protégé. He'd always wanted to be a police officer, just like my father. Unsurprisingly, he followed my dad around like a puppy, always picking his brain about the law.

"We came in early today to meet with Principal McKenna about Pride Week. Since it's during playoff season, the basketball team wanted to wear rainbow patches on their jerseys to show their support." He offered Jessica a small smile. "When I saw the body, I pulled the fire alarm. I thought it would clear the halls out." He shrugged. "I guess people don't really care if they burn to death. Pretty much everybody just stared until the teachers started yelling."

Jessica and I had been among them. We'd heard about the other two school hangings, but to see one in person? Nothing could have prepared us for that. The shock had tugged me under a fog. I'd hardly registered the fire alarm or its meaning.

Dad put his hand on Dustin's shoulder. "Nicely done." He turned to the rest of us. "You should go home. This is now a crime scene. School will be canceled for the next couple of days."

Jessica pulled her keys from her purse. "I can drive Pepper and Liv home and stay over until you get back," she offered. Jessica's parents worked late hours, and her girlfriend, Tiffany, went to a private school

several hours away. Chauffeuring us around benefited her too. She hated being alone.

“I think that’s a good idea. Dustin, why don’t you join them?”

Dustin saluted.

“I’ll call your parents and let them know the four of you will be at the house doing your schoolwork until I get home. We can order pizza for lunch later.” Dad snapped his fingers at Pepper, who was staring sullenly at the ground. “You. Shower. I can smell the smoke on you from here.”

She grimaced but acquiesced. Fighting him wasn’t necessary. We all knew she’d go home, lock herself in her room, blast her tribal music, and not come out until dinner. Eating was the only group activity you could count on her to show up for.

Dustin grabbed my bag from me. “I’ve got it,” he said as he flung the backpack over his shoulder.

We trekked toward Jessica’s car. Not two steps in, a shiny black 1972 Ford Bronco, dragging a trailer hauling a black motorcycle, pulled into the parking lot. I’d know that car anywhere. It was my dream car, the one I had been saving for since my sophomore year. I was practically drooling as it pulled in, ten spaces down from Jessica’s silver Volkswagen.

While I gawked at the exterior, three people emerged from the car.

I scrunched up my nose the way I did whenever I sensed Pepper lying or trying to distract me. Something about them was just . . . off.

The driver, an older man around my dad’s age, wore a brown trench coat, black suit, and black scarf, possibly government. At least he looked like the government officials on television. He walked around the car and tossed something at the gorgeous teenage girl behind him. About Pepper’s age, she had wavy blond hair past her shoulders and wore jeans, a cream turtleneck, and a fitted navy peacoat. Barbie-doll pretty. She caught the foreign object and pointed it at the school. It looked like a plain black box, the size of one of my favorite novels, but as the girl held

it up, orange and red lights flickered on its side. She tossed it back to the older gentleman, who placed it in his pocket.

Oh my God, was that a detonation device for a bomb? My pulse raced. I opened my mouth to call for help, but only a wheeze came out.

But when nothing went boom, my fright transformed into bafflement as the third person crossed in front of the other two.

He appeared to be around my age, tall and wide like Dustin, but slightly leaner. My heart gave a mighty thump in my chest as my eyes traveled from his black boots, up faded blue jeans that molded to his muscular thighs, to his black leather jacket and stretched-out white T-shirt pressing against his defined chest. He looked nothing like his sharply dressed, professional-looking companions. He had darker hair than the girl, similar to the older man, with a touch of douchebag swagger, but he had plenty going for him.

I bit my lower lip, studying his face. I pressed my fingers to my mouth as if I remembered his on mine.

But that was impossible.

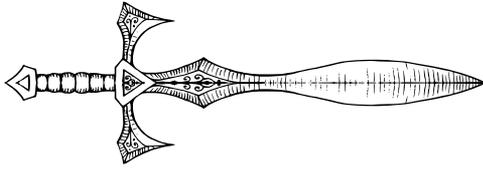
As if he could feel my stare, he turned and looked directly at me.

Warmth seeped up my neck and overtook my cheeks. His narrowed eyes trailed over me, heating me like a brand. I jerked as if he'd lunged at me, and to my surprise, he started to laugh. He leaned against the car and crossed his arms over his chest. His critical gaze gave way to a stupid grin. Though the other two spoke to him, he never took his eyes off me. I didn't realize I'd stopped following my friends and stood alone in the parking lot, transfixed on this stranger, until the horn of Jessica's car sounded, startling me.

She lowered her window. "What are you doing? Get in."

Jessica, Dustin, and Pepper waited with the door to the backseat flung open. When I looked back, the three newcomers were gone, and in their wake, an uneasiness settled in my core.

Something had gone incredibly wrong at Falkville Falls High, and my gut told me they were here because of it.



2

LIAM

Another school, another hanging.

We'd been following this case for almost a year now. Five schools in Wisconsin, each with at least one dead nurse. The electromagnetic force (EMF) reader confirmed supernatural activity, but our little black box couldn't tell us the details.

Falkville Falls High School differed, though. Out of three victims, only the second was a nurse. The Hunterland message board picked up the chatter last week sending our investigation here. Damned if we could figure out why this school was an anomaly.

We stepped into the lobby, where the police were lowering the body from the ceiling. Several school employees stood off in the corner, sobbing and holding one another.

Grieving the deceased or fearing for their own lives, I had no idea and didn't really care. Mr. Kline, thirty-nine years old, lived alone and had worked as the athletic advisor at this school for the last sixteen years. No priors or known enemies. Lived a simple life, just like the other victims. The only significant connection with the other casualties was occupation.

The sheriff barked detailed orders at his subordinates, and we watched as they scrambled to obey. He stood about six feet tall, was in shape, and worst of all: he appeared confident. Too confident. We dealt with a lot of overweight idiot cops who lost their breath during press conferences. Most of those guys were the paper-pushing, donut-eating types who'd never worked a serious case in their careers. Dad and I loved them. They stayed out of our way and let us do our job.

But this guy? This guy screamed pain in the ass.

As if on cue, the sheriff homed in on us.

Jac, my younger sister, mouthed the words *You folks can't be in here*, just as the sheriff shouted them in our direction. He had a deep, intimidating voice.

But we weren't easily intimidated.

I chuckled under my breath and crossed my arms, making my heavy leather jacket creak. We'd heard that sentence a thousand times, and we'd ignored it a thousand and one times.

Dad opened his credentials and held them up for the sheriff. "Agent Jack Hunter," he announced, using the surname our ancestors took on generations ago. As expected, the sheriff's eyes widened at the sight of Dad's badge. "And I can be anywhere I damn well please, Sheriff."

It was a statement my dad made so often even *I* almost believed him.

"FBI?" The sheriff raised an eyebrow. He crossed his arms, mirroring my stance. "And why would the FBI be interested in a small town like Falkville Falls?"

Other officers gathered around him.

"They send us big boys to handle things the locals can't." Dad flipped his wallet closed and shoved it into his blazer's inside pocket. "Sheriff...?"

"It's Sheriff Matthew Davis." His pursed lips said he was anything but pleased by our presence. Our arrival into new towns had brought on a variety of reactions over the years. Some were ecstatic to get federal

assistance, but small towns like this one—the ones that likely needed us the most—normally weren't. I'd bet everyone in this place knew each other, and their basketball games were like backyard barbecues. There was probably a Billy Bob's convenience store in the center of town.

Sheriff Davis glanced at Jac and me. "And who are they?"

"My kids," Dad answered, offering no further explanation. He slipped his notebook and pen from his brown overcoat and started his usual line of questioning. "What connection do the three teachers have to one another? Were they friends? Lovers? Enemies? Anything odd about their deaths?"

Sheriff Davis grimaced. "Other than the obvious, no." He glared at my father before his eyes found mine; they then changed to worry as he looked over at Jac. "I'm not answering any official questions with your children around. They are too young for this conversation."

Dad kept his cool, but I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing.

I was the brawn, Jac was the brains, but even she was no saint. At fourteen, she had already gotten her hands dirty a time or two: beheaded a bunch of vamps, slaughtered several shifters, burned more ghost bones than I had, and even slew a few rare banshees and ghouls. She'd been waiting for her chance at a zombie.

My dance card, however? Completely full. I'd eliminated every kind of creature known to man and this guy thought I was too young for this conversation. *Hilarious*.

"And that's funny to you?" the sheriff said.

"Very," I answered, pretending to wipe a tear from my eye.

Dad glared at me. "You don't need to worry about my kids," he told Sheriff Davis with his gaze still hard on me.

I shrugged. We'd be gone in a couple of months, anyway. What did I care what this homegrown official thought? I had a job to do: find the monster who was killing teachers.

I'd be nineteen in six months, and Dad and I agreed after that I could no longer pull off the student routine. Internally, I couldn't wait

for that day to come. Acting like a high schooler was starting to wear on my nerves. I knew I could play a very convincing agent after all these years of watching Dad do it.

“If they were my kids, I’d want to keep them away from this tragedy.” The sheriff glowered—a papa-bear sort, it seemed.

Dad took three steps forward. The sheriff stiffened. I had to hand it to him; most would’ve crumbled. Two of his officers moved to flank him, but Sheriff Davis held up his hand for them to stand down. At six feet four and as wide as a Mack truck, Dad usually won stand-offs. This tiny department’s balls would’ve been more impressive if it wasn’t such an inconvenience. We didn’t have a lot of time before the next teacher fell victim, and we needed to act fast. The gap between murders had decreased, and time was of the essence.

“It’d be in your best interest to work with me. We’re here to help.” Dad slipped out a phony business card made by an online print store and handed it over to the sheriff.

When he took it, his sleeve rose, and I noticed a fraying string bracelet on Sheriff Davis’s wrist. It looked like he’d been wearing it for decades. Probably an arts-and-crafts gift from his kid.

The sheriff flipped my dad’s fake business card over a couple times as if even he doubted its authenticity and then slipped it into his chest pocket.

“We will be staying at the Rose Motel, down the street. If you can think of anything, let me know,” Dad said. He placed his arm around Jac. “Let’s go. I’ve got to feed you weeds. Let’s see what culinary delights this town has to offer before we bunk down in that little room.”

Before we made it halfway to the exit, the Sheriff called to us. “You’re *all* staying at a motel, for the whole investigation?” I looked back to see his eyes crinkled in concern, bouncing between Jac and me.

Dad’s pace slowed, but he kept walking. He’d played his cards perfectly, never intending to take us to any local diner. Meals typically included ramen noodles, canned soup, and fast-food runs. However, if we

were lucky enough to get a room with a kitchen, Jac cooked. Our own vegetarian version of Betty Crocker. But most of these dumps barely had fully intact mattresses and working plumbing, let alone enough space to prepare food.

Nah, Dad wasn't worried about our food intake. This was a ploy for sympathy. Dad could find a weakness in the toughest audience, and Sheriff Davis just gave his away.

I could hear the hesitation in the officer's voice as he said, "Do you and your family want to join mine for pizza? I'm a great chef. I dial the number to the local Italian restaurant like no other."

At first, Dad ignored him. But then the sheriff added, "We can talk about the incidents in *my town* while the kids eat."

His town. Of course. We were on his turf now. Small-town sheriffs were so territorial.

"My daughters are around your children's ages. I'm sure they would get along." The strain in his voice told me he was anything but confident about that.

I watched my father's lips peel back into a grin. He always liked using us as bait.

We already knew Sheriff Davis had two daughters. The eldest, Olivia Davis, who they called Liv or Livy, just turned eighteen last week, and she was squeaky clean. Not an outcast, but not winning any popularity contests either. She probably looked both ways before crossing the street. His youngest, Patricia "Pepper" Davis, age fourteen, wreaked havoc, destined for juvey before her senior year. Mom, also Patricia, died during childbirth. High-school sweethearts, Patricia and Matt went to school here at Falkville Falls High and were married after graduation.

There wasn't a town we stepped into without doing our homework.

Dad dropped his smirk before turning around. "We'd love that. Wouldn't we?" He squeezed Jac into his side.

Sheriff Davis pulled out his phone and dialed. I couldn't hear most of the conversation but by what I could make out, whichever daughter

he had on the other end wasn't over the moon about strangers coming over for lunch.

"I have a couple things to follow up with here. Why don't you meet me at our house?" He scribbled his address on the back of his own official business card and handed it to Dad. Not that we needed it.

We piled into the Bronco, and Dad started the engine. "Watch yourself, Liam," he warned as he pulled out of the school parking lot and onto the main road. The Bronco growled as if in agreement. Figured, since it was technically Mom's car and she had always sided with Dad when on a hunt.

I kicked up my heels on the dash. "That guy's going to be a problem."

Dad focused on the road as we drove up and down several hills, following winding roads filled with potholes. We passed signs for developments like "Basking Ridge" and "Clinton Community," before we located "Falkville Falls Family Homes."

Jac leaned over the center console. "Dad, I agree with Liam. I think Sheriff Davis is going to be an issue. He's stubborn and old school. I noticed none of his deputies had updated gear or tech in their cars. They are archaic and stuck in their ways."

Dad, an inventor by trade, was unimpressed with official tactical gear, so he couldn't care less that Sheriff "pain in the ass" Davis didn't have modernized equipment. His interests lied in his DIY inventions currently crammed in the trunk. In his defense, some of his gadgets were pretty freaking cool. Jac used to say we had our own "Q" from the old James Bond movies. I argued he acted more like MacGyver, using whatever trash he had in arm's reach to invent a solution.

"We've dealt with worse. Why is this guy bothering you both so much?" Dad asked, making a right onto Sheriff Davis's street.

"His daughters attend that school, which makes him emotionally invested. He won't let this go," I said. "He's either going to be dead weight or get in our way, or worse, get himself killed."

The worst type of complication in our line of work happened when people got involved when they really should just stay the hell out of the way. Didn't matter if it was other hunters, nosy law enforcement, or stubborn officials. We were the best, but to be the best, we needed to be left alone to do the job. Sometimes that meant coloring outside the lines of the law, and a good cop was the last person keen on breaking it.

"You handle the daughters; I'll handle the sheriff. Got it?" Dad pulled into their driveway as Jac and I agreed.

The house reminded me of any suburban community stuck in the late eighties, early nineties. It had a brick chimney on the side, a white wraparound front porch complete with a porch swing, and a red front door with a small etched-glass window.

From the car, I spotted Olivia on the second floor, pulling back the curtain. She gawked when she saw me. She'd clearly had no idea her houseguests included the guy who'd laughed at her in the school parking lot. This was going to be fun, maybe too fun.

"Oh, I'll take care of Olivia. I'll take such good care of her, she'll cry the day we leave." I swiveled around to face my sister. "You think you can handle the juvenile delinquent, or should I have my go at both of them?"

Dad smacked me across the chest. "Do not be 'Liam the Romance King' around these two! Get information and get out. No relationships whatsoever."

I rubbed my bruised chest.

Jac laughed. "Yea right, like Liam can keep it in his pants! They'll be making out by sunset. That girl will be doodling his name in her notebook before week's end." Jac winked. "Isn't that right, Romeo?"

Dad shifted in his seat. "Knock it off, the both of you. Seven people are dead, and we're eleven months in without any real leads. It's no laughing matter."

I groaned. He was right. The duty of monster extermination was an enormous honor and no joke.

HUNTERLAND

“Sorry, Dad.”

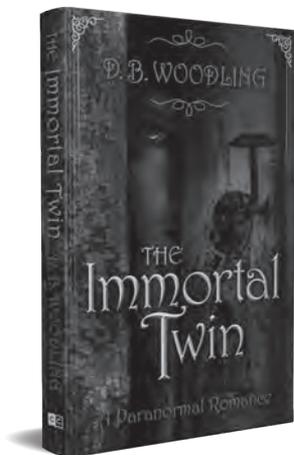
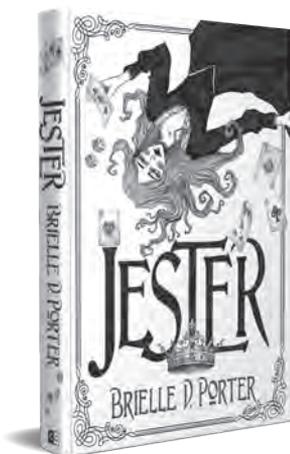
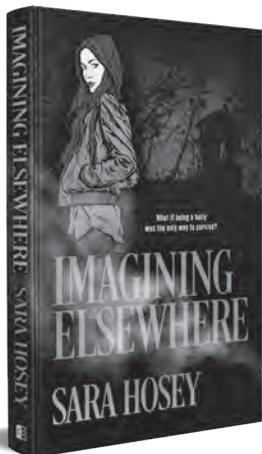
When I looked back up at the second-floor window, the hairs on my arms stood at attention.

A familiar, faint flicker of light danced behind Olivia’s outline.

I grabbed the shotgun resting at my feet and darted out of the car.

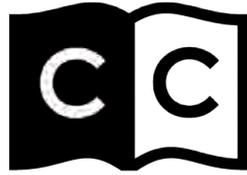


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GRAB YOUR STAKES AND YOUR ROCK SALT. MONSTER HUNTING CLASS IS IN SESSION.

Liam Hunter has warded off hungry vampires, slayed monstrous beasts, and put agonized spirits to rest since he could hold a stake. When trouble comes through the Hunterland message board, alerting them that nurses are dying at high schools across Wisconsin in a string of fishy “suicides,” the Hunter family hits the road to save the day.

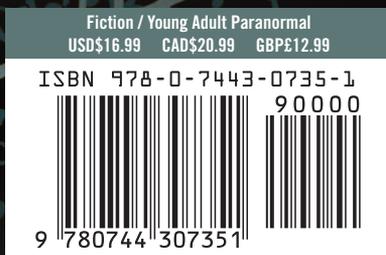
The trail leads to Falkville Falls, where Liam clashes with Olivia Davis, whose maddening family seems inexplicably embroiled in this haunting mess. Olivia has always mothered her little sister, Pepper. But when the Hunter family opens her eyes to the hidden underworld of real monsters prowling the dark, she realizes she can’t protect Pepper from this newest threat by herself. Can the two families work together to uncover who or what is responsible before the next murder, or will this vicious death cycle have no end?

“Hunterland delights in every way. Both the intrigue and the romance are deliciously dangerous.”

—Eva Pohler, *USA Today* bestselling author of the Underworld Saga



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