HUNTED by Cheryl Rainfield, mini book 1:6 scale.

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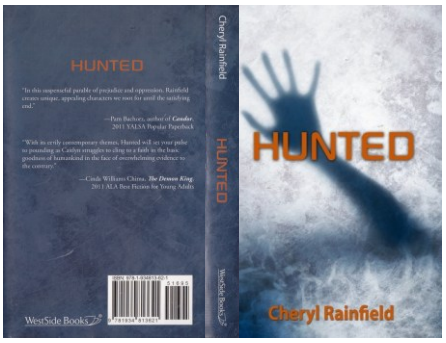

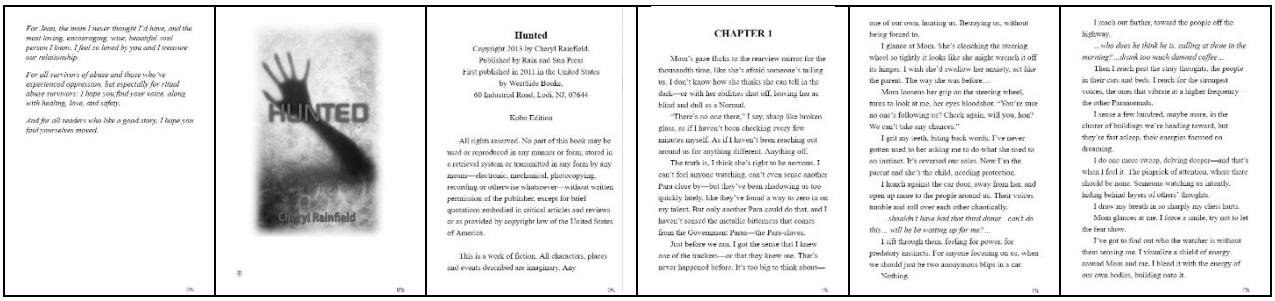

For Jean, the mom I never thought I'd have, and the most loving, encouraging, wise, beautiful soul person I know. I feel so loved by you and I treasure our relationship.

For all survivors of abuse and those who've experienced oppression, but especially for ritual abuse survivors. I hope you find your voice, along with healing, love, and safety.

And for all readers who like a good story. I hope you find yourselves moved.

Hunted
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This is a work of fiction. All characters, places and events described are imaginary. Any

CHAPTER 1

Mom's gaze flicks to the rearview mirror for the thousandth time, like she's afraid someone's tailing us. I don't know how she thinks she can tell in the dark—or with her sidelites shut off, leaving her as blind and dull as a Normal.

"There's no one there," I say, sharp like broken glass, as if I haven't been checking every few minutes myself. As if I haven't been reaching out around us for anything different. Anything off.

The truth is, I think she's right to be nervous. I can't feel anyone watching, can't even sense another Para close by—but they've been shadowing us too quickly lately, like they've found a way to zero in on my talent. But only another Para could do that, and I haven't sensed the metallic bitterness that comes from the Government Paras—the Para-slaves.

Just before we ran, I got the sense that I knew one of the trackers—or that they knew me. That's never happened before. It's too big to think about—

one of our own, hunting us. Betraying us, without being forced to.

I glance at Mom. She's clenching the steering wheel so tightly it looks like she might wrench it off its hinges. I wish she'd swallow her anxiety, act like the parent. The way she was before…

Mom loosens her grip on the steering wheel, turns to look at me, her eyes bloodshot. "You're sure no one's following us? Check again, will you, Jon? We can't take any chances."

I grit my teeth, biting back words. I've never gotten used to her asking me to do what she used to do instinct. It's reversed our roles. Now I'm the parent and she's the child, needing protection.

I bunch against the car door, sway from her, and open up more to the people around us. Their voices tumble and roll over each other chaotically.

…shouldn't have had that third dinner…can't do this… will be be waiting up for me?…

I sift through them, feeling for power, for predatory instincts. For anyone focusing on us, when we should just be two anonymous blips in a car.

Nothing.

I reach out farther, toward the people off the highway.

…who does he think he is, calling at three in the morning?…drink too much damned coffee…

Then I reach past the noisy thoughts, the people in their cars and beds. I reach for the strangest voices, the ones that vibrate at a higher frequency—the other Paranormals.

I sense a few hundred, maybe more, in the cluster of buildings we're heading toward, but they're fast asleep, their energies focused on dreaming.

I do one more sweep, delving deeper—and that's when I feel it. The pinprick of attention, where there should be none. Someone watching us intently, lashing behind layers of aliases' facights.

I draw my breath in so sharply my chest hurts.

Mom glances at me. I force a smile, try not to let the fear show.

I've got to find out who the watcher is without them sensing me. I visualize a shield of energy around Mom and me. I bleed it with the energy of our own bodies, building outs it

Then I reach out gently for that hidden mind. The layers open up to me slowly—cautious, a proprietary protectiveness, and intense concentration.

I laugh as I recognize the familiar mind pattern. My old Para-friend and contact, John. I've never met him in person, but he's helped us get to safety so many times over the years.

"What are you doing, watching us?" I ask, teasingly. *"I told you, we'll be okay."*

I feel him startle—surprised, even annoyed, that I caught him keeping tabs on us. *"If you think I was going to let you face the wolves alone, you're wrong."* John sends. *"I'll always watch out for you. Besides, you've had too many near misses lately. I want to make sure you're safe this time."*

"Too many near misses" is putting it lightly. Normals used to get suspicious of us—of me—once every six months or so. But lately, their target rate has increased—at least with me.

I rub my gritty eyes. *"You sense anyone with a lock on us?"* I ask John.

"No one. But something doesn't feel right. Have you sensed anyone?"

"No." But then I didn't last time, either—until it was almost too late.

"Keep your talent damped down just in case."

"You mean try to pass as a Normal." I send, disgusted. I can't stop my gaze from sliding to Mom. She's worse than a Normal. She's deadened everything inside her so nothing gets out, nothing gets in. It's like her brain is a lump of cement, unreachable—instead of energy and thought.

"It's better to have a little discomfort and be safe." John sends.

"I know, I know." I jerk away from him grumpily, closing our connection. "Nobody's watching us, except John," I tell Mom. "Most of the Paras are asleep."

"Caitlyn Isobel Waters, you know I don't like you saying 'Para'; it's derogatory," Mom says, her voice as hard and brittle as an icicle.

"It's Caitlyn Ellis this time, remember?" I say.

"I remember." Her mouth tightens, then she glances at me, her face softening. "Thank you for

making sure we're safe. I wish I could check myself."

I scowl and slouch down in my seat. *You could if you wanted to. If you tried.*

Mom takes a gulp of coffee. "You want to get some sleep?"

Like I could, knowing they're after us. And she'll need me. "That's all right. It's not that far now."

God. We're always so polite to each other. Like strangers.

I hate that I can't hear what she's thinking. I stare out into the murky night, my tinted glasses making it as dark as ink. Even at three in the morning, there are small yellow squares of light, testaments to the people still awake—dealing with crying babies, nightmares, heartache.

People's thoughts are coming at me faster now, little blips as we pass other cars, the buildings in the distance. We drive beneath a big anti-Para sign flashing its message:

BE A GOOD CITIZEN! REPORT PARA BEHAVIOR

I've seen that one so many times my eyes almost glaze over. The next sign is just as common:

DON'T LET THE PARAS TAKE OVER!
REPORT SUSPICIOUS BEHAVIOR.

But the sign after that makes me sit up straight:

PARAS ARE UNNATURAL!
THEY DO WHAT NO HUMAN SHOULD

Shivers race down my spine. I've never seen that one before. I haven't seen so many anti-Para signs so close together in a while. I can almost feel the hate closing in around us. Why did John think we'd be safe here? But I know why—it's easier to hide in a city.

My eyes ache and my body's heavy with exhaustion. I try to focus on the rhythmic drum of our tires on the road, the whisper of classical music from the speakers, the click-click of the turn signal as Mom changes lanes, but the Normals' mind-voices keep growing until they're a faceless roar.

We pass a PuraTrooper outpost, the building lit up in the dark, the barbed wire along the top of the fence gleaming like bloody teeth. I avert my gaze fast, as if they'll feel me looking. If they have a

Government Para on staff, they might. Paras are forced to do the government's bidding against their will.

To protect us. I build the shield up around Mom and me again, gritting my teeth with the effort. I'm so tired that every little thing drains me.

Mom pats my knee. "We'll be okay, Cait. You'll see."

"Sure." She says the same thing every time—but we're still running.

Mom sighs. "It won't always be like this, honey. Someday, we won't have to run. Someday, we'll have rights, just like every other citizen. Every Normal."

I roll my eyes, quietly snarling. *That's right, Mom. Keep hoping.*

Mom sighs again, her sour-coffee breath filling the car. Her hair is greasy, her face lined, deep shadows beneath her eyes. She badly needs a shower; we both do. But there wasn't time. We haven't stopped driving except for gas and to pee.

We travel light—what we can each carry in one duffel bag and one backpack. It makes for a fast

getaway, but I feel like a visitor in my own life.

Now it's my turn to sigh. I've lost so many people I care about—Dad, Daniel…

I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't want to get pulled into the undertow.

"Caitlin!" John sends.

Heavy, murderous thoughts seep into the car, filling my head, making it hard to think. I snap my eyes open, glance in the rearview mirror. A PuraTrooper patrol car is coming up behind us. They've got a Government Para with them. I can almost taste the bitter metal of the tracker embedded in his tongue. How could I not have noticed? I curse myself. I'm too drained to deal with this. But I have to. I reach for Mom's thigh, touch it gently, and build up the shield around us. "Parea," I say softly. "Just keep driving."

Mom nods grimly, the knuckles of her hands bone white, her eyes as wide and as scared as I feel.

"Caitlyn! Do you feel them?" John sends.

"I don't just feel them, I see them," I send.

"Shit. Can you lose them?"