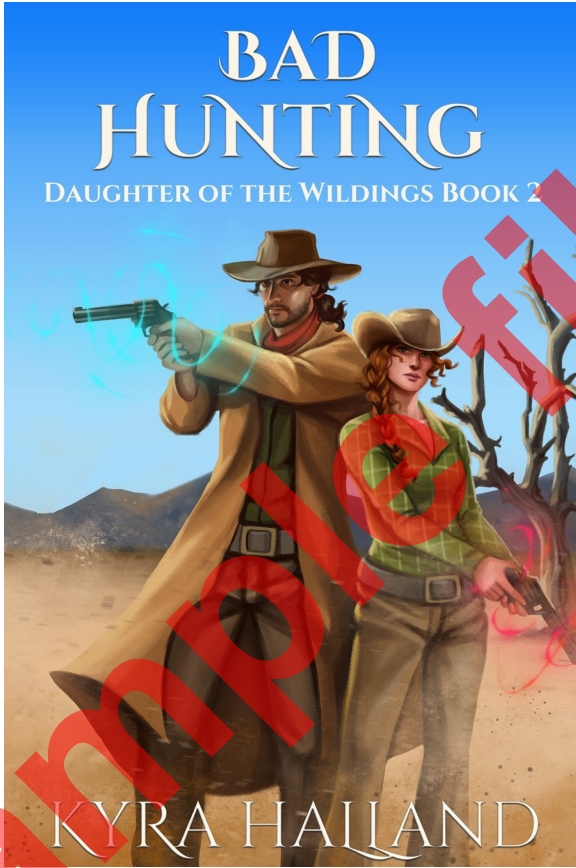


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Daughter of the Wildings Book 2

by Kyra Halland

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Silas and Lainie have defeated the dangerous rogue mage who brought Lainie's hometown to the brink of open warfare. But the town of Bitterbush Springs isn't big enough for two wizards, or even one, so they've hit the trail. Then Silas gets word that another mage hunter down in the dry and desolate Bads is onto something big and needs backup. He and Lainie head into the badlands to find one mage hunter dead and another one missing... And Silas could be next.

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Chapter 1

THE TUG ON Silas's mage senses came at an inconvenient moment. Silas ignored it; whatever message it heralded couldn't be nearly as interesting as what he was doing right now.

Refusing to be dismissed, the magical signal came again, as jarring as a bell ringing right next to his ear. "Dammit," he growled, breaking the kiss he and Lainie were locked in.

"What's wrong?" Lainie asked.

He pushed himself up on his elbows and looked down at her face, soft and luminous in the starlight. Her wide eyes were filled with concern. "Nothin', darlin'," he said. "Sorry about that." He dropped back down for another kiss.

The alert came a third time, even more insistent, breaking his concentration for good. "Sheep-humping sons of bitches," he grumbled, throwing in a few Island curses for good measure. He rolled over and felt around on the ground next to the blankets for his hat. "Can't they wait till morning?" If they had to interrupt a man in the middle of a pleasant time with his wife, it had damned well better be important. He jammed his hat onto his head, then reached for his knapsack.

Behind him, Lainie laughed softly. He glanced back at her. She was now lying on her side with her head propped up on one hand. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"You're the only man I know who wears a hat when he's naked."

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The corner of his mouth quirked up. “It helps me concentrate.” He groped in the depths of his knapsack for the ornate silver message boxes hidden away in the magical space at the bottom. “And anyhow, Miss Lainie, how many men do you know what they wear when they’re naked?”

“Well, just you,” she said.

He laughed in turn. “So what makes you think I’m any different?”

He took the two message boxes from his knapsack. To his disappointment, the Hidden Council box was cold and inert. He was still hoping for word from them about who Carden’s backers were and what they were up to. The Hidden Council must have been having more trouble tracking down the origins of Carden’s message box and the identity of the mysterious “A” on his letters of credit than Silas had expected they would.

He set the square silver box aside and turned his attention to the round Mage Council box. It was warm and seemed to vibrate slightly. He opened the box; a folded piece of paper lay inside. He called up a small magelight and read the message.

Strange, he thought, frowning down at the words on the piece of paper. Mage hunters usually preferred to work alone and almost never asked for help. He had his reasons for wanting to avoid contact with other mage hunters at the moment, and he also had no desire to get mixed up in anything complicated, which this was certain to be if the hunter on the job was requesting help. But he needed the generous bounty the Council was offering, and he did feel an obligation to help out a fellow hunter.

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Besides, if he refused the request, the Mage Council would want to know why. Considering that he had put himself firmly on the wrong side of the law by taking on both an illegal student and an unauthorized wife in the person of Miss Lainie Banfrey, he couldn't afford to draw any undue scrutiny from the Council.

Lainie sat up and leaned against his back, her head resting on his shoulder, her skin warm and soft against his. "What's that?" she asked.

His frown eased. Her laughter a moment ago and her curiosity were good signs. Two ninedays ago, she had been forced to leave her home after nearly being hanged by wizard-hating townsfolk. At the same time, she had suddenly found herself in the position of Silas's student and his wife. Ever since, she had seemed lost and off-balance. She missed her Pa and the ranch and her pets, and worried about them constantly, and seemed uncertain around Silas a lot of the time. Her father hadn't exactly forced them to get married when Silas offered to take her with him and teach her, but Burrett Banfrey had made it very clear that his little girl wasn't going anywhere with a man she wasn't married to. Silas hoped she didn't think he had only married her because her father made him. Though he had only met her a little more than a month ago, he couldn't imagine his life without her in it.

"It's a message from the Mage Council," he told her. "A hunter named Garis Horden thinks he's onto something big down in the Bads and wants backup."

"Is that someone you know?"

"I haven't met him, but I know of him. I've heard he's a good man."

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“Why are they asking you?”

“Probably because they figure I’m between hunts at the moment. I just finished one and haven’t reported anything new, and they haven’t sent me anything new, either. And they can trace the locations of the message boxes they give us; I might be the closest hunter to the Bads right now.” He and Lainie had headed southeast when they left Bitterbush Springs, and Silas figured the Bads lay about a nineday’s ride to the southwest of where they were now. Most mage hunters stayed away from the sparsely-populated low plains and deserts of this part of the Wildings, but Silas was hoping to catch a rogue mage or two who also preferred to avoid the more civilized areas where most mage hunters tended to cluster.

“Do you have to go?” Lainie asked. “If we’re with another mage hunter, he might find out about my power, and about us.”

“If I turn this down, the Mage Council might start asking questions I’d rather not answer. Anyhow, we need the money. The cheap bastards only paid me twenty-five gildings for Carden, but now they’re offering to match whatever they pay Horden if I help him out. It could be as much as three hundred gildings.”

“Three hundred,” she said in awe. “We sure could use the money. That would set us up for a year or more. You don’t think it’ll be too dangerous?”

“We’ll just do what we talked about. Keep your power hidden, and we won’t work on your training. As far as Horden’s concerned, you’ll just be some birdie I picked up along the way.” He hated the necessity of letting people think Lainie was a woman of light virtue. She was his

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wife, whom he had married before the gods and three witnesses. But if the Mage Council found out about their marriage, it could cost them their freedom, their power, maybe even their lives. “Or you could hole up somewhere and wait for me.”

She wrapped her arms around his chest and hugged him tight. “Without knowing what’s happening to you or when you’ll be back? No.”

He had known that would be her answer, shy and uncertain though she seemed around him sometimes. And, gods help him, it was what he wanted to hear. However much he wanted to protect her, he didn’t want to hear her say she’d rather stay behind without him. “All right, then. We’ll just be careful.” And if it looked like the situation was shaping up to be really dangerous, he added to himself, he would find a way to keep her out of it.

Lainie loosened her embrace, and he leaned forward to take his message kit out of his knapsack. With the bespelled ink and pen, he scrawled his acceptance of the assignment on the note. Then, with a murmured spell, he folded the piece of paper back into the pattern that would take the words written on it safely to their destination. He replaced the message in the box, set the paper alight with a touch of his left forefinger, and closed the lid. In a moment, in a room high up in the Mage Council tower in the city of Sandostra seven hundred leagues away, the message with his response would reappear in the box it had first been sent from.

He returned the boxes, pen, and ink to the magical pocket at the bottom of his knapsack, then turned to Lainie. “Now,” he said, “where were we?” He bore her

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back down beneath him onto the blankets and covered her mouth with his.

“There,” she gasped through the kiss. “But what about your hat?”

“Helps me concentrate,” he growled.

* * *

THE BADS. THE lowest, hottest, driest part of the Wildings. After six days of traveling through the badlands, the only explanation Silas could think of for their existence was that the Maker had gotten up on the wrong side of the bed the day He made them.

This part of the Bads was known as Onetree, because it was within sight of the only full-size tree known to grow in the Bads. From this distance, the tree looked like nothing more than a thick trunk splitting off into several crooked, bare branches. The dusty track Silas and Lainie were following stretched southwest past the tree and on endlessly into the distance through bare, rocky dirt, sparse scrubgrass, and low-growing cactuses. Eventually it would lead them to the town of Ripgap, where, according to the message from the Mage Council, Garis Horden would meet them. The track showed no signs that anyone had passed this way in days, if not months.

The mid-afternoon sun beat down mercilessly. The sky was empty of all but the thinnest wisps of clouds, even above the distant, scattered clusters of jagged hills, where rainclouds would have formed first if they were going to appear at all. Rain would have been welcome for the relief from the heat and to refill their canteens and the horses' waterskins, which were running low.

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At least the absence of clouds meant there was no chance today of dust storms. The giant dust storms that blew up when powerful downdrafts from summer thunderstorms swept down from the hills might not be quite as deadly as heat or thirst, but they were pretty damned unpleasant. Silas and Lainie had already ridden out one such storm, huddled with the horses behind a shield of power to keep the blowing dirt and sand from stinging their eyes, scouring their skin, and clogging their noses and lungs. Rumors said that the heaviest storms could bury a man, or even a house, two measures deep.

According to Silas's sketchy map of the Wildings, Ripgap was only two more days away, and Silas had never looked forward to reaching civilization, or what passed for it out here, so badly.

Lainie sat slumped in her saddle, looking worn down. The Bads were much hotter and dryer than the Bitterbush Valley where she had been born and raised. Even beneath the shelter of her hat, her face was flushed from heat and sunburn, and her lips were dry and chapped.

"Hey, darlin'," Silas said.

"Yeah?"

"We'll be in Ripgap in a few more days. There must be a well there, otherwise there wouldn't be a town, so we can get plenty to drink, and maybe sleep under a roof for a few nights. Think you'll make it?"

She gave him a weary smile. "I'm fine."

No matter the heat, no matter how hungry and thirsty and tired and dirty she got, she never complained, he thought admiringly, as he did so often. Though she herself would have just put it down to being practical. No point

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complaining when there was nothing to be done about it, she would say.

They approached the Onetree. As they followed the track as it made a slight curve around the tree, something about the size and shape of a man dangling from one of the limbs came into view on the far side of the tree –

“Hold on,” Silas said, but Lainie’s sharp gasp told him it was too late. She stared at the body hanging from the tree, her eyes wide with shock. Her hand moved to her throat, as though feeling for the noose that the hanging mob in Bitterbush Springs had put around her neck. Silas knew what she was thinking – it could have been her, hanging dead by the neck at the end of a rope. If he hadn’t stayed around Bitterbush Springs those extra days, trying to decide what to do with her, if he hadn’t heard the commotion down on the street as the townsfolk ganged up on her and dragged her to the gallows, it would have been her.

He reached for her hand and lowered it away from her neck. “Don’t look at it. Wait here.”

She snapped her head around towards him as though startled out of the horrifying memory, then nodded.

Silas kneed Abenar to turn towards the tree, but the big gray flattened his ears and tensed up, not wanting to go any closer to the corpse. To spare the horse’s nerves, Silas climbed down from the saddle and left him with Lainie while he walked over to the tree. They had seen no other signs of life the whole time they’d been in the Bads; the question of who the hanged man was and how he had ended up like this made an unpleasant tickle crawl up the back of Silas’s neck.

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He got close enough to the body to take a good look at it. Abruptly, the world seemed to shift around him. In spite of the ravages of death, Silas recognized the dead man's face. It was Verl Bissom, a mage hunter he knew. They had crossed paths on a difficult hunt several years ago and teamed up for a few days. While he couldn't say he and Verl had been friends, they had developed a solid respect for each other. Verl was a big man and an experienced fighter with magic, gun, and hands. Not a man who was easy to kill. But here he was, hanging dead from the Onetree in the middle of the Bads.

It could be a coincidence that another mage hunter was hanging dead from a tree along the road Silas had been sent down on an unusual errand. Bissom could have been coming through this way on business of his own and run afoul of a group of Plain travelers who had taken advantage of the only tree in nearly two hundred leagues to solve their wizard problem. But it would have to have been a pretty large and determined group of Plains to get the better of Bissom, and a party that large would have left plenty of tracks. The signs of their passage could have been erased by a dust storm, but the lack of an accumulation of dirt and sand in the folds of Verl's clothes told Silas there hadn't been any storms since Verl was killed.

Or it could have been a rogue mage. Or, more likely, two or three. Rogue mages seldom teamed up, and when they did they were more likely to turn on each other than to successfully carry out any cooperative ventures. But it wasn't unheard of, and the presence of a team of renegades working out here would explain Garis Horden's call for assistance.

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Silas's back prickled, right between his shoulder blades. All at once, two days to Ripgap seemed far too long. He reached out with his mage senses, checking for signs of power or power-concealing shields, and found none. After Carden, though, he knew better than to assume there really were no other mages around.

Lainie walked up behind him. "Well?"

He didn't dare turn around and let her see his own shock and consternation. If she found out the dead man was another mage hunter, someone he knew, it might be more than she could bear. She had enough to deal with as it was; he didn't want to burden her with this as well. "Could be a cattle rustler," he said, trying to sound unconcerned. Cattle rustling was a hanging offense no matter where you were in the Wildings.

"Maybe." It was clear from her voice that she wasn't buying his explanation for a copper bit. "I don't reckon there's enough cattle in all the Bads to be worth rustling, or hanging a rustler over."

"Or a horse thief," Silas suggested. Another crime worthy of death, especially in a place like this, where a man's life could depend on his horse.

"Don't lie to me, Vendine." Already he had learned that when she called him by just his last name, that meant she was dead serious. "I haven't seen no signs of cattle or horses or people for days now."

He sighed. She was right. He shouldn't lie, not even to spare her feelings. For her own safety, he had to let her know what they might be dealing with. "All right. It's someone I know, Verl Bissom. Another mage hunter."

She sucked in a sharp breath and clutched at the back of

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his duster. “Damn.”

“I’m not saying his death had anything to do with him being a mage hunter. There’s any number of things that could have happened. So don’t worry yourself over it. I’ll bury him, then we’ll be on our way.”

Silas walked back to the horses and coaxed them over to the meager shade of the tree’s bare branches. They snorted and fidgeted at being so close to the body, but Lainie set about watering them from the skins and giving them some oats and dried apples, and they soon settled down. Silas took his hunting knife from his saddlebags and climbed the tree to where he could reach the hanging rope. He cut the rope, and Verl’s body fell to the ground in a crumpled heap.

He climbed back down and dug into the magically expanded space in his saddlebags for his collapsible shovel. “This might take a while, darlin’. You sit in the shade and rest.”

The horses cared for, Lainie sat down, leaning against the tree trunk on the side away from the sun and Verl’s body. Silas shrugged off his duster and started digging the grave. The dirt was hard-packed, baked solid in the summer heat, so he used a little magic to help break it up. He didn’t want to signal his presence to any rogue mages who might be in the area, but he also didn’t want to spend the rest of the day and possibly a good part of the night in this spot. Even with magic, digging a grave big enough for Verl Bissom was going to take a while.

“Do you think this has anything to do with what that other hunter wants help with?” Lainie asked.

Silas took off his hat and wiped sweat from his face.

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Had Verl Bissom also been coming to help Garis Horden? Or had Horden received a call for help from Bissom? He would have to ask Horden when he saw him, and tell him what had happened to Bissom. “Maybe. Could be rogue mages at work. Or it could just be that he came across some settlers on the move and they found out he was a wizard.”

“Huh.” She didn’t sound any more convinced of that last notion than he was.

The sun had gone a considerable way down the western sky by the time Silas finished digging the grave. He rolled Verl’s body into it and arranged him properly. Bissom’s mage ring wasn’t on his hand or hidden in his clothing, but that didn’t mean anything. Plain folk could have stolen it as easily as a mage once he was dead. His gun, another likely item to be stolen, was missing from its holster.

Silas covered the grave with dirt, then recited the proper prayers to the Sunderer and the Gatherer and the Avenger to calm Bissom’s murdered soul, torn from his body by violence, and guide him safely to the Afterworld. He was no priest – far from it – but as part of the requirements for being authorized as a mage hunter, he had learned the proper burying of the dead. You kill them, you bury them, was the rule. No mage’s body should be left to the mercy of the Plain folk.

His duty to the dead man carried out, Silas sat down in the shade next to Lainie. A light breeze blew up, drying the sweat on his face and body and bringing a brief moment of blessed coolness. They drank sparingly from their water flasks and ate a little jerky and flatbread, then Silas got out his message kit and sent the Mage Council a mes-

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sage informing them of Bissom's death.

The whole time, that prickling sensation kept running up and down his spine. He couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched. But there was nothing anywhere in the area, no big rocks, no other trees or tall brush, that would give cover to someone watching them. He checked again for shields, this time also looking for the heavier shields that would hide a person's physical presence.

Nothing.

A sudden creaking sound from the branches above them made him glance sharply upwards. "Look!" Lainie gasped.

A knapsack dangled from an upper branch of the One-tree, swinging gently even though the breeze had died away. Silas could have sworn the knapsack hadn't been there before. Had he just missed seeing it, or had a mage whose shields he was unable to detect, who was able to come and go unheard and unseen, put it there just now? He didn't like that idea at all. "Wonder if it's Bissom's," he said, trying for Lainie's sake not to show how much the knapsack's sudden appearance had unsettled him.

"I'd lay money on it," Lainie said.

Silas climbed the tree to where the knapsack hung. He reached for it, then pulled his hand back. It was too convenient... He probed thoroughly and carefully for any magical traps that might have been set on the pack, and found none. Gingerly, in case he had missed anything, he unhooked the pack from the branch and climbed down. He was tempted to go through it right away, to see if it held any clues to what had happened to Bissom or information about how to contact Bissom's family. It was an unwritten

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rule among mage hunters that, if at all possible, no man's family would be left wondering why they never heard from him again. But he also didn't want to spend one more moment out here in the open than he had to. Someone had put that knapsack in the tree, and that someone had to still be close by even though Silas couldn't find him. The contents of Bissom's knapsack could wait until he and Lainie had the safety of walls around them.

He strapped the knapsack behind Abenar's saddle, and mounted up. Then, with a silent nod to each other – neither of them seemed to want to speak out loud – he and Lainie rode on southwest along the endless, empty trail towards the slowly-sinking sun, the feeling of death still at their backs.