


THE

HUNTING

A NOVEL

WIVES

MAY COBB



"Sultry, salacious, and
utterly unpredictable. . . .
You'll devour it."

—RILEY SAGER, author of
Home Before Dark

The
Hunting
Wives

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To my extraordinary mother, Liz, who told me the story that inspired this novel; you continue to inspire me each and every day.

And to my fabulous husband, Chuck, who guided me out of the depths of writer's block by saying: "Well, you better write something." This one's for you.

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Prologue

I KEEP SEEING her face, upturned in the pool. Her long hair darkened by the water, stringy and tangled and noodling around her neck. Her eyes are closed, her body floating. Her lips are parted just slightly, and it looks as if she's resting, tranquil and at peace.

Of course, it wasn't like that at all. Her body was found facedown in a puddle of mud-soaked leaves. A shotgun blast had shredded her back. She was slumped down next to the edge of the lake, and near the silty shoreline, the lake water is the color of rust, not a sparkling turquoise. But the pool was the first place I saw her.

A week later, she was dead.

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Tuesday, March 13, 2018

THINGS ARE DIFFERENT tonight. Electric and humming. There's a charge building in the air, crackling and buzzing through me, and I can pinpoint the moment this morning when everything shifted.

When my flat, dull routine of walking from room to room, collecting wads of wilted laundry, became something more luminous, something pulsing with an energy of anticipation so that even then, as I stuffed the washer with clothes and shook a thin layer of soap flakes over the top, I knew my day would follow a different course than the one usually mapped out by me, a stay-at-home mom.

I'M AT THE local wine bar now, waiting for Erin. We're meeting for happy hour and I'm outside at one of the bistro tables, the light from the sun dancing in my glass of chardonnay, the taste buttery and sharp on the back of my tongue.

It was a frigid thirty-eight degrees here this morning, but by late afternoon, it had climbed to eighty, our first warm snap this spring, and I'm taking full advantage, sitting out here like this.

I'm tapping on my iPhone, scrolling through my Facebook feed, but finding nothing interesting. Just more back-to-school posts even

though we're well into March. It's endless. Day #63 of second grade! Or Time please slow down! They grow up too fast!—the kinds of updates I wince at and can't bring myself to post. I place my phone down on the table and stretch my bare legs, letting the sun warm them.

It feels so good to be in a dress; I can't remember the last time I wore one, and I've piled my hair in a neat but relaxed bun. Hoping for chic, but effortlessly so. Silver earrings in the shape of feathers tickle my neck as I turn to scan the crowd, hoping to spot them as soon as they arrive.

THIS MORNING, WHEN everything tilted, so that my day would end here instead of at the dinner table with Graham and Jack, watching Jack mop up spaghetti sauce with an elbow of crusty bread, adorable streaks of orange painting his cherub cheeks, I had just finished my morning jog on the trail that runs through the woods near our house. I had stepped inside the back door and peeled off my yoga pants, which were drenched with sweat and sucking and clinging to my thighs, and slid back into my comfy flannel pj's. It's cold here. Not Chicago cold, of course, but the humidity makes it a vicious, different kind of cold that grabs its icy paws around your bones and doesn't let go.

Still shivering, I padded to the kitchen and steamed some milk for a second latte and rubbed my hands together, trying to warm up.

I powered up my laptop in the home office—just a small nook, really, in the back parlor—and was just beginning to type in my password for Facebook when I heard a loud banging at the front door.

I figured it was the FedEx man with yet another of my online purchases. Maybe a case of Illy espresso—our favorite—which I used

to buy at the flagship store in the city, or, perhaps, the set of lime-green throw pillows I'd been waiting for. It's hard to find cute textiles in this town, and lately I've fixated on making the inside of my house look like a dreamy spread from Pinterest, or, more specifically, how I imagine the inside of Margot's home looks.

I've only seen glimpses of the outside, of course, from our mutual friends' photos on Facebook, but all of that changed this morning when I was invited into her world.

THE LOUD KNOCKING was followed by the chime of the doorbell, then a quick, staccato rapping, so I jumped up and rushed to the front door. Where I found Mrs. Murphy from down the street. Yet again. She's persistent. Ever since we moved in, she's found an excuse to pop by at least once a week.

"Hello, dear," she said, aggressively thrusting a crate of blushing grapefruits toward me.

"Thanks so much for these, Mrs. Murphy. They're gorgeous."

She craned her head around my shoulder, clearly fishing for an invite inside. But I just stood there shivering as cold shards of wind blasted us, a plastic smile frozen on my face.

"Well, then," I said quickly, before she had a chance to fill the void, "I'd better get these beauties inside!" I leaned down and took them, gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "So nice of you to think of us. Jack and I will drop by soon, I promise."

"Oh, I would love that! And Erin's so happy you're back. She's been filling me in on everything." I flashed another smile and turned around, then walked inside and shut the door.

I PLOPPED BACK down again in front of my laptop and finished logging on. My eye immediately caught the three new notifications glaring at me in red, which always give me a frisson of excitement. Sadly, not much else going on these days.

Janis White reacted to a photo you shared.

A heart, in “reaction” to a pic I posted of Jack, his hair wild with sweat, yesterday on a swing set.

Angela Cline commented on your post.

Same post. Love this little man.

But it was the third notification that drew heat to my face, made my heart flutter.

You are now friends with Margot Banks.

Margot Banks. She of the famed Banks family in East Texas. Oil money dripping out of their ears and pouring back for generations.

Last week, I finally caved and sent Margot a friend request after a few months of trolling her pics on Facebook. Her profile is set to private, but I would click through photos of her—pics she was tagged in by our mutual friends, like Erin, for instance—and find myself entranced.

I took a sip of my latte and felt the warmth spread through my chest; now that we were friends, I began scrolling through her photos.

There was Margot at an upscale restaurant, raven hair perfectly coiffed. Cut just above the chin line. She's leaning back in the booth, slender legs toned and scissor-crossed. Her candy-apple-red lips are slightly parted, as if in invitation. Heavy-lidded, smoky-gray eyes with a hint of smirk in them. Bedroom eyes, as Graham would call them.

I clicked on another photo: Margot draped in a glittering red evening gown. At a charity ball or some such event for the Junior League, no doubt. She's backlit. Her chiseled shoulders are bare, her olive skin flawless. She wears the same smirk, as if mocking the camera.

Next, I hopped over to her updates, scrolled through her posts. Landed on one dated from last Tuesday, from the local wine bar. The post read: Tuesday happy hour at Chino's—SO fun. I scrolled farther back and saw a similar post from the previous Tuesday, took out my phone, and texted Erin:

Up for happy hour tonight?

A second hadn't even passed and she was already typing back. Erin, always there, solid and dependable and as eager as a teenage boy on prom night.

Woo-hoo! YESSSS.

Her response was followed by a champagne glasses emoji. I typed back the thumbs-up, which usually wraps up her text-a-thons.

I SWIPED BACK to Margot's photos, clicked on yet another one. Margot on her front lawn wearing a black wrap dress, her arms

draped around two children who look as if they've stepped from a Renoir painting.

My eyes were drawn to her plunging neckline with a pinch of cleavage. A single diamond dangled from a chain and rested just above her breasts. I zoomed in and, to my absolute horror, Facebook asked me, Who do you want to tag?

I panicked and closed out. I felt like I'd been caught watching a dirty movie. The latte screamed in my bladder, and I stood and went to the bathroom and checked the time. I realized an hour had passed.

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I' M WELL INTO my second glass by the time Erin arrives, dressed in frumpy browns and blacks, harried and disheveled, a bead of sweat licking her hairline.

"Sorry I'm late!" She sinks into a chair and swings her mom-bag down next to her. She's wearing clunky sandals, and suddenly I'm a bit embarrassed to be seen with her. But it's better than being alone. Plus, I like Erin. Truly. She's reliably cheery with a toothy grin and childlike energy. And I hate myself for thinking like this, for judging Erin this way, but a decade spent in the lifestyle magazine business has me hardwired toward shallowness. It's something I'm keen to shake off, to leave behind me.

The waiter saunters over to take our order.

"Split a bottle?" I ask.

"Yes, ma'am!" Erin beams.

We order chardonnay, the brand they have on special for happy hour, and Erin launches into a ragged monologue.

"I SO needed this! Mattie was a complete tyrant today," she says, tucking a lock of cowlicked hair behind an ear. Mattie—short for

Matilda—is Erin’s five-year-old daughter, and she’s a spitfire, an adorable brunette with ringlets of hair framing her face. I love her.

“She started in on me this morning with wanting to wear a miniskirt—and you know that’s not gonna happen—and she was so keyed up by the time we hit school that I wanted to stab my eye out with a butter knife!”

Erin serves on the board for a bunch of civic stuff—the children’s museum, the local library—and her husband, a teddy-bear type, works from home building websites. Erin’s able to stay at home, too, doing volunteer work and raising Mattie.

The waiter stops by and refreshes our glasses. Erin is becoming more animated with each glass of wine and drones on and on. I nod in the correct places, but find myself unable to listen. I keep eyeing the street for Margot, slyly checking my Facebook feed on my phone.

Before I know it, though, more than an hour has passed and the night sky is turning to ink all around us. There’s no sign of Margot and I’m more disappointed than I should be.