



The Hunt: A Novel (Predator Trilogy)

By Allison Brennan

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Touched by a killer, she feels the fire of revenge.

Twelve years ago, Miranda Moore miraculously survived the torture of a serial killer who was never caught. Since then, Miranda, a former FBI trainee and now a member of a local search-and-rescue squad, has witnessed with horror the recovery of the mutilated bodies of seven young women, all victims of her tormentor, known as The Butcher. When another beautiful Montana college student goes missing, the Feds get involved, and an agent, a man Miranda once trusted with her heart, arrives to take over the investigation—forcing her toward a painful choice.

Now, while Miranda battles her demons, while friends, lovers, and traitors are caught up in a frantic race against time, a killer hides in plain sight—waiting to finish the one hunt he has left undone.

After the hunt, go in for the kill.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Allison Brennan is the author of ten bestselling romantic thrillers, including **The Prey**, **Speak No Evil**, **Killing Fear**, and **Playing Dead**. For thirteen years she worked as a consultant in the California State Legislature before leaving to devote herself fully to her family and writing. She is a member of Romance Writers of America, Mystery Writers of America, and International Thriller Writers. She lives in Northern California with her husband, Dan, and their five children.

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Chapter One

Twelve Years Later

Nick Thomas stared at the outline of the petite body under the blinding yellow tarp. He pinched the bridge of his nose, swallowing anger so bitter he could taste it. The foul stench of death surrounded him and he turned away.

He still pictured the dead, broken body of twenty-year-old Rebecca Douglas as he'd found her only an hour ago.

"Sheriff?"

Nick looked up as Deputy Lance Booker approached. He was clean-cut, a good cop, though a mite wet behind the ears. Much like Nick had been twelve years ago when he'd been called out to his first murder scene. "Deputy."

"Jim said there's a guy claiming to be an FBI agent at the road wanting to be let through. Quincy Peterson."

Quinn. Nick hadn't seen him in years, ten to be exact, but they'd shared an e-mail relationship since he was elected sheriff more than three years ago. After the Croft sisters had been found.

Now there were seven dead girls. Seven that they knew about.

"Let him through."

"Yes, sir." Booker frowned, but relayed the orders through his walkie-talkie. In matters that would as a rule fall under their local jurisdiction, no law officer welcomed outside interference, and usually Nick was no different. He didn't mention that it was his call to Quinn last week that precipitated this visit.

Nick turned and walked away from the deputy, away from the bright tarp, down the path to where Rebecca Douglas's last steps were evident. He squatted next to an unusable footprint, a mess in wet, hardening mud. It might have been Rebecca's last step. Or the killer's. It had rained nearly three inches in the last two days, a deluge that saturated a ground recently recovered from a cold, wet Montana winter. The clouds had broken this morning, the sky such a vivid blue and the air so refreshing that Nick would have enjoyed it if he hadn't been called to a crime scene.

He closed his eyes and breathed the clean, crisp air of his Gallatin Valley. He loved Montana, the vast beauty and sheer majesty of its mountains, its swift rivers, green valleys, big sky. The people were good, too, down-to-earth. They cared about their neighbors, took care of their own. When Rebecca Douglas was declared missing, hundreds of men and women—many from the university where she'd been a student—had scoured the wilderness between Bozeman and Yellowstone looking for her.

Nick's jaw tightened in restrained fury. Good people, but for one. One who had killed Rebecca and at least six other women in the past fifteen years. And other women were still missing. Would they ever find their bodies? Had the harsh Montana weather or four-legged animals obliterated their remains? He'd never forget finding Penny Thompson's remains—nothing but a skull and scattered bones. She was identified through her dental records.

Nick surveyed the area. Tall pines grew primarily downslope; as the mountain rose the trees thinned out. The ancient, heavily overgrown road he'd driven on was unmapped. Possibly an old logging trail, it appeared to end here, in this natural clearing roughly thirty feet square. On the edge of this clearing, Rebecca's body lay.

They'd mark off the area in grids and search for anything that might possibly lead back to the killer. But if it was the same bastard, they'd find nothing. He was so damn perfect in his every crime that even their one surviving witness could tell them little. Defeat weighed heavily in Nick's heart, but he would not give up.

Sometimes, he hated his job.

He turned when he heard an SUV roll into the clearing, rocks and muddy clumps of leaves shooting out from the backs of all four tires. Sun reflected off the windshield and Nick shielded his eyes to watch Quinn approach.

The SUV jerked to a stop behind Nick's dark green police-issue truck. The driver's door opened and Quincy Peterson jumped out, slamming the door behind him and striding toward Nick. Quinn hadn't changed much since Nick had last seen him, still looked more like a damn cover model than a fifteen-year veteran of the FBI. Nick stood and absently brushed the dirt off his jeans.

"Rebecca Douglas?" Quinn nodded toward the covered body. His face was blank, but his dark eyes revealed the same anger and sadness that Nick felt.

"Yep. We'll need a positive ID, but—" There was no doubt it was the missing woman. He glanced at Quinn and raised an eyebrow at the bandage over his left eye. "Bar fight?" he asked, half joking.

Quinn reached up and touched the bandage as if he'd forgotten it was there. "The last few days have been eventful," he said. "I'll tell you about it later." He glanced around. "When are you processing the scene?"

"I wanted you to check it out first, but I have my men waiting up on the main highway."

Nick didn't know why the Fed made him feel so inferior. Maybe it had something to do with Quinn's quiet confidence, his knack for seeing through bullshit, always getting to the heart of the matter. Or maybe it was because Nick had puked his guts out at his first murder scene and Quincy Peterson hadn't.

Or maybe it was because the woman Nick loved was in love with Quinn.

Despite all that, there was no one Nick trusted more than Special Agent Quincy Peterson.

Quinn bent down, pulled on latex gloves, and lifted the tarp. His square jaw clenched and a vein twitched in his neck at the sight.

Rebecca had been beautiful. Now, her long blonde hair was tangled, matted, and caked in mud. The happy face reproduced on thousands of flyers was gone. She was swollen, bruised, grotesque in death. The recent rains had cleaned some of the dirt from her naked body, leaving her pale and blue.

Her neck had been cut, slashed deep with a sharp knife, though there was very little blood to see. Most of it had been washed into the ground by the storm, along with any trace evidence. Her body showed signs of abuse. Torture. Bruises of all shapes and hues of purple covered her skin. Her breasts had been clamped into some sort of vise. The strange marks wouldn't have indicated that to most eyes, but both Nick and Quinn had read the coroner's reports for each of the six other women murdered in these woods, and had grown familiar with this killer's M.O.

Quinn removed the tarp to study the victim's legs and feet, much as Nick had done when he first arrived on scene. Her left leg was crooked, broken. Her feet were covered in raw blisters and deep cuts. From running.

She was thin, so pale, empty. Clinically, her gaunt skin told the cops that she'd bled out, her life drained from her. She'd died quickly; nobody could survive long with their carotid artery sliced open. Small consolation for the previous week of terror she'd lived through.

Quinn covered the body. "Coroner been called?"

Nick nodded. "He'll be out by noon. He was in the middle of an autopsy on that hiker we found up on the north ridge the other day."

"So who found the body?"

"Three boys—the McClain brothers and Ryan Parker. The Parkers have a spread three, four miles west of here. The boys took a couple horses for the day, were going to shoot their .22s at rabbits and whatnot." He shrugged and added, "It's Saturday."

"Where are they now?"

"A deputy took them home. Told them to sit tight at the Parkers' until I came by."

Quinn nodded, surveying the scene that Nick had marked with yellow and black crime scene tape. Observing the clearing, the old path, the trees.

"It looks like she came up through that brush over there," Nick gestured. "I checked it out, but didn't go down the trail yet."

"If you can call it a trail," Quinn said, frowning at the overgrowth. "I'll take a quick look while you call in your team. How many people do you have?"

"I have a dozen of my own men right now, more later, and a crime scene specialist. I'll need volunteers if we're going to do this right."

"Agreed. The more eyes the better, but no hotshots. We can't have someone going off half-cocked."

Quinn put his hand on Nick's shoulder. "I know you were hoping the bastard dropped dead after Ellen and Elaine Croft were found. I'm sorry I couldn't come out personally then. But Agent Thorne is good. She would have found something."

Nick agreed, but he still felt so damn helpless. The Butcher was the only bastard who had ever gotten away with murder under his watch. "It's been three frickin' years! Three years since he killed. And we had nothing then—no clues, no leads, no suspects."

"And there are other girls missing," Quinn didn't need to remind him. The missing girls haunted Nick in his sleep.

"It's been slow, but we're gathering evidence," Quinn continued. "We have casings, bullets, a partial from Elaine Croft's locket. We'll get him." Quinn turned and Nick watched him walk down the path. He sounded so confident. Why couldn't Nick feel the same?

He glanced down at the outline of Rebecca Douglas. At least she would have a proper burial. Closure for her family. But not for him.

He thought of Miranda.

He started toward his truck. He'd already put in the call for all available law enforcement to head to this location. Then he heard the unique but familiar sound of a Jeep bouncing over the rough trail. He didn't need to see the vehicle to know who approached.

"Damn."

The red Jeep jerked to a stop behind Peterson's rental. Almost before the truck halted, Miranda Moore jumped out, the mud no match for her heavy boots and confident stride. Deputy Booker approached her, and she glared at him without stopping as she pulled a red down-filled vest over her black flannel shirt. In any other situation, Nick would have grinned at the way Booker backed off.

Then she focused her sharp blue eyes on him.

His heart quickened and his stomach lurched. If only he'd had more time to prepare for her inevitable arrival. If he'd been warned she was on her way, he could have steeled himself for the confrontation.

"Miranda," he said as she approached, "I—"

"Damn you, Nick!" She poked a finger at his chest. "Damn you!" Nothing intimidated Miranda. Though she was tall for a woman—at least five-foot-nine—he had six inches and a hundred pounds on her. You'd think he'd intimidate her, that any man would frighten her after what she'd gone through, but he guessed he shouldn't be surprised. She was a survivor. She didn't expose her fear.

"Miranda, I was going to call you. I didn't know for certain it was Rebecca. I didn't want you to have to go through it again."

Her darkening eyes told him she didn't believe him. "Screw that. Screw you! You promised you'd call." She brushed past him and strode over to the tarp, staring at the covered body. Her fists clenched, her shoulders reverberated in tension.

Nick wanted to stop her, to protect her from seeing another dead girl. Most of all, he wanted to protect her from herself.

And she'd always been perfectly clear that she didn't want Nick's protection.

Miranda worked to control her temper. She shouldn't have yelled at Nick, but dammit! He'd promised. For seven days she'd been searching for Rebecca, the nightmares destroying the few hours of sleep she allowed herself. He'd promised she'd be the first to know when they found her.

Neither she nor Nick had expected to find Rebecca alive.

She stared at the sunny tarp in the middle of the quiet earth tones of the land and inhaled sharply, her throat raw with hot anger and unwanted ice-cold fear. Her fists squeezed into tight balls, her nails digging into her palms. She knew it was Rebecca Douglas. But she had to see for herself, force herself to look at the Butcher's latest victim. For strength, for courage.

For vengeance.

She pulled latex gloves over her long fingers, knelt beside the still woman, and fingered the edge of the tarp. "Rebecca," she said, her voice a whisper, "you're not alone. I promise you I'll find him. He'll pay for what he did to you."

She swallowed, hesitated, then drew back the tarp to reveal the girl she'd been searching for, twenty hours a day for the last week.

At first, Miranda didn't see the swollen face, the slit throat, or the many cuts washed clean by the rain. The image of the twenty-year-old in Miranda's mind was beautiful, as she had been when she was alive.

Rebecca had a contagious laugh, according to her best friend, Candi. Rebecca cared about those less fortunate and volunteered one night a week reading to the infirm at Deaconess, according to her career counselor, Ron Owens. A straight-A student, Rebecca had wanted to be a veterinarian, according to her biology teacher, Greg Marsh.

Rebecca hadn't been perfect. But no one had shared the less attractive stories while she'd been missing.

No one would ever repeat them now that she was dead.

As Miranda watched, the image of Rebecca she'd held so close to her heart during the hours and hours of searching morphed into the broken body before her.

"You're free," she told her. "Free at last."

Sharon. I'm so sorry.

"No one can hurt you anymore."

She reached over and touched Rebecca's hair, brushed a matted piece to the side, cupped her cheek.

Stay in control.

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