

The Soul Hunter

Second in the spiritual thriller trilogy from Melanie Wells, author of “When The Day of Evil Comes.” This preview of Chapter 1 is the first ever released to the public.

Chapter 1

You’d think I’d have learned my lessons by now. Some promises, it turns out, are not to be believed. Some people, it turns out, are not what they seem. Some secrets, it turns out, are better left untold. And some specters, it turns out, are better left unseen.

I thought I’d gotten all the education I needed a year or so ago, starting with an innocuous decision I’d made to go to a cold spring pool on a hot summer day. I’d found myself standing in the gaze of the red-hot eyes of hell and discovered, quite by accident, that I’d caught the attention of the universe somehow. But not the kind of attention you really want, if you get my meaning.

I’d looked evil in the eye that day and faced it down in the weeks that followed, more out of necessity than anything else. It certainly had nothing to do with bravery or spirituality or any quixotic sense of adventure I might have had. I’d just found myself in the target zone, so I’d fought when I had to, ducked when I could, and run when I couldn’t think of anything else to do. And I’d eventually gotten myself out the whole mess with a good-sized dose of grit, some help from the Almighty, and a couple of trips to Chicago.

But the answers, it turns out, don’t always arrive in order. And when they do show up, they just might kick open a door you’re better off leaving closed up tight.

It began this time, as some of my least intelligent moments do, in front of the mirror. It was the eve of my thirty-fifth birthday and I was feeling the need for self-examination, I suppose. Some misguided ritual to mark the passageway to the other side of my thirties.

Magnifying mirrors were invented by Satan, I’m convinced. No human I’ve ever known could spend any time at all in front of a magnifying mirror examining pores and eyebrow hairs that closely without coming away from there with a toxic sense of shame and self-doubt.

On this occasion, I committed the additional catastrophic error of looking at myself from behind. In a department store dressing room. Under fluorescent lights. While trying on bikinis. In winter. Any fool should know better.

To my dismay, stuck right there to the back of my own, formerly firm legs, were my mother’s thighs. My mother’s Texas milkmaid thighs.

Now I’ve always prided myself on my physique. Not my figure, mind you. That’s another conversation. But my physique.

I work hard to stay in shape. Though I am an academic, and most of the professors I know are thoroughly slovenly in their personal habits, I have resolutely risen above the fray. I am non-lumpy. I have fitness goals. I have completed a triathlon.

And I absolutely refuse to let my rear end slide south toward my ankles.

So the dismay I felt at that moment under the lights was genuine. I could not have been more surprised.

Now, all women know the steps to combat body image trauma. Men would do well to memorize the procedure too. This sort of handbook-type information, if utilized correctly, could cut the divorce rate by a third, I'm convinced.

The first step, of course, is to shop. Preferably for expensive fitness gear that will encourage you to work out in a new and aggressive way. Or, if you choose to punt on the concept of self-improvement, an alternative is to shop for a new and fetching outfit which effectively disguises the body part in question.

I went for the fitness gear. Now, I swim regularly. But clearly those endless laps in the pool were not warding off the impending thigh disaster, though I have to say, my arms looked pretty darn good.

The answer here was shoes. I needed shoes. Running shoes. Now.

The second step is to call a friend or perhaps an evolved squeeze or spouse, and complain. This is generally a fishing expedition. Qualified and well-trained personnel will assure you that you look like a couple of million bucks, that any sane human being would kill to have your body, and that you are just in the middle of a psychotic break.

Let's go get double-hot-chocolate lattes, they'll say.

Which is step three.

Step four is to roll your sad little self out of bed the next morning, strap on your new gear, and get yourself to the gym. Most individuals hit the wall after steps one or three.

I intended to complete the entire process. I was not going down without a fight.

Since I was already at the mall, I abandoned my bikini search and marched myself straight to the sporting goods store, squaring my shoulders against the heady smell of chocolate chip cookies as I passed by Mrs. Field's.

I had momentum. I was feeling good. I was on it.

And then I ran into John Mulvaney.

John Mulvaney is a colleague of mine. A fellow psychology professor at Southern Methodist University. A full citizen in the sometimes moldy and pretentious world of academic clinical psychology. That is the entire extent of our common ground.

That, and the fact that we both believe deeply that he is a genuinely pathetic human being.

We'd crossed paths the year before in a bizarre incident that left me with a strange mix of pity and loathing toward the man. And a powerful urge to avoid him.

In this instance, avoiding him was impossible. I literally bumped right into him.

He was turning away from the cash register at Mrs. Field's, both hands loaded with a half dozen greasy warm cookies, a soft drink, and a vanilla milkshake. He had a smear of chocolate on his upper lip.

"Dr. Foster," he said.

"John," I said back.

John insists on being called Dr. Mulvaney by anyone who will submit to it. I truly think it is the only ace in his fragile card-house of self-esteem.

I do not count myself a member of the Build-John-Mulvaney's-Self-Esteem-Club. He's in charge of his own self-esteem as far as I'm concerned. He had never once gotten a "Dr. Mulvaney" out of me.

"You can call me Dylan, John."

"I prefer the title," he mumbled.

We went through this silly little ritual each time we spoke.

His eyes firmly fixed on the ground – he hadn't a single confident bone in his considerably lumpy body – he sucked hard on his milkshake straw, coaxing a thick clot of ice cream into his mouth. He chased it with an enormous bite of cookie.

I watched with raw disgust, fighting the urge to wipe the chocolate off his lip. It's very hard to concentrate on anything else at all when the person you're looking at has food on his face. And is eating with two hands.

"Well," I said. "Nice seeing you, John. Have a good afternoon."

I turned to leave.

I got a good twenty yards into my escape when he called out after me.

"I'm going shopping," he said. "I need a sweater."

I stopped, turned, and stared at him. Was this merely a social-skills debacle on his part or had he gone insane?

Incredibly, he kept talking. "And then I'm going to see a movie. The new art film. At the Inwood."

Why do academics love art films? And why was John Mulvaney telling me about his afternoon plans?

"Okay, John," I said. "Have a good time."

I turned and walked away. Rapidly. I made it this time. A clean exit.

I bought myself some nifty high-tech running shoes, after a fairly intriguing ritual of rolling up my jeans and walking barefoot in front of the sales person so she could see what my feet do when I walk. I pronate, apparently. Whatever that means.

And then I initiated step two and called my evolved boyfriend.

“David Shykovsky,” he said.

“I hope you know the correct answer to this question.”

“What question is that, Sugar Pea?”

“What do you think of my legs?”

“Ah. Let’s see. Many men would fail this test,” he said. “But not me.”

Darling man.

“The correct answer,” he said, “if I recall from years of answering this sort of question miserably in other, less crucial circumstances with other, less fabulous women, is that your legs, like the rest of you, are perfect. Wonderful. Sublime.”

“Flabby?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Good man.”

“Why?”

“No reason. Want to meet me for a double-hot- chocolate latte?”

“I’m working, babe.”

Rats. So much for step three.

“Funeral today?”

“Nope. Body coming in.”

“I don’t know how you do that job.”

“I don’t know how you do yours either, Professor Foster. At least my patients are mentally stable.”

“Your patients are dead.”

“Exactly. I don’t talk to them. I don’t worry about them. I don’t listen to their problems. I just drain ‘em and dress ‘em.”

“That’s so gross.”

“I prefer to think of it as a necessary art.”

“How do you figure that?” I said.

“You try to make a ninety-seven year old dead person with no teeth look like they’re forty years younger and in deep, peaceful repose. It’s not easy.”

“I could see that,” I conceded. “Are you still taking me out tonight for a surprise birthday supper?”

“Check.”

“Italian food?”

“Check.”

“White table cloths?”

“Check.”

“Expensive wine?”

“Mid-list, I’d say.”

“Death business been slow?”

“Check.”

“How about 7:30?”

“You’ll be late.”

“8:00?” I said.

“Check,” he said. “See you at 8:30.”

“Check.”

We hung up. David Shykovsky is an enigma to me. Delightful man. Smart. Charming. Good-looking. Adores me.

Owns a funeral home in Hillsboro.

I can’t quite get past that last part.

I spent the rest of the afternoon, a rare sunny Saturday in January, embarking on my new thigh fitness program. Lunges, squats, weights and a three-mile run. Take that, milkmaid.

I’d be lucky if I could walk the next day.

After my workout, I showered, stared at my thighs some more – I swear they looked better – and then spent a good half hour primping for my dress-up pre-birthday date with David Shykovsky-owns-a-funeral-home-in-Hillsboro. All in all, a pretty high-end day for me.

I was smack in mid-primp when I heard something at the front door. It was a knock of sorts, but just one. More of a thump, actually. Or a clunk.

I heard the motor of a car pulling away from the house. Maybe I'd missed the UPS truck or something. Maybe it was a pre-birthday present!

Twinkling with anticipation, I threw on a robe and scooted to the front door, checking the peephole. No one was there.

I unlocked the deadbolt and opened the door.

Something slid across the wood and smacked heavily onto the floor of the entryway, catching my baby toe under its end.

I let out a little scream – a mixture of pain and indignation – and looked down to see what had fallen into my house and onto my foot.

It was an axe.

I couldn't see it clearly against the hardwood floor, so I reached down and picked it up, then flipped on the light.

My hands were red. Why were my hands red?

I turned the axe over in my hands.

The axe was red. Had it just been painted?

I looked over at the light switch. A handprint was smeared in red on my wall. My handprint.

I squinted at the blade.

There was hair on the blade.

I dropped the axe, my eyes widening as it thwacked heavily to the floor.

I slid to the floor, my back against the wall.

That axe was covered in blood.

And that, of course, was the moment I knew I'd made my first mistake.