

New York Times bestselling author of
Kiss Me While I Sleep and *Killing Time*

LINDA
HOWARD

COVER OF
NIGHT

Cover

A NOVEL

of Night



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First Edition

By Linda Howard

A LADY OF THE WEST

ANGEL CREEK

THE TOUCH OF FIRE

HEART OF FIRE

DREAM MAN

AFTER THE NIGHT

SHADES OF TWILIGHT

SON OF THE MORNING

KILL AND TELL

NOW YOU SEE HER

ALL THE QUEEN'S MEN

MR. PERFECT

OPEN SEASON

DYING TO PLEASE

CRY NO MORE

KISS ME WHILE I SLEEP

TO DIE FOR

KILLING TIME

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1

THE GUEST WHO WAS STAYING IN ROOM 3 OF NIGHTINGALE'S Bed and Breakfast, which Cate Nightingale privately thought of as the He-Man room because it was almost unrelievedly masculine, stopped in the doorway of the dining room, then almost immediately stepped back out of sight. Most of the patrons who were enjoying Cate's morning offerings didn't even notice the man's brief appearance; those who did probably didn't think anything about his abrupt departure. People here in Trail Stop, Idaho, tended to mind their own business, and if one of her guests wasn't in the mood for company while he ate, that was fine with them.

Cate herself noticed him only because she was bringing in a platter of sliced ham from the kitchen at the same time, and the kitchen door was directly opposite the open hall doorway. She made a mental note to go upstairs the first chance she got and see if he—his name was Layton, Jeffrey Layton—wanted her to bring up a breakfast tray. Some guests didn't like eating with strangers, plain and simple. Taking a tray up wasn't anything unusual.

Nightingale's B and B had been open for almost three years. The Bed part of the business was often slow, but Breakfast was

booming. Opening her dining room to the public for breakfast had been a happy accident. Instead of having one large dining table where everyone would sit together—assuming all five of her guest rooms were occupied at the same time, which had never happened—she had placed five small tables, each seating four, in the dining room so that her guests could eat in relative privacy if they wanted. Folks in the little community had quickly realized that Nightingale's offered some fine eating, and before she knew it, people were asking if it was okay if they stopped by for coffee in the mornings, and maybe for one of her blueberry muffins as well.

As a newcomer she wanted to fit in, so because she had the extra seats, she said yes, even though mentally she had groaned at the thought of the added expense. Then, when they tried to pay her, she had no idea what to charge, because the cost of breakfast was included in the room rental; so she'd been forced to hand-print a menu with prices and post it on the porch by the side door, which most of the locals used instead of walking around to the front of the big old house. Within a month she'd squeezed a sixth table into the dining room, bringing her total seating capacity to twenty-four. Sometimes even that wasn't enough, especially if she had guests in residence. It wasn't unusual to see men leaning against a wall while they drank their coffee and munched on muffins, if all the seats were taken.

Today, however, was Scone Day. Once a week she baked scones instead of muffins. At first the community folk, mostly from ranch and lumberjack stock, had looked askance at the "fancy biscuits," but the scones had quickly become a favorite. She had tried different flavors, but the vanilla was a runaway favorite because it went well with whatever jam the customer preferred.

Cate set the platter of fried ham down in the middle of a table, exactly halfway between Conrad Moon and his son so that neither could accuse her of playing favorites. She had made that mistake once, putting a platter closer to Conrad, and ever since then the two had kept up a running commentary about whom she liked best. Gordon, the younger Moon, would be joking, but Cate had

an uneasy feeling that Conrad was looking for a third wife and thought she'd fill the position just fine. She thought otherwise, and made certain she never gave him any accidental encouragement with the ham placement.

"Looks good," Gordon drawled, as he did every day, stretching out his fork to capture a slice.

"Better'n good," Conrad added, unable to let Gordon top him in the compliment department.

"Thank you," she said as she hurried away, not giving Conrad a chance to add anything else. He was a nice man, but he was about her father's age, and she wouldn't have picked him even if she weren't too busy to even think about starting to date.

As she passed by the Bunn double coffeemaker, she automatically checked the level of the coffee in the pots, and paused to start a fresh batch. The dining room was still full, and people were lingering longer this morning. Joshua Creed, a hunting guide, was there with one of his clients; folks always hung around when Mr. Creed was there, just to talk to him. He had an aura of leadership, of authority, that people naturally responded to. She'd heard he was retired from the military, and she could believe it; he radiated command, from his sharp, narrow gaze to the square set of his jaw and shoulders. He didn't come in very often, but when he did, he was usually the center of respectful attention.

The client, a handsome dark-haired man she judged to be in his late thirties, was just the sort of outsider she liked the least. He was obviously well off, if he could afford Joshua Creed, and though he was dressed in jeans and boots like most of the people in the room, he made certain, in some subtle and some not-so-subtle ways, that everyone knew he was Someone Important despite his show of camaraderie. For one thing, he'd rolled up his shirt-sleeves and kept flashing the thin, diamond-set watch on his left wrist. He was also just a shade too loud, a shade too hearty, and he kept mentioning his experiences on a game hunt in Africa. He even gave everyone a geography lesson, explaining where Nairobi was. Cate managed to refrain from rolling her eyes at his assump-

tion that *local* was synonymous with *ignorant*. *Weird*, maybe, but not *ignorant*. He also made a point of explaining that he hunted wild animals mostly to photograph them, and though on an emotional level Cate approved of that, her common sense whispered that he was just saying it to give himself an out in case he didn't kill anything. If he was any kind of photographer, she'd be surprised.

As she hurried on to the kitchen, she wondered just when she'd started looking at newcomers as "outsiders."

The dividing line between her life before and her life now was so sharply defined that sometimes she felt as if she weren't even the same person. There hadn't been a gradual change, giving her time to analyze and process, to slowly grow into the woman she was now; instead there had been jagged breaks, abrupt upheavals. The period between Derek's death and her decision to move to Idaho was a steep, narrow valley into which sunshine had never reached. Once she and the boys had arrived here, she'd been so busy getting the B and B open and settling in that she hadn't had much time to worry about being an outsider herself. Then, almost before she knew it, she was as much part of the warp and weave of the little community as she ever had been in Seattle; more, even, because Seattle was like all big cities, filled with strangers and everyone moving in individual little bubbles. Here, she literally knew everyone.

Just before she reached the kitchen door, it opened, and Sherry Bishop stuck her head out, a quick look of relief crossing her face when she saw Cate approaching.

"What's wrong?" Cate asked as she rushed through the door. She looked first to the kitchen table, where her four-year-old twins, Tucker and Tanner, were industriously digging into their cereal; the boys were sitting on their booster chairs exactly where she had left them. They chattered and giggled and squirmed, as usual; all was right in their world. Rather, Tucker chattered, and Tanner listened. She couldn't help worrying because Tanner talked so little, but their pediatrician hadn't seemed alarmed. "He's fine," Dr. Hardy had said. "He doesn't need to talk because

Tucker is talking for both of them. He'll talk when he has something to say." Since Tanner was completely normal in every other way, including comprehension, she had to assume the pediatrician was right—but she still worried. She couldn't help it; she was a mother.

"A pipe burst under the sink," Sherry said, sounding harassed. "I turned off the valve, but we need the water back on fast. The dishes are piling up."

"Oh, no." Other than the obvious difficulty of having no water to cook or wash dishes with, another problem loomed even larger: her mother, Sheila Wells, was en route from Seattle for a week-long visit, and was due in that afternoon. Since her mother wasn't happy about Cate and the twins leaving Seattle to begin with, Cate could just imagine her comments about the area's remoteness and lack of modern conveniences should there not be any water.

It was always something; this old house seemed to need almost constant maintenance and repair, which she supposed was par for the course with old houses. Still, her finances were stretched to the breaking point; she could use just *one* week in which nothing went wrong. Maybe next week, she thought with a sigh.

She picked up the kitchen phone and from memory dialed the number of Earl's Hardware Store.

Walter Earl himself answered, catching the phone on the first ring as he usually did. "Hardware." He didn't need further identification, since there was only one hardware store in town, and he was the only one who answered the phone.

"Walter, this is Cate. Do you know where Mr. Harris is working today? I have a plumbing emergency."

"Mistuh Hawwis!" Tucker crowed, having caught the name of the local handyman. Excited, he banged his spoon against the table, and Cate stuck her finger in her ear so she could hear what Walter said. Both boys were staring at her in delight, quivering with anticipation. The community handyman was one of their favorite people, because they were fascinated by his tools and he didn't mind if they played with the wrenches and hammers.

Calvin Harris didn't have a phone, but he customarily stopped by the hardware store every morning to pick up whatever supplies he would need for the day's work; so Walter usually knew where he could be found. When she had first moved here, Cate had been taken aback that someone wouldn't have a phone in this day and age, but now she was accustomed to the system and didn't think anything of it. Mr. Harris didn't want a phone, so he didn't have a phone. Big deal. The community was so small, finding him wasn't a problem.

"Cal's right here," Walter said. "I'll send him your way."

"Thanks," said Cate, glad she didn't have to hunt him down. "Could you ask him what time he thinks he can get here?"

Walter's voice rumbled as he relayed the question, and she heard a softer, indistinct mumble that she recognized as Mr. Harris's voice.

Walter's voice sounded clearly through the phone. "He said he'll be there in a few minutes."

Saying good-bye and hanging up, Cate breathed a sigh of relief. With any luck the problem would be minor and the water would soon be on again, with minimal impact on her finances. As it was, she needed Mr. Harris's fix-it genius so often she was beginning to think she would come out better to offer him free room and board in exchange for repairs. He lived in rooms over the feed store, and while they might be bigger than any of her bedrooms, he still had to pay for them, plus she could throw in meals. She would lose a bedroom to rent, but it wasn't as if the bed-and-breakfast had ever been filled to capacity. What held her back was the slightly unwelcome prospect of having someone permanently in the house with her and the twins. As busy as she was during the day, she wanted to keep the nights just for them.

Mr. Harris was so shy, though, she could easily see him mumbling something after supper and disappearing into his room, not to be seen again until the morning. But what if he didn't? What if the boys wanted to be with him instead of her? She felt small and petty for worrying about such a thing, but—what if they did? She

was the center of their young lives, and she didn't know if she could give that up yet. Eventually she would have to, but they were just four, and all she had left of Derek.

"Well?" Sherry prompted, her brows raised as she waited for news, good or bad.

"He's coming right over."

"Caught him before he got started on another job, then," said Sherry, looking as relieved as Cate felt.

Cate looked at the boys, who were both sitting watching her, their spoons held suspended. "You two need to finish your cereal, or you won't be able to watch Mr. Harris," she said sternly. That wasn't exactly the truth, since Mr. Harris would be right there in the kitchen with them, but they were four; what did they know?

"We'll huvwwy," Tucker said, and both resumed eating with more energy than precision.

"Hurry," Cate said, emphasizing the *r* sound.

"Hurry," Tucker obediently repeated. He could say the sound when he wanted to, but when he was distracted—which was often—he fell back into babyish speech patterns. He talked so much; it was as if he didn't take the time to properly say the words. "Mistuh Hawwis is coming," he told Tanner, as if his brother didn't know. "I'm gonna play with the dwill."

"Drill," Cate corrected. "And you will not. You may watch him, but *leave the tools alone*."

His big blue eyes filled with tears, and his lower lip trembled. "Mistuh Hawwis lets us play with them."

"That's when he has time. He'll be in a hurry today, because he has another job to do when he leaves here."

When she first opened the B and B, Cate had tried to keep them from bothering the handyman while he was working, and since they'd been just one at the time, the job should have been easier, but they had shown remarkable skill in slipping away. As soon as she turned her back, both boys zoomed back to him like magnets to steel. They had been like little monkeys, poking into his toolbox, running off with anything they could pick up, so she

knew they had been as severe a trial to his patience as they had been to hers, but he'd never said a word of complaint, and for that she blessed him. Not that his silence on the matter was surprising; he seldom said anything, period.

The boys were older now, but their fascination with tools hadn't waned. The only difference was that now they insisted on "helping."

"They don't bother me," Mr. Harris would mumble whenever she caught them, ducking his head as his cheeks colored. He was painfully shy, rarely looking her in the eye and actually speaking only when he had to. Well, he did talk to the boys. Maybe he felt at ease with them because they were so young, but she had heard his voice mixed with the boys' higher-pitched, excited tones as they seemed to carry on real conversations.

She glanced out the kitchen door and saw three customers lined up to pay their bills. "I'll be right back," she said, and went out to take their money. She hadn't wanted to put a cash register in the dining room, but her breakfast business had made it necessary, so she had installed a small one by the outside door. Two of the customers were Joshua Creed and his client, which meant the dining room would soon be emptying out, now that Mr. Creed was leaving.

"Cate," Mr. Creed said, inclining his head toward her. He was tall and broad-shouldered, his dark hair silvering at the temples, and his face weathered from the elements. His hazel eyes were narrow, his gaze piercing; he looked as if he could chew nails and spit out bullets, but he was always respectful and kind when he spoke to her. "Those scones of yours just keep getting better and better. I'd weigh four hundred pounds if I ate here every day."

"I doubt that, but thanks."

He turned and introduced his client. "Cate, this is Randall Wellingham. Randall, this lovely lady is Cate Nightingale, the owner of Nightingale's Bed and Breakfast, and incidentally the best cook around."

The first compliment was debatable, and the second one a

downright lie, because Walter Earl's wife, Milly, was one of those natural cooks who seldom measured anything but could cook like an angel. Still, it couldn't hurt business to have Mr. Creed saying things like that.

"I can't argue with any of that," Mr. Wellingham said in his too-hearty tone, holding out his hand while his gaze swiftly raked down her before returning to her face, his expression saying that he was unimpressed with either her or her cooking. Cate forced herself to shake hands. His grip was too firm, his skin too smooth. This wasn't a man who did a lot of physical work, which would have been okay in itself if he hadn't plainly looked down on all the other people there because they *did*. Only Mr. Creed was spared, but then only someone blind and stupid would treat him with disdain.

"Are you staying long?" she asked, just to be polite.

"Just a week. That's all the time I can manage away from the office. Every time I leave, the place goes to hell," he said, chuckling.

She didn't comment. She imagined he owned his own business, considering the wealth he flashed, but she didn't care enough to ask. Mr. Creed nodded, placed his black hat on his head, and the two men exited to let the next customer step up to pay. Two more people joined the queue.

By the time she had taken their money and refilled the coffee cups around the room, Conrad and Gordon Moon had finished, and she returned to the cash register, where she fended off Conrad's heavy compliments and Gordon's amusement. He seemed to think it funny that his father had developed a *tendre* for her.

Cate didn't think it funny at all when Conrad paused after his son had stepped out on the porch. He paused and swallowed so hard his Adam's apple bobbed. "Miss Cate, I'd like to ask—that is . . . are you receiving visitors tonight?"

The old-fashioned approach both charmed and alarmed; she liked the way he'd done it, but was horrified that he'd asked at all. Cate did her own swallowing, then stepped up to the plate, on the