



Veil of Night: A Novel

By Linda Howard

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BONUS: This edition contains an excerpt from Linda Howard's Prey.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

In this thrilling novel of romantic suspense, Linda Howard cordially invites us to an elaborate wedding—one in which rings will never be exchanged, kisses will never be shared, and the bride will never see the light of day, because a killer has been waiting under a

VEIL OF NIGHT

Jaclyn Wilde is a wedding planner who loves her job—usually. But helping Carrie Edwards with her Big Day has been an unrelenting nightmare. Carrie is a bridezilla of mythic nastiness, yet the unpleasant task at hand turns seriously criminal when Carrie is brutally murdered and everyone involved with the ceremony is accusing one another of doing the deed. Assigned to the case, Detective Eric Wilder finds that there's too much evidence pointing toward too many suspects. Compounding his problems is Jaclyn, now a prime suspect, with whom he shared one deeply passionate night before Carrie's death. As the heat intensifies between Eric and Jaclyn, a cold-blooded murderer moves dangerously close. And this time the target is not a bride but one particularly irresistible wedding planner, unaware of a killer's vow.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Linda Howard is the award-winning author of many *New York Times* bestsellers, including **Ice, Burn, and Death Angel**. She lives in Alabama with her husband and a golden retriever.

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Chapter One

Six weddings in five days. *Holy shit.*

All Jaclyn Wilde could think was that her mother, Madelyn, who was her partner in Premier, *the* events planning firm to hire in the greater Atlanta area if you wanted your guests to be impressed, must have been sipping a couple or twelve champagne martinis when she'd accepted so many bookings so close together. It wouldn't have been nearly as bad if the bookings had been anything other than weddings: a party was simple in comparison to a wedding, because they were relatively free of emotional turmoil. A wedding, on the other hand, was fraught with every emotion known to man. It wasn't just the brides; it was the bride's mother, the groom's mother, the maid of honor, the bridesmaids, the parents of the flower girl and the ring bearer, the cousins who weren't invited to be in the wedding party, what colors to choose, the date, the location, the damn *font* on the friggin' invitations . . .

"Jaclyn Wilde," the clerk called, interrupting Jaclyn's increasingly stressed and frantic thoughts.

The clerk's voice was too cheerful. Didn't she realize it was inappropriate to sound cheerful when you were collecting payments for traffic violations? Maybe it was asking too much that she sound glum, but she could at least sound bored and noncommittal, instead of all but dancing with glee at taking someone's money.

Jaclyn stifled her irritation; it stemmed more from the almost impossible workload facing her during the coming week than it did from paying her speeding ticket. Adding to her stress was the fact that *because* they'd been working so hard, she'd forgotten to mail in the money for the speeding ticket, and today was the day it was due, so she'd either had to take time off from work—thereby increasing the stress by getting behind—or have a warrant issued for her arrest. Yeah, that would be a real stress-reducer.

Being late was her fault. If the city of Hopewell, where she lived and where she'd received the ticket, had been set up to receive online payments, she could have handled it that way, but it wasn't. She got up, silently forked over the cash, and a minute later was striding down the hall, the speeding ticket already forgotten because that particular item had just been checked off her to-do list.

She glanced down at her watch. She had just enough time to get to her next appointment—Carrie Edwards, a bitch for all seasons, and one of the reasons why six weddings in five days was looming as Mission Impossible. Carrie's wedding wasn't even one of the six; her wedding wasn't for another month, but Carrie was taking up way too much of their time with her histrionics and constant flip-flopping on decisions. One bridesmaid had already told her—Carrie, not Jaclyn—to go fuck herself, which was a first in Jaclyn's experience. Usually, no matter what the bride did, the members of the wedding party would grit their teeth and see it through. Even when they did drop out, they'd make polite excuses. Not this girl; she'd let Carrie have it with both barrels, and hadn't minced words.

When the blow-up happened, Jaclyn had stepped out of sight, allowed herself a wide smile and a fist pump, then schooled her expression and returned to try to forestall a hair-pulling, eye-gouging cat fight. She'd have loved to see Carrie with a black eye, but business was business.

If she hadn't been so wrapped up in her thoughts she might have been faster on her feet, but when a door suddenly swung outward she was caught by surprise and slammed into the tall, dark-haired, dark-suited man who stepped into the corridor. She gave a short, sharp "Oomph!" The impact knocked her briefcase from her hand and sent it spinning across the gray-tiled floor. She felt one foot, elegantly shod in three-inch heels, begin to slip, and in panic instinctively grabbed the man's arm to steady herself. Her free arm slipped inside his open jacket and she grabbed a handful of shirt fabric, holding on for dear life. The side of her arm brushed against something very hard, and there was a very brief glimpse of leather before she made the startled identification of *holster*, followed by *gun*, then *cop*. Considering she was in city hall, the conclusion was both logical and inescapable.

The arm she grabbed turned to iron as the man immediately tensed it to hold her weight; he half-turned, his other arm sliding around her waist to catch her. For a brief moment, no more than the second needed for her to catch her balance, she was held firmly against a very warm, very solid, indisputably male body.

He released her the moment she was sure-footed, but he didn't back away. Not immediately, anyway. She blew out a shaky breath. "Wow. Whew." Her heartbeat, thrown into high gear thanks to the collision and almost falling, was pounding against her rib cage so hard she could feel the thuds. A spill on the floor of city hall would've been par for the course on this perfectly crappy day, but the last thing she needed right now was to break an ankle or something. Even a sprained ankle, at this point, would throw Premier into a time-crunch they simply wouldn't be able to handle.

"Are you all right, ma'am?"

He bent his head down as he spoke and his breath, scented with spearmint chewing gum, brushed her temple. His voice was a warm baritone, with a slight rasp that roughened it just enough to take the tone from mellow to something . . . more. She didn't know just what that *more* was, just that it was there— Wait a minute. Had he just called her *ma'am*?

Did she look *that* haggard?

Jaclyn squashed her initial annoyed reaction. The badge he wore explained the "ma'am." Actually, being almost anywhere in the South explained it. He wasn't commenting on her appearance; he was a cop, a civil servant on his best behavior. She blew out another breath, and realized she hadn't yet released her grip on either his arm or his shirt. He *couldn't* step back, not as long as she clung to him. She forced her fingers to unclench from both shirt and arm, and she took the necessary step back to put some distance between them.

"I'm fine," she said as she looked up at him. "Thanks for catching me. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going." A small part of her brain, the part reserved for hormones and irrational decisions, gave a wolf whistle. Abruptly she felt both over-heated and overexcited. Damn, he was fine-looking, in a way that wasn't at all boyish and depended more on strength and an air of competency than it did on regular features. There were boys, and there were men. This was a *man*. This was a man who had *it*, that indefinable quality of sex appeal, maturity, and strength all mingled together into a potent whole.

He gave a slight smile, a nice and natural, easy curve of his lips. "Not the best layout here, as far as traffic goes."

“Don’t mention *traffic* to me,” Jaclyn said, almost under her breath.

He shot a quick glance of comprehension in the direction from which she’d come, and his smile widened a little. She liked that smile more than she should.

In her line of business, Jaclyn met a lot of men; unfortunately, they were usually about to get married. Not always, of course, but it took something special to get her attention this way: a certain look, an unexpected chemistry . . . and to be honest, it had been a very long time since she’d had the time to admire any man.

She didn’t have time now, either. She had to really hurry, or she’d be late.

“Thanks again. Sorry I almost smashed you flat.” She gave the polite cop a quick nod of her head, a friendly—but not *too* friendly—good-bye, then looked around for her dropped briefcase.

The case had spun all the way across the wide hall, coming to a stop against the far wall. Before she could reach for it, a man in stained jeans and a dingy T-shirt stretched tight over an enormous beer belly laboriously bent down and picked up the case. “Here ya go, ma’am,” he said, holding the slender case out to her in one meaty paw and smiling a ridiculously sweet smile for such a rough face.

“Thank you,” Jaclyn said as she gripped the handle, giving the burly guy a warmer smile than she’d given the cop, because she wasn’t attracted to him at all, so being nice to him didn’t seem as dangerous as being nice to the cop. As she strode away down the hall she mused on how cock-eyed that reasoning was, on a logical basis, but how rock solid it was on some gut-level feminine instinct. She didn’t have time for the cop, didn’t have time to be attracted to him, so she wasn’t about to do anything that might attract him.

As she walked away, she was almost certain that he was watching her, but she didn’t dare turn around to look. She didn’t *need* to turn around; she could practically feel the bull’s-eye his gaze was painting on her back.

She hurried out to the parking lot, using her remote to unlock her steel-gray Jaguar just before she reached it. In almost one motion she opened the door, tossed her briefcase onto the passenger seat, and slid behind the wheel. Her first action then was to hit the door lock, a safety precaution she’d taken so often it was second nature to her now. As she turned the key with one hand, she was pulling the seat belt into place with the other.

She didn’t need another ticket, so she kept an eye on the speedometer. She especially wasn’t going to speed on the way to a meeting with Carrie Edwards; it was all she could do to keep the car hea...

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Jacqueline and her mother establish a premier wedding-planning firm when both their marriages fail. This romantic mystery begins with a passionate sexual encounter between Jacqueline and Eric, a police officer she seems destined to spend a lot of time with since she becomes a suspect in the murder of a client. Clarinda Ross lays on a thick Southern accent, particularly for Jacqueline, her colleagues, and her mother. In the character of Eric, the accent is less consistent. In addition, Ross applies a range of nuances to a wide range of characters of varying classes, thereby differentiating them and reflecting the author's commentary on the weddings they're involved in. J.E.M. © AudioFile 2010, Portland, Maine

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jose Longoria:

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