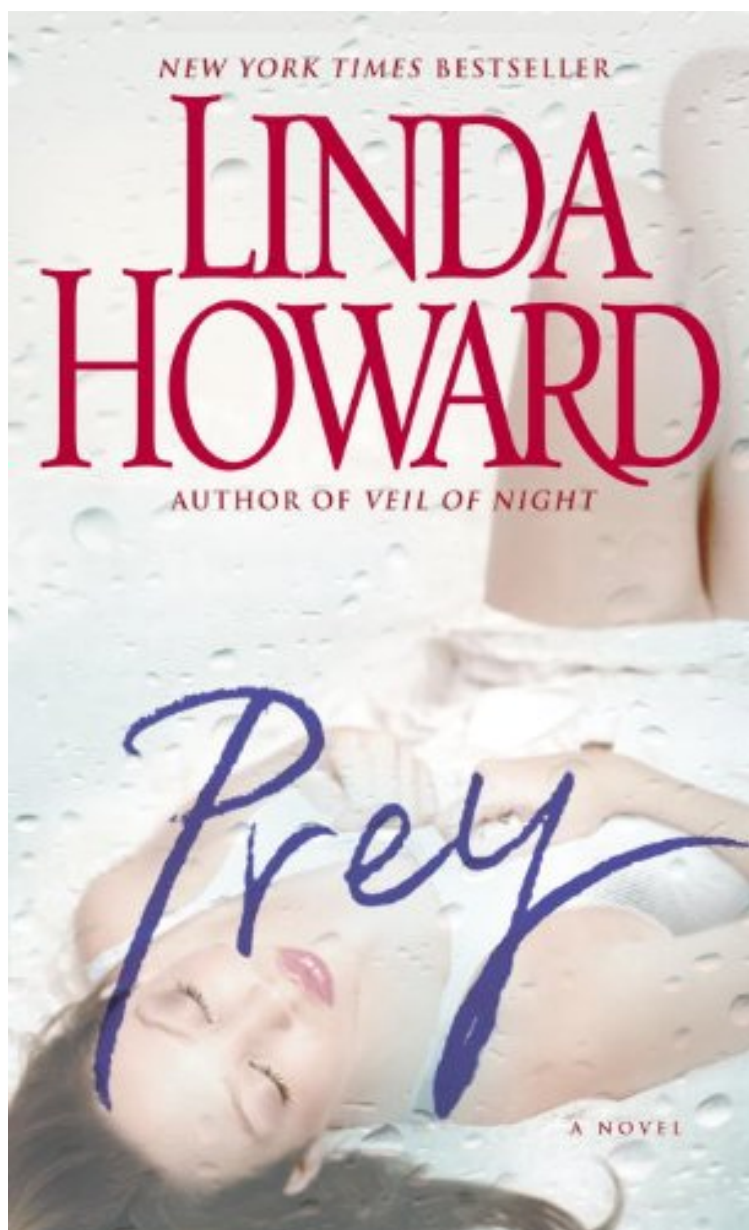


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## Prey: A Novel



*Par Linda Howard*  
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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurNEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLERBONUS: This edition contains an excerpt of Linda Howard and Linda Jones's Running Wild. Thirty-two-year-old Angie Powell has always spoken her mind, but in the presence of Dare Callahan she nurses a simmering rage. Three years ago, Dare returned home to rural Montana and opened a hunting business to rival Angies own, forcing her to close up shop. The infuriatingly attractive Iraq war vet even had the nerve to ask Angie out, not once but twice. Before Angie leaves town, she organizes one last trip into the wilderness with a client. But the adrenaline-fueled adventure

turns deadly when Angie witnesses a cold-blooded murder and finds herself on the wrong side of a gun.

Then a bear comes crashing through the woods changing the dark game completely. Luckily, Dare is camping nearby and comes to her aid. Forced together for survival, Angie and Dare must confront hard feelings, a blinding storm, and a growing attraction while a desperate killer and a ferocious five-hundred-pound beast stalk their prey. *Extrait Chapter One Hed won. Shed lost. She really, really hated losing. Losing pissed her off more than just about anything else. The very idea made her grind her teeth, made her think twice about what she was about to do, which essentially was to throw in the towel. Okay, not exactly throw in the towel, but she was denitely retrenching, and she needed to act now. Stubbornness was one of her main faults, something she was well aware of, so before it could trip her up and make her change her mind, Angie*

Powell quickly scrawled her name on the contract with the only Realtor in the area, Harlan Forbes, then leaned back in her chair and tried to control her breathing. There, it was done. Her place was ofcially up for sale. Her stomach was so knotted she felt as if shed stepped off a cliff and was cartwheeling toward the ground, but there was no going back. Well, there probably was; Harlan had known her most of her life, and would probably tear up the contract right now if she asked him to. Not only that, the contract wasnt opened. If her home didnt sell in the allotted time, shed either extend the contract or . . . what? What other option did she have? None, thats what. This was do or die, sink or swim, and any number of other back-against-the-wall clichs. She was damned if shed just give up, though. Moving operations wasnt the same as giving up. Ill get this posted online right away, Harlan said, swiveling around to lay the contract beside his sleek, all-in-one computer and monitor combined, a surprisingly up-to-date piece of electronics in a shabby, crowded two-room ofce on the second oor above the hardware store. Thats how most of my contacts are being made these days. He gave her a quick glance, concern written large on his orid face. Dont get your hopes up on having a rm offer right away, though. The listings around here are on the market for six months, average, which isnt bad in this economy. Thanks, she said to Harlan, whod been one of her fathers best friends. She supposed he needed to make the sale as much as she needed to sell. The downturn in the economy had hit everyone. Six months. God, could she hold on for six more months? The answer was: If she had to. She could do anything if she had to. She got to her feet. Believe me, Im not hoping for anything right away. But she was; she couldnt help it. She wished the place would sell this very minute, before she could think about it too much. At the same time, she dreaded the thought of leaving, and the two emotions pulled and fought inside her until she wanted to scream, for all the good that would do, which was none. She shrugged into her coat and picked up her big tote bag, settled her hat on her head. She needed both the coat and the hat. November had come in cold and brisk, already dusting the valleys with a few light snows. The mountain peaks surrounding the valley were white, the wind blowing off them carrying the scent of winter, evergreen mixed with fresh snow. A warm front was coming in that should melt the snow back some, but everyone, human and animal, knew the warmth would be temporary; soon the cold would settle in for months. She had to plan on being here through another winter. It would be nice if her place sold immediately, but if she was anything, Angie was realistic. Pie in the sky had never appealed to her, not when there was a plain old apple on the ground. Right now, however, she couldnt see either apple or pie. All she could do was try to eke out a living and stay on top of her bills enough to hold off foreclosure, until her place sold and she could relocate. If. Now there was a word. If her dad hadnt borrowed a bunch of money ve years ago to expand the business, buying more horses, four-wheelers, building three small guest houses, the place wouldnt even have a mortgage, and shed be okay even with the downturn in her income. But he had, and she wasnt. Yes, shed sold the four-wheelers and most of the horses, and used the money to pay down the principal on the loan, but even if she renanced, the payment would be more than she could handle, and that was assuming the bank would let her renance, as tight as credit was right now. At least she hadnt waited until she was in real trouble. No, that big, wide streak of realism had read the writing on the wall and recognized that, within a year at the absolute most, she was going to be out of money and out of business, unless she took action. But a year was optimistic; the six months Harlan had mentioned for selling her house and property was far more like it. By then, she might not even be breaking even, and one thing she didnt want to do was dip into her savings. For one thing, she didnt have that much; for another, throwing good money after bad was a good way to lose everything. Harlan heaved his bulk out of his squeaky ofce chair and walked with her to the door. Ill be out tomorrow to take some pictures, he said. Ill be there. I have a guide trip day after tomorrow, so Ill be getting everything ready. Right now, that one guide trip, with a repeat client, was the only thing on her books. Three years ago, before Dare Callahan had returned home and begun carving huge holes in her business, she had gone weeks with just enough time between guide trips to

replenish supplies. Even two years ago, with him set up in competition, shed done okay, and had actually been glad to have a little time to rest between trips. Last year had been slow. This year had been disastrous. Harlan patted her arm as he opened the door for her. I hate to see you leave, but you know best. I hope so. Ive done some research, and I think Ive found a good location, up past Missoula. She wasnt getting her heart set on any particular place, though; shed isolate sections where hunting guides were thin on the ground, and work from there. Moving wouldnt accomplish much if she put herself back into a situation with steep competition. He glanced out the door, at the mountainous scenery hed seen thousands of times, and a faintly sad expression crept over his face. Im thinking about leaving, too. What? The unexpected confession jerked Angie out of herself and her own problems; she stared at him in shock. Hed always been here, been in these parts, and a xture in her life from the time she and her dad had moved to the area. She had moved away a couple of times, once to college and then afterward to Billings, but Harlan had always been here, as reliable as the sun rising in the east. She couldnt imagine this place without him. Why? There was a faraway look in his eyes, as if hed turned inward. Because the older I get, the closer I am to the people whove already gone on, and the harder it is to relate to the ones still here, he said softly. Some days all I can think about are the dead ones. I catch myself talking to Glory all the time. Gloria was his dead wife; Angie had never heard him call her anything other than Glory. And your dad ...I still talk to him as if he were standing right here. And there are more, too many more. He sighed. I dont have an unlimited number of years left, you know, and Im spending too much of my time alone. I need to move closer to Noah and the grandkids, connect more with them while I still can. Youre talking as if you have one foot in the grave. You arent old! She was still too shocked to be diplomatic, but then diplomacy had never been her strong point. Afterward she could always think of what she should have said, but in the moment she tended to blurt out whatever she was thinking. Besides, Harlan wasnt old; he was probably in his mid- sixties, close to her dad in age. But her dad was gone, and suddenly Angie thought she knew what Harlan meant. He was hearing the call of the beyond; sometimes she caught the echo of it herself, in the stillness around her that would suddenly be lled with memories. Maybe it was natures way of transitioning from life to death, or life to another life. He knew he was probably in the last quarter of his life, and he wanted to make the most of it with the people who meant the most to him. Old enough, he said, and looked again at the looming mountains. If I dont make the move now, I might run out of time. And that was it in a nutshell. She was doing exactly the same thing, though for a different reason. She was running out of time. Yeah, she said gently. I know. Abruptly he hugged her, a one- armed, rib- crushing hug that was over before she could do more than gasp. Ill miss you, Angie, but we wont lose touch. I promise you that. Back at you, she said awkwardly. The emotion of the moment left her ailing way out of her depth, as usual, but she managed a smile for him as she stepped out onto the landing. Some people instinctively knew the right thing to say, the right thing to do, but she wasnt one of them. The best she could do was, well, the best she could do, and hope she didnt screw up too much. As soon as the door closed behind her, though, her smile turned sad. Shed grown up in her house, she liked the small community here even though God knows there was absolutely nothing that would qualify as a nightlife, unless you counted frogs. But so what? Shed enjoyed living in Billings, and she enjoyed living here. After a while, wherever she moved to would become home. She was who she was, no matter where she lived. Fiercely she shrugged off her sadness. Shed better get over her pity party or risk turning into what she disliked most: a whiner. She took the ight of stairs down the outside of the building at a brisk pace, then strode across the cracked parking lot to her seven- year- old dark blue Ford pickup, keeping her head high with an effort. She wasnt beaten, not yet, but shed denitely lost this battle, and the taste of defeat was bitter as gall in her mouth. The worst thing was, Dare Callahan probably didnt even know and wouldnt care if he had known that shed been in a ght for her survival, and that as shed been going under for the third time he had effectively put his boot on top of her head and held her underwater. God, she hated him. No, not hate, not exactly, but she sure as hell didnt like him. To think that when hed asked her out, two years ago, shed actually been tempted to accept, that shed even gotten butteries in her stomach, but that was before she realized what he was doing. She knew better now. She didnt like anything about him, not the way he looked or the truck he drove, or even his damn name. Dare. What kind of name was that? Like he thought he was some supercool urban daredevil, able to leap small Yuppies with a single bound except he was too cool to make the effort. If she had to be fair about it and she didnt feel like being fair she supposed she had to blame his parents for his name, but that didnt mean he was completely innocent, because he could have changed his name to Jim or Charlie, something like that. But on a website, Dare Callahan, Wilderness Guide, looked a whole lot cooler than, for instance, a plain old Charlie Callahan; people probably subconsciously felt as if

they were hiring Indiana Jones. And when she compared her own website to his, Powell Guide Trips was so lackluster she had to admit she probably wouldn't hire herself, either. That was a hard thing to face, but there was no getting around it. She didn't have the extra money to hire someone to jazz- up her website, so in her spare time she'd been trying to figure out how to do it herself, though she was painfully aware that generally one got what one paid for. Her site had been set up so she could update it, but it was inspiration that failed her. She had no idea what to do to make herself sound more capable than Dare Callahan, Wilderness Guide. Change her name to Ace, maybe? The idea struck her and she stopped in her tracks, wondering if she might have actually come up with a workable idea, something that would buy her a little more time if nothing else. Her income had been falling for the past two years. Part of it was the economy, sure, but it didn't help that she was a woman. Even though some of the big- game hunters who came to Montana every year were women, and an even larger percentage of the photographers on photo shoots were women, most people seemed to think that a male guide was a safer bet than a female one. If there was trouble, a man was stronger, supposedly tougher, yada yada. She knew the drill. She wanted to fault it, but she couldn't, even though she knew she was good at what she did. She was ve- seven, a little above average height for a woman, with a lean, rangy build that disguised how strong she was. Even given that, there was no way she came anywhere close to being as strong as most of the men around here, especially a muscle- bound jerk like Dare Callahan. But if she changed her website and, say, used her initials instead of her name so people didn't know right away that she was a woman... Yeah, she might lose repeat business, but that was practically nil anyway, so any new business could only be a plus. And maybe she should concentrate more on photography trips and wilderness camping, things like that, rather than on hunting trips, which naturally leaned more toward men, as if a set of nuts was a requirement for competent guiding. From what she could tell, not having testicles was a big check mark on the plus side. Not only did she not have testosterone blinding her with ego and competition problems, she didn't have to worry about whether to put them on the left or right, and she didn't fall down and vomit if anyone punched her in the groin. Talk about selling points: lifelong experience, no testicles. She could see it now, blazing from her website in brilliant red letters. She enjoyed the vision for a moment, then jerked her thoughts back to repositioning herself as more of a guide for photography trips and family outings. Except this was something she should have done back in the spring, to pull in business during the height of the hunting season. Winter was coming fast, and with it came the end of hunting trips until next year. No, she had to face it: She was up against the wall. It galled her that she couldn't turn her situation around at least not here, not now. Her only chance at turning this around was to move somewhere else, where she wouldn't have to deal with the competition of a jackass superstar. But she hated being a failure, at anything, anywhere, and under any circumstances. She hadn't failed just herself, but her dad and his faith in her. Why else would he have left the property and business to her if he hadn't thought she could make a go of it? Because there wasn't anyone else, she muttered, then, despite everything, she had to give a little laugh. Not that her dad hadn't loved her; he had. But whether or not he'd loved her hadn't factored into the decision to leave everything to her, because she was his only child and there literally hadn't been anyone else. Maybe if he'd had any inkling of having heart trouble before literally dropping dead, he'd have put the place up for sale and taken up a line of work that wasn't so physically demanding, but all in all Angie was glad that, if he had to die, at least he'd died doing what he loved. He'd been riding the range, not cooped up in a store or an office. She'd been living and working in Billings at the time; her job had been just an ordinary one, in the administrative office of a hospital, but it had paid her rent and she'd liked it okay. The thing was, she'd never had a great ambition to do anything in particular. All she wanted at the time was to support herself. So when her dad died, the logical thing had been to move back home and take over his guide business. After all, she'd often helped him before she moved away, so it wasn't as if she was a novice and didn't know how to conduct a guide trip. She was a decent tracker, and a decent shot. At the time, she hadn't seen any reason why she couldn't make a go of it, and she was kind of ready for a change anyway, so why not? And then she'd found something she hadn't expected to find: She loved it. She loved being out on the mountains, she loved being in charge of her own destiny. There was something special about stepping out of a tent into the pristine early morning and being overwhelmed by the solitude and beauty around her. How could she have gone so many years without realizing this was exactly what she wanted to do? Maybe she'd had to go away for a while in order to see how suited she was for this life. Not that she hadn't enjoyed living in a city; she had. She'd liked the variety, the people, the friends she made; she'd even taken some cooking classes and thought about maybe doing some catering on the side. But she loved being a guide, and enjoyed living here way more now than she had when she'd been growing up. She did wish she'd made some different

decisions, such as selling the horses and keeping the four-wheelers, instead of doing the exact opposite. Hindsight was great, except it was so damn slow in coming. She hadn't anticipated that the economy would bottom out and discretionary spending would almost disappear. She hadn't known Dare Callahan would move back home and siphon away most of her business. Why couldn't he have stayed in the military where he belonged, safely away from her little patch of Montana? If only No. No if onlies. Never mind that she was thirty-two and he'd given her butterflies. She didn't trust butterflies, didn't let herself get carried away by emotions and hormones. Once had been enough. She'd made such a fool of herself that whenever she thought of her abbreviated marriage her stomach still curdled from an almost overwhelming sense of embarrassment. A strong desire to leave Billings, the scene of the debacle, had made her that much more eager to take over her dad's guide business when he died. No doubt about it, if she'd been happily married at the time she'd have sold off the business and stayed in Billings, simply because she'd built a life there. When her personal life fell apart, though, she'd withdrawn so much that her friends had almost given up on her in exasperation. After moving back here and getting her feet under her again she'd mended those relationships a woman always needed other women but by then she'd fallen so in love with her way of life that dynamite couldn't have blown her back into an office setting. Thinking that she needed to send some e-mails when she got home, just to keep in touch, she opened the truck door and was about to climb into the cab when she abruptly remembered that she needed some nails and staples to repair fencing, which she might as well get now while she was right here at the hardware store and save herself a trip later. She also wanted to catch up on the community gossip, such as it was, with Evelyn French, the chatty half of the husband and wife team who owned the hardware store. Their son, Patrick, had been the only other kid her age in their little community, and all during their school years the Frenches and her dad had swapped out driving them to school in the nearest real town, forty miles away. Patrick was a cop now, in Spokane, married, with two ankle-biters of his own. Evelyn was crazy about her grandchildren, two little boys ages four and two, and always had time to relate the latest tales of what they'd said and done. She seemed to relish their mischief, as if she thought Patrick deserved everything they did. Remembering some of the things Patrick had gotten up to when they were growing up, Angie had to agree. She closed the door she'd opened and trudged across the parking lot, watching her step as she went around a deep pothole and when she lifted her head she saw him, the big man, the devil, Dare Callahan himself, coming straight at her from the parking area on the other side of the store, where his big black truck loomed like a shining, sinister metal monster. Seeing him was too much. Angie's heart gave a sudden hard thump, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach. Her reaction was completely automatic. She didn't stop to think, didn't give herself a pep talk, didn't consider how it looked; she simply turned around and headed back to her own truck, muttering under her breath. She'd pick up the nails and staples when she got back from the guide trip; she wouldn't have any time to work on the fencing until then, anyway. Running was cowardly, but at the same time she couldn't nod at him and be polite, couldn't pretend she hadn't just up-ended her world because of him. Damn it, guess she'd run into him at the hardware store immediately after putting her place up for sale, an action he'd forced her into taking. Sometimes coincidence really sucked. Hey! The deep bark, laden with anger, rolled across the space between them. Angie didn't look back. She didn't think he'd be talking to her after all, for over two years she'd gone out of her way to avoid him if possible and barely grunt a hello if forced to acknowledge him so she glanced around to see who he was talking to, because she hadn't noticed anyone else nearby. With a jolt she realized there wasn't anyone else. He was talking to her.

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