

[PDF] Strangers In The Night

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Description:

About the Author Linda Howard is the award-winning author of many New York Times bestsellers, including Drop Dead Gorgeous, Cover of Night, Killing Time, To Die For, Kiss Me While I Sleep, Cry No More, Dying to Please, Open Season, Mr. Perfect, All the Queen's Men, Now You See Her, Kill and Tell, and Son of the Morning. She lives in Alabama with her husband and two golden retrievers.

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From Lake Dreams: Chapter One

His eyes were like jewels, aquamarines as deep and vivid as the sea, burning through the mist that enveloped him. They glittered down at her, the expression in them so intense that she was frightened, and struggled briefly in his grasp. He soothed her, his voice rough with passion as he controlled her struggles, stroking and caressing until she was once more quivering with delight, straining upward to meet him. His hips hammered rhythmically at her, driving deep. His powerful body was bare, his iron muscles moving like oiled silk under his sweaty skin. The mist from the lake swirled so thickly around them that she couldn't see him clearly, could only feel him, inside and without, possessing her so fiercely and completely that she knew she would never be free of him. His features were lost in the mist, no matter how she strained her eyes to see him, no matter how she cried out in frustration. Only the hot jewels of his eyes burned through, eyes that she had seen before, through other mists --

Thea jerked awake, her body quivering with the echo of passion...and completion. Her skin was dewed with sweat, and she could hear her own breathing, coming hard and fast at first, then gradually slowing as her heartbeat settled into its normal pace. The dream always drained her of strength, left her wrung out and boneless from exhaustion.

She felt shattered, unable to think, overcome by both panic and passion. Her loins throbbed as if she had just made love; she twisted on the tangled sheets, pressing her thighs together to try to negate the sensation of still having him within her. *Him*. Nameless, faceless, but always *him*.

She stared at the dim early-morning light that pressed against the window, a graying so fragile that it scarcely penetrated the glass. There was no need to look at the clock; the dream always came in the dark, silent hour before dawn, and ended at the first approach of light.

It's just a dream, she told herself, reaching for any possible comfort. *Only a dream*.

But it was unlike any dream she'd ever had before.

She thought of it as a single dream, and yet the individual episodes were different. They -- it -- had begun almost a month before. At first she had simply thought of it as a weird dream, singularly vivid and frightening, but still only a dream. Then it had come again the next night. And the next. And every night since, until she dreaded going to sleep. She had tried setting her alarm to go off early, to head the dream off at the pass, so to speak, but it hadn't worked. Oh, the alarm had gone off, all right; but as she'd been lying in bed grumpily mourning the lost sleep and steeling herself to actually get up, the dream had come anyway. She had felt awareness fade, had felt herself slipping beneath the surface of consciousness into that dark world where the vivid images held sway. She'd tried to fight, to stay awake, but it simply hadn't been possible. Her heavy eyes had drifted shut, and he was there again...

He was angry with her, furious that she'd tried to evade him. His long dark hair swirled around his shoulders, the strands almost alive with the force of his temper. His eyes...oh, God, his eyes, as vivid as the dream, a hot blue-green searing through the clouds of mosquito netting that draped her bed. She lay very still, acutely aware of the cool linen sheets beneath her, of the heavy scents of the tropical night, of the heat that made even her thin nightgown feel oppressive...and most of all of her flesh quivering in frightened awareness of the man standing in the night-shadowed bedroom, staring at her through the swath of netting.

Frightened, yes, but she also felt triumphant. She had known it would come to this. She had pushed him, dared him, taunted him to this very outcome, this devil's bargain she would make with him. He was her enemy. And tonight he would become her lover.

He came toward her, his warrior's training evident in the grace and power of his every move. "You tried to evade me," he said, his voice as dark as the evening thunder. His fury rippled around him, almost visible in its potency. "You played your games, deliberately arousing me to the mindlessness of a stallion covering a mare...and now you dare try to hide from me? I should strangle you."

She rose up on one elbow. Her heart was pounding in her chest, painfully thudding against her ribs, and she felt as if she might faint. But her flesh was awakening to his nearness, discounting the danger. "I was afraid," she said simply, disarming him with the truth.

He paused, and his eyes burned more vividly than before. "Damn you," he whispered. "Damn both of us." Then his powerful warrior's hands were on the netting, freeing it, draping it over her upper body. The insubstantial wisp settled over her like a dream itself, and yet it still blurred his features, preventing her from seeing him clearly. His touch, when it came, wrenched a soft, surprised sound from her lips. His hands were rough and hot, sliding up her bare legs in a slow caress, lifting her nightgown out of the way. Violent hunger, all the more fierce for being unwilling, emanated from him as he stared at the shadowed juncture of her thighs.

So it was to be that way, then, she thought, and braced herself. He intended to take her virginity without preparing her. So be it. If he thought he could make her cry out in pain and shock, he would be disappointed. He was a warrior, but she would show him that she was his equal in courage.

He took her that way, pulled to the edge of the bed and with only her lower body bared, and the mosquito netting between them. He took her with anger, and with tenderness. He took her with a passion that seared her, with a completeness that marked her forever as his. And, in the end, she did cry out. That triumph was his, after all. But her cries weren't of pain, but of pleasure and fulfillment, and a glory she hadn't known existed.

That was the first time he'd made love to her, the first time she'd awakened still trembling from a climax so sweet and intense that she'd wept in the aftermath, huddled alone in her tangled bed and longing for more. The first time, but definitely not the last.

Thea got out of bed and walked to the window, restlessly rubbing her hands up and down her arms as she stared out at the quiet courtyard of her apartment building and waited for dawn to truly arrive, for the cheerful light to banish the lingering, eerie sense of unreality. Was she losing her mind? Was this how insanity began, this gradual erosion of reality until one was unable to tell what was real and what wasn't? Because the here and now was what didn't feel real to her anymore, not as real as the dreams that ushered in the dawn. Her work was suffering; her concentration was shot. If she worked for anyone but herself, she thought wryly, she would be in big trouble.

Nothing in her life had prepared her for this. Everything had been so *normal*, so Cleaverish. Great parents, a secure home life, two brothers who had, despite all earlier indications, grown up to be nice, interesting men whom she adored. Nothing traumatic had happened to her when she was growing up; there had been the tedium of school, the almost suffocating friendships youngsters seem to need, the usual wrangles and arguments, and the long, halcyon summer days spent at the lake. Every summer, her courageous mother would pack the station wagon and bravely set forth to the summer house, where she would ride herd on three energetic kids for most of the summer. Her father would drive up every weekend, and would take some of his vacation there, too. Thea remembered long, hot days of swimming and fishing, of bees buzzing in the grass, birdsong, fireflies winking in the dusk, crickets and frogs chirping, the plop of a turtle into the water, the mouthwatering smell of hamburgers cooking over charcoal. She remembered being bored, and fretting to go back home, but by the time summer would come again she'd be in a fever to get back to the lake.

If anything in her life was unusual, it was her chosen occupation, but she enjoyed painting houses. She was willing to tackle any paint job, inside or out, and customers seemed to love her attention to detail. She was also getting more and more mural work, as customers learned of that particular talent and asked her to transform walls. Even her murals were cheerfully normal; nothing mystic or tortured there. So why had she suddenly begun having these weird time-period dreams, featuring the same faceless man, night after night after night?

In the dreams, his name varied. He was Marcus, and dressed as a Roman centurion. He was Luc, a Norman invader. He was Neill, he was Duncan...he was so many different men she should never have been able to remember the names, and yet she did. He called her different names in the dreams, too: Judith, Willa, Moira, Anice. She was all of those women, and all of those women were the same. And he was always the same, no matter his name.

He came to her in the dreams, and when he made love to her, he took more than her body. He invaded her soul, and filled her with a longing that never quite left, the sense that she was somehow incomplete without him. The pleasure was so shattering, the sensations so real, that when she had awakened the first time and lain there weeping, she had fearfully reached down to touch herself, expecting to feel the wetness of his seed. It hadn't been there, of course. He didn't exist, except in her mind.

Her thirtieth birthday was less than a week away, and in all those years she had never felt as intensely about a real man as she did about the chimera who haunted her dreams.

She couldn't keep her mind on her work. The mural she'd just finished for the Kalmans had lacked her customary attention to detail, though Mrs. Kalman had been happy with it. Thea knew it hadn't been up to her usual standards, even if Mrs. Kalman didn't. She had to stop dreaming about him. Maybe she should see a therapist, or perhaps even a psychiatrist. But everything in her rebelled against that idea, against recounting those dreams to a stranger. It would be like making love in public.

But she had to do something. The dreams were becoming more intense, more frightening. She had developed such a fear of water that, yesterday, she had almost panicked when driving over a bridge. She, who had always loved water sports of any kind, and who swam like a fish! But now she had to steel herself to even look at a river or lake, and the fear was growing worse.

In the last three dreams, they had been at the lake. Her lake, where she had spent the wonderful summers of her childhood. He had invaded her home turf, and she was suddenly more frightened than she could ever remember being before. It was as if he had been stalking her in her dreams, inexorably moving closer and closer to a conclusion that she already knew.

Because, in her dreams, only sometimes did he make love to her. Sometimes he killed her.

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