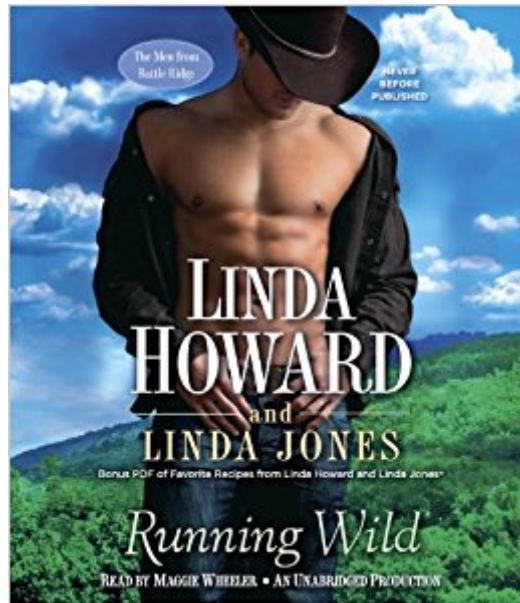




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Running Wild: The Men From Battle Ridge



Synopsis

In book 1 of this steamy new contemporary Western romance series by two blockbuster authors, a cowboy and a woman on the run take a stand and fight for love. Carlin Reed lives in fear, off the grid, moving from place to place. So Battle Ridge, Wyoming, a small town in the middle of nowhere, seems like a good place to lie low for a while. But after becoming cook and housekeeper to cattle rancher Zeke Decker, Carlin suspects that she's made her first mistake. Rugged, sexy, and too distracting for his own good, Zeke is pure temptation mixed with something deep and primal that makes Carlin feel almost safe. Soon things are getting way too hot in the kitchen. Zeke doesn't challenge Carlin's terms: cash, dead bolts, and no questions. It is easy to see that she's a woman in trouble. Problem is, he's so blindsided by his attraction to her he can't think straight. Zeke tries to stay all business, no complications •but that game plan is sabotaged the second Carlin gets under his skin. And when her terrifying past follows her to the ranch, Carlin faces a heartbreaking choice: run away from the man she loves, or put him in the crosshairs of a madman.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Linda Howard is the award-winning author of many New York Times bestsellers, including *Prey*, *Veil of Night*, and *Ice*. She lives in Alabama with her husband and a golden retriever. Linda Jones is the acclaimed USA Today bestselling author of more than sixty novels, including *Untouchable*, *22 Nights*, and *Bride by Command*. She lives in Huntsville, Alabama.

Chapter One

10 months later Battle Ridge, Wyoming, didn't look like much. Carlin Reed pulled her faded red Subaru into a parking space in front of an empty store and looked around. There probably wouldn't be any jobs here, but she'd ask around anyway. She'd found work in some of the damndest places, doing things that she'd never before have considered. Work was work, money was money, and she'd learned not to be picky. She wasn't above doing yard work, washing dishes, or just about anything else as long as it didn't involve prostituting herself. Her first attempt at mowing a lawn on a riding mower had been something worthy of a clip on YouTube, but she'd learned. From what she could see, Battle Ridge had fallen on hard times. Her atlas gave the population as 2,387, but the atlas was six years old, and from what she had seen driving in, she doubted Battle Ridge supported that many residents now. She'd passed empty houses, some with "For Sale" signs that had been up so long they'd become dingy and weather-beaten, and empty stores with "For Sale or Lease" notices in the windows. Here in the West it would still be considered a fair-sized town, especially in a state the size of Wyoming with a grand total population of half a million people. Nevertheless, the reality was that half the buildings around her were standing empty, which meant she'd likely be moving on. Not right this minute, though. Right now, she was hungry. Not surprisingly, traffic was light. Hungry or not, Carlin sat in the dusty four-wheel-drive SUV and through her dark sunglasses carefully studied everything around her, every vehicle, every person. Caution had become second nature to her. She hated losing the unconscious freedom and spontaneity she'd once known, but looking back she could only marvel at how unaware she'd been, how vulnerable. The level of her vulnerability might change depending on circumstances, but she was damned if she'd add in the factor of not being aware. She'd already noted that the license plates of the cars and trucks parked on each side of the street were all from Wyoming. There was little chance her movements could have been anticipated, since she hadn't known she'd be stopping here, but she still checked. Two buildings down on the right was a café, The Pie Hole; three pickups were parked in front even though two o'clock in the afternoon wasn't exactly a prime mealtime. The name of the café amused her, and she wondered about the person who had come up with it, whether a quirky sense of humor or a don't-give-a-damn attitude was behind the choice. Her amusement was momentary, though, and she returned to studying her surroundings. Directly behind her was a hardware store, another small cluster of vehicles was

parked in front of it. To the left was a general store, a Laundromat, and a feed store. A block back she'd passed a small bank, and beside it had been a post office. Down the street she could see a gas station sign. There would probably be a school, and maybe people from fifty miles around drove their kids here. Was the town big enough to support a doctor or a dentist? To her, it seemed like a good deal: a thousand or more patients, and no competition. A person could do worse. After she'd watched for a few minutes, she settled back and watched some more, waiting for that inner sense to tell her when she'd been patient long enough.

She'd learned to listen to her own instincts. The normalcy seeped into her bones. There was nothing frightening here, nothing unusual going on. She got her baseball cap from the passenger seat, pulled it on, and grabbed her road atlas and hooded TEC jacket before getting out of the Subaru. Though it was summer, the air was cool. The TEC was very lightweight, just a couple layers of nylon, but it had so many pockets that it had actually taken her days to locate all of them. If she had to run, everything she needed was in those pockets: ID, money, a throwaway cellphone - with the battery removed and stored in yet another pouch, a pocket knife, a small LED flashlight, even a couple of ibuprofen and some protein bars. Just in case. Seemed as if these days she surrounded herself with "just in case" items and scenarios; she was aware and prepared. She hit the lock button on the remote, and slipped the key and remote into her right front jean pocket, then headed toward the little café; her leggy stride covered the distance at a fast clip, just one more detail about her that had changed during the past year. Once, she'd never gone anywhere in a hurry; now her instinct was to move, to get from A to B, get her business accomplished, then move on. While it was true that a rolling stone gathered no moss, she wasn't worried about getting mossy; more to the point, a moving target was harder to hit. Still, when she reached the café door, her own reflection startled her. Baseball cap, long blond hair in a ponytail, sunglasses - when had she acquired the whole Sarah Connor Terminator vibe? When had she become someone she barely recognized? The answer to that was easy: the moment she'd realized Brad was trying to kill her. She opened the door of The Pie Hole; a bell over the door sang as she walked in. Stepping to the side, she took a moment to do a fast assessment, looking for another exit - just in case - evaluating the three men currently riding the stools at the bar counter, their legs spread and boot heels hooked on the railings as if they were on horseback - again, just in case. There was no clearly marked rear door she could see from her vantage point, though there was one door with a plain "Keep Out" sign. Could be a storage closet, or an exit. She could also assume there was a back door off the kitchen, though, and maybe a window in the

bathroom. Not that she'd need either, during this short stop. The three men at the counter evaluated her right back, and she found herself tensing. She didn't like attracting notice. The more she stayed under the radar, the less likely it was that Brad would be able to track her. It was reassuring that there was nothing remotely familiar about any of the men, and that their clothing proclaimed them local. She'd gotten good at judging what was local—wherever "local" happened to be—and what wasn't. These men fit right in, from their creased hats down to the worn heels of their boots. She shouldn't have come in here. Too late she realized that any stranger would stand out in a place this small, where the locals might not all personally know one another, but they'd certainly recognize who belonged and who didn't. She didn't. She thought about leaving, but that would attract even more attention. Besides, she was hungry. The best thing to do was the normal thing: sit down and order. She'd eat, pay the bill, then move on down the road. The café itself was a smallish, pleasant-looking place, gray linoleum floor, white walls, an honest-to-God jukebox against the back wall, red booths along the street-front windows, and a smattering of small round tables in the center of the place. The counter, complete with a couple of clear pie cases and an old-fashioned cash register, ran the length of the right side of the room. A pretty brunette in a pink waitress uniform stood behind the counter, talking to the three men with the ease of long acquaintance; like the men, she'd glanced up at Carlin's entrance, and even through her sunglasses Carlin caught the brilliant glint of strikingly pale eyes, making her alter her grade of the waitress's looks from pretty to something more. Maybe those eyes were why the three cowboys were camping on those stools, rather than the lure of food. Good. If they were flirting with the waitress, they were less likely to pay a lot of attention to anyone else. The last booth was positioned against a solid wall; Carlin chose that one and instinctively slid in so she was facing the doorway . . . just in case. The plastic menu was inserted between the napkin holder and the salt and pepper shakers; she removed her cap and sunglasses and grabbed the menu, more from curiosity than anything else, because all she wanted was coffee and pie. She'd get something to eat, and use the break to study her map of Wyoming, figure out exactly where this little country road went, and pick a place to stop for a while. She'd been so sure Brad wouldn't bother to follow her to Dallas. She'd been wrong, disastrously wrong. Now when she stopped she took extra precautions. No one got her social security number. There could be no bank account, no W-2, damn it; somehow she had to fall off the radar, something that was increasingly hard to do with everything computerized. He'd bragged about his computer skills and she'd hoped that was

all it was—bragging—but evidently not. She didn't know how he'd found her in Dallas, but he had, and she'd barely made it out alive. Jina hadn't. If she let herself think about what had happened her stomach would knot in panic, and she'd feel as if she were strangling on her own breath, so she'd pushed the memory away and focused on simply moving, doing what was necessary to stay alive. He'd try again, but she was damned if she'd make it easy for him. Somehow she'd figure out what to do, a way to outsmart him, set a trap—something. She couldn't live like this forever. But for now, she couldn't stay in any one place too long. Unfortunately, she didn't have enough cash to just keep driving around the country on a permanent road trip, so she'd work her way around the country. Ideally, she'd find someplace to stay through the winter, which was why she'd ventured this far north. People on the run tended to head toward warmer climes, bigger cities. She'd done the opposite. She'd told Brad once that she hated the cold, and joked about one day retiring to Florida. Maybe, if he remembered that detail, he wouldn't think to look for her in Wyoming. She studied the menu. The offerings were simple: eggs, burgers, and a mysterious "daily special"—along with, of course, the "pie of the day." Today was Thursday. Maybe Thursday's pie was apple. "What can I get you?" The brunette in pink arrived at the booth. She didn't carry an order pad, but with such a limited menu, there probably wasn't much need for one. Carlin glanced up. "Kat" was embroidered on the breast pocket of the pink uniform, and the waitress's eyes were even more striking close up, a kind of electric gray that tended toward blue, as clear as a mountain lake. "What's the pie of the day?" "We have cherry and lemon meringue." "I was kind of hoping for apple," Carlin said, "but cherry will be fine. And coffee, black." "Coming right up." After Kat walked away from the table, Carlin placed her atlas on the table and opened it to Wyoming. Her finger traced the road that had led her to Battle Ridge. She followed it on beyond, to other names of other towns and other roads and miles and miles of nothing, on into Montana. In the periphery of her vision she saw Kat approaching with her order and she moved the atlas to the side to make room. A silverware set wrapped in a napkin and a small plate bearing a huge slice of cherry pie were slid in front of her, followed by a saucer and an empty cup. Lifting the coffeepot from her tray, Kat expertly filled the cup. "Are you lost?" she asked, nodding toward the atlas. "Not really." "Where are you headed?" "That was the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question." "I

haven't decided yet. "That sounds like freedom," observed the waitress, and walked away without saying anything else. Picking up her fork, Carlin took her first bite. The not-Apple pie was amazingly good. For a minute, maybe two, she forgot all her troubles and simply indulged her taste buds. The crust was flaky and buttery, and the filling was perfectly sweetened. The coffee was good, too. She took a deep breath, and realized that it was the first time in weeks that she could honestly say she was relaxed. It wouldn't last, but for now she'd take it. While she was eating, a man came in for a slice of pie to go. Seemed as if she wasn't the only one who thought the pie was outstanding. Idly she listened as he and Kat chatted, about neighbors, about the weather. Yes, beyond a doubt the waitress was as much of a pull as the pie, at least as far as the male populace was concerned. Carlin looked out the window. Battle Ridge wasn't much to look at, that was a fact, but it had everything a small town needed, at least as far as she was concerned: a place to eat, a Laundromat, a general store. The people who passed by The Pie Hole all glanced in and waved, even though they didn't stop. Pulling her jacket close, she unzipped one of the pockets to get money for her food, instinctively counting the bills. Oh, there was plenty for the pie and coffee, but not enough, not nearly enough. Living on the road was eating through her savings faster than she'd expected. She gathered her things and walked toward the cash register with money in hand. The man who'd come in for lemon meringue left, his gaze lingering on Carlin for a moment too long. There it was again; the look was curious, not malicious - she knew the difference - but one more person had noticed her. Kat took her money, rang up the sale, and passed back the change. Carlin laid down a dollar tip. It wasn't much, but percentagewise it was generous, and no matter how poor she was she wasn't going to stiff a nice person who'd earned a tip. Carlin knew she should take her atlas and go, but she didn't. There might be a job opportunity in town, but if she just drove away without asking, she'd never know. She slid her butt half onto a stool and asked, "How long have you worked here?" A slow smile curled Kat's mouth. "Seems like forever. It's my place. I'm cook, waitress, manager, and chief bottle-washer all rolled into one. Out of all that, one thing registered uppermost. "You made the pie? It was great." "I did. Thanks." The grin widened. "Apple tomorrow, if you're still around." "Depends on whether or not anyone around here is looking for help." Carlin figured there were two places in a town where pretty much everything would be common knowledge: the beauty salon, and the café. She'd planned to eat, fill the Subaru's gas tank, and head on down the road, but her plans were

fluid, and she couldn't take advantage of whatever break came her way. For a long moment, Kat was silent, her gaze still clear but not giving anything away as she did her own assessment.

"Maybe. Can you cook?"

"I can learn."

She could cook enough to get by, for herself, but she for certain wasn't on Kat's level. If anyone had ever asked her what her life's ambitions were, cooking would have been way down close to the bottom of the list. Okay, it probably wouldn't even have made the list. Her life had changed though, and she was willing to do any kind of work.

"You got anything against doing dishes and mopping floors?"

"Nope."

She wasn't proud; she could scrub floors on her knees, if that was what it took to earn some money.

"Ever done any waitressing?"

"A little. It's been a while."

"Some things never change."

Kat pursed her lips. "I can only afford to hire you part-time, and the pay isn't exactly great."

One thing she hadn't expected when she asked about available jobs was to find one here in this little café. She wasn't about to turn it down, but now came the tough part.

"That's okay. The thing is . . ."

She paused, looking at the three other customers to make certain they couldn't hear, then glancing out the window to take a quick study of the street before taking a deep breath and turning back to Kat.

"I need to be paid in cash. No record, no taxes, no paperwork."

Kat's easy smile died, and something flashed in those clear eyes.

"Are you in trouble? More specifically, are you in trouble?"

Carlin tilted her head, considering that, then shrugged. "I guess you could look at it both ways, but I'd say in trouble."

"What kind of trouble? Legal, or man? It has to be one or the other."

"Isn't that the truth?" Carlin muttered, then said,

"Man. Stalker, to be specific."

"Small-town didn't mean stupid."

"Why didn't you go to the cops?"

"Because he is one," she said flatly.

"Well, that complicates matters, doesn't it?"

Kat's eyes narrowed. "There are bound to be good cops, too, wherever you're from. I really hate the thought that one bad apple can force you to take to the road. Maybe you should try again."

"Twice was enough to suit me."

"Well, shit."

Kat stared at her, hard, her gaze as sharp as a knife's edge. Carlin had no idea what she saw, but whatever it was, her next words were brisk and decisive.

"You're hired. Just part-time, like I said. Some cooking, the easy stuff, but mostly cleaning, waiting tables. I do all the baking. Business is okay, but I'm hardly raking in the dough, if you'll pardon the pun. I'll make it worth your while, though. Still

interested? "Yes." She said it without an instant hesitation. "Do you have somewhere to stay?" Since Carlin had just now as in the very second Kat had made her offer decided to stick around, the answer to that was a big no. She shook her head. "Do you know where there's a room I can rent? Nothing too expensive, just a room with a bed." She hadn't seen a motel driving in, but surely there was someone in town who would rent her a room. Kat tilted her head toward the single restroom door at the back of the cafe; beside it was that closed door that was decorated with a "Keep Out" sign. "I have a place upstairs. You can stay there. No charge for employees," she added. "It's really more of an attic, but in the winter I stay up there when the weather's so bad I don't want to drive back and forth from the house. Might as well have someone living up there," she said, as if the offer wasn't a big deal. It was, at least to Carlin. She wasn't so proud that she'd argue about paying rent. Every dollar she saved gave her more of a chance of not getting killed. Besides, it wouldn't be for long. She'd make a few dollars, catch her breath, maybe come up with a more permanent plan. "Thank you." She managed a smile. Having the near future settled took away some of her anxiety. "I can start right now; just tell me what to do." "Good deal." Kat offered a hand across the counter. "Since we're going to be working together, I should introduce myself. Kat Bailey." Carlin hesitated a moment, thinking hard, then took the offered hand. She wasn't ready to give her real name to anyone, not until she knew exactly how Brad had found her the last time. Not that she didn't trust Kat; she'd simply learned that she really couldn't be too careful. Her gaze scanned the counter. A few feet away was a full bottle of ketchup, and inspiration struck. "Hunt," she said swiftly. "Carlin Hunt." Kat snorted as she ended the handshake. "Well, at least you didn't look at the floor and tell me your last name was Linoleum." Caught. She wasn't a very good liar, and that had to end. Like it or not, she had to get better at spinning tales. Wrinkling her nose and not bothering to deny the fib, Carlin waited for the offer of a job and a place to stay to be rescinded. But Kat merely gave her a brisk nod, and that was that. "Get your stuff; you can at least get unpacked before you start work." Evidently a fake surname wasn't something that upset Kat Bailey's apple cart. As Carlin went out to the Subaru to fetch her backpack, she blew out a huge breath of relief. She had a place to stay and a way to make a few dollars, a way that didn't require a lawn mower or a weed eater. And tomorrow there would even be apple pie. It was the first time in a long while that she'd been

able to think of a "tomorrow" that wasn't full of anxiety and uncertainty.

I'd rate this book a solid 4 1/2. It turned out to be unexpectedly good, really good, despite some negative reviews. This is not a mystery so there is no complicated twists and surprises. The reader knows from the start who the bad guy is and what he's trying to do. Same thing for the heroine. The real draw of the story here is to see how the main characters evolve from being a world apart to becoming a team, a family. There is some psychological suspense. It's a classic stalker story, better than most, in a western setting and with a good character study mixed in. Both the main characters and the secondary characters are well fleshed out and interesting. The little town of Battle Ridge as well as the life on the ranch are well developed so they become real to the reader, without drawn out, boring descriptions. Overall, the story is well-written, with healthy doses of humor. The story develops naturally and logically, it doesn't feel rushed or too short (which happens often nowadays). I just read it a second time with great pleasure! I'm wondering though, as this seems to be the first book in 'The Men from Battle Ridge' series, why there still hasn't been a second book in this series...

This story is mostly very good, but the resolution hinges on a minor supporting character being a ridiculously body so-and-so who makes some fairly ridiculous assumptions and the author acting like they (the assumptions) are not only perfectly reasonable but also the only real conclusion this person should or could have come to. The author does this on a fairly regular basis in her books, though, so it's not that far out of the normal way of her stories. Overall, very enjoyable.

Caitlin Reed has been running for more than a year; she is a victim of a stalker who will not give her up after only two dates. Living off the grid is the only way for her to feel safe. Taking jobs that pay cash she saves enough to move to the next town until she can save enough to move again, in fear of her life. She finally ends up in Battle Ridge, Wyoming working in a small restaurant for the Katy Bailey sister of Zeke Decker. When Katy can't keep Caitlin as a waitress any longer she suggests she work for Zeke, who has been half-heartedly looking for a male cook for his ranch, Zeke refuses because of problems he had with another younger cook, but when an accident happens at the ranch, he has no choice. Caitlin wants to stay but, she also knows how Zeke feels about hiring a woman so she gets a guarantee that he will keep her employed until spring after some discussion Caitlin agrees. Battle Ridge is the best hiding place she's found in the past year and she is reluctant to leave. I loved this story, the characters were great and I agree, with the review that said Ms

Howard went back to form, this is like her earlier books. Yes, you can guess a lot of the plot but it was handled well and the outcome was not rushed. A good read.

This is another adventure I'm glad to experience from the safety of my armchair. It's not enough that the guy beats you, cyber stalks you, kills because of he's obsessed with you but the people who should protect you side with him. You're safe until a well meaning busybody puts you back on the grid. I was on tenderhooks as I devoured the page wondering whether the h was going to flee or the H was going to talk her down. Besides the extreme central story the guys cooking attempts are hilarious

WAAAYYYY too much money for this type of book. I have stopped buying books that cost \$7.99 & are not lendable to other Kindle users. I feel this is a rip off. I could likely get this book at my local grocery store for less than I paid, then loan it to friends or donate it. With Linda Howard and these prices, I am opting for checking it out at the library instead.

The series is set in a small Wyoming town with a likable cast of a characters. Carlin Reed lived in Houston and her two dates with a police officer ended up with an obsessed manic. When her cries for help went unanswered from his fellow officers she decided she needed to move and hoped that would deter him. But he followed her and in a case of mistaken identity her friend was killed in her place. She decides is time of go off the grid and ends up in a dying town called Battle Ridge, Wyoming. She befriends the local diner owner and starts working there to replenish her dwindling cash supply. She tells her the truth about what she is running from and that she needs to be paid under the table. Zeke Decker's owns and runs a ranch just lost his cook, housekeeper and a woman that was as close to a mother when she decides to go live with her daughter. He knows he is in trouble as his men expect 3 good meals a day and he cant cook and is the worst housekeeper. After months of one of his young ranch hands being the cook with disastrous results he finally gives in to his cousin's request to give Carlin the job. These two do a dance around each other for quite a while. She has her secret she tries to hide and refuses to get involved with anyone when she knows any time she may have to run again. He's already had one bad marriage behind him and wasn't looking to get married again but something about Carlin starts to chip away at him. Most of the book is what I would categorize as a contemporary western romance. The beginning and the end have suspenseful moments that were well written.

I am huge huge fan of Linda Howard. Just love the way she etches the leads..not to mention their sizzling chemistry and thoroughly enjoyable repertoire.. be in Duncan's Bride or All Queen's Men. It would be tough for me to choose my favourite among her writings because they are just too many of them. But Running Wild doesn't have that touch of hers. It felt more like a cook book than a love story. It is most definitely much, much better than her Independent Wife (God knows what happened when she wrote that one! I literally threw the book away.) What she cooked when and how was highlighted more than what each of them were feeling or even talking. It's definitely nowhere near any of my favourites but can skim through once if you have nothing else to do.

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