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By Linda Lael Miller

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Editorial Review

Review

"Midwest Book Review" An exciting romantic suspense thriller....Linda Lael Miller at her intriguing best.

About the Author

Linda Lael Miller is the author of seventy historical and contemporary romance novels, many of which are set in the American West. She was awarded the Romance Writers of America's prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007.

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Chapter One

Cave Creek, Arizona

I didn't kill Harvey Kredd; somebody beat me to it. That night at the Horny Toad, a week after his untimely and gruesome death, my brain fried by an afternoon in the courtroom, where I was hammered by an assistant D.A., I was ready to dig the boss up and empty my trusty .38 into his chest, just in case there was so much as a flutter of life left in him.

Stopping by the Toad for beer and burgers wasn't my idea; all I wanted to do was go home, put up my feet, and knock back a couple of glasses of Chablis. I ended up there because my car was in the shop and my friend Loretta, having picked me up at the courthouse, was behind the wheel and therefore in control of my immediate destiny. I guess she figured neither of us was in any condition to cook; she'd worn herself out taking back-to-back yoga and Pilates classes while I'd argued, and lost, one of the half-dozen crappy cases I'd inherited after Harvey took a bullet between the eyes and ended up facedown in a bowl of yakisoba, breathing noodles. Since his death, everybody in the firm had been scrambling to take up the slack, and we were all stressed out.

Now, I was tired and stressed out, and not just because of Harvey's recent demise and its many and varied ramifications. A year before, I'd defended a guy named Ned Lench on charges of drunken driving and negligent homicide, and won an acquittal on the proverbial technicality. I'd lost a lot in the process -- most notably, my quasi-relationship with Detective Anthony Sonterra, who had busted his very fine butt for eight months to nail Lench in the first place. To make matters infinitely worse, a few days prior to Harvey's murder, Lench, tanked up on coke and booze and God knows what else, had crashed his pickup truck into a minivan at the corner of Scottsdale Road and Chaparral, killing himself in the process.

Thanks to him -- and partly to me -- three others were dead besides, two of them children.

Reporters had been dogging me ever since, clamoring for comments. I guess they wanted to know how I managed to face myself in the mirror every morning, and the answer to that was simple: I was careful not to look too closely.

So far, I'd kept my face out of the papers, but my name was all over the place.

Clare Westbrook, attorney at law, tireless champion of scumbags everywhere.

Loretta was in one of her save-the-world-starting-with-Clare moods that night, determined to see me through

the latest crisis, or *drag* me through, if necessary. And she'd feed me in the process, or die trying.

"Clare," she'd said, during the ride up Highway 51 in her Lexus, "you're running on the nutritional dregs, and I'll bet there isn't squat to eat at your place, so we're having dinner out."

One of the most exasperating things about Loretta -- besides her seemingly bottomless bank account and the fact that she's drop-dead gorgeous -- was that she was nearly always right. What with all the drama in my life of late, I hadn't had a chance to hit the grocery store. My thirteen-year-old-niece, Emma, and I had been living on stuff from the freezer and donations from Mrs. Kravinsky, our neighbor. Tonight, Emma was doing homework at a friend's house. Since Mrs. K spent every Wednesday afternoon hunched over a collection of bingo cards at one of the casinos, I couldn't count on finding one of her strange but nourishing casseroles waiting on my doormat, and the last entrée in the freezer was sprouting ice-fur.

The Horny Toad's parking lot was particularly crowded, which is most likely why I didn't spot a certain SUV in time to save myself a major dose of aggravation. As Loretta and I went in to give our names to the hostess, we passed a lot of cheerful tourist types gathered at the picnic tables, waiting for inside seating. The Toad is a popular hangout for both tourists and locals, especially in late September, when the snowbird season begins in earnest.

Loretta vanished as soon as we'd been told it would be at least thirty minutes, making her way to the back room, where a country band was playing. No doubt she was hoping to snag a cardboard carton of free pretzels.

I sank into a chair at the video-game table near the front door and waited, keeping an eye out for media types. The narrow space between where I was sitting and the bar was packed with an elbow-to-elbow crowd of winter visitors, obsessive golfers, and upscale types with swanky homes hidden away in the rocks and behind the gates of walled communities sporting names like Estancia, Whisper Rock, and Troon.

I sighed and cupped my chin in one hand, resting my elbow on Pac-Man, staring glumly down at my own shadowy reflection in the dark glass, with its intermittent sparks of light -- little universes, dying and being born, endlessly.

I thought of Harvey.

I could hardly believe he was dead, though I'd definitely fantasized along those lines a time or two in the five years of our professional association, especially after the Lench case, and when he dumped the worst rich-brat felony cases on my desk. At Kredd and Associates, we weren't expected to fight the good fight and abide quietly by the court's decision, we were mandated to win. No excuse would suffice if the verdict was "guilty"; Harvey took every defeat personally, whether he'd argued the case or not, and there was always hell to pay back at the office when the dust settled.

A hand on my shoulder brought me back from my wanderings. I figured it was Loretta, returning at last with the pretzels, so I got a wicked shock when Tony Sonterra lowered his hot self into the chair opposite mine. If I'd had a list of everybody I did not want to see at that moment, Sonterra would have been near the top, right up there with the aforementioned reporters, my first college boyfriend, and Harvey's ghost.

He let his dark gaze slide over my best suit; Sonterra may be a pain, but he is also seriously fine to look at: thirty-five, half Irish and half Hispanic, his hair almost black, his eyes brown. He's six feet tall, with the kind of build that belongs in a Bowflex commercial, and that slow Latin smile of his ought to be registered somewhere. My coloring is similar to his, and I'm five-nine. I found myself speculating that if he and I were to have children...

Well, I rounded up and corralled *that* stray thought quickly enough. Although we'd had some steamy sex in

our brief and tempestuous time as an item, before the Lench case, these days Sonterra and I were about as compatible as Pakistan and India. I was still a little hung up on him -- I'd hardly dated since our breakup -- and though our paths crossed occasionally in the halls of justice, I usually made a point of staying clear.

Mrs. Kravinsky flitted into my mind just then, like an absentee fairy godmother -- my thinking really was scattered -- but she served to distract me from memories of Sonterra and myself in the throes of sweaty, mind-blowing passion, so I was grateful. Mrs. K was seventy-four years old, a dear friend who lived in the condo across from mine, looked after Emma when the need arose, and spent a significant share of her time lighting pink candles in a brave but altogether pitiful effort to conjure up an affair to remember for yours truly. If Sonterra was the result, the Cosmos definitely had a sense of humor.

I sensed Loretta hovering somewhere in the mob behind me, giving us room to hang ourselves. Loretta is as much of a romantic as Mrs. Kravinsky, though her matchmaking efforts are subtler. Why bother with candles, moon phases, and rhyming chants when it's so easy to steer two people together in a crowded restaurant and then conveniently vanish?

"What do you want?" I asked. With Sonterra, it pays to be direct. He's smart as hell, but he's a man and, by virtue of the testosterone factor, somewhat obtuse.

"We don't have time to cover the subject of what I want," Sonterra answered, a little wearily. He carried a folded newspaper under one arm and smiled again, showing those great teeth of his. "You get a real job yet?"

I ignored the remark, hoping he'd go away, knowing all the while that I couldn't get that lucky.

"Too bad about Kredd taking a bullet in the frontal lobe," he said.

I wanted to tell Sonterra that I thought he was a rude and insensitive bastard, but I refrained. One of us had to show some decorum; there was, after all, such a thing as respect for the dead, even when the corpse in question was Harvey Kredd's.

"*Hello, Clare,*" Sonterra said pointedly. The silent treatment never worked with him. "Or should I call you 'Counselor,' since our relationship is strictly professional these days?"

"What 'relationship' would that be?" I snapped, wishing Loretta would put in an appearance already. She knew the whole sad story of my thing for Sonterra -- or most of it, anyway. Even if she hadn't set me up, she'd abandoned me. Some friend. "We didn't relate, Sonterra. We had sex."

His dark eyes glowed. Maybe "smoldered" would be a better word. "Oh, yeah," he agreed, in a sort of rough-edged purr. "We definitely did."

A scene flashed into my mind; the two of us lying under an overturned rowboat during a visit to his lake cabin up north, while a summer rainstorm pocked the earth. Sonterra, touching me in places that had since frozen over. I felt light-headed all of the sudden, and a warm, spreading sensation settled between my pelvic bones.

I promptly put the reaction down to a combination of malnutrition and the emotional rigors of the last ten days or so. When you grow up the way I did, denial is second nature.

"Go away," I said, without much hope that he would oblige.

"Not a chance," Sonterra replied, and a muscle tightened in his jaw. He set the still-folded newspaper on the game table with a slight whack.

I braced myself, refused to look at Sonterra *or* the newspaper. "Harvey's funeral was nice," I said, aware that the remark was inane, but desperate to dodge what I knew was coming. Sonterra and a slew of his cop friends had been present for the services, wearing dark suits and looking suitably grim. I suspected they'd only wanted to make sure Harvey was in the box.

Super Cop offered no comment; he took a sip from his beer, and I found myself looking at him after all, watching his throat as he swallowed. He set the chilled bottle down with a thump, leaving a frosty ring on the glass tabletop; his eyes narrowed, and a muscle flexed in his jaw. I knew that look well enough, since Sonterra and I have a history; denial no longer served. This was no casual encounter -- he was after something, and I concluded that it must be big, if he was willing to speak to me in even a halfway civil tone. Following the Lench trial, which was held in the judge's chambers, Sonterra had trailed me back to the offices of Kredd and Associates, in Scottsdale, breathing fire. There, in my cubicle, we'd had the kind of no-going-back yelling match that can be broken up only with a fire hose.

Sonterra had never forgiven me for unraveling a righteous bust. The way I saw it, I was just doing my job, which is not always pleasant.

Feeling cornered, the Toad's cheerful atmosphere notwithstanding, I tried to establish a psychic link with Loretta. *Get over here, damn it. I'm in way over my head, and going down for the third time.*

Nothing. According to Emma, who was terminally pubescent, I don't have a psychic bone in my body. Furthermore, she maintained, I'm so practical, so "lawyerly," that I probably don't even *have* a right brain.

"You didn't cry at Krudd's funeral," Sonterra observed, when I failed to pick up the conversational ball. It was a little joke with the cops, mispronouncing Harvey's last name. To say there was no rapport between the Scottsdale Police Department and my employer would be elegant understatement, and the Phoenix contingent hadn't been wild about him, either, nor had the sheriff's office. The lawmen spent their time rounding up bad guys, and Harvey had devoted his very successful career to springing them in grand style -- at a price, of course. Zero down and a few dollars a month, for the rest of their arguably natural lives, for the 1-800 crowd, which was probably the most lucrative, due to the sheer volume of idiots out there, and serious upfront bucks for the well-to-do.

"Neither did you," I retorted acidly, wishing I had a beer, too. It would have served two purposes -- cooling my dry throat and giving me something to hide behind.

Sonterra's eyes darkened, but there was a spark of humor lurking in them as he sat back in the short chair and looked me over again. The newspaper lay between us like a bomb, explosive enough to turn our insides to soup when it went off.

"What are you doing here, Sonterra?" I demanded when he didn't answer.

"I just stopped in to have a beer with some of the guys," he said.

The liar.

"You followed me."

"You flatter yourself, Counselor. Cave Creek is a small town. We ended up at the same watering hole, that's all."

"Whatever," I said, just to bug Sonterra. He hated dismissive tones.

He didn't bite, but simply splayed the fingers of one hand in an idle acknowledgment of our surroundings.

What the hell was he up to? "Place like this" -- he scanned the bar -- "good food, good beer -- I figured you had to be celebrating."

"*Celebrating?*" God knew, I was no champion of Harvey Kredd's good name -- after all, he didn't exactly have one -- but *still*. The man had been gunned down on his own property, for heaven's sake. He'd left behind a busy, complex law practice, a smart and sexy wife, two exes, and three greedy offspring who would probably spend the next decade wrangling over his estate. "Listen, *Detective* Sonterra, Harvey might not have been your favorite person, but he *was* a human being. He was murdered, in the prime of his life, and at least a *pretense* of concern would seem appropriate."

Sonterra appeared to shrug off everything I'd said, the way he usually did, sticking with his own agenda. I should have guessed what it was sooner than I did, but I was worn out, and not as quick on the uptake as I might have been otherwise.

"I understand you and Krudd -- Kredd -- had words a few days before the murder. Loud words. In public."

So I was a suspect? Perfect. I sighed and gave the room another quick visual sweep, searching for Loretta. She was as elusive as a desert mirage.

I bit the bullet and met Sonterra's gaze head-on. "Yes," I said, stiffening my spine and jutting out my chin a little. "Harvey and I 'had words,' and they were indeed public." I paused, gathering my waning forces. Remembering the confrontation with my boss, which had taken place, not in the relative privacy of the firm, but in one of Harvey's favorite restaurants, in the middle of the day. "This ought to make you really happy, Sonterra. CNN wanted to do a special report, after Lench wiped out that woman and her kids, and Harvey thought I ought to take the heat, even though he dumped the case on me in the first place. I refused, Harvey got angry, and I fought back. It got ugly."

"But he didn't fire you?"

Harvey, fire me? Not in a million years. Harvey and I had had a contract; he'd paid my way through law school, as well as providing a stipend for my living expenses during those three years, and I was virtually indentured to the firm as a result. I had never told Sonterra any of this, partly because it was none of his damn business and *mostly* because I knew he'd see it as one more instance of Clare selling her soul to the devil.

"No," I said moderately. "He didn't fire me. I'm a good lawyer." Yet again, I looked for Loretta, but there was no sign of her big hair and tasteful black ensemble. I was getting really irritated with her, and really hungry, even though Sonterra made me nervous as hell. Unfortunately, nothing much ruins my appetite; I've been losing and gaining the same ten pounds ever since high school.

Sonterra unfolded the newspaper, tapped the headline with one forefinger. "Yeah," he said dryly. "You're a good lawyer. Which makes this all that much harder to stomach."

I tried not to look, but my gaze went straight to the headline and the sobering photo beneath.

"CHRONIC OFFENDER KILLS SELF, OTHERS, IN FIERY CRASH." The picture showed the twisted, blackened remains of the minivan, which contained the bodies of Janice Murdock and her children, Ethan, four, and Abigail, two. Lench's truck lay on its side, also burned.

I closed my eyes against the images that had been haunting me since I first learned what had happened, but it didn't help. And Sonterra didn't need to say a word: if I hadn't fought so hard to free Lench on that earlier rap, those people would still be alive.

"Put it away," I said.

Sonterra complied. I like to think he might have been a little ashamed of himself, but I doubt it.

"Tell me what you know about Kredd's murder," he said, after a few moments of anything but respectful silence.

"Just the basics," I said, mildly surprised to find that I could breathe, let alone speak coherently. "Janet Baylin called that Monday morning, early, to tell me Harvey was dead. I heard the rest of the details when I got to the office at nine." And gory details they were, too.

Poor Harvey. He'd worked late on Sunday night, in the converted guesthouse behind his sprawling mansion in nearby Paradise Valley, dining at his desk, as he'd made a habit of doing. He'd been a driven man, with a seemingly endless supply of energy, a workaholic's workaholic.

He'd been found by his wife, Betsy, late that night, facedown in food and blood, with a tidy little bullet hole between his eyes and a nasty exit wound at the back of his head.

"Am I a suspect?" I asked bluntly, when Sonterra had mulled my answer over for a while, "or is this just garden-variety police harassment?" I was a bit sensitive where the cops were concerned, I admit. It went with the kind of work I did, though I had a few personal misgivings about them, too. Shades of my troubled youth.

"You probably had a motive," Sonterra said, dead serious.

"So did half the population of Metro-Phoenix," I responded.

Tony gave a gruff chuckle at that and lifted his half-empty beer bottle in an offhand toast of agreement.

"Any leads?" I asked, figuring it was my turn to steer for a while. "Real ones, I mean?"

"Yeah," Sonterra said, and that bleak smile appeared again, though briefly. "There's a comprehensive list -- all we have to do is start at A in the phone book and work our way down to Z." He leaned in a little, lowered his voice. "You seeing anybody?"

I couldn't believe his nerve. "Yeah. My love life is a torrid whirl, one steamy interlude after another."

He drew back, as if to dodge a blow. "I've got some advice for you, Counselor," he said, after a few moments of potent silence. "Get your hormone levels checked." Trust Sonterra to think my problem was a lack of estrogen. If he'd had his way, I would have quit my job, moved in with him, and spent the rest of my days barefoot and pregnant.

"And I've got some advice for you," I retorted. "Be all you can be, Sonterra. Join the circus."

That familiar muscle bunched in his jaw.

"Westbrook, table for two," the hostess called, from the midst of chaos.

I practically turned Pac-Man on his ear, getting to my feet, casting about for any sign of my best friend. There she was, with her blond helmet of hair, lush figure, and elegant gold jewelry, holding court at the far end of the bar like Mae West in a thirties musical. She wagged her fingers at me, smiling a little, and I tossed her a look hot enough to scorch the grass off an acre of ground.

Sonterra stood, too, beer bottle in hand. He cleared his throat. "You'll be in your office tomorrow?" he asked,

with surprising moderation.

I nodded. Harvey had left me a fresh batch of cases that nobody else wanted, before checking out, and I wasn't due in court until Wednesday afternoon.

"Westbrook!" the hostess called a second time, over the noise. She was waxing impatient, and little wonder, with all those customers jostling for seats.

"Here," I called back, making my way past Tony, beckoning curtly to Loretta.

Sonterra caught my elbow in a loose grip, and, without warning, a lot of complex sensations surged up out of the past, washing over me in waves. I pulled free, maybe a second or two later than I would have liked. "I have to go."

"I'll see you in the morning," he said. "Around eleven. This is important, Clare."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have wasted time torturing me with that newspaper," I replied, and walked away.

I didn't look back.

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