

Love Inspired
SUSPENSE
RIVETING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Shadows at
the Window

LINDA HALL



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“Lilly? You okay?” Greg said.

“Fine,” I said. My voice was whispery and it cracked. *This is a dream. If I close my laptop, the picture will go away.* I tried it. But the picture was still there.

“Something’s the matter, I can tell.” He came toward me, and in that instant I wanted to melt into his arms. I wanted him to make everything okay. He touched my face.

“What is it? A bad e-mail? Something from school?”

I shook my head. “No.” At least that wasn’t a lie. It was definitely not something from school.

Books by Linda Hall

Love Inspired Suspense

Shadows in the Mirror #71

Shadows at the Window #107

LINDA HALL

When people ask award-winning author Linda Hall when it was that she got the “bug” for writing, she answers that she was probably in fact born with a pencil in her hand. Linda has always loved reading and would read far into the night, way past when she was supposed to turn her lights out. She still enjoys reading and probably reads a novel a week.

She also loved to write, and drove her childhood friends crazy wanting to spend summer afternoons making up group stories. She’s carried that love into adulthood with twelve novels.

Linda has been married for thirty-five years to a wonderful and supportive husband who reads everything she writes and who is always her first editor. The Halls have two children and three grandchildren.

Growing up in New Jersey, her love of the ocean was nurtured during many trips to the shore. When she’s not writing, she and her husband enjoy sailing the St. John River system and the coast of Maine in their 28-foot sailboat, *Gypsy Rover II*.

Linda loves to hear from her readers and can be contacted at Linda@writerhall.com. She invites her readers to her Web site, which includes her blog and pictures of her sailboat: <http://writerhall.com>.

Shadows at the Window

LINDA HALL



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Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

—2 *Corinthians* 5:17

To Rik

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ONE

I was in my boyfriend Greg's office when the e-mail came that would change everything. Greg is the youth pastor at the church I've been attending for seven years. My apartment building is just two doors away, so it's easy for me to pop over. Of course, that's something I do a lot. Any excuse is a good excuse for a visit.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary that day. I traipsed into the church carrying my backpack, my classical guitar and a cardboard tray containing four coffees, plus a small bag of doughnut holes, which I had to hold in my teeth. There wasn't a whole lot of time for a visit and a chat. I had a guitar student at the music store where I work part-time, plus a music class of my own at the college in the afternoon.

Even though I was visiting Greg, I knew better than to bring coffee for just the two of us. There would probably be at least two more bodies in the church this morning. Brenda, the church secretary, would be there, along with Dave, the senior pastor. Paige, the music director, works part-time so I wasn't sure she'd be there but I was hoping she would. I had written a few of the worship songs that we sang in church and was having difficulty resolving the last verse of a new song—I was eager for her input. For the past seven years, Paige has been my music mentor. She's also been my good friend. She and her husband Henry are those rare people who you could call at three in the morning when bad news comes. Their daughter Sara is taking classical guitar lessons from me. I like her a lot.

I managed to push open the church door with my shoulder without spilling the coffee and found a gaping hole in the floor. The entire place was strung with caution tape. I'd have to walk through the basement, get lost and try to find my way up through narrow hallways back to the office area. The old building was undergoing a massive facelift. It was either that or tear it down. Since it's a heritage building, the church really had no option but to renovate.

This past summer the exterior was fully refurbished, complete with new copper turrets. And now that it was getting cooler, the inside was being torn out and rebuilt.

"I smell coffee," Brenda said, poking her head out of her office and talking to me over the yellow tape and the hole in the floor.

I dropped the doughnuts on top of the coffees and answered her.

"Yeah, but can I get there from here? Can I jump over?"

She shook her head. “I wouldn’t even try it. They’re taking up the floorboards and we’ve been warned that it’s dangerous. I don’t want you falling down two floors. Do you know the way through the basement?”

“Barely,” I said. “I always get lost down there.” It’s full of bugs, too, I wanted to add, but didn’t. “You guys need to put up a detour sign,” I joked.

“Don’t laugh. Dave wants me to do just that. Wait there. I’ll come around and get you. Greg’s on the phone or he would.”

“Thanks.” I leaned against the wall, laid my guitar case on the floor, and rested the tray of coffees and the doughnuts on top of it. Paint-splattered workmen chatted among themselves as they hammered and sawed. I heard the far-off sound of drills, saws and other equipment. Dust was everywhere. With both hands I pulled my hair out of my eyes and shoved it behind my ears. It was frizzing more than usual in the wet weather we’d been having. As I waited, I hummed a new praise song we’d sung here a week ago.

It seemed like five minutes before Brenda reappeared and picked up the bag of doughnut holes and the tray of coffees, saying, “How nice.” I followed her down the main staircase to the basement, along an uneven cement corridor flanked on either side by tiny, dusty rooms which looked as though they were used for storage. I am seldom down in the bowels of the church—it’s not a particularly appetizing place. I brushed cobwebs out of my hair as we made our way through the narrow hallways.

She said, “Soon this’ll be torn up, too. They’re planning to open up this whole area, tear out every single wall you see and put in bigger classrooms.”

“That’ll be nice.”

“How’s school?”

“It’s great. I didn’t think I’d like it, but I’m settling in. It’s been more than ten years since I’ve been in school, but I’m right back in the routine.”

“You’ll do fine,” Brenda said.

We went up a set of skinny, creaky steps—the wood was shiny, worn down by a century of footsteps—and into yet another passage that led into the brightness of the wide church hallway, which housed the offices. I gave Brenda two coffees and some of the doughnut holes, and took the rest to Greg’s office.

He was still on the phone, leaning against his bookshelf. I set my offerings on his desk. He smiled when he saw me. His grin widened when he saw the doughnut holes.

I realized that he was standing because the two chairs in his office were entirely covered with books, papers, CDs, DVDs, leaflets and odd bits of things. His entire

office was in disarray. I moved one pile from a chair onto the floor as Greg said, “That would be fine. Yes, that’s doable...”

I looked at his face, at the crinkles around the edges of his light blue eyes, the way he absently brushed his hands through his messy dark-blond hair. He was wearing faded jeans and a dark blue golf shirt with a little sailboat embossed on the pocket. To most people, Greg seemed like one of those big, affable teddy-bear kind of guys. Very few people know that a lot of pain is hidden behind that happy-go-lucky exterior. Sometimes it frightens me, the depth of pain both of us have come through to get to a point where we are almost ready to commit to each other. But we did, and we are, and sometimes I have to pinch myself for my good fortune and God’s blessings. Life is good.

“Hey, gorgeous,” was the first thing he said when he hung up the phone.

“Gorgeous? I like that!”

“You think I was talking about you?” He reached for me, gave me a quick kiss. “I was talking about the coffee.”

With both hands he managed to lift a three-foot pile of books from the other chair, balancing them under his chin before he placed them on the floor. A small, rectangular carpet covered with roads and villages lay on the floor beyond his desk. He’s had this since he was a boy and can’t part with it—he says that when the stresses of the ministry get to be too much for him, he can push his favorite Matchbox cars around the avenues and lanes on his carpet. I’ve never actually seen him do this, though.

He flipped up the plastic tab on a coffee and inhaled the aroma. “Nectar of the gods,” he said. “They’re going to have this in Heaven.”

I extracted my laptop from my backpack, took a sip of my coffee and looked around. “So, when did the hurricane hit?”

“Organizing,” was his reply. Munching on a doughnut hole, he said, “They’ve told me they’re going to tear down this wall next week, so I really have no choice but to go through my books. Get rid of some stuff. Organize.”

“Tear out that wall? What’s on the other side?”

“A lounge that nobody uses. And then, supposedly, they’re going to enlarge this little cubby hole of an office for me—more space, new floors, the works.”

On top of one haphazard mound, his laptop perched precariously; his wastebasket overflowed with papers and other bits of trash. I looked down and saw a whole file folder full of Christmas cards he’d received. Christmas cards? It was September!

On the floor were more stacks of books and a variety of newspapers and

magazines. I picked up one. It was from three years ago. “Hey,” I said. “I know a doctor’s office you could take these to.”

“Funny,” was his comment. “My bookshelves are overloaded.”

“Ya think?” My laptop had booted up. I was about to check my e-mail on the church’s Wi-Fi when he said, “Cinni called.”

I looked up. “Yeah?”

“She and Sara are doing up some sort of spreadsheet.”

“Wow. They’re really working hard.”

“They want to show it to us,” he said.

We were in the middle of the fall youth fund-raising clean up. As the youth pastor’s girlfriend, my arm had been twisted into heading the committee, which consisted of Paige and Henry’s daughter Sara, and Sara’s friend Cinni. The money we were raising was going to purchase books for an African school.

My e-mail began to download. So much spam. I looked up at Greg and smiled. He was looking at me intently, so intently. We didn’t say anything for a minute. Sometimes when I’m around Greg, I’m nervous that this whole wonderful new life of mine is going to come crashing down.

“What?” I asked, still smiling.

“I’m just thinking about tonight.”

Tonight. I hugged my knees. “I could never forget that.”

It was our six-month anniversary. We would be going to the same restaurant we went to on our first date, Primo’s Pizza. I know, I know, some would say it’s just a pizza joint, but the place—in all its laid-back splendor—holds special memories for us. Plus, they make the best pizza in all of Boston.

And then Greg started telling me about a youth conference he was going to go to in a couple of weeks and how he wanted to get his office cleaned up and ready before he left. My e-mails downloaded as I listened. Wading through spam these days is a full-time job. Delete. Delete. Delete. It seemed to be the only key I was pressing.

When it came—that e-mail that would change everything—I almost deleted it, too. In retrospect, maybe I should have.

It was from a Hotmail account and the subject line read, “TO YOU, LCJ.”

My initials: L.C.J. Lilly Carolynne Johnson. Lilly spelled with two Ls instead of

one. My mother's doing—my mother who wanted me to be different than the flower, my mother whom I hadn't seen in two years and hardly ever heard from. I shoved that thought away. I was too happy with Greg to let it interfere.

I clicked to open the e-mail and a picture began to download on my screen.

“...And so then I'm thinking, why can't we clean the houses of anyone who asks? I mean, we've got people coming out of the woodwork these days. It doesn't have to just be church people. That's what I told Dave. And Cinni.”

Greg is a great talker. I think it's because he's a pastor and counsels youth, and also delivers sermons—he has to be a talker. He was pulling books from his bookshelf while he chatted on and on, as much to himself as to me.

I was watching the picture download onto my screen. I felt cemented to my chair. Occasionally, I managed a nod just to show that I was listening. “...And so I've got that to deal with on top of this whole church-building thing.” He picked up a thick book. “I should just get rid of this commentary. I'll check with Dave. Maybe he could use the whole set. These belonged to my dad, actually. That's how old they are.” Greg's dad had been a minister before him.

I could barely make out the meaning of the words he was saying to me. The picture was now open on my screen. I swallowed, put a hand to my chest, trying to quell the rapid beats of my heart. All that I said before about pinching myself for God's blessing? I take it all back. This picture could shatter that dream like a window besieged by baseballs.

I closed my eyes—*please, God*—but when I opened them, the picture was still there. The image was grainy and obviously had been uploaded from another source. The young woman on my screen was bone thin and her hair hung to her shoulders, straight and black. She looked tough, this girl, with her blue lipstick and dark-rimmed eyes. She wore a leather bustier, a skirt which ended midthigh, and boots. And chains. Lots of chains. She was the kind of girl you'd expect to have tattoos and multiple piercings, the kind you would not want your son to date.

Greg must've seen something in my eyes because he stopped what he was doing and said, “Lilly? You okay?”

“Fine.” My voice was whispery and it cracked. I coughed and took a few deep breaths. *This is a dream. If I close my laptop, the picture will go away.* I tried it. But when I opened it again, the picture was still there.

I quickly shut down my computer and stuffed it into my backpack, telling Greg I had to leave. Right now. I looked at my watch for effect. I'd forgotten how late it was getting, I told him. I stood and made for the door.

Greg looked surprised, “Lilly?”

“Yes?”

“Something’s the matter, I can tell.” He came toward me, and in that instant, I wanted to melt into his arms and never leave that safe and warm place. I wanted him to make everything okay. I wanted to forget that the girl on my computer screen had ever existed.

A tear winked at the corner of my eye. I blinked rapidly. Greg touched my face. “What is it? A bad e-mail? Something from school?”

I shook my head. “No.” That wasn’t a lie. It wasn’t from school. It was definitely *not* something from school.

He took my hand, led me back to his desk. “Come here, babe. Let me show you something that’ll cheer you up. I almost forgot. You have to look at this before you go.”

I followed him to the desk like a puppy dog. What else could I do? He opened his laptop, clicked through a few links and then said, “Ta da!” He turned the screen to face me.

For one horrid moment I thought he was going to show me the photo of the girl. He didn’t. It was our church’s brand-new Web site and there was a picture of me, front and center.

“The world’s most beautiful singer. In all her splendor,” he said.

I blinked. There I was, holding a microphone in one hand, raising my other hand toward the congregation. The lights had picked up the glints in my strawberry-blond hair. My skin was so pale, I looked like a ghost.

I said, “Is this new? I didn’t know I was on the Web.”

Greg nodded. “Stuart’s done an amazing job. You remember that sorry-looking old thing we called a Web site? It’s gone now. This is our new, professional Web site—it even has pictures of the youth group. You’ll get a kick out of this one.” For the next few minutes we clicked through the various links. “Stuart’s even arranged it so that there’s a blog. It’s mostly for the youth group, but anyone can post if they want to.”

“Stuart did this?”

“Yep.”

I always felt a bit unnerved around Stuart—the church’s projectionist-slash-soundman-slash-resident sci-fi expert, and now apparently, slash-webmaster. He works in the projectionist booth here in the church and is always in black: black T-shirts, black jeans, black boots.

A few years ago, before Greg moved here, Stuart and I went out. Once. We went to a movie, some classic sci-fi film that he kept raving over. The whole thing bored me to pieces with its continual chase scenes, and aliens oozing green and killing people by breathing on them.

Later over coffee, he had seemed almost angry when I said it wasn't really my thing.

“But it's a classic!”

Since then, our relationship has been cordial, but that's it. There are times, though, when I find him gazing at me with those intense, dark eyes and I have to look away. So, he put me on the Web site, did he?

“A blog. Cool,” I said, without enthusiasm, attempting a cheerfulness I didn't feel. “Well,” I said, “time for me to get going.”

Greg walked me down the back stairs, through the basement with its cobwebby rooms and out the front door of the church, holding my hand the whole time. Even though we were in front of the church, and it was the middle of the day, and there were construction workers all around, he kissed me for a long time. Then he said quietly, “I know things have been hard for you, Lilly. I know the things you've gone through, but I just want you to know that everything is going to be different now. You're with me. And with God. I love you, Lilly.”

When he left, I caught my reflection in the window of the front door of the church. My face looked pale and watery in the glass, like it would melt.

I knew that girl in the picture. I knew her all too well.

TWO

I somehow managed to get through my work at the music store and my guitar lesson with my student Irma who, like she did every week, arrived early with foil-wrapped treats from her kitchen. Today, almond brownies. When she handed them to me she said, “You’re not as happy as I’d thought you’d be. Isn’t tonight a special night for you?”

I blinked. Had I told positively everyone?

“I’m fine,” I said. “Let’s have a listen to that chord progression you’re working on.”

“I practiced every day,” she said.

I’m convinced Irma spends whole days practicing the guitar her late husband used to play in a country band. It’s a beat-up Martin with a fantastic sound.

After the lesson, I put my head inside a cheerful bubble and finished the day. I attended my afternoon music-history class and made myself smile a lot. But later in the practice room, I couldn’t get my fingers to obey my brain’s commands on the piano. And as the clock moved steadily toward evening, I was slowly coming undone. I gave up on Beethoven and pulled out the notebook where I’d jotted down the lyrics to my unfinished worship song. I took my classical guitar out of the case and began. But as I went through the now-familiar melody, I paused midphrase. What did I think I was doing? How could I possibly think I could write worship songs to God? I tried to resolve the chords, but my fingers refused to find the final notes in the sequence.

For several minutes, I forced myself to work on it. I hit wrong strings and played chords that sounded like my life today—jarring, off key and dissonant.

I jutted out my bottom lip, blew my bangs out of my eyes and tried again, but no matter how much I pursued that piece, I could not finish it. I looked down at my trembling hands as if they belonged to someone else.

Why was someone sending me a picture of that girl? Why, when everything was just beginning to get good again? I sighed loudly. *I can’t go out with him tonight. I can’t see Greg.*

I had the feeling that Greg was going to ask me to marry him tonight. All the signs were there. Even Bridget, my roommate and best friend, had heard things. A few

weeks ago, he'd taken both my hands, looked me in the eyes and said, "Two weeks. The night of our anniversary, we'll go out. I've got it all planned. Don't let *anything* interfere."

I had looked into the depths of his blue eyes and said, "I don't intend to."

And why would I? Greg and I been going out pretty much exclusively for six months. I was twenty-nine, he was thirty. We were madly in love. So what were we waiting for?

I had already started picking out wedding colors. If he asked me tonight, we could be married in the spring. I'd even bought a *Brides* magazine—one—which I'd shoved into my top dresser drawer. I brought it out every once in a while to flip through it and dream, but it always made me feel a little like an impostor. I just couldn't believe that could be mine. And now I knew it wouldn't be.

I placed my guitar back in the case and closed it. I couldn't marry Greg Whitten. I couldn't be with him. We would have to break up. I sat there. I listened. Through the muffled walls, I could hear the other students practicing. Somebody was playing something darkly discordant, another was working on a classic Beatles tune, and still another was playing a blues number. I smiled. That was probably my new classmate Neil Stoner. A pale complected, serious young man, he plays both piano and cello—he transferred this year from a school out west. Neil and I—plus two bright-eyed sophomores named Tiff and Lora—were working on a music-history project. Sometimes I felt like a big sister to all of them.

Since I'd seen that picture on my computer screen, I'd thought about it a million times. It occurred to me that I could ask Stuart—he might have an idea how to find out where the e-mail had come from. I knew there were ways to do that but I didn't know how. If anyone would know, Stuart would.

I dismissed that idea as soon as it came to me. I didn't need Stuart nosing around in my business. Earlier, I'd Googled the e-mail address, but came up with nothing. I knew enough to realize that anybody in the whole world, good guy or bad guy, could sign up for a Hotmail account. And then get rid of it just as quickly. It could be someone clear on the other side of the world—or it could be someone living right next door. That thought chilled me as I looked at the closed door of my practice room. Was I vulnerable in here? Was I vulnerable everywhere?

I thought about Greg. My love was probably making plans for tonight, maybe even getting flowers. Greg is very romantic. I shut my eyes, bent my head and leaned my cheek against the cool white piano keys. Suddenly I was remembering a man from a very long time ago who wasn't so romantic.

"Stop it, please! You're hurting me!"

"If you and Moira would listen to me for once instead of always trying to fight me

on everything, I wouldn't have to keep you in line like this."

I closed my eyes, trying to quash those thoughts, but they simmered on the surface. *Stop it*, I told myself. *Think about good things, about pleasant things*. Doesn't the Bible encourage this, after all? I'd been trying to live by its precepts since I'd become a Christian seven years ago.

So why should this happen now? It just wasn't fair.

A tear fell onto the piano keys. I put my music books back into my bag, got out my cell phone and, before I could change my mind, called Greg at his home, a place I hoped he wouldn't be. The phone rang once and I had a horrible feeling that he might answer it. What if he'd gone home early? I was counting on him *not* answering. It rang twice. I held my breath. Three times and I began to relax. On the fourth ring it went to the machine, and I said as pleasantly as I could, "Greg? It's me. Sorry I missed you." I coughed a bit for effect. "I'm so sorry, but I'm going to have to cancel tonight. I know, I know, but I am just so totally sick. I don't know what's come over me, but you really do *not* want to be around me tonight. You might catch it. I'm surprised I can even talk this long on the phone without running to the bathroom. It came on me so suddenly. So, hey, I'll talk to you tomorrow. We'll reschedule." I hung up and very carefully and deliberately turned off my cell phone. Then I bent my head into my hands. I'd just told another lie in a long string of lies to the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

When I got home to my apartment, I went into my room, and closed the door. I pulled my two big suitcases out from under my bed and haphazardly began stuffing clothes and books inside. When one suitcase was filled with my music books and composition papers, it became obvious that I couldn't take everything. But when I got to where I was going, wherever that was, I wouldn't be able to send for my stuff. Because I would have disappeared. Like I had eight years ago. Except I hadn't, had I?

My mistake, I thought, as I crammed in T-shirts and jeans and socks and sweaters, was in ever thinking that I could have a normal life—get married, have children, go to church and pick out china patterns—like a regular person.

If I got in my car right now, I could miss rush hour maybe. I looked out my window to the street three stories below. Bridget and I live on a semi-busy avenue lined with old brownstones like ours. It's also a pedestrian street with lots of ancient trees and people who walk dogs or jog or push baby carriages along the cement sidewalk. The church spire towers on the left, and I confess to often sitting right here, just to catch a glimpse of my beloved. I sat at the window and cried for all that I was about to lose.

And this is the way Bridget found me an hour later, sitting on my bed, clutching a book of poems that Greg had bought me, crying. I quickly dried my eyes on the ends of my sleeves and said, "What are you doing home so early?"

“Oh, Lilly!” She dropped the high heels she’d been holding and raced to my side. “You look so sick! Greg called me and told me you guys aren’t going out tonight. Do you want me to stay home with you? Was it something you ate? Why don’t I make some of my chicken soup?” She sat beside me, placed her perfectly manicured fingers on my forehead and looked at me sadly. Then she noticed the mess on my bed. “What’s all this?”

If there is another person I didn’t want to lie to, it’s Bridget, but again, I didn’t think I had a choice. We’ve shared this apartment for four years, and I value her wisdom and her friendship more than I can say. I could never lie to her and yet—and yet—I had and I would continue to do so.

I said, “I thought maybe of going home...I don’t know.”

“Are you that sick, Lilly?” Her eyes were wide as she sat beside me in her mauve designer suit. She pulled her stockinged feet up underneath her. Bridget works in a downtown Boston office. The first thing she does when she walks in the door from work is pull off her heels and groan about sore feet. She does this absolutely every day, even before she removes her coat.

Four years ago, when the rent on this place went up, it became apparent that with my music-store salary, I wasn’t going to be able to afford a somewhat pricey, top-floor walkup on my own. It has basically three rooms: two bedrooms and a large living space which is a combination living and dining room with a kitchen nook in the back. It’s a cute place, and even though it’s as expensive as the sky, I didn’t want to give it up. Plus, I love the location.

I let it be known around the church that I needed a roommate, and Bridget came and saw me. We’ve been best friends ever since. She seems so very sleek and sophisticated, but she bakes tollhouse cookies on the weekend, knits socks for her nieces and nephews and knows the names of all our neighbors.

She was sitting beside me, a worried look on her face as she raised her flawlessly waxed eyebrows. Even at the end of the day, her auburn hair shimmered and fell into place like in a TV commercial.

“And you’re going to need your music books there? A whole suitcase full of them?” She looked at me and then something seemed to register. “Oh Lilly, you really are sick, aren’t you? Does Greg know? When did you find out?”

I put up my hand. I had to stop her. “No, no. I’m not dying. I’m okay. Well, sick, but okay. I’m just organizing. I was feeling a speck better, so I decided to organize.”

“And you’re going home?”

“I don’t know. I’m just not thinking. I...” And then I began to cry deep, heaving sobs. I just couldn’t stop myself.

Bridget hugged me. “I’ll stay with you. I don’t have to go to that stupid company dinner tonight. I’ll call right now and cancel so I can be with you here. You shouldn’t be alone.”

“No, Bridget, you don’t have to. Really. Don’t miss your dinner on account of me.”

“My dinner is nothing compared to the welfare of my best friend.”

I looked down at my hands. Quietly, I said, “I lied to Greg. I’m not really sick, Bridget. I’m just afraid.” I looked at her. “I can’t go into it. It’s complicated and has to do with a whole lot of stuff that happened to me before I came here, before I met Greg.”

“But honey, everybody gets afraid. Everything is different for you now. You’re a Christian. The past is in the past and you and Greg love each other.”

I shook my head. Oh, if it were that simple. And as I looked up into the pretty face of my best friend, I thought about the pretty face of another best friend from a long time ago. Her name was Moira Peterson. At a time in my life when no one was my friend, we two clung to each other as if drowning.