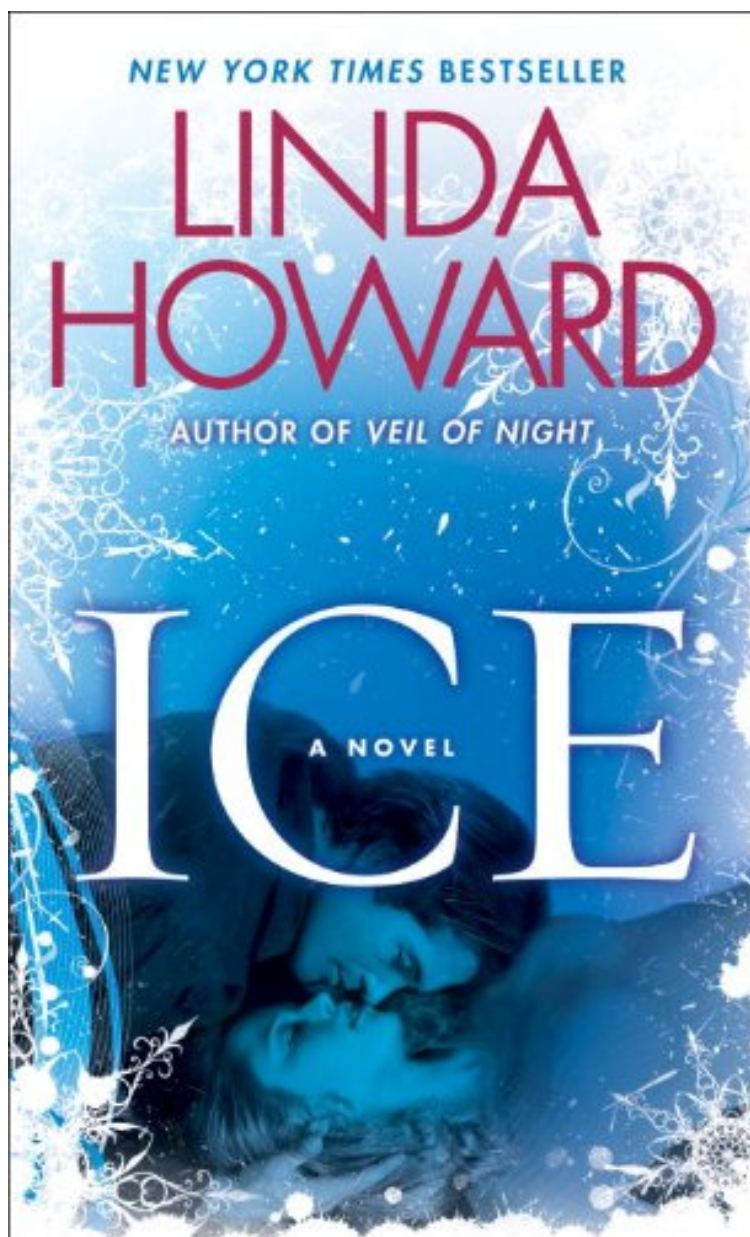


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Ice: A Novel



*Par Linda Howard
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurOn holiday leave from the service, Gabriel McQueen is sent into a brewing ice storm to make sure that his fathers distant neighbor, Lolly Helton, who has fallen out of contact, is safe and sound. Its a trip that Gabriel would rather not make, given the bitter winter weatherand the icy conditions that have always existed between him and Lolly. Arriving at Lollys home, Gabriel spots strangers through the windowandone of them packing a weaponand kicks into combat mode. But once Lolly is rescued, the heatand the huntare on. Snowbound, unarmed, and literally under the gun, Gabriel and Lolly must depend on each

other to endure the merciless forces of nature and evade the ruthless enemy out in the blackness of the silent night and out for their blood.

Chapter One

The place never changed. Gabriel McQueen actually liked that about his hometown, Wilson Creek, Maine. He liked the continuity of it, the security, the solidarity. He liked that his seven-year-old son, Sam, was seeing the town almost exactly as Gabriel himself had seen it growing up. He liked that Sam was building some of the same memories he had. He liked the little town as it looked during the march of seasons: the budding of spring, the green of summer, the rioting colors of autumn when the twin white steeples pierced a deep blue sky, but his favorite time of the year was right now. The last few weeks leading up to Christmas were special, when excitement and anticipation seemed to grip everyone and the little kids were almost giddy from it all. He could barely wait to see Sam enjoying the same things he'd enjoyed at that age. He drove his black four-wheel-drive Ford F-250 through the town square, smiling as he saw that every storefront was decorated with tinsel and twinkling multicolored lights, that the big fir tree in front of the courthouse was festooned with so many lights that it looked like a solid blaze that even the cold, steady, miserable mist of rain dripping from the ugly leaden sky couldn't dim. There was an empty parking space at the end of the metered row in front of the courthouse, and he squeezed the big pickup between the white lines. Jamming his weatherproof cap on his head, he got out and fed enough change into the old-fashioned meter to buy him two hours. He wouldn't be there that long, but he erred on the side of caution because it would be embarrassing as hell for the sheriff's son to get a parking ticket in front of the courthouse on his first day home not to him, but to his father. Not embarrassing his father was well worth a couple of quarters. The mist of rain blew in his face; the last weather report he'd checked predicted snow later on tonight when the temperature dropped. Ducking his head against the wind, he quick-timed up the courthouse steps, opened the double glass doors, then took the stairs on the right down to the basement. The sheriff's department still occupied the basement of the courthouse even though the jail was on the top floor and the arrangement was damned inconvenient, but that was how things had always been and Gabriel figured they would still be that way when he died. The sheriff's department was the first door on the left. The door opened into an area filled with four desks, three women, and a lot of attitude. Behind them was another door, and stenciled on it was Harlan McQueen, Sheriff. The stencil had been done almost thirty years before, and in some places the lettering was almost gone, but Gabriel knew his dad was thinking of retiring. He'd been for the past five or ten years so, as a thrifty Mainer, he didn't see any sense in having the doors relettered. All three women looked up when Gabriel entered, their faces immediately wreathing in smiles. All three jumped up with disconcertingly girlish squeals, considering the youngest was a good fifteen years older than he was, and rushed at him; you'd think he hadn't seen any of them in a year, instead of just two months. Somehow he managed to almost get his arms around them all; he was a big guy, but three women were a lot for any man, especially when one of the women was pleasantly hefty. Two of the women wore brown sheriff's department uniforms; Judith Fournier and Evelyn Thomas were sisters, and their resemblance was strong enough that when they were in uniform and their hair was pulled back and secured per regulations, they were almost indistinguishable. Patsy Hutt, the queen of the outer office, was soft and round and crowned with snow-white hair. Today she wore thick-soled boots, jeans, and a wool sweater decorated with sequined snowflakes. She looked like the most benign woman in the world, but Gabriel had a very clear memory of her swatting his ass when he was about seven and full of self-importance because his dad was the sheriff. Among the three women, they controlled the outer office and access to the sheriff, ran most of the department, and knew everything there was to know about everyone in the county. It's about time you got here, Patsy scolded. I was getting worried, with you driving in and meeting this storm head-on. Storm? He went on alert, adrenaline surging. I checked the weather forecast before I headed out; the rain was supposed to turn to snow tonight, but that was all. That had been this morning, at a motel in Pennsylvania. Before leaving North Carolina he'd put snow tires on his truck because, hell, December in Maine meant snow. That was a no-brainer. Since leaving, though, he'd been listening to XM, so he wasn't up to the minute on the weather forecast. Patsy's concern meant something, however. Mainers were accustomed to winter weather and knew how to handle it, so any looming storm severe enough to get their attention told him a lot about the potential for danger. Before she could answer, the door behind them opened and all four looked around. Gabe, said his father, a wealth of affection and something close to relief in his lined face, and Gabriel tore himself from the clutches of the outer-office tyrants to stride across the floor. He exchanged a brief bear hug with his dad, they clapped each other on the back, then Harlan said, I'm glad you made it. The weather is turning nasty in a hurry and I need help. Gabriel's level of alertness ratcheted upward several more degrees. If Harlan McQueen was admitting he needed help, then something serious was going on. You got it, he said as

they moved on into Harlan's office, which tended more toward cramped than spacious. The county hadn't splurged on the department's offices, that was for damn certain. What's up? His father's sharp gaze showed appreciation for Gabriel's unhesitating support and willingness to act. When he'd been younger, that natural inclination toward action had sometimes landed his ass in hot water, but as a sergeant in the military police, he'd been able to channel that aggression and decisiveness into the job, which was good for both him and the army. This damn weather system is dipping our way, Harlan said tersely. We were supposed to get snow, with the ice staying northeast, but now the weather service is saying we're going to get hammered by the ice. They issued the storm warning just a little over an hour ago, and we were scrambling to get ready, plus there's an accident tying up three deputies when I can't spare even one. Shit, an ice storm. Gabriel was on full alert now, his eyes narrowing, his stance subtly shifting as if he could take on the storm in a bare-knuckle brawl. Ice was ten times worse than a blizzard, in terms of damage. Maine had taken two hits from ice in the past ten or twelve years, but both times the storm had missed this area. That was good then, but bad now, because it meant there was a lot of weakened timber that had been spared before but would now be coming down under the weight of the ice, crushing cars and houses, taking down power lines and leaving hundreds of square miles in the cold and dark. Ice was like a crystal hurricane, destroying everything it touched. What can I do? Drive out to the old Helton place and check on Lolly. I haven't been able to get her on her cell phone, and she may not know this weather system has shifted our way. Lolly Helton? Gabriel almost groaned aloud. Of all the people, what's she doing here? he asked, trying to disguise his sudden hostility, which was the way Lolly Helton had always affected him. I thought the whole family had moved away. They did, but they kept the house for summer vacations. Now they're thinking about selling it, and Lolly's here to check things out and, hell, what difference does it make? She's out there by herself, with no way of calling for help if she gets hurt. *Revue de presse* If you want to whet your appetite for Christmas romance, this is perfect. . . . Guaranteed to keep your pulse racing. *Tacoma News Tribune* All the classic elements of a Howard romantic adventure. *RT Books* Linda Howard is a superbly original writer. Iris Johansen From the Paperback edition.