



## Open Season

By Linda Howard

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Seamlessly blending heart-pounding romance and breathless intrigue, *New York Times* bestselling author Linda Howard writes a masterful, stylish, and provocative suspense novel that absolutely defies readers to put it down.

Daisy Minor is bored. Worse than that, she's boring. A plain, small-town librarian, she's got a wardrobe as sexy as a dictionary and hasn't been on a date in years. She's never even had a lukewarm love affair, let alone a hot one. So when she wakes up on her thirty-fourth birthday, still living with her widowed mom and spinster aunt, she decides it's time to get a life.

But can a lifelong good girl turn bad? No, not exactly.

But she can pretend, right?

One makeover later, Daisy has transformed herself into a party girl extraordinaire. She's letting her hair down, dancing the night away at clubs, and laughing and flirting with men for the first time in, well, ever. With a new lease on her own place and her life, it's open season for man-hunting.

But on her way home late one night, Daisy sees something she's not supposed to see. Suddenly the target of a killer, she's forced to put her manhunt on hold. But the very moment she stops looking might be the moment she finds what she's wanted all along. Trouble is, before he can share her life, he might just have to save it.

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## Open Season By Linda Howard Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #154066 in Books
- Brand: Pocket Books
- Published on: 2002-06-01
- Released on: 2002-06-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.75" h x 1.00" w x 4.13" l, .38 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 368 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

*The Orlando Sentinel* A thriller...with deftness and charm.

#### About the Author

Linda Howard is an award-winning author whose novels include the recent *New York Times* bestsellers *Shadow Woman*, *Up Close and Dangerous*, and *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, as well as the Pocket Books releases *Kill and Tell*, *Now You See Her*, *All the Queen's Men*, *Mr. Perfect*, and *Open Season*. She lives in Alabama with her husband and two golden retrievers.

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### Chapter One

"Daisy! Breakfast is ready!"

Her mother's voice yodeled up the stairwell, the intonation exactly the same as it had been since Daisy was in first grade and had to be cajoled into getting out of bed.

Instead of getting up, Daisy Ann Minor continued to lie in bed, listening to the sound of steady rain pounding on the roof and dripping from the eaves. It was the morning of her thirty-fourth birthday, and she didn't want to get up. A gray mood as dreary as the rain pressed down on her. She was thirty-four years old, and there was nothing about this particular day to which she looked forward with anticipation.

The rain wasn't even a thunderstorm, which she enjoyed, with all the drama and sound-effects. Nope, it was just rain, steady and miserable. The dreary day mirrored her mood. As she lay in bed watching the raindrops slide down her bedroom window, the unavoidable reality of her birthday settled on her like a wet quilt, heavy and clammy. She had been good all her life, and what had it gotten her? Nothing.

She had to face the facts, and they weren't pretty.

She was thirty-four, never been married, never even been engaged. She had never had a hot love affair -- or even a tepid one. A brief fling in college, done mainly because everyone else was doing it and she hadn't wanted to be an oddball, didn't even qualify as a relationship. She lived with her mother and aunt, both widowed. The last date she'd had was on September 13, 1993, with Aunt Joella's best friend's nephew, Wally -- because he hadn't had a date since at least 1988. What a hot date that had been, the hopeless going on a mercy date with the pitiful. To her intense relief, he hadn't even tried to kiss her. It had been the most boring evening of her life.

Boring. The word hit home with unexpected force. If anyone had to pick one word to describe her, she had a sinking feeling she knew what that word would be. Her clothes were modest -- and boring. Her hair was boring, her face was boring, her entire life was boring. She was a thirty-four-year-old, small-town, barely-been-kissed spinster librarian, and she might as well be eighty-four for all the action she saw.

Daisy switched her gaze from the window to the ceiling, too depressed to get up and go downstairs, where her mother and Aunt Joella would wish her a happy birthday and she would have to smile and pretend to be pleased. She knew she had to get up; she had to be at work at nine. She just couldn't make herself do it, not

yet.

Last night, as she did every night, she had laid out the outfit she would wear the next day. She didn't have to look at the chair to envision the navy skirt, which hovered a couple of inches below her knee, both too long and too short to be either fashionable or flattering, or the white, short-sleeved blouse. She could hardly have picked an outfit less exciting if she had tried - but then, she didn't have to try; her closet was full of clothes like that.

Abruptly she felt humiliated by her own lack of style. A woman should at least look a little sharper than usual on her birthday, shouldn't she? She would have to go shopping, then, because the word "sharp" didn't apply to anything in her entire wardrobe. She couldn't even take extra care with her makeup, because the only makeup she owned was a single tube of lipstick in an almost invisible shade called "Blush." Most of the time she didn't bother with it. Why should she? A woman who had no need to shave her legs certainly didn't need lipstick. How on earth had she let herself get in this predicament?

Scowling, she sat up in bed and stared directly across the small room into her dresser mirror. Her mousy, limp, straight-as-a-board brown hair hung in her face and she pushed it back so she could have a clear view of the loser in the mirror.

She didn't like what she saw. She looked like a lump, sitting there swathed in blue seersucker pajamas that were a size too big for her. Her mother had given her the pajamas for Christmas and it would have hurt her feelings if Daisy had exchanged them. In retrospect, Daisy's feelings were hurt because she was the sort of woman to whom anyone would give seersucker pajamas. Seersucker, for God's sake! It said a lot that she was a seersucker pajamas kind of woman. No Victoria's Secret sexy nighties for her, no sirree. Just give her seersucker.

Why not? Her hair was drab, her face was drab, she was drab.

The inescapable fact was that she was boring, she was thirty-four years old, and her biological clock was ticking. No, it wasn't just ticking, it was doing a countdown, like a space shuttle about to be launched: ten...nine...eight...

She was in big trouble.

All she had ever wanted out of life was...a life. A normal, traditional life. She wanted a husband, a baby, a house of her own. She wanted SEX. Hot, sweaty, grunting, rolling-around-naked-in-the-middle-of-the-afternoon sex. She wanted her breasts to be good for something besides supporting the makers of bras. She had nice breasts, she thought: firm, upright, pretty C-cups, and she was the only one who knew it because no one else ever saw them to appreciate them. It was sad.

What was even sadder was that she wasn't going to have any of those things she wanted. Plain, mousy, boring, spinster librarians weren't likely to have their breasts admired and appreciated. She was simply going to get older, and plainer, and more boring; her breasts would sag, and eventually she would die without ever sitting astride a naked man in the middle of the afternoon -- unless something drastic happened...something like a miracle.

Daisy flopped back on her pillows and once more stared at the ceiling. A miracle? She might as well hope lightning would strike.

She waited expectantly, but there was no boom, no blinding flash of light. Evidently no help was coming from On High. Despair curled in her stomach. Okay, so it was up to her. After all, the Good Lord helped those who helped themselves. She had to do something. But what?

Desperation sparked inspiration, which came in the form of a revelation:

She had to stop being a good girl.

Her stomach clenched, and her heart started pounding. She began to breathe rapidly. The Good Lord couldn't have had that idea in mind when He/She/It decided to let her handle this on her own. Not only was it a very un-Good Lord type of idea, but

...she didn't know how. She had been a good girl her entire life; the rules and precepts were engraved on her DNA. Stop being a good girl? The idea was crazy. Logic dictated that, if she wasn't going to be a good girl any longer, then she had to be a bad one, and that just wasn't in her. Bad girls smoked, drank, danced in bars, and slept around. She might could handle the dancing -- she kind of liked the idea -- but smoking was out, she didn't like the taste of alcohol, and as for sleeping around -- No way. That would be monumentally stupid.

But -- but bad girls get all the men! her subconscious whined, prodded by the urgency of her internal ticking clock.

"Not all of them," she said aloud. She knew plenty of good girls who had managed to marry and have kids: all her friends, in fact, plus her younger sister, Beth. It could be done. Unfortunately, they seemed to have taken all the men who were attracted to good girls in the first place.

So what was left?

Men who were attracted to bad girls, that's what.

The clenching in her stomach became a definite queasy feeling. Did she even want a man who liked bad girls?

Yeah! her hormones wailed, oblivious to common sense. They had a biological imperative going here, and nothing else mattered.

She, however, was a thinking woman. She definitely didn't want a man who spent more time in bars and honkytonks than he did on the job or at home. She didn't want a man who slept with any road whore who came along.

But a man with experience...well, that was different. There was just something about an experienced man, a look in his eyes, a confidence in his walk, that gave her goosebumps at the thought of having a man like that all to herself. He might be an ordinary guy with an ordinary life, but he could still have that slightly wicked twinkle in his eyes, couldn't he?

Yes, of course he could. And that was just the kind of man she wanted, and she refused to believe there wasn't one somewhere out there for her.

Daisy sat up once more to stare at the woman in the mirror. If she were ever going to have what she wanted,

then she had to act. She had to do something. Time was slipping away fast.

Okay, being a bad girl was out.

But what if she gave the appearance of being a bad girl? Or at least a party girl? Yeah, that sounded better: party girl. Someone who laughed and had fun, someone who flirted and danced and wore short skirts -- she could handle that. Maybe.

Big maybe.

"Daisy!" her mother yodeled once more, the sound echoing up the stairs. This time her voice was arch with the tone that said she knew something Daisy didn't, as if there was any way on earth Daisy could have forgotten her own birthday. "You're going to be late!"

Daisy had never been late to work a day in her life. She sighed. A normal person with a normal life would be late at least once a year, right? Her unblemished record at the library was just one more indicator of how hopeless she was.

"I'm up!" she yelled back, which wasn't quite a lie. She was at least sitting up, even if she wasn't out of bed.

The lump in the mirror caught her eye, and she glared at it. "I'm never going to wear seersucker again," she vowed. Okay, so it wasn't quite as dramatic as Scarlett O'Hara's vow never to be hungry again, but she meant it just the same.

How did one go about being a bad girl - no, a party girl, the distinction was important - she wondered as she stripped off the hated seersucker pajamas and wadded them up, then defiantly stuffed them in the waste basket. She hesitated a moment - what would she wear to bed tonight? - but forced herself to leave the pajamas in the trash. Thinking of her other sleepwear - seersucker for summer and flannel for winter - she had the wild thought of sleeping naked tonight. A little thrill ran through her. That was something a party girl would do, wasn't it? And there was nothing wrong with sleeping naked. She had never heard Reverend Bridges say anything at all about what one wore, or didn't wear, to bed.

She didn't have to shower, because she was one of those people who bathed at night. The world, she thought, was divided into two groups: those who showered at night, and those who showered in the morning. The latter group probably prided themselves on starting the day fresh and sparkling clean. She, on the other hand, didn't like the idea of crawling between sheets already dirtied by the previous day's accumulation of dust, germs, and dead skin cells. The only solution to that was to change the sheets every day, and while she was sure there were some people obsessive enough to do just that, she wasn't one of them. Changing the sheets once a week was good enough for her, which meant she had to be clean when she went to bed. Besides, showering at night saved time in the morning.

Like she was ever rushed for time anyway, she thought gloomily.

She stared in the bathroom mirror, which confirmed what she had seen in the dresser mirror. Her hair was dull and shapeless, without style. It was healthy but limp, without any body at all. She pulled a long brown strand in front of her eyes to study it. The color wasn't golden brown, or red brown, or even a rich chocolate brown. It was just brown, as in mud. Maybe there was something she could put on it to give it a little bounce, a little oomph. God knows there were zillions of bottles and tubes and sprays in the Health and Beauty section of the WalMart over on the highway, but that was fifteen miles away and she usually just picked up a

bottle of shampoo at the grocery store. She had no idea what the products in those zillions of bottles and tubes did, anyway.

But she could learn, couldn't she? She was a librarian, for heaven's sake. She was a champion researcher. The secrets of the earth were open books to those who knew where and how to dig. How difficult could hair products be?

Okay. Hair was number one on her list of improvements. Daisy went back into her bedroom and got a pad and pen from her purse. She wrote the number one at the top of a page, and beside it wrote: HAIR. Below that she quickly scrawled MAKEUP, and below that CLOTHES.

There, she thought with satisfaction. What she had was the blueprint for the making of a party girl.

Returning to the bathroom, she quickly washed her face, then did something she almost never did. Opening the jar of Oil of Olay Aunt Joella had given her for her birthday last year, she moisturized her face. Maybe it didn't do any good, but it felt good, she decided. When she was finished, she thought that her face did look smoother, and a little brighter. Of course, anything that had been greased looked smoother, and all that rubbing was bound to have reddened her complexion, but one had to start somewhere.

Now what?

Nothing, that was what. She had nothing else to do, no other ointments, none of the mysterious and sexy little squares of color or dark colored pencils with which other women lined their eyes and darkened their lids. She could put on her lipstick, but why bother? It was virtually the same shade as her lips; the only way she could tell she had it on was by licking her lips and tasting. It had a slight bubble gum flavor, just as it had when she was in junior high - "Oh, God!" she moaned aloud. She hadn't changed her shade of lipstick since junior high!

"You're pathetic," she told her reflection, and this time her tone was angry. Cosmetic changes weren't going to be enough.

She had to do something drastic.

Two gaily wrapped boxes were sitting on the kitchen table when Daisy went downstairs. Her mother had made Daisy's favorite breakfast, pecan pancakes; a cup of coffee gently steamed beside the plate, waiting for her, which meant her mother had listened for her footsteps on the stairs before pouring the coffee. Tears strung her eyes as she stared at her mother and aunt; they were really two of the sweetest people in the world, and she loved them dearly.

"Happy birthday!" they both chimed, beaming at her.

"Thank you," she said, managing a smile. At their urging she sat down in her usual place and quickly opened the boxes. Please, God, not more seersucker, she silently prayed as she folded back the white tissue from her mother's gift. She was almost afraid to look, afraid she wouldn't be able to control her expression if it was seersucker - or flannel. Flannel was almost as bad.

It was...well, it wasn't seersucker. Relief escaped in a quiet little gasp. She pulled the garment out of the box and held it up. "It's a robe," said her mother, as if she couldn't see what it was.



"I...it's so pretty," Daisy said, getting teary-eyed again because it really was pretty - well, prettier than she had expected. It was just cotton, but it was a nice shade of pink, with a touch of lace around the collar and sleeves.

"I thought you needed something pretty," her mother said, folding her hands.

"Here," said Aunt Joella, pushing the other box toward Daisy. "Hurry up, or your pancakes will get cold."

"Thank you, Mama," Daisy said as she obediently opened the other box and peered at the contents. No seersucker here, either. She touched the fabric, lightly stroking her fingertips over the cool, sleek finish.

"Real silk," Aunt Joella said proudly as Daisy pulled out the full length slip. "Like I saw Marilyn Monroe wear in a movie once."

The slip looked like something from the nineteen forties, both modest and sexy, the kind of thing daring young women wore as party dresses these days. Daisy had a mental image of herself sitting at a dressing table brushing her hair and wearing nothing but this elegant slip; a tall man came up behind her and put his hand on her bare shoulder. She tilted her head back and smiled at him, and he slowly moved his hand down under the silk, touching her breast as he bent to kiss her...

"Well, what do you think?" Aunt Joella asked, jerking Daisy out of her fantasy.

"It's beautiful," Daisy said, and one of the tears she had been blinking back escaped to slide down her cheek. "You two are so sweet -- "

"Not that sweet," Aunt Joella interrupted, frowning at the tear. "Why are you crying?"

"Is something wrong?" her mother asked, reaching over to touch her hand.

Daisy drew a deep breath. "Not wrong. Just -- I had an epiphany."

Aunt Jo, who was sharper than any tack, shot her a narrow-eyed look. "Boy, I bet that hurt."

"Jo." Sending her sister an admonishing glance, her mother took both of Daisy's hands in hers. "Tell us what's wrong, honey."

Daisy took a deep breath, both to work up her courage and to control her tears. "I want to get married."

They both blinked, and looked at each other, then back at her.

"Well, that's wonderful," her mother said. "To whom?"

"That's the problem," Daisy said. "No one wants to marry me." Then the deep breath stopped working and she had to bury her face in her hands to hide the way her unruly tear ducts were leaking.

There was a small silence, and she knew they were looking at each other again, communicating in that mental way sisters had.

Her mother cleared her throat. "I'm not quite certain I understand. Is there someone in particular to whom

you're referring?"

Bless her mother's heart, she was an English teacher to the core. She was the only person Daisy knew who actually said whom - well, except for herself. The acorn hadn't fallen far from the mother oak. Even when her mother was upset, her phrasing remained exact.

Daisy shook her head, and wiped the tears away so she could face them again. "No, I'm not suffering from unrequited love. But I want to get married and have babies before I get too old, and the only way that's going to happen is if I make some major changes."

"What sort of major changes?" Aunt Jo asked warily.

"Look at me!" Daisy indicated herself from head to foot. "I'm boring, and I'm mousy. Who's going to look at me twice? Even poor Wally Herndon wasn't interested. I have to make some major changes to me."

She took a deep breath. "I need to spruce myself up. I need to make men look at me. I need to start going places where I'm likely to meet single men, such as nightclubs and dances." She paused, expecting objections, but was met with only silence. She took another deep breath and blurted out the biggie: "I need to get my own place to live." Then she waited.

Another sisterly glance was exchanged. The moment stretched out, and Daisy's nerves stretched along with it. What would she do if they strenuously objected? Could she hold out against them? The problem was that she loved them and wanted them happy, she didn't want to upset them or make them ashamed of her.

They both turned back to her with identical broad smiles on their faces.

"Well, it's about time," Aunt Jo said.

"We'll help," her mother said, beaming.

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