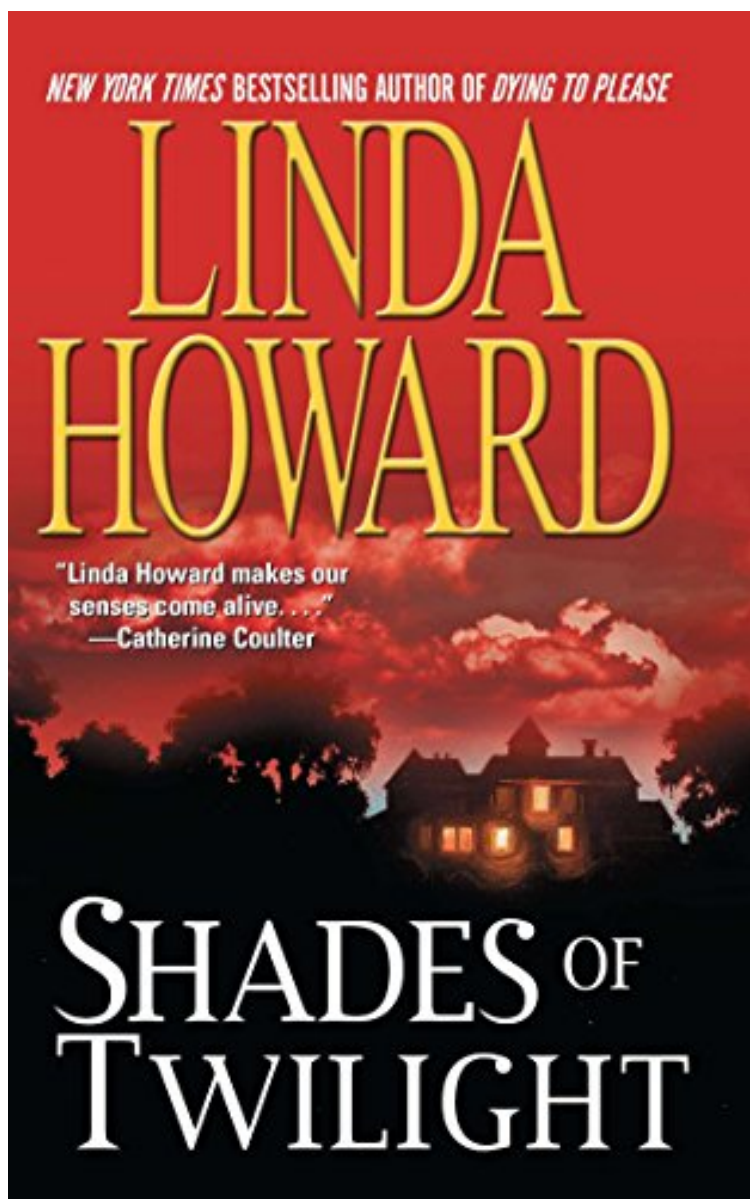


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Shades Of Twilight (English Edition)



Par Linda Howard

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurShades of TwilightRoanna Davenport was raised a wealthy orphan on her grandmother's magnificent Alabama estate, Davencourt, where she developed a genius for trouble and a deep love for her cousin Webb. But everyone expects Webb to marry the ravishing Jessie, and he does. Then Jessie is found bludgeoned to death, and Webb leaves for Arizona, abandoning his legacy. Years later, an all-grown-up Roanna walks into a dingy bar in Nogales and Webb is drawn back to Davencourt, to Roanna -- whose ice melts under his touch -- and to the killer who once destroyed his life and waits only for the chance to finish the job....ExtraitChapter 1"What are we going to do with her?" "God knows. We certainly can't take

her."The voices were hushed, but Roanna heard them anyway and knew they were talking about her. She curled her skinny little body into a tighter knot, hugging her knees to her chest as she stared stolidly out the window at the manicured lawn of Davencourt, her grandmother's home. Other people had yards, but Grandmother had a lawn. The lawn was a deep, rich green, and she had always loved the feel of her bare feet sinking into the thick grass, like walking on a live carpet. Now, however, she had no desire to go outside and play. She just wanted to sit here in the bay window, the one she had always thought of as her "dreaming window," and pretend that nothing had changed, that Mama and Daddy hadn't died and she'd never see them again."It's different with Jessamine," the first voice continued. "She's a young lady, not still a child like Roanna. We're simply too old to take on someone that young."They wanted her cousin Jessie, but they didn't want her. Roanna stubbornly blinked to hold back the tears as she listened to her aunts and uncles discuss the problem of what to "do" with her and list the reasons why they'd each be glad to take Jessie into their homes, but Roanna would simply be too much trouble."I'll be good!" she wanted to cry but held the words inside just as she held the tears. What had she done that was so terrible they didn't want her? She tried to be a good girl, she said "ma'am" and "sir" when she talked to them. Was it because she had sneaked a ride on Thunderbolt? No one ever would have known if she hadn't fallen off and torn her new dress and gotten it dirty, and on Easter Sunday, at that. Mama had had to take her home to change clothes, and she'd had to wear an old dress to church. Well, it hadn't exactly been old, it had been one of her regular church dresses, but it hadn't been her gorgeous new Easter dress. One of the other girls at church had asked her why she hadn't worn an Easter dress, and Jessie had laughed and said because she'd fallen in a pile of horse doo-doo. Only Jessie hadn't said doo-doo, she'd used the bad word, and some boys had heard, and soon it was all over church that Roanna Davenport had said she'd fallen in a pile of horseshit. Grandmother had gotten that disapproving look on her face, and Aunt Gloria's mouth had pursed up like she'd bitten into a green persimmon. Aunt Janet had looked down at her and just shook her head. But Daddy had laughed and hugged her shoulder and said that a little horseshit never hurt anybody. Besides, his Little Bit needed some fertilizer to grow. Daddy. The lump in her chest swelled until she could barely breathe around it. Daddy and Mama were gone forever, and so was Aunt Janet. Roanna had always liked Aunt Janet, even though she'd always seemed so sad and hadn't liked to cuddle much. Still, she'd been a lot nicer than Aunt Gloria. Aunt Janet was Jessie's mama. Roanna wondered if Jessie's chest hurt the way hers did, if she'd cried so much that the insides of her eyelids felt like sand. Maybe. It was hard to tell what Jessie thought. She didn't think a grubby kid like Roanna was worth paying any attention to; Roanna had heard her say so. As Roanna stared unblinkingly out the window, she saw Jessie and their cousin Webb come into view, as if she had dreamed them into being. They walked slowly across the yard toward the huge old oak tree with the bench swing hanging from one of the massive lower limbs. Jessie looked beautiful, Roanna thought, with all the unabashed admiration of a seven-year-old. She was as slim and graceful as Cinderella at the ball, with her dark hair twisted into a knot at the back of her head and her neck rising swanlike above the dark blue of her dress. The gap between seven and thirteen was huge; to Roanna, Jessie was grown, a member of that mysterious, authoritative group who could give orders. That had happened only within the last year or so, because though Jessie had always before been classified as a "big girl" to Roanna's "little girl," Jessie had still played dolls and indulged in the occasional game of hide-and-seek. No longer, though. Jessie now disdained all games except Monopoly and spent a lot of time playing with her hair and begging Aunt Janet for cosmetics. Webb had changed, too. He had always been Roanna's favorite cousin, always willing to get down on the floor and wrestle with her, or help her hold the bat so she could hit the softball. Webb loved horses the way she did, too, and could occasionally be begged into riding with her. He got impatient with that, though, because she was only allowed to ride her old slowpoke pony. Lately, Webb hadn't wanted to spend any time with her at all; he was too busy with other things, he'd say, but he sure seemed to have a lot of time to spend with Jessie. That was why she'd tried to ride Thunderbolt on Easter morning, so she could show Daddy that she was old enough for a real horse. Roanna watched as Webb and Jessie sat down in the swing, their fingers laced together. Webb had gotten a lot bigger in the past year; Jessie looked little sitting beside him. He was playing football, and his shoulders were twice as wide as Jessie's. Grandmother, she'd heard one of the aunts say, doted on the boy. Webb and his mama, Aunt Yvonne, lived here at Davencourt with Grandmother, because Webb's daddy was dead, too. Webb was a Tallant, from Grandmother's side of the family; she was his great-aunt. Roanna was only seven, but she knew the intricacies of kinship, having practically absorbed it through her skin during the hours she'd spent listening to the grown-ups talk about family. Grandmother had been a Tallant until she'd married Grandpa and turned into a Davenport. Webb's

grandfather, who had also been named Webb, was Grandmother's favorite brother. She had loved him a whole lot, just as she had loved his son, who had been Webb's father. Now there was only Webb, and she loved him a whole lot, too. Webb was only Roanna's second cousin, while Jessie was her first cousin, which was a lot closer. Roanna wished it were the other way around, because she would rather be close kin to Webb than to Jessie. Second cousins weren't much more than kissing cousins, was what Aunt Gloria had said once. The concept had so intrigued Roanna that at the last family reunion she had stared hard at all her relatives, trying to see who kissed who, so she would know who wasn't really kin. She had figured out that the people they saw only once a year, at the reunion, were the ones who did the most kissing. That made her feel better. She saw Webb all the time, and he didn't kiss her, so they were closer than kissing cousins. "Don't be ridiculous," Grandmother said now, her voice cutting sharply through the muted arguments over who would be stuck with Roanna, and jerking Roanna's attention back to her eavesdropping. "Jessie and Roanna are both Davenports. They'll live here, of course." "Live at Davencourt! Equal parts of terror and relief displaced the misery in Roanna's chest. Relief that someone wanted her after all, and she wouldn't have to go to the Orphans' Home like Jessie had said she would. The terror came from the prospect of being under Grandmother's thumb all day, every day. Roanna loved her grandmother, but she was a little afraid of her, too, and she knew she'd never be able to be as perfect as Grandmother expected. She was always getting dirty, or tearing her clothes, or dropping something and breaking it. Food somehow always managed to fall off her fork and into her lap, and sometimes she forgot to pay attention when reaching for her milk, and knocked the glass over. Jessie said she was a clumsy clod. Roanna sighed. She always felt clumsy, fumbling around under Grandmother's eagle eye. The only time she wasn't clumsy was when she was on a horse. Well, she had fallen off Thunderbolt, but she was used to her pony and Thunderbolt was so fat she hadn't been able to get a good grip with her legs. But usually she stuck to the saddle like a cocklebur, that's what Loyal always said, and he took care of all Grandmother's horses so he should know. Roanna loved riding almost as much as she had loved Mama and Daddy. The upper part of her felt like she was flying, but with her legs she could feel the horse's strength and muscles, as if she was that strong. That was one good part about living with Grandmother; she would be able to ride every day, and Loyal could teach her how to stay on the bigger horses. But the best part was that Webb and his mama lived here, too, and she'd see him every day. Suddenly she jumped down from the window seat and raced through the house, forgetting that she was wearing her slick-soled Sunday shoes instead of her sneakers until she skidded on the hardwood floor and almost slid into a table. Aunt Gloria's sharp admonition rang in the air behind her, but Roanna ignored it as she wrestled with the heavy front door, using all of her slight weight to tug it open enough that she could slip through. Then she was running across the lawn toward Webb and Jessie, her knees kicking up the skirt of her dress with every step. Halfway there the knot of misery in her chest suddenly unwound, and she began sobbing. Webb watched her coming, and his expression changed. He let go of Jessie's hand and held his arms out to Roanna. She hurled herself into his lap, setting the swing to bumping. Jessie said sharply, "You're making a mess, Roanna. Go blow your nose." But Webb said, "Here's my handkerchief," and wiped Roanna's face himself. Then he simply held her, her face buried against his shoulder, while she sobbed so violently that her entire little body heaved. "Oh, God," Jessie said in disgust. "Shut up," Webb replied, holding Roanna closer. "She's lost her parents." "Well, I lost my mama, too," Jessie pointed out. "You don't see me squalling all over everybody." "She's just seven," Webb said while he smoothed Roanna's tousled mop of hair. She was a pest most of the time, tagging along after her older cousins, but she was just a little kid, and he thought Jessie should be more sympathetic. The late afternoon sun slanted across the lawn and through the trees, catching in Roanna's hair and highlighting the glossy chestnut, making the strands glitter with gold and red. Earlier in the afternoon they had buried three members of their family, Roanna's parents and Jessie's mother. Aunt Lucinda had suffered the most, he thought, because she had lost both of her children at once: David, Roanna's daddy, and Janet, Jessie's mama. The huge weight of grief had bowed her down under the past three days, but it hadn't broken her. She was still the backbone of the family, lending her strength to others. Roanna was quieting down, her sobs dwindling into occasional hiccups. Her round little head bounced against his collarbone as, without looking up, she scrubbed her face with his handkerchief. She felt frail in his strong young arms, her bones not much bigger than matchsticks, her back only about nine inches wide. Roanna was skinny, all pipestem arms and legs, and small for her age. He kept patting her while Jessie wore a long-suffering expression, and eventually one slanted, tear-wet eye peeped out from the security of his shoulder. "Grandmother said that Jessie and I are going to live here, too," she said. "Well, of course," Jessie replied, as if any other place would be unacceptable. "Where else would I live?"

But if I were them, I'd send you to the Orphans' Home." Tears welled in that eye again and Roanna promptly reburied her face in Webb's shoulder. He glared at Jessie, and she flushed and looked away. Jessie was spoiled. Lately, at least half the time he thought she needed a good spanking. The other half of the time he was enthralled by those new curves to her body. She knew it, too. Once this summer, when they were swimming, she had let the strap of her bathing suit top fall down her arm, baring the upper part of one breast almost to the nipple. Webb's body had reacted with all the painful intensity of recent adolescence, but he hadn't been able to look away. He had just stood there, thanking God that the water was higher than his waist, but the part of him that had been above water had been dark red with mingled embarrassment, arousal, and frustration. But she was beautiful. God, Jessie was beautiful. She looked like a princess, with her sleek dark hair and dark blue eyes. Her features were perfect, her skin flawless. And now she would be living here at Davencourt with Aunt Lucinda...and with him. He returned his attention to Roanna, jostling her. "Don't listen to Jessie," he said. "She's just spouting off without knowing what she's talking about. You won't ever have to go anywhere. I don't think there are any orphanages anymore." She peeked out again. Her eyes were brown, almost chestnut colored like her hair, just without the red. She was the only person on either the Davenport or Tallant sides of the family who had brown eyes; everyone else had either blue or green eyes or a mixture of the two. Jessie had teased her once, telling her that she wasn't really a Davenport because her eyes were the wrong color, that she'd been adopted. Roanna had been in tears until Webb had put a stop to that, too, telling her that she had her mother's eyes, and he knew she was a Davenport because he remembered going to see her in the hospital nursery when she'd just been born. "Was Jessie just teasing?" she asked now. "That's all it was," he replied soothingly. "Just teasing." Roanna didn't turn her head to look at Jessie, but one small fist darted out and hammered Jessie on the shoulder, then was quickly retracted back into the safety of his embrace. Webb had to swallow a laugh, but Jessie erupted into fury. "She hit me!" she shrieked, lifting her hand to slap Roanna. Webb shot his hand out, catching Jessie's wrist. "No, you don't," he said. "You deserved it for telling her that." She tried to jerk away but Webb held her, his grip tightening and his darkened eyes telling Jessie that he meant business. She went still, glaring at him, but he ruthlessly exerted his will and superior strength, and after a few seconds she sullenly subsided. He released her wrist, and she rubbed it as if he had really hurt her. He knew better, though, and didn't feel guilty as she intended. Jessie was good at manipulating people, but Webb had seen through her a long time ago. Knowing her for the little witch she was, though, only made it more satisfying that he had forced her to back down. His face flushed as he felt himself getting hard, and he shifted Roanna slightly away from him. His heart was beating faster, with excitement and triumph. It was just a little thing, but suddenly he knew that he could handle Jessie. In those few seconds their entire relationship had changed, the casually close ties of kinship and childhood becoming the past, while the more intricate, volatile passions of male and female took their place. The process had been happening all summer long, but now it was completed. He looked at Jessie's sulky face, her lower lip pouting, and he wanted to kiss her until she forgot why she was pouting. Maybe she didn't quite understand yet, but he did. Jessie was going to be his. She was spoiled and sulky, her emotions volcanic in intensity. It would take a lot of skill and energy to stay on top of her, but someday he would be there physically as well as mentally. He had two trump cards that Jessie didn't yet know about: the power of sex, and the lure of Davencourt. Aunt Lucinda had talked to him a lot the night of the car wreck. They had been sitting up alone, Aunt Lucinda rocking and quietly weeping as she dealt with the death of her children, and finally Webb had worked up the courage to approach and put his arms around her. She had broken down then, sobbing as if her heart would break -- the only time she had so completely given in to her grief. But when she had composed herself, they had sat alone far into the early hours of the morning, talking in hushed tones. Aunt Lucinda had a great reservoir of strength, and she had brought it to bear on the task of securing Davencourt's safety. Her beloved David, heir to Davencourt, was dead. Janet, her only daughter, was equally beloved but had not been suited in either nature or desire to handle the massive responsibilities involved. Janet had been quiet and withdrawn, her eyes dark with an inner pain that never quite went away. Webb suspected it was because of Jessie's father -- whoever he was. Jessie was illegitimate, and Janet had never said who had fathered her. Mama said it had been a huge scandal, but the Davenports had closed ranks and the upper echelon of Tusculumbia society had been forced to accept both mother and child or face Davenport retaliation. Since the Davenports were the wealthiest family in the northwest quarter of Alabama, they had been able to carry it off. But now, with both her children dead, Aunt Lucinda had to safeguard the family properties. It wasn't just Davencourt, the center jewel; it was stocks and bonds, real estate, factories, timber and mineral rights, banks, even restaurants. The sum total of Davenport holdings required an agile brain to

understand it and a certain quality of ruthlessness to oversee it. Webb was fourteen, but the morning after that long midnight talk with Aunt Lucinda, she had taken the family lawyer into the study, closed the door, and designated Webb as the heir apparent. He was a Tallant, not a Davenport, but he was her adored brother's grandson, and she herself had been a Tallant, so that wasn't a great hindrance in her eyes. Perhaps because Jessie had started life with such a huge strike against her, Aunt Lucinda had always shown a marked preference for Jessie over Roanna, but Aunt Lucinda's love was never blind. As much as she might wish otherwise, she knew Jessie was too volatile to take up the reins of such a huge enterprise; given a free hand, Jessie would have the family bankrupt within five years of attaining her majority. Roanna, the only other direct descendant, wasn't even considered. She was only seven, for one thing, and completely unruly. It wasn't that the child was disobedient, exactly, but she had a definite talent for finding disaster. If there was a mud puddle within a quarter mile, Roanna would somehow manage to fall in it -- but only if she was wearing her best dress. If she was wearing expensive new slippers, she would accidentally step into a horse pile. She constantly turned over, dropped, or spilled whatever was in her hands or merely nearby. The only talent she had, apparently, was an affinity for horses. That was a big plus in Aunt Lucinda's eyes, as she, too, loved the animals, but unfortunately didn't make Roanna any more acceptable in the role of main heiress. Davencourt was going to be his, Davencourt and all the vast holdings. Webb looked up at the huge white house sitting like a crown in the middle of the lush green velvet of the lawn. Deep, wide verandas completely encircled the house on both stories, the railings laced with delicate ironwork. Six enormous white columns framed the front portico, where the veranda widened at the entrance. The house had an air of graciousness and comfort, imparted by the cool shade promised by the verandas, and the airy spaciousness, indicated by the vast expanse of windows. Double French doors graced each bedroom on the upper story, and a Palladian window arched majestically over the center entrance. Davencourt was a hundred and twenty years old, built in the decade before the war. That was why there was a gently curving staircase on the left side, to provide a discreet entrance to the house for carousing young men, back when the bachelors of the family had slept in a separate wing. At Davencourt, that wing had been the left one. Various remodelings over the past century had done away with the separate sleeping quarters, but the outside entrance to the second floor remained. Lately, Webb had used the staircase a time or two himself. And it was all going to be his. He didn't feel guilty over being chosen to inherit. Even at fourteen, Webb was aware of the force of driving ambition within him. He wanted the pressure, the power of all that Davencourt entailed. It would be like riding the wildest stallion alive but mastering it with his own force of will. It wasn't as if Jessie and Roanna had been disinherited, far from it. They would still both be wealthy women in their own right when they came of age. But the majority of the stocks, the majority of the power -- and all the responsibility -- would be his. Rather than being intimidated by the years of hard work that lay before him, Webb felt a fierce joy at the prospect. Not only would he own Davencourt, but Jessie came with the deal. Aunt Lucinda had hinted as much, but it wasn't until a few moments ago that he'd realized fully what she meant. She wanted him to marry Jessie. He almost laughed aloud in exultation. Oh, he knew his Jessie, and so did Aunt Lucinda. When it became known that he was going to inherit Davencourt, Jessie would instantly decide that she, and no one else, would marry him. He didn't mind; he knew how to handle her, and he had no illusions about her. Most of Jessie's unpleasantness was due to that massive chip on her shoulder, the burden of her illegitimacy. She deeply resented Roanna's legitimate status and was hateful to the kid because of it. That would change, though, when they married. He would see to it, because now he had Jessie's number. Lucinda Davenport ignored the ongoing chatter behind her as she stood at the window and watched the three young people sitting in the swing. They belonged to her; her blood ran in all three of them. They were the future, the hope of Davencourt, all that was left. When she had first been told of the car accident, for a few dark hours the burden of grief had been so massive that she had felt crushed beneath it, unable to function, to care. She still felt as if the best part of herself had been torn away, with huge gaping wounds left behind. Their names echoed in her mother's heart. David. Janet. Memories swam through her mind, so that she saw them as tiny infants at her breast, rambunctious toddlers, romping children, awkward adolescents, wonderful adults. She was sixty-three and had lost many people whom she had loved, but this latest blow was almost a killing one. A mother should never outlive her children. But in the darkest hour, Webb had been there, offering her silent comfort. He was only fourteen, but already the man was taking shape in the boy's body. He reminded her a lot of her brother, the first Webb; there was the same core of hard, almost reckless strength, and an inner maturity that made him seem far older than his years. He hadn't flinched from her grief but had shared it with her, letting her know that despite this massive loss, she wasn't alone. It was in

that dark hour that she had seen the glimmer of light and known what she would do. When she had first broached to him the idea of training to take over the Davenport enterprises, of eventually owning Davencourt itself, he hadn't been intimidated. Instead his green eyes had gleamed at the prospect, at the very challenge of it. She had made a good choice. Some of the others would howl; Gloria and her bunch would be outraged that Webb had been chosen over any of the Ameses, when after all they were the same degree of kin to Lucinda. Jessie would have good cause to be angry, for she was a Davenport and direct kin, but as much as she loved the girl, Lucinda knew Davencourt wouldn't be in good hands with her. Webb was the best choice, and he would take care of Jessie. She watched the small tableau in the swing play itself out in silence and knew that Webb had won that battle. The boy already had the instincts of a man, and a dominant man at that. Jessie was sulking, but he didn't give in to her. He continued comforting Roanna, who as usual had managed to cause some sort of trouble. Roanna. Lucinda sighed. She didn't feel up to assuming the care of a seven-year-old, but the child was David's daughter, and she simply couldn't allow her to go anywhere else. She had tried, out of fairness, but she couldn't love Roanna as much as she loved Jessie, or Webb, who wasn't even her grandchild, but a great-nephew. Despite her fierce support for her daughter when Janet was pregnant without benefit of a husband, Lucinda had expected to, at best, tolerate the baby when it came. She had been very much afraid that she would actively dislike it, because of the disgrace it represented. Instead she had taken one look at the tiny, flowerlike face of her granddaughter and fallen in love. Oh, Jessie was a high-spirited handful with her share of faults, but Lucinda's love had never wavered. Jessie needed love, so much love, soaking up every snippet of affection and praise that came her way. It hadn't been a starvation diet; from her birth, she had been cuddled and kissed and made over, but for some reason it had never been quite enough. Children sensed early when something about their lives was out of kilter, and Jessie was particularly bright; she had been about two when she had started asking why she didn't have a daddy. And then there was Roanna. Lucinda sighed again. It had been as difficult to love Roanna as it was easy to love Jessie. The two cousins were total opposites. Roanna had never been still long enough for anyone to cuddle her. Pick her up for a hug, and she was squirming to get down. Nor was she pretty the way Jessie was. Roanna's odd mix of features didn't fit her small face. Her nose was too long, her mouth too wide, her eyes narrow and slanted. Her hair, with its un-Davenport-like tinge of red, was always untidy. No matter what she wore, give her five minutes and the garment would be dirty and likely torn. She favored her mother's people, of course, but was definitely a weed in the Davenport garden. Lucinda looked hard, but she couldn't see anything of David in the child, and now any resemblance would have been doubly precious had it existed. But she would do her duty by Roanna, and try to mold her into some sort of civilized being, one who would be a credit to the Davenports. Her hope, though, and the future, lay with Jessie and Webb. Copyright 1996 by Linda Howington
Presentation de l'diteur
Shades of Twilight
Roanna Davenport was raised a wealthy orphan on her grandmother's magnificent Alabama estate, Davencourt, where she developed a genius for trouble and a deep love for her cousin Webb. But everyone expects Webb to marry the ravishing Jessie, and he does. Then Jessie is found bludgeoned to death, and Webb leaves for Arizona, abandoning his legacy. Years later, an all-grown-up Roanna walks into a dingy bar in Nogales and Webb is drawn back to Davencourt, to Roanna -- whose ice melts under his touch -- and to the killer who once destroyed his life and waits only for the chance to finish the job....