

DEADLY
REUNIONS
BOOK 3

WHEN A

SECRET KILLS

A NOVEL

LYNETTE EASON


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To my awesome Revell team.
You guys are amazing.
Working with you is a joy and a privilege.
I pray God's blessings on each of your lives.



But those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

—Isaiah 40:31 NIV

PROLOGUE

MID-AUGUST 2012
6:45 PM

“Are you crazy?” Jillian Carter stared at the man seated across from her, momentarily distracted from watching those who entered and left the restaurant.

“No. I’m serious.” Jeff Lindler’s dark eyes flashed with good humor as his lips lifted in a lazy smile. “I think it could work.”

“Marriage? But . . . we’re best friends.” And she used that term loosely although he was one of the few people she trusted. But he still didn’t know her. Not the *real* her.

“And you don’t want to marry your best friend?”

“I . . . I . . .” Jillian snapped her lips shut. “Well, yes, of course, but I just don’t think of you like that. I . . . don’t . . . think I do anyway.”

Tenderness filled his eyes and he clasped her hand. “Will you try? Give us a chance? We make a great professional team, why not a great marriage? You know I’m crazy about you.”

Did she?

For a moment, she was tempted. Oh so tempted to give in and forget the past, to simply live in the moment. “Jeff, I don’t know

what to say.” She did notice that he hadn’t said he loved her. Crazy about her? Sure. She was crazy about him too, in a best friend sort of way. But not crazy in love with him like she’d been with—

“Say you’ll think about it.” He leaned back and studied her while she looked at him with new eyes. A reporter for KSWB, he was the one person at work she’d let in to get to know her. And that was still at a very shallow level.

“Jeff, I’m sorry, I’m not looking for marriage or romance or—”

His lips tightened and the tenderness slid into hurt. After a moment he tried again. “You are the most mysterious person I’ve ever met. You’re also the best investigative reporter I’ve ever worked with. With all of the stories and leads you’ve ferreted out, you could be a household name. And yet, you choose to let me have all the glory. Why?”

“The truth is very important to me. I don’t care how it comes out, just so it does.” She eased up on the intensity in her voice. “And besides, glory looks good on you, Jeff. Natural.”

“Stop trying to flatter me and tell me what’s going on with you. I’ve known you for four years and you won’t let me any closer than friends. Come on, Julie, what gives?”

Julie. Julie Carson. The alias she’d been using for ten years.

And the reason she and Jeff would never be anything more than friends. She took a sip of water and plastered a concerned look on her face. A look that had gotten more than one subject to open up and tell everything she knew. “What do you mean? I share almost everything with you.”

“Yes. Everything to do with work.” He slapped a hand on the table and she jumped. Customers nearest their table cast them sidelong glances. “But nothing about what’s going on inside you. What is it you’re hiding from? What keeps you looking over your shoulder every time we go out? Who are you afraid of?” He leaned in. “Let me in.”

Jillian closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. She’d had

no idea he'd been so perceptive, so in tune to her fears. When she opened her eyes, he stood.

"You can trust me, Julie. I love you."

Now he said it. Three words she'd longed to hear. Just not from him.

"You don't even know me," she whispered. "No one can know me."

His brows drew together and he shook his head. "I don't believe that."

"We've never even kissed. How can you say you love me?"

He leaned over, cupped her chin, and placed his lips over hers. Stunned, she could only stare at him when he lifted his head. He smiled. "Trust me. I mean it. Now give me the keys. I'll pull the car around while you pump the mayor for more information on those corrupt real estate agents."

Jillian spied Mayor Jacobs to her right. "No, I'm not in the mood."

"Get in the mood. This is the perfect time. He hates me, but will spill his guts to you if you turn on that southern accent you do so well."

She jerked. "Southern accent?"

"It comes out when you get mad or want to be charming. Now go use it."

Jillian sighed, wondering how the man could just turn his feelings off like a switch. She didn't want to talk to the mayor. She wanted to go hibernate for a week and process what had just happened between her and Jeff. Instead, she said, "Fine." She handed Jeff her keys and crossed the room to stand in front of a man in his midsixties. He had his gray hair styled and combed to the side. Sharp green eyes watched her approach.

Jillian forced a smile. "Hello, Mayor Jacobs."

"Hello, Ms. Carson." He lifted his glass in a mock toast. "Loved the piece you did on my daughter's equestrian award."

This time Jillian had no trouble producing a genuine smile. “She’s an amazing rider. I enjoyed the afternoon and the interview.” Jillian paused and slid into her reporter personality. “I was wondering if you could—”

The glass window behind the mayor exploded. Jillian screamed as the floor shook, knocking her feet out from under her. She landed hard on the tile, the mayor fell beside her, eyes wide open, mouth slack. Screams of terror echoed through the restaurant. Jillian felt the sting of cuts, saw a gash on her forearm, and felt the air whoosh from her lungs.

Scrambling to her feet, she grabbed her cell phone and clicked it into video mode. Terror rushing right along with the adrenaline surge she always got when she smelled a story, she shot a quick glance at the mayor, who struggled to his feet, eyes dazed. But he was alive.

Then she saw the cause of the explosion and all thoughts of any story vanished.

The burning remains of her car greeted her stunned gaze. “Jeff!” Stumbling, shoving past other panicked customers, she forced her way to the exit and burst outside. “Jeff! No! Jeff!” The heat of the flames kept her back as horrified disbelief and grief hit her at the same time.

SUNDAY

1

10:25 A.M.

Would he try to kill her today?

Probably.

Jillian shifted her carry-on bag and walked through the jetway into the airport, her eyes scanning every face she passed. Yesterday, she'd called Serena Hopkins, one of her best friends from high school, and gotten an earful on events in her hometown the past two months. Serena had warned her in no uncertain terms that Jillian was a target.

Jillian had almost laughed out loud. She'd been a target for the past ten years.

She fingered the healing scar on her forearm as she thought about Jeff. The grief threatened to smother her and she shoved it off with a vengeance. There would be time for grieving later.

Knowing they'd tracked her down after ten years of hiding not only scared her down to her bones, it told her two things.

They were getting desperate . . .

. . . and it was time to fight back.

Serena had had to back out of picking her up due to a last-minute meeting called by her boss and an unexpected autopsy,

but she'd promised someone trustworthy would meet Jillian at the baggage claim.

Someone trustworthy?

Or someone who wanted to see her dead?

No, she could trust Serena.

Jillian picked up the pace and followed the flow of the crowd, staying a little to the side and yet trying to blend in. Baggage claim crawled with people, and she swallowed hard as she tried to scan each face, be alert to anyone who seemed too interested in her.

She hitched her carry-on up on her shoulder and shoved her glasses to the top of her head. One finger reached up to twirl the brown strands as she let her eyes rove the area for a familiar face. Uneasiness clamped down on her stomach as she made eye contact with a tall man leaning against the terminal wall. He offered her a small smile and straightened.

Jillian frowned and turned, indicating her disinterest while keeping him in her peripheral vision just in case . . .

He came toward her and Jillian tensed, moved to the side, and dropped her carry-on to the floor beside her. All she had to do was defend herself long enough for security to grab him.

And then a pretty blond woman dashed past her and into his arms.

As they kissed, Jillian wanted to wilt into the floor. Releasing a harsh sigh, she felt her adrenaline ebb. Grabbing her carry-on from the floor, she looked around again and, seeing no one she knew, headed for the restroom off to the side. She needed to calm down. To think. Convince herself she was doing the right thing. Again.

She entered the bathroom and took her spot in line. After a short wait, she rounded the corner and stepped into the first stall, just vacated by an elderly woman.

Hanging her bag on the hook on the door, Jillian leaned her head against the wall and closed her eyes for a moment. She was so tired. When her phone buzzed, she groaned. Serena? Or Meg?

Just thinking about Meg stiffened her spine. She was doing this for Meg. A glance at her screen told her nothing. She didn't recognize the number. She frowned and felt her tension build. Who would have her number? Had Serena given it to someone?

Probably the person who was picking her up. Her tension eased slightly as the call went to voicemail. She'd check it in a minute. As soon as her pulse slowed a little more. Jillian sent a text to her friend. *Who's picking me up?*

Reality started to sink in. She was home. Back in Columbia, South Carolina.

And she was here to right a wrong, to face her past, and to put a killer behind bars. So she and Meg didn't have to live in fear, constantly watching over their shoulders, Jillian wondering if this would be the day they'd die.

Beautiful, full-of-life, nine-year-old Meg.

Did *they* know about her yet?

Just the thought of the people after her finding out about Meg sent waves of nausea through Jillian. If they knew about her, they'd find her and use her.

And that's why failure wasn't an option. One by one she heard people leave the restroom. Time to get going, to face the past and step into the future. Jillian grabbed her bag from the hook and stepped out of the stall, senses alert.

Movement to her left. A flash of something metal coming toward her. A woman's scream distracted her for a brief second, then instinct and training kicked in. Jillian ducked and spun, using her carry-on as a shield. She felt the knife rip into the bag as she stumbled back. The bag hit the floor and she crashed into the sink.

The attacker paused for a split second, then came at her once again, dark eyes cold and determined. She read the mission there.

Kill Jillian Carter.

With a scream of fear and outrage, she used the sink behind her

as leverage to lift herself from the floor. She kicked out and gave a hiss of satisfaction as her foot landed against a hard stomach.



Colton Brady stepped into the airport baggage claim and looked around. The flight had landed ten minutes ago. Serena said Jillian would be waiting on him. She'd be in disguise as a brunette and she was about ten pounds heavier than the last time he'd seen her.

Ten years and two months ago.

But he wasn't counting. Really. He wasn't.

He was just doing a friend a favor.

A scream echoed through the area and Colton froze, determined the direction of the sound, then rushed toward the women's restroom, pulling his weapon as he ran. He flashed his badge at the two TSA officers and one airport police officer also attracted by the scream and rounded the corner into the bathroom.

His brain registered the facts.

A man attacking a woman. A woman fighting for her life. A cop in front of him.

"Police!" the officer yelled.

The woman froze. The man didn't.

The knife arched downward.

Three shots from the cop a breath of a second before Colton's finger tightened.

Blood blossomed on the attacker's chest and he dropped like a rock.

Colton held his fire, raced in, and kicked the weapon away. He handcuffed the wounded man's hands behind his back, then rolled him away from the woman. She sat up with a shaky grunt.

"Is he dead?" She scooted away, grasped her carry-on, and stood. Flecks of blood covered one cheek. A whole lot of it had pooled on her right shoulder.

Colton leaned over and checked the man's pulse. Weak and

thready. “Not yet.” He looked up at the hovering airport police officer. “Get an ambulance.”

The officer holstered his weapon and radioed it in. Colton had his doubts that the attacker would live long enough to benefit from the help.

“Are you hurt?” Colton asked the woman.

“N-no. I don’t think so. I managed to block the knife, but . . .”

The fine tremor in her hands and the shallow panting breaths told Colton she was on the verge of either hysteria or collapse.

Then she surprised him by hitching the carry-on over her shoulder and shoving her tinted glasses up onto her head. She marched to the sink, grabbed a handful of paper towels, and started to scrub the blood from her face.

Once again he felt his heart slam into his lungs. Jillian Carter. She had been beautiful as a blond. As a brunette, she took his breath away. He wanted to pull her into his arms, kiss her senseless—then demand what she’d been thinking when she’d disappeared from his life ten years ago. Either that or send a fist through the wall, releasing all of the pent-up anger he’d thought he dealt with years ago.

He did neither.

“He tried to kill her. He just attacked her . . .” Shock stood out on the white face of the witness to his right. “I saw him but I . . . it just happened so fast.” She looked at Jillian, her trembling increasing with each word. “I’m so . . . so sorry . . . I—” Her eyes dropped to the man on the floor, whose breathing was shallow and labored, and Colton saw her shudder.

Jillian shook her head. “It’s all right. You couldn’t have done anything.”

Colton motioned for a uniformed officer to usher the woman from the bathroom. “Why don’t you get her statement?”

The officer swallowed hard and nodded. “I called 10-99. Everyone’s rolling.”

It was going to be a madhouse. TSA, FAA, and the FBI were no

doubt already on their way. TSA was in the process of shutting down the airport and screening every person in the building. Colton gathered his composure and walked over to Jillian. He took the paper towel from her trembling fingers and said, "It's been a long time."

As though in slow motion, her eyes lifted to meet his in the mirror. Tears trembled on the edges of her lashes and his gut clenched. Then those brown eyes narrowed. He stared, trying to see past the contacts that covered the blue eyes she'd been born with. Her tears faded. "Ten years."

"I've been counting," he said as he wet the towel a little more and wiped up a few spots around her nose that she'd missed. "Did you get any in your eyes?"

"No."

Good. He made a mental note to check with Serena about blood-borne diseases on the dead man. No need to mention that to Jillian right now.

She hitched her carry-on up again and nudged her glasses farther atop her head, then twisted her fingers together.

"That's how I knew it was you," he murmured.

"What?"

"You used to do that same maneuver in high school. Shrug your backpack up higher on your shoulder, then push your glasses on top of your head."

She went still and fear flashed across her face. "I did?"

Colton frowned at the fear. "Yes."

"Sir?"

Colton looked up and away from Jillian's puzzling expression. "Yeah?"

"We need to secure the crime scene."

Jillian stepped away from the man who'd tried to kill her, and Colton followed her from the bathroom.

Colton rubbed a hand through his hair. "Looks like Serena will be making a trip to the airport after all."

Her throat worked and he wondered what was going through her head. But instead of saying anything, she let out a sigh, looked at the blood on her shoulder, and grimaced. She asked, “Were you my ride?”

“Yes. I was on my way to church when Serena called me about an hour ago. I called your cell phone, but you didn’t answer.”

“Of all the people—”

Colton had to strain to hear her words, but he gathered she wasn’t happy about his presence. Tough.

She shook her head. “I guess we have to stay here, give a statement or whatever.” Her eyes jumped from one person to the next, her shoulders stiff, posture on guard.

She was watching, ready for an attack from any side. Colton felt the first stirrings of sympathy for her. “Yes.”

Jillian dipped her head, hiding her eyes. Her hair slid over her shoulder to cover her face. She dropped her carry-on to the floor and sat on it. “Fine.”

“Do you have a different shirt in your bag?”

She looked up, surprised. “Of course.”

He wanted her out of the open. Even though the bystanders had been ushered out of view of the scene, he wasn’t sure someone wouldn’t try to grab a few pictures with a cell phone. “Why don’t I clear the men’s room and you go in and change? You’ll feel better. Keep the bloody shirt, though. It’s evidence. I’ll get a bag to put it in.”

With a grateful glance at him, she nodded. The men’s bathroom, right next to the women’s, had been cleared. Colton waved her in. Five minutes later, she returned and placed the shirt into the bag he’d found and now held out to her. She leaned against the wall, closed her eyes, then slid to the floor, her carry-on bag pulled against her stomach. He gave her another couple of minutes to gather herself, then stood in front of her. “Why don’t you tell me what you’ve been doing the past ten years and why you’re back now?”

Jillian groaned and dropped her face into her hands. “Go away.”

Anger shot through him and he sank to his knees as he placed a hand beneath her chin to jerk her face up to his. “Oh no, Jillian Carter. I’m not like you. I don’t run away when the going gets tough. I’ve waited ten years for some answers. You’re not leaving my sight until I get them.”