

The background of the poster is a fiery, orange-red scene with a woman in a dark red shirt running away from the viewer. The scene is filled with smoke and fire, with a large, dark, angular shape on the left side. The overall mood is intense and dramatic.

**LYNETTE
EASON**

**WHEN THE
SMOKE
CLEARS**

D E A D L Y R E U N I O N S

“*When the Smoke Clears* is a story about reconnecting with friends, facing the past, and falling in love—with a bit of murder along the way. I highly recommend my friend Lynette’s stories and I love this book. It will keep you guessing until the very end.”

—Dee Henderson, bestselling author

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“The suspense is high; I was turning pages so fast I had to go back and reread a time or two.”

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“This plot-driven third entry in Eason’s series is sure to appeal to fans of romantic suspense as well as readers who like Joel C. Rosenberg and Ted Dekker.”

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“Eason has the ability to make the characters come alive, to use the setting as an additional character, so that it plays into the story, and to keep the suspense strong enough that the pages have to keep turning.”

—ARomanceReview.com

Books by Lynette Eason

WOMEN OF JUSTICE

Too Close to Home

Don't Look Back

A Killer Among Us

DEADLY REUNIONS

When the Smoke Clears

DEADLY REUNIONS

BOOK 1

WHEN THE
SMOKE
CLEARs

A NOVEL

LYNETTE EASON



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*Dedicated to my Savior, Jesus Christ,
who allows me to do all that I do.
Thank you for the words.
May the readers see you on every page.*

*So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

—Isaiah 41:10

PROLOGUE

JUNE 6, 2002

Flames licked higher, swallowing everything in their path. The curtains, the recliner . . . her father and sister.

Blinking the nightmare away, eighteen-year-old Alexia Allen clutched her diploma and looked out over the audience.

The families of five hundred students hovered around their proud teens in the downtown auditorium. Camera flashes nearly blinded her, and she decided she didn't care a bit that she didn't have even one family member in the audience.

She had her diploma. That was all that was important. That and the bus ticket she had in the back pocket of her only pair of jeans. She would've worn a dress if she'd been able to afford it, but the graduation gown and cap had already taken enough of her savings. A dress wasn't a necessity.

Jillian Carter sidled up to her. "Are you going to the graduation party?"

"For a few minutes. Then I've got a bus to catch."

"Where are you going?"

Alexia sucked in a deep breath and looked around. "Anywhere that's not here."

The flash of pain in her friend's eyes made her bite her lip and regret her bitter words. The thumb and forefinger of her right hand went to the little silver ring on the pinky of her left hand and twisted it.

Round and round. A nervous habit she'd picked up right after the fire.

"Sorry. You and Serena are the only good things left in this town, but even you guys can't keep me in that house a minute longer. Every day it's a constant reminder of . . . well . . . you know. And my mother told me the other day not to let the door hit me on the rear on my way out." Alexia swallowed and studied her fingers.

"I'm so sorry."

Jillian's compassion brought Alexia's emotions to the surface. Emotions she didn't want to deal with. "She's just turned into this bitter old woman and I can't take it anymore. I tried to help her. I did." She sighed. "But she doesn't want help. At least not *my* help."

And still she couldn't seem to lose the guilt. If only she'd had more control over her actions. If only . . .

"I don't blame you." Jillian's soft words brought Alexia back to the present.

"I know you don't." She paused. "There was something in her eyes when she told me to leave . . . something . . . I don't know . . ." She let her voice trail off, forced her mother's face from her mind, then whispered fiercely, "I won't let him hit me again. I can't stay there one minute longer. If I do, it's going to kill me. *He's* going to kill me." A shudder wracked her. "I need to get away. Tonight." She now understood the desperation her brother, Dominic, had felt when he'd run away. She'd been angry with him for a long time, but now . . . she empathized with him. She just wished she knew where he was.

Wished she could take back the spiteful, hurtful words she'd hurled after him as he stomped out the door, and out of her life.

"I wish I had the guts to come with you," Jillian murmured.

Hope brightened Alexia's heart for a brief moment before she

could stop it. She knew Jillian wouldn't leave. Her mother needed her too much. However . . . "Call your aunt. Tell her she needs to come help with your mother."

"I can't do that and you know it. She's got my two little cousins to take care of." Jillian gave a sigh and shook her head. "No, I'd love to go, but . . ." She shrugged and the pain returned to her eyes along with a flash of desperation.

Alexia put a hand on her friend's arm. "What's wrong, Jilly?"

"Nothing. Nothing. I'm fine."

The forced smile said otherwise, but before she had a chance to question her friend further, she spotted Serena Hopkins pushing through the crowd and heading their way.

Giving a rare squeal, the usually dignified Serena waved her diploma and then gave each girl a massive bear hug. "We did it!"

Alexia couldn't help laughing. Serena could always make her laugh, even when she thought she had nothing to laugh about.

Midnight black hair that looked almost purple danced around her shoulders. Tall, poised, and runway gorgeous, Serena was confident in the dark good looks her Spanish mother had bestowed upon her, not to mention her serene personality and flashing chocolate eyes that drew guys to her like a moth to the flame.

And she made it impossible to hold her wealth against her. Although Alexia often wondered what attracted Serena to the two girls from the wrong side of the tracks, she'd never worked up the courage to ask her. It was enough to bask in the friendship and Serena's loving family.

So different from her own.

"Are we going?" Serena demanded. "The party's starting."

"I'm in," Alexia said.

"I'll be there too," Hunter Graham said over Alexia's shoulder.

She shivered as his breath caressed her left ear. And his bright blue eyes had that little glint in them that she'd started seeing every time he looked at her. The little swoop in her stomach failed

to take her by surprise this time. But she'd sworn off guys forever after Devin's betrayal.

She frowned as she pictured her ex-boyfriend. She'd thought Devin was different.

Obviously, she had lousy judgment in guys and wasn't to be trusted when it came to picking one out. Although she had to admit, if she were interested in trying the whole boyfriend thing again, Hunter would be the one she'd choose.

But she wasn't.

Besides, he was only going to the graduation party to keep an eye on his brother and sister, who'd just graduated with Alexia. Chad and Christine Graham were twins who had a penchant for trouble. Which was why Hunter often drew the short straw and got chaperone duty. She wondered how they felt about his big brother eye now that they were eighteen.

She considered him again. He was already a junior in college. Alexia knew she'd never be worthy of his interest.

Not that she wanted his interest, her mind insisted.

Right?

Right. Besides, she was on the next bus out of here.

Frowning at him, she started to tell him to get out of her space—in a nice way, of course—when Jillian said, "I'll be there in a little while. I have to run an errand first."

The girl's voice trembled and Alexia shot a glance at Serena to see if she'd caught it. The frown on her face confirmed she had.

Glancing at Hunter, Alexia said, "Excuse me." Taking Jillian's arm, she pulled her to the side.

Serena followed.

Hunter got the hint and walked off.

Alexia rubbed her hand up her friend's arm and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Tell us what's wrong, Jilly."

Jillian waved a hand. "Later. I need to go. I'll catch up to you at the party, all right?"

Serena grabbed Jillian's hand. "Promise?"

"Promise."

Jillian whirled and headed for the door.

Alexia looked at Serena. "What's her problem?"

"I have no idea. We'll get it out of her when she gets to the party. Now let's go!"

They raced for Serena's car—a sweet little BMW Roadster—and within ten minutes arrived at the school gym.

Alexia looked around and smiled. The decorations looked great, the music was loud, and her friends were at her side. Life was good.

Soon she'd be on a bus to wherever, USA, and she'd never have to come home again. No more living with the craziness of her home life. The thought of her mother shot pain through her. She really didn't care if she never saw her dad again, but her mother . . .

Memories of her mother's arms around her when her dad had been gone—or passed out—flitted through her mind. Whispered words of her mother's brand of encouragement flickered.

But the woman didn't want her at home. Had been pretty definite when she'd told her she needed to leave.

She shook her head and focused on the music.

Life had just improved 110 percent. And the fear churning in her gut had no place in that new life.

Serena danced with Jacob Styles, her on-again, off-again boyfriend. Alexia gave a regretful sigh as she watched Serena fold her head into Jacob's shoulder.

Even though she'd just convinced herself that she wasn't interested in having a boyfriend, she couldn't help wondering what it would be like to be able to lean on someone. To let yourself go enough to trust another person with your heart. To believe that person would never betray you. Alexia blinked back tears.

Allowing someone that close hadn't been an option. Not with her home life. The one time she'd allowed someone to cross the

barriers to her heart, he'd betrayed her. Devin Wickham. It hadn't taken him long to show his true colors.

But now?

No. She had a life to make for herself. She had goals. Plans. Dreams . . .

But maybe one day.

Her throat clogged. Would she ever find someone to love her? To believe in her?

Alexia's eyes strayed to Hunter, dancing with his sister, who didn't seem to care that he was there. He caught her eye and winked. She flushed and looked away.

Then back.

If he was interested . . .

A hand gripped hers and she turned to see Jillian standing beside her, wide-eyed and frantic, tears streaking her cheeks. "Jillian! What's wrong?"

"I need your help," she gasped. "I don't know what to do . . . I saw . . . I've got to leave!"

Alexia looked for Serena, snagged her attention, and motioned her over with a mouthed "Help!"

Frowning, Serena whispered something to Jacob and moved to join them. Alexia pulled Jillian into the relative quiet of the hallway. Serena followed two steps behind. "What is it?"

Jillian burst into tears and sank to the floor. "I'm dead," she whispered. "I'm so dead. I can't believe this. I don't know what to do."

"What happened?" Serena ignored her expensive dress and sank to the floor beside her friend.

"He's going to kill me. He's going to . . . because I was there and I think he saw me and what I saw . . ."

Jillian stopped and slapped a hand over her mouth. Her eyes darted to the door as the tears flowed. Frustration with Jillian started to sprout inside Alexia—not to mention a sprig of fear at

her talk of killing. “Spill it, will you? You’re talking in circles. How can we help you if we can’t understand you?”

The girl went still. Her tears stopped as though turned off with a switch. She looked up, horror on her face. “I can’t. I can’t be here and I can’t tell you. He knows we’re friends . . .”

“Wh—?”

“I’ll just put you in danger too.” She jumped up, eyes wide with sudden renewed horror. “Oh no! I can’t believe I didn’t think . . . I didn’t—” She shot a desperate look toward the exit. “I’ve got to get out of here. They’ll find me. And then they’ll find you. They’ll think I told you . . .”

“Who? What?” Alexia nearly yelled.

“I can’t go home . . . I’ll need some money.” Grief and terror flowed from her. “Please, I’m sorry to ask, but . . .”

“Here.” Alexia dug into her purse and pulled out a hundred dollars.

“Never mind, I have to get out of here.” Jillian started for the door and Alexia grabbed her arm.

“Here,” she said, shoving the money into Jillian’s hand.

Serena did the same and handed her a handful of fifties. Jillian didn’t even blink as she grabbed the cash and took off.

“Hey! Come back!” Alexia called.

But Jillian’s feet pounded down the hallway toward the exit at the other end.

“Jillian!” Serena yelled. “Wait!”

Jillian didn’t even turn as she hit the door at a full run. The alarm sounded and Serena and Alexia took off after her.

By the time they got the door open again, Jillian was nowhere to be seen.

1

TEN YEARS LATER

APRIL 6, 2012

5:45 P.M.

He suspected what was in the envelope. Shaky fingers opened it and pulled out the single white sheet with the block-style printed words.

I KNOW.

Senator Frank Hoffman leaned back in his plush leather chair and drew in a deep breath.

It was Jillian; he knew it. She'd decided to come out of hiding. He'd searched high and low for the girl ten years ago, when she simply dropped off the face of the earth.

But the letter proved she wasn't dead. She was back, taunting him with the skeleton in his closet.

Jillian Carter. The one person who could kill his career, ruin his shaky marriage, and sabotage his future.

He'd rather put a bullet in her brain than let that happen.

Again, he read the words.

I KNOW.

Amazing that two small words could instill such terror.

Jaw tight, he started to crumple the letter into a ball, then thought better of it.

Pulling out a large brown envelope, he added it to the one that had come two weeks ago. The one that said, “HELLO FRANK. I’LL BE IN TOUCH.” The one he’d been praying was from anyone but her.

He shoved the envelope into the top drawer of his desk, shut the drawer with a snap, and twisted the key to make sure it was locked. He did *not* want his wife finding those notes.

What did Jillian want? There’d been no blackmail demand, no reason given for the subtle threat.

Just, I KNOW.

And only two people on this earth knew his secret.

Of course one wasn’t talking. Were there others?

He doubted it. The fact that the last ten years had flown by without a peep from anyone was proof of that. With dread in his heart, he knew the truth of his situation. A truth he had avoided facing for ten years. Now that truth stared him in the face, mocking him. Letting him know that his comfort zone had just been penetrated.

He had to find Jillian Carter.

There was only one way to restore peace to his life. He picked up the phone and called the one person he trusted with absolute confidence to bury this secret so deep it would never stir again.