

CORNERED

*THREE ROMANTIC
SUSPENSE NOVELLAS*

**LYNETTE EASON,
LYNN H. BLACKBURN,
AND NATALIE WALTERS**



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Lynette Eason, Lynn H. Blackburn, and Natalie Walters, *Cornered*
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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
RevellBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Eason, Lynette. In the dark. | Blackburn, Lynn Huggins. Downfall. | Walters, Natalie, 1978– Perilous obsession.

Title: Cornered : three romantic suspense novellas / Lynette Eason, Lynn H. Blackburn, Natalie Walters.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024009874 | ISBN 9780800746087 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800746339 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493447138 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Suspense fiction, American. | Romance fiction, American. | LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction). | Romance fiction. | Novellas.

Classification: LCC PS648.S88 C67 2024 | DDC 813.08720806—dc23/eng/20240508

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024009874>

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Cover design and images by Kirk DouPonce

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We appreciate you and love you.
Thank you for loving our stories.

IN THE DARK

LYNETTE EASON

ONE

THE SEPTEMBER SUN had barely risen over the mountain town of Lake City, North Carolina, casting a warm, golden glow that filtered through Stephanie Cross's kitchen window. She sipped her morning coffee, scanning the headlines of the *Lake City News* like she did most every day. Yes, she could read it online and sometimes did, but she liked the feel of an actual paper when she had the chance to do so. Her morning routine comforted her, anchored her for the day, and offered a moment of quiet before she headed to the office.

She flipped the page. "Local Woman Killed in Tragic Early Morning Car Accident."

CPA Brenda Hudson, her good friend and coworker at Blackston and Cosworth, had been confirmed dead at the scene. "What? No!" Steph jumped to her feet and scrambled for her phone. "No, it can't be." She dialed her friend's number and it went straight to voicemail. She hung up and called her boss, Stan Gilcrest.

Four rings, then voicemail.

"No, no, no."

She grabbed her purse and keys and darted out the door. Once in the car, she tried Stan again.

This time he answered just before the call slipped to voice-mail. “Hello? Steph, that you?” His usually warm and confident voice sounded shaken. Wobbly.

“Yes. I just saw the newspaper. Brenda was killed in a car wreck? Tell me it’s not so.”

“I’m so sorry. Yes. I just got the news about an hour ago. Her husband called me at home to tell me.”

“And it’s already in the paper?”

“Yes, it is. As soon as the call came in to 911, that reporter, Cynthia Green, was right there. Probably heard it on the police scanner. Wrote her piece and sent it in on the side of the road.”

“Unbelievable. But why?”

“It happened on Youngstown. You know how people are complaining about that road. Sharp curve, no guardrail. Claiming it’s not safe and trying to get the city to do something about it. Cynthia is leading the way on that, and this is fodder to help push the agenda.”

“Youngstown Road. Oh no.”

“Yes.”

“B-but I just talked to her yesterday. We were going to have lunch today.”

“I know. I know.” His voice caught and Steph swiped at the tears sliding down her cheeks.

She blinked, keeping the road in focus. “What happened?”

“Her husband said they suspect she was going too fast and lost control. Just like everyone else who’s ever wrecked in that area.”

“I just . . . I can’t believe it.” But what was Brenda doing on that road? She lived on the opposite side of town.

“I’ve got to go, Steph. I’ll see you at the office.”

Work. Right. “Yes. I’m on my way now.” She hung up only to have her phone buzz with an incoming call from her brother James. She activated the Bluetooth once more. “Hey.”

“I just heard about Brenda. Steph, I don’t even know what to say. I’m so sorry.”

She was going to have to pull over if she kept crying. “I’m in shock. I don’t even know what to do.”

“Are you driving?”

“Yes.” She sniffed and swiped her eyes.

“Then pull over.”

Right. She turned into a grocery store lot, parked, and rested her forehead on the steering wheel. Sobs ripped from her while James’s soothing voice came through the speakers. Finally, she got herself together and pulled in a deep breath.

“You still there?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She swallowed. “Okay. I’m going to work and trying to brace myself. It will be horrible. Everyone loved Brenda.”

“Call me if you need me, Squirt. I’m here for you.”

“I know. Thanks, James.” She hung up and aimed her Subaru toward the office, dreading the coming hours, because while her heart pounded out a rhythm of grief, her mind whirled with questions. What had Brenda been doing on Youngstown Road? She, like everyone else in the city, hated it and avoided that route whenever possible. Parents forbade their teens to drive it—and the new drivers had often lost enough friends to obey. So *what* had compelled Brenda to be on it? And at that time of morning? Or rather night? She couldn’t imagine.

She pulled into the parking lot of her office and parked.

And sat there.

Please, God, get me—us—through this day.

DETECTIVE TATE COOPER STOOD at the edge of the scene of the car accident, the flashing lights of police cars casting an eerie blue glow on the area around him. The air was thick with

tension as his fellow officers worked to make sure they didn't miss anything that might help them understand exactly what happened. The tow truck had finally arrived and pulled the mangled vehicle up onto the bed. Tate was ready to head home and get some sleep. Except sleep was going to have to wait.

He glanced at his watch. In just a few short hours, he was supposed to meet Detective Cole Garrison at the station and begin his first day as a newly appointed detective. He should have scheduled some downtime between his last day as a patrol officer and his first day as a detective, but he'd been eager to get started. Who could have known he'd draw the night shift and have to work an accident with a fatality for his last day?

Tate walked up the slanted embankment and looked at the road. It hadn't rained in a few days, so the asphalt was dry. The curve was sharp, but Brenda had been a native to Lake City, knew the dangers of the curve, so it hadn't caught her by surprise. And yet she'd gone around it at a high rate of speed. One of her tires was blown and could have contributed to the accident, but—

"What are you thinking?"

He glanced at Jeff Goode, his partner of six years. "I'm thinking there aren't any skid marks."

"Suicide?"

"Maybe." No matter how many times he worked an accident scene, he always had the same sick feeling in his gut. "But I guess this case will stay with you while I move on. Keep me updated. I want to know why."

"Of course." Jeff planted his hands on his hips. "You ready for your big day?"

Tate gave a soft huff that was half sigh, half chuckle. "If I can make it through the shift without having to take a nap, then I'll call it a success."

"Yeah, you didn't plan that very well."

“No kidding.”

“Hey, Cooper!”

Tate looked up to see one of the officers waving him over. Bobby Knight. He walked to the edge of the drop-off and looked down the path of destruction the runaway vehicle had left behind. “Yeah?”

“Come down here. Wanna show you something.”

Tate turned and raised a brow at Jeff. “You want this one?”

“No thanks. I’m not into rock climbing.”

Tate snorted. “This is a bit different. Just hold the rope and walk down.”

“Pass. He asked for you.”

Tate shook his head, grabbed the rope tied to the back of a fire truck, and belayed his way down. He landed on flat ground next to where the car had been stopped by a copse of trees. “What is it?”

Bobby pointed to one of the larger trees involved in bringing Brenda’s car to a hard halt. Next to it were shards of glass and a hubcap. “That hubcap didn’t come off her car.”

Tate looked closer. “Could it have been here before she drove off the mountain?”

“Naw. Look at it.”

He did and noted it was pretty clean. If it had been there before the wreck, it hadn’t been long. “You think this is more than a one-car accident? That someone ran her off the road?”

“I’m speculating.”

“Anything on the victim’s car that might suggest that?”

“Yeah. Paint that wasn’t there when it came from the factory. It’s an olive-green color. Victim’s car is white. But here’s the deal. It’s been bumped twice.”

“Like someone hit it and then came back for another swipe?”

“Yep.”

Tate snapped a picture of the hubcap with his phone. “Anything else?”

“Well, just one thing. There’s a bullet hole in this tree right here.”

Tate blinked. “Okay. Fresh?”

“As a newborn. Now, I’m not saying they were shooting at the victim, but I can’t rule it out either.”

“Right. So they were chasing her, bumped her—twice—then shot at her?”

“That’s about how I’d put it together, but again, I can’t say for sure. The victim didn’t have any bullet wounds. Looks like she died from head trauma.”

“Okay, thank you.” Tate rubbed his hand over his bearded chin. “You bringing that hubcap up?”

“I am.”

“Good.” He sighed. “Best-case scenario in this tragedy is it really *was* an accident and someone got scared and ran. Maybe they’d been drinking or whatever. Knew they’d be in a world of trouble if they called it in. Worst case . . .”

“It was on purpose. The two hits kind of indicate this was intentional. And then there’s the bullet hole in the tree.”

“Right.” Tate radioed Jeff. “Don’t let the tow truck leave yet. I want a couple pictures of the car.”

“Ten-four.”

“Could have been a hunter or something,” he said to Bobby.

“Could have been. It’s archery season right now. Guns don’t start till October. Of course, that doesn’t mean someone forgot to read the calendar and didn’t realize it.”

True. Or just plain ignored the date. Some hunters thought risking getting caught and fined was worth it.

Tate finished examining the area and shook Bobby’s hand. “Thanks. I’ll pass this on to Jeff, and he can share with whoever’s going to be taking over the case.” Tate made his way back up the incline, got the pictures of the paint on the white car and all four hubcaps still attached, then walked over to his partner to fill him in. He slapped him on the shoulder.

“All right, buddy, stay in touch. I’m out of here.” He’d already gone through all the personnel stuff, getting his badge, gun, and everything else he needed for his first day on the job as a detective.

Jeff eyed him with an Eeyore expression. “I’m going to miss you. You always let me get away with not doing the hard stuff.”

Like walk down the side of a mountain. Most stuff Jeff thought was hard . . . wasn’t. “Because I knew you’d always have my back while I did it. Maybe your next partner will too.”

“Take care.”

“You too.”

Tate went to his personal vehicle he’d driven up hours earlier and climbed behind the wheel. With a heaviness in his heart for the victim of the accident, he aimed his Nissan Armada toward the precinct and refused to feel nervous. He’d been working toward this moment his whole life. Since he was fifteen he’d been focused, one goal in mind. To be a detective and to put the bad guys away. To stop as many crimes as he possibly could before they were committed.

He drew in a deep breath. He’d done it. He was a detective. Now it was time to make his mark.

If he could just stay awake.

TWO

STEPH ARRIVED AT THE OFFICE, her heart still beating the rhythm only grief knew. Lela Simmons was at the reception desk, tears drying on her cheeks. When she looked up and caught Steph's gaze, the tears flowed once more.

Steph hugged her. "I know."

"I can't believe it."

"I can't either, but we'll get through this. Brenda would be the first one to tell us she's happy right where she is, but to take care of her family."

"That's very true, but it still hurts." Lela sniffed and snagged a clean tissue to mop up her face. The phone rang and she sucked in a breath. "I need to get that."

"Of course." Steph left her friend and pushed through the door that led to her office. Although "office" was a stretch. It was a cubicle. One of many in the center of the large open floor. The perimeter contained private offices.

But Steph didn't mind the noise, she relished it. She lived alone, and sometimes the quiet threatened to suffocate her.

Only today, for the first time in the five years she'd been an employee, it was quiet, the atmosphere thick, heavy with grief and disbelief. Coworkers exchanged hushed whispers

and shared condolences, the tragedy casting a somber shadow over their usual bustling workplace. Stephanie settled in at her desk and tried to focus on her tasks, hoping to find solace in the familiarity of numbers and spreadsheets.

Unsure of how much time had passed, she finally blinked and realized what she'd done was going to have to be done again.

Stan walked over. "Steph?"

She looked up. "Yes?"

He cleared his throat. "I . . . uh . . . hate to bring this up in light of the fact that Brenda's only been dead for a few hours, but I need to clear out her desk and see where she is with different clients and notify them."

Steph blinked. Well, that was a little soon, but Stan was always worried about the clients more than propriety. Not that he didn't care, but . . . she had to admit, this rankled. "Stan—"

He held up a hand. "I know. I know. I'm a horrible person, but word is getting out and clients are going to hear and then the phone is going to start ringing, wondering who will be taking care of their money. They won't mean to be unfeeling, and neither do I, but I need to get ahead of this. We all do."

Steph blew out a low breath. "It's okay. I understand what you're saying." And she did, but it just seemed wrong somehow to be worried about clients and their money when Brenda was dead. But . . . "Okay. Someone has to do it and I know she'd want it to be me."

Alarm flashed in his eyes. "Oh, no, that's not . . . I mean, I've got this. I just didn't want to be harshly judged when I started working on her desk." He cleared his throat. "And reassigning clients."

"No one's going to judge you. I'll do it after everyone goes home so they don't have to watch me—or you—do it."

For a moment, she thought he might offer more protests, then he nodded. "All right. Thanks, Steph."

“Of course.”

“And there’s a basket of vegetables in the break room. Please take some home. I’m going to drop some off to Greg on my way home.”

Greg. Brenda’s husband.

“I know he’ll appreciate the gesture,” she said.

Stan’s garden was legendary in the office. No doubt he’d already had his stash picked and loaded to bring in to the office before he’d gotten the call about Brenda.

He returned to his office but paced to the window instead of taking a seat behind his desk. He walked to his little watering pot and began to care for the multitude of plants in his office. His hand shook and he lowered the can. He was more upset than he was letting on.

For the next few hours, Steph worked, but her mind kept drifting back to Brenda. Why had she been on Youngstown Road, nowhere near her home? Had she been going to Bolin’s? Bolin’s Nature Nurture Expeditions, an ecotourism spot, was one of her favorites, and she worked there one weekend a month simply because she loved it. Youngstown Road would take her there, but so would one of the other safer roads. Granted, Youngstown was ten minutes faster, but still . . . No, there had to be another explanation. But what?

Steph finally pushed her chair back and stood, stretched out the ache in her lower back, and made her way to the break room for a cup of coffee. Brenda’s mug had been rinsed out and placed on the rack next to the sink. The basket of fresh vegetables was right where Stan said it was.

More tears threatened, and Steph turned away to see Detective Cole Garrison and another man step off the elevator. The new partner James had told her about? He was handsome. About six feet tall with red hair, kind eyes, and a well-trimmed beard.

Stan walked over to greet them, then pointed in the direc-

tion of her cubicle with a frown. Steph took a deep breath and went to see what this was all about.

TATE LOOKED WITH ENVY at the steaming cup in the pretty woman's hands. She was about five feet six inches and had dark blue eyes and brown hair with subtle blond highlights. Definitely pretty. Gorgeous, actually. At the moment, however, he was more interested in her coffee. What he wouldn't give to be able to chug it. He cleared his throat and met her gaze while his partner took the lead on the case that had dropped into their laps as soon as they realized it was most likely a hit-and-run at the very least. Since Tate had been with it from the beginning, they'd agreed they'd be the best ones to see it through to the end.

"Hey, Steph," Cole said. "This is my new partner for the time being. Tate Cooper."

"Hello."

Tate nodded. "Good to meet you. Sorry it's under these circumstances. I've heard a bit about you from your brother."

"Don't listen to anything he says." She attempted a smile, but it faltered, her blue eyes sad and red rimmed.

Tate offered a smile in return, hoping his sympathy was reflected in it.

"Can we talk?" Cole asked.

"About Brenda?" Pain flashed on her face, but she kept the tears at bay.

"Yeah."

"Sure. Let's go back to the break room. It's more private." She shot a knowing look at Tate. "And there's coffee if you want it."

She'd accurately read his longing. He fell halfway in love with her just for that. "If it's not too much trouble."

He and Cole followed her into the small area equipped with a table and full-sized kitchen. She motioned toward the disposable cups and Keurig, and Tate helped himself. Cole did the same, then the three sat at the round table.

Cole leaned forward. "We're going to need to talk to her closest friends and coworkers."

"Well, then I'm a good place to start. She and I met at the gym twice a week, then worked together every day. We hung out some on the weekends. I even let her lead me down the river occasionally when she was working at Bolin's."

"The ecotourism place," Tate said. "I know it."

Cole nodded. "Yeah, me too."

"Then there's Stan Gilchrest, our boss. You'll need to talk to him if you haven't already."

Tate scratched his chin. "Not in detail."

"Virginia Carson and Patti Smith were also good friends with Brenda. What else do you need to know?"

"Did she have any enemies that you can think of?" Tate asked.

Stephanie blinked, then frowned. "Enemies? Brenda? No. She was the kindest, most gentle soul you'd ever hope to meet. She had an incredible mind for numbers and was very good at her job."

"Like you, I'm told," Tate said. At her questioning look he said, "James."

She sipped her coffee. "Hm. Well, I like to think so."

Cole set his cup aside. "Look, Steph, I hate to say it, but it's possible Brenda's accident wasn't exactly an accident. It's possible someone ran her off the road on purpose."

She gasped, then gaped. "What? You mean as in . . . *killed her?*"

"Maybe. We found paint from another vehicle on the side of her car in different places. Like someone bumped her twice and it was enough to send her over the side."

“B-but could it have been someone who was careless or drunk or—”

“It could be, but either way, they left the scene, so for now we’re treating this like a homicide.” At her stunned expression, Cole sighed. “I know it’s terrible to ask this, but could you show us Brenda’s workspace? We’re going to need to go through it in case it was someone she knew. If it was just some weird accident by a stranger, that’s one thing, but we’ve got to rule other stuff out.”

“Stan was just talking about needing to clear out her desk this morning, and I told him I’d do it after everyone left for the day.” She frowned. “It’s right there in the middle of the room next to mine. If you guys start going through it, everyone will . . .” She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“We get it,” Tate said, “but it’s possible she might have something in the desk that can lead us to why she’s dead. The faster we find that, the faster we hope to find out what happened on the road.”

“Right. Of course.” Steph stood and waved for them to follow. Tate snagged his coffee and pulled up the rear.

She stopped at a cubicle that was neat and organized. Ready for its occupant to settle into the chair and start work. Unfortunately, Brenda wouldn’t be coming back. Tate pulled in a deep breath while a sense of rightness settled over him in spite of the reason for his position being necessary. This was why he did this job. To get justice for those who couldn’t get it for themselves.