

Excerpt from *A Southern Promise* by Jennifer Lohmann

Julianne could play haughty and privileged, but poker would never be her game. Experiences she'd had with Rupert Carrie flickered in her eyes until she settled on one that was especially meaningful. Only, instead of sharing, she shook her head. "He just made me uncomfortable, is all."

"There's more to it, isn't there?" Howie could still see her rolling the experience over in her mind.

A dark pink tongue flickered out between light pink lips. "No."

She lied with such conviction in her tone—and doubt in her face—that Howie added the question to a mental list to ask again later, and later again if needed. He could approach the question from one hundred different directions if necessary—she'd answer it eventually.

"It sounds like your aunt donated a lot of money," he asked as a distraction. "Was she having money problems? Did she give money to the wrong person? Or borrow money from the wrong person?"

"No," Julianne said with conviction. "Aunt Binnie hasn't had control of her own finances since I came home."

Howie raised an eyebrow.

"When I first moved back to Durham, she was giving money to anyone who knocked on her door and said they could lower the crime rate. Politicians. Nonprofits. Companies seeking investment. Scam artists." Tendons in her neck appeared when she turned her head to look out the window. When she turned back to face him, her long neck was smooth again, and kissable.

*Shit. She's a family member—one that might have killed her aunt.* He wasn't supposed to look at Julianne Dawson—of all people—and want to put his lips all over her.

"Mom didn't want her giving away any money, so she fought my mom's attempts to take control. I suggested that I could vet each person, and that we'd agree on a set of nonprofits she could give money to without my signature. That seemed a good compromise."

"And your cousin? Were you vetting him, too?"

She flushed. "Yes. He had something planned, but he wouldn't tell me any more than he would tell Binnie."

Howie didn't entirely know how his mind managed detective work, but he'd described it to a friend once as if there was a little boy in his head hunting for clues while some jerk played the hot-cold game. Right now, that jerk was saying, "Getting warmer." But his tone implied he thought Howie might trip and fall on his face before he found something.

Julianne was running her tongue along the bottom of her lip. Howie's eyes followed it, both because he wanted to and because he'd learned this was a nervous response of hers. And that she clammed up afterward.

"Who inherits Mrs. Somerset's money?" he asked, approaching the question of money from a new direction.

She sniffed. "My brother and I. She...she and the Carries never reconciled enough for Binnie to change her will."

Howie figured that was Julianne's polite way of saying that Binnie's own family had called her crazy, maybe even to her face, and only found her useful if he needed money.

Was there an expectation there? Rupert, expecting Mrs. Somerset to give him money because she had some and he was her grandson? Maybe even expecting that his relationship with her was enough reason for Binnie to leave him something in her will.

And he couldn't discount what money problems Julianne and her brother might be having. A healthy inheritance wasn't a guarantee of a financially secure adult. And he knew well that people killed each other—relatives—for far less money than what was at hand here.

"Do you have financial problems?" he asked flat-out.

"I am quite secure." She didn't say *as you probably know*, but he heard the indignation in the way her voice rose at the end of the sentence.

Howie did know some, but he would double-check.

Whenever he'd come across articles about Julianne in the *Herald-Sun*, he'd always skimmed over them. His general interest in Durham and Durham's history was enough to make him read the brief reports about Julianne Dawson's plans to renovate a tobacco warehouse into a tech incubator. Not to mention his memories of Julianne the couple times he'd seen her, there by her father's side. Those stuck out as much as his mother's comments about Howie's biological father, David, and the unfairness of the world as it fell to the haves and the have-nots.

"I read the papers, but the costs of a business venture like yours can grow. Will you have enough when it does?"

"My plan," she said with a proud lift of her chin, "has always been to give what's left of Aunt Binnie's money to the charities she supported."

Not a full answer to his question, but he let it pass. Banking records would give him what he needed to know. "And your brother?"

Julianne deflated before his eyes, barely recovering enough to respond. "Isn't this just a robbery gone wrong?" she asked in a sinking voice.

Her question shocked him, until he realized that she was being both disingenuous and completely honest. The way she'd shimmied away from discussion of her cousin suggested that she knew he was capable of harm, but blood was powerful, even if you didn't like the person the blood connected you to. And now she was acting similarly in regards to her brother...

"We will investigate every possibility," Howie said as gently as he could. "But your aunt was likely killed by someone who knew her."

"Oh." She looked past him, but the blank look in her eyes meant she probably wasn't seeing any of the activity happening outside the patrol car window.

"Tell me what happened to my aunt." Julianne whispered the words. He knew her tone and understood the horror uncertainty caused.

"Ms. Dawson, please answer the question about your brother. You can't help Mrs. Somerset now, but you can help catch her killer."

"Can I see her?" Her voice was small, tiny compared to the magnitude of her family's influence on Durham—like the voice of anyone in her situation would be.

"No. Even if..."

He didn't finish his sentence. He didn't have to. Julianne started shaking as she began to realize the truth of what had happened to her aunt. Her head listed a little to the right. Howie was worried she might faint when her body jerked and her head returned upright. Just when

he thought she'd caught herself, her eyelids eased down and her whole body sunk into the seat.

He caught her before she fell on him, pushing her both away from him and down, shoving her head between her knees. "Breathe, Julianne."

Her neck stiffened at the familiarity and life returned to her shoulders. Howie still didn't remove his hand from her head, though he loosened his grip enough for her to turn and gaze up at him, her silky hair sliding under his palm.

"Don and his wife live exactly at their means," she said, half to the floor and half to him. "They spend too much money, but I don't think they have debts. Or not significant ones, anyway. Whatever of Aunt Binnie's they inherit will go to their kids. They spend most of their money on their kids." She was talking so quietly that Howie had to bend forward to hear her.

"But Don wouldn't kill for more money." This was said with force.

"Are you sure about that?"

She was still bent over, her head still resting on her knees, her eyes still turned to him. Their faces were inches apart and when he asked his last question, he could follow the trail of his breath in the goose bumps that traveled up her forearm.

"About my brother? Yes." Her voice had gone soft again. "Yes," she repeated, stronger this time. "I'm sure Don couldn't have done this."

"Can you sit up?"

She nodded and he loosened his fingers. "Slowly now."

Howie kept a small amount of pressure on the nape of her neck, both to guide her slowly back up, and because he liked the feel of her hair under his hand.

This position, his hand on her head and their faces nearly touching, was more intimate than he'd been with a woman in a while. He'd had to cancel a date for a third time in two weeks because of a murder—summer was the bad season for Durham's crime rate.

Once back upright in the hottest part of the car, Julianne swayed a bit and closed her eyes, though she didn't seem at risk of fainting again. Her face was still pale, but when her eyes opened, it wasn't just the remains of tears that gave them a little brightness.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yes." She nodded once, as if testing the movement of her head. Then a second time, with more force. Convinced now that she would be okay, he removed his fingers from where they'd mingled with her hair. Once she was fully composed again, her stomach growled and embarrassment turned her fainting-spell-pale cheeks into a deep, dark red.

"When's the last time you ate?"

"Last night, I guess. Binnie was supposed to be cooking me lunch and—" she paused, her eyes rolling up to the ceiling of the patrol car as she considered the question "—I worked late last night and had a meeting early this morning. I've had a cup of coffee."

Between the heat of the car, the shock of the news and a stomach filled only with coffee, it was no wonder she'd fainted. He reached into the front pocket of his Dockers, pulled out the Clif Bar he kept there for long days, and offered it to her. "Here."

She stared at bar, looking both surprised and unwilling to take the gift. Which amused him, because his handkerchief still lay on her knee and he was pretty certain he was never getting it back. "Take it," he said. "The Durham Police Department doesn't want you fainting and running your car into a tree."

“Thank you.” She was still looking at the bar as if she had never been offered such a thing in her life. And maybe she hadn’t. Maybe industry princesses who lingered around after the dissolution of tobacco empires weren’t offered Cliff bars. Maybe when they needed a snack they pulled little trays of caviar out of refrigerated compartments in their luxury vehicles.

Of course that was ridiculous, he thought as he watched her peel the wrapper off the energy bar and take a nibble off the corner. More likely she hadn’t expected anything about this day, including the Cliff Bar.

Howie could tell the moment the food hit her stomach and she realized how hungry she had been. Her color settled into a normal pink. She took a bigger bite. Then another. Then another, until the bar disappeared and she was staring at the empty wrapper in her hand.

“Thank you. I needed that.” She held the empty wrapper out between them and they both stared at it. Howie didn’t take it from her, he had no better place to put it than she did, and eventually she crumbled it up and set it on her knee, on top of the handkerchief.

“I’ll be in touch again soon. Leave your contact information with Henson. And your brother’s. And your cousin’s.” Not that he needed the information, as he could easily find it himself, but this was a good test of Julianne’s sincerity. “Are you okay to drive?”

“I will be. In a minute.”

“Good. Thank you for your time,” he added, even though they both knew she hadn’t had much of a choice. “Here’s my card. Call me if you think of anything else. I’ll be in touch.”

At Howie’s signal, Henson opened the door. He stepped out of the car, giving Julianne time and privacy to collect herself, if she wanted. Which she apparently didn’t because she followed him immediately, so close on his tail he could almost feel her breathing down his neck.

Once she was out of the car and lifting her face to the sky, the fresh air seemed to revive her. Her shoulders lowered as she steadied herself on her feet. Then she turned to him and gave him a dirty look—one she definitely didn’t learn in finishing school.