

When, after her father's murder, Jill Carlisle moves into their ancestral home in rural North Georgia, she finds that she, herself, is now the victim of stalking and threats. Strengthened by the spirit of a Yamasee Indian woman, Jill seeks for answers. Matt Branson, who has dreams of operating a hippotherapy ranch, sets his sights on her. But is he really just after the land she has inherited? And, what lengths would he go to in order to get it?

## **Yamasee Falls**

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A scenic view of Yamasee Falls, a waterfall cascading into a river surrounded by autumn foliage. The water is white and frothy as it falls, and the surrounding trees are in vibrant shades of yellow, orange, and red. The river flows through a rocky bed with several large logs and branches scattered across it. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

# Yamasee Falls

**Norma Jean Dyer**

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## Chapter 1

Jill dropped her suitcase on the porch and turned her key in the door lock. In the dusk, the old farmhouse looked uninviting and cold. But, as she stepped inside, the warmth of familiarity welcomed her. Choking back a sob, she flipped the light switch and looked around. It had been several months since she had last visited her father here. She glanced sadly at the open book that he would never finish, the wood piled neatly by the fireplace, the family pictures on the mantel. Guilt overwhelmed her; she should have come more often. How could he be gone with no warning; no chance to say goodbye?

Exhausted, Jill kicked off her shoes and sank down in her father's favorite old chair. Her shoulders were tight and knotted from stress and she didn't know when she had felt so tired. She had flown the day before, from New Hampshire to the Greenville-Spartanburg Airport in South Carolina, the closest airport to where her father lived in Yamasee Falls, Georgia. Arriving at the airport just hours after the sheriff had called to tell her of her father's death, she had rented a small sedan and driven to the little North Georgia town. Because roads through this part of Georgia had been cut through the mountains, they were curvy and narrow. Drivers had to be cautious and alert or they would find themselves coming around curves on the wrong side of the yellow line. She had traveled this route many times before for visits to her father's home but, this time, Jill's heart felt so heavy, she had to push herself to keep moving. Her mind numb, she was oblivious to the beautiful wildflowers and blossoming trees of early Summer along the roads in rural North Georgia.

Jill had driven directly to the office of the local sheriff who, unemotionally, told her how her father had been murdered: with a close range pistol-shot in the chest, and his body left in his backyard. Sheriff Harris appeared to be a man in his late forties, his skin weather-beaten from years outside in the sun, and the beginning of gray at his temples. Eyes that were hooded, one more than the other, gave his face an unbalanced appearance. His politeness seemed to Jill

to be forced and condescending as if he resented having to deal with an outsider.

The sheriff accompanied her to meet with Dr. Whitney, a coroner, who had driven in from the next town. Yamasee Falls couldn't support a coroner of their own so they had a cooperative agreement with Elberton, the nearest city. Years ago, an addition had been built onto the local funeral parlor to serve as a small morgue and laboratory for the coroner's use. It was a brightly lit, sterile room as one would expect in a morgue. There were two stainless-steel tables alongside spotless counters that held numerous steel instruments. Joe Carlisle's body lay on one of the tables.

Dr. Whitney was an older man with soft blue eyes and wavy white hair that gave him a grandfatherly appearance. He supported Jill by the elbow as he led her to view and identify her father's sheeted body. As he pulled back the cover, Jill, white with shock, stumbled backward, landing in a chair just seconds before she would have sunk to the floor in a faint. It seemed as if her strong body had disappeared, leaving a floppy ragdoll in its place. The smell of chemicals added to her nausea as the reality of her father's murder sank in. Slightly strengthened by a glass of water and some comforting words from the kind old man, Jill listened as Dr. Whitney explained to her that her father was shot in the chest, the bullet penetrating his heart and then exiting out his back.

"There were fragments of skin and spots of blood on his fingers," Dr. Whitney continued, "that indicate he tried to defend himself. I've sent them on to the lab in Atlanta, hoping they will help in the investigation."

Jill's head was spinning. This couldn't be her father, lying there lifeless. Surely she would wake up from this nightmare.

The two men moved to the other side of the room to give Jill a few moments alone with her father's body. She caressed his still face lovingly, quietly sobbing as she vowed to find his killer. Then, pulling herself together, she nodded to the coroner and walked to the door.

"Why, why?" she lamented, as Sheriff Harris drove her back to his office to pick up her rental car.

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“Case like this is usually burglary,” he answered authoritatively. During the short drive, the sheriff asked her a few questions about her father’s habits and promised he would do all he could to find out who had killed him and why.



Tired and emotionally drained, Jill knew she didn’t have the fortitude to drive to her father’s house to spend the night. She just couldn’t face the emptiness yet. So, instead, she had driven to the Wilmont Inn, the only hotel in the little town. It was an old building that had been a hotel for a hundred years. Each new owner, over the years, had renovated it but in a way that retained the quaint elegance of its history. News, both sad and joyful, traveled fast in a town this size and the murder of one of its residents was no exception. When a pale and grieving young woman walked hesitantly into the lobby, the manager surmised exactly who she was, and treated Jill with extra kindness and consideration as she registered for a room.

At a different time and circumstance, Jill might have enjoyed relaxing in the inviting lobby. Overhead hung an ornate antique chandelier, giving light to the Victorian settees beneath. Queen Anne chairs sat invitingly in front of the tall marble fireplace that boasted a polished mahogany mantle. On a table in the center of the room was a gorgeous old silver tea set on a matching tray. Beautiful fresh lilies and fragrant lilacs in porcelain vases adorned the registration desk. The refined ambience almost seemed out of place in the small rural town. Sadly, its understated elegance was lost on its grieving guest.

Departing the elevator and entering her room, Jill barely noticed that her room was tastefully decorated as well. An ivory brocade fabric covered the walls and olive-green silk drapes dressed the tall, narrow windows. Over the mahogany four-poster bed was a Renoir print in pinks and ivory in a large gilded frame. A matching mahogany armoire concealed the television. It was surprising that, in all the times she had visited her grandparents, and then her father, she had never set foot in this lovely old hotel.

Still shaky, Jill wanted to just crawl into the antique bed and fall asleep but she knew that the day was slipping away and she had things to attend to. She telephoned the funeral home to discuss preparations for a service for her father the next afternoon since the coroner was releasing his body in the morning. Being in the same building, she could have made arrangements in person when she was at the coroner's but she hadn't been comfortable having the sheriff hovering over her. Her father's murder was such a stunning blow, Jill couldn't imagine facing a lot of people and would have liked to have just a small private service, but she knew that the years of his and his parents' residence in the town would have touched many lives. When she called Reverend Conner, the minister at the local Presbyterian Church her father had attended, to ask him to speak at the service, he agreed with her that a public service would be more appropriate.

"Your family meant a lot to the people here," Reverend Conner assured her. "They'll want a chance to say goodbye and also to show their sympathy to you, especially considering the circumstances of your father's death." In her heart, Jill knew he was right so she gave him permission to spread the word among the townspeople.

Then Jill called Arthur Barton, her father's lawyer and close friend of the Carlisle family. She had met Arthur many times before when he had been a frequent guest at her father's home. He was more like an uncle or godfather to her than the family attorney. After expressing his shock and condolences, Arthur insisted on meeting Jill the next day for lunch and, then, to escort her to the funeral service.

"No one should have to go through this alone, my dear," he offered.

Having completed the arrangements, Jill lay down on the huge bed and pulled the warm duvet over her. In minutes she was in a fitful sleep, tossing and turning, and was gratefully awakened by a knock on the door. Passing her hands through her messed hair, Jill opened the door to find a bellhop standing there with a tray containing a small steaming pot of chamomile tea and a plate of fresh scones, courtesy of the manager. Realizing she hadn't had lunch and, not wanting to leave the room for dinner, Jill devoured the contents of the tray. Her

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appetite satiated, she changed into a nightgown and, after turning the clock radio to some soft music, she was able to drift into a deep sleep.

The next morning Jill awoke early and reluctantly prepared for the day. While sipping the room service coffee, she called the funeral home and confirmed the arrangements. Then she took a long hot shower and dressed in her navy business suit. With its mid-calf length skirt, it was the only outfit she had brought that she thought appropriate for the service. After brushing her red hair back into a bun, she repacked her suitcase, left the hotel, and walked over to the restaurant next to Arthur's office where they were to meet for lunch. A worried look on his face, Arthur wrapped his arms around her and sadly repeated his condolences. Over coffee and bagels, he expressed his concern for her and the fact that she had come alone to deal with her father's death.

"I'll be here for you; whatever you need," he assured her.

A million questions saturated Jill's mind as she sat with her head bowed through the brief ceremony, trying not to focus on the reason for the closed casket. Words being spoken sounded to her overwhelmed mind as if they were coming from under water. Several townspeople gave short speeches; mostly about the many years that her father and his parents had lived in Yamasee Falls and the friends that they had been. In her grief, Jill hardly looked around to acknowledge the others present. She struggled to concentrate on the scripture being read. *Ashes to ashes*, she repeated soundlessly.

Arthur stood next to her as sympathizers spoke kind words and reached out to touch her hand or pat her shoulder. As dark clouds formed overhead, her father's body was interred in the family plot alongside his parents. When she turned to leave, Al Clayton, her father's employer, made an appointment to see her on Monday at his office to tie up loose ends. Then Jill had picked up her belongings from the hotel and drove her rental car on the two-lane country road twelve miles out of town to her father's house.

It was a comfortable old house that had been home to three generations of Carlisle's. A sprawling one story farmhouse with a stone front, it originally had five small bedrooms. Jill's grandparents had remodeled it to include a second bathroom and took down walls



to make just three large bedrooms. When her father had moved south to care for her grandfather, he had claimed one of the bedrooms as an office and installed a pullout sofa against one wall for Jill to sleep on when she visited. The room conveniently next to it became his bedroom. After both of his parents had passed away, he turned their large master bedroom into a guestroom for Jill. The pullout sofa then made way for bookshelves in the office. He had furnished Jill's room with a white canopy bed and her grandmother's antique dressing table. Ruffled curtains and a matching bedspread made the room too "prissy" for Jill's taste but she knew her father would always see her as his little girl and that, in a way, was comforting.

The livingroom with its stone fireplace and dated furniture gave off a warm, comfy appearance. Jill's father had refinished the hardwood floor, which now shined around the edges of a large braided rug. On one wall hung an old picture of Jill's grandfather smiling from ear to ear in front of his very first tractor. On another, was a portrait of her father with his brother, Sam, who had died in the Vietnam War. Bookcases lined a wall where stories of flying by Ernie Gann and Ken Follett competed for space with the non-fiction of pilots, Richard Collins, Charles Lindbergh and Chuck Yeager. The sofa, at least two decades old, had been reupholstered in a subtle print that blended nicely with her father's old recliner.

Jill's favorite room in the house had always been the bright, sunlit eat-in kitchen with a large window over the sink. It still had her grandmother's ivy vine wallpaper but the old, dark cabinets had been painted white. Jill had helped her dad pick out the sturdy light-pine table and chairs several years prior. Matching chair cushions and curtains in a pretty yellow pattern added to the cheerfulness of the room. The window looked out over a mass of colorful peonies that her grandmother had planted years ago and now just sprang up on their own. Beyond that, one could see, in the distance, the neighboring house.

More mentally than physically exhausted, Jill dozed off in her father's worn chair. After just a few moments, a sharp knock on the door startled her awake. Getting her bearings, she pulled aside the curtain and peeked out the window nearest the door. There was a tall,

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dark-haired man standing there who looked vaguely familiar. When Jill opened the door a large, yellow, longhaired dog bounded in, nearly knocking her over.

“Hey Buddy,” she hugged her father’s dog, an eight year old Labrador, tightly.

The man held out his hand, “Remember me?” he asked. He towered over her petite frame but his eyes were warm and friendly.

Jill looked up at him, “Oh yes,” she recalled, “the neighbor up the road.” On one of her visits to her father’s, he was just moving in and her father had introduced them. “Mr. Branson, isn’t it?”

“Make it Matt,” he answered, “Buddy has been anxious to come home. I took him to my house yesterday when they found your father. I’m so sorry about your loss. I’ve been so busy, I’m afraid I didn’t get to know Joe very well.” His deep gray eyes were sympathetic.

Jill looked up at him, her own eyes sorrowful and teary, “Thanks for bringing Buddy home, now if you don’t mind, I’m just so tired.”

Matt turned to leave, “Will you be staying awhile? If there’s anything I can do to help you; I practice law in Atlanta but I do most of my research and prep at home so I’m around a lot.”

Not feeling like conversation, Jill nodded, “Thanks, I’ll let you know,” and closed the door behind him as he left.

The large dog ran to his master’s old chair and pawed it gently, a mournful sound deep in his throat.

“I know, Buddy,” Jill said as she led him into the guest room, “looks like it’s just us now.”

Buddy jumped up on the bed and watched patiently as Jill undressed and crawled under the blankets. She wanted so much to sleep for days but knew she wouldn’t. There were too many questions crowding her head. *Why would someone want her father dead? If it was a burglary why was he killed in the backyard? What would she do with the farmhouse that had been in her father’s family for so long?*

“Oh, Buddy,” she cried hugging him close and burying her face in his fur. “What are we going to do?”

No longer able to hold back, Jill curled into a fetal position, big gulping sobs tearing at her throat.

*Norma Jean Dyer*

“Andy, I wish you were with me now,” she cried. It had been over a year since her boyfriend, Andy, died and somehow she had managed to get on with her life. But now, with this new crisis, she felt so alone and so scared

On that fateful winter weekend, Jill and Andy, avid skiers both, had made plans to fly to Aspen. The night before, Jill came down with a high fever and other symptoms of the flu. Upon Jill’s promise that she would stay in bed and rest, Andy decided to join some skier friends that had left for Aspen the previous day.

Andy had called Jill from the lodge on Saturday and mentioned how crowded the slopes were due to the nice sunny weather that weekend. He said that he and a couple of friends might hop a small plane that was taking a few skiers across the mountains to other slopes that would be less crowded. That was the last Jill ever heard from him. The small plane had crashed in the mountains with no survivors.

Unable to relax, Jill stepped into her slippers, padded out to the kitchen and heated some milk to make cocoa. Ever since she was little, hot cocoa had always comforted her and helped her sleep. Her father’s kitchen looked as if he had been interrupted right after lunch the previous day. A half-empty mug of coffee and a sandwich plate with some wilted remnants of lettuce sat in the sink. Yesterday’s newspaper was opened on the counter nearby next to his reading glasses. These familiar signs of her father’s life decried the fact that he would never return. Indeed, it seemed as if he would walk through the door at any moment. Holding back tears, she reached into the cupboard for a mug.

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