

DECEPTION

Lillian Duncan

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Dedication

To Ronny, I couldn't do it without you! Your support and encouragement keep me writing.

To Jay, you made a difference.

Praise for *Pursued*

This is one of the best Christian fiction books I've read - definitely the best suspense/drama book I've read in the Christian genre. Lillian Duncan is a good writer, and her strong character is evident throughout the book. ~ *Chad Young*, author of *Authenticity: Real Faith in a Phony, Superficial World*

Duncan's story was deliciously romantic and breathtakingly paced. Her characters were wonderfully portrayed and I was drawn into Reggie's plight from the moment an ex-English teacher businessman drops her firm over a misplaced word. Those readers who enjoy some great kissing in between bullets and prayers will enjoy *Pursued*. ~ *Lisa Lickel*, co-author of *A Summer in Oakville*

1

Cleveland, Ohio

Patti Jakowski sat alone at her deck watching the drizzle from the leaky roof form an ever growing puddle on her picnic table. Taking another sip of the now cold coffee, she frowned. It would be the third time she'd contacted the roofers. She would never let herself be talked into a major house renovation from a door-to-door salesman again.

Great way to start summer vacation. Sitting and watching the rain.

The ringing of the phone brought her to her feet, and she ran into the kitchen. The scent of baking cinnamon rolls reminded her to check the oven after the call. "Hello."

"Me want my aunt." It was a young girl. By the sound of her voice, maybe three, or four.

"Oh, I'm sorry, honey. You must have dialed the wrong number. Hang up and try again. OK, sweetie?" instructed Patti, slipping into her teacher voice.

"I need my aunt. Mommy's not here," said the little girl. "I 'sposed to call my aunt. I want my mommy."

Her heart skipped a beat. Patti didn't like the sound of that. Surely, her parents hadn't left this little girl alone. "You're mommy's not home with you?" Concern edged into her voice.

"Just me. Can't find Mommy. Where's Mommy?"

The little girl's voice trembled.

"I don't know, sweetie. How old are you?" Patti asked, while reaching for the pad and pen by the phone.

"I'm four." The little girl's voice was tinged with pride at the announcement.

"That's very good. What's your name?"

"I not 'spose to tell strangers." It came out more like a wail than words.

"That's a good girl. You're right, you shouldn't tell strangers your name, but I'm not a stranger. You called me, remember?"

There was a pause as the little girl considered this new information. "Sabina."

"Do you mean Sabrina?"

"Yeah, Sabina."

Patti smiled. She'd had a cat named Sabrina when she was young. Patti and her twin had played house with that silly animal for hours on end.

Her sister always said she would name her first daughter after...

Patti's heart skipped a beat. It couldn't be. Patti shook the thought away. This Sabrina had nothing to do with Patti's twin. It was a coincidence, nothing more. There were lots of little girls with the name. A little voice told her there was no such thing as coincidences. Patti ignored the little voice. "That's a pretty name, Sabrina. What's your mommy's name?"

"Mommy."

Patti resisted the urge to sigh, glad she worked with high school students instead of younger children. "Does she have another name, Sabrina?"

"No, just Mommy."

Patti looked up at the ceiling. This wasn't going

anywhere. The authorities needed to get to this little girl's house. Why hadn't she taken the time to get the caller ID on her phone set up?

"Can you tell me your aunt's name?"

"I forget." The girl's whimpers turned into sobs.

"That's OK, Sabrina. Don't cry. You're being very brave. What I want you to do is to hang up and wait by the phone until it rings. Then, make sure you pick it up, OK? It will be me calling you back."

"Otay," the little voice said.

Patti waited to hear the disconnection but nothing happened.

"Sabrina, hang up the phone. I promise to call you back."

"Otay."

This time Patti heard the disconnection. She hung up the phone, and then immediately picked it up and dialed *67.

A mechanical voice came on. "I'm sorry the number has been blocked."

"Oh, perfect," Patti mumbled. Her idea hadn't been all that great. She flopped on a kitchen chair. What was she supposed to do? She had to help this little girl.

She jumped back up as a whiff of cinnamon scented the air. Opening the oven, she pulled out the cookie sheet, found a spatula and transferred the rolls onto a plate. Another idea popped into her head. She picked up the phone and hit 0.

"Operator. How can I help you?"

Patti explained the situation and was put on hold. She ran fingers through her hair in an attempt to comb it. A haircut was one of the first things on her to-do list now that school was over for the summer.

The operator came back on after several minutes. "We'd like your permission to access your phone records to find out where the little girl called from. Just a reminder, this call is being recorded."

"Of course."

"Thank you, ma'am." The operator hung up.

Patti squeezed vanilla icing out of the plastic container and munched on slightly burnt cinnamon rolls.

Just because her name was Sabrina didn't mean she had anything to do with Jamie.

Patti hadn't heard from her twin in years. Her foot tapped against the chair rail.

The phone rang again.

"Hello."

"Who dis?"

Relief flooded Patti's soul as she heard Sabrina's little voice. "This is Patti."

"Aunt Patti. I called you. You didn't call me back. You promised," Sabrina whined.

"I know I did, Sabrina, but my phone wouldn't work. I'm not your aunt, but I'm going to find her for you."

"But you Aunt Patti. Mommy told me to call you."

Patti felt a chill at the little girl's certainty. It couldn't be...could it?

"Where do you live, sweetie?"

"Me live at home. Where you live?"

"I live in Cleveland, Sabrina. What's the name of your city?" Patti didn't know how to help without knowing where the girl was calling from.

"I gotta go potty. Bye."

"Wait, don't hang..." Patti groaned when she heard the click.

2

After her third cup of coffee, Patti sat at her kitchen table tapping her fingers on the green tile that didn't match the rest of her blue kitchen.

The operator had discovered the source of the call and assured Patti the police were on their way to the little girl's house.

Patti hoped Sabrina's mom would be there when the police arrived, and the problem would be solved.

"Of all the days to rain," she muttered as she stared out the window. Her tradition of using the first day of summer vacation to plant flowers wouldn't be happening that day—unless she wanted to crawl around in knee-deep mud.

Sighing, she went to the sink to rinse out the coffee cup. She wandered through the house trying to find something to keep her mind off Sabrina.

Twenty minutes later, the phone rang.

"Is this Patti Jakowski?"

"Who's this?" she asked.

"I'm Sergeant Carter Caldwell with the Palm Beach Police Department in Florida. Are you the person who called about the young child being left alone?"

"I hope everything turned out all right. Did you find Sabrina?"

A moment's hesitation made Patti's heart drop.

"We did, but we're confused."

Patti's stomach clenched in a knot. "About what?"

"Are you sure you're not her aunt?"

"Of course, I'm sure." The knot tightened. "I would know if she was my niece."

Another long pause.

"Here's the thing. She wasn't dialing your number by mistake. It was programmed into the cell phone. Sabrina's mother taught her to speed dial your number. The house belongs to a..."

"Jamie Jakowski." Patti finished his sentence. Her legs shook, and she reached for the closest chair. She plopped down on the seat. *I should have known. What has Jamie gotten herself into, now?*

"So you do know them?" asked Sergeant Caldwell.

"Jamie's my sister, but I didn't know anything about Sabrina. It's been a long time since Jamie and I talked. Last I knew she lived in New York City, not Florida. And I didn't know she had a daughter." The flush of shame crept up her cheeks. Bad enough having to admit she didn't speak with her sister, but to admit she didn't know she had a niece was worse.

"Well, she's living here, now."

Fury flowed through her. How could her sister leave her child alone like that? Anything could have happened. "So Sabrina was alone." It was a statement, not a question.

"Not exactly."

"What's that mean?"

"Sabrina was confused when she called you. When she went to bed her mom was at home, but when she woke up she wasn't in her bedroom or the house. She panicked and called you, but the nanny was in the house the whole time."

"A nanny?"

How could her sister afford a nanny? The last time she'd seen Jamie she'd been sharing an apartment with roaches.

"The nanny's confused, too. Not sure why Jamie disappeared in the middle of the night. She was scheduled to leave today on a business trip, so she figured your sister couldn't sleep and left early."

Now that was the Jamie she knew. Left without saying goodbye to anyone, and scaring her daughter half-to-death. Apparently, her twin hadn't grown up at all.

"The nanny says they live a quiet life."

"A quiet life? That doesn't sound like Jamie." Anger bubbled up. *Calm down.* Patti tapped her fingers on the telephone and closed her eyes.

Jamie had a child and hadn't told her. That wasn't the kind of news someone forgot to mention. So Jamie must have decided their relationship was over, kaput. Forever.

Deep down, she always thought she and Jamie would one day reconcile. That spark of hope cooled to an ember and then died out completely.

Her bad day had officially turned into a nightmare. "What's going to happen to Sabrina?"

More silence on the other end.

Patti wished she hadn't had the third cup of coffee. Acid churned in her stomach. The caffeine wasn't helping matters, either. Her knees were shaking.

"Nothing. Sabrina's fine. Just a little shook up and wondering why Mom didn't say goodbye to her, but other than that, nothing's amiss."

Patti was wondering the same thing.

"And the nanny's here with the proper documentation proving she's the legal guardian when

Mom is away. So, case closed.”

“What about the fact Jamie disappeared in the middle of the night?”

“She’s an adult. Her daughter had proper supervision the whole time.”

“Has she done this before?”

“I have no idea.”

Just leave well enough alone. Sabrina was safe.

The authorities were saying there wasn’t a problem.

Her sister and her crazy antics weren’t her business, but...Patti could hear Sabrina’s sweet little voice. “I want my aunt.”

“Maybe, I should come down there and check on Sabrina.”

“The nanny is concerned, but at this point it’s not a police matter. As I said, Sabrina is fine.”

She sighed. “I’m sure Jamie will be back before I could get on a plane. It would just be a wasted trip.”

“That’s probably true, ma’am. I just wanted to call and let you know the little girl was safe and sound the whole time. And to thank you for taking the time to get involved. A lot of people wouldn’t have bothered.”

“Thank you for calling me back.”

“Do you want the phone number and address?”

She should hang up, and pretend Sabrina had never called her. “What’s the number?” she asked.

Patti sat in the chair holding the phone. Despite her twin’s many flaws, Patti had a hard time believing Jamie would abandon her child in the middle of the night, no matter what the reason. True, the nanny was there, but to leave without saying goodbye to her child?

Jamie had a daughter.

The thought boggled her mind. Patti chewed the inside of her cheek and then put her head in her hands and cried. Anger surged through her. Her emotions were bouncing faster than a ping-pong ball.

Righteous indignation and compassion for Sabrina, living with a nanny while Jamie went merrily on her way.

Or was she just jealous Jamie had a child and she didn't?

Patti shook away the horrible thought. She wasn't that selfish and self-centered, was she?

Patti's breathing quickened. Not enough air. Trouble breathing. Panic attack. With eyes squeezed shut, she forced herself to slow her breathing down. *One. Two. Three. Four. One. Two. Three.* She didn't want to think about having babies, or her sister.

As soon as her breathing returned to normal, her thoughts returned to Sabrina. Even though Patti and her twin didn't have a relationship, they were still sisters. This little girl was her niece, her family. And Jamie trusted Patti enough to teach Sabrina how to dial her number in an emergency.

And even though it wasn't a real emergency, Sabrina had been terrified, nonetheless.

Thinking of phone numbers, how exactly had Jamie known hers?

Patti hadn't talked with Jamie since she'd moved into her new house, and Patti's number was unlisted so students couldn't find it.

3

Palm Beach, Florida

Patti clenched the arm rests as the plane tilted forward.

The plane hit the runway.

Her head bounced in time with the bumping as they slowed. She looked at her watch. As much as she hated flying, it was still the fastest way to travel. She blew out nervous air.

After several conversations with the nanny, Patti decided she needed to come to Florida.

The nanny had yet to hear from Jamie and was worried.

Sabrina kept crying for her mommy. It was as if the little girl knew something was wrong even if the adults did not.

Patti had no idea how long she'd stay.

Unless Jamie came back home to be with her daughter.

She released the breath she'd been holding, feeling that familiar anger her twin could ignite.

Talk about a love-hate relationship. Her twin could irritate Patti more than any other person on earth. Didn't she understand kids weren't disposable? One couldn't just quit taking care of them when it stopped being fun.

Patti pictured the scene.

Jamie all full of remorse, as always. Apologizing and promising to do better next time. A lot of good that would do. What must her poor niece's life be like with a mother as flighty as Jamie?

That sweet, innocent child deserved better.

If Jamie wasn't capable of taking care of her daughter, Patti was.

Being Sabrina's aunt gave her responsibilities and, unlike Jamie, she wouldn't shirk them. She needed to have a serious talk with her twin about her own responsibilities to her daughter and whether she could fulfill them.

Of course, Jamie had managed to take care of Sabrina for the past four years without any help from her. Jamie may have a legitimate reason for leaving without saying goodbye.

As others stood and jostled Patti, her pulse raced and heat rushed to her face. *I don't have claustrophobia. I don't have claustrophobia. Breathe.*

She forced herself to think about Jamie rather than all the people.

Jamie had a certain sparkle and charm people gravitated towards.

Patti was the quiet one, the awkward one, the one who always felt out of place. She wasn't jealous.

Patti frowned. *Stop lying to yourself.*

That's exactly what it was.

4

Palm trees lined the drive on both sides. Huge beautiful tropical flowers were planted between each tree.

The taxi pulled up to a small sentry building by a gate which protected the exclusive community.

A man stepped from the gatehouse. He bent down and peered into the car.

"Hello, Ms. Jakowski. How are you today? I didn't realize you were out." He looked down at a clipboard and then back up at her. "No record of you leaving. Did something happen to your car?"

Patti was too stunned to reply.

Jamie actually lives in this place. How had her sister managed that?

The guard waited for an answer.

"I'm...I'm not Jamie. I'm her twin sister, Patti. I'm here to visit Sabrina." Patti gulped. "Does...does Jamie travel a lot?"

The guard stared at her open-mouthed, shook his head, and then smiled. "Wow, identical twins, huh?"

She nodded.

"Sure. She travels a lot for work. I know she hates leaving Sabrina so much, but..." The man shrugged. "She's got to pay the bills, right? She'll usually go for a week, or so. Sometimes, she comes back for just a day before she has to leave again."

Perhaps, she'd married a rich man. It had always

been one of Jamie's many lifelong goals. She must have succeeded. *But then again, why not? Everything came so easy to Jamie.* She pushed the angry thoughts away. Right now, she needed to focus on Sabrina, not Jamie. "When was the last time you saw Jamie?"

He walked over to the guard shack and came back holding a paper. "She checked in yesterday about two p.m. and never left again."

How could that be? A second twinge of concern. She'd been so busy assuming Jamie messed up again, she hadn't considered the possibility of a serious problem. In spite of their issues, Patti loved Jamie.

Patti stared out the window as they drove past a private golf course, and then a beautiful clubhouse. Each house sported an immaculate landscaped lawn which abounded with exotic flowers and shrubs. Thinking of her own tiny bungalow in Ohio City she'd worked so hard to buy, she couldn't imagine living in such luxury.

Her stomach twisted.

What had her sister done to afford a house in a place like this?

Jamie had been trying to break into the acting business, but as far as Patti knew, her sister hadn't gotten her big break. Being a waitress didn't pay for these kinds of houses.

The taxi turned into a circular drive leading to a huge house. It reminded her of the plantation from *Gone with the Wind*, including the white marble pillars.

He nodded. "This is it."

5

The door opened before she hit the doorbell.

A stout woman with short, black hair sprinkled with gray, stood before her. "Miss Patti? I'm Anna Martino, Sabrina's nanny. Oh, my. You look just like Miss Jamie. She talks about you mucho. Always showing Sabrina pictures of you and telling her stories about her Aunt Patti."

The revelation surprised Patti to the point of speechlessness. She recovered after a few seconds. "So, have you heard from Jamie, yet?"

Anna's eyes darkened, and her smile faded. "No, something is wrong. She always calls us."

"I understand what you're saying Mrs. Martino, but at this point—"

"*Si, sí.* You tell me this already." She smiled at Patti once again. "Sabrina is very excited to meet you. Come in. Come in." Anna led the way. "And please call me Anna."

"I'm excited to meet her as well." Her jaw dropped open as she crossed the threshold.

She said nothing as she looked up at the vaulted cathedral ceiling and the loft. The living room was done all in white, white sofas, white carpet, white coffee tables, and white walls. Elegant was the only word to describe it. Judging from the outside, she'd expected a beautiful house, but she wasn't prepared for the opulence.

Patti scrimped and saved every penny to buy her little house, but it was a shack compared to this place.

She looked at the marble stands, the white leather furniture, and the snow-white rug that adorned the sitting area in front of the marble-white fireplace.

Her gaze moved upwards to the picture hanging above the fireplace, the only color in the room.

It showed a stylized figure of a girl staring at her reflection in the mirror. Instead of the reflection being the same, it showed the same face, but with a darker feel. The girl was reaching through the mirror as if to hug her reflection or to pull her into the darkness of her own world.

Patti walked over to examine the picture more closely. She looked at the signature.

A Picasso!

The painting wasn't the real thing, was it? Considering the quality of the rest of the house, it very well could be.

Anna motioned for her to sit. "I will go get Sabrina so she can finally meet her *tia*."

I have nothing to feel guilty about. Jamie was the one who broke the ties. Jamie was the one who ruined Patti's chance at happiness. Jamie was the one who chose to stop coming home to Ohio. If Jamie had ever bothered to come back, they might have fixed their fractured relationship.

Anna walked back in holding Sabrina's hand. A beautiful child. Her shiny black hair was chin length and straight, her forehead covered by bangs. With beautiful olive-colored skin and dark eyes surrounded by thick dark eyelashes, it was obvious she hadn't inherited Patti and Jamie's pale coloring.

Her niece.