

Betrayed

Lillian Duncan

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Dedication

This and all I do is for God's Glory

This book is lovingly dedicated to all those who support, encourage, and keep me writing. And no one does that more than my husband, Ronny. What a gift you are from God!

I might create the story and write the words, but without all the supporting roles my dream would be just that—a dream. Instead, I'm living my dream. How awesome is that!

Thanks first to my readers, including my friends and family. Another group of people are Christian writers who live their Christian faith not only in their writing, but by helping and supporting other writers obtain their dreams through more ways that you can imagine.

A special thanks to my publisher, Nicola Martinez at Pelican Book Group and to my editor, Jamie West, your knowledge and advice are invaluable to me.

God Bless and Good Reading.

Praise

THE CHRISTMAS STALKING (2012)

Contemporary inspirational writer, Mary Manners, winner of the 2012 IRCA for *LIGHT THE FIRE*: (www.marymannersromance.com): 5 BEAUTIFUL STARS... Lillian Duncan has a gift for writing romantic suspense and *The Christmas Stalking* is no exception. With an original storyline and characters that are rich and full of personality, she has managed to weave a plot full of twists and turns that kept me on the edge of my seat until the very last page. Now, I am only hoping for more from her!

DECEPTION (2011) A Sisters By Choice novel:

Coffee Time Romance: This suspenseful, inspirational, well-written romantic fiction is an excellent example of its genre. The key players: police, FBI agent, Patti, Jamie and Carter are people of faith, but it is integrated in such a way that it reads realistically. The pace is professional, and the characters are well drawn--a fun read.

PURSUED (2011)

Chad Young, author of *Authenticity: Real Faith in a Phony, Superficial World*: 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.

Prologue

No way off. No way to escape. No way to get to her daughter. Why had she ever thought a yacht was a good idea for a benefit? Maria Hammond pushed her way through the throng of partygoers towards the exit. She had to get off this yacht and get to Layla before Raymond did.

“Maria.”

She jerked around at her husband’s voice, not believing her eyes. Raymond’s arm was snaked around Patti’s neck. Even from that distance, Maria recognized the panic in Patti’s eyes.

Maria wanted to help, but there was nothing she could do. She had to get to her daughter. It was her only chance to keep Layla safe, to keep her away from her father. Otherwise, she would never see her child again.

Maria kept moving towards the exit ramp of the yacht.

Who was this stranger she’d slept with for so many years? She’d believed he loved her when they married, but she’d been so wrong. The events of the past month proved that—and more.

“Don’t do it, Maria.” Raymond’s voice was low and guttural, in spite of the noise from the crowd surrounding them. She turned back as he moved the gun to Patti’s head. His eyes turned black with rage. The face of evil. Why hadn’t Maria seen it before? How

could she have married a monster and not even known?

Her heart broken, she turned and pushed through the crowd.

No one noticed the drama happening in their midst.

Maybe, they needed to notice.

When Maria hazarded a glance back, Raymond trailed with one arm around Patti's neck. The other hand still held a gun, now pressed against Patti's temple.

Patti motioned with her hand. "Go, Maria. Just go. Don't worry about me."

Maria pointed. "Gun. He's got a gun!" Maria screamed, and then pointed at Raymond.

Heads turned.

A buzz travelled through the growing crowd.

Maria kept yelling. She couldn't do much, but she could draw attention to Raymond.

Murmuring grew louder—more partygoers panicked. People shoved and pushed as they tried to get away from the madman with the gun—her husband. Others stared and pointed.

Hatred glittered in Raymond's eyes.

It was time to go. She'd managed to turn attention to Patti and Raymond. Surely, someone would intervene. Someone would help Patti.

Gunfire exploded.

Screams erupted.

More shots.

Then a burning stab of pain. Her back. She turned.

Raymond's gaze met hers. He smiled.

Another hot burst of pain. This time in her stomach.

Have to get to Layla. Her feet wouldn't move. She swayed, and then crumpled to the deck. Her hand moved to her stomach. Wetness. Red wetness. She gasped for air. It didn't matter how much it hurt. She had to get to her daughter. She attempted to stand, but collapsed onto the smooth wooden deck. Her cheek rested against the wood, now dirty from all the feet that had walked on it that day.

Summoning strength, she moved to hands and knees, crawling. Nothing would stop her from getting to her daughter. The world suddenly turned wavy and she fought to stay conscious.

Raymond thought he had all the power, but he'd forgotten one thing.

A mother's love knew no limits.

1

He was back.

Maria's hand shook as she lifted a pink rose from the bucket and added it to the bouquet, but her gaze never strayed from the man leaning against a brown minivan across the street. It seemed as if he stared directly into the flower shop, into her eyes, into her soul.

As if searching for someone.

Her pulse raced as she memorized his features. Shaggy beard. Longish, sandy blond hair. Average height. Average build.

She took a deep breath. *Calm down. It's just your paranoia. It's not real.*

Her imagination was running wild...again.

He was probably some local man waiting for his wife or a friend to finish shopping.

Please, let him have nothing to do with us. Let him be a harmless husband waiting for his wife.

But if that was the case, why was it the third time in as many days she'd seen him?

That couldn't be a coincidence.

Could it?

The first time she'd noticed him, he was walking out of one of the many antiques stores that surrounded the square of Sunberry. The second time, he'd been sitting at the Coffee Cup's outside table sipping one of their fancy concoctions. And now, he sat across from

her shop staring in her direction.

Whenever she saw him, she kept her face averted, but his gaze moved from one person to another—always searching.

Stop being so paranoid.

She picked several more flowers to add to the bouquet.

Again.

What other explanation could there be?

Her nightmare would never be over. Raymond warned—no, promised—that she'd never be free of him. That he would win. That she would never be allowed to raise Layla as an American.

She didn't want to leave Sunberry. It was their third location since entering Witness Protection. Layla needed some stability, and Maria thought this was the right place.

This was where Layla could grow up free from fear.

Maria loved the flower shop. She wanted to believe being surrounded by the beauty of the flowers every day would erase the ugliness she'd experienced.

No sane woman would ever forget the betrayal of a man she'd loved and whom she thought loved her.

Betrayal was an understatement. Maria didn't have a word big enough to describe what Raymond had done to her—and to Layla, their daughter. She forced the pain away. Better to keep it dead and buried—just like her name, her past, and her identity.

She walked back to the sales counter and focused on the man across the street.

"Everything OK, Veronica?" Conrad's voice brought her back to the present.

"Sure, why do you ask?" Her new name always

gave her an internal pause, a fraud that had to be continued for Layla's safety.

"That's not what I asked for." Conrad pointed at the flowers in her hand.

Her gaze moved to the bouquet. Instead of the dozen pink long-stemmed roses he ordered, she held a hodgepodge of different flowers.

Her cheeks heated up. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. It will just take a minute to fix."

"You seemed worried."

His eyes were warm and kind. Not cold like Raymond's.

"OK, those will be fine," he said with a grin. "Don't worry about it."

She looked at Conrad, one of the local police officers. The uniform he wore should've made her feel safe, but it didn't.

Nothing did.

She laughed. "That's nice of you, but I don't think so. My customers get what they want." She held up the bouquet. "Not a mess like this. It will only take—"

"This is fine. Really." He touched her arm in a comforting gesture.

A shiver ran up her spine, causing confusion. She sputtered an answer. "Well, then, they're on the house. Your wife or girlfriend must love flowers. You're one of my best customers."

"Is that a sneaky way of finding out if you had coffee the other day with a married man?" A grin tugged at his mouth.

"I just assumed the coffee was about business. Your sneaky way of finding out about the new business owner in town. Making sure I'm..." Her words faltered, not sure how to finish the statement

without giving him cause for suspicion. "Making sure I have the town's best interests at heart."

"Actually, the flowers are for my mother. And our coffee date wasn't about interrogating the new business owner. It was about getting to know you. You don't have any secrets lurking behind those beautiful brown eyes, do you?"

She forced her gaze to meet his, hating the fact she couldn't be honest with anyone. How was she supposed to make friends when she had to lie to them all the time? "No secrets that you need to know about." Her cheeks flamed at her flirtatious come back. In a more serious tone, she said, "No. Of course not. I was...never mind. Anyway, you must be a good son."

"It's the least I can do for her. After all I put her through, she deserves a medal."

Maria wrapped the bouquet in pink tissue paper and then handed it to him. "Instead all she gets are these crazy flowers. Hey, that's a great idea. I'll call this my crazy quilt bouquet. And I can use all my leftover flowers to make it. What do you think?"

"And I'm the first to get one. I'm honored." He handed her a twenty.

Not taking the offered money, she shook her head. "On the house, really."

"Can't. That could be construed as a bribe, ma'am." He winked. "And here in Sunberry we don't do things like that."

The twenty passed between them. As their fingertips touched, she felt another tingle.

"The crazy quilt bouquet's a good idea. Of course, I think you should create a 'Go Bucks' bouquet." He grinned, obviously a fan of the football team.

"Scarlet and gray carnations." She wrinkled her

nose and then counted out his change.

"What's wrong with scarlet and gray?" Conrad asked in a mock serious tone. "I happen to think they are a beautiful color combination."

"You and all the other Ohio State fans."

"That's my point. I think they'd be a big seller."

"I will take the matter under consideration when football season comes around."

"Don't you like football?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"You aren't a fan of that state to the north, are you?"

"Oh my, no." She laughed. "That would be wrong on so many levels."

"I've got season tickets for OSU. Maybe you'd like to go to a game with me—sometime."

Uh-oh. Time to nip the flirting. Having coffee with him was one thing, but going on a real date—and to an Ohio State game at that—was probably not a good idea. "Thanks for being so understanding about the flowers."

He nodded. "Not a problem. But you looked so worried a minute ago. Are you sure everything's OK?"

Her gaze moved to the street. The shaggy man was not in her line of sight any longer. Had he moved down the street?

"Yes, I'm OK." She hoped her tone was steady.

"See you soon, Veronica." Conrad turned to leave. "And don't forget about the Bucks Bouquet. It even has a nice ring to it."

"Who could forget that?"

"It'll be a big seller. Trust me."

Her gaze met his. "I don't do trusting."

"That's no way to live."

"I tried it once. It didn't work."

"Everyone needs to trust."

"Oh, I trust God and myself." She paused and gave him a grim smile. "But truth be told, most days I don't trust myself all that much, either."

"Well, God's the right choice, anyway. He won't let you down like people." He pointed at his badge with a wink. "And you can trust me. See you soon, Veronica." The bell above the door tinkled as he left.

She breathed out a sigh of relief. Next time he came in, she'd need to be more professional. She had no plans to have a relationship again—ever.

Good thing he'd been so nice. Another customer would have complained. She needed to keep her mind focused if her flower shop was to be successful. The pittance Witness Protection gave her was enough to get by—just barely.

She should take a picture of the man out in the square. Why hadn't she thought of that earlier? She walked out of the flower shop. He was gone, along with the van he'd been leaning against. Maybe she should have told Conrad about him. She'd been tempted to, but what could she say without sounding paranoid?

Don't act paranoid around others. They'll wonder what you're hiding. That had been one of the nuggets of wisdom from the Witness Protection people.

As she walked into The Bouquet, she caught a glimpse of herself in the store's window. There was always that one quick second when she was surprised at her new look.

Instead of the thick, long black hair she'd been born with, her hair was now short and blonde. She'd lost twenty pounds by running and weightlifting.

Instead of the slightly plump housewife she'd been, she was now slender and a lean, mean fighting machine.

If they tried to steal Layla from her again, she'd be able to protect her daughter.

Looking at her reflection reminded her that Maria Hammond was as dead and buried as her husband. Veronica Minor had risen from the ashes with hope of a new life, but her hope faded a little more each day.

Transitioning to life as a new person wasn't easy. Some days, she could barely function with the fear that always lurked. It was getting harder to leave their apartment to go to work, to shop, to go to church.

Plain and simple, she was a mess.

But Layla was happy. She loved her new school and already had two best friends.

Maria pretended to be happy when Layla was around. She had no idea how much longer she could fool her daughter. Maria walked back into the store.

There was work to be done, but her gaze strayed outside, searching for the man or anyone else who seemed too interested in the flower store.

Her stomach clenched.

This wasn't going to work out—again. They promised her she was safe, and a part of her believed them. But the other part was winning.

At night, she dreamed of Raymond's glittering black eyes. During the day, flashbacks would take her back to those terror-filled days when he'd stolen Layla from her.

The U.S. Marshals at the Witness Protection Program wouldn't be happy when she requested another move, but she didn't care. It was her responsibility to keep Layla safe. She'd failed her

daughter once, and that would never happen again.

Time to call Morgan Reed.

It wouldn't be pleasant.

Her knees weakened as she walked to the door and turned the sign from open to closed, then locked it and set the security system. She slid her cell phone from her pocket and hit Morgan's number. It was on speed dial.

"Good morning, Veronica. How are you today?" Morgan refused to call her Maria any longer.

Her voice was cheerful, but Maria knew the woman wasn't happy to hear from her. "Not so good."

"What's the problem now?"

"A man has been watching me for the past three days."

"Did you get a picture of him? I can run it on facial recognition."

"I went outside to get it, but he disappeared."

"Probably just waiting on someone near the store."

"I've seen him the past three days."

"Veronica, I warned you to go to a bigger city than Sunberry. You're bound to see the same people over and over when you live in a small town. That doesn't mean they're out to get you. Small town living is like that. You know everybody and everybody knows you."

"We need to move."

"Not going to happen. We went through this. Unless there is a credible threat, I can't move you again. Witness Protection can't move you every two months. It doesn't work that way."

"So, what's a credible threat? After they kill me? After they kidnap Layla? When does it become a credible threat, Morgan? Tell me that."

A pause. Maria could imagine Morgan rolling her eyes. The woman didn't take anything she said seriously. They hadn't been a match from the first time they'd met. She'd always felt like Morgan thought she'd been involved with Raymond's activities.

"Of course not, Veronica. I'm concerned, just as you are." The right words, but the wrong tone.

"You always discount what I say."

"That's not true. We haven't had any proof that they found you, but we've moved you each time you requested."

"I'm requesting it now."

"It's not my call. I'm not the one who made the decision. If we have any sort of proof, even a slight indication, I'll make them change their mind. If the man comes back get as many pictures as you can. I'm sorry, that's the best I can do. My hands are tied. The offer for counseling still stands."

"Thanks." Maria took a deep breath and hung up.

She and Layla were leaving. With or without Witness Protection's help. She'd close the shop, pick up Layla from school, get their escape bags, and disappear. Heading for the back door, her feet slowed. Maybe she was paranoid.

Raymond's betrayal had stolen her trust. She no longer had any confidence in her own ability to make the right decisions.

She didn't want to make Layla leave again if it wasn't truly necessary.

Layla loved Sunberry. Her daughter would be hurt if they moved again. All Maria wanted was keep Layla safe, let her have a normal childhood. It wasn't fair to keep uprooting her.

Maria closed her eyes, summoning strength she

didn't have.

Please God, give me wisdom.

It was up to her to make a real life for Layla. Her sweet, trusting Layla. Her daughter had no idea there were people out there who wanted to kill Maria. Or to steal Layla and take her far away so Maria would never see her daughter again.

Maria slid to the floor behind the counter, sobbing.

2

Maria lost track of time as she cried and rocked back and forth. She had to get a grip on her life—if not for her then for Layla.

Maria couldn't go through life being afraid every time someone stared at her a moment too long. Or approached her to talk. Or tried to be her friend.

She believed *in* God, but now it was time to *believe* God and all the wonderful promises she'd read in His Word.

She wouldn't be intimidated by faceless, nameless bullies any longer.

She stood up, straightened her shoulders, and went to the tiny bathroom to freshen up.

Returning to the front of the store, she stiffened her spine. The scent of the flowers wafted through the air. She took a deep appreciative breath.

Beauty for ashes. One of God's promises.

Her hand touched the "Open For Business" sign as she stared out at the picturesque square. When the U.S. Marshal had shown her the photo of Sunberry's square, she knew she could be happy here.

A huge white gazebo sat in the middle of the town square. On summer nights the local talent gathered to entertain citizens. The square was surrounded by an old brick road where the patrons of the local antiques stores and other quaint shops parked the old-fashioned way.

Sunberry seemed a million miles from the bustle of big cities, but it was less than an hour from the capital of Ohio. She'd wanted a place where she and Layla could be part of the community since they'd never see their own family or friends again.

Unfortunately, she was still as alone as the day they moved to town. But it was her own fault. People reached out to her, but she'd shunned their efforts, afraid to trust.

Maria closed her eyes in a wordless prayer and felt strength seeping into her spirit. *I won't let Raymond win. He isn't going to steal my daughter's joy or innocence. No more.*

A smile played on her lips as she flipped the sign to open.

After reopening the flower shop, Maria focused on work. She paid bills, ordered supplies, and even had a few customers. Of course, she kept checking for the man, but he didn't show up again.

Several hours later, two girls came skipping down the street, one dark-haired and the other a blonde. The girls reminded her of a whirlwind of leaves on a breezy fall day. So happy and carefree. Her eyes filled with tears at the giggling girls, glad she'd decided to stay in Sunberry, for now.

Thanks for the courage, God. Keep it up. Please.

She walked outside to greet them. "Hi, Jasmine." She bent down to give Layla, now Jasmine, a hug, and then looked at the other girl. "Hello, Emily. How was school today?"

The little blonde girl grinned up at her with two front teeth missing. "It was good, Mrs. Minor." She held up a chubby hand and opened it. "I lost another tooth today."