

Game On

Lillian Duncan

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Dedication

This and all I do is for God's glory.
As always to my amazing husband—my partner in life
and in writing!

To the wonderful doctors and nurses who've taken
such good care of me since being diagnosed with brain
tumors and NF 2, especially Dr. Steven Rosenfeld and
Erin Vogan--because of your compassionate and
excellent care, I can still hear the words I love to write!

What People Are Saying

DEADLY SILENCE

Deadly Silence is a sweet romance wrapped in page-turning suspense. Lillian Duncan paints enough suspicious characters to keep readers guessing who the villain is until the end. Great characterization and setting descriptions in a story sure to please readers who love suspense.

~Jo Huddleston, author of the West Virginia Mountains series

NO HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

No Home for the Holidays is like curling up with a special cup of coffee and a pumpkin muffin--a warm break for a cool day. Enjoy this quick, feel-good read soon!

~Linda Rondante, author of Looking For Justice

Not your average Christmas story, but the Gospel message still comes through. No Home for the Holidays is the perfect, quick read for the busy Christmas holidays.

~Ruth O'Neil author of the What a Difference a Year Makes series.

Lillian Duncan has outdone herself. "No Home For The Holidays" is a fast read but so enjoyable, I was sad when it ended. The story contains mystery, romance, and plenty of spiritual wisdom. Thank you Lillian for another hit just in time for Christmas.

~Barbara Ann Derksen, author of Shadow Stalker

1

Lucas McMann walked down the street, pretending everything was normal. With his premature gray hair and his expensive suit, he looked the part of a senator even if he wasn't one yet. And he never would be—if something didn't change soon.

Scanning the area, his heart rate increased with every step. Only the strictest discipline kept him from breaking into a run. If he did that, then they'd know he knew.

He didn't know why he'd been chosen to play the game. He didn't know what they wanted. He didn't even know who they were. There were many things he didn't know about the game, but Lucas knew one thing. In the end, he would be the winner.

The situation was intolerable, possibly even dangerous.

As he forced his footsteps to slow, his gaze flitted from person to person. Was the young girl with spiked pink hair one of them? Or the older man dressed as a tourist? Or the well-dressed man pretending to be a businessman?

It could be any of them or all of them. They were everywhere. No matter where he went, he couldn't get

away from their prying eyes or their cameras. And now not even his home was safe. As they'd proven last week.

The Washington Monument towered over the city.

After all that he'd lost, his career was the only thing he had left. He'd never become the next US senator from North Carolina if he couldn't stop them. There was no way he could focus on the upcoming election if these people kept hounding him.

It was part of the plan his father had mapped out years before. It had worked perfectly up to this point. First, local government, then the state. He'd been a US congressman for the past four years. Now it was time to move up to the Senate. Each step moved him closer to his ultimate goal—the White House.

President Lucas McMann? He wasn't even sure how he felt about that anymore. But his father had wanted this so badly, Lucas owed it to his dad to at least try now that he'd passed.

Focusing on the well-known landmark, Lucas regained a little more control of his thoughts, his emotions, and his rationality.

To win this game, he needed a new plan—one to stop them.

To end the game for good.

Lucas approached a café. The sidewalk was filled with tourists and residents enjoying springtime in DC after a harsh winter. He bypassed the only empty table and went inside. He chose a seat facing the door. His muscles relaxed.

A waiter came up. "Know what you want?"

"A black coffee and a croissant."

"Be right back."

Lucas stared at the door.

A man walked in with a camera and aimed it at him.

Lucas grabbed a menu to put it in front of his face but was too late.

The man gave a wave and walked out with a satisfied grin.

The waiter brought his order.

Lucas gritted his teeth. For weeks, he'd been reacting to them, but no more. It was time for him to step up to the plate and make a game-changing play. It wouldn't be easy since he didn't know the rules, the players, or even the goal. He would have to step out of the box. Do the unexpected so he could take control. Then he would end it.

The waiter stopped at his table. "Need anything else?"

Lucas glanced at his name tag. "Thanks, Nick, I'm fine."

Lucas fixated on the man's name. Nick. The name conjured up a glimmer of an idea. A person who might be able to help. Could she be the answer?

Lucas paid the bill and walked out. He stopped and blinked several times as if the sunshine was too bright. In reality, he was searching for them. Nobody seemed to be paying attention to him. He sauntered back towards the Capitol Building. Almost time for his appointment.

The plan was for the current senator to announce his retirement tomorrow and throw his support to Lucas. At the same time, Lucas would officially announce his bid for the Senate. Even though he'd unofficially been a candidate for the better part of a year.

A twenty-something woman walked towards him,

a camera slung around her neck. She met his gaze and smiled. Actually, more of a smirk. Her hand caressed the camera slung around her neck. Another one.

His pulse rate skyrocketed.

Not waiting for the crosswalk, he zigzagged his way through stopped cars. Once he'd made it to the other side, he half-jogged, half-walked down the block.

"Mr. McMann," a young voice called. "Mr. McMann."

He slowed down and turned.

A young boy about eight or nine stood with a camera and a hopeful look. "Can I get a picture of you?"

Was he part of the game? It didn't seem likely. Taking a deep breath, Lucas smiled. "Sure thing, buddy."

His father walked over. "I told him you'll probably be the next senator from North Carolina. But I didn't mean for him to bother you."

Lucas smiled. "He's not a bother."

The boy snapped a few pictures. "Thanks, Senator McMann."

"I'm not a senator yet, son. But it does have a nice ring to it." Lucas laughed even as he searched for the woman. She stood on the other side of the street, watching. Woman or not, he wouldn't ruin this boy's day in his nation's capital. "Hey, how about a selfie with the two of us?"

Grinning, the boy ran his hand through his hair as if that could improve his curly brown mop.

Lucas slung an arm around his shoulder while the boy held the phone camera at arm's length. When he was finished, he said, "Wow. My teacher will be impressed."

“Maybe you’ll get some extra credit.”

The woman across the street lifted her camera.

He turned his back and focused on the boy.

“Where are you from?”

“We’re from Wade, North Carolina.” The boy’s grin revealed a missing tooth. “Just like you. It’s a really small town.”

“My hometown of Maiden is small too.”

The boy’s father shook Lucas’s hand. “Nice of you to take time for my son. It’s our first visit here.”

“It’s a beautiful city.” Lucas glanced back at the woman. “Let me call my assistant and tell her to give you the VIP tour of the Capitol and the White House. What’s your name?” After scheduling the VIP tour, Lucas said his goodbyes.

Anger coursed through him. Time to make that game-changing play. He sprinted down the street. Just before he turned the corner, he glanced back. She was still there, running to catch up.

Game on, lady! Let’s see who can run faster.

People he passed looked alarmed, but he ignored them. He scanned the crowd. After several deep breaths, he smiled in triumph.

The woman was nowhere to be seen.

Now was the time to gain the advantage. He needed help. Someone he could trust. Someone with investigative experience. Someone those people wouldn’t know. His mind flashed back to the waiter’s name tag.

If she’d talk to him.

If she’d help him.

If she’d forgotten all about the past.

But those were mighty big ifs.

2

Nikki Kent gritted her teeth as she made a U-turn. What a way to start the day. Well, not exactly the start—it was almost noon. But as a private investigator, her days weren't nine to five. They might start at noon, like today, or at midnight.

On the track of a philandering husband, and she'd forgotten her camera. Oh well, it wouldn't take but a minute to pick up her camera at the office and get back to the seedy motel. They'd still be there, no doubt.

Nikki pulled into the strip mall where her office was located.

A man stood in front of the window that proudly announced this was the home of Kent Investigations. A new client perhaps?

Putting on her professional smile, she stepped out of her car.

He turned towards her.

Their gazes met.

An angry spark ignited inside Nikki. In an instant, the spark grew into a bonfire.

Lucas McMann walked towards her with a smile, his arms moving into position as if to hug her. "Nikki. You look beautiful."

She sidestepped his outstretched arms. "What are you doing here?"

"Sorry about dropping in on you out of the blue, but I figured if I called, you'd hang up." His voice had

that slow Southern drawl she remembered, like warm honey.

Her heart thumped. She told herself it was only from the shock of him showing up unannounced. Of course, he was right. She would have hung up on him in a heartbeat, then had her phone disconnected. And maybe moved out of the area for good measure. But she wouldn't admit it. "You don't know what I would do or not do."

"Why don't we go inside so we can talk in private?"

"We have nothing to talk about, and I'm in a hurry. I only stopped here to pick up something."

Lucas put a hand on her arm. "Don't be that way, Nikki. I know things ended badly with us, but that was years ago. I need your help."

Ended badly? That was an understatement.

"Need my help?" Her laugh was bitter as she removed his hand from her arm. He hadn't come here to give her a way-overdue apology, but because he needed something. Typical of the Mighty McManns. "That is priceless, but I don't think so."

"You can't turn me down without at least hearing what I have to say."

Two customers from another store gawked at them. She didn't need a scene, so she marched to her office door and unlocked it. She turned to Lucas. "In fact, I can do just that." Nikki opened the door, and then closed it before he could come in. She smiled at him as she turned the lock.

His look of shock was genuine. He knocked.

"Go away, Lucas."

He knocked louder. "I'm not leaving until you talk to me."

She shook her head. How could she get out of here? She could use the back door, but her car was out front. Certainly he'd notice her walking to the car.

After a moment, he fished out his cell phone and hit some numbers.

Her phone rang.

Lucas smiled and pointed to the phone number on the door.

Acting this way was beneath the new Nikki. Sometimes it was so hard to be a Christian. She unlocked the door.

Lucas sauntered in, still smiling. Didn't anything ruffle those political feathers of his? "Shall we try this again? Good afternoon, Nikki."

"It was until a few minutes ago, Lucas. Or should I call you Senator? Which do you prefer?"

"I'm not a senator yet. And even if I were, you could still call me Lucas."

"Actually, I don't plan to call you anything." She placed her hands in her lap to keep them from shaking. She forced her voice to sound calm and reasonable. "I don't have time for this. You need to leave. I really do have things to do. Some of us have to work for a living."

"I want to hire you."

How could he even think she'd consider such a thing? "I choose whom I work for and whom I do not work for. You can be sure I won't work for you. Not now, not ever."

She looked at the yellow sticky note attached to her computer monitor. *FORGIVENESS* was written in huge capital letters. It was her God word of the month. She'd made a commitment to not only study the fruits of the Spirit, but to cultivate them in her everyday life.

Her Christian mentor had assured her she could do it. That nothing was too difficult when one put God in control of one's life. Her fingernails tapped on her desk. *Jesus said to forgive our enemies.*

Lucas might not be her enemy, but he was close.

But this...this was much more than she'd bargained for. Never in a million years had she thought she'd ever come face to face with Lucas McMann again.

This wasn't a test she'd expected, nor could she pass it. She opened the drawer and picked up the camera. "Lucas, I don't have time for this. I am in hot pursuit of a philandering husband. He just gave me the perfect opportunity to prove it to my client—his wife."

"Can't it wait?"

"No. As I said, some of us have to work for a living."

He flinched as if she'd slapped him. She brushed away the momentary guilt. Surely he hadn't thought she'd welcome him with a smile and a hug.

"I don't blame you for being angry." His voice was calm and rational, just the opposite of what she was feeling. "But it was years—"

"Don't flatter yourself. That was years ago." She'd thought she was over it until now.

"I'll pay you whatever you want."

"You think your money can buy me." Her voice was tinged with rage. "But I'm not for sale. I am not my parents."

"That's not what I meant, Nikki. Give me a break here. I'm in trouble, and you're the only one I trust." He sounded sincere, but that meant nothing.

"That doesn't speak well for you or your friends, does it?"

"I guess it doesn't." He grinned. "I'm only asking for a few minutes of your time. I know I have no right to ask anything of you, but please listen to me."

"Sorry, I really don't have the time." She gravitated towards the door.

"Fine, give me a time and I'll meet you back here later."

Instead of answering him, she opened the door and motioned for him to leave.

He sighed but walked out.

After locking the door, Nikki turned to him. "One of the good things about owning my own business is there's no one to tell me what to do. Hire someone else. I can give you a list of some good investigators."

"I want you."

Her heart cracked just a little. He'd told her that once before. She walked to her car.

He followed. "I think you'd change your mind if you'd only listen to me."

Her response was to hit the unlock button on her car. "Sorry, Lucas. The McManns can't always get their way." As she slid into her seat, another sticky note on the dashboard caught her eye. *PATIENCE*. To remind her to be nicer when she drove.

The passenger door opened. Lucas slid in just as the car started moving.

"Lucas, get out of my car. I don't have time for this."

"This really is important. I'm not leaving until I talk to you."

"Get out of my car." Her gaze moved up to the sticky note. She added, "Please."

"Go follow that philandering husband. I'll sit here quietly until you have the time to talk with me. Better

hurry before he leaves.”

Why wouldn't he leave her alone?

She really did need to get to that motel.

Instead of answering him, she put the car in gear and then turned the radio up full blast. Even if he tried to talk, she wouldn't be able to hear him. She refused to give in to the twinge of curiosity. He had no right to ask anything of her. Anger surged through her once again.

A moment later, he joined in with the song. Lucas knew the words to a Christian praise song? Surprising.

Her heart thumped as his deep, rich baritone filled every space of her car. How was she supposed to ignore him? Her hands tightened on the steering wheel as she gritted her teeth, determined to not let him get to her. *Focus on the traffic, not Lucas or that beautiful voice.*

Why was the one person she would never forgive sitting beside her? *Certainly You don't want me to forgive him, do You, Lord? He doesn't deserve it.* In her heart, she knew God's answer. She hadn't deserved forgiveness either, but God had gladly given it to her.

When Nikki got to the motel, she grabbed her camera and finally looked at Lucas. “Stay in the car. Or I'll take your picture at this no-tell motel and post it all over the web. I'm sure your opponents would love that.”

“Whatever you say. Your wish is my command.”

That charming little grin of his that she'd once loved so much only managed to irritate her. That proved she was over him. “If that were true, you wouldn't be sitting in my car.”

“I just want you to listen. But we can talk about all that later.” He motioned for her to go. “Take care of your business. I don't want to interfere with you

making a living.”

“Promise me that you’ll stay in the car. No matter what.”

“Whatever you say.”

“That wasn’t really a promise.” But it would have to do. She grabbed the camera and marched towards room seven, hoping she wasn’t too late.

The happy couple stepped out of the room arm in arm.

Nikki lifted her camera and clicked five photos in quick succession with the cheap motel sign flashing in the background. She’d earned her money this time.

“Hey, what are you doing?” the man yelled out at her.

Time to go. Nikki lowered her camera as she turned towards her car. Now his wife could get the alimony she deserved.

“Hey, I’m talking to you.”

Nikki quickened her steps. A hand grabbed her shoulder and twirled her around.

“I said, what are you doing?” His mottled-red face was an angry mask.

“Back off.” She stepped back with her hands in a surrender position, the camera hung around her neck. “I don’t want any trouble. I’m leaving.”

“Not before you give me that camera.” He stepped towards her.

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Give me that camera.” He made a grab for it.

“Stop it!” Nikki jumped back.

“Give her some money, Stanley.” The woman stepped up and looped her arm through his. “Just pay her more than your money-grubbing wife, and she’ll give you the pictures. That’s how those people are.”

“Good idea, Macy.” He beamed at the woman and then turned back to Nikki. “How much will it take for you to give me those pictures instead of my wife?”

“Sorry, they aren’t for sale.”

“Then I want that camera.” He lunged at her. “Give it to me. I mean it.”

Nikki pushed him away with her free hand.

Stanley stumbled but charged at her again, his face red and angry.

Macy came at Nikki from the side and pushed her off balance.

Nikki shoved her away with ease, but that gave Stanley time to grab the camera. The strap tightened around her neck as he pulled on it. “Stop it.”

His response was to tug even harder.

OK, she’d tried reasonable—it hadn’t worked. Nikki moved in close and elbowed him in the stomach. His hold loosened. Nikki pulled the camera from his grasp.

Lucas had an enraged expression on his face as he opened the car door.

“Stay in the car. I can handle this.”

Stanley grabbed the camera. “You aren’t going to ruin my life.” He glared as he twisted her wrist.

Instead of answering, she moved forward to relieve the pressure around her neck.

Macy jumped at her from behind, grabbing her hair.

That was it!

Now she was mad. In one fluid motion, Nikki let go of Stanley, then bent low so the strap slipped from around her neck. He could keep the stupid thing. She could always take more pictures. The man probably wouldn’t even end his affair after all this.

Nikki turned towards Macy and flipped her onto the ground.

Stanley held the trophy—her camera. “Hey, don’t you hurt her,” he yelled.

“Then give me back my camera.” She moved forward.

“No way.” He tucked the camera into his arm as if it were a football.

“Last chance. Give my camera back. You don’t want to get arrested, do you?”

“Me? You’re the one who needs to be arrested.”

“It’s not against the law to take pictures.”

3

Wow. Nikki really could take care of herself.

Lucas had to fight the urge to help. That probably wouldn't make her agree to work for him though. He'd hoped she'd be over their mangled teenage romance, but that didn't seem to be the case. Promise or not, if it looked as if she was in danger, he wouldn't sit there and do nothing.

A police car with flashing lights pulled in.

Good. The cavalry had arrived.

As the officer stepped out of his car, Lucas did the same.

The officer moved towards Nikki and the couple. "Break it up." The officer turned to the man. "Back up a few steps, sir."

"I'm not the one causing the problem. It's her." The businessman pointed at Nikki, then at the woman who was still on the ground. "She assaulted my friend. Arrest her."

The officer glared at Nikki.

"He stole my camera." Nikki spoke in a calm voice. She must be used to this type of situation. "And she attacked me first. Pulled my hair."

The officer walked over to the woman on the ground, his gaze clearly on her thigh. Her tight red dress had moved up several inches during the wrestling match. He helped her up. "Are you all right, miss?"