

SHE WANTS DELIVERANCE. HE WANTS HER.
NOW THEY MUST SETTLE OLD SCORES
BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.

REDEMPTION

LILLIAN
DUNCAN

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Lillian Duncan

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Dedication

To my Creator.

As always, to my beloved husband, Ronny. I couldn't do this without your love and support.

A special thank you to my medical team at Cleveland Clinic, including Dr. Gene Barnett, Dr. Jill Schaeffer, and especially to my nurse, Gail Ditz, who was there every time I needed her.

Praise

THE CHRISTMAS STALKING

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! ~Mary Manners

DECEPTION

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. ~Coffee Time Romance

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

1

"You're retired from the spy business. Remember?" Patti stood with hands on her hips, demanding an answer.

"I was never a spy and..." Jamie paused. Nothing she said would satisfy Patti. "I don't want to discuss it."

"Not a spy? Really, you want me to believe that? Do you want to get yourself killed?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course not."

Jamie's twin sister worried too much. True, in the past she may have had good reason, but not any longer. Jamie was done with danger. She'd barely survived her last assignment, and that was only by the grace of God. The last thing she wanted was to orphan her daughter. She understood Patti's worry.

The two of them were identical—at least physically. Wavy brown hair. Five feet five inches. Both slim, but Jamie was more muscular than Patti, thanks to her vigorous training schedule. Their temperaments, on the other hand, were polar opposites. She was the risk-taker, and Patti was the rule-follower.

"Well, whatever you were, you said you were retired. Remember that?"

"I do remember, dear, sweet sister of mine. But I didn't retire from life."

Jamie faced Patti. Through the window she could

see her sister's guests enjoying the Florida sunshine. Little did they know the entertainment was inside

She and Patti were supposedly getting the food ready, but Patti didn't appear to be interested in that task. Her twin's goal seemed to be to have an argument with her.

Jamie didn't want to leave after an argument with Patti. The last time that happened, they hadn't seen each other for years—many painful years. She wouldn't do that again.

Patti's forehead wrinkled as she glared. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I can't sit back and do nothing if I think I can help someone. And Zink needs my help."

"I know that, but..." Patti rolled her eyes. "That is not the point."

Jamie picked up a knife, and stabbed through the clear cellophane of raw burgers. "I think it is the point, Sis."

"I don't understand this need for putting yourself in danger." Patti's lip trembled. "Why isn't being Sabrina's mother enough for you? Why do you insist on doing this?"

Those were good questions—fair questions.

But how was she supposed to tell her sister about the regretful things done in the name of patriotism? Her motives may have been right, but shame burned inside for her choices—no, not choices. "Mistakes" was a much better word.

Even after renewing her commitment to God, Jamie had done things she was ashamed of. If she could just help people, then maybe she could find some peace for her own soul. "This has nothing to do with Sabrina. Besides, I have no plans to put myself at

risk.”

“Yeah, just like last time?”

“That’s not true. I knew that was dangerous. I did it because I had no choice.” Jamie looked over at her sister. “Patti, let’s not fight. You and I both know I’m getting on that plane tomorrow and flying to Ohio. And just for the record, I don’t believe I’m putting myself in jeopardy.”

“I know you don’t think so, but that doesn’t mean it’s not a dangerous situation. The woman’s ex-husband is a wanted criminal who kidnapped her son and disappeared almost two years ago. You have no idea what that man is capable of.”

Jamie arched a brow at her sister. “Really, Patti? You don’t think I know?”

“OK, maybe you do know. I’m not saying you’re naïve about that. All the more reason to let the professionals handle it. I don’t want you anywhere near that man.”

“Sooooo...you believe I can find him, too?”

Patti’s face registered surprise, and then her expression went to the stern look she used when she wanted to win an argument. “I didn’t say that. Do not twist my words.”

“But you must believe it or you wouldn’t be worried about what kind of a man he is. If I can’t find him, it wouldn’t matter. Soooo...that means you think I can find him. How could I not go help Zink find her son? What kind of a person would that make me?”

“Stop putting words in my mouth, Jamie.” Patti grabbed the burgers and transferred them to a plate with a spatula, much harder than necessary.

Patti’s husband walked in and smiled at Jamie with a little shrug. “Stop putting words in your mouth

and put some food in our bellies instead. We've got hungry people out there waiting. And it could turn ugly at any time." Carter hugged his wife. "You two can argue later."

"We are not going to argue, dear brother-in-law."

Carter was a man who could be trusted, a man her twin could count on. A godly man. But a godly man wouldn't want someone like her—not after the things she'd done.

"I'm trying to talk some sense into her." Patti jabbed a finger at Jamie. "You tell her. There is no reason for her to fly to Ohio and get involved in this mess with Suzanne Zinkleman. The FBI is looking for Zink's son. Jamie doesn't have to put herself in danger, yet again."

"And they haven't managed to find him in more than two years." Jamie picked up the platter of burgers. She pointed a finger at Carter. "You tell your wife to stop worrying about me. I can take care of myself."

Carter put his hands up as he backed out the door. "Well, I can guarantee that's not going to happen, Jamie. Your sister has made it her life mission to keep you safe whether you like it or not."

"That's a slight exaggeration, Carter, but I see no reason for Jamie to go looking for trouble."

"I'm not looking for trouble. I'm looking for Zink's son. Big difference. And I can't believe you're not OK with that, Patti. That poor woman has been without her child for almost two years. Can you even imagine what that must feel like?"

Her sister's eyes misted. "No, I can't imagine, but—"

"Then you know why I have to do this. Sabrina

will be fine. She has two weeks of camp. Hopefully, I'll be home by then. If not, I know you and Carter and Anna will take good care of her until I come home." Tired of arguing, she picked up the burger plate and walked outside.

"Promise me, you won't do anything that will put you in danger. If you find something out, you call the authorities." Patti trailed behind with the buns.

"Easy to promise. Once I find out where the creep is, you can be sure I'll be calling the authorities." Jamie handed the burgers to Marcus Hanks, her former boss at the FBI. "In fact, I'll call this authority as soon as I know anything. And he can take over from there."

"Not my job. I'm not in the kidnapping department." Marcus grabbed the plate and slapped the burgers on the grill. Each one sizzled as they hit the black iron of the grate. Marcus was an intimidating figure, an African-American who looked more like a linebacker, but he had a marshmallow heart. His gold earring and bald head gave the impression of danger.

He'd rescued her from a lifetime of mistakes and helped get her life back on track. Without him, she'd probably be dead or in prison. He'd even reintroduced her to God, for which she was more thankful than words could express. She smiled at him. "I know that, but I also know you'll be there when I need you. You always are."

Patti glared at Marcus. "Aren't you at least going to try to talk her out of this?"

"Not me." He shook his head. "I've known your sister for way too many years to try. If I couldn't talk her out of infiltrating a terrorist ring, you think I'll be able to talk her out of this? Reuniting Suzanne Zinkleman with her son is a mission from God, as far

as she's concerned, and that means there's no stopping her."

"I take it the two of you have talked about this."

"We have."

"And is this going to be an FBI operation?"

"Funny you should ask that."

Jamie walked over to the picnic table and grabbed a handful of chips from a bowl. "There's nothing funny about it. I'm going alone as a private citizen. The FBI and I have cut all associations. Just like I promised you, dear sister. I am retired." She popped a chip in her mouth.

Marcus flipped a burger and then looked at her. "Not exactly true, Jamie. I'm with Patti on this. There's no reason for you to tackle this case alone. Besides, it is an active Bureau case, so technically—"

"I don't care about technicalities." Jamie swallowed the chip. "I work alone, Marcus. You know that."

"Not this time you don't. Your days of being a lone wolf are over. No more going undercover by yourself." Marcus gave her one of his famous stares. "Just like I promised myself."

Carter came up and slung an arm around Patti's shoulder. "See, now you don't have anything to worry about. Marcus will take good care of her."

Jamie glared at her part-time boss and full-time friend. "I'm not going undercover for the FBI, so it's not really any concern of yours or theirs, Marcus."

Using the spatula, Marcus picked up a burger and plopped it on the plate he held. "I'm making it my concern."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

A man walked around the side of the house

whistling.

Jamie's jaw fell open but she immediately shut it—tight. *This wasn't happening.* She didn't care what Marcus wanted. Some might call Enrique Rodriquez tall, dark, and handsome, but the only words she would use to describe him were vain, conceited, and a pain in the neck. And not a man she would work with again—ever.

"Hi, Jamie. You must be Jamie, right?" Enrique gave her a knowing smile and pointed at Patti, who was leaning against Carter. "Unless Patti's husband is confused. I can't believe how much the two of you look alike. It's amazing."

"Enrique, what are you doing here?" Jamie didn't bother to hide her frustration as her hands moved to her hips.

"Marcus invited me." He actually had the nerve to wink at her.

"You're a little early, Rodriquez." Marcus grimaced.

"A little early for what?" Jamie stared at Enrique, and then at Marcus, knowing exactly what was going on, but refusing to acknowledge it.

"I haven't told her yet, but I guess she's figured it out by the look on her face." Marcus set the plate of burgers down on the picnic table. He called to the group. "Burgers are ready. Caldwell, it's your house, say the blessing, and let's eat."

Jamie fumed during the prayer. She didn't play well with others, and she definitely had no use for Enrique Rodriquez—as an agent, or as a man. Ever.

He was under the mistaken illusion that he was God's gift to women.

And maybe he was—but not to her. She preferred

someone she could trust.

After the prayer, people crowded around the table, filling their plates.

Jamie marched up to Marcus and kept her voice low. No reason to ruin the day for everyone. "I'm not working with Enrique. You know what happened the last time."

"That was years ago. He was a rookie then. He's a very good agent now and one of the best."

"I don't care what he is. I work alone. There is no way I'm working with him."

"I don't care what happened between the two of you, but this is the way it has to be." Marcus looked her in the eye.

She knew the look, and she knew what it meant.

"I'm sorry, Jamie. It's the only way I could get approval for you to check into the situation. You don't work for us anymore, remember? This is an open case, and Agent Rodriguez has been assigned to it. He'll be keeping you company." Marcus was using his non-nonsense, no-arguing tone. "This was not my decision, but I agree with it. This discussion is over."

Enrique walked up. He ran a hand through his shiny black curls. His sparkling brown eyes and perfect white teeth irritated her for some reason. "Jamie, I know you aren't happy about this. But trust me. There won't be a repeat of the fiasco from last time. That was my first field assignment. I've learned a few things since then."

His pronunciation of the J in her name brought back memories. She pushed them away and glared. "Rookie or not, there was no excuse for your incompetence." The man had almost gotten her killed. "I don't mean to be rude, Ricky—"

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“The name is Enrique. Not Ricky.”

“—But it’s not happening. Period. So you wasted a trip coming to see me, Ricky. You are not working with me on this case.”

His brown eyes twinkled, not looking a bit offended. “I’m pretty sure I will be.” He grinned.

2

Jamie rubbed her eyes. Reading legal documents with that horrible tiny print for over two hours wasn't easy. Papers were strewn all over Zink's dining room table as she learned about Michael Zinkleman and his crimes. She hadn't wanted to wait until tomorrow to get started, but maybe she should have. The flight from Florida to Ohio had taken its toll. It was time to take a break.

Suzanne Zinkleman, Zink to her friends, walked in carrying two glasses of soda. Her sandy-blonde ponytail fell forward as she handed one of the sodas to Jamie. "It means so much that you came up to help me. I can't thank you enough." Her violet-blue eyes showed a sparkle of tears.

"Don't thank me yet. Wait until I find your son."

"Either way, the fact that you took time out of your own life to help is amazing. We barely know each other. And besides, I have no doubt you will find him. Maria told me all about you. Imagine, a real life hero in my house." Zink smiled.

"I'm not a hero."

"Well, then, I don't know what you call it. You've saved a lot of lives."

"It was more Patti and Maria than me. Besides, I suppose you're going to tell me you're not a hero, either."

"I've had a few good moments as a police officer,

but Sunberry is a small town. Not a whole lot happens here.”

“Well, you are my hero, Zink. Especially considering this...this whole situation. I can’t imagine how you’ve dealt with your son missing for so long. And still smiling and helping others. Living each day without giving up. That is truly heroic.”

Zink’s eyes filled with tears. “It’s all God. I couldn’t get through one day without His amazing grace. He has seen me through each and every day.”

“Still, I don’t know how you’ve managed the past two years.”

“I had a choice when Michael kidnapped Andrew. To fall apart or to trust God. I chose to trust God.”

“What amazing faith.”

“Not really. I just do what I have to do every day to keep my sanity.”

“Maybe you can’t see it, but everyone around you sees what an amazing woman of God you are. Like I said. Truly heroic.”

Zink’s cheeks turned a rosy pink, and she batted a hand at Jamie as if brushing away her words. “Marcus told me there would be another agent with you when he called me.”

After the party at Patti’s, Jamie had taken the first plane out alone. Enrique would not be her partner—for anything. “Change of plans. Just me and you should know I’m not an agent. In the past, I did consultation work with the FBI, but not any longer. I’m here as a private citizen.”

“I don’t care who you work for if you can find Andrew and bring him back.” Zink’s voice cracked. “I can’t imagine working alone. I’ve always thought it was better to have a partner around who had your

back. I can take a few weeks off to help you. The chief won't mind."

"Thanks for the offer, but it's not necessary. With traditional police work, you're right about backup. But if I do my job right, nobody even knows I'm not who I pretend to be. I come into their lives for a minute and then disappear quietly and quickly." She put her hands together and threw them up in the air. "Poof. I'm gone. Just like that. And no one's the wiser."

Zink's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure?"

"Partners only complicate matters." Enrique and his perfect smile flashed in Jamie's mind. That was a complication she definitely didn't need. "And besides, this is too personal for you. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"I guess, but I like having my buddies at the department for backup. I hate thinking about you being out there all alone."

"Then don't think about it."

"Think about what?"

A teenaged girl walked in through the sliding glass door that led to the deck. She wore a baggy T-shirt and jean shorts. From the odor that wafted in with her, she'd obviously been out with the horses.

"Think about how bad you smell." Zink gave her a playful nudge with her elbow.

"Are you kidding?" The girl took a dramatic deep breath. "Horses, hay, and manure! What could smell better?"

"I can think of a few things." Jamie hid her smile. At that age, she'd thought the same thing about horses.

"Don't you like horses?"

"Actually when I was younger I loved horses, but I haven't been on one in years." She wrinkled her nose.

“Probably because of the smell.”

“It’s not that bad. But you’re right. I can think of a few things that smell a little nicer.” The girl giggled.

Zink smiled. “Rose, this is Jamie. The woman I told you about. She’s going to find Michael and Andrew.”

“Wow. I hope you can. That would be wonderful. I can’t wait to meet Andrew.” Her smile was genuine.

“And this beautiful girl is my houseguest. Rose and her mother are staying with me for the time being.”

Rose’s eyes filled with tears. “Zink’s helping us. My mom has cancer and...” She looked at Zink. “Before we came to stay with Zink we were staying in this horrible place. It smelled worse than I do. Speaking of which, I gotta get ready for work. See you later.” She waved as she walked down the hall.

“It’s so nice of you to let them stay here.” Jamie looked at Zink. “How’s her mom doing?”

“The cancer’s winning. Rose puts on a brave face, but...you can imagine. She’s way too young to be losing her mother.”

“Actually, I can imagine. Patti and I were seventeen when we lost our parents. It was horrible. That’s why it’s wonderful Rose has you for a friend.”

“I’m still believing her mother will be healed. In fact, she’s going to a holistic physician. The doctors may have said there was nothing more they could do, but she’s not giving up. She loves her daughter and wants to be here for her.”

This was one more reason Jamie wanted to help Zink. If she was willing to go the extra mile for other people, then someone should do the same for her. Suzanne Zinkleman brought this teenager and her

ailing mother into her home and cared for them in the midst of her own tragedy.

"Good for her. Only God knows the outcome. Still, it can't be easy for you having them in the house."

"It's good for me. It feels like I have a family again."

"Everyone needs a family whether by birth or by choice."

"Rose is a great kid. Besides school, she works at Maria's flower shop and insists on paying rent. I'm saving it for when she goes to college."

Jamie went silent before she changed the subject. "Ok, let's start with the basics. What's your ex-husband's name?"

"Michael Zinkleman."

"And your son's?"

"Andrew. His birthday is September second. He'll be four this September. He's probably grown so much since...since the last time I saw him." Zink got a faraway look in her eyes, and then focused on Jamie.

"I'm sorry."

"I've had a lot of time to get used to it."

"I know this is going to be tough, but I need you to tell me about the events leading up to your son's kidnapping." She held up a tape recorder. "I'm going to record this if you don't mind."

"I don't mind, but why do you want to?"

"I'll listen to this so many times that I'll start believing I lived through it, too. Each time I listen a new detail will be embedded in my subconscious. And you never know which detail will be the key."

"Where should I start?"

"Wherever you want. I'll ask questions as we go along unless that will bother you."

"Works for me."

"You ready?"

Zink nodded.

Jamie pressed the record button.

Zink looked up at the ceiling for a moment, and then started to speak. Her voice was filled with pain. "I fell head over heels in love with Michael. It wasn't love at first sight, but it was pretty close. We were married three months after we met and I got pregnant almost right away. We joked that it happened on our wedding night, but we were actually married about three months."

"So it wasn't planned?"

"Nothing about Michael and I was planned."

Jamie's heart skipped a beat as a horrible thought came to her. Perhaps this wasn't a parental abduction. Maybe Michael Zinkleman was tired of being a father. "How did Michael feel about it?"

Zink met her gaze. As a police officer, she must have understood Jamie's question. Tears welled up in her eyes. "No, it wasn't like that. Michael would never hurt Andrew."

"Are you sure?"

Zink didn't answer.

The silence fell around them for several long moments.

Finally, Zink took a deep breath. "Yes, I'm sure. Michael was thrilled about having a baby. That wasn't the problem, but he was worried about money. I kept trying to tell him it would all work out. He just wouldn't listen to me. As time went on he became more and more obsessed with it."

"With money?"

"Yes. His family was poor, and he was determined