



LILLIAN
DUNCAN

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IS NEVER EASY.
IN THIS CASE, IT COULD BE LETHAL.

DADLY COMMUNICATIONS

Deadly Communications

Lillian Duncan

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Deadly Communications

COPYRIGHT 2014 by Lillian Duncan

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given away to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version^(R), NIV^(R), Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.TM Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Harbourlight Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

Harbourlight Books sail and mast logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2014

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-383-4

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my beloved husband, Ronny. I am so blessed to
have you in my life.

Endorsements

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, author

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

What was taking them so long?

Ella Decker smiled as she put away the last dish. It had been a fun night even if it had been a shock to see them standing at her door. And Matt seemed nice enough, even though it was the first time they'd met.

A blind date? Just what she needed, or so everyone else thought. Her life was too busy for a boyfriend. Getting chosen to be on the USA Olympic Team was the only thing that mattered, but she supposed it was important to have a little fun now and then.

They said it would only take a minute.

Ella slid the patio door open and walked outside to see what was keeping her guests.

The spring night was warm and breezy. Stars sparkled against a backdrop of black velvet.

She stepped out on the redwood deck. Her mouth turned to cotton and she wasn't able to breathe.

A man was kneeling on the grass with his hands tied behind his back.

Her date, Matt, stood behind him pointing a gun at the man's head.

She blinked once—twice, her gaze glued to the gun. This couldn't be real. Her throat constricted as she attempted to scream. Taking a deep breath, she tried again. "What are you doing, Matt?"

Matt looked at her. His gaze flashed in anger. "Go

inside. This has nothing to do with you. It's business."

This was crazy. It had to be a prank of some sort, but nobody was smiling. Especially not the man kneeling on the ground.

"What kind of business?"

"The kind you don't want to know about." Matt glared at her. "Now be a good girl and go inside. It's not your concern." How dare he talk to her as if she was a child?

"Not my concern? This is my home. You're both invited guests in my house." Well, actually, they hadn't been invited at all—they'd shown up uninvited, and now she understood why.

His gun moved from the man's head towards her.

Her heart thumped, but she refused to back down. "I'm not going anywhere and you aren't going—"

Matt pointed at the other man. A man she thought she knew, but now realized she didn't. "Take care of her. Unless you want me to?"

The other man walked between her and Matt. He hugged her as if that would reassure her. "Go inside. I'll take care of this. We're just talking to him. Like Matt said, it's business. Nothing for you to worry about."

"Are you nuts?" She spat out the words. "Nothing to worry about? You need to stop this right now."

"I can't, but I'll explain everything later." He pushed her gently towards the door.

She shrugged his arms off. "I won't let you hurt him."

"We won't. Just go inside. Please."

Their gazes met.

She wanted to believe him. As far as she knew, he'd never lied to her before. But then again, she never

thought he'd do something like this. She nodded and backed inside, not able to take her gaze off the scene.

They wouldn't hurt him. It was like they said; they were just talking to him. Trying to scare him for some reason, but they wouldn't really shoot him. They wouldn't kill him.

That would make them monsters.

She stared through the sliding door of the dining room, barely able to breathe. Her body shook. The longer they talked, the more she knew she needed to call the cops, no matter what would happen after that. She wouldn't let this happen.

The man with the gun stepped closer to the kneeling man.

She jerked open the sliding glass door and ran out of the house, moving towards the men. "I'll not let you hurt him. Stop right now or I'll call the police."

Matt nodded at the other man. "Take her inside. Now."

He ran up the stairs, onto the deck, and then grabbed her arm. He whispered to her as he led her back into the house. "Stop causing problems or you'll get hurt, too. This has nothing to do with you." He pushed her inside and then slid the door shut. He ran down the deck steps.

Her knees shook so hard that she pressed her hands against the window to keep from falling. This couldn't be happening, but it was. She had to stop it. Before she could move, a flash, a popping sound, and then another.

The kneeling man no longer knelt. He'd collapsed on the ground, not moving. Was he still alive?

She had to call 911 and get an ambulance to try to help the man. But first, she needed to leave. They

would never let her call for an ambulance or the police.

She grabbed her cell phone out of her purse and ran for the front door. Running into the trees, the blackness of the night crowded in on Ella as she attempted to make her way through the thicket.

The call to the police would have to wait until she found a safe place to hide. *A safe place?* No place would ever be safe after what she'd seen.

Not until they were behind bars. Not until they paid for what they'd done.

Moving through the woods, a sharp pain sliced through her terror. Her arm. It was too dark to see. Her fingers found the pain. Wetness. She must have scratched it on a branch, or maybe an old, rusty nail from a long-forgotten tree swing.

A noise. Someone was creeping through the darkness as they searched for her.

"Ella, come here. We aren't going to hurt you." A voice called out. "You need to come back. It's not safe out here at night." A voice she knew so well. A voice she trusted. A voice she loved.

Life would never be the same again.

She swiped away the tears.

She wanted to believe him, but he'd said they wouldn't hurt the man either. He'd lied.

If they found her, she would be dead, too, just like the man. She couldn't let them find her. But if she moved, they would hear her.

She searched the darkness for somewhere to hide, but there was no place.

They were stronger and faster. They would overpower her. There was no way to get away from them, but she couldn't simply stand here.

If they found her, she wouldn't see the morning.

On hands and knees, she crawled through the trees and the bushes inch by inch, praying only she could hear the soft rustling sounds she created. Muscles tight with fear, she grew tired and laid her head on the ground. She forced her ragged breath to slow, her eyes closed. The horrible scene replaced the darkness once again.

His eyes—dark and soulless as the gun flashed silver, and then the man slumped over lifeless. No matter what he'd done, the dead man didn't deserve that. It had been an execution, plain and simple.

She forced her eyes open. She couldn't think about that now. She had to get away. Back on her knees, she crawled through the darkness as she wiped away tears. How could they have killed that man? She would never have believed it if she hadn't seen it, and she would never forget it.

A different kind of noise reached her ears. Traffic. Traffic meant cars. Cars meant people. People meant help. Help meant they couldn't kill her—at least not tonight.

It was her chance. Without hesitation, Ella jumped up and dashed towards the noises—towards safety. She wouldn't live the way they wanted. She wasn't a monster. She wouldn't live with the monsters. No matter what.

"I hear her. This way." His voice called out in the darkness. "Find her. Now."

She ignored the voice and kept running towards the traffic—towards safety. Her heart pounded as she ran. She was unsure if it was from the exertion or the terror. Not that it mattered. The only thing that mattered was getting away from the monsters.

Monsters.

Lillian Duncan

How could she not have known? She should have known.

The trees thinned out and the noise from the traffic was louder now.

Turning towards the sounds, she ran down the hill and into the road.

Bright lights came towards her—too fast.

2

Maven Morris sat in the darkened room on the edge of her bed staring at nothing. Her hand moved through her mass of black curls. What a mess. She needed a haircut. She'd lost track of the time—again.

Her gaze moved to the bright red numbers on the alarm clock on the nightstand. Forty-five minutes later than the last time and still not dressed. Oh, well. It wasn't as if she had anything important to do, and she was so tired.

Curling up in a fetal position, she closed her eyes. Her mind told her things couldn't continue this way, but her body had no energy to make the effort to change them. And her heart said it didn't matter, anyway.

Maybe tomorrow.

She drifted off to sleep.

Light flooded the room.

"Hey, what's the big deal?" Maven said.

Lizzie sat down on the edge of the bed. "You're not dressed yet. We had plans today, remember?"

Maven stared at her friend. "Was that today?"

"You know it was."

"I don't really feel like it today. I'm not feeling well."

Lizzie walked to Maven's closet, rifling through her clothes. "Too bad. I can't change the appointment now. It's too late."

Maven stared at her friend through squinted eyes. "Appointment? I thought we were going out for lunch."

"You thought wrong." Lizzie shook her head. "I never said that. I told you I had something to discuss with you." She tossed Maven an orange dress.

"I hate that dress. It's too bright. And I'm not putting on a dress because I'm not going anywhere."

"I know that. He's coming here."

"He? Who is he, and why is he coming here?" Panic gripped Maven. She didn't want to see anyone.

Lizzie Morton might be her best friend, but that didn't mean Lizzie always had the best judgment. What had she done now? Hands on her slim hips, Lizzie shook her blonde tresses. "If I told you that, it wouldn't be a surprise. Now get up."

Maven grabbed a pair of dark green sweatpants and a faded pink T-shirt. Not sure what Lizzie was up to, Maven walked to the bathroom. She looked back. "I don't like surprises. Tell me what's going on right now."

"You'll know soon enough."

After dressing, Maven gathered her hair into a ponytail, brushed her teeth, and walked back out.

Lizzie stood by the door with a smug smile.

"OK, I'm dressed. Tell me what's going on."

"So tacky." Lizzie frowned. "You'll be sorry you didn't wear something nicer than sweat pants. I swear you have no taste when it comes to fashion."

The doorbell rang.

"Your surprise is here."

"If this is some sort of intervention, I will—"

"It's not, so stop threatening me. It's much better than an intervention."

"Just so you know: I hate surprises." Maven walked down the hall.

Lizzie moved towards the door at lightning speed. She opened it just as the doorbell clanged again.

A man stood there, dressed in a suit. His neatly cut brown hair was lightly sprinkled with gray. Everything about him screamed confidence and power, just the opposite of her.

His hand dropped from the buzzer. "Good afternoon, Lizzie. For a minute, I thought I might be at the wrong house, or it was the wrong day."

Afternoon? Maven watched the exchange. Where had the morning gone?

"No, we were in another part of the condo. It's nice to see you, Donald."

The man looked vaguely familiar, but Maven couldn't figure out why.

As usual, Lizzie was right.

Maven wished she'd chosen better when dressing. Oh well, too late now.

Lizzie turned towards her. "This is Maven Morris, and this is Donald Decker. He has a job proposal for you."

3

"Money's no object." Donald Decker leaned forward as if this was some sort of intense business negotiation.

"But it's not my area of expertise."

"I understand that, and I thank you for your honesty, but you're still the one we want."

"Why would you want me? Like you said, money's no object. You can hire the best speech pathologist in the country."

"And I am trying to do that. If only you would cooperate with me." His smile seemed sincere.

Maven shook her head. "I am not the best for what you need. I don't understand why you want me."

"Because you know my daughter."

"Only slightly. Not enough to make a difference. She probably doesn't even remember me."

"But it could be enough. Besides, you did such a wonderful job with Micah. Her mother and I know you can do the same with Ella. We trust you."

Maven Morris sighed. Donald Decker wasn't making it easy for her to say no. But that was exactly what she needed to do. It wouldn't be right to take their money or to give them false hope when she'd never worked with this type of client before.

"And money's no object." Why wouldn't he take no for an answer?

"I heard you the first five times you told me that."

She was careful to pace her words, keeping each of them distinct and clear from the other. "I'm not being difficult as a negotiating ploy, Mr. Deck—"

"Call me Donald. No need to stand on formalities."

"Donald, this is not about the money. I just know there are more experienced, more capable, more knowledgeable people out there for what you need. I am not the best speech pathologist for this job. Really."

"And yet, you are the one we want." The man folded his hands with grace, putting them quietly in his lap. His blue-gray eyes rested on her as he waited for her answer. It was obvious he was used to getting his own way.

But she truly was the wrong person for the job, and besides, she was so tired. She didn't have the energy to take on a client right now. "I'm not being modest. Micah was completely different. That's what I'm good at. Not this." Maven stared back, wondering why she was arguing so strongly against taking the job. It wasn't as if she couldn't use the money, but it wouldn't be right. She knew how to help kids communicate better, knew how to improve their speech, their language, even their listening skills.

But an adult patient with a traumatic brain injury? That was completely different than her job in the schools. Completely out of her comfort zone. Her stomach twisted. She wouldn't even know where to start.

Still, she had taken the classes, even if it had been years ago. She could always brush up on techniques, ideas, and theories. And she did need the money. At the moment, she didn't actually have the job she loved any longer.

Temporary medical leave.

More like being put out to pasture. Her sick days had run out, and she still hadn't been approved for medical disability. Her husband's illness had used up most of them, not that she regretted using them to take care of him during his last days. Those days had been precious—for both of them.

She forced herself to stay in the moment, instead of her own problems. Involuntarily, her hand strayed towards her lips, her mouth. *A speech pathologist whose mouth wouldn't move the way it was supposed to wasn't worth much.* First, the death of her husband, and then the Bell's palsy that froze her face and slurred her words. Losing her job had been too much. Now she had nothing good left. Nothing to get up and get dressed for every morning. In less than a year, her life had gone from wonderful to...nothing.

Not wanting to call attention to her drooping mouth, she buried her hands in her lap. "I guess I can give it a try as long as you understand—"

"Wonderful. Wonderful." He clapped his hands. "Sandy will be so pleased. And, of course, so am I."

He pulled out a business card. After scribbling on it, he handed it to her. "Here's our address. I can try to answer your questions. Please ask me anything you like. I'll tell you what I can."

Maven tried to think of something to make herself sound more prepared for this new assignment than she actually felt. "How is she doing?"

"Physically, she's able to take care of her basic needs now. After the coma, she couldn't take care of herself, but she's improving. She still has physical and occupational therapy, so her days are fairly busy."

"Does she attempt to communicate at all with you

or the other family members?"

"Not much. It's almost as if she's given up."

"That has to be hard for her and the family."

Donald nodded. "Especially for her. When she was younger, we called her blabbermouth because she loved to talk. Now she stays up in her room most of the time by herself. Her friends have tried to be supportive, but you know how young people are."

Life could be so hard. Sometimes it was just easier to give up rather than get knocked down again and again. Maven understood that completely. "When you ask her to do something, will she do it?"

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean. Are you asking if she's combative with us?"

"No, I mean, do you think she understands you? For example, if you ask her to hand you the remote to the TV, does she pick it up and give it to you? Does she simply stare or maybe even get you the wrong item?"

"Oh, I see. I'm not sure, to tell you the truth. I work a lot of hours. My wife spends more time with her than I do. Perhaps you should talk with Sandra before you actually see Ella."

"That won't be necessary. I'll figure it out as I go along. The reports, though, are important. I want to see her treatment history and how she responded to physical therapy. The results of any tests they gave her."

"I'll be sure to get them to you." He stood. "Thanks so much."

She stood as well. "Don't thank me yet. Like I said, it's not my area of expertise."

"I'm sure you'll do a perfectly wonderful job." He pulled a check out of his pocket and handed it to her. "This is for the first month of treatment. It's not an