

A movie poster for the film 'Deadly Silence'. The background features a white Gothic-style church with a steeple and a cross, set against a dark, stormy sky. In the foreground, a woman with dark hair, wearing a white wedding dress and a long, sheer veil, looks intensely at the camera. She is also wearing a pearl necklace. The overall mood is dark and suspenseful.

**LILLIAN
DUNCAN**

**BEING LEFT AT THE ALTAR IS NEVER EASY
IN THIS CASE, IT COULD BE LETHAL.**

**DEADLY
SILENCE**

Deadly Silence

Lillian Duncan

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Dedication

This and all I do is for God's glory.

To my writing partner—my beloved husband, Ronny,
without your support and love my dream to be a
writer would never have happened.

There isn't enough room to list everyone who helped
me during my many years of being a speech
pathologist so thanks to all the amazing SLPs, teachers,
and others I've been privileged to work with as well as
all my students who taught me so much. A special
thanks to Susan Braun and Dr. Deb Williams.

1

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Up to you." His gaze moved from one officer to another. Paul Jordan was surrounded by cops. The spokesperson of the group met his gaze, then stepped forward. "What's it going to be, buddy?"

"Come on. Let's just for—"

"We aren't forgetting anything. Easy or hard?"

"I need to go home."

"Hard way it is." The officers stepped forward, tightening the circle.

"Come on. I'm too old for a bachelor party." He needed to go home to pack for the honeymoon.

"The way I look at it, if you're too old for a bachelor party, then you're too old to get married," Jay said. He turned to the others in the group. "Am I right?"

The men hooted and hollered their agreement.

"Thanks for the support, big brother."

"Anytime. Anytime, little brother."

"What's it going to be, Paul?" Eric Donnelly grinned as he took another step towards him. "As your commanding officer, I think you need to listen to what I'm saying."

"Fine. Fine. Let's go party!" Paul held up his hands in surrender. It was the last thing he wanted to do, but it was all part of the tradition. "But there better

not be any naked ladies. That's all I've got to say. If there is, Maven will have my hide—and yours."

Ray patted his shoulder. "Don't worry. Nothing like that. Just your buddies and you having a good time."

Two hours later, Paul finally made it back to his condo, whistling "Here Comes the Bride." He stopped in the middle of the song, unable to control the silly grin on his face. Whoever said happily ever after was only for fairytales didn't know what they were talking about. And they sure didn't know Maven. What a blessed man he was. Life was good.

Second marriages weren't necessarily an easy thing to accept, but his family loved Maven. And she loved them. His daughter had not only been ecstatic when they announced their engagement, but had blessed their union as well.

And tomorrow was the big day.

Finally.

Paul walked into his bedroom and stared at the empty bed. This was the last night he'd be alone in it. Tomorrow he would marry Maven. And it couldn't be a minute too soon as far as he was concerned. Of course, he wasn't a starry-eyed teenager.

Whatever God had planned for Maven and himself, he knew it would be a wonderful adventure. Whatever time they had together, he would use it to make Maven happy. Just the way she made him happy.

What a woman. She'd even agreed to try camping. Of course, not in a tent. But they could rent a camper to see if she liked it enough to buy one. He laughed out loud—camping with Maven would be quite an experience.

His doorbell buzzed.

Who could that be? His brother again? No, he was probably still at the party along with most of Paul's friends. It certainly wasn't Maven. Lizzie Morton would make sure of that.

After the rehearsal dinner, Maven hadn't come home with him, even though they lived next door to each other. Lizzie, her best friend, insisted Maven spend the night with her so that neither of them would be tempted to see each other on their wedding day.

Not that any of them believed in superstitions.

Still, there was something to be said for traditions. He smiled as he realized the next time he'd see Maven, she would be coming down the aisle to marry him.

He was truly blessed.

The doorbell buzzed again.

It might be his daughter, even though she said she wouldn't be down until morning. She could have changed her mind.

Paul walked out of the bedroom. He had no more plans for the night. Whoever it was would have to understand that. He needed to spend some time with God.

Maybe, it was...

He opened the door.

2

A quiet moment to herself before the festivities.

Maven Morris stared at her reflection, hardly believing it. In her wildest dreams she'd never imagined she'd be standing in front of a mirror in a wedding gown ever again.

The cream-colored wedding dress hugged her waist, showing off the fact she'd lost thirty pounds—thanks to Lizzie and her killer exercise regime. The bodice was lace. Cream-colored fake pearls decorated it as well. No train since the dress dropped to just above her ankles.

She hadn't wanted to chance the train—she was clumsy enough as it was. No way she wanted to trip on it as she made her way down the aisle of the church in front of all Paul's family and friends. That would be too humiliating—even for her.

Her black curls cascaded every which way. She'd thought of going with a fancier upswept look, but in the end decided to go with her natural hairstyle, though tamed with a little help from the hairstylist and a lot of hair spray.

She grabbed the simple veil. After it was in place, she stared at the mirror. Her eyes filled with tears.

At first, she'd wanted a simple, no-nonsense wedding. But at Paul's urging, a simple ceremony had morphed into a real wedding. With wedding gowns, tuxes, and the whole shebang.

He'd said over and over again, "Just because it's our second wedding isn't a reason not to do it up right!"

And so they had.

When her husband had died, she'd never believed she would marry again, never believed she'd be happy again. As far as she was concerned, her romantic life was over. But God had a way of working things out just the way they were supposed to be.

She'd never believed she'd fall in love again, but she had. So happy and so blessed.

Paul was such a wonderful, godly man. So kind and patient. He could make her laugh when nobody else could. Maven couldn't imagine not spending the rest of their lives together. It had taken a lot to make her see that.

She hadn't wanted to risk opening up to the pain of loving someone only to lose them. After her husband's death, she'd locked that part of her heart.

But Paul had found the key. Patience should be his middle name. Instead of pushing her when she wasn't ready, he'd simply been her friend until the time was right.

And boy, was she ready. Maven touched her pink cheeks. A blushing bride at her age.

Even knowing Paul was a policeman hadn't marred her happiness. God had given her a second chance at happiness, and she was going to take it.

The door opened.

Lizzie walked in.

Her best friend and maid of honor wore a simple lilac A-line dress. It looked beautiful. "Oh my. You look absolutely stunning, Maven. You were right about leaving your hair natural." Lizzie's hand flew to her

mouth. "I think I'm going to cry."

Maven smiled and then gave Lizzie a stern warning. "Do not cry. If you do, I will. Then we'll both look a mess as we walk down the aisle."

"Fine, I won't cry even if I want to." Lizzie laughed. "Besides, it's not a day for tears. Only smiles and happy thoughts. And it doesn't matter how I look. You're the one walking down the aisle with your handsome hero. He won't be able to take his eyes off of you."

"All of this is so amazing." Maven looked at the clock on the wall. "Can you believe this is really happening?"

"You so deserve it, Maven."

"It was only a little while ago I was so depressed I couldn't get out of bed. And now I have a whole new life. God is so good."

"Yes, He is. Now if He'd only send a good man my way."

"In His time, girlfriend. Speaking of time, is it time to start?"

"Not yet. But I have a special guest of honor who wanted to see you." Lizzie opened the door.

Moses stood there in a suit and all smiles. Behind him was Lara Holt, his mother, looking completely recovered from her ordeal.

Maven was sure there were internal wounds that only God and time would heal.

"Maven." Moses rushed to her. She bent down as little arms hugged her neck. "You look beautiful."

"And so do you."

He giggled. "I'm not beautiful. Boys are handsome." When he'd first come to her as foster child, he hadn't spoken at all. But he'd come a long way in a

few months.

"You are so right. My mistake. How silly of me."

"You are silly."

"I tried to tell him you were too busy and that we'd see you later. But he insisted," Lara said.

"And he was so right." Maven ruffled his hair. "I always have time for him and for you."

Moses gave his mother an I-told-you-so look.

Lara smiled. "This is the first fancy wedding I've ever been at. Everything is so lovely, Maven. And you are so beautiful."

"Your turn will come, Lara."

"I don't even—" She held up her hands. "Well, let's not talk about sad things. Only happy." She held out her hand to her son. "Come on, Moses, let's go before we don't have a seat in the church."

Lizzie smiled after they left. "Lara's looking good."

"Yes, she is. I'm so glad they're here to share the day."

"They're all here." Lizzie didn't need to explain who they were. The women they'd rescued from their kidnapper were now a joyful part of their lives.

"Isn't it about time to start?" Maven fiddled with the pearls.

"Well, not exactly. That's the other thing I came to tell you. Paul's not here yet. His daughter's been calling him, but he's not answering. No one seems to know where he is."

"Did Vickie try his home phone as well as his cell phone? He's always misplacing his cell phone or letting the battery die."

Lizzie shrugged. "I'm not sure. I'll go check."

When Lizzie left, Maven's smile faded as worry

blossomed. Why wasn't Paul here yet? Had he had an accident? Paul wouldn't be late to his own wedding.

A few minutes later, a knock came on the door.

Maven hurried over.

Instead of Lizzie, Paul's brother stood there. He shook his head. "I'm not sure what's going on, Maven. When I went to pick Paul up this morning like we planned, he wasn't there. I just assumed he was already here. I don't know what's happening. I don't know where he is. Nobody does."

A knot formed in her stomach. "When did you see him last, Jay?"

"Last night. He was leaving the bachelor party."

"Bachelor party? He didn't tell me anything about that. I didn't know he was having one."

"It was spur-of-the-moment. Just some of us guys poking fun at him and watching the game."

"Maybe he drank too much and had an accident."

"Come on, Maven. You know Paul better than that. He had soda and that was it."

"Well, I know he's not a drinker under normal circumstances, but..."

"But nothing. I can assure you he wasn't drinking last night. The only thing on his mind was marrying you."

"That's good to hear. But I wonder where he is."

Lizzie walked in a moment later. "Vickie's driving back to his house. Don't worry, Maven. He'll be here soon. Paul loves you so much. He wouldn't leave you at the altar."

3

Maven sat on her sofa, staring at her bare ring finger. She wiped at the tears coursing down her face. How had this happened? One moment she was an excited, happy, blushing bride looking forward to the future. And then the next moments were filled with humiliation, embarrassment, but mostly sadness. And if she was honest with herself, a little anger.

How dare Paul leave her at the altar? He'd been the one to propose to her. She'd been more than happy with just being friends. He'd pushed her, made her love him, and then left her at the altar all alone to face her friends and family—and his.

OK, truth be told, it wasn't a little anger. It was a lot. It was hard to decide which emotion was stronger—the sadness or the anger. It seemed to keep changing. Her emotions were on a roller coaster.

She wasn't a child. She was an adult. If Paul had come to her and told her he'd changed his mind, it would have hurt. But she'd have survived. She'd certainly had her share of bad times. But...but this was too much. How would she ever show her face in public again? Closing her eyes, she reached out for strength in a wordless prayer.

If she'd learned anything over the past few years, it was that she was a survivor. As long as God was by her side, she could survive anything. And survive this she would. No, not survive, but thrive. Somewhere

deep inside her, a spark of determination flickered. She'd get past this and move on with her life—her own life without any complications of a relationship. She was done with men. Forever. God had blessed her with one wonderful husband. And that was more than lots of people got.

Her hand reached out and picked up the letter. When Vickie had checked on her father, she hadn't found him. Instead, she'd found this letter. Addressed to Maven.

Maven's eyes blurred with more tears as she read it yet again.

Maven,

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you, but this all happened too fast. I need time to figure out what's right for me. Again, I'm sorry.

Paul

She stared at the impersonal typewritten words. He hadn't even bothered to write out the short note by hand. It probably took him longer to type it up and print it out than it would have to simply write it on a piece of paper.

How could she have been so wrong about Paul?

Godly men didn't act this way. The man she thought she knew would have come to her. Told her the truth about his doubts. He would have taken care of telling their family and friends. He would never have humiliated her like this. Paul was not the man she'd believed him to be. And since he wasn't, she had nothing to mourn.

She stood up.

She walked to her phone. Looking down at the number scribbled on the piece of paper beside it, she dialed it. On the second ring, a voice answered.

"Mr. Coleman, this is Maven Morris."

"Oh, I didn't expect to hear from you for a few weeks."

She took a deep breath as her eyes filled with tears. "There was a change of plans. I'm ready to start working with your wife if she's ready."

There was a pause. "Well, ready or not, she needs to start."

Maven didn't like the sound of that. "I can't force her to do anything she doesn't want to do, Mr. Coleman. If she isn't ready, we can wait until she is."

"I know. It's not that she's against it. She's just so depressed, she can't seem to make any kind of decisions. She doesn't seem to care about anything. So, I'm making them for her. I think some lessons with you will help her."

Maven could relate. When she'd been so depressed she couldn't get out of bed, Lizzie had been there for her. And Paul too. She resisted a sigh. As much as she understood the depression, she didn't have the energy to fight with an uncooperative client. Sometimes it was necessary with children, but not adults. She didn't think she was up for it at the moment. "Are you sure, because—"

"I'm sure, Mrs. Morris. Don't worry about a thing. She'll be ready. I promise. If it doesn't work out, then so be it. But let's at least give it a try."

Work would be good for her and for Mrs. Coleman apparently. "OK."

After setting up the time and writing the Colemans' address, Maven hung up. Good. One thing

done. She refused to sit around feeling sorry for herself. Time to go for a run. Sweating would make her feel better. As she stepped out the door, she stared across the shared driveway.

The driveway she shared with Paul. Her ex-fiancé. The man she was supposed to marry. The man who'd said he loved her, but then left her at the altar to fend for herself. Scenes flashed in her mind.

Paul taking out her garbage. Paul grilling for them. Paul...Paul...Paul...

Tears filled her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she shook away the tears. *I will not fall apart this time.* Turning her back on Paul's townhouse, she jogged down the drive and towards the park.

Across the street, Mimi sat on her own porch as she often did.

Maven tossed her a wave but kept running. She didn't want to talk to anyone right now, especially not the neighborhood gossip. Just run and sweat—that was what she needed.

And God, of course.

4

In spite of the rolling hills and checkered fields of the farms she passed as she drove on the country road, Maven took none of her usual pleasure in the beauty. It had been a rough two days. She was able to admit that, but she'd survived it.

And now it was Monday—a new week and a great time to start a new life. A life on her own. Without Paul. Today would be better than yesterday, and the next day would be even better. Because it sure couldn't get much worse.

Paul hadn't come home yet.

She wasn't sure if that good or bad. The best thing might be to face each other, get it over with, and both of them to move forward. But so far, all she'd heard from Paul was silence. Oh well. When he was ready to deal with it, she'd be ready too.

Maven pulled her bright red car into the Colemans' drive.

She grabbed the book, the electronic tablet, and her purse off the seat, then pasted a determined smile on her face. *Give me strength. I can't do it without You.* Maven rang the doorbell. Nothing happened. After a minute or so, she rang it once again.

A dog barked from inside and then the door opened.

A tall, thin woman stood there. Still in her pajamas, the woman looked at her. "Are you Maven

Morris?"

In spite of Mr. Coleman's assurances, his wife didn't look ready for anything. Except maybe a nap.

Maven nodded with a smile. "Yes, that's me. Can I come in?"

The woman opened the screen door. "I'm Layla Coleman. I'm not really happy about any of this, but my husband is insisting I work with you." Her voice was soft and sounded so sad. She turned her back on Maven and then walked to the middle of the living room.

Maven didn't bother responding.

The woman wouldn't hear her if she did.

Instead, Maven walked inside the door without waiting for an invitation.

Layla turned to her and motioned for her to sit on the sofa.

Maven did, laying her things on the coffee table between them. She picked up the tablet and tapped on an app. She typed a message and then turned the tablet towards Layla.

I know this is awkward for you. We can use this time any way you want. If you want to scream and yell, I can listen. If you want to learn a few signs, we can do that. If you want to cry, that's OK too. I can't imagine how hard this has been for you.

It was important to empower those without a voice. And right now, Layla Coleman had lost more than her hearing—she'd lost her voice. A deadly silence filled her soul.

Maven could help—if Layla would let her.

Layla's eyes moved across the screen as she read

it. When she was done, she threw herself down in a chair opposite Maven.

Layla started to speak, but then stopped. Her lips quivered. After a few moments, she tried again. "I...I don't know what to do. This is so horrible. I never expected something like this to happen to me. Ever. Even after the doctors told me it might happen, I didn't think it would."

Maven picked up the keyboard and typed in another message.

I can't even imagine what you've been through. My heart breaks for you. It must be a nightmare. How did you lose your hearing? Want to tell me about it?

Layla read the screen and nodded. "I was diagnosed almost two years ago with brain tumors called schwannomas. I'd never heard of them, but I wasn't all that concerned. I felt great. I didn't have really any symptoms. Not even a headache. I didn't think it was any big deal. After all, they said they were benign." She rolled her eyes. "Believe me, there's nothing benign about them."

Layla told the story of how she'd become deaf.

Now and then, Maven would ask a question using the keyboard, but mostly she listened.

Everyone needed to talk about their problems—especially something this traumatic.

Layla wiped away the tears. "You can't imagine how hard being deaf is. It's as if I'm in a room with thick glass walls. I can see the world, but I can't be a part of it. I can see people, but I can't hear what they're saying. I reach out to them, but can't touch them. I can't feel them."