

**LILLIAN
DUNCAN**

**NO HOME
FOR THE
HOLIDAYS**

No Home for the Holidays

Lillian Duncan

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Dedication

This and all I do is for God's glory.
To my amazing husband, Ronny, and my family, also
amazing.

What People are Saying

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! No Home for the Holidays has winter's glow mixed with suspense and likeable characters--a great read for the season! ~Linda Rondante, author

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

Lillian Duncan has done it again.... Penned yet another story which grabs the reader and speeds him along a road of story twists and turns. With a background of Christmas touches, "No Home For the Holidays" is a quick, suspenseful read with characters who make you care—from hiding secrets to finding each other's hearts-- under God's loving gaze." ~Robin Bayne, author

This utterly absorbing story begins when a preacher's path crosses that of a frightened woman who is in the midst of a desperate situation. There are engrossing twists and turns throughout and the mesmerizing suspense easily captured my interest. It was gratifying to discover the couple's relationship with God along the way and to enjoy the thrilling ending. ~Nadine Hapaz, author

1

Colton Douglas huddled in the dark while the icy wind swirled.

If the weather got worse, he wouldn't be able to take pictures. With the falling snow and the star shining bright above the Nativity, it would make an awesome picture to post on the church website. So far, the photos hadn't turned out as pretty as what he could see.

He rubbed his hands together in an effort to keep warm. The wind chill factor was already below zero. He considered going back to his warm cozy house to sit in front of the fireplace, but insomnia had crept in once again. Instead of lying in bed trying not to think of things better forgotten, he'd decided to get up. A glance at the Nativity had brought him out to capture the perfect photo.

He held up the camera and snapped several times and shivered as a strong gust of wind assaulted him. Colton pulled the scarf tighter around his neck, then held his hands up to his mouth so he could warm them with his breath. He wiggled them around, barely able to feel his fingers. Five more minutes and then he'd call it a night whether he got the right picture or not.

Waiting outside in the dark reminded him of his days as an FBI agent. The familiar pit in his stomach jolted, inviting him back into the darkness. Colton

refused to jump in. Those days were behind him.

God had other plans for him that didn't include carrying a gun.

These days he carried a Bible.

Colton stamped his feet to bring back feeling. Brutal was the only way to describe the weather this winter—and it was only December! What would January be like?

He snapped a few more shots but still wasn't happy. Maybe it would be better with the flash off. To give that ethereal quality he was looking for.

Snap.

Perfect! The star shone but with a hazy quality. He sent the photo to his social media sites and to the church website. Pleased that he'd captured the essence of the season, he scanned the area, taking in the lovely scene one more time.

A shadowed figure darted near the church steps.

He glanced down at the picture once again. He hadn't realized a person was in the scene when he'd snapped it. But there she was, clear as day. He looked back at the church.

She opened the door to the church. Did they need help or shelter from the frigid night? Or were they here to steal? The church had some valuable antiques. He immediately chided himself for being so willing to think the worst.

The church was open 24/7 for spiritual solace.

Colton kept it that way on purpose, reaching out to those in need, even if they didn't want company. But he could make sure that all was well with whoever was inside. And then he could get out of this brutal cold. He walked across the street, deliberately taking deep breaths, willing the adrenaline to ease up. When he

entered the church he wanted to have the right mindset.

Silence greeted his entry. The warmth felt wonderful, the furnace was working just fine.

Colton wouldn't have known anyone else was in the church if he hadn't seen them go in. Where was the soul in need of comfort? He peeked through the double doors that led to the sanctuary.

Light silhouetted the cross. It was one of his favorite sights, always reminding him of God's goodness.

Someone was sitting in a pew.

Colton spoke softly, not wanting to disturb the person's reverie. "Hi."

Light pink spikey hair bounced as the person jerked. "Oh, you scared me." She wiped at her eyes.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"I'm not here to steal anything." Her hands moved up to show they were empty.

Usually when people said something like that, it was exactly what they planned. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"No. No. I..."

"It's OK to be here. The church is unlocked for just that reason. Do you need someone to talk with?"

She shook her head again, as she wiped a few more tears away. "I just needed to warm up. I didn't realize it was so cold when I decided to take a walk."

"Then you came to the right place. This church has always given shelter to those who need it, physically or spiritually. You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"I don't need shelter. I have a home. If you think I don't, then you're wrong." Her voice turned sharp.

“I just meant—”

“Oh, I understand what you meant. I’ve had a lifetime of listening to Christianese.” She held up a hand. “You Christians are great at coming up with platitudes that sound good. Too bad they mean nothing in the real world.”

“Does that mean you don’t believe in God?”

She stood up. Colton could see she was older than he’d originally thought. The pink hair had made him think she was a teen, but this woman was probably close to his age.

She glared. “I didn’t say that. Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“I wasn’t doing that.” He smiled as a peace offering. “That leads me back to my original question. Is there something I can do for you?”

The woman pushed past him. “I don’t need anything from you or anyone else.” Her hand motioned around her. “Or from God.”

“I know it’s another one of those Christian platitudes, but the truth is, we all need Him.” He pointed at the cross.

“Whatever.”

“You look familiar. Do I know you?”

She turned away, as if frightened. “Absolutely not.” She stepped around him and rushed out the doors.

The illuminated cross drew his attention. “Protect her, Lord, wherever she goes.” As he turned to leave, he glanced at the pew she’d been in.

She’d left her stocking hat and gloves.

2

Colton grabbed up the cap and gloves and jogged through the church. He had no idea if she actually had a place to go, but either way she'd need them for warmth.

Once outside, he searched for her. Past the Nativity scene the street was empty to the left. To the right, far ahead, she turned the corner. The woman could run.

He looked down at the hat and gloves he held. God had put her in his church for a reason. Better find out why. He charged after her, hoping to catch up. When he turned the same corner, he was greeted with an empty street except the snow-covered cars.

Just because she'd gone down this street didn't mean she lived here. She'd probably zigzagged through different backyards and to another street, and was now long gone. That's what he would have done if he wanted to get away from someone.

Retracing his steps, Colton trudged toward home, his feet crunched on the snow and ice. He stopped and stared down at his feet. At his footprints.

Wow, he really didn't think like a cop any more.

~*~

What a disaster the day had been. Chloe Sullivan

sat on the couching gasping for air.

Who did that preacher think he was anyway—a cop or something? Had he been waiting for her to show up? Why hadn't he been home in bed like the rest of Wooster?

Home. Tears filled her eyes. She blinked, refusing to let them to fall. There wasn't any point in thinking about home or her family. That life was gone. She leaned over taking several deep breaths. Between the snow, the cold, and the wind, the run had been a struggle in spite of all her training.

What had she been thinking—going into a church? Wanting to feel the presence of God for a little while had endangered all she'd built, and it hadn't even helped fill her sorrowful heart. Was God through with her?

The preacher could call the police and tell them she was trespassing. But wasn't that why churches didn't lock their doors? Of course, each church was probably different.

Getting in trouble with the police wasn't something she could risk. It wouldn't be good if anyone recognized her. She'd developed several different looks. One for work. One for shopping. And this one, of course. She fingered her crazy pink wig with very short spikes. It was for fun.

Not that there'd been anything fun about tonight.

The doorbell buzzed.

Who would be at her door this time of the night?

She had no friends, one of the consequences of her choices. Anyone close to her was a luxury she couldn't afford. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. It could be a neighbor who needed help.

Moving the curtain ever so slightly, she peeked

through the shutter slats.

The preacher stood there stamping his feet and rubbing his hands together. No way was she opening that door. For him. There was no way she'd give him a second look at her.

Pounding started. The door rattled.

"I know you're in there. Open up. I just want to give you back your hat and gloves."

She looked down at her hands. She'd been so freaked out when he'd said she looked familiar that she hadn't realized she'd left them.

How had he been able to find the right house?

More pounding and buzzing.

"I'm not going away so you might as well let me in."

If he kept yelling, the neighbors would call the cops. She moved closer to the door. "Just leave them on the porch. I'll get them later."

"Why? I'm not here to hurt you."

Leaving the chain lock engaged, she opened the door just enough to see out. "Be quiet. You'll wake up the neighborhood."

He pulled out his cellphone. "Besides, I wanted to show you the picture I took. I didn't even know you were in it when I took it."

A picture of her? Not good. She opened the door wider. "What picture?"

"Of you at the Nativity. I posted it on the church website."

"You didn't?" Forgetting her resolve to not let him in, she removed the chain and opened the door. "You can't do that. You need to take it down. Right now."

He smiled, clueless as to what his action might cause.

"Why are you chasing me?" Had someone found her? Was the minister stalking her? Maybe he wasn't really a minister at all. Why else would he take photos of her?

"You left your things. I thought you might need it." He handed the stocking cap and gloves up to her. "It's too cold to be outside without them."

"You chased me down the street to give me back my hat?"

He nodded and held out his hand. "Colton Douglas. And your name is..."

"None of your business." She turned away. He didn't need to get a better look at her. Good thing she still had her makeup on. "Let me see that picture, please."

He held out the phone. She stared at the picture. Would anyone recognize her?

"It's a beautiful picture, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think. You have to take that down. Right now."

"Why?"

"It could be dang...well, you just need to take it down. I don't like people taking my picture. It's not...please take it down."

"Sure thing. Not a problem. I'll take them down just as soon as I get home."

"No, you have to do it right now. Before anyone...please, just do it now."

"OK. OK. Not a problem." He sat down and began to hit buttons on the phone. After a few moments he looked up. "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't."

"Then I'll call you Pink. For your hair." He hit another button on the phone. "All deleted. Are you

happy now?"

She nodded.

"Why was it so important to you?"

"I don't like my picture taken. It's not... safe."

"Not safe? Sounds a bit melodramatic. Why don't you tell me the real reason?"

This guy did it all. Preacher. Cop. Psychic. And now a shrink. "It's time for you to go."

"I think I deserve an answer, Pink."

"How did you find me anyway?"

"Footprints in the snow."

"Oh...that makes sense."

He gave her a sincere look. "Really, I want to help you. Something's wrong or you wouldn't have been in the church tonight. Please tell me what's going on. God can always make a way."

She turned away, not wanting him to see tears. "I suppose that's true if God loves you."

"And you think God doesn't love you? Of course, he does. He will never forsake any of us."

He sounded just like her...a preacher.

"I'm not having a philosophical discussion about religion. It's time—"

"I know. For me to go." He turned to go but then held up his phone. "But you know where I am if you want to talk. Even if it's purely philosophical. So what do you really believe in, Pink?"

"None of your business. What do you believe in?"

"I'll be glad to answer that question." He moved to the door. "Stop by any time and we can discuss it. You know where I work, Pink."

"That's not going to happen." She slammed the door after him. "And don't call me that."

3

Colton sang along with the Christmas music playing on the radio. His mind turned to other matters. There was something about Pink that seemed familiar, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Maybe, if she hadn't been wearing all that make-up, he'd figure it out. She needed help, he was sure of it.

For him to be up and outside at the exact moment she'd gone in the church. Well, that had to be God working. After talking with her, he was even more sure she needed help.

But he couldn't force her to accept it, and he had other things to do, like get ready for Christmas. But Pink had left a definite impression.

~*~

Six hours later, Colton pressed the print button with a flourish. This week's sermon was finished and the Christmas Eve message was close to being finished.

A knock pounded on the door.

"Come in."

"Pastor Douglas?" The stranger was huge, his shoulders filled the doorway of the church office.

"Guilty as charged."

"I'm John Smith."

"Really?" Colton arched a brow.

“Yeah, I get that a lot.” The blond giant grimaced. “My mother didn’t have much imagination when it came to naming me.”

“What can I do for you, Mr. Smith?”

The man slid out his cellphone and showed the picture of Pink at the Nativity scene. The one he’d deleted. “I need to know where she is.”

“Why?” Colton managed to hide his surprise, but he was disturbed that the photo he’d deleted somehow made it into this man’s phone. Pink would be upset. What was going on here?

“I’m looking for her.” He flashed a badge. “FBI.”

“Is she in trouble?” Colton hadn’t really seen the badge, but he didn’t request to see it again. Intuition tingled, not in a good way.

The man met his gaze. “I’ll ask the questions.”

“How’d you even see the picture? It was only up for a few minutes and then I took it down.”

“Why?”

“I decided it wasn’t the right photo. So how did you get it?”

John Smith sat down. “If you must know, I have software that scans the Internet for faces. And since she’s one of the faces I’m looking for...” He shrugged as if that was enough of an explanation.

He hadn’t said the FBI had software.

Colton decided to not tell this man he was ex-FBI.

“So what name is she using now?” The blond giant’s eyes bored into Colton’s.

“I don’t know her name.” Colton had no intention of helping him. Nothing about this guy seemed genuine.

“Do you know where she lives?”

Colton didn’t want to lie and instead used a cop

tactic, answer a question with a question. "If I don't know her name, why would I know where she lives?"

"Does she go to your church? I need to know what you know about her."

"She doesn't come to my church. She just happened by as I snapped the photo." Colton's cop instincts were buzzing. Pink had said having her picture on the Internet wasn't safe. Maybe she wasn't being overly dramatic.

"Lucky break for me that she did. You must know something about her that you can tell me."

"I saw her in my church and wanted to talk, but she left. Sorry I can't be of more help. Why don't you give me one of your business cards, and I'll give you a call if she comes back."

"Sure, sounds good." John reached into his coat pocket. His hand came back out empty. "Well, would you look at that? All out of business cards."

Colton met his gaze.

Neither one blinked.

Then John Smith smiled. "But let me give you my phone number so you can call if she comes around again. I'd appreciate if you wouldn't tell her I was looking for her. People like her tend to run away from the FBI."

People like her? What was that supposed to mean? "What do you want her for?"

"Nothing to concern yourself with."

"If you say so." Colton handed him a pen and paper.

John scribbled a number on a paper. "Thanks for your help." He left the office.

The man would be easy to check out, but Colton wasn't an FBI agent any longer. He was a preacher. It

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wasn't his job to worry about what John Smith wanted with Pink. Perhaps it wasn't his job to worry about Pink either, but he did. Though she didn't seem to believe, she was hanging around his church, which made her lost soul seeking comfort from the Lord.

He sighed as he walked toward the coat closet.