



# *puzzle house*

A NOVEL OF HEALING AND HOPE

*Lillian Duncan*

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**Puzzle House**  
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## *Dedication*

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

To my amazing husband, Ronny, without you my stories wouldn't get written. Thanks for all that you do.

To all those who suffer from Neurofibromatosis of any type. Life can be difficult but with God all things are possible, even peace and joy.





# 1

"I hate you." Nia's gaze shot little darts of anger at the woman standing by the car door.

The woman met her gaze with a smile.

Which infuriated Nia even more. "I said I hate you and I do."

"You don't hate me. You're just angry." Her voice remained calm, almost emotionless.

"Don't you care about me, Auntie?"

"I'm not going to dignify that question with an answer." She leaned down. "Are you ready?"

"I said don't you care about me? Why are you making me do this?"

"Because I do love you so very much." One of her hands moved under Nia, the other moved to her back.

Nia knocked her hands away. "I can do it myself. If I wanted to. I'm not going in there. You can't make me."

"I would think you had better ways to use the little bit of energy you have than arguing with me about this. We agreed."

"No, *we* didn't." Her lip trembled. No crying. Crying wouldn't change anything. She flopped back against the car seat, exhausted. "I never wanted to come and you know it."

Her aunt knelt down beside her, eyes filled with tears. "Please. This will be a good thing, Nia. I promise."

"How do you know that?"

"I can't explain it but I know it will be. If you just give it half a chance. Please."

"What if I say no?"

Her aunt's head drooped.

No one spoke.

When her aunt gazed back at her, there was no pity in her eyes, only strength. Her shoulders moved back ever so slightly. "You'll still have to stay."

"So I got no choice."

"Nope. None at all."

"That ain't right, Auntie."

"I'm sure it seems that way to you. But I'm the one responsible for you. So it's my decision. I love you and I have to do what I think is right."

"I hate you."

Her aunt patted her cheek. "I hear you, sweetie." She leaned in and scooped Nia up. A moment later Nia was in the wheelchair she hated almost as much as her disease. As her aunt wheeled her toward the house, Nia wiped away tears. She couldn't help but stare at her surroundings, so different from her life in the city.

This place had more grass than her whole neighborhood. And a pond and trees and a barn. A barn? She'd never seen a barn in real life before—only in pictures and on TV. Were there really animals in it?

The house was pretty in a country hick sort of way. A long porch wrapped around both sides and there were a bunch of rocking chairs lined up. Two of the rockers had a small table with a checker set between them. How old-fashioned could you get? Still it was sort of pretty. "Where's my welcoming committee, Auntie? I would have thought they'd be thrilled I was coming."



Her aunt patted her shoulder. "They are thrilled. I guess we should use the ramp." She made a sudden turn and pushed Nia toward the ramp at the far side of the porch.

When they got to the door, Nia's aunt stopped. "I don't see a doorbell. Think we should just walk in?"

"Don't see why not."

"Maybe we should knock?"

Nia leaned forward, grabbed the knob and then opened the door. She looked back at her aunt with a grin. "Too late."

Her aunt *tsked* as she pushed the wheelchair into the house. A huge sign hung on the wall.

*WELCOME TO THE PUZZLE HOUSE*

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.*

*But the greatest of these is love.*

"Yea, whatevs." Nia mumbled.

To their right there was a large room. There was a white boy sitting at a table totally focused on something on the surface.

An old white lady—older than dirt—sat in a chair in front of the largest picture window Nia had ever seen.

She was whispering with another white lady, not as old

Nia's aunt pushed her and the chair into the room.

No one noticed them.

"Ain't nobody going to notice the sick girl in the wheelchair?" Nia asked.

The woman standing by the old white lady turned. "Oh, my goodness. I didn't hear you come in. Of course there's lots of things I can't hear these days." She hurried toward them but then stumbled and fell

forward.

~\*~

Rachel grabbed onto the nearest table and righted herself. "Oops. I know better than to rush. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Are you all right?" The woman pushing the wheelchair asked.

"Fine and dandy." She took a deep breath and walked toward them. Much slower this time. "I'm Rachel and you must be Margaretta and Nia. It's so wonderful to meet both of you. Welcome to The Puzzle House."

"Yea, whatevs." Nia mumbled, clearly not happy to be here.

"I wasn't expecting you for another few hours."

"We got an earlier start than planned." Margaretta stepped out from behind the wheel chair. "I'm Nia's aunt. We talked on the phone. Margaretta Johnson."

Ignoring the outstretched hand, Rachel moved closer and enveloped her in a hug. "It's nice to meet you Margaretta. Finally. Though I'm sorry it's under these circumstances."

A momentary stiffness, then Margaretta relaxed in the hug. When she stepped back she smiled as if they were old friends. She wiped a tear. "I guess I should thank you. Not just for accepting Nia but for...other things."

"No thanks needed. I'm just so happy to meet you and your beautiful niece."

Nia was staring at the two of them with a confused expression. Good. A little curiosity could make the week go a little easier.

"What are you thanking her for? For taking me off your hands?" Nia's tone said she wasn't in the mood for niceties. "She—"

"Nia, be nice. This is a very special woman and we are very blessed to be here."

"I ain't nothing and I'm sure not blessed. I don't wanna be here with her. I want to go home. With you."

"I'm sorry, but that won't happen, sweetie. I promise I'll be back in a week. But for now this is where you need to be, Nia." She looked up at Rachel. "I'm really sorry. She's...having a difficult day."

Rachel smiled at Nia. She was so thin, probably not more than ninety pounds. Her brown face was gaunt. She had only a bit of hair on her head, mostly bald from the chemo, no doubt. But in spite of all that, she was truly beautiful. "Don't worry about it, Margaretta. It's such a blessing to have Nia here with me. I'm looking forward to spending some time with her."

A choking sound came out of Nia's mouth but she said nothing.

"Well, I hope Nia listens to—"

"Listens? What that old white lady gonna teach me about my life? She don't know nothing about me."

"Nia. Don't be rude. We don't talk about people by their colors." Her aunt looked horrified and embarrassed all at the same time. "We don't like that when people judge us that way."

Nia met Rachel's gaze for the first time. "Sorry. No offense meant."

"None taken."

"See, Auntie. She don't care that I noticed she's white." She looked at Rachel. "So, what you think you gonna teach me that I don't already know?"

A challenge? That was good. Much better to be angry than apathetic. Just as it said in Revelation, better to be hot or cold than lukewarm. There was nothing about this young girl that was lukewarm.

"Is that a challenge, Nia? If it is, it's not one I'm taking. What you learn or don't learn here at The Puzzle House will be up to you, my dear." She looked at Nia's aunt. "Don't worry about us, we'll be fine. Won't we, Nia?"

"Whatevs."

Margaretta took a moment to glare at Nia but smiled when she looked at Rachel. "I'll go get her luggage."

The boy at the table jumped up. "Not necessary. That's my job."

"Oh. Thank you so much."

His curly brown hair flopped in his eyes. He brushed it away. His blue eyes twinkled with curiosity as he looked at Nia.

Rachel was glad Brandon was here this week. The two of them could keep each other company. "Hi. I'm Brandon."

"What do I..." Her aunt's hand touched Nia's shoulder. Nia rolled her eyes. "I'm Nia."

"Nia. That's an awesome name. What's it mean?"

"How should I know? Probably means sick girl with no hair." She touched the top of her head to emphasize her point.

"Probably not. I didn't even notice it." He turned his attention to Margaretta. "Do I need the keys?"

Margaretta nodded and handed him the keys. "The luggage is in the trunk."

"Great. I'll be right back."

True to his promise, he walked back in with two

suitcases. Margaretta took the smaller of the suitcases. "Nia isn't on any...treatment right now. She has a few meds to...help keep her comfortable. I've made a list of what and when she's allowed to take them. The others are just vitamins which she will take every day, right Nia?"

"Sure, Auntie." The words were correct, the tone was not. "Whatevs."

Rachel had figured that Nia would be a handful after several conversations with Margaretta. Most of the people who came to The Puzzle House wanted to be there. "I'll keep the one with the meds."

"Why? I can take care of 'em myself." Nia's hands went to her hips in spite of being in the wheelchair. "Don't need you checking up on me. I can take care of myself. I don't need nobody to help me."

"I'm sure that's very true, but unless you're eighteen, I have to take care of the meds. Rules are rules. So not much point in arguing about it." Rachel turned to Margaretta. "You're welcome to spend as much time as you'd like with us. Even stay overnight if you choose. We've got the room."

"I'd love to but I can't. If I leave now I can get back home by bedtime. Work tomorrow, you know." Her arms went around the young girl. "I love you, Nia. Please understand. This is where you need to be right now."

"I won't understand. I don't want to understand. I need to be home so I can die in peace. Not here with strangers. Don't leave me."

Margaretta touched Nia's chin and gazed into the young girl's eyes. "You will not die this week. I promise you that."

"I might as well. Since you're leaving me. What do

I care what happens to me? You don't."

"I'm not abandoning you, Nia, and you know it."

"Sure feels like you are."

"Stop trying to make me feel guilty. Please, trust me. This will be a great experience for you. If..." Margaretta's chin quivered. "If you give it a chance."

"I don't want to die here. Alone. Without you."

Margaretta stood up and straightened her shoulders. "I will see you next week. I love you, sweetie. Have a wonderful time."

Nia's anger dissolved. "Please, Auntie. Don't make me stay here. I want to be home with you. And my friends. And Cubbie."

"And you will be soon, but not right now." She knelt down in front of Nia once again. "You trust me, don't you?"

Nia nodded.

"Then trust me this time. This is the place you need to be for now. If you...if you..." She sighed, and then stood up. "Just trust me on this. Enjoy the week here with Rachel. Think of it as a vacation."

"A vacation in the middle of nowhere." She glared at Rachel. "With nobody I want to be with. Sounds like a lot of fun."

"Gotta go, sweetie." Tears were in Margaretta's voice as she walked out of the room.

Nia gave Rachel a militant look. "What? The sick girl gotta carry her own suitcase to her room?"

Brandon moved closer. "That's my job. I'll take it up for you and set it on your bed." He looked at Rachel. "I'll be back later."

"And I'll show you around while he does that." Rachel pushed the wheelchair toward the door. "Let's take that tour now."

"Let's not. I don't need this thing when I'm in the house." Nia stood up. She touched the wheelchair. "I hate this thing. But I get so tired sometimes. Especially when I walk. I guess that's why Auntie wanted to make sure I had it with me."

"I understand. The good thing is there's plenty of room here for it. Use it when you want. Sort of like this cane. I use it sometimes but not all the time." Rachel showed Nia the cane leaning on the wall.

"Why do you need a cane? You sick too?"

"Balance issues. I get sort of wobbly sometimes. The cane keeps me from falling down. Most of the time."

"Oh great! Sick girl in a wheelchair and an old white woman who falls down." She paused. "No offense meant."

"None taken. I see you still have your sense of humor. Nia."

"Yeah, whatevs."

"Nia, I'm not your enemy."

"Didn't say you were."

"There's no reason we can't be friends." Rachel looped her arm through Nia's and led her out of the room. "Who's Cubbie?"

"My cat. But she doesn't know she's a cat. She thinks she's tough, like a bear. That's why I call her Cubbie."

"She sounds like a great cat. We don't have any cats in the house because of my allergies. But a few cats hang around outside. So, welcome to The Puzzle House."

They were in a hallway. The staircase was in the middle with closed doors on each side of it. A lift was against one wall of the stairs.

Nia pointed at it. "I suppose I have to use that thing."

"Only if you want. It's easy enough to use. Sit down in it, buckle up, and then hit the button." Rachel moved to the room to the left. There were several chairs and two sofas in the room. "This is the meeting room."

"We gotta have meetings?"

Rachel laughed. "Not really. But meetings can be helpful to keep things running smoothly. It's really a quiet room in the house. To read or study or just relax."

"Quiet. This whole place is quiet. Too quiet. How many people are here now?"

"There's you, of course. And you met Brandon. Annie's the older woman I was talking with when you came in. That's all. We have enough rooms for six guests."

Rachel closed the door the meeting room. "You've already been in the puzzle room. We'll come back to that in a minute. Let me show you the kitchen and eating area."

They made their way to a huge room. The kitchen took up one side and a large table filled the other space. The walls were made of wood planks with lots of dark holes. On the other side of the room was a huge picnic style table.

"Kind of cool. What do you call that?" Nia pointed at the walls.

"Knotty pine. I like it too." Rachel walked to a large refrigerator. "Anything in this one is yours to eat whenever you get hungry. The other one has the ingredients for the meals so it's better if you don't eat from that one."



"Don't matter. I don't get very hungry any more. The doctors said it's my body shutting down."

Rachel walked over and patted her. "I'm sorry. Let me take you back to the puzzle room and then you'll probably want to rest some. Are you tired?"

"A little."

The puzzle room was empty. One side had large windows that showcased a beautiful pond, and trees, now showing their fall colors. In front of the windows were a sofa and several chairs arranged in a semi-circle with a coffee table. In the middle of the room were card tables, each with two chairs.

"What's with the tables?"

"Well, we aren't called The Puzzle House for no reason. Every guest works on a puzzle while they're here. The tables are the perfect size for the puzzles."

"I ain't never worked on no puzzle." Nia glared at her. "And I don't plan on wasting time doin' one now. Where's the TV?"

"No TVs here. At least not for guests. I have one in my room so I can keep up with the news from time to time. And the weather reports."

"I can't watch TV?"

"Sorry."

Nia rolled her eyes. "I'm gonna be so bored."

"That's why we have the puzzles."

"I already said I don't want to do no puzzle."

"I'm sorry I thought I heard you say you weren't going to do a puzzle." She lifted her hair to reveal a hearing aid, but I'm sure I heard wrong." Rachel met her glare with what she hoped was calmness. "Besides it's a rule. The only one we have, actually. Well, that and respecting each other, which is not really a rule. Just common courtesy."

"Whatcha going to do if I don't do no puzzle? Send me home?" Nia's hand went to her hip as she glared at Rachel.

Rachel said nothing, just held Nia's gaze. Waiting.

Nia threw up her hands. "Fine. Where's mine?"

"Just like in life, you get to make your own choice. Pick the one you want." Rachel motioned at a shelf across the room.

"Ain't nothing about my life, I got to pick. You think I picked my mama to be a druggie? You think I picked to get sick? You think I picked to be dying? You think I even picked to be here?"

"I suppose not. And you're right; we don't always get to pick our circumstances. But there are still choices we all get to make. And those choices can make a big difference in the life we live."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, whatevs."

Nia walked to the puzzle shelf with attitude.

"The puzzles go from easy to super hard. Left to right."

Nia walked to the easy section.

Rachel smiled and waited.

"Ain't you going to tell me not to pick the easiest?"

"You get to pick whatever one you want."

Nia picked up a box, stood there contemplating, and then set it back down. After squaring her shoulders, her chin jutted. Then she walked to the opposite side of the shelf. "You know it'd be a lot easier to pick one if I could see what it looked like." She pointed at the plain brown boxes. "Most puzzle boxes have the picture on them."

"Sort of like life, huh? It would be a lot easier if we could see the finished picture. But we only get to live

our life one piece at a time. It's only later that we see how one piece fits into another piece."

"I 'spose so. Well, I don't think I should pick the super hard since I never did no puzzle before."

"Up to you, my dear."

"I bet you thought I'd pick the really easy ones. Like I was a chicken or something."

"I don't think you're a chicken. I think you're quite brave. But if you'd picked the easy one that would have been fine. God seems to have a way of matching the person up with the right puzzle for them."

"Yeah, whatevs." Nia ran her hand over several boxes, picked one up and shook it, then set it back on the shelf. She picked up another, shook it. "This sounds like the right one to me."

Rachel sat down at one of the tables in silent invitation.

Nia set the box down, but didn't open it. "So are you a nurse or something?"

"No, I'm not."

"Well, isn't that what this is? A place to die? One of those hospice places where people go when they're going to die. The doc said I'm done. No more treatment. Nothing else they can do for me. Time for me to go home and die. I don't think Auntie wants me to die in her house so she brought me here. That way I can't haunt her. The doctor said it's all up to me now."

"And up to God."

Nia sputtered at the word. "God. What's He got to do with anything?"

"Everything." Rachel smiled.

"Yea, whatevs." Nia shrugged. "Don't make no difference one way or the other to God what happens to me. He don't care nothing about me."

"Is that what you really believe, Nia?"

Another shrug. Then she picked up the puzzle box, giving it an angry shake. "I still don't know why there ain't no picture on the box. I mighta picked an ugly one."

"There are no ugly puzzles."

Nia gave her an assessing look.

"See all the beautiful puzzles on the walls?" Rachel motioned with her hand.

Under each puzzle was a picture of the person who'd put it together, some had two or three pictures beneath them.

"Didn't notice them." Her gaze moved around the room as she studied the puzzles. "I didn't know they made so many different puzzles."

"Every puzzle at The Puzzle House is unique. Just as each of our guests are."

"You gonna put mine up there after I die?"

"Who says you'll die?"

"The doctors. And Auntie, when she thinks I'm not listening."

"Don't believe everything you hear. It's still up to God, no matter what the doctors say."

"Well God sure ain't listening to me. If He was, I wouldn't be here. With you."

Rachel smiled again. "Are you sure about that?"

Instead of answering, Nia picked up the puzzle box and poured out the pieces. She stared at them. "What a mess. I ain't ever going to get this thing together. I shoulda picked an easier one."

Rachel smiled. "Too late now. Unless you want to give up?"

Nia's chin jutted out and her voice became defiant. "I don't give up."

"Are you sure about that? Because it sounds as if you've given up on living to me. You've decided you'll die because the doctors said so. They aren't always right, you know."

Ignoring Rachel, Nia picked up two pieces and stared at them. "I'm pretty sure I can't do this."

"Giving up isn't allowed here at The Puzzle House."

"Another rule? Thought you only had one."

"Mmm...you're right. I guess there are a few more than I realized. But don't panic over the puzzle. Concentrate on one piece at a time, my dear. That's all we ever have to do."

"Isn't that what they say about druggies? One day at a time. Besides I don't got all that many days left. I'm pretty sure this puzzle ain't getting put together." Nia pointed at the wall behind Rachel. "You got any puzzles of yours up there?"

"I've done a few over the years. But I don't display them. I put these up to help me remember my friends."

"Cause all of them died."

"Not all. Some died and some are still alive. But we all have to die sometime. It's a part of life. And it's not always in the way we expect." She stood up and walked over to a puzzle. "Take this one. Monique survived her cancer, only to be killed in a car accident ten years later."

Nia walked up beside her. "Kinda makes me think it's just not worth it. What's the point? If you're just going to die, anyway. You know what I mean?"

"I see what you mean, but every life has a point. Just ask Monique's children, who had their mother for ten more precious years. One's a teacher and one's a doctor now. In those ten years, Monique not only got