

*Suffer the
Little
Children*

A PUZZLE HOUSE NOVEL

*Lillian
Duncan*

Suffer the Little Children

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Suffer the Little Children
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Dedication

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

To Ronny, I love you now and forever!

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Puzzle House

The David Years

Suffer the Little Children

Christmas Holiday Extravaganza

The Christmas Stalking

No Home for the Holidays

A Christmas Stolen

1

But when Jesus saw it, He was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. ~ Mark 10:14 (KJV)

The newlyweds sat in their car staring at their new home—Puzzle House.

The first time Nia had been here, she'd been fourteen—and dying. And this was the last place she wanted to be, but Auntie wouldn't take no for an answer. As usual, Auntie was right and the doctors were wrong. It turned out God had other plans for Nia and now here she was, sitting in a car with her new husband.

She could never have imagined this on that day when Auntie practically dragged her into the house. God really was amazing. Nia looked at her husband, Bart, and then back at Puzzle House. "Are you ready for this?"

He grinned. "I'm not sure what'll happen, but I'm sure it's an adventure God wants us to take." He took hold of her hand. "Together."

"Together." She laced her fingers through his.

There was a time when she thought they wouldn't ever be together. But once God's grace entered, they both knew it was meant to be. They'd discussed the fact that their marriage was a bi-racial one. She was black and Bart was about as white as they come. For the most part, it didn't seem to bother people. In the end, they'd decided they wouldn't let other people dictate their lives for them. When she'd met him four years earlier, his brown hair had been in a ponytail, but that was gone, just as she'd stopped wearing braids. But his bright blue eyes still had the twinkle she'd first noticed about him.

A few moments later, they stood in front of the steps. Nia was in her wedding gown—even though the wedding had actually been two weeks earlier. But they both wanted to follow tradition. She turned to Bart. "Let's get this adventure started, my husband."

Bart smiled. "I suppose my beautiful bride expects me to carry her across the threshold."

She put a hand on her hip. "Well, tradition is tradition but as much as I love you, I don't think you're up to it. You really should work out more."

"Is that a challenge?" He scooped her up and walked up the steps. "You really didn't think I could carry your skinny self up a few measly steps?"

She nuzzled his neck. "I knew you could. I was just giving you a little motivation. Reverse psychology and all that."

He stopped at the door. She reached for the doorknob, but before she touched it, the door opened. Cooper stood in the hallway with a huge smile and

balloon in his hand.

Bart carried her across the threshold. He gently placed her on the floor and then kissed her soundly. When they separated, Bart smiled, "Sorry, Cooper. I had to finish the tradition."

"Well, tradition is tradition." Cooper laughed. "Welcome home, Mr. and Mrs. Simpson."

"I love hearing that," Nia said with a huge grin. "I'll never get tired of it."

Bart hugged her. "I'm holding you to that. I'll remind you of it on our fiftieth anniversary."

"No need. I'll remember that today and then and every day in between."

Cooper smiled. "How was your honeymoon?"

"Perfect." Nia straightened out her gown. "How could Paris not be perfect?"

"I think I would have preferred t it didn't rain every day we were there," Bart said.

"Every day?"

"Every day."

Cooper looked at Nia. "And that didn't bother you?"

"Not in the least." She touched her head. "Though I will admit I was glad I cut off the braids before we made the trip. It makes for much easier styling. Especially with the rain."

Cooper touched her new do. "I can't believe you cut them off. You've had them for as long as I've known you."

She shrugged. "It was time for a change."

"I completely agree. Speaking of change, I've got

some surprises for the newlyweds.”

Nia clapped. “I love surprises.”

“Here’s the first one.” Cooper motioned to a sign on the wall in the hallway.

Welcome to Puzzle House

Be joyful in hope,

Patient in affliction,

Faithful in prayer.

Romans 12: 12

“Oooh, I love it. It came out great, don’t you think?” Nia had told Cooper about wanting a new welcome sign with the Bible verse. It was good advice for her and anyone who came, no matter what the reason, for the visit to Puzzle House. “You didn’t get rid of the other one, did you?”

Rachel Summers, Cooper’s wife and founder of Puzzle House, had put the other welcome sign up years earlier. Rachel had passed several years earlier, right before she’d told Nia that she was to be her successor at Puzzle House—as a healer.

Even all these years later, the thought humbled Nia that God would choose her. At the time, she’d been a Christian, but she had no idea what was to come in her life. “I’ll love seeing it in the kitchen when I cook.”

“I put it in the dining room for now, but you can put it wherever you want. This place is your home now. You’re the boss and that means you make the decisions.”

“Don’t even talk that way, Cooper. You and Rachel built this place. Not me. I’m just part of the team.”

Cooper shook his head. “Not true, Nia. This is your time to step up and my time to take a backseat. I won’t interfere with your decisions.”

“Not even when I make mistakes?”

“Well, I may share an opinion or two, but this place really does belong to the two of you now. It’s just like when John the Baptist said it was time for him to take a step back. Same here. I’m stepping back so you can step forward.”

“I don’t want that to happen. I need you and your wise advice.”

“And you’ll have it. Come and take a look. See what you think of it.”

Hand in hand, she and Bart followed Cooper into the kitchen. He’d placed the sign on the back wall behind the dining room table.

WELCOME TO PUZZLE HOUSE

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

But the greatest of these is love.

Nia looked at Bart. “What do you think?”

He shrugged. “Looks good to me, but decorating isn’t really my thing.”

“I love it.”

“Glad to hear it. On to my second surprise, or maybe I should say our surprise.” Cooper smiled, and then winked at Bart. “It might be a bit more of a shock.

At least to you, Nia." Cooper pointed to a door in the kitchen.

"That door wasn't there before. What's it for?"

"Follow me."

Nia looked at Bart.

He had a huge grin plastered on his face.

"Do you know anything about this?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. Cooper and I sort of worked on this one together. I know you wondered what I've been up to since I quit my job a few months ago."

"Mmmm. Now, I'm really curious."

Cooper walked past the huge picnic style dining room table to the back of the kitchen. The room and the table were large enough to accommodate all their guests and workers even when they had a full house.

"We did a few renovations this year and this was one of them." Cooper opened the door that revealed a long hallway. Windows lined both sides of the hallway with shelves for plants

"You built a greenhouse? For me. How awesome."

"I suppose that's sort of true, but it's really a hallway," Cooper said.

"A hallway to what?"

"That's the surprise."

"I don't know about the other surprise, but this is a beautiful hallway. I can't wait to fill it up with all sorts of plants and flowers. And maybe an herb garden." Nia clasped her hands to her chin.

"She's on a roll now." Bart laughed.

"I can see that," Cooper agreed.

When they got to another door, Bart instructed her, "Close your eyes, bride."

As soon as she shut them, he scooped her up once again. A few moments later, he set her down. "OK, open your eyes."

"Oh my." Nia stood in the middle of a room. It had a sofa and a TV—and not much else.

Cooper smiled. "We thought about decorating it but decided you'd probably want to do that yourself. Welcome to your private suite. We even put a tiny kitchen here so you don't have to walk all the way down the hall in case you get hungry."

She turned to get a better view. "I can't believe it. I had no idea you two did this." She walked over to the kitchenette, which held a microwave and a small refrigerator as well as a bistro table for two. "This is awesome."

Cooper walked to another door. "In here is the bedroom and a private bath." He pointed to another door beside the kitchenette. "That's another room you can use as an office or whatever you want it for. You and Bart will have to share it or flip for it. Or it might become a nursery one of these days."

"It's amazing, Cooper."

"Well, you guys are newlyweds. I wanted you to have your own little home."

She turned to Bart. "And you helped with this?"

"Yep. Cooper and me and a few other volunteers did most of the work ourselves, but we left the plumbing and electricity to the pros." He looked over at Cooper. "Is it ready?"

“Another surprise?”

Cooper nodded.

Bart grabbed her hand. “Come see the bedroom.” He opened the door. As soon as she walked in, her gaze was drawn to a sliding door on the far wall. “Oh. We even have a deck?”

They walked outside. The deck was surrounded by a high privacy fence. There was a patio set with a small table as well as lounge chairs. In one corner, there was a hot tub with a small roof over it. “Wow.”

“The gate leads to Puzzle House’s pool and patio area, but this is your own private area. No sharing it with the guests.” Cooper smiled. “I know God wants both of you here, but you need to know it’ll not be all roses. And sometimes, you’ll need time to yourselves. And that shouldn’t mean having to leave home to get it.”

“This is wonderful, Cooper.” She hugged him.

“I helped,” Bart said.

“And I love you for it.” She hugged him. “I can’t believe you kept it a secret.”

“It wasn’t easy, but I managed.”

“One more surprise for you, Nia,” Cooper said. “And it’s a doozy.”

She looked at Bart. “Did you help with this one, too? I never knew you were so sneaky.”

“Not me. I don’t even know what it is.” He looked at Cooper.

Cooper shrugged. “I’ll tell Bart all about it while you go upstairs to your old room.” Cooper’s voice filled with emotion.

She looked closely at Cooper. He wasn't prone to being overly emotional. "What's going on?"

"An answered prayer. You'll find out when you get there."

Nia looked at Bart, but he shrugged. "I promise I don't know anything about this surprise. Go on. I'll be down here with Cooper."

They left their suite of rooms. At the steps she stopped, remembering the first time she went up them. Her body had been so weak from cancer and the treatments that she'd had to use the chair lift. And now she was strong enough to run a half-marathon. *How amazing is Your love, God?*

She stopped in front of her old room and knocked on the door. Hearing a muffled response, she opened the door. Her eyes filled with tears, momentarily speechless. Finally, she found her voice. "Keisha."

It had been more than two years since she'd seen her best friend from high school. Keisha had been in and out of rehabs for the past four years—since her daughter's birth. She'd be all right for a little while, but then she'd start using again.

Keisha sat cross-legged on the bed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to ruin your homecoming. But Cooper wouldn't let me leave once I got here. I told him I could come back in a few weeks, but he insisted I stay."

"Good thing. I would have been quite upset if you'd left." Nia sat down on the bed and grabbed her friend's hand. "It's so good to see you, Keisha. When did you get here?"

"Yesterday. Sorry I missed your wedding. Thanks

for inviting me.” Keisha looked down at the bed. “I...I was too busy getting high.”

“I’m just happy that you’re here now.” Nia purposely kept her tone neutral. Keisha had tried so many times. *God, please, help her...*

Keisha’s gaze met Nia’s. “I...I’m tired of living like this. I want...do you think God can heal me?”

Thank You, Lord. No one could do anything until Keisha asked for help. There were many kinds of healing. Her friend probably needed all of them and with God, all things were possible. Nia put her arms around her friend. “Welcome to Puzzle House.”

2

Nia took a vomit filled trashcan from her aunt's hands. "This is not the way I planned to spend my honeymoon."

"Nia Johnson...oops—I mean, Nia Simpson, are you complaining?" Aunt Margaretta shook her head.

Nia grimaced. "Not me, Auntie. I'm thrilled that I can be here for Keisha. Finally. I've prayed for her for so long. This is most definitely God's hand in Keisha's life." She looked down at the trashcan. "Who would have thought this could be an answered prayer?"

"Good thing. Besides, it's not actually your honeymoon. That was the trip to Paris, remember?"

"Maybe so, but this was supposed to be the second part of the honeymoon. The calm before the storm, a short period of marital adjustment before our first guests arrive."

"You know what they say about God laughing at man's plans," Auntie added.

"I most certainly do. And trust me, I'm not complaining, Auntie. Not really. But as thrilled as I am to be able to help Keisha, Puzzle House is not a drug rehab center. I didn't go to college for four years to empty yucky trashcans."

Her aunt didn't say anything for a long moment but then gently asked, "What if that's God's plan for Puzzle House, my sweet Nia?"

Nia had known since she was fourteen that Puzzle House was her destiny. After being healed of cancer, Rachel had told her that God had anointed Nia to be a healer—the next healer at Puzzle House.

Nia closed her eyes, remembering the awesome feeling that had traveled through her body as she and Rachel held hands and prayed. God had been in that room with them. Nia believed then and she still did.

Of course, she'd had her share of doubts during college, but she'd ended up exactly where she believed God wanted her to be. At Puzzle House—a place of healing, and hope.

"As I said, if God wants Puzzle House to become a drug rehab, then I guess that's what we'll do whether I like it or not. But I really don't think that's the plan."

"You don't think so or you hope not?" Auntie smiled.

"A little of both, Auntie."

"Just remember, it's not the first time Keisha's gone through rehab, so don't get your hopes up. Addicts get clean all the time; the problem is staying that way."

"Oh, my hopes are up, Auntie. Not because of me, but because of God. This time Keisha's relying on God. And that will make all the difference." She tottered off with the trashcan held at arm's length. "At least I hope so," she added when she was out of her aunt's hearing range.

Her aunt was a wise woman. While Nia was in college getting her education slash Bible studies degree, Margareta had become a physician's assistant with a specialty in drug rehab.

It was the only reason that Nia felt comfortable having Keisha here at Puzzle House and not in a certified detox center. As soon as Nia had seen Keisha, she'd called her aunt. Auntie had told her to take Keisha to the nearest hospital, but Keisha had refused.

That left only one option.

Her sweet auntie had taken a week off work to monitor Keisha's health. "But Keisha will go to the hospital if necessary," Auntie had warned. So far, it hadn't been necessary.

And as requested by Keisha, no one told Keisha's mom what was going on. That would have to wait until later. For now, the focus was on getting Keisha through the detox part of getting clean.

Nia turned to leave but then stopped. Since their high school graduation, her friend's life had gone from bad to worse. There was no way Nia would turn her back on her friend—even if it weren't in their plans.

They'd been praying for Keisha for years. Not just Nia, but Bart and Auntie and Cooper. This was an answered prayer—even if it wasn't the most convenient of times. *But God's timing was never wrong.*

Once upon a time, she and Keisha had big plans. They would go to Bible college together. Then after graduation, the two of them would move to Puzzle House to continue Rachel's work.

Instead, Keisha ended up hooked on drugs. And

then pregnant. It broke Nia's heart to see her best friend go from bad to worse. And nothing Nia had done made a difference—not prayer—not giving her money—nothing.

At some point, Nia decided to take a step back—away from her friend, knowing that Keisha had to make the decision to get healthy for herself. It was one of the hardest things she'd ever had to do, but Nia came to understand that she had no power in the situation. Only God could change Keisha's life if Keisha would make the decision to allow Him to do so.

And now that was exactly what she was trying to get Keisha to understand. *Thank You, God, thank You. Please give her the strength to do it this time. And thank You for this opportunity to help her. Sorry I was complaining.*

Auntie walked in as Nia was washing out the waste basket. "You're a trouper, sweet niece. It's been more than four days since she's taken any drugs. Keisha should start feeling better any time."

Nia poured bleach into the now clean plastic trashcan. "I hope so."

"And then the hard part starts."

Nia looked up. "What do you mean? I thought this was the hard part."

"Detox is only the first step. Helping her change her thinking, refusing the lure of old habits, and creating a new life. Those are the really hard things." She left the room but then turned back. "Those are the things that make the difference between an addict and a recovering addict."

Suffer the Little Children

Nia stared after her aunt for a few moments then went to her knees. "God, give me strength to get through this and wisdom to know how to help Keisha. I can't do this without You. And neither can she."