

The Messengers

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Messenger

Life is perfect in NewAm...
until the moment you wonder...Who is God?

LILLIAN DUNCAN

Messenger

The Messengers Series, Book 1

Lillian Duncan

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The Messengers Series

Messenger
UnCitizen
Exile

Dedication

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

To my amazing husband, Ronny. God sure knew what he was doing. Thanks for all your love and support. I love you.

PROLOGUE

YOU WILL SEEK ME AND FIND ME WHEN YOU
SEARCH FOR ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART.
JEREMIAH 12:13

The orange and yellow flames cast a shadow on the ceramic sink.

Tears streamed down Magdalena's cheeks as she tore more pages from the journal and tossed them into the ever-growing fire. This was harder than she'd imagined. But she didn't have a choice—if she wanted to stay alive.

Without the books, there was no evidence. Without any evidence, she had a chance not to be convicted. Without a conviction, she might get her life back.

Mesmerized, she stared at the fire knowing she was only delaying the inevitable. It was big enough now, and she knew it. It was time. No reason to delay what had to be done. She tossed in more pages.

The flame burned brighter.

She didn't want to do this.

Every nerve in Magdalena's body vibrated.

She picked up the tattered old book with a cross on the front. THE NEW TESTAMENT. The thought of

destroying it nauseated her.

But she didn't have a choice. It was the book or her life. Why would God give her this amazing book only so she would have to destroy it?

The fire was red hot now.

She closed her eyes. *Please God, what should I do?* The tears wouldn't stop. She didn't understand why an old ragged book was so important. And yet, it felt as though it was the most important thing ever—not just to her but to the world.

Everyone needed to know what was in the book.

Everyone needed to know The Guardians were liars.

Everyone needed to know that God was real.

Not sure who she was talking to, she whispered, "I'm sorry, I have to do this. I don't have a choice."

Mary's words echoed in her head. "You always have a choice."

1

Weeks earlier

Magdalena Denton stared at her reflection. It was getting harder to put on her happy mask.

It wasn't that her life was bad.

In fact, life was perfect in NewAm. The Guardians said so. No crime. No poverty. No war. No discrimination. The Guardians provided for a citizen's every need, and in return, every citizen was expected to follow The Guardian Rules.

The system worked.

The Guardians had fixed all the problems that existed before the Techno War in Old America, such as poverty, homelessness, discrimination, crime... The list could go on and on.

Now everyone was equal, treated the same, and had all they needed to live the good life. Plus they lived together in peace and harmony.

Life was good, even perfect, and yet...Magdalena sighed. It was her own fault, she knew that. It had to be her. Something must be broken deep inside. On the outside, she smiled, went to her service assignment, and even spent time in the lobby during social hour.

But on the inside, she was sad.

She wanted to go to bed and stay there. But that

wasn't permitted. If she didn't fulfill her service it meant no eating or living space, no clothes, and none of whatever else she needed.

If a citizen chose not to work, they were sent to ReTraining Camp. If that didn't work, they went to prison, a place she never wanted to go. Each day she forced herself to get up and put on the happy mask that allowed her to get through another day. It was either that or swallow an S-pill, and she refused to do that. Just because The Guardians gave every citizen the suicide pill in the annual medical supply, didn't mean she was ready to throw away her life completely.

Yes, every day seemed to be another version of the day before and the day before that—an endless, pointless, and sometimes painful existence—but death was scary. And very permanent. If she took the pill, there would be no second chance.

It seemed to Magdalena there should be more to life than just serving her country and then going home or out to party with friends—which she didn't do very often. Maybe, she should go out more, but she didn't like the way the alcohol made her feel.

Or maybe it was time to think about mating. She was old enough, and it would mean not being alone. But most people only mated when they wanted a child—something she most definitely didn't want.

If she had a son or daughter, The Guardians would take him or her when they turned seven. Why would she create a child so they could only grow up and feel as sad as she did?

So mating wasn't the answer either. Besides, she

didn't mind being by herself. Alone wasn't the problem. The problem was that she didn't know what the problem was. She shook her head. *Stop thinking like this.*

The Guardians said life was good, and so that meant life was good. And if Magdalena didn't feel good, it was her own fault. Nobody else's. She just needed to figure out the problem so she could fix it.

After her shower, she slipped on her gray scrubs. Looking down at them, she realized they matched her mood. She should put on something more cheerful. It might lighten her mood. Sighing, she decided against it. Using a towel, she dried her blonde curls as much as possible, and then went to the mirror. She gathered her hair into a ponytail then secured it with a band. She should style it or something, but it just wasn't worth the effort. Nothing was.

2

Magdalena moved from her private sleep space to the kitchen. Nobody was there, not that she expected her roommates to be up yet. Everyone was on a different work schedule.

That made for good roommates or so The Guardians said.

Magdalena's workday started at 7:00 AM. sharp. Bethany's started at 8:00 AM and Trisha's at 9:00 AM. In fact, they were originally assigned as roommates based on their service assignment schedules.

Of course, they had the freedom to change roommates. After all, this was NewAm, where everyone was free to live their life the way they chose—as long as it didn't violate the rules.

So far, her two roommates seemed compatible. The reality was, they rarely saw each other except for the evening meal, which they each took turns preparing. Sometimes they ate together, but most of the time they each retired to their own sleep space to eat, or they didn't eat at home at all.

Bethany usually went out for the evening—definitely a party girl. And just as often as not, Trisha missed the meal unless it was her turn to cook. Trisha was such a loyal citizen that she stayed late at her

service assignment a lot.

Magdalena usually had the communal living space to herself in the evenings which was fine with her. She could read or watch TV without having anyone around to bother her.

Tonight, it was her turn to cook. What should she make? She opened the freezer and pulled out a pack of chicken. She'd add some vegetables and rice and that should be tasty enough. She brewed a cup of coffee and slid two slices of bread into the toaster. She stood waiting for them to pop up.

"Morning."

She jumped.

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

"That's OK, Weldon. I didn't realize you stayed here last night."

Weldon Franks, Bethany's latest perspective mate, stared back at her. He was good-looking. Of course. Bethany wouldn't be attracted to anyone who wasn't tall, dark, and handsome.

Even though Magdalena had no real desire to be mated, it seemed as if that was the only thing on Bethany's mind these days. This was her third prospect in as many months.

The toast popped up. "Want some toast?"

"I don't want to take yours."

"That's OK. I can make more." She put the toast on a saucer and handed it to him. "There's spread in the refrigerator." She put two more pieces of bread in the toaster and waited.

Weldon raised an eyebrow in query at the coffee

pot, and Magdalena nodded.

He poured a cup.

Neither of them spoke.

When her toast was finished, she sat back down at the kitchen island. Leaning against the dingy laminate top, Weldon took a sip of coffee, and then smiled, his white teeth dazzled against his dark complexion. "Good coffee. How are things going with you, Magdalena?"

"Nothing to complain about." Her private thoughts were her own. She didn't share them with anyone. "How about you?"

"I just got promoted to director at the Life Training Center."

"Wow. That's great but a lot of responsibility, I'm sure."

"I guess so, but I still have bosses."

"Don't we all?"

"I might start looking for a new place to live, but I hate the thought of leaving the building. All my friends live here. I'd miss seeing everyone. I guess I could wait until a single space opens up here. I haven't decided yet."

Even though everyone was equal, excellence in your service assignment had its perks. One of them was that you could get a single space apartment or even a house—if you were mated.

"That's nice. I would love to live in a single space. But I've only been working for a few years so...not for a while."

"I was thinking,"—he lowered his voice—"that

maybe we could go out to dinner sometime.”

“Me?” Her voice squeaked in surprise. “I...I thought...you and Bethany.”

He shook his head. “That won’t work out. So how about it? My treat. It’s one of my perks. I get more meals than I need.”

“I...uh...I’ll think about it.” She jumped up. “But I need to go before I’m late.”

Weldon stood also. “Me, too. It wouldn’t be good to be late on my first official day as director. See you soon.” He winked. “I hope. Thanks for the toast and coffee.” He started walking out of the kitchen but then turned back. “By the way, I love your blonde curls. Even when they’re in a ponytail.”

His words brought an unexpected rush of pleasure. Before she could respond, he was gone. She couldn’t believe it. Weldon was interested in her. It never occurred to her to think of him in that way.

But maybe now she would.

Of course, if she dared to go out on a date with him, she’d probably have to get a different roommate. Bethany wouldn’t be happy about her roommate dating Weldon, even if that roommate was someone Bethany called a friend.

Magdalena swallowed the last bite of her toast and downed her coffee. Then she washed her dishes and Weldon’s and put them back in the cupboard. The Guardians frowned on a messy living space.

A messy living space equaled a messy mind.

3

Magdalena buttoned her coat and stepped outside. As the wind tried to steal her hat, she pulled it farther down on her head. Her gaze moved to the first thing it did every time she stepped outside: The Wall.

The twenty-foot monstrosity could be seen from almost any place in the city. They said it was to keep NewAm's citizens safe, but it felt more like a cage to her.

"Hey, Magdalena."

"Weldon. I thought you'd be at work by now."

"I'm the boss." He grinned. "What were you doing? You were just standing there not moving. I thought you'd frozen in place."

"It's cold enough for that to happen." She pointed. "It's that Wall. I hate it."

"It keeps us safe from the exiles."

"I know but..." She shuddered. "I just don't like it."

He leaned close and whispered, "Be careful what you say and to whom you say such things. You wouldn't want someone to get the wrong idea."

"Oh, I didn't mean it like that."

"I know. And you don't have to be afraid to talk to me about anything, but you just never know who's

listening.” In a louder voice, he said, “Want a refresher course in NewAm History while we walk together?”

Not particularly. “Sure. Maybe, it will take my mind off this freezing weather.”

He looped his arm through hers. “Snuggle up. So, after the Techno War, there were all these criminals attacking loyal citizens who were helping to rebuild NewAm. The Guardians decided the only way to protect loyal citizens was to build walls to keep out the exiles who were dangerous and refused to cooperate with The Guardians.”

“Yeah, but if the wall is there only to protect us, why can’t we go into the Empty Lands? Shouldn’t it be our choice?”

“Just like parents, The Guardians’ job is to keep us safe—even when we don’t have the best judgment. You’d be surprised how often kids make the wrong choice at the Life Training Center, even when they know what the right thing is.”

“I’m sure that’s true.”

But shouldn’t it be her choice? She kept that thought to herself. Weldon was right about being careful. “So how did they decide which cities got walls and which ones didn’t?” she asked.

“They thought the best thing was to build walls where most people lived. They created super-cities that had enough space for all NewAm citizens.”

“That’s interesting. I guess I should have paid more attention during history class.”

“History’s my specialty. In Cleveland’s case, Lake Erie and the Cuyahoga River formed natural borders.

They built the wall following the river's course. That gave them more than enough space to allow for citizens from other areas to move inside the walls to stay safe." He stopped walking and pointed at a bus transport sign. "This is where I get picked up."

"Wow. It must be nice to have a transport to your service assignment."

"I still have to walk to get here."

"Yes, you do. Thanks for the history lesson, Weldon. See you later."

"Count on it."

She walked on alone. Had Weldon waited for her? He must have been serious when he'd asked her out to dinner. It made her feel special. She knew it was silly to feel that way, but it was nice that Weldon wanted to go out with her. She wouldn't, of course. It would complicate her life in ways she didn't need.

Still it was nice to get a little male attention.

She wrapped the scarf tighter around her face. It was a wonder that The Guardians had never found a way to control the weather since they controlled everything else. She really did hate winter.

Of course, that was it.

It was winter. She and winter didn't get along.

As a trained caregiver, she knew that SAD, or Seasonal Affective Disorder, was a real thing. At least for her. She should have realized it before. Some caregiver she was.

The sidewalks were eerily quiet even though there were plenty of other citizens on their way to their own assignments. The lucky ones rode past on bikes. Now

and then a car drove past. But that was rare since only The Guardians and their representatives had access to motorized vehicles now.

Even Weldon, as director of the Life Training Center, didn't rate getting his own car. Almost everyone walked or applied to get a bike. The waiting list was long. Magdalena had put her name on it as soon as she'd gotten her service assignment. She was still waiting—even though it had been more than three years.

Once upon a time, everyone had cars, or so she'd been told. It was hard to imagine, but that was before the Techno War and long before she was born. At one time there had been so many motorized vehicles that the air was ruined, making it hard to breathe, so The Guardians banned privately owned cars.

Now, only The Guardians and their representatives had vehicles...because they needed the transportation to oversee the workings of government, not because The Guardians were more important than anybody else.

Because all citizens were equal in NewAm.

Besides private cars weren't really needed. Citizens were allocated apartments close enough to their service assignments so they could walk. The Guardians said it was healthier to walk anyway. Apparently, obesity had been a problem at one time as well, but The Guardians had taken care of that, too.

Life before the Techno War sounded horrible. People fighting and killing each other over almost anything. Some people having everything and others

nothing. Some people not having a place to live while others lived indulgent lives, unwilling to share.

But The Guardians had changed all that.

Now everyone had the same as everyone else—no matter how important their service assignment was. No one had more than anyone else. Except for a few perks for excellence in your service. Other than that, everyone was equal.

Everyone had what they needed to live a good life. And everyone had the same freedoms—as long as they were loyal citizens.

NewAm was so much better than the original America as far as Magdalena was concerned. Sure, she'd never experienced the original America, but she knew about it. She got a little irritated at them now and then, but the truth was, The Guardians did a good job taking care of everyone.

Of course, there was The Wall.

But Weldon was right, The Guardians only did it to protect the citizens of NewAm. It wasn't their fault that the exiles refused to obey the rules. The Guardians had even tried to help them adjust to life in NewAm. When they wouldn't, they had no choice but to exile them.

Magdalena shuddered.

She couldn't really imagine what it was like to live out there in the Empty Lands; it had to be awful. No law. No way to make a living. Killing each other for food. None of the comforts she enjoyed, not even electricity or clean water. And who knew if people were even still out there? Perhaps they'd all killed each

other off. Another shiver raced down her spine.

Just the threat of the Empty Lands was enough to make most people stay loyal to The Guardians. Of course, criminals weren't exiled to the Empty Lands any longer. They were placed in prison—exactly where criminals belonged so they couldn't cause problems for loyal citizens.

Finally, Magdalena arrived at her service assignment. The sign on the door read Mercy Life Center. An odd name considering most of her patients came here to die. And the truth was Magdalena rarely saw much mercy either.

She sighed. Oh, well, it was what it was.

This was her chosen path. Not that she'd chosen it, but The Guardians didn't make mistakes when it came to service assignments. And in her case, it really wasn't a mistake. She loved being a trained caregiver.

Maybe one of these days, she'd be chosen to get more training so she could become a full-fledged nurse. She made a point to never complain. Not only would it not do any good, but it would bring attention to herself—not a good thing in her experience. People who complained too much seemed to eventually disappear. Where they went, she had no idea. Perhaps given a different service assignment.

She walked into the lobby.

The Mercy Life building held three separate facilities. One side was living spaces for older citizens who could still take care of themselves but couldn't work any longer. The second was a hospital for all citizens, no matter the age. Magdalena rarely went