

A woman with her hair in a ponytail, wearing a dark, possibly wet, dress, is seen from behind. She is walking on a wet street at night. In the background, there is a string of warm, glowing lights that create a bokeh effect. The rain is visible as vertical streaks on the right side of the image. The overall mood is melancholic and romantic.

LILLIAN DUNCAN

WALKING
THROUGH
THE RAIN

He'd promised
to be her
umbrella

Walking
Through the
Rain

Lillian Duncan

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Walking Through the Rain
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Dedication

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

To my amazing husband, God knew what he was
doing when he joined our two hearts.

Publisher's Note

This book touches on themes of substance abuse. If you or a person you know is in need of help due to an addiction, please telephone a local hotline or seek a treatment center near you.

1

“You are not going anywhere with that boy today. You need to study, Penny Rachel Stickley.”

Rachel stood at the window. Watching. Waiting. She ignored her mother. The raindrops raced down the window forging new paths. Five...six...seven... She hated fighting with her mom, but sometimes Mom made her so mad. “Leave me alone, Mama. And don’t call me Penny. My name is Rachel.”

“I will call you anything I want. I’m your mother. I’m pretty sure I know your name. It’s Penny.”

“You know I hate that name.” Rachel twirled her hair around her finger. Her name was supposed to have been Rachel, but when her parents saw her copper-red hair, they immediately gave her the name Penny Rachel instead. “Who wants to be named after a coin?” Certainly not her. At age thirteen, she refused to answer to it any longer and insisted people call her Rachel.

Her mom ignored that request when she was mad. Like now.

“I will not leave you alone, Penny Rachel Stickley. And stop twirling your hair. It’s a bad habit. It makes you look weak. As if you don’t have any confidence in yourself.”

Rachel bit her lip and stared out the window, trying to contain her own temper. Arguing with her mom never helped anything. It had been raining for two days. She was sick of the rain. And sick of her mother. With hands on her hips, she turned back. "Leave me alone, Mama. I'm spending the day with Brandon. I don't care what you say. Stop trying to control my life. I'm almost eighteen."

"You are eleven months from being eighteen. And I'm still your mother no matter how old you are. That's something you need to remember. I still get to tell you what to do. What you need to do is stay in and study. Or have you forgotten what your report card looked like this time?"

"I remember. I remember. But it's Saturday. I can't study twenty-four-seven."

"Apparently, you're not studying at all. You've never gotten a C before." Her mom held up her grades.

Rachel suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. "It's no big deal. Mrs. Mackey said I could do a special project and she'd change the grade. I've already started working on it, so stop trying to control me."

Her mother pointed a finger at her, anger coloring her voice. "You need to stop talking to me like that. I'm not trying to control your life. But I'm your mother. It's my job to protect you. To teach you right from wrong. To help you make good choices so you can have a good life."

Rachel pushed her hair back from her face. "Mama, I'm not doing anything wrong with Brandon. Why won't you believe me? Brandon is a good guy."

Really. I promise you that we're not having sex. And I have no plans to. What's wrong with going on a picnic?"

"A picnic in the rain? I don't think so."

She turned toward her Mom. "Well, obviously the picnic's out, but that doesn't mean we can't find something fun to do."

"Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of." Her mom untwisted the hair from Rachel's finger, and then patted her face. Her voice was calm. "I believe you, sweetheart. Really, I do. But things happen when you're alone with a boy you care about that you don't mean to happen. And you've been spending way too much time alone with that boy."

"He's not that boy, Mama. His name is Brandon. And he loves me. And I love him. He would never do anything to hurt me. We're going to get married and live happily ever after."

"Rachel honey, I know you believe that, but rich boys don't marry girls from this side of the tracks. They might like us for a while, but then they find a more suitable girl at the country club to marry and have a family with."

Rachel shook her head. Why couldn't her mom understand? "Brandon's not like that, Mama. He doesn't care where I live. He doesn't care how poor we are. He loves me."

"Of course, he loves you. Right now. You're beautiful. You're smart. Fun to be around but you can't trust him, Rachel. And even if he's every bit as wonderful as you think, things happen. Life happens."

You have to be able to take care of yourself, Rachel. And the only way that happens is by getting an education, so you can get a good job to do just that." Amanda Stickley held up her daughter's latest report card once again. "A C. That never happened before you started dating Brandon."

"It's no big deal."

"It's a very big deal, Rachel. You're on an academic scholarship to Boston Educational Academy. Do you think you'll keep it for next year with a C?"

"I already told you I'm taking care of it."

"You worked so hard to get that scholarship. I don't want you to mess it up because you think you're in love. I don't want you to end up like me."

"What's wrong with you?"

Her mother's laugh was bitter. "You're kidding, right? Look around you. We live in a dump, and I can barely afford that. I can't remember the last I was able to buy you new school clothes. You deserve so much more than I can give you. I want you to have a better life than this."

"Mama, our life is good. We have a place to live, food to eat, and clothes on our back. And we have each other. What more could I want? Besides when Brandon and me get married, that C won't matter one bit."

"That's what I thought when I married your Daddy, Rachel. And we see how that worked out."

"It's not his fault he died in the war, Mama."

"I know that, sweetheart. But if I'd gone to school the way I'd planned instead of getting married so young, I could have supported us after he died."

Instead, I've spent my life struggling. Walking through the rain...without an umbrella. I don't want that to happen to you."

"It won't, Mama. I promise."

"I want you to have a better life than I've had. And the only way to make sure that happens is for you to get an education, so you can take care of yourself. And the only way that will happen is for you to have excellent grades at Boston Educational Academy, so you can get a scholarship to college."

"Mama, I do have excellent grades, and I've already started applying for scholarships for when I graduate next year."

"A C is not excellent, Rachel. It's not excellent at all."

"Oh, my gosh, Mom. Give it up. I won't keep having the same conversation with you over and over."

A car pulled up.

She turned to her mother. "I'll make sure that doesn't happen again. I promise. There's Brandon. Can I go, Mom? Please. Please."

Her mom rolled her eyes. "I suppose."

Rachel ran over and kissed her Mom. "Thank you, Mama. Thank you. I love you. I promise I'll work all day on my project tomorrow for Mrs. Mackey. It will be ready to give it to her on Monday."

"Don't make me regret it."

Rachel opened the door but turned back. "Mama, walking through the rain isn't always a bad thing if it takes you to where you want to be. And I want to be

with Brandon. Stop worrying so much about me. I know what I'm doing." She ran out the door. The cold rain made her squeal. By the time she got in Brandon's car she was soaked.

He grinned. "You look like a drowned rat."

"Thanks."

"If you'd waited a minute, I was coming to get you. I have an umbrella." He showed her the black umbrella in his hand.

Tears filled her eyes. "Will you always be my umbrella, Brandon?"

"I don't understand what that means."

"My mama has a saying. Walking through the rain without an umbrella. It means that when bad things happen, she doesn't have anyone to help her. Are you my umbrella, Brandon?"

"Rain or shine, I'm your umbrella. Always and forever."

2

Later that day, Amanda Stickley put away the few measly groceries she could afford. A couple of packs of ground beef, one pack of chicken legs, four cans of green beans, a bag of rice, a loaf of bread, and a jug of milk.

It wasn't much but it would get them through.

Hopefully tips would be better this week. Maybe she should try smiling at the customers more, but it didn't feel as if she had anything to smile about. Ever.

Rachel had always been the sunshine in her life. The one thing that could make her smile at any moment, but now Rachel was being totally rebellious. A C—unbelievable. That boy. It was all that boy's fault.

She'd always been an excellent student. Now, she didn't seem to care about her grades at all. Why couldn't Rachel understand how important they were? Without good grades she wouldn't be able to graduate from the Boston Educational Academy and that meant no college scholarships as well.

Someone knocked on her front door.

Probably some kind of salesman. As if she could afford to buy anything. When Amanda opened the door, a woman stood there.

Money.

That was the first thing that came to her mind as she stared at the woman. Amanda wasn't quite sure why she thought that. The woman was dressed in jeans and a simple sweater. But she oozed money. Her blonde-streaked hair probably cost more than the groceries she'd just put away. Her body had been born in a gym, not from hard work. Her perfectly manicured nails testified to fact that this woman didn't do a lot of physical labor.

She looked past the woman and saw the fancy red sports car at the curb. Amanda found her voice. "Can I help you? Are you lost? Got car trouble?"

"It's nothing like that. I'm not lost unless you're not Amanda Stickley." Each word was clearly articulated. The woman's smile was confident and friendly, but the smile didn't reach her eyes.

"I'm Amanda."

"I'm Sara Withers, Brandon's mother."

"Oh."

"I think we need to talk, Amanda."

"What's there to talk about, Mrs. Withers?"

"Please call me Sara. And we actually have a lot to talk about. Can I come in?"

Amanda didn't move. She didn't want this woman to see how shabby their house was. "Uh, I'm sort of busy right now. Maybe we can set up a time to meet for coffee. Later."

"I'm sorry to barge in like this. I know I should have called first but with Rachel and Brandon out for the day, I realized it would be the perfect time to have a little chat with you. It's really important. For both our

kids.”

Amanda sighed. How could she say no? “Sure.” Amanda opened the door wider and motioned for her to come in, feeling completely ashamed of the living room she’d cleaned and scrubbed earlier. “Uh, I’d offer you some coffee, but I forgot to buy some at the store today.” Because she didn’t have enough money.

“Not a problem.” Sara Withers smiled politely as she walked in. “I just had some anyway.”

Amanda closed the door behind her. “Please sit down.”

The woman sauntered over to the couch. Definitely a saunter, not a plain old walk. Amanda wondered if she’d gone to school just to learn how to walk like that.

Sara sat down and smiled. “I’m really sorry to just drop in unannounced and uninvited.”

Amanda sat down in a chair, hoping the woman wouldn’t notice the tear in the sofa she sat on. She forced a smile. “What do you want?”

A tiny sigh escaped from Sara’s perfect red lips. “I want what’s best for my son. I’m sure you want what’s best for Rachel.”

Amanda felt a twinge of anger. This woman’s son was the problem, not Rachel. How dare she act as though Rachel wasn’t good enough for her precious son. “I’m guessing you don’t think what’s best for your son is my daughter.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I think Rachel is a wonderful girl. She’s so sweet and has brains as well. She’s a delight. You should be so proud of her.”

"I am. You've met her?"

"Yes, several times. She's been to dinner at our house a few times. I was under the assumption you knew."

"First, I'm hearing about it. She never lied or hid things from me until she started dating your son. And to be quite truthful, I'm not at all happy she's dating him. Her grades are starting to slip."

Sara started to say something, and then stopped. "So, we're agreed then. They are not good for each other."

"Rachel got a C on her report card this time. Her first C in her life. She's never had anything lower than a B. She's more interested in being with Brandon than studying these days." Amanda fought the urge to fuss with her hair. She didn't want to show this woman how nervous she was.

"I'm having the same problem with Brandon, so we're agreed that we need to do something about it. Before...before..." Sara sighed. "Before anything happens that can't be undone."

Amanda didn't like this woman or what she was insinuating. "They're not having sex if that's what you mean. At least Rachel swears they aren't."

"I'm sure that's true for the moment, but..." Sara shrugged. "We all remember what it's like to be young and have those raging hormones."

Amanda nodded but wasn't sure she remembered at all. She'd pushed that part of her life away long ago—after her husband's death. Her energy went in to providing and making a home for Rachel, not dating.

"I don't know what we can do. They're almost adults as Rachel just reminded me this morning. The more we tell them they can't see each other, the more they'll want to."

Sara nodded. "Sadly, I think you're absolutely right. But I do have an idea."

Amanda wasn't surprised. The woman wouldn't have come to this part of Boston if she didn't have a plan. "What is it?"

"First let me say, I really do think Rachel's a lovely girl. I wouldn't want you to think this is about the fact that she...you..."

"We're poor. I know that. Get to your point."

Sara's face turned red. Her hand fluttered up to her perfect haircut. "Anyway, I want you to understand this isn't about Rachel at all. The timing is just not right for the two of them to fall in love. They're just too young. He's already talking about getting married next year when she graduates from high school. And that's just not acceptable. He has college, and then graduate school to worry about. Not a wife."

Amanda wondered if it would be acceptable if Rachel were rich. Probably not. No parent wanted their child to get married that young these days. "I want Rachel to get an education. She's very smart. She'll probably get enough scholarships that she can go to college next year after she graduates. I certainly don't want her to get married until she graduates from college."

"Exactly. They need to focus on school not on each other. When they're older...well, then it will be up to

them.”

“I still don’t see what we can do about it.”

Sara nodded. “If they didn’t have access to each other, then they’d eventually realize they weren’t right for each other and both of them could get on with their lives. And their education.”

“Access to each other? I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

“If...if you moved away...far away, then they wouldn’t be able to see each other. Before you say anything, I understand that moving is an expensive thing. I’m willing to help with your expenses to relocate. Somewhere nice.”

Money. The woman was willing to pay money so that Rachel would go away and not be a problem. Amanda stared hard at the woman. “How much?”

Sara cleared her throat. “I...uh...I was thinking twenty-five thousand.”

Amanda’s laugh was bitter. “That ain’t anywhere near enough if you want to keep your son away from my daughter.”

Sara licked her lips and then met Amanda’s gaze. “Then why don’t you tell me how much?” Her sweet tone had turned brittle. She was all business now.

How much indeed? How much was this woman willing to pay to make Rachel disappear from her son’s life? She might as well go for the gold—so to speak. “I’m thinking a million dollars. How does that sound?”

Sara’s eyes widened. “That’s ridiculous.”

Amanda shrugged. “I don’t think so. It’s very expensive to relocate. And Rachel needs money for

college. If she moves away, it will hurt her chance for scholarships. The Boston Educational Academy is very prestigious, and they would help her get the scholarships she needs to go to college. Four years of college is very expensive. She should be able to go to college, don't you think? If she stays with Brandon, she'd get a lot more than that, wouldn't she?"

Sara sighed. "I suppose I can scrape up three hundred thousand without raising any suspicions."

Scrape up three hundred thousand? How much money did these people have? If Sara Withers wanted to buy her, it wouldn't be cheap. "For five hundred thousand, I can buy a nice house for Rachel and pay for college for her. I think that number works for me."

The two women started at each other for a long moment, and then Sara nodded. "I would need some assurance that she's out of Brandon's life. Forever."

Amanda shrugged. "I can move her away from here, but if Brandon comes around, there's nothing I can do about that. It's a free country."

Sara Withers smiled. "I have an idea about that as well."

3

“Are you kidding me?” Amanda couldn’t wrap her head around Sara’s plan. “That’s crazy. It will never work.”

Sara’s perfectly manicured fingernails tapped nervously on her very expensive jeans. “I’ve thought about this for a while. I absolutely believe it will work. It just requires a little planning on our parts.”

Amanda was sure that Sara was used to getting her way. About everything. And she probably wouldn’t back down from her crazy idea. “And I suppose you have an idea about that as well.”

Sara leaned forward as if eager to share her plan. “Well, I did do some brainstorming about the problem before I came here. I mean there would be no point in this discussion if I didn’t have a solution to our mutual problem.”

“And...”

“First, I make Brandon break up with Rachel.”

“How will you do that?”

“Threaten him, of course. I’ll tell him we won’t pay for college if he doesn’t break up with Rachel right now. Before graduation. He’ll be forced to break up with her. He won’t have a choice.”

“And you think he’ll agree?”

“Oh sure, he’ll agree. And all the time, he’ll be planning on seeing her behind our backs. I’m not stupid but neither is he. Sooner or later, he’ll figure out a way to see her without me knowing. He’s just like every teenager. They always think they’re smarter than their parents.”

Amanda nodded. “That’s true enough.”

“But we’ll prove that’s not always the case. After he breaks up with her, you’ll move Rachel away from Boston. Far away. She probably won’t put up too much of a fuss since she’ll be heartbroken. We just have to make sure they can’t contact each other after the breakup but before you move away. And then...here’s the tricky part.”

“Tricky part?” The whole thing sounded impossible.

“After you’ve moved away, we’ll tell both of them that the other person died.”

“What?” Amanda couldn’t believe her ears. Tell Rachel that Brandon had died? “What a cruel thing to do.”

Sara nodded. “I know but it’s the only way, Amanda. Really. If they think the other one is dead, they won’t look for them, right? And then each of them will be free to get on with their lives.”

Her stomach clenched at the thought. “I don’t know. It seems so cruel. And I don’t like the idea of lying to Rachel. It’s just not something I do.”

Another shrug. “Maybe but think about it. Since both of them will be grieving, they’ll probably put all their energy into their education instead of romance.