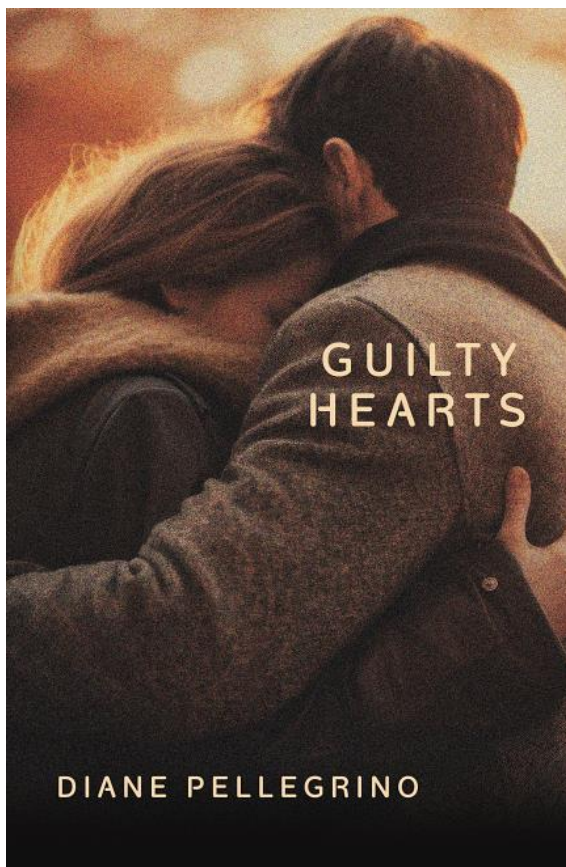




Teenager Lincoln is dying. As her health declines, she reflects on the value of her life while her boyfriend becomes withdrawn. When they are involved in a car crash, everyone wants to know what caused it...and if it really was an accident.

Guilty Hearts
By Diane Pellegrino

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A close-up, intimate photograph of a man and a woman embracing. The man is in the foreground, his back to the camera, wearing a dark jacket. The woman is behind him, her head resting against his. They are positioned against a bright, hazy sunset or sunrise sky, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The overall mood is romantic and contemplative.

GUILTY
HEARTS

DIANE PELLEGRINO

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-961265-63-9

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-961265-64-6

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-212-6

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.

2026

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Pellegrino, Diane

Guilty Hearts by Diane Pellegrino

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025926210

Young Adult

Romance

CHAPTER 1

Time. Something Lincoln had always taken for granted but was running out of. Sitting on the hill at the park waiting for her boyfriend, her brain refused to let go of the nagging thought—like an annoying song on repeat. Whenever she tried to think of something else, the sinister reminder of her impending death crept back in. How could she tell him the terrible news she'd received from the doctor?

She breathed in the scent of freshly mown grass and thought about how this place had become *her* place. She came here to think when her thoughts were as jumbled as a child's bedroom, needing to be sorted into bins and baskets—school worries on a shelf, arguments with her brothers in the box under the bed, disagreements with parents in the tub in the corner. She also came to this solitary hill with no trees providing shade or obstructing her view of the clouds to make plans for the future, which, until this morning, had been bright and long reaching.

As she stared at the clouds, she remembered how only a few years ago she would imagine what it would be like to float on them. Although she knew better now, it didn't stop her from looking for familiar objects and creatures. In the distance, gray clouds started to form. *We might be in for a nice thunderstorm tonight.* Lincoln closed her eyes and tried to relax, knowing Jake would be there in a few minutes.

It was also here she and Jake had shared their first kiss when they were fifteen. They had known each other all their lives—a consequence of living in a small town. After almost three years together, she couldn't imagine being with anyone else.

"Lincoln! Hey, Lincoln! Are you up there?" *There's Jake, reliable as always.*

“Yeah, I’m here!” she called to him, standing so he could see her. She preferred to sit on the side of the hill facing the soccer and baseball fields rather than the playground and parking lot.

She watched as he set down his bike and started up the hill. His unassuming handsomeness—from his brown hair which turned amber in the summer and blue eyes, to the ease with which he wore his daily wardrobe of jeans, T-shirt, and Converse—was one of the many reasons her friends were envious. She loved the way they complemented each other—with her green eyes and straight blond hair, which she often braided, curled, styled in an updo, or, on “lazy days,” wore in a ponytail hanging halfway down her back. When she wore heels, she was almost his height, as evidenced by their formal dance photos displayed around her room. She watched with pride as he worked his way toward her.

When he reached the top, Lincoln pulled him in for a hug. She wrapped her arms around his waist, holding onto her lifeline. With her head nestled against his shoulder, she fought back the tears she knew were going to come. Jake gently put his hand on her cheek and lifted her head for a kiss. Lincoln closed her eyes and waited for his warm, soft lips to move over hers. She relaxed her hold on him, and the kiss deepened. Eventually, she pulled away and guided him to sit beside her, facing the empty soccer field. In another month, there would be practices every night and continuous games on Saturday, but for now, they sat in the stillness, ignoring the occasional hoots of laughter from the playground behind them.

Finally, she spoke. “It’s not good.”

“How bad?”

Although she’d prepared for this moment since the words left the doctor’s mouth, she found it difficult to get the word out with more than

a whisper: “Malignant.” She tried to say more, but when she looked at Jake’s eyes, already brimming with tears, her throat immediately closed.

“No, Lincoln.” He showed no signs of self-consciousness as he wrapped her in his arms. As the tears flowed down his face, Lincoln felt the back of her neck getting wet, which made it more difficult to tell him the rest.

She had to force herself to concentrate on breathing to continue. “It’s grade four...it’s inoperable.” She hated giving him all the bad news at once, but there was no point in delaying the inevitable. He had to know all the facts. He had wanted her to call him as soon as she finished meeting with the doctor, but she needed the afternoon to digest the information. Her father, visibly shaken, managed to stay stoic until they got home. Her mother had burst into tears upon hearing the report from the neurosurgeon and had still been misty-eyed when Lincoln left the house. She went to her room and put on music to escape the heart-wrenching moans he hid behind his bedroom door. Lincoln had planned what to say to Jake and tried to guess what his reaction would be. Even though she had played it a hundred times in her head, she had not been ready to see the physical toll the news took on him.

He pulled away and took her hands. Even in a terrible emotional state, Lincoln was aware of how perfectly their hands fit together—like pieces of a puzzle that must match perfectly to complete the picture.

“So...what? What now? What are they going to do for you?”

“I have an appointment with a neuro-oncologist to discuss treatments...but the doctor this morning...he’s not very optimistic.”

“What did he say?”

“The tumor in my brain is in a spot he can’t get to through surgery.” They already knew this, which was why she had a stereotactic biopsy

instead of a craniotomy. If the doctor had been able to get to the tumor, he would have opened her skull to remove it, or at least get some of it out for the biopsy. Instead, she had a hole drilled in her head and a needle threaded through to collect part of the tumor to determine if it was cancerous. “When we meet, the neuro-oncologist will tell us the options. Maybe radiation, chemo, or both.” She took a breath before continuing. “But my surgeon said because he can’t remove it, the prognosis....”

When she paused, he squeezed her hands. “What?” The flow had ebbed a little, but he had twin trails snaking down his cheeks that caught in the corners of his mouth.

Lincoln knew the words would be the hardest she would ever say to Jake, even worse than the heap of sorrow she had just piled on him. She tried to look him in the eyes, but the blurriness of her own tears would not let her focus. Instead, she looked at the back of their hands and whispered the painful words. “Maybe a year.”

Jake shook his head and stared out over the field. She leaned closer and put her head on his shoulder. She wanted to take away his sadness, to end his misery, but didn’t know how.

She knew telling Jake would be difficult, but she still had to go through the emotional strain of talking to her family and friends, most of whom she had grown up with. She spent the time alone during the day dealing with the news and planning her talk with Jake; she didn’t think about how her brothers would handle hearing their only sister—their “second mother”—wouldn’t be around to help with homework, be a cheerleader at their games, or see them graduate from high school. And the rest of her tight-knit family—grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—how would they take the news? How would it be for them to know she wouldn’t be at Sunday gatherings anymore? And Ryan—her

best friend—how would this affect her? Everyone had known she had been ill and seeing doctors, but the result of those numerous trips to the city would be a shock.

Lincoln didn't know how long they sat in silence, but she knew she had to be more aware of time. She wondered if she would start measuring her life in "lasts," such as the last birthday she'd celebrate or the last movie she'd see.

When the sun started setting, filling the sky with glorious shades of orange and blue, she knew she had to face her parents again. She didn't trust herself to form a sentence. She started to rise and whispered, "Home."

Lincoln walked with the slow gait of the condemned, Jake by her side, pushing his bike. She didn't know what awaited her at home. She assumed her parents had talked to her brothers, but it might not be easy for them to see her for the first time after hearing she would not be with them for much longer.

When they arrived at her house, she did not invite Jake in. She knew it would be too much for him to see her family now. She kissed him on the cheek, still not able to form words, in a silent goodbye.

Time. Everyone needed time. It was the one thing Lincoln didn't have.

CHAPTER 2

Lincoln and her parents made the trek to the city again to meet with the neuro-oncologist. She loved her little town and, up until the last month, loved its distance from the city—not too far that they couldn’t go to an occasional sporting event, museum, or concert, but far enough to not be overrun with the pollution and “busy-ness” of the people who lived and worked there. Now she wished her town was not so small and specialists were more readily available.

Their meeting was with Dr. Clark, recommended by the hospital’s neurosurgeon as “a great talent with a lot of experience in this area.” Lincoln’s mother had been thrilled the doctor had an opening right away, but Lincoln’s first thought was, *Who died so I could have the appointment?* The cheerful waiting room—calm music, pictures of seascapes, and comfortable, clean chairs—was in contrast to the other offices they had been in. Lincoln had seen her share of waiting rooms and there were many times when she wanted to stand instead of sit on the stained fabrics to watch a loudly playing talk show on a wall-mounted television.

Her mother sat next to her and stared at the ocean view on the wall in the downtown fifth floor office. She avoided looking at Lincoln, as she had for the last two days. She looked at the dishes she was putting away: “Good morning, how are you feeling?” She looked at her shopping list: “Are you hungry for lunch yet?” She looked at the book she was reading: “Are you going to take a nap?” Lincoln understood why she couldn’t face her—she felt the tears coming all the time also—but it didn’t stop her from feeling guilty for causing her pain and worry.

Lincoln's father, on the other hand, had been going out of his way to be cheerful. After the initial shock, he had been doing whatever he could to try to make her smile. Lincoln appreciated his efforts, even though they often fell short. "On the way home, why don't we stop at the zoo? As long as I'm playing hooky from work, we might as well have some fun. Not that I'm not having fun right now." Lincoln rewarded him with a weak smile and eyeroll—the response she knew he was looking for.

When her name was called, they followed a pert woman in yellow through a labyrinth of offices to a small room with a couch and desk. Lincoln squeezed between her parents on the couch. "Doctor Clark will be with you in a moment. Is there anything I can get for you while you wait? Water...?" Lincoln noticed the box of tissues on the desk. *Nope, we're all set here.*

Dr. Clark was a petite woman with a round face. She wore square glasses which Lincoln thought looked odd on her. When she greeted them, Lincoln noticed she had a crooked tooth in the center of her bottom teeth. As she sat at her desk looking over the file, she talked at them, stopping occasionally to check their comprehension. At some point, Lincoln's mind started to drift, and all she could see were her glasses and tooth. A repeated thought went through her head as the doctor talked about treatments: "Steroids..." *Round face, square glasses, crooked tooth.* "Best chance...radiation..." *Round face, square glasses, crooked tooth.* "With chemotherapy..." *Round face, square glasses, crooked tooth.* "Medication...prevent seizures..." Lincoln didn't realize she had started to rock to her mantra until her mother put a hand on her arm, startling her.

"What do you think, Lincoln?"

Lincoln did not know what she was talking about, but it registered this was the first time in three days she was looking at her. “What?” She met her gaze, hoping she would not look away.

“How do you feel about what the doctor is suggesting? I think we should do it all.”

“What if she becomes too sick? Can she stop? Should we start off with one treatment and see if it helps before throwing everything at her?” Her father’s remarks caused her mother to look away.

“If? If she starts treatment? Why *wouldn’t* she?” Her mother’s voice rose with each word. Apparently, in the days since the diagnosis, she never considered this an option, even though they both heard her death sentence presented in a more plainly decorated doctor’s office three blocks away.

Dr. Clark stacked her papers on the open folder as she mentioned Lincoln’s immune system could be weakened, so she would be at higher risk for infection. “You are aware people in Lincoln’s condition survive about twelve months.” Lincoln wondered if she practiced phrasing it that way, as if twelve months sounded longer than one year. “Sometimes people choose to forgo treatment because they are concerned side effects may negatively affect their quality of life.”

“Well, we want whatever will give Lincoln the most time,” her mother whispered as she reached for a tissue. She made it longer than Lincoln thought she would.

“Do we?” her father asked, in an equally low voice. “Is it best if she is sick—even though she lives, what, a few months longer?” Lincoln realized, even though her father had been the cheerful one around the house, it didn’t mean the situation hadn’t been on his mind.

Her mother almost glared at her father with an “I can’t believe you would think that” look usually reserved for her brothers when they got

caught doing something stupid. Lincoln had never seen her mother give her father the look and impulsively shrunk back in her chair, so she would be out of her sight line. “We will do *whatever* it takes.”

Dr. Clark adjusted her glasses and cleared her throat. “I understand you have a lot to talk about. I want you to make informed decisions that will be best for everyone, so please let me know if you have any questions. Any treatments need to start soon for the best results.”

“What do you think is the best plan?” Lincoln suspected her mother was trying to find an ally, someone who would support her choice, so she could prove she was doing the best for her daughter.

Dr. Clark closed the file and placed her folded hands on the desk. “I gave you all the options and possible side effects. I’m sorry, but I can’t make the decision for you.”

Lincoln glanced surreptitiously at her mother to see if she would give her “glare” to the doctor, but she just looked at her hands.

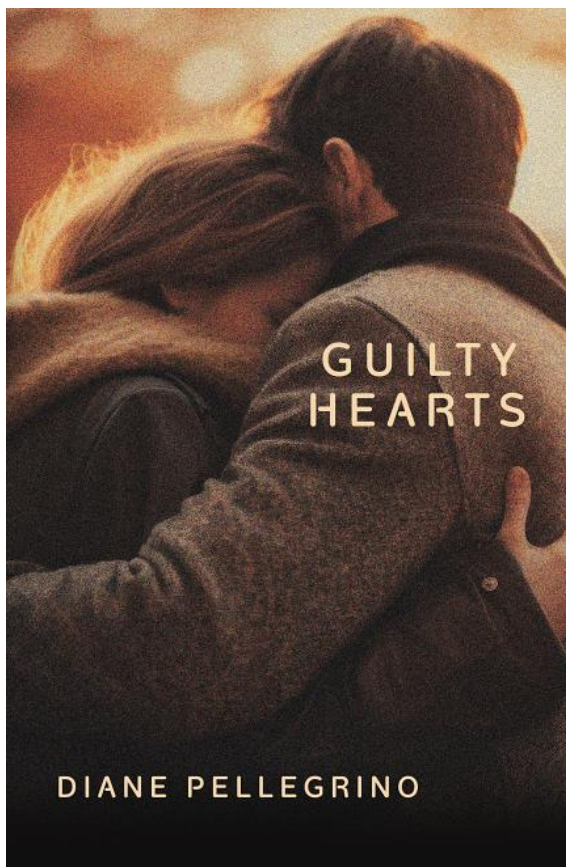
“Any thoughts, Lincoln?” She sensed that her mother was trying to get a commitment from her.

Looking at the desperation in her mother’s face, Lincoln realized she couldn’t let her leave thinking everyone was against her. She surprised herself by responding, “Why don’t we give one round a try and see what happens?”

The relief on her mother’s face was instantaneous as she sat up taller. She reached for Lincoln’s hand and squeezed it. A hint of a smile danced at the corners of her mouth, and it made Lincoln happy to know she put it there. She looked at her father and he gave a half-hearted smile. In that look, Lincoln knew he understood. Although she was the one dying, this moment was not about her. As he squeezed her other hand, she realized he would be the one providing her true support.

As they stood and thanked the doctor, Lincoln wondered why. Why did they robotically thank someone who had handed them a death sentence? She could not provide a cure, so were they thanking her for *maybe* giving her a few more months to live? Months that might be painful and difficult to bear for the whole family? The sudden realization made Lincoln shake her head. Her mother must have misinterpreted the action. “Are you okay? Is your headache back? Do you need something before we start heading home?”

Lincoln told her she was fine as they got prescriptions for the new drugs she would be taking. As soon as they got in the car, Lincoln leaned back and closed her eyes. Riding made her head hurt more, from a dull ache to a stabbing pain. She hoped she could sleep a little so the ride would not seem too long. When they pulled into the driveway, she opened her eyes, glad to be back home. During the ride from the city, she managed to relax a bit. She only looked out the window once—to see the exit for the zoo pass by.



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