

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a woman sitting in a room with a window. The woman is in the lower right corner, looking out a window on the left. The room is dimly lit, with light coming from the window, creating a sense of being trapped or isolated. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

LILLIAN DUNCAN

SHE HAD THE PERFECT LIFE
UNTIL THE DAY SHE WAS

Trapped

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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.

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Dedication

This and all I do is for God's glory.
Without the unfailing support of my husband, Ronny
Duncan, in more ways than I have space to write,
thank you for all you do.

What People are Saying...

GAME ON (2016)

Game On is a romantic-suspense story layered with intrigue that captivates the reader on the first page and doesn't let go till the last page is turned. Lillian Duncan adds one surprise turn after another to keep readers on the edge of their seat. I enjoyed reading this book and recommend it to all suspense lovers.

~ Jo Huddleston, author of the West Virginia Mountains series of sweet Southern historical romances

I have enjoyed every book I have read by this author, and I got this one as soon as it was released. I was not disappointed in this one. There is lots of suspense, romance, family secrets and faith which resulted in a story that I couldn't put down after I had started it.

~ Ann Lacey Ellison, reader

1

“Why are you doing this?” Her eyes were open. Not that it did any good since she was surrounded by complete darkness. With a madman.

“I thought you might want to play a game with me, Ange,” came the whispered response. “Want to play with me?”

And then a sharp jab on the bottom of her foot. She whimpered.

“Don’t you like my game, Ange?”

Another sharp jab. On her shoulder this time. “How about it, Ange? Do you want to play, Ange?” came the whisper.

Each time he said her name, she cringed, knowing pain would follow. Before she could take another breath a knife scraped against her leg, leaving a trail of pain up to her knee. Probably blood, too. Not that she could see it.

“Stop it. Leave me alone.” The words came out as a whisper even though she’d meant to yell them. “Why are you doing this to me?”

In answer, the room was flooded with light. Her eyes protested at the sudden change. She squinted at her captor as he came closer.

“Because I can.” He bared his white teeth in what would probably pass for a smile in a different situation even as his eyes darkened with hatred. “Women like you think you have all the power because you’re rich

and beautiful. You think you can do what you want, then discard us like we're nothing. Well, who's nothing now, Ange? Who's the one in control?" He held up the knife as if to emphasize his words.

She stared up from the bed. Her hands and feet were tied to opposite bedposts. All she had on was a long T-shirt. The dirt was his. The blood was hers. "I never did anything to you. I don't even know you. Please...please...this...this...isn't right. Just let me go. Please."

His bright blue eyes glittered with hatred and excitement as he stared at her.

She wasn't sure what drove him to such horrible actions, but the man was evil incarnate. She didn't care if he hadn't received enough love from his mother or if he was bullied as a child. That didn't give him the right to treat her worse than an animal.

"This isn't right." He mimicked her, his lip curled with disgust. "And so what? Is there really anything about your pitiful life that is right? All that money and what have you done with it? Nothing. Nothing but party and make sure everyone knows your name. The beautiful Ange Matthews."

"That's not—"

His hand moved at lightning speed, and he slapped her. Hard. "Don't you call me a liar."

She bit her bottom lip to keep the tears from falling. He didn't like it when she cried. It made him angry. And that wasn't good. "I didn't mean it like that. But I really do give money to charities. All the time."

"I give money to charities." He mimicked her with a falsetto voice. "And that's supposed to justify your pitiful existence. Because you give a little money now

and then to some cause. Big deal. And no doubt, you make sure your picture is all over the news when you do. 'Look at me. I'm rich and I give money to the poor. I'm so good.' That's all you care about—having pictures of the beautiful Ange Matthews all over the place. Of course, you aren't all that beautiful right now, are you, Ange?"

Is that what this was about? Her money? Had he sent a ransom demand? "If you want my money, I'll give it to you. All of it. Please just let me go."

He stared at her as if thinking about her offer.

Hope surged. "Really. I'll give you my money. All of it. Every penny. Then you can go someplace where the police can't find you. There are countries that won't extradite you."

"Interesting idea but what would the beautiful Ange Matthews be without all her money? Do you think your celebrity friends would still want to hang around with you, Ange?" He shook his head. "But it might be nice to be rich for a change."

Please. Please. Take the money. If he wanted it, she would give it to him. *Every penny.* "We can go to the bank today."

He shrugged. "No, thanks. I love this country. And I'm a model citizen so I have no reason to leave."

The thought of freedom spurred her on. "Then stay here. I won't tell anyone about this. Please take my money, and let me go. How about a million dollars? I promise I won't tell anyone what you did. Ever." She sobbed now, unable to control it. "Please, I...I can't...let me go."

"This isn't my fault. It's yours." He pointed the knife at her then jabbed her in the arm with it. A spot of blood appeared. Beside all the other poke marks.

"It's not. It's not my fault. I—"

He slapped her face again, even harder. "I already warned you not to call me a liar. I said it's your fault. Tell me. Tell me that it's your fault." He held the knife close to her throat.

"Don't hurt me. It's...it's my fault."

"Of course it is. The beautiful Ange Matthews only cares about herself. No concern at all for those people you wanted me to leave behind. Not about how they would get home. How it would ruin their special evening. So very selfish of you." His finger pointed at her as if he was a school teacher giving her a lecture. "Your fault, not mine."

"I already told you I was sorry. You're right. I shouldn't have done that. It was selfish. And mean. But...but...I was upset. I'm so sorry. I promise I won't ever do it again. Please let me go." They'd had this same conversation countless times. And the results were always the same, but she couldn't stop herself from trying. One of these times it might work. He might take pity on her and free her.

"You're right about that because you'll not ever have a chance to do it again. Or anything else again, for that matter." His hand brushed her cheek and moved down. His fingers tightened around her throat. "But you know what? Even if I gave you a second chance, you'd probably do it again. That's just the kind of person you are. Selfish."

"I wouldn't. I'm not. I've changed. I promise."

His fingers squeezed until she couldn't breathe.

"I hate selfish people. Who knows, maybe you would change." His fingers relaxed, she gasped in air. "But it doesn't matter whether you changed or not since you'll never have the chance to prove it. You

don't really think I could let you go, do you? After all, I am a model citizen. Can't let my reputation get tarnished. It wouldn't be good for business."

She stared at this monster. He seemed so normal, dressed in his work clothes with that stupid hat. To look at him, no one would know he was evil. Wouldn't know he had her trapped in his basement—or at least that's where she thought she was.

"Guess what? Nobody even cares that you're gone. Nothing's been on the news or the papers or even your precious social media. That just proves how worthless your life is."

"That's...that's not true." Everybody loved her. She had tons of friends. She was the life of the party. Actually, she was the party.

"Oh, isn't it? Then why haven't I heard a thing about the fact that the famous Ange Matthews is missing? Not one little peep on TV. I'll tell you why. Because nobody cares about you or your pitiful life. Only me. So you really should be nicer to me." He walked closer and put a hand on her shoulder as if comforting her.

Right! She jerked away from him.

His vicious slap stung once again. "I said be nice to me. Don't worry. I know it's been a difficult few weeks for you, but it won't last much longer."

"What does that mean?"

"What does that mean?" More mimicry, and then he smiled. "It means just what you think. You're not as much fun as I thought you'd be. I'm getting tired of this game with you. You're really quite boring, to tell the truth. All you do is whine and complain." He checked his watch and tipped his hat at her. "Gotta go. Duty calls." At the door he turned back. "Maybe

tonight will be the night I end your suffering. Would you like that? Want me to end our little game, Ange?" He closed door and left. He'd left the light on this time.

Usually, he kept her in the darkness. She hated the dark now. She couldn't see him coming toward her. Couldn't ready herself for the next stab with the knife, or sometimes the whack of a hammer. Her body was one big bruise.

He hadn't done anything to her sexually. Which seemed odd to her. But every time he came back she thought this might be the day when that fear would become a reality as well.

It means what you think it means.

He had decided to kill her. She'd known that would happen sooner or later. Tonight might be the night. Unless she figured a way out. There had to be a way to escape from this mad man. She stared around at the tiny room that was her prison. If she could get untied then she might be able to get away. But it was almost impossible to even move.

There was no way to escape.

She would die here—and it really was her own fault.

2

The short slightly plump woman walked up to Nate Goodman's desk. "I need to talk to a co...policeman."

He smiled at her blunder. Some thought the word "cop" was an insult, but he wasn't one of them. He motioned for her to sit in a chair in front of his desk. "Then it's your lucky day because I happen to be one. What can I do for you, Miss..."

"I'm Keren Strong. K-E-R-E-N." She gave an embarrassed chuckle. "Sorry, force of habit. That's how I always introduce myself. I don't suppose you need to know how to spell by name."

"Not a problem, K-E-R-E-N." A little humor went a long way in putting people at ease. And this woman was anxious. "What can I do for you?"

She leaned forward in the chair, her fingers drumming on his desk. "I think my cousin's been kidnapped. I can't find her. Anywhere. She's simply disappeared, and I'm very worried about her."

Kidnapping wasn't a usual part of Nate's duties on the Mount Pleasant Police Department, population 17,000, give or take a few hundred. He stared. "Excuse me?"

"I said I think my cousin's been kidnapped. Her name is Ange Matthews. I'm sure you've heard of her, right? Everybody has."

If anyone in Mt. Pleasant was to be kidnapped, it

would be Ange Matthews, their most famous and wealthy resident.

This woman didn't look as if she traveled in the same social circles as her glamorous, celebrity cousin. She was pretty but wore no makeup and her brown hair was a curly mess. A simple T-shirt with blue jeans completed her look.

"Really? What makes you think that?" He motioned to his boss and ex-fiancé, Leslie, the Chief of Police, to come over. "I think you better hear this. Go ahead; tell her what you told me."

"I think my cousin was kidnapped. Her name is Ange Matthews."

Leslie's eyes narrowed. "Why do you think she's been kidnapped?"

Keren clasped her hands together. "We were supposed to have lunch a week or so ago on Saturday, but she didn't show up. I haven't been able to get hold of her since then. Something's definitely wrong."

"And you say this is Ange Matthews?" Leslie asked.

"Yes, I'm sure you know she's very rich. Someone probably kidnapped her for her money. You've got to help her. I'm sure she's in trouble."

"How do you know she needs help? Has there been a ransom demand?" Leslie asked. "When was she kidnapped?"

"I don't really know if she was kidnapped, but something's wrong. I just...if not, why isn't she answering her phone?" She looked at Nate as if wanting him to step into the conversation. "Ange loves her phone, you know. She always has it with her. And even my husband is worried. He told me to come talk with you today."

"So you haven't received a ransom demand? Or any other type of communication that would indicate she's been kidnapped? That she's being held against her will?" Leslie asked as she sat down facing Keren.

"No but—"

"Then that probably means she's not been kidnapped. With her kind of money that would have been the first thing to happen. I'm sure she's fine." Leslie smiled at Keren. "I don't think it's a good idea to say she's been kidnapped when you have no such proof."

"Maybe there was a ransom but just not to me. How would I know? I'm only her cousin, and I'm sure not rich. The money's from her mother's side of the family. I'm from her father's side."

"Well, I'm sure if someone, anyone, had received a ransom demand, we would have been contacted about it." Leslie's tone told Nate she was no longer interested. "Besides, isn't she sort of known for traveling here and there all the time? She goes to New York and LA and other hot spots."

"Well, yes, but I can always get hold of her. But I can't this time. She's not answering her phone. And she always answers her phone. For me."

Leslie sighed. "Are the two of you close?"

"We see each other now and then. And we talk on the phone at least a few times a month. We were getting together for lunch a few Saturdays ago, and she never showed up. It was my birthday, so I don't think she'd just skip out without contacting me."

Nate hid his smile, understanding the situation a little bit better. Her rich, famous cousin had forgotten her birthday.

Leslie gave him a glance and a smirk. She was

probably thinking the same thing. Leslie looked back at the cousin. "Has she ever just left before? Without telling you."

"Well, sure, but—"

"So it is plausible she just left and isn't returning your calls. Because she's busy."

Leslie didn't have an ounce of concern for Ange Matthews or Keren, the cousin. Compassion was not her strong suit. That didn't surprise him.

Ange had probably thoughtlessly gone off somewhere, involved in her own pursuits, and had forgotten her cousin's birthday. The wealthy often had an entitlement personality, forgetting mere mortals who had to work for a living. He chided himself for making such a judgment. He didn't know her.

Keren's face was splotted with frustration. "Sure, it's plausible, but—"

"Then there's no case. We can't really help you." Leslie stood, dismissing the woman. "But be sure to contact us if you do get a ransom demand. Or have some real proof that she's missing." She walked away.

The woman looked at Nate. "I would have thought she'd be a little more concerned about Ange. Considering how rich and famous she is. And she does live in your town. I thought this was a friendly place."

"I'm sure she's concerned." He tried to be diplomatic. "But she's a busy woman. And I believe the Matthews Estate isn't actually within the city limits."

"Still. She wasn't very nice about it. And how busy could she really be? In this tiny town. It's not like it's Cleveland where there's real crime."

He couldn't disagree with her assessment about the town or Leslie so he said nothing.

"If she doesn't live right in town, does that mean it's not in your jurisdiction? Should I go someplace else?" She looked at him, obviously still wanting him to do something.

Nate thought about that for a moment. "Actually, I think this is the right place. It seems I remember something about the town expanding their city limits out past her house. Have you gone to her house?"

She nodded. "She wasn't there. Called her fiancé. He hadn't talked to her either."

"Didn't I read somewhere that she broke up with him?"

"Yea, I read that, too, but he didn't mention it when I called him. So I don't know if it really happened that way or that's just people blowing up an argument into more than it really was."

That was interesting. Keren had Ange's fiancé's phone number. So perhaps, her relationship was closer than he'd first thought. "Was he worried about her?"

"Not really. You know who he is, right? He's a Cleveland Browns player, and they're in training camp right now so he's been really busy. He probably hasn't had time to worry about her being gone."

"See, there you have it. I'm sure she's fine. If her fiancé isn't concerned, then there's probably nothing to worry about."

"Then why won't she return my calls? It doesn't make sense."

"Well maybe the two of them did break up. And that's probably why she hasn't wanted to talk to anyone. She's nursing a broken heart."

Her cousin laughed. "Nursing a broken heart? That doesn't sound like Ange at all. It's not her first broken engagement. She loves to get engaged, but

marriage is a different story. I think she can't believe anyone wants to marry her unless it's for her money. Besides, it was my birthday. She wouldn't just blow me off like that."

Ange Matthews probably would do just that. Even though he'd never met her, her reputation was well-known. And it wasn't exactly a good one. "Look, I'll check into it a little, and if I find anything suspicious, I'll let you know. OK?"

She stood. "Thanks. Do you want my phone number?"

"Sure. And while you're at it, the fiancé's number as well. Hold on a minute." He walked over to a file cabinet and came back with a paper. "We might as well make this official. Fill this out and on the backside give me any information that might be helpful. Names and numbers of friends, including the fiancé. I don't know if you have access to any of her credit cards or such but that would be helpful as well."

"Oh, I don't have access to that at all. Like I said, I come from the other side of her family. Not the rich side."

What might that be like—having a very rich cousin who was also glamorous and famous? Keren obviously didn't have any of those things herself. Could this woman have led to her cousin disappearing? *Stop it. Not everyone is a suspect. You don't even know if the woman's really in trouble.*

After Keren left, he pulled his keyboard closer. He had an obligation to help. Ange Matthews deserved the same consideration as any one of the other citizens of Mt. Pleasant. It couldn't hurt to spend a few minutes checking out the situation.

Famous and rich. That probably added up to lots

of technology and social media. After twenty minutes at the keyboard, Nate had a good idea of Ange's life before she disappeared.

And he wasn't so sure Ange Matthew's cousin wasn't right.

Ange hadn't been on her public social media for more than a week. Before that, her posts were consistent. Since the Friday before she was to have lunch with Keren. Before that she was everywhere, the woman loved her social media. Her name was on all the major sites along with lots of news stories. She posted about anything and everything. And her followers seemed to love it. He didn't get why anyone would care what Ange Matthews had for breakfast, but they seemed to.

He stared out the window, his gaze focused on the bank. Did Ange Matthews use the town's only bank? Less than a minute later, he walked into that financial institution.

"Hey, Nate." Clint Smith gave him a wave from where he stood talking with one of the tellers.

"Just the man I'm looking for. Can we talk in your office?" Clint was the bank manager—or whatever his title was these days. It seemed to change from time to time, depending on what big bank had purchased it that week.

"Sure. Is there a problem?"

"Not a problem. I just have a question." He answered as they walked into the office.

Clint shut the door and motioned for him to sit.

Nate shook his head. "This won't take much time. I was wondering if Ange Matthews uses this bank."

Clint's eyes widened. "It's probably not legal for me to give you the answer to that question."

"Yeah, I sort of thought that's what you might say. But let me ask you this hypothetically."

Clint arched an orange-red brow. "Hypothetically?"

"I'm not just asking out of curiosity, you know."

"Then why are you asking?"

"Her cousin's worried about her. I'm sure it's nothing, but I figured one of the ways I could establish that it was, indeed, nothing was to see if her credit card transactions have been normal for the past week or so. So does she bank here?"

"I can't tell you that, but I can tell you I have met her on more than one occasion. If that helps." Clint walked around the desk and sat down at his computer. He looked up at Nate. "The last week or so? Hypothetically, of course."

"Of course."

A moment later Clint looked up with a worried expression. "Hypothetically speaking, it would be most unusual for someone like her to have no transactions for the past nine days."

"No transactions as in zero?"

Clint nodded. "What's going on, Nate?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. I was really hoping you'd tell me she went on a trip to some exotic location to nurse a broken heart, and she's there spending lots of her money."

"Well, I'm also sure our hypothetical person would have credit cards from other banks. That said, that someone likes our card. A lot."

"Can you access the info for me? About other cards?"

"Sorry. I can't do that even hypothetically."

"That's OK. I think I got what I needed. If you hear

from her or her cards are accessed, let me know.”

“Hypothetically.”

“Of course.”

Nate walked across the street. It didn't appear as if Ange Matthews had gone on a last-minute trip somewhere. The last time she'd been on social media was the night she'd broken up with her fiancé. He needed to talk to the man.

He went to Leslie's office and knocked even though the door was open.

She motioned him in.

“There might be something to the cousin's concern about Ange Matthews.”

“Really?” She arched a brow. “Why do you think that?”

“She hasn't been on social media or had a credit card charge since the night she broke up with her fiancé nine days ago. The Friday night before she was to have lunch with her cousin.”

“Credit card? You have no right to access that info.”

“I didn't. I just asked hypothetically. And got answered hypothetically.”

She rolled her eyes. “Spare me the small-town bonding. You just said she broke up with her fiancé. She's probably off nursing a broken heart.”

“Or maybe he wasn't happy that she broke it off with him in such a public way. Nobody likes to be humiliated. Didn't you see the news?”

“The football player, right?”

“Right.”

She flipped a pencil back and forth. “Let it go, Nate. Ange Matthews is just off on another one of her trips somewhere. Everyone knows how she is. She's a