

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *GAME ON* AND *JANE DOE*

LILLIAN DUNCAN

# SMALL TOWN SECRETS

A SHADY VALLEY  
MYSTERY

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Lillian Duncan

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## *Dedication*

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

To my amazing husband—my partner in life and in writing. I couldn't do it without you.

# 1

Cami Martine stepped out of her car then adjusted the holster around her waist. It wasn't the most comfortable part of her uniform, but definitely necessary. Even in the sleepy town of Shady Valley, Ohio.

No community was immune to crime these days.

Police work in Shady Valley wasn't what she'd call exciting most of the time and that was more than fine with her. She didn't choose law enforcement as a career to get an adrenaline rush but as a way to give back to her hometown. She mostly dealt with domestic and traffic issues and the occasional shoplifting charge, but every now and then there would be more serious issues—not that the chief let her handle those. She was the current rookie of the department.

Still, she loved her job and had no desire to work or live anywhere else. Shady Valley's population was not quite ten-thousand. The Shady Valley Police Department consisted of six full-time officers plus six part-time for the weekend plus the chief and the assistant chief. It worked out so that each eight-hour shift had two officers plus the chief and assistant chief who were always on call.

She rolled her eyes.

Yeah, some assistant chief. Zack King. She still

couldn't believe Stanley hired him...of all people. What had he been thinking?

Her fingers fussed with her chestnut brown curls, already regretting what she'd done on a whim. But it couldn't be undone now. She took a deep breath and walked into the station waiting to see what Franny's reactions would be to her new haircut.

There were four desks in the squad room, one for each officer on shift and another for the assistant chief. The chief was the only one with a private office. The fourth desk belonged to Franny.

Franny's official title was receptionist, but that didn't come close to describing what she did or how important she was to the department. She answered phones, typed up reports, but more importantly she was often the first contact citizens had with the department. She had a gift of being able to calm down people in the midst of their crisis.

Franny was everybody's mother at the station—no matter whether they were younger or older than she was. If you were sick, Franny made you homemade chicken soup. If you were feeling down, Franny found a way to chase those blues away. She never forgot a birthday either.

Cami walked up to Franny's desk and waited. When Franny didn't notice, she cleared her throat. Franny looked up from the computer screen. Her eyes widened, and she didn't say anything for a moment. Then she squealed, "I love it, Cami. It didn't look like that this morning, did it? I'm sure I would have noticed."

"I had it done on my lunch hour. I got tired of wearing a ponytail all the time, but I think I made a mistake." Cami ran her fingers through the chestnut curls once again. "It's sooooo... short."

Franny stood up and walked around Cami, touching her hair as she went. "And so curly. Is that natural?"

"Yep. When my hair's longer, it's not so noticeable because I sort of blow dry the curls away."

"You definitely did not make a mistake. I love it. And it will be perfect for the wedding. It's adorable."

"I'm not sure I was going for adorable. Police officers aren't supposed to be adorable."

Franny laughed. "Maybe not, but it's definitely adorable. And so are you. So...what are the plans for the big festivities this weekend?"

"The rehearsal dinner's tonight. Tomorrow night's the bachelor and bachelorette parties. And then the wedding's on Saturday."

"Sounds great. I love weddings." Franny looked around, leaned a bit closer, and then whispered, "Did you hear what happened?"

"About what?"

Keeping her voice low, she said, "Tri-County Drug had another bust on a drug bust last night."

"You're kidding."

"Nope, I guess they've been watching a house in Wooster for weeks. They finally decided to move on it, but when they got there, it was empty." Her hands moved around as she talked, no longer whispering. "I mean empty. Nothing there, and nobody. No furniture.

No people and no drugs.”

“Isn’t that the third time that’s happened?”

Franny lowered her voice. “Actually, it’s the fifth time this year. Third time in the last two months. Mark my words. If this keeps up, they’ll shut down Tri-County. Lose their funding.”

“I’d hate to see that happen. They provide a valuable service. They make it a lot easier on our small force.”

“I agree.” Franny shook her head. “I just can figure out why it keeps happening.”

Cami had a theory. Someone from the inside had to be tipping off the bad guys. There was no other explanation. But that would mean someone in law enforcement was helping them. The thought made her sick to her stomach. She prayed that she was wrong. She kept her theory to herself. “I have no idea either.”

“So you’re off work until Monday, right?”

“Right.”

“Where’s the bachelorette party?”

“Nothing fancy. We’re going to the Cowboy. Just the girls. Dancing and pizza.”

“Sounds fun.”

“It’s not that big of a deal. Angie didn’t want a big fuss.

I feel bad about not working tomorrow since the boss is on vacation.”

“You better not let Stanley hear you call him that. You know how much he hates it.”

“I know.” Cami laughed. “That’s why I do it.”

The bell above the door tinkled. Cami turned

toward it.

Assistant Chief of Police Zack King walked in, tall, dark, and handsome.

She'd known him for years. Zack had been a few years ahead of her in school. The football team captain and quarterback, and on the basketball team as well. Definitely the most popular guy in school. Cami still referred to him by the moniker the girls had given him, The Golden Boy. All the girls had crushes on him.

She hated to admit it, but she'd been one of those silly girls with a crush, not that he'd been interested in her. She wasn't sure if he even remembered they'd gone to school together—at least he'd never mentioned it in all the time he'd been working with her.

Of course, neither had she. For the most part, she tried to ignore him—unless she absolutely had to interact with him.

About four months ago, Zack waltzed back into town and just like that, got the coveted position of assistant chief of police—without spending even a single day as a police officer in Shady Valley.

True he'd been with the military police but still, it didn't seem fair to her.

Zack walked over to Franny's desk. "Hey. Just stopped in to let you know I'm on duty. Heading out to the elementary school now."

Franny smiled. "Thanks, Zack. How're you today?"

"Can't complain." He looked over at Cami. His gaze swept over her then stopped at her head, but he didn't say anything.

Apparently, he didn't approve of her haircut—not that she cared. "I was just leaving for the day, Assistant Chief."

"You don't have to call me that. Zack is fine."

Franny said, "I'm sure you heard all about the drug bust last night, Zack. What do you think happened?"

Zack gave an easy grin. "The way I heard, it wasn't much of a drug bust. But that's the way it goes sometimes, I guess."

Franny shook her head. "But why does it keep happening? They must be getting inside information from somewhere, don't you think?"

Zack shook his head. "I doubt that very much. I can't see anyone doing something like that."

Cami listened to the conversation but said nothing. Zack had been working here for four months. And suddenly the Tri-County couldn't make a bust. True, it had happened a few times before he started, but it seemed to be happening a lot more often since he started working here.

As assistant chief, he probably knew all about the operations of Tri-County. No doubt Stanley kept him informed. Not that she was accusing him, still it was a curious thing. "Don't forget I'm off work tomorrow, Assistant Chief."

He nodded. "Zack. The name is Zack and I know. I've got you covered. Have fun with all that wedding stuff. Better you than me."

"What's wrong with weddings?"

"Nothing, as long as it's not mine."

Cami refrained from rolling her eyes. He was still the same jerk as in high school. He was a player then and apparently still was. Not that she knew much or cared about his social life.

He gave a small wave. "See you later, Franny. Have a good time at the wedding, Officer Martine. I'll see you on Monday."

After he left, Cami looked at Franny. "I wonder why he took the job here. He seems like someone who'd like a little more action than sleepy old Shady Valley."

"Maybe he just wanted to come back home."

Or maybe, he'd figured out a way to make a lot of money working as a police officer—that didn't have anything to do with his salary. "He doesn't seem like the hometown type of guy. Besides, I can't believe Stanley hired him as assistant. With no experience."

"He's had plenty of experience in the Marines, Cami. Besides, I'm sure he can handle himself in a fight. From the looks of that body, he must be a workout junkie."

"I hadn't noticed."

"Then you must be blind, girl." Franny punched her arm playfully.

"But really why do you think he moved back here? After all, he was some big shot Marine, right? He should have been able to get a job anywhere."

"Who knows?" Franny shrugged. "Everyone has their secrets, right?"

"Especially in this town."

## 2

Music blared from the jukebox at the Cowboy Bar. The singers were going on about doing the boot-scooting boogie. Everyone at Cami's table was laughing and having a good time.

Cami wasn't much of a bargoer, but the Cowboy was different. It was everyone's favorite pizza place in Wayne County—maybe in all of Ohio. OK, maybe not everyone's but certainly hers and most of her friends.

Angie McVey, the guest of honor held up the dubious offering. She shook her head and grinned. "You people are so bad."

Cami laughed. "I've seen your collection of flannel. You needed help."

"Oh, I'm more than prepared. Trust me. To my last night being single." Angie shouted over the blaring of the music. She held up her shot glass.

"You mean to your last night of freedom." Markie countered.

"To freedom." Cami echoed. The others did the same.

"No. No way. No. That's not what I mean at all." Angie grinned; her violet blue eyes glistened. Her wavy blonde hair fell to her shoulders. At the moment she also had on a cheap and silly wedding veil.

Beautiful was usually the first word people used to describe Angie, but what they didn't know was that she was even more beautiful on the inside—where it really counted. “If I wanted freedom, I'd stay single. And that's not happening. I can't wait to get married tomorrow. To share my life with the man of my dreams. My soulmate.” Angie lectured the table.

The group echoed. “To soulmates.”

They all downed the contents.

“Delicious.” Angie announced as she slammed the shot glass on the table. “Just what I needed. I think I'll have another.” She looked around for the waitress.

Cami was more than a little surprised about the shots Angie kept downing. Normally, Angie wasn't much of a drinker. But it was her bachelorette party. It wasn't Cami's place to judge.

Angie adjusted the wedding veil on her head, and then started singing. “I'm going to the chapel and I'm...”

“Oh, no. She's had too much to drink. She's singing oldies,” Cami told the others at the table.

“That's not true.” Angie signaled for another round. “I sing when I'm happy. And I'm happy. Very, very happy. I'm here with all my good friends and tomorrow I'm getting married to the man of my dreams.”

“OK. If you say so.”

“And besides, when was the last time you saw me drunk?”

Cami nodded in agreement. Even though there'd been a few wild years for them right after high school,

that was a long time ago. "That's true enough. I can't remember the last time. Certainly not when I've been around. And I've been around you a lot." The two of them had been best friends since fifth grade.

Angie smiled as she bumped shoulders with Cami. "Thanks for setting the record straight, best friend."

"You're very welcome. May your marriage be filled with love, laughter, and joy. To marriage."

"To marriage." After Angie downed another shot then slammed the glass on the wooden table. She smiled sweetly at them. "Besides, the only thing in my shot glass is apple juice."

"What?" Cami said indignantly. "Are you kidding me? That's outrageous. This is your bachelorette party. With emphasis on party. You're not supposed to be drinking apple juice."

"If you really think I would let myself be half-drunk or have a hangover on my wedding day, then you don't know me at all, my BFF. Before you got here, I told the waitress and the bartender to make sure my shot glass was filled with apple juice. And only apple juice, no matter what any of you tried to bribe them with."

Cami started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Mariah asked.

Cami managed to stop laughing. "I'm drinking apple juice too."

Angie laughed. "No way."

"Way."

"Same here." ZeeZee raised her hand.

Cami pointed at each of the women then asked.

“And you?”

Turned out that most of them had opted for non-alcoholic beverages and only Angie’s work buddies were actually drinking alcohol. Cami laughed. “That’s good to know. As the only law enforcement officer at the table, I only have to worry about getting two of you home safely instead of all of you.”

Faye protested. “We didn’t drink that much. We’ll be fine driving.”

Markie nodded her agreement. “It’s not like we’re drunks or anything. We’re teachers so that means we’re upstanding citizens.”

“Good to know.” Cami said, “But we’ll see how the rest of the evening goes. And I’ll be the one to make that decision. Right?”

Markie gave a salute. “Right, Officer.”

That cracked up everyone at the table.

Angie stood up. “Physical exercise helps burn off the alcohol in your body so come on people, let’s dance!”

“To dancing.” Everyone yelled as they jumped up.

Cami went over to the old-fashioned jukebox and punched in a bunch of songs as the other six women made their way to the dance floor. They formed a line, put their hands in the back pockets and boot-scoted one way and then the other.

A man walked up. “Can anyone dance with the bride?”

It was easy to know who the bride was with the bridal veil Angie still wore on her head. Angie made a welcoming motion with her hand. “Sure, everyone’s

welcome. Get in line.”

“I meant I wanted to dance with you.” He grabbed at her waist.

She sidestepped out of his grasp. “Sorry. That’s not happening. I’m taken.”

He grinned then shrugged. “It was worth a try.” He made his way to the end of the line and joined in. And then another man and a few more women. Before long, the floor was filled with dancing people having a good time.

A man half-walked, half-staggered up. He stopped directly in front of Angie. “Hey, cutie,” he said as he reached for her waist.

Angie deftly moved out of his grasp. “Jump in the line and dance with us.”

He reached for her again and managed to pull her toward him. “No. Just wanna dance with you. You’re so beautiful.”

“Sorry. We’re line dancing. Not slow dancing.” Angie pulled his hands away from her waist, but he didn’t let go. Angie tried to wiggle out of his grasp. He held on tight.

Cami moved over to his side and touched his arm. “Let go of her, please. We’re just having fun.”

“I wanna have fun, too. With her. She’s sexy.” His words were slurred and his eyes glassy.

Cami squeezed his arm. “Look, we don’t want any trouble. Let go of her and I won’t arrest you.”

“Arrest me? For what? I didn’t do nothing.” But he let go of Angie and glared at Cami. “You’re no fun.”

“And neither are you. Go back to your table with

your friends.”

He staggered away.

Cami looked at Angie. “You OK?”

“I’m fine.”

Cami walked over to the bar and waited for the bartender to notice her. He walked over and asked, “Ready for another round of that tasty apple juice?”

“No thanks. I just wanted to warn you that the guy over there—” she pointed toward the table “—in the brown cowboy hat. He’s had enough to drink. He probably shouldn’t be served anymore.”

“Yeah, I saw that. I already cut him off.”

“Good. Can you make sure someone else drives him home? There’s no way he should be behind the wheel.”

“Not a problem.” He nodded. “Will do.”

Cami walked back to her table. The drunk glared at her as she passed his table, but she ignored him. She wasn’t on duty, but she still had an obligation to make sure the man didn’t drive in his condition.

Angie danced over to the table. “Everything OK?”

“Yeah, I just wanted to make sure he didn’t drink anymore. You go have fun. I’ll make sure his friends drive him home.”

“Hey, look. There’s Juan.” Juan Diaz was the music leader at their church. Angie said, “I wonder what he’s doing here. I’ll go say hi to him.”

“OK. I’ll sit here for a minute.”

Angie rolled her eyes. “You’re getting old, Cami.” Angie danced her way through the crowd and over to Juan.

Cami pulled out her phone and checked her messages. When she looked up Angie was nowhere to be seen. Where was she? Juan had disappeared as well. Cami was about to go look for her when Angie walked through the door.

The expression on Angie's face told Cami she wasn't happy about something. As Angie passed the drunk's table, he grabbed at her. She turned toward him and slapped his face. "Don't touch me."

He stood up, his arm moving back. "Why you little—"

"Ray. That's enough." One of the guys at his table stood and grabbed his arm. "Or you'll end up in jail."

"I don't care. She shouldn't have done that. Who does she think she is?"

Cami rushed over, badge in hand. "Get him out of here. Now. Before he ends up spending the night in jail and then has to see the judge in the morning. And make sure he doesn't drive anywhere tonight."

"OK. OK." His friends tugged him toward the door. "We're leaving. Right now. We don't want any problems. We'll drive him home."

"Make sure you do. Are you guys sober enough to drive?"

"I'm the designated driver." The one guy that was still at the table said as he laid down a twenty for a tip. "No problem. Sorry about this. Ray's a good guy but a bad drinker."

"Then maybe he shouldn't drink."

The man shrugged. "You're probably right, but I ain't his mother."

Angie and Cami walked back to their table.

Angie shook her head. "Men. I'm so glad Lonnie's not like that."

"Yep. You've got a good guy who really loves you."

"I'm so blessed. That's for sure. I can't believe I'm getting married tomorrow."

Cami asked, "Why did you go outside?"

"To talk to Juan."

"Why? What's going on?"

"It's just..." She shook her head. "Never mind. It was nothing."

"It seemed like something. Your face is a dead giveaway. You've never been able to hide your feelings. A poker player, you're not."

"Fine. I had this weird conversation with Juan."

"About what?"

"He kept asking me if I was sure about going through with the wedding tomorrow. That maybe I should think about calling it off or at least postponing it. That I shouldn't rush into marriage. That maybe I should take more time to get to know Lonnie better."

"I can't believe that."

"I've known Lonnie for more than two years. How much longer does he think I should wait?"

"Wow. That is weird. I thought they were friends. They go fishing together, don't they?"

"Yep."

"Why would Juan say that?"

"I have no idea. Even though I asked him why, he wouldn't tell me. Just kept saying I might not know

him as well as I thought I did."

ZeeZee walked over. She grabbed each of them by an arm. "Come on, you two. No fair resting."

Angie pulled the veil off her head. "Not me. My fun is over. I have a wedding tomorrow, and I'll not be a bride with bags under my eyes."

ZeeZee grinned. "I have a way to fix that."

ZeeZee was a make-up artist and would be meeting them at the church tomorrow to do Angie's make up while Faye would do her hair.

Angie laughed. "I'm sure you do, but it's time for me to go anyway. I'll see you at the church tomorrow by eleven, right?"

"I'll be there with bells on." ZeeZee danced away.

"I can't believe this." Angie muttered as she stared at her phone.

"What?"

"Now Lonnie's upset."

Lonnie Ellsworth wasn't the type of person that Cami thought Angie would marry. She liked him well enough, but he wasn't as devout as Angie. He said he was a Christian and that seemed to satisfy Angie. But one thing was sure, Lonnie loved Angie to the moon and back. Cami had no doubt about that. And so Cami liked him because he made Angie happy.

"Why? Because of the party? It's not as if he isn't having his own."

"He's already on his way home." Angie was typing a message furiously. When she was finished, she looked up. "He actually had the nerve to ask me if I drank too much. Unbelievable."

“Oh, I’m sure he’s just making sure you’re safe. Give him a break.”

Angie rolled her eyes. “I guess. Don’t worry about it. I’m certainly not. But it’s time for me to go. Thank you so much for my party. It’s been so much fun.” Angie leaned over and hugged her. “You’re such a good friend. I love you.”

Cami hugged her back. “And I love you. Besides, that’s what best friends and maids of honor are for. I’ll walk outside with you.”

Angie gave a little happy dance. “I can’t believe I’m getting married tomorrow. I’m so happy.”

“And I’m so happy for you. Don’t let Lonnie or Juan ruin your night. Neither one of them should be adding stress to your life right now.”

“You’re right about that.” Angie flipped her blonde hair over her shoulder. “I’m certainly not letting either of them rain on my parade—or my special day.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Angie rolled her eyes. “Men. Can’t live with them and can’t live without them.”

“Why was he even here?”

“Who?”

“Juan.”

“Oh. He said he was picking up a pizza for Becca.”

“I thought she was allergic to gluten.”

“She is, but apparently every now and then she eats one and then suffers the consequences. Can’t say I blame her. I would hate to live without pizza or spaghetti or ravioli.”