

A Tracey Marks Mystery



**SECRETS
CAN KILL**
ELLEN SHAPIRO

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First Edition published September 2020
by Indies United Publishing House, LLC

Cover Art by irPanda Designs

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ISBN13: 978-1-64456-174-4

Library of Congress Control Number:2020943161



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

P.O. BOX 3071

QUINCY, IL 62305-3071

www.indiesunited.net

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For Sam, always in my heart.

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CHAPTER 1

I was alone in my office when the call came in. There was silence, and then I heard a woman's voice muffled at the other end of the phone.

"My name is Stephanie Harris. I need to speak with you today. It's urgent," her voice cracking.

The person on the other end of the phone sounded distraught, and I was having a hard time understanding her as she rambled on, choking out her words. I interrupted her. "Ms. Harris, can you come to my office?"

"I could be there at four. Please wait for me," and abruptly hung up.

I wondered what that was all about. It sounded as if she had been crying. I put it out of my mind hoping I'd find out the answers when I met with her.

My name is Tracey Marks and I run an investigation firm. About a year ago my business was on death's door and I was in a panic. I was saved by a gentleman who walked into my office and told me his wife was missing. Though I had no experience with missing person cases, I took the case. It was a gutsy and maybe a dumb thing to do, but fortunately for me it worked out.

Four o'clock came and went and no Ms. Harris. By five-thirty I knew I was stood up, but why? She said she needed to see me right away. Maybe my imagination was getting the best of me but I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. I left a message on her voicemail just in the off chance something came up or she forgot to call me. I packed everything up and walked outside to the biting, freezing cold. It was the beginning of December. I put up my hood and walked to my apartment on the upper west side, fifteen blocks from my office. Wally, my doorman, greeted me with a big grin.

"Hello Ms. Tracey. I don't see any gloves on your hands. You must be freezing."

"I ran out this morning and left them in my other jacket. You weren't here when I left to remind me," I said with a smile.

Wally has been my doorman since I leased my apartment more than ten years ago. Actually for me, Wally is more than a doorman. I think of him as my guardian angel, always looking after me. Though Wally is probably near seventy, you would never know it, his face as smooth as a baby's. He's big, with a slight paunch around the middle. I waved

goodbye as I walked to the elevator.

As I stepped out of the shower my phone beeped. “Hey Susie, what’s up?”

“You wanna get some dinner?”

“Sure, I’ll meet you at Anton’s at seven-thirty. Anton’s is a neighborhood Italian restaurant in walking distance for both of us and our favorite place to go. The food is really good, especially their linguini and clams. It’s not as noisy as some of the trendier places.

I slipped on a heavy cotton pullover, zipped up my jeans, grabbed my gloves and hooded jacket and walked to Anton’s. Susie was already at the bar chatting with John, the bartender. Susie Jacobs has been my best friend since high school. We are completely the opposite in every way. Susie is about 5’2”, boyish figure with red curly hair, and a positive, outgoing personality. I on the other hand am 5’8” with straight light brown hair cut to my chin, a bit more curvy than Susie, with a less positive attitude and a bit more reserve. I have to mention Susie is six months older than me, a sore spot with her.

“How’s Mark?” I asked as I sat down. I can’t believe it’s been a year since you guys shacked up and you’re still together,” I said grinning.

“To tell you the truth I can’t believe it myself. I thought we would have killed each other by now. And to answer your question, Mark’s good. I left him hunched over his laptop frantically working on a presentation that he’s giving tomorrow. A client is interested in buying a company that Mark has been researching.”

I ordered a glass of Merlot. As John was putting my wine down we were called to our table.

“How are you ladies doing tonight?” Our favorite waiter Sam asked.

“Starved, as usual,” I said. “I’m ready to order my usual linguini and clams and your house salad.”

“I’ll have the lasagna and your house salad. And another glass of Chianti,” Susie said.

“Something weird happened today,” I said to Susie. “A woman called me up this morning sounding very distressed. We set up an appointment for four o’clock but she never showed. I left a voice message and haven’t heard back. Normally I wouldn’t think too much of it but something doesn’t add up. She sounded so upset.”

“Try her again in the morning. Maybe she just changed her mind or got distracted.”

“I guess. How was court today?”

“The judge ruled in my client’s favor. Now we have to pray the

husband ponies up the alimony and support each month.”

“Well we can always hope for the best,” trying to sound optimistic. Susie is a matrimonial attorney at a small law firm in Manhattan. I know I can always count on her for advice when I’m stumped on a case.

“How’s it going without Carolyn?”

I hired Carolyn last year when business started to pick up. Unfortunately after I trained her, she decided to leave and follow her boyfriend to California.

“It’s fairly quiet with Christmas coming in a few weeks, and fortunately the two estate cases she was working on before she left were completed.”

“Are you looking to hire someone else?”

“I think I’ll wait a while and see how it goes.”

After dessert, we called it a night. I thought I would give Ms. Harris a call in the morning

The next day I was up by six and headed out to the gym. I did my usual routine, consisting of weights, sit-ups, push-ups and running on the treadmill. I showered and put on my standard work clothes, jeans, a pullover sweater and short black boots. It makes my life a lot simpler when I don’t have to figure out what to wear each day.

On my way to the office I stopped at my favorite place for coffee, the Coffee Pot. Anna handed me my coffee and Banana Nut muffin before I had a chance to open my mouth. If you can’t tell, I’m a creature of habit.

“One of these days I’m going to surprise you and order something completely different.”

“I can’t wait,” Anna chuckled.

I walked into my office balancing my coffee, muffin and laptop bag. I called Ms. Harris right away, still no answer. I sat there mulling over what to do. I found an address for her in Scarsdale, New York from an internet website. I headed out to get my car that I keep parked in my building garage. I still had my Beetle even though I could probably afford a bigger car. Getting into parking spots is a lot easier with a small car, especially living in the city, and my patience for finding parking spots is almost non-existent. That’s why I try to walk to work most days.

Luckily, there was very little traffic on the way up. As soon as I was on the Bronx River Parkway, the scenery changed. I saw grass with lots of trees even though they were bare. Unfortunately my thoughts were on Ms. Harris and not on the landscape. I couldn’t imagine why Ms. Harris never showed for her appointment. There was such urgency in her voice. I hoped nothing happened to her.

Ms. Harris' house was on a beautiful tree lined street with brick colonial homes. When I arrived at her address there were two police cars parked in front. What the hell was going on? I parked down the street and sat in my car wondering what to do. The thoughts running through my head were making my heart beat faster. I got out and slowly walked up to her front door.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I was writing my first mystery novel, *Looking for Laura*, I had no thoughts of turning it into a series. The main character, Tracey Marks, a private investigator, became a part of my life. Her voice was in my head. While writing the book, my teacher, Eileen Moskowitz-Palma, suggested I create a series depicting the personal and professional evolution of Tracey Marks. I am currently working on my third novel of the Tracey Marks Mystery series.

I have to thank my dear friends for their continued support and encouragement. I would also like to thank my editor, Jennie Rosenblum, for her input and patience. Another thank you goes to my writing teacher, Ines Rodrigues, whose insights were invaluable. And a special thanks to my daughter, Carrie, who is my biggest supporter and is always there for me.

About the Author



Ellen Shapiro is a private investigator and the author of *Looking for Laura*, a Tracey Marks Mystery. Acting on her passion for writing, she enrolled in the Sarah Lawrence Writing Institute where she took courses in creative writing. Her professional expertise in locating people led her to create the storyline and develop the characters for her novel. She has written articles related to her field for both local and nationwide newspapers. She is a member of Mystery Writers of America. When she is not writing or working, you can find her on the golf course yelling at her golf ball. Ellen resides in Scarsdale, New York.