

A Tracey Marks Mystery

**MISSING**

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**OR**

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**DEAD**



**ELLEN SHAPIRO**

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## Other Books by the Author

*Looking for Laura*  
*Secrets Can Kill*

For Muriel, whose work ethic rubbed off on me.

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# CHAPTER 1

My watch said 2:30 pm. I was expecting Joanie Gray to walk into my office at any moment. We met at my best friend Susie's wedding two weeks ago. The only thing I knew for sure was that Joanie wanted to hire me. I had no clue why. I heard the doorknob turn.

"Joanie, nice to see you again. Can I get you anything to drink, coffee or tea?"

"Coffee would be great, black, no sugar."

Joanie looked very put together, wearing a black linen pants suit with a white silk blouse and black heels that showed off her slim figure. Her wavy light brown hair came down to her shoulders and her fair complexion was flawless. On a great day I would never look as fabulous as her.

I poured Joanie a cup of coffee from my brand new coffee maker and we sat down in my office.

"So how do you know Susie?" I asked her.

"We met in law school and have been friends ever since."

"You mentioned on the phone you wanted to hire me. What's going on?"

"Susie told me I'd be in good hands coming to you and I trust her. This is very difficult for me to talk about."

"Take your time." Joanie seemed very nervous, her eyes darting all over the place.

"About three weeks ago my best friend Cynthia went missing. She just vanished. Cynthia is my age, thirty-six. She has a husband and two children, ages ten and eight. I'm sorry," she said, "every time I think about her I start to cry," the tears rolling down her cheeks. "I would have come in sooner but I didn't want to interfere with the police investigation."

"Oh I believe I had seen her photo on TV," I said handing Joanie a tissue and waiting for her to continue.

“The police haven’t found her yet. I know from her husband John it’s still an active case but I worry they won’t be looking very hard.”

“It’s only been a few weeks; why not wait?”

“I would feel more comfortable if you were investigating what happened to her. I’m just concerned that the police might think she left on her own.”

“Was there any response from her husband’s TV appearance?”

“No. And there was never any ransom note or phone call.”

“And you’re sure she wouldn’t just leave?”

“No way, absolutely no way. She loved her family. She would never leave her children.”

“Sometimes we just don’t know what’s going on with someone, even though we may be close to them.”

“If something was wrong, she would have told me.”

Everyone has secrets, I said to myself. “What would you like me to do?”

“I need to know for sure what happened to her.”

“I just find it curious why her husband didn’t hire someone.”

“To be perfectly honest he can’t afford to and I can. I know it won’t be easy since the police haven’t found her but Cynthia is just one more case to them. I’m having trouble sleeping. I think about her all the time. Can you please help me?”

“I’ll do my best. Why don’t you put together a list of Cynthia’s friends, family members, employment, cell phone number, and anything else you can think of. Also, email me a photo of Cynthia. I’ll see if I can get a copy of her file from the police. That will give me a place to start. I’ll send you my retainer letter to sign. As soon as I have everything I’ll call you if I have any additional questions.”

After Joanie left I wondered whether there was any chance that Cynthia could still be alive. I had my doubts. My first call was to an acquaintance I knew who had a contact in the police department.

“Frank, how are you?”

“Tracey Marks, I thought you fell off the face of the earth. What’s going on?”

“Not much. How’s the family?”

“They’re doing great. So what’s up?”

“I can’t fool you. I need a favor and I’ll owe you. I just got hired by a woman whose friend has been missing for a few weeks. The police are investigating but they haven’t found a body and have no clue what happened to her as yet. I’d like a copy of her file so I know what they’ve covered.”

“You’ll really owe me, and you know that I’ll make you pay.”

“I have no doubt. Thanks Frank.”

After hanging up, I called Jack. “Hey Jack, call me when you get a minute.”

Jack is a man I’ve been seeing for over a year now. I met him on a case that took me to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he lives. Well actually he lives in the Town of Lee. He’s also a private investigator who works for a criminal attorney. Though it takes me a while to warm up to someone, it was hard to resist his smile. About a year and a half ago my private investigation business in Manhattan was on the rocks, but was saved by a man who wanted me to locate his missing wife. She turned out to be dead but I had the good fortune of apprehending the killer. Since then business has been on the upside.

“What’s up?” Jack said when I answered my phone.

“You remember the woman I mentioned at Susie’s wedding that wanted to hire me? Well she came in today.” I explained to Jack what she told me.

“Whoa! That’s one interesting case you have there.”

“I’m really excited. I contacted someone that has connections in the police department and he’s going to get me a copy of her file.”

“I didn’t know you knew people in such high places,” Jack said.

I could picture him smiling. “Stick with me kid; you’ll go far.”

“Good to know you’re not just some good looking broad.”

“And what do you have to offer?” I said in a seductive voice.

“You’ll soon find out. When are Susie and Mark coming back?”

“Their flight from Vancouver comes in tomorrow morning. It’s a little weird that I haven’t seen her for two weeks, and she hasn’t a clue that her friend hired me.”

“Unfortunately I have to run. I need to serve a subpoena on someone before five. Keep out of trouble.”

I packed it in and decided to walk the fifteen blocks to my apartment on the upper West Side. On the way home I stopped to pick up Chinese food and then to my favorite place, the Corner Sweet Shoppe, to pick up pistachio ice cream.

“Hi Mr. Hayes.”

“Hi Tracey, always so nice to see my favorite private investigator.”

“You’re such a flatterer. What’s the flavor of the day?”

“Cinnamon mocha.”

“Sounds delicious but I’ll stick to pistachio.”

“Always a wise choice,” he winked.

At home I took a quick shower, put on my sweats, poured myself a glass of Sauvignon Blanc and turned on the little TV I have in the kitchen. I was looking forward to seeing Susie. She and her husband Mark were married two weeks ago at her parents' house in New Hampshire. They left right after the wedding for Northern California and Vancouver. I wanted to pick them up at the airport in the morning but they insisted on taking an Uber.

Susie and I met in high school and have been best friends ever since. We are as different as you can imagine but somehow it works just like an old married couple. Susie is feisty and outgoing, while I'm more reserved. I hate change, while Susie is always game for something different. Even our appearances are completely the opposite. Susie is on the short side with a boyish figure and short curly dark brown hair, while I'm about 5'8" on a good day, more curves and light brown straight hair cut to my chin.

After dinner I got into bed with my laptop and my pistachio ice cream. I wanted to see what articles I could find regarding the disappearance of Cynthia Lambert. There were a few but none that told me anything that I didn't already know from the brief conversation I had with Joanie. If the police did have anything they were keeping a tight lid on it.

## CHAPTER 2

The following morning I was out of the house by six with my gym bag. Wally, my doorman, was at his post.

“Hi Wally, what a perfect spring morning.”

“Well Miss Tracey you’re in a really good mood.”

Wally knows me all too well. My personality tends to be on the less optimistic side, more like doomsday, though I do have my moments. Wally has been my doorman ever since I moved into the building more than ten years ago. He’s originally from Alabama. Wally’s a big guy, probably around seventy, but it’s hard to tell with his velvety complexion.

“Have a good day Wally. Don’t let the lady in 4B get to you. She can drive anyone crazy.”

Wally laughed.

At the gym I did my routine, twenty minutes on the treadmill, then to the weight area to work out my arms and shoulders, finishing up with squats, push-ups and crunches.

On my way into the office I stopped at my usual place, the Coffee Pot, where Anna greeted me with my morning jolt of coffee and a Cranberry Nut Muffin to go. It’s always a treat when I open the bag and see what kind of muffin Anna has surprised me with.

As I closed the door to my office, my phone beeped. “Susie where are you?”

“We just walked into our apartment. It’s good to be home, though I need a day to recuperate. I’ll meet you tomorrow at Anton’s at six. I can’t wait to see you.”

“Me too. Have a lot to tell you.”

“You are such a tease. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Anton’s is our go-to place to eat. It’s a great neighborhood Italian restaurant, not as trendy but less noisy than other restaurants.

While biting into my muffin I opened up my computer and noticed an email from Joanie Gray. I printed it out and looked over the

information she sent me. She provided me a photo of Cynthia, her husband's telephone number, the names and contact information of a few friends and relatives, her place of employment and a cell phone number.

I sat there staring at the photo of Cynthia. There was something about her face that drew me to her. Her black hair was cut right below her chin with bangs cut straight across and a smile showing off her dimples. Her big green eyes were staring right at me. Her nose was a little off-centered but somehow it all worked.

I didn't know when Frank was going to get the police report to me but I figured I would interview the husband first. I called and left a message in his voice mail. In the meantime I emailed the company I use asking them to obtain Cynthia's cell phone records going back three months. Just as I sent the email my phone buzzed.

"Tracey Marks."

"Ms. Marks this is John Lambert returning your call."

"Thank you for getting back to me so quickly. I believe Joanie Gray may have mentioned to you that she hired me to look into the disappearance of your wife."

"Yes, she mentioned you might be calling," he said sounding nervous.

"I need to meet with you. Are you available some time today?"

"I would prefer if we didn't talk with my children in the house. I can come to your office around 5:00 today if that's alright."

"Sure." I gave Mr. Lambert my address before hanging up and decided to wait before calling anyone else on Joanie's list till I spoke with Mr. Lambert.

I walked across the hall to my Cousin Alan's insurance office. The other office on the floor of the brownstone is occupied by Max, a tax accountant who's retiring next month.

"Hey Margaret, how's everything?" Margaret is Alan's assistant.

"Quiet, just the way I like it. Go ahead in."

"Hey cous, how's my favorite boy?"

"I'm assuming you mean Michael. Should I be insulted?" he chuckled.

"Nah, I just like him better." Michael is Alan and Patty's almost one year old son that Patty had in her forties. Michael was an unexpected but wonderful surprise.

"What's going on?" Alan asked.

"I just got an interesting case looking into the disappearance of a woman who vanished less than a month ago and the police have come up empty so far. I was hired by her best friend."

"You think she's alive?" Alan asked.

"According to the friend she would never leave her two kids and her

husband.”

“A lot to take on.”

“I know.”

“How about coming over for dinner Thursday, say around 7:00?”

“Great. Make sure Michael’s still up.”

“Will do.”

By the time I finished up some paperwork and located a witness for a court appearance, it was almost 5:00. I was looking forward to speaking with John Lambert.

I heard a knock and the door-knob turn.

“Mr. Lambert nice to meet you,” I said as I ushered him into my office. Mr. Lambert looked a lot like Adam Driver who played in Star Wars, though Mr. Lambert was shorter.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“No thank you.”

“Why don’t we first start by telling me about yourself and your family?”

“Alright. Begin anywhere?”

“Yes.”

“I work as a paralegal in a law firm in the city. Cynthia and I have been married eleven years and we have two girls, Samantha, 10, and Megan, 8. Do you need to know how we met?”

“Whatever you’d like to tell me.” I was trying to get him to relax and decided not to be direct with all my questions.

“When I first met Cynthia she had just graduated from college and was working at a small brokerage house in their accounting department. As corny as it sounds we met on a blind date.”

“Where was she working before she disappeared?”

“At a firm in the city, Tompkin Insurance, in their Claims Department.”

I noticed John was fidgeting with his hands. “Is something wrong?”

“I was laid off at my job last week.”

Ah, the reason why he can’t afford to hire me.

“Why were you laid off?”

“The police were hounding me. They suspected me of hurting Cynthia. They came to my workplace to question me and to my house in front of my girls. I was having a hard time concentrating on anything as you can imagine.”

“Did the police have any reason to suspect you?”

“Don’t they always suspect the husband?”

“They must have had some reason.”

“Someone told the police that Cynthia and I had separated for a short time about two years ago. Though that’s true, we loved each other and wanted it to work so we went for counseling.”

“What was the reason you separated?”

“Cynthia thought I was wasting my talent being a paralegal. She was pushing me to go to law school at night but I didn’t want to. We would fight a lot. That’s why we separated. But with counseling Cynthia realized I would be miserable being a lawyer. When we got back together things were different. She was more relaxed and we began enjoying each other’s company again.”

“How are you supporting yourself now?”

“We have some savings and I’ll be getting unemployment. Also, I had started working part-time for another law firm to earn more money. I thought it would help our relationship if Cynthia saw how hard I was working. I’m still doing some work at the firm.”

“Tell me more about Cynthia.”

“She’s a great mom. The girls are crying. They have no idea what’s going on and I can’t tell them for sure that their mother is coming back. The other day Samantha asked me if her mother was dead. Some girl at school told Samantha her mother was probably dead. She came home sobbing. It’s heartbreaking. How can I comfort them when I have no idea if Cynthia is still alive.”

I felt bad for Mr. Lambert but I needed to move on. “Is Cynthia an accountant?” I asked in a soft tone.

“That’s what her degree is in but she’s been working at the insurance company for the last six years now. Her brother-in-law got her the job. She went back to work when Megan turned two. I want you to know that Cynthia is a wonderful person, everybody loves her.”

“What can you tell me about the time when you were separated? Was she seeing anyone?”

“As far as I know she wasn’t. Why would you ask me that?” he said raising his voice.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Were you seeing anyone?”

“No, of course not. I wanted us to get back together. I wasn’t looking for someone else.”

“When was the last time you saw your wife?”

“The morning she disappeared. We spoke for a few minutes before she was heading home. She asked me to pick up a few things at the

market. That was the last time I heard from her,” he said as he swallowed some water.

“I think that’s enough for now. I’ll call you if I have any additional questions. And if you think of anything else please contact me.”

As I was walking Mr. Lambert out, I said: “By the way, were the police able to track your wife’s cell phone?”

“No. It was turned off.”

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## About the Author



Ellen Shapiro is a private investigator and the author of two novels, *Looking for Laura* and *Secrets Can Kill*, both Tracey Marks Mysteries. Acting on her passion for writing, Ellen enrolled in the Sarah Lawrence Writing Institute where she took courses in creative writing. Her professional experience led her to create the storylines and develop the characters for her novels. In addition to her novels, Ellen has written articles related to her field for both local and nationwide newspapers and 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.