



Gone Missing (Love Inspired Suspense)

By Camy Tang

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WITHOUT A TRACE

As a skip tracer in training, Joslyn Dimalanta knows she has the skills to track down her missing friend. As long as her friend's startlingly handsome brother, Clay Ashton, doesn't distract her. But then his sister's house detonates—almost killing Clay and Joslyn. Now they realize the harsh reality: they must either find the person after Clay's sister, or face deadly consequences. And the closer they get to exposing the source of the crimes, the more explosive surprises they discover. With every obstacle they overcome, Joslyn finds herself relying on Clay more and more. Still, the peril they face scares her less than the idea of trusting Clay with her wounded heart.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Camy Tang writes romance with a kick of wasabi. She used to be a biologist, but now she is a staff worker for her church youth group and leads a worship team for Sunday service. On her blog, she ponders frivolous things like knitting, dumb dogs (namely, hers), coffee-geek husbands, the writing journey, Asiana, and anything else that comes to mind. And on her Facebook page, the silliness is unleashed. Join her online!

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The man had danger written all over him.

Or maybe that was just Joslyn's perception because of the grim cast to his mouth and the way his powerful body moved with the athletic grace of a man confident in his physical strength. His blue-gray eyes found hers across the hot sidewalk in front of Fiona Crowley's Phoenix home, and her vision wavered as if he were a mirage.

The sun glinted off of the straight, blond-streaked, brown hair that fell over his forehead, and it triggered a memory for her. Fiona had the same hair color, and in pictures she'd shown Joslyn of her brother, they'd looked very much alike.

Joslyn looked more closely at the man as he closed the car door and approached her where she stood at the edge of Fiona's front yard. He had golden-brown stubble that softened his square jaw, but there was no doubt that the shape of his face was the same as Fiona's, although wider and more sharply cut.

"Are you...Clay?" Joslyn guessed as he stopped in front of her.

His low brow wrinkled. "Who are you?" His voice was deep but not gravelly, with a smoothness that made her think of honey.

The Arizona sun had been unbearably hot since six this morning, but it suddenly became a furnace. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of her neck, and she wiped at it. "I'm Joslyn Dimalanta. I was good friends with Fiona when she lived in Los Angeles—we were classmates in the same master's degree program. You're her brother, right? You look exactly like her."

"Half brother." There was a tinge of bitterness in his tone. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here looking for Fiona." She straightened her shoulders. "I got a postcard from her—"

"When?" Clay's eyes suddenly became more intense, and he took a half step toward her.

He wasn't a large man, but something about the strength simmering beneath his wide shoulders gave Joslyn a flash of memory of her abusive ex-boyfriend, and her heartbeat went into red alert for a second. It must have showed on her face, because he looked conscientious and quickly stepped back.

She took a long breath before answering him. "Fiona sent it three weeks ago, but I only got it a few days ago. It was sent to my old address in LA."

"Three weeks? I got a phone call from her three weeks ago."

"What did she say? Is she all right?"

"She said, 'Clay, help me,' and then she hung up." A muscle flexed in his jaw.

"Did she sound frightened? Stressed?"

"Her voice shook." Worry was etched in his face, in the lines between his brows and alongside his mouth. "I hadn't heard from her in..." He stopped himself and looked away.

Joslyn knew, from what Fiona had mentioned back in LA, that Fiona and Clay had been close as children, but had drifted apart. "Before I got the postcard, I hadn't spoken to Fiona in the two years since she left LA." Why would she reach out to him now?

"What did she say?"

"She said she was in trouble and needed my help. But she didn't say where she was." The handwriting had been messy, as if written in a hurry, but she'd recognized it as Fiona's.

"Where was the postmark from?"

"Phoenix. The card was a touristy Grand Canyon design, prestamped."

Clay frowned. "That's strange. Why would she call me and send you a postcard?"

And why wouldn't she say anything more than that she needed help? The knot at the base of her skull tightened even more. "It's why I came here. I had to do some digging to find her address—after she left LA, it looks like she didn't want to be found."

"I had to hire a private investigator to find this address for me." But there was uncertainty in his face as he glanced at the house. The house's large front bay window had white curtains pulled across it, and there was no way to know if anyone was inside. "Did you ring the doorbell?"

"No, I just got here."

Clay's mouth was grim. "Maybe it was just a bad joke."

On two people Fiona hadn't spoken to in years? Joslyn didn't think it was likely, but the alternative was that Fiona was in serious trouble.

Clay strode up the concrete walkway that wound through the stone garden in the front yard to the door. "Let's hope she doesn't run away screaming when she sees me," he muttered.

"Fiona always talked about what a great big brother you were," Joslyn said. Protective. Someone she'd trust. Fiona had loved him dearly, but had simply shaken her head sadly when Joslyn asked why she didn't try to get in touch with Clay again after all these years.

He looked at Joslyn in surprise, his eyes lightening to blue. It transformed his serious face into that of a man

from whom a great burden had been lifted. But then pain flickered across his gaze and he turned away.

Joslyn followed him to the front door, trying to wrap her head around everything that had come out in the past few minutes. This was too much thrown at her at once—not just Fiona's postcard, but her phone call to Clay, equally as vague. And then meeting Clay here, seeing firsthand the strength in his body and the fearless way he carried himself, fitting the stories Fiona had told Joslyn about Clay being a mob strong-arm in Chicago, before he went to prison.

Her first reaction had been attraction, but her second had been wariness. She'd suffered physically and emotionally at the hands of her ex-boyfriend. She knew that not all strong men would hurt her, but she had become extra cautious about making herself vulnerable again.

Clay rang the doorbell, and they could faintly hear it ding-dong inside the house. He stood with his hands in his jeans pockets, but there was a tension across his wide shoulders that belied his casual pose. He rang the doorbell again. Still no answer.

Joslyn checked her watch. It was eight o'clock on Monday morning. "Maybe she went to work already."

"Do you know where she works?"

"She's IT support at a manufacturing company." It was a rather low-paying job for Fiona, assuming she'd ended up finally getting her degree, but maybe she couldn't get anything on a higher pay scale, or maybe she preferred the hours there.

Clay's eyes narrowed to a stormy gray. "You said you haven't talked to her in two years. How do you know all this?"

"It's my job to find out stuff like this. I'm training to be a skip tracer."

"A skip tracer?"

"I find people. I also help people disappear." Joslyn had been especially grateful to her friend Elisabeth, who had originally helped her escape her abusive ex, a Filipino gang captain in Los Angeles. Elisabeth had gotten Joslyn a job in the O'Neill Agency while she finished her last few quarters of school. Joslyn found she enjoyed helping people, especially other women who wanted to get away from dangerous relationships. She understood their situations only too well and only hoped that Fiona wasn't suffering at the hands of a man.

Clay went to the front window to try to peer through the crack in the curtains. Joslyn noticed an envelope sticking out of the mail box next to the door and opened the lid. It was full of mail. It didn't look as though Fiona got a lot of junk mail, but some envelopes she did get were postmarked several weeks ago. "I don't think Fiona's been home for a while." A chill crept over her skin.

Clay frowned. "I don't like this."

"I know where Fiona usually kept a spare key," Joslyn said. "In the back, under—"

"The ugliest gnome," Clay finished for her, flashing a smile. His eyes crinkled and turned a glittering aquamarine, and Joslyn's heartbeat blipped. While Fiona was beautiful, her brother was incredibly handsome.

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"She got that from me. It's where I hid the spare key at my house back in Chicago, years ago."

They headed around the side of the house, through the wooden latch gate, which was unlocked. The shade from the building made the temperature drop a few degrees, but it was still oppressively hot.

The backyard was small and bricked over, with plant beds along the walls containing a few orange and lemon trees. However, there was also a line of little gnome statues next to the glass back door, and the ugliest one was clearly the largest, a hideous creature with a long nose and a grinning mouth full of grimy teeth. Clay tipped it over and found a key underneath.

Joslyn tried to peer through the wooden slats of the blinds covering the glass door, but couldn't see anything in the darkened room beyond except for a glimpse of a television set and a leather couch. The space seemed unusually dark considering the number of windows the house had.

Clay inserted the key and it turned smoothly. He swung the handle and eased the door open.

Then suddenly he was grabbing her and leaping aside just as an explosion shattered the morning.

The noise of the blast boomed in Clay's ears as he rolled with Joslyn, protecting her with his body. The heat from the blast rushed over his back like an ocean wave, and debris pelted them like hail.

His brain felt like a bottle of soda that had been shaken and popped open, with fizzing bubbles clouding his vision. A ringing roared in his ears, dominating all other sound. He blinked, and his vision cleared to the sight of Joslyn's dark hair tumbled over the bricks of the yard. He was sprawled on top of her, and he could smell apricot and jasmine, and the scent of walking through a quiet wood.

"Are you all right?" His voice came from far away. He rolled to the side so he wasn't crushing her beneath him.

"Joslyn?"

She moved slowly, lifting her head. Her clear, goldenbrown eyes were dazed. She didn't speak, but simply looked at him in confusion. "Anything broken?"

She slowly sat up, checking her slender limbs. She shook her head, then looked behind him at the house.

There was a gaping hole where the back door had been. Plaster from the exploded wall still rained from the air. The roof lurched drunkenly.

"Come on, we need to get clear of the house." He rose to his feet, feeling aches in his joints from the blast and the hard landing on the bricks. Joslyn took the hand he held out to her, and they skirted around the less damaged side of the house to get to the front again.

Fiona's next-door neighbor had rushed out to her front yard, an older woman with gray, permed hair, dressed in a tank top and shorts. She gaped at them as they appeared. "Are you all right? What happened? Good gracious, was that a bomb? Fiona's poor house. What was a bomb doing in her house?"

What *was* a bomb doing in Fiona's house? It had been rigged to explode as soon as the door was breached. Clay had been incredibly lucky to see the tripwire as he opened the door, and his reflexes had taken over, allowing him to grab Joslyn and leap to safety. Luckily, it looked as if it hadn't been a very large explosion, although it had been enough to blow out a few of the windows in the house. Glass covered the stone garden in the front yard.

Clay was starting to recover his hearing because he now heard a dog barking from inside the house next door and a car alarm sounding from somewhere nearby. Luckily, there hadn't been many people home at this time of morning on this street—just the next-door neighbor, and a couple people from houses across the street, including one older woman with two young children.

"We need to call the police," Joslyn said to the neighbor.

Clay's shoulders knotted. Once the police realized he was an ex-convict at the site of an explosion, things would get interesting. This had nothing to do with his past.

At least, he hoped it didn't. The mob family he'd worked for years ago, before he'd gone to prison, was now defunct, and he hadn't been very high on the totem pole to begin with. He didn't think he had any enemies left who would want revenge on him, but if he did, then rigging his sister's house to blow up was a rather melodramatic way to do it. A sniper shot would have been easier.

"I'm calling them right now," said a neighbor from across the street who had her cell phone. "I can't believe this. My great-grandkids are with me today, too."

The two kids were standing in the street staring wide-eyed at the house, which didn't look much different from the front except for some dust and curls of smoke rising from the broken windows. "Can we go see—"

"No," their great-grandmother said firmly, then spoke into the phone as the police dispatcher picked up the line. "Yes, I'm here at Braeden Court, and there's been an explosion!" She gave Clay a suspicious look.

"Oh, don't mind her," Fiona's next-door neighbor said to Clay. "She thinks the government put microchips in polio vaccines so they could monitor everyone." The woman waved a finger in a circle around her ear. "Completely cuckoo."

"Are you all right?" Joslyn asked her. "Your house is right next door."

"Luckily there's a lot of space in the side yards and the fence is good and thick. My windows rattled but no damage. I'm Mary, by the way." She held out a gnarled hand.

Joslyn and Clay introduced themselves, and Mary looked closely at Clay. "You related to Fiona? You look just like her."

"She's my half sister."

"I'm a friend of hers from Los Angeles," Joslyn said. "We came here to see her."

Mary's steel-gray eyebrows rose. "I'd hoped she'd just gone to visit someone like one of you when she disappeared."

"She disappeared?" Clay had to fight the alarm he felt.

"A few weeks ago, I heard barking from her house and went to see what was going on. She gave me a spare key because sometimes she asks me to take care of her dog, Poochie. Looked like the poor thing had been left alone for a day or two, so I took him." Mary jabbed a thumb backward toward her house, where the dog was still barking intermittently. "I haven't seen any sign of Fiona since. I filed a police report, but they haven't done anything. Do you think her vanishing has something to do with the blast? Thank God it didn't happen when I got her dog." Mary shuddered at the close call. "Was it a gas leak or something?"

"Um...we're not sure," Joslyn said carefully. She looked briefly at Clay, but he somehow knew what she was thinking. The less they told the neighbors, the better.

"We were opening the door when it blew up," Clay said to Mary.

"My goodness, are you two all right? You don't look injured, but..."

"We're fine," Joslyn said.

"You better make sure you get seen by a doctor," Mary said.

"What happened?" People started to arrive from other streets in the area, gaping at the house. Mary was only too happy to tell them a dramatized account of the explosion.

Clay pulled Joslyn aside. "You sure you're okay?" he asked her. She was tall but slender, and she seemed so delicate.

She nodded, although there was worry in her face. "Who rigged Fiona's house to explode?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. But whoever did it is a ruthless killer." He sighed and eyed the ruined shell of the house.

Joslyn shivered, even in the sweltering heat.

Clay had dealt with men just as ruthless when he'd been a street thug for that mob family in Chicago. He hadn't killed anyone, but if he'd kept going down that road, who knows what he might have become?

That thought was like a dark blot on his soul.

Police sirens blared, and soon a squad car turned the corner and barreled down the street toward them, followed by paramedics. Clay's shoulders tensed out of habit, and he relaxed them. He wondered if there would ever be a time when his past wouldn't crop up in his present.

He answered the officers' questions evenly, but that only seemed to make them suspicious, if the curious looks they threw at him were any indication. He submitted to the paramedic's exam, but other than a few minor cuts from flying glass and debris, he was unhurt. Part of the door frame had hit him on the side and a chunk of plaster had glanced off his shoulder, but he shook off the bruises. He'd had worse.

He knew the exact moment the officers had looked him up and found out about his prison record. They had hard glints in their eyes as they approached him. "So Mr. Ash-ton, what are you doing here in Arizona?"

You're a long ways from Illinois." The officer's name badge read Campbell.

"I came to see my half sister, Fiona Crowley."

Users Review

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