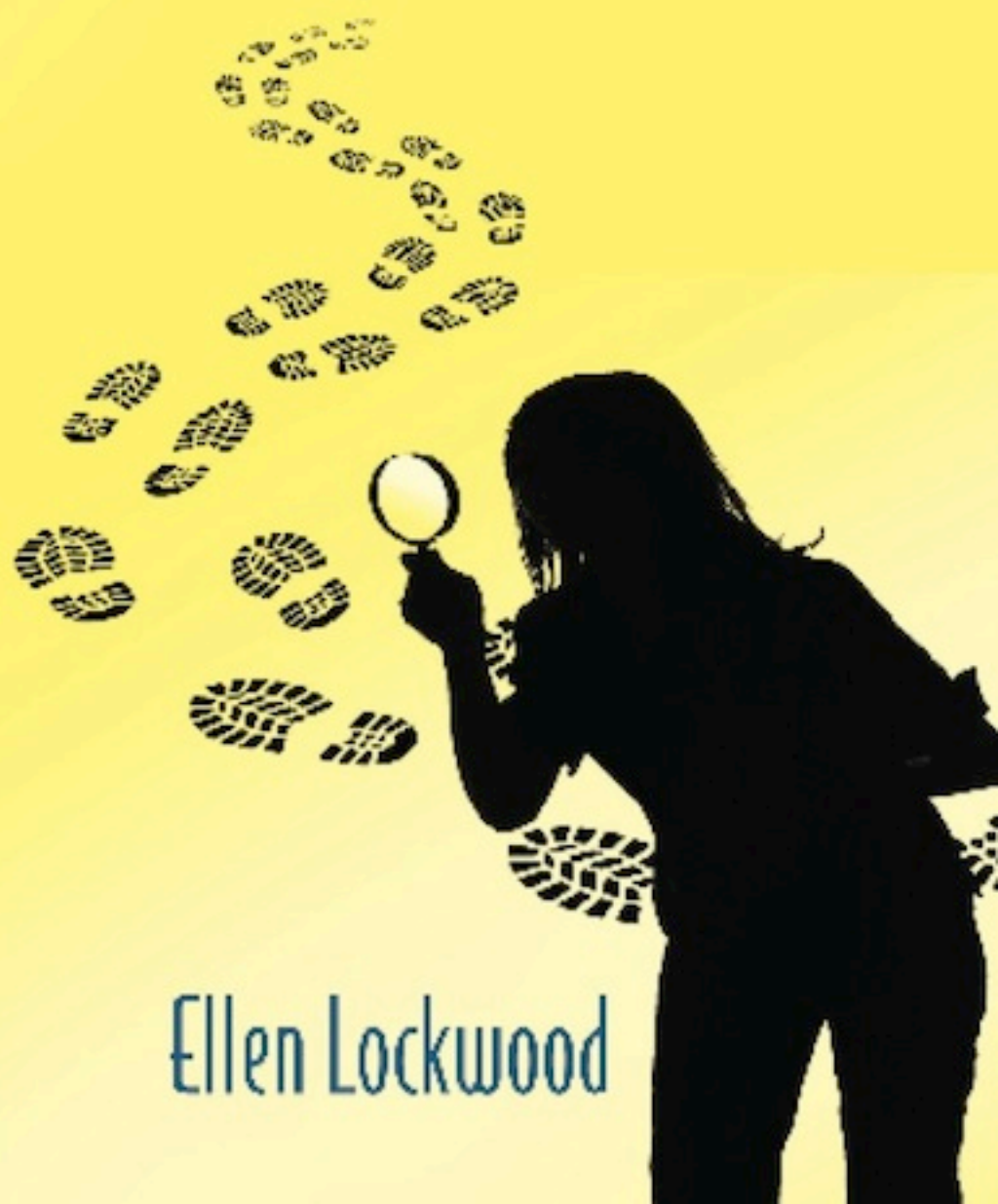
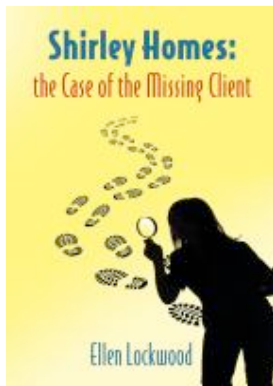


Shirley Homes:

the Case of the Missing Client



Ellen Lockwood



Shirley Homes, a spunky, single, 35-year-old woman who has not found success in traditional roles or the corporate environment, decides to become a private detective. Shirley sees an ad on the side of a bus about becoming a private detective, and takes the class. With her enthusiasm for snooping, and her love of gossip, this is the perfect profession for her. She gets her first client, Marigold Ashford, and their adventures begin...

Shirley Homes and the Case of the Missing Client

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Your free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

Shirley Homes

The Case
of the Missing Client

Ellen Lockwood

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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First Edition

Dedication

I want to thank my husband for his inspiration of Shirley Homes and for his love and support while I wrote this book.

I would also like to thank all the people who believed in me and those who supported me in this endeavor. Thank you for your support and encouragement.

To my readers, I hope you enjoy Shirley and her adventures and will want to read more about her endeavors in the future.

Shirley Homes

The Case of the Missing Client

My name is Shirley Homes. I am 35 years old, overweight, or as some would say pleasingly plump but I don't see anything pleasing about it. I am 5'4" tall which means when I shop for pants in petite sizes they can be too short and look high water and the regular length pants drag the floor. With all my shopping frustrations, I often thought about trying to design a line of clothing that would be in a special category called "regular lite." When you try on a pair of pants and there are six inches dragging the ground it makes you wonder who can really wear these things. After much thought, I decided I was not a designer. Heck, I couldn't even sew. I tried to make myself a skirt in the past and ended up calling it a sarong and being done with it. Since designing a line of clothing was not in my future, I moved on to various jobs trying to keep myself living indoors and fed. I attempted to be a secretary in the past and found that my skills in that area were definitely lacking. I am too honest and outspoken in order to fit nicely into the corporate world. I learned early on that when one of the wives called for the boss I was not supposed to say "he says to tell you he is not in."

Since I like living indoors and eating, which goes back to my figure, I had to find a way to survive. I saw an ad on the side of a bus about how to become a private detective. Since I am basically a nosey person and willing to snoop I thought that sounded like a good fit for me. I signed up for classes and found that a lot of people in the class were a lot like me, trying to find themselves. The instructor was some burly guy whom I suspect was an ex-marine. He did not have a soft voice and everything he said sounded like he was yelling. I wondered how he could keep that up and not lose his voice but no such luck. Day after day he was there yelling. The basics of the class were not difficult, and I felt certain I could master the content. I felt confident until we got to the part of the training about shooting a gun. That part was tricky for me. No matter how much I practiced, I would overshoot the target. Of course, the instructor always ended up being right behind me every time I missed the target. I could hear him and his expletives easily over everyone shooting and the earphones I wore. I finally decided to try to aim low, which allowed me some degree of success in hitting the head of the target. Occasionally, I even hit the chest area. I also learned, as time went on, that aiming low with men was more frightening to them than if I aimed at their heads. After much practice and more yelling, I finally passed the test and received my license. I was so proud and just knew I was on the road to success. All I had to do now was find a nice cushy job, and I would be set. The class I took

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promised you would have no trouble finding a job and in addition, promised great salaries. Reality was different than the class promises.

I applied at all kinds of agencies looking for private detectives, or security details. What I found was that hiring an overweight female was not on the top of the list for most companies. Oh, they would never admit that, after all, they did not want me to sue them; I came to that conclusion myself by noticing the other members already on the team. All of them were tall, slim and some could even pass for linebackers on a football team. When I left the office, I could actually hear laughing but since I am a feisty broad, I just pictured aiming low and then moved on.

Finally, I printed up business cards and decided I would work for myself. I pictured days of making my own schedule, sipping drinks at lunch with money rolling in. My office would be so lush it would rival the offices of the biggest CEO at any corporation. That lasted about two weeks when reality struck. I needed money for rent. I found myself back to taking part-time jobs to take care of the rent and the food I am so fond of. I never gave up my dream and continued to put my cards on bulletin boards all over town. I put several on my favorite ice cream parlor's board since I frequented it quite often.

Instead of the plush office I had pictured, I worked out of my one-room apartment with furniture I had gotten in various

places. My couch had been set on the curb with a sign that said “free” so I dragged it home figuring I could cover the stains on it with a blanket, and it would give me some place to sit instead of the bed.

When I was almost ready to give up and throw in the towel, a call came in. A perfect case for me, a wife wanted to know if her husband was cheating on her. After listening to her give me her reasons for being concerned, I thought I could guess the answer. However, I needed the work, so I gave her my price and took the job. I arranged to meet my client at my favorite ice cream parlor, and so I found a corner table to wait for her. My client was Marigold Ashford....yes, Marigold. She was tall, thin, blonde the total opposite of me. I whipped out my little official-looking notebook, so I could take down the information that Marigold was giving me. I was writing furiously because Marigold was talking so fast, and I was trying to keep up. She also brought a picture for me of her and her husband. I could not believe it. He was built more like me. He was not at all what I expected from meeting Marigold. I figured this was a marriage for money but Marigold really seemed to love the guy. As I studied the picture, I noticed he was a good six inches shorter than Marigold, balding, and in this picture was wearing a Hawaiian shirt. He was wearing Bermuda shorts, and I could see his bony legs and knobby knees trying to hold up his rather pudgy middle. Marigold had on a bathing suit with a wild print that could have blinded

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passersby and a loose wrap around her tiny waist that was supposed to resemble a type of skirt. She was looking adoringly at Buford. I tried to bite my tongue so I wouldn't laugh, but in my head I heard the children's rhyme, "Marigold and Buford sitting in a tree....." Actually, I was not sure Buford could have climbed a tree with his short legs and beer belly. Marigold was upset so I tried to show compassion. I have been told that tact is not my strong suit, so I guessed that asking her who she thought would be chasing Buford was not the route to take. Unfortunately, I found that out after I had asked the question. Marigold was crying, so I waited for her to collect herself and reminded myself how much I needed this job. I assured her I would do my best to get the information she needed and get back to her as soon as I could. I tried to prepare her by letting her know I could not guarantee she would like what I found out. She dried her eyes and we agreed to meet here the next Monday to discuss the update of what I had found.

I left the ice cream parlor and jumped into my old clunker of a car. You actually have to jump in as the door is dented and doesn't open. Hey, it is all I could afford. I turned the key and waited for the backfire I knew would come then rattled on down the street to Buford's office. His office was in an upscale part of downtown, and my clunker stood out like a sore thumb among all the BMWs, Mercedes, Cadillacs, Audis and Corvettes. The office building was very high end, the kind with

a big green awning and a doorman. I decided in my current outfit, I would never get into the building. I was in my favorite jeans the ones with enough stretch to make me feel like I was losing weight and a pullover shirt. I hated wearing anything with buttons as the shirt always gapped in some area. I had tried the trick of pinning the gap but was never successful in hiding the safety-pin. The pin always showed no matter how many times I tried to do it correctly. I cruised around the block and finally found a place to park where I could watch the entrance and see people leaving the building. Marigold had assured me that Buford always left the building by 7:00 PM. I asked how she knew that, and she told me when she had become suspicious, she got into the habit of calling him at 7 each evening. I asked her how she knew he was gone and not just avoiding answering the phone. She told me she had gotten his office key and had a duplicate made and when this went on for several weeks, she actually drove to his office and let herself in to look around. I liked the sneaky way she had done that, and I think we bonded when I found that out about her. You have to admire someone who looks like a model but can stoop to being a snoop when times call for it.

I was sitting in my hot car thinking Buford was never going to appear when I suddenly spotted him walking out with a group of men. I almost missed him as all the men he was with were taller than he was. The taller man said something, and Buford started talking animatedly hopping up and down and waving

his arms around in the air. I wanted to have Marigold help me identify the others in the group, so I whipped out my old camera and started taking pictures of the men. The camera was a Christmas gift from my aunt Mona many years ago. Mona had high hopes that I would take up photography and pursue a respectable career. I had opened the camera at Christmas, several years ago and never taken it out of the box. Some of the Christmas paper was still covering the bottom of the box. Mona was one of those people who could wrap gifts like a professional. Every corner was exactly straight and there were never any wrinkles in the paper. The design of the paper was folded so that the top half of Santa lined up perfectly with the bottom half of Santa on the other side. Mona was also one of those people who could actually fold a fitted sheet to perfection. I admired her and loved her dearly; however, my fitted sheets were rolled into a ball and stuffed into the closet. She did try very hard to help me; I just could never get the hang of it. Silently, I thanked her now, for the camera as I continued snapping pictures of the men. Several of them had listened to what was being said and shaking their heads had moved on to their own cars driving to who knows where. When I looked back, I saw Buford shaking his fist at the man left standing with him. I thought it was pretty gutsy of Buford as the guy he was talking with towered over him and was a lot heavier. It was like watching a Yorkie take on a Great Dane. The taller man had dark hair, muscular arms that you could

see through his suit coat and a sizeable thick black mustache with huge buck teeth. The teeth were so large he reminded me of a beaver and as he talked, I could see the mustache moving up and down. I thought to myself "this guy would never be able to say his bark was worse than his bite!" He glared at Buford and yelled something that sent spit flying from his mouth. Buford stepped back and wiped his face then turned on his heel and walked toward his car.

I started my car, which caused both men to turn their heads when it backfired. I think they thought one of them had taken out a gun and was shooting. They glared toward my car but kept walking in opposite directions. To my surprise, Buford walked past his car and hailed a taxi. I thought "great now I have to drive like a taxi driver in traffic." I reminded myself that this was my first case and I was determined to make good on it. I followed the taxi and had no trouble staying out of site as the traffic was terrible. The good news for me was that the taxi driver could not go too fast, and even though he zipped around cars and changed lanes he always ended up having to stop at the same light that I did. I had no idea where Buford was heading, and so I had no choice but to keep following him. Finally, the taxi broke loose of the traffic and headed over the bridge into the next town. This was more of a challenge for my poor clunker as speed was not something it had the capacity to do. I was afraid to push it too hard as I did not want to have

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to walk or hitchhike back to my apartment if I blew up the car engine.

Just when I thought I might lose the cab, it slowed down and turned right on a little shady side street. There were neat little houses and small well-kept yards. The neighborhood was quiet, not a lot of kids playing or anything, so I figured this was mostly an adult area. I passed one house with an old couple sitting on the porch. They looked so happy, and I smiled to myself and thought of Mayberry. I noticed that Buford was getting out of the cab about four houses down so I pulled over and stopped my car. I slipped out of the car and walked down the sidewalk hiding behind the bushes lining the street. The taxi took off and Buford looked both ways before walking up to the front door of a little yellow house with white shutters. The porch was small but there were flowers in planter boxes on the rail. I thought this could have been his mother's house, just a sweet little place that looked harmless. Buford tried the door; I noticed he did not knock. When he found he could not get in, he walked around the side of the house, and I guessed he was going to try the back door. There was no way for me to follow and not be spotted so I had to wait to see if he came back around. Sure enough, I saw him turning and heading for the garage. About that time, a little red sports car pulled into the driveway. The woman who got out could have been a Dolly Parton look-alike in the bust area. She was very well endowed on the top shelf and about the same height as

Buford. She had flaming red hair. She was wearing short-shorts and a little top that tied at the waist. I was stunned, and wondered what she saw in Buford. She wrapped her little skinny arms around him and kissed him thoroughly. I was busy watching the display, and I almost forgot to start taking pictures. Darn, I hated that this case would be ending so soon. It sure looked like Buford had something going on the side but for the life of me; I could not figure out how he was such a magnet for hot women. They talked for a minute and then headed for the front door. Before they could reach the porch, a big black limo came careening down the street. It stopped right in front of the house and I heard a scream but could not see anything with the limo blocking my view. I decided I needed to act fast and stashed the camera in the bush I was hiding behind then ran over across the street. The man with the buck teeth was dragging Buford into the car. I grabbed for my gun and yelled at him to stop. He shoved the redhead in my direction slammed Buford into the car and took off before I could take a shot at him. I tried to shoot at the tires like they do in the movies but totally missed, and so I stopped before I hit an innocent bystander. With all the commotion, neighbors were now collecting out on their porches and watching the best entertainment they had probably seen in years in this quiet place.

I helped the redhead up off the ground, and grabbed my cell phone to call 911. The redhead begged me not to make the

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call and I assured her this had to be reported as Buford had obviously been kidnapped. I talked to the dispatcher, crossed the street to get my camera and came back to talk to the redhead. I told her who I was, and that I was a private detective. I left Marigold's name out of the introduction.

The redhead said her name was Ivy, and I wondered what it was about Buford that attracted him to girls with plant names. I asked her if we could go inside and talk, she nodded and took me into the front room where we sat down on a sofa that put my sofa to shame. She was a little shaky but considering what had just happened she did not seem as upset as I expected her to be. Ivy began talking before I could even start asking questions. She had met Buford at a sports bar where she was a waitress. There had been a fight and Buford had offered her a ride home. They had gotten friendly, and she thought of him as a father figure. In my mind, I was remembering the kiss I saw and thinking she was trying to cover up the relationship. Before I could tell her what I saw the police were at the door. I identified myself and gave the police my statement. I showed them the picture I had of the buck-toothed man and then sat quietly listening to the version they were getting from Ivy. She swore Buford was a kindly gentleman friend, and she had no idea why this had happened. I rolled my eyes but kept my mouth shut. I looked at the Policeman whose name was Bernie and could tell he was not totally buying this story either. He gave me his card and told me to call if I could

remember anything else. The police checked around outside and then spoke to neighbors as I went back to talk to Ivy. I let Ivy know I had seen the lip lock she had put on Buford, but she said it was just a kiss of gratitude for him helping her get this house and yes; he had given her the car. I wished I had a friend like that! I went over how they had met for the fourth or fifth time, but she never changed her story. I asked if she had ever seen the big guy that had taken Buford, and she stuck to the story that he was a total stranger. Since I am not big on coincidences, I thought it was odd that this man would know exactly where to find Buford. I handed my card to Ivy and asked her to call me should she hear from Buford or the big guy again.

I walked back to my car and saw a few people standing around out on the lawns. I went over and asked if they had recognized Buford or the big guy or had ever seen them in the neighborhood before. The police were still walking around and talking to people as well, so I was not sure I would have much luck gathering additional information. Just when I had heard all the general statements I thought I could handle, I saw an old lady motioning to me. She was short and spry with a gleam in her eyes that was unmistakable. Her face was wrinkled and she had chin hairs growing in wild and various directions. I reached out to shake her hand and she almost pulled me out of my shoes as she tugged me over to her, I was shocked at her strength. She looked so cute and tiny but wow did she

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have a grip! She told me her name was Georgia Wrinkle. I looked at her suspiciously, and she assured me that was her name. She also told me that she had a son who was doing time in the slammer, and she did not like talking to policemen. I did not have to ask her how she knew I was not a cop, so I saved myself the embarrassment. I asked her if I could call her Georgia, and she told me to mind my manners and call her Ms. Wrinkle. Ms. Wrinkle led me to her porch where she had set out some iced tea. She asked me to sit down and we chatted about the neighborhood briefly. I asked her if she knew Buford and showed her his picture. I silently thanked Aunt Mona again for the camera. Ms. Wrinkle said she knew Buford and also had known the lady who used to live in the house that was now being occupied by the redheaded Ivy. The lady who had resided there had been her friend and the third person to live in that house. She had passed away almost a year ago and left the house empty. Her greedy family, according to Ms. Wrinkle, did not even provide a proper funeral. All they cared about was getting their hands on her possessions and selling her house for whatever money they could get. I nodded sympathetically but did not make any comments. Ms. Wrinkle said she met Buford when he came to look at the house about eight weeks ago. She had introduced herself and in her words tried to get a feel for what kind of a neighbor he might be. She thought he was a nice elderly gentleman who might be a good fit in this older community. She knew he paid cash for the

home and then moved the dreaded redhead into the house. She was shocked and not at all pleased to see someone like that in her neighborhood. I kept my thoughts about her son being in the slammer to myself but could not help thinking he used to live in this neighborhood too. I asked if she had gone over to meet Ivy and she said she would not darken her front porch. She did however, have a lot to say about the comings and goings of that house since Ivy had moved in. The large buck-toothed man had been around a few times but mostly he just walked around outside the house. It was weird, like he was casing the place according to Ms. Wrinkle. She went on to tell me about how his parents should have paid for braces for him and he should do something about his teeth now that he was a grown man. I smiled and nodded not wanting to stop the flow of information. Ms. Wrinkle had lived in this neighborhood since her “sonny” had been in grade school. She was like a built in historian of the neighborhood and could easily tell me all the gossip about every house on the block. The sweet old couple I had seen when I drove in were actually newlyweds. It was the fourth marriage for him and the fifth for her. Ms. Wrinkle looked for the demise of the husband any day now so the old woman could move on to husband number six. There went my delusion of a sweet old couple who were in a long-time relationship sitting on the porch holding hands. I was hopeful that sweet-faced woman was not a murderer but felt unsure of what to believe. Ms. Wrinkle was talking, and I

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was daydreaming until I heard her say something important. I asked her to repeat what she said about Ivy having changed her looks when she moved in. She explained that Ivy had dark hair and a flat chest when she first moved into that house. Things had changed very fast it seems. This definitely got my curiosity going. Was Ivy hiding from someone or something? Would the kidnapper have grabbed Ivy instead of Buford if I had not run over there? Questions were swirling in my head. I needed to talk to Marigold and see if she recognized any of the men I had pictures of.

I gave Ms. Wrinkle my card and asked her to call me if she saw anything going on at Ivy's house or anything strange in the neighborhood. I felt like I was leaving the Twilight Zone as I drove away because after talking to Georgia Wrinkle it seemed this quiet little neighborhood hid a lot of secrets.

I drove slowly back to my apartment and trudged up the stairs to my lowly abode. I was extremely tired, and it was very late when I got home. I needed a shower from sitting in a hot car and hiding in bushes. After my shower, I put on my favorite soft flannel shirt and laid down on the bed. Thoughts were running through my head on how to talk to Marigold when my phone rang. I was so groggy I considered not answering the phone but then saw it was Marigold's number. Marigold was crying and carrying on about Buford, obviously the police had talked to her. She was to stay at home near the telephone in

case there was a call demanding ransom for Buford. She wanted to know everything I had found out right away. I told her I had just gotten into bed so I needed a minute to get my notes. She told me to pack a bag because her driver would be at my place shortly. I was going to stay with her until some news broke about Buford. I protested but saw there was no way I was going to win this argument. I stuck my tongue out at the receiver before hanging up the phone, dragged myself out of bed and threw some things into a bag. Luckily I don't own a lot of things, and I barely wear make-up so it did not take me long to pack. I sat on my old ratty couch and thought about my daydream of making my own hours and all the freedom I was going to have when I worked for myself. I would have laughed if I had the energy to do it. The knock on my door told me my ride had arrived. I looked out the peep hole and saw a uniformed driver. I asked his name, and he slid his ID under my door. He assured me Marigold had sent him, so I opened my door. I was led to a car that was almost as big as my apartment and much nicer to sit in. The driver was not chatty, so I leaned back and closed my eyes.

I awoke to Marigold clamoring about something and tried to orient myself to my surroundings. I got out of the car and Marigold hugged my neck like we were old friends. We went inside, and I saw a room that was like a picture out of a magazine. Marigold called it the sitting area. To me, it looked like a small apartment, complete with a little bar, sink and

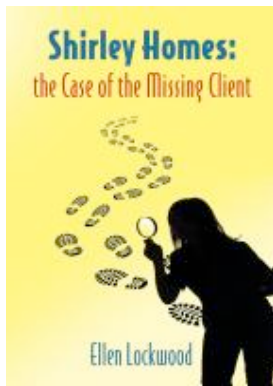
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refrigerator. She asked if I wanted anything to drink, and I said no. We sat down, and I told her everything I could remember about what I saw. I left off the big kiss I saw Ivy lay on Buford, but did mention Ivy by name. I showed her the pictures on the camera and she identified the group of men I had seen with Buford. Finally, I had a name for the man with buck-teeth so I could stop thinking of him as beaver. His name was Woody, I laughed until tears were running down my face. I could not help it; I was tired and it had been a long day. Why on earth would some parent name a kid with buck-teeth Woody? Marigold sat staring at me, but I could not stop laughing. I tried to explain why this was funny, but she did not see the humor since he had been the one that had taken Buford. Woody's last name was Lucas, and I asked her if she had told the police that. She said they described the man I had shown them the picture of, and she thought that was the name she had given them. I told her that it appeared Buford had purchased the house for Ivy, but I was not really able to clearly state their relationship. It appeared as if they were close, but Buford was kidnapped before I could prove anything. I figured the case was closed as far as I was concerned so I offered to refund part of the money she had given me earlier. She said she did not want a refund and offered to pay me to stay on with her until we could find out why Woody had taken Buford. I think I might have jumped for joy if I had not been so tired. I now had an excuse to stay in this house and continue working

on my case. I told Marigold that I needed some sleep, and then we could talk again in the morning about the financial part of this deal. I did not want to cheat her out of money but tonight was not the time for me to talk about financial matters. My brain was too fuzzy.

Marigold showed me to the guest room and it was bigger than my entire apartment. The bathroom was white marble, and the shower really was the size of my apartment. There was a tub with jets and lots of plush towels and good smelling soaps. The bed looked bigger than king sized and was made up with silk sheets. Real silk, not the fake silk I found in the stores I went to. Somehow it felt wrong to put on my favorite flannel shirt so I just stripped out of my clothes and went to bed in the nude. I could not believe how good the silk felt on my skin. The bed was the perfect balance of support and softness and I fell asleep instantly.

I woke up the next morning to the smell of coffee and bacon, my two favorite things. I showered quickly or as rapidly as I could and still enjoy the rain showerhead and the jetted water from the system on the shower wall. It was heaven. I dressed in my good old stretch jeans and a clean pullover shirt. This one was yellow and I thought the color would brighten me up since I still had bags under my eyes. I went in search of Marigold.



Shirley Homes, a spunky, single, 35-year-old woman who has not found success in traditional roles or the corporate environment, decides to become a private detective. Shirley sees an ad on the side of a bus about becoming a private detective, and takes the class. With her enthusiasm for snooping, and her love of gossip, this is the perfect profession for her. She gets her first client, Marigold Ashford, and their adventures begin...

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