

**READ IT FIRST**

*The  
Lost Women  
of Lost Lake*



A JANE LAWLESS MYSTERY

*Ellen Hart*

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A crimson sun sat low in the sky over the blue waters of Lost Lake when the stranger walked into the LaVasser Soda Fountain & Gift Emporium on Main Street. Lyndie LaVasser, the owner, happened to be standing behind the cash register at the time, hiding the cigarette she was smoking by keeping her hand tucked under the counter. She'd been watching her grandson, Kenny, hustle a girl who'd graduated from high school with him last spring. She was seated on one of the old-fashioned chrome and red Naugahyde stools. The girl's name was Emily Jensen, a va-pid but pretty little flirt. Kenny was ignoring the rest of the customers, which concerned Lyndie because, with the bad economy, the soda fountain was keeping the emporium afloat.

She cleared her throat.

Her grandson glanced up and grinned.

She nodded to the man waving his hand, trying to get his attention.

"Be back in a flash," Kenny said to Emily.

The boy might look like a linebacker for a pro football team, yet he was still a child, in Lyndie's opinion—happy one minute, down in the dumps the next. Emily, with that ethereal look in

her eyes, overdone makeup, and long, golden, naturally curly tresses, was a diva in training, not the kind of girl who would ever understand a difficult personality like Kenny. The boy needed someone down-to-earth, someone who could watch a Vikings game with him and then go outside during halftime and enjoy watching him blow stuff up in the backyard. In her experience, men rarely picked wives for the right reasons. They went for looks. Legs. Breasts. Hips. Mouths. Eyes. Smiles. Damn the torpedoes and anything else that got between them and their favorite body part.

Lyndie made a mental note to talk to Kenny about this Emily kid, and yet as she watched the stranger move around the store, the thought drifted out of her mind.

Dipping down to take another quick drag, Lyndie eased onto a stool. At sixty-two, she was still slim and attractive, although she also fit quite easily into the grandmother category, which annoyed the heck out of her because inside she felt a tad divalike herself. Outward appearances, as she well knew, could be deceiving. Lyndie had a past, and that past told her the man eyeing the books by Minnesota authors along the back wall was a cop.

Working his way up to the front, the man smiled at her as he touched the black brim of his Chicago White Sox cap. “Evening.”

“Can I help you?”

“I hope so. I’m looking for a woman named Judy Clark.” He planted a pair of hairy hands on the glass countertop. “She’d be in her sixties now. About your age, I would guess. I have a photo, although it’s old. And it’s not very good.” He reached into the inner pocket of his light cotton jacket, drew it out.

Lyndie stubbed out the cigarette and slipped on her reading glasses. “You say this person lives in Lost Lake?”

“That’s what I’ve been told.”

The photo showed a waiflike young woman in jeans and a navy peacoat standing next to a handsome, sandy-haired guy in a ripped army jacket. Both were wearing bulky scarves that partially obscured their faces. “Have you tried the phone book?”

“She’s not listed.”

Handing the snapshot back, Lyndie shrugged. “Sorry. I’ve never seen either of these people before. As you said, the picture’s kind of old. Where was it taken?”

“Chicago. November, nineteen sixty-eight.”

“A long time ago.”

He didn’t respond, just nodded.

“Who’s the guy?”

“Name was Jeff Briere.”

“Was?”

“He’s dead.”

“I’m sorry. Was he a friend?”

“I never met him.”

“So . . . it’s the woman you’re interested in?”

“Correct.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, who is she to you?”

His thick eyebrows drew down over penetrating dark eyes. He reminded her of a crow—sleek, watchful, clever. “Just a person I need to talk to. I’ll find her. One way or the other.” He turned, looked up at the old tin ceiling. “You’ve got quite a place here. A piece of history, something from the early part of the last century.” Glancing over at the soda fountain, he added, “That almost looks real.”

“It is real. My ex-husband and I had it removed, piece by piece, from a drugstore that was going out of business in a small town in South Dakota. It’s a big attraction around here,

especially in the summer when the fishermen arrive and the resorts fill up.”

He gazed around him a moment more, then faced her. “I take it you’re a lifelong resident.”

“That’s right.”

He repositioned his cap, clearly not ready to end the conversation. “The guy over at the hardware store told me about a woman in town who might be able to help me. Her name’s Helen Merland. Apparently she and her husband own the Lost Lake Brewing Company.”

“Used to. Helen’s husband died many years ago. She’s in her late eighties now.”

“The guy said she knows everybody. That’s what I’m looking for. Someone with connections and a good memory.”

“Well, then, I think you’re out of luck. Helen was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s last year.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

He didn’t look the least bit sorry, just disgruntled.

“How bad off is she?”

Helen was forgetful. She became mixed up easily, would occasionally move back and forth in time, and yet, for the most part, was still able to take care of herself and live in her own home. Lyndie had never considered that Helen’s growing affliction would have any bearing on her life, other than the sadness that came from slowly, inexorably losing a dear friend to a terrible disease. “I wouldn’t bother her if I were you.”

He returned the snapshot to the pocket of his jacket.

“Are you planning to stick around?”

“For a while.” He took out a card. “If you think of anything that might help me, that’s my cell.”

She waited until the front door closed behind him before she picked up the card and read the name.

STEVEN FEIGENBAUMER

CELL: 984-555-8291

With a last name like that, he had to be related.

“What’s wrong?” called Kenny, still hovering near Emily.

Lyndie forced a smile. “Nothing. Everything’s fine.”

Except that it wasn’t. She did know a woman named Judy Clark. She saw her every morning when she looked in the mirror.



## 2

“What if he’s out for revenge? Or wants to turn us over to the police? We’ve got to *do* something!”

Tessa Cornell held the phone away from her ear and could still hear Lyndie’s braying voice through the phone line. “I agree,” she said, setting her briefcase down on the kitchen island. “But what?”

“You’re the one with all the ideas,” said Lyndie, all but hyperventilating. “If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.”

“Don’t use that kind of language around me.”

So it was finally here, thought Tessa. She was about to face the adversary she’d always known would come. Now that he had, she felt a strange calm settle over her, though she knew it wouldn’t last.

“Once upon a time,” began Tessa, about to deliver a history lesson.

“Just stop it,” said Lyndie. “I’ve changed. I’m not the same person I was back in Chicago.”

Tessa felt the gulf, too, between the woman she’d been and the woman she was now.

“If that man knows we’re here—”

“You said that all he had was an old picture of you and Jeff that barely showed your faces.”

“Yeah, but—”

“So how does he get from a bad photo to us?”

“I don’t know, but I’m scared. I mean, why, of all places, did he choose to come into the emporium? Maybe he knows more than he’s letting on.”

Tessa was furious with Lyndie for not grilling the guy harder to find out what he knew. Bad luck had tied Tessa’s fate to Lyndie’s, though there was little she could do about it now. Lyndie was a lightweight. She was also a chameleon. Her usual MO was to let the men in her life fill in the blank space between her ears.

“He wants to talk to Helen,” said Lyndie.

“He won’t get anything out of her.”

“What about the Alzheimer’s?”

The last time Tessa had talked to Helen she’d seemed almost normal. Still, it was something to consider. “Just keep your mouth shut. You haven’t said anything to George, have you?”

George was Lyndie’s fiancé and the pastor of Lost Lake Lutheran. To think that Lyndie, alias Judy Clark, with her past, had ended up engaged to a minister might have been hilarious if it weren’t so absurdly ironic.

“If George ever finds out what we did—”

“Call me tomorrow,” said Tessa. “And relax. If the guy had more, we’d already be in jail.”

“Or dead.”

“I can always count on you to be Miss Sunshine, right, Judy?”

“Don’t call me that. They might be tapping our phones.”

“Who’s *they*? ”

“You know. People who tap phones.”

“Just be careful.”

“A little late for that.” She hung up.

Tessa was glad now that she’d called the rehearsal early. She was directing an Alan Ayckbourn farce, *Relatively Speaking*, for the Lost Lake Community Theater, but as the evening went on, she found herself growing increasingly annoyed by the playwright’s babbling dialogue. Dialogue was supposed to be an Ayckbourn speciality. She usually found the riffs and charming misunderstandings entertaining. Perhaps it was the leaden way the actors were delivering their lines. For the past four weeks she’d done her best with them. Summer audiences expected humor, light entertainment. The show opened next Friday. She had work to do before then, but couldn’t deal with it tonight. Ultimately, the play would be what it would be. She laughed, somewhat bitterly, to think that her youthful idealism had turned into such aging fatalism. Cozy bromides aside, “’Twas ever thus” still seemed an accurate statement of human affairs.

Early on, Tessa had chosen to keep her partner, Jill, in the dark about her past, although she often wondered if she’d made the right decision. Unbelievable as it seemed to her now, the kid who had once wandered the streets of a small town in Nebraska wondering if there was anyone like her anywhere else on earth had ended up in a twenty-six-year relationship with a woman she adored. Dreams did come true.

Jill’s family had owned Thunderhook Lodge, Lost Lake’s premier resort, ever since Lars Anders Ivorsen, Jill’s great-grandfather, had built the main lodge in the early nineteen twenties. For Jill, Thunderhook was a connection to her childhood and a job she loved. For Tessa, Lost Lake suited her needs because it was about as remote as a person could get and still find some semblance of civilization.

Unlike Lyndie, who never saw a cocktail she didn't like, Tessa rarely drank anything stronger than a glass of wine with dinner. Back in the day, she remembered thinking that people who did drugs were weak-minded. She refused to partake, even when most of her friends, people she trusted and admired, frequently got wasted on booze or stoned on pot. After the phone call from Lyndie, however, she felt the urge for something stronger than chardonnay.

Tessa held the tequila bottle over the blender jar. Several long glugs later, she added the Rose's lime juice and the triple sec, then a bunch of ice cubes. In a matter of seconds she had herself a pitcher of margaritas. Not that she bothered to find an actual pitcher.

Stepping out on the deck overlooking the lake, feeling the breeze off the water ruffle her short, dyed blond hair, she drank straight from the blender jar as she stood at the railing. The burn in her throat felt good, centering. In the blue twilight, lights dotted the far shoreline. She assumed that Jill was still up at the main lodge working the reception desk, which meant she had some time to tuck her emotions safely back inside. She hated all the lies, although in the years she and Jill had been together, she had found no way around them. To tell Jill the truth would have made her an accomplice.

It was possible, Tessa supposed, that Steve Feigenbaumer would find nothing concrete and go away quietly. If all he had was a faded snapshot, he didn't have much to go on. Still, the fact that he was even *in* Lost Lake meant that he'd learned something, and that thought acted like acid, eating away at the barriers Tessa had so carefully erected between the woman she used to be and the woman she was now.

What was that famous Faulkner line? "The past is never

dead. It's not even past." That was the best definition of her life she'd ever come across.

Sitting down on a chaise, Tessa continued to sip from the blender jar. Under normal circumstances, the waves lapping against the shore would have provided some sense of calm. Tonight, however, with the restless mood she was in, the waves did nothing but irritate her. She couldn't work on the new play she'd begun writing, didn't want to think. The truth was, she was sick to death of her own nihilism. If Nietzsche and Eugene O'Neill were right, a person needed a heavy set of delusions to find any meaning in life. Her delusions had been burned to the ground long ago.

Hearing the garage door open, Tessa got up and walked over to the stairs leading down to the driveway. Jill was backing the Jeep out into the drive. When Jill cut the motor, Tessa called down, "Didn't expect you home so early."

Jill slid out of the front seat and smiled up at her. "I figured you'd be at the rehearsal until ten." She cocked her head. "What's in your hand?"

"Margaritas."

"Are you planning to share?"

"Possibly."

"Something wrong?"

"What could be wrong?"

Jill leaned partway over the hood. "Thought I'd run up to the store and get us some munchies. I was hoping we could watch a movie tonight."

Tessa took an unsteady step down the stairs. "How do I know you don't have a girlfriend waiting for you at the Piggly Wiggly?"

"If I did, would you be jealous?"



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