



Tracking Justice (Love Inspired Suspense)

By Shirlee McCoy



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In the night, a young boy goes missing from his bedroom. Police detective Austin Black assures desperate single mother Eva Billows that he'll find her son. He *has* to, so he can put to rest his own harrowing memories. With his search-and-rescue bloodhound, Justice, Austin searches every inch of Sagebrush, Texas. And when Eva insists on helping, Austin can't turn her away. Eva trusts no one, especially police, but this time, Austin—and Justice—won't let her down.



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Editorial Review

About the Author
SHIRLEE McCOY

began writing her first novel when she was a teenager. A busy mother of five, Shirlee is a homeschooling mom by day and an inspirational author by night. She and her husband and children live in the Pacific Northwest and share their house with a dog, two cats and a bird. You can visit her website, www.shirleemccoy.com, or email her at shirlee@shirleemccoy.com.

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Police detective Austin Black glanced at the illuminated numbers on the dashboard clock as he raced up Oak Drive. Two in the morning. Not a good time to get a call about a missing child.

Then again, there was never a good time for that; never a good time to look in the eyes of a mother or father and see terror and worry or to follow a scent trail and know that it might lead to a joyful reunion or a sorrowful goodbye.

If it led anywhere.

Sometimes trails went cold, scents were lost and the missing were never found.

Knowing that didn't make it any easier to accept.

Austin wanted to find them all. Bring them all home safe.

Hopefully, this time, he would.

He pulled into the driveway of a small, bungalow-style house, its white porch gleaming in exterior lights that glowed on either side of the door. Just four houses down from the scene of a violent crime and the theft of a trained police dog the previous afternoon. An odd coincidence.

Or maybe not.

Two calls to the same street within nine hours? Not something that happened often in a place like Sagebrush, Texas.

Justice whined, his dark nose pressed against the grate that separated him from the SUV's backseat. A three-year-old bloodhound, he was trained in search and rescue and knew when it was time to work. Knew and was ready, even after the eight-hour search they'd been on earlier.

Austin jumped out of the vehicle and started up the driveway, filing away information as he went. Lights on in the front of the house. An old station wagon parked on the curb. Windows closed. Locked?

A woman darted out the front door, pale hair flowing behind her, a loose robe flapping in the cold night air as she ran toward him. "Thank God you got here so quickly. I don't know where he could have gone."

"You called about a missing child?"

"Yes. My son."

"The dispatcher said that you don't know how long he's been gone?" Austin had heard the call go out shortly after he'd left his captain's place. Hours of searching for Slade's stolen police dog, Rio, had turned up nothing but a deadend scent trail and mounting frustration. Austin had been exhausted and ready to go home. Now he felt wired and ready to hit the trail again.

"I thought that I heard Brady call for me, and when I walked into his room, he was gone. That was about ten minutes ago."

"Has he ever run away?"

"No."

"Ever talked about it?"

"No! Now, please, can you help me find him?" She ran back up the porch stairs, her bare feet padding on the whitewashed wood.

Austin jogged after her, stepping into a small living room. Neat as a pin except for a small pile of Legos on a light oak coffee table and a college textbook abandoned on a threadbare sofa. No sign of the woman.

"Ma'am?" he called, moving toward a narrow hallway that led toward the back of the house.

"Here." She waved from a doorway at the end of the hall. "This is my son's room."

Austin followed her into the tiny room. Blue walls. Blue bedding tangled and dripping over the side of the twin mattress. Crisp white curtains. A blanket lay on the floor near the open window, the frayed edges ruffled by the wind.

"How old is your son, Ms...?"

"Billows. Eva. He's seven."

Billows?

The name sparked a memory, but Austin couldn't quite grab hold of it. "Did you and your son have an argument about something? Maybe a missed curfew or—"

"He's *seven*. He's not even allowed to be outside by himself." Her voice broke, but her eyes were dry, her face pale and pinched with worry. A pretty face. A young one, too. Maybe twenty-three or four. Too young, it seemed, to have a seven-year-old.

"Did you argue about homework? Grades?"

"We didn't argue about anything, Officer—?"

"Detective Austin Black. I'm with Sagebrush Police Department's Special Operations K-9 Unit."

"You have a search-and-rescue dog with you?" Her face brightened, hope gleaming in her emerald eyes. "I can give you something of his. A shirt or—"

"Hold on." He grabbed her arm as she tried to move past. "I need to get a little more information first."

"Find my son. *Then* I'll give you whatever information you want."

"Unfortunately, without the information, I won't know where to begin searching for your son."

"How about you start out there?" She gestured out the window.

"Was it open when you came in the room?"

"Yes. And the curtains were just like that. One hanging outside. Like, maybe..." She pressed her lips together.

"What?"

"It looks like someone carried Brady out the window, and Brady grabbed the curtain to try to keep from being taken. But I don't know how anyone could have gotten into his room. The window was locked. *All* the doors and windows were locked."

He nodded. He could see the scenario she'd outlined playing out. The little boy woken from a sound sleep, dragged from his bed and out the window, grabbing on to whatever he could to keep from being kidnapped.

He could see it, but that didn't mean it had happened that way. Most children were abducted by family or friends, and most didn't even know they were being abducted when it happened.

"You're sure everything was locked?"

"Of course." She frowned. "I always double-check. I have ever since."

"What?"

"Nothing that matters. I just need to find my son." Hiding something?

Maybe. She seemed more terrified than nervous, but that didn't mean she didn't know something about what had happened to her son.

"Everything matters when a child is missing, Eva."

Missing.

Gone.

Disappeared.

The words just kept coming. Kept filling Eva's head and her heart and her lungs until she wasn't sure she could breathe.

"Do you need to sit down?" Detective Black touched her elbow, his dark blue eyes staring straight into hers.

"I need to find my son." The words stuck in her throat, caught on the roof of her mouth, and she didn't know if they even made a sound when they escaped through her lips.

"I'm going to help you do that. I promise. But I need to know if there's some reason why you were careful to keep your doors and windows locked. Someone you were afraid of." His voice was warm and smooth as honey straight from the hive, and Eva might actually believe every word he was saying if she weren't so terrified.

"My parents were killed two years ago, but it had nothing to do with me or my son."

"The killer was caught?"

"No."

"Is it possible—"

"It's not possible!" She nearly shouted, and Detective Black frowned. "I was estranged from my father when the murders occurred. There's no connection between my life now and what happened to my parents." She tried again. Tried to sound reasonable and responsible because she was afraid if she didn't, the detective would linger in Brady's room for hours instead of going to look for him.

"Is Brady's father around?" He leaned out the window without touching it, eyeing the packed earth beneath.

Did he see anything there?

She wanted to ask, wanted to beg him to get his dog and go after her son, wanted to go after Brady herself, run into the darkness and scream his name over and over again until she found him.

"No," she answered a little too sharply, and Detective Black raised a raven-black eyebrow. "You're not on good terms?"

"We're not on any terms."

"When was the last time you and Brady saw him?"

"Brady has never seen him," she retorted. "The last time I saw Rick was six months before my son was born."

"Have you spoken to him on th—"

"I haven't had any contact with him since the day I told him I was pregnant. He's not in my life. He's not in Brady's life. He didn't want to be. He was married, okay? He and his wife moved to Las Vegas two months before Brady's birth. That's it. The whole story." She'd been nineteen and foolish enough to believe every lie Rick had told. It didn't hurt like it used to, but admitting it to the detective still made her blush.

"Is there anyone else? A boyfriend? Fiance?"

"No. Just me and Brady. That's all there's ever been." She swallowed hard and turned away. Holding back tears because crying wouldn't solve her problems. Wouldn't help her son.

"When did you last see Brady?"

"I checked on him at midnight. Right before I went to bed. He was sleeping."

"You went to bed after that?"

"Yes! I went to bed. I fell asleep. I thought I heard Brady call for me, and I went to his room. He was gone. Now, will you please go find him?"

"I will. As soon as—"

The doorbell rang and Eva jumped, her heart soaring with wild hope.

Brady.

Please, God, let it be him.

She shoved past Detective Black, not caring about niceties. Not caring about anything but getting to the door, opening it, seeing Brady's face. Only it wasn't him.

Her heart sank as she looked into the eyes of a uniformed officer.

"Ms. Billows? I'm Officer Desmond Cunningham. We have a report of a missing child?"

"My son. There's already a detective here."

"He's with our K-9 Unit. He'll start searching for your son while I interview you."

Thank You, God. Thank You, thank You, thank You.

She stepped back so he could enter the house, wishing she'd had time to straighten up the living room, put the sofa cover over her threadbare couch. A twenty-dollar Goodwill find that worked fine for her and Brady but wasn't great for company.

Such a silly thing to think about.

Such a stupid thing when her son was missing.

She pressed a hand to her stomach, sick with dread and fear.

"He's been gone for twenty minutes already," she said, the horror of the words filling her mouth with the coppery taste of blood.

"It takes a little time to get a search team mobilized, ma'am, but we'll have plenty of people out here before

you know it." Officer Cunningham offered a reassuring smile, his dark eyes filled with sympathy.

Seeing it there in the depth of his gaze was too difficult, made the tears she'd been holding back too tempting. She turned away, met Detective Black's steady gaze.

Deep blue. Bottomless. Unreadable.

"Were you home this afternoon, Eva?" he asked, and she shook her head because she wasn't sure she could speak without tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Was Brady?"

"He was with his babysitter. Mrs. Daphne lives two doors down," she managed to say past the lump in her throat.

"Is that close to Slade McNeal's place?" he asked. And odd question, but she'd answer whatever he asked if it meant getting him outside searching for Brady.

"Yes."

Detective Black and Officer Cunningham exchanged a look she couldn't read. One that excluded her, made her even more terrified than she already was.

"What's going on?"

"Captain McNeal's father was attacked today. His dog, Rio, was stolen. The person responsible is still on the loose."

"What does that have to do with Brady?" she asked, but she knew, the cold icy feeling in her heart making her shake.

"It's going to be okay." Detective Black walked across the room and opened the front door. "I'm going to get Justice. Eva, if you want to get a photo of your son and an article of his clothing. Something that he wore today, preferably. I'll be back in a minute."

She ran into Brady's room, trying not to think about Slade's father, his missing K-9 partner. Trying not to think about how pale and quiet Brady had been when she'd picked him up from Mrs. Daphne's house.

He hadn't eaten much for dinner.

Maybe he'd just been sick. A stomach virus. Kids got those all the time.

She wanted to believe that accounted for his silence at the dinner table, his desire to go to bed early.

Check the window again, Momma. Did you check it?

The words seemed to echo in Brady's empty room.

She should have asked him why he was worried about the window lock. Should have pressed him about his

day, asked just one more time if everything was okay.

If she had—

"Did you find something?" Detective Black walked into the room, a bloodhound padding along beside him. Orange vest and droopy ears, a wet nose and big, dark eyes. Brady would have loved to see him.

The thought burned behind Eva's eyes, and she ran to the closet, yanked out the T-shirt Brady had worn to school.

Blue today. Orange tomorrow!

"This is the shirt he wore today." She handed the detective Brady's T-shirt before she gave into temptation and pressed it to her face, inhaled her son's little-boy scent.

Please, God. Please.

"He asked me to check the window lock twice. He seemed quiet at dinner. I thought he might be getting sick, but maybe..." Her guilt spilled out, and she had to stop the words so that the tears didn't spill out, too.

"Your son's disappearance might not have anything to do with what happened at Slade's house."

"But you think that it does?"

"Do you have a recent photo?" He didn't respond to her comment, and she knew that he did.

She hadn't realized she could be any more petrified than she'd been when she'd walked into Brady's room and seen his open window.

She could be.

She was.

Cold air blew in, carrying a hint of rain or snow. And, somewhere out in the darkness, Brady was scared and probably calling for her. A tear dripped down her cheek.

"Eva, I need that photo," Detective Black said gently, and she ran from the room, ran into hers. So close to Brady's.

She'd planned it that way when she'd decided which of the three bedrooms she'd take and which Brady would have.

So close, but she hadn't heard a sound until he'd cried for her.

She grabbed the framed school photo from her night-stand, pressed it to her chest.

"Got it?" Detective Black walked into the room with his bloodhound, and Eva didn't care that she'd left her wait-ressing uniform in a stack on a chair. She didn't care that a pile of college books and papers lay beside her bed. She didn't care about anything but handing him the photo and watching him walk out the door to

find her son.

"This was taken a few months ago." She handed him the photo, and he studied it for a moment.

"Cute kid," he said with a small smile, and she nodded because she couldn't speak past the tears that clogged her throat.

The doorbell rang again. This time she didn't run to answer it. Didn't believe that somehow Brady would magically appear on the porch, tired and scared but with some explanation that would make sense. Maybe some story about sleepwalking or thinking that Mrs. Daphne's dog was outside whining for his attention.

She walked into the living room, her heart heavy and aching, her chest tight.

Captain Slade McNeal stood near the front door, his dark hair mussed, his face drawn and weary. "Eva, I'm sorry I couldn't be here sooner. I had to wait for my son's babysitter to arrive."

"It's okay." Her voice sounded hollow and old.

"Have you found any evidence, Cunningham?" Slade turned to the patrol officer.

"I checked the back window. It looks like someone popped the lock on it. I've already called for an evidence team."

"Good. Are you going to take Justice out to track Brady, Austin?"

"Yes. We'll start around back and work our way from there."

"I'll come with you." Eva pulled her old wool coat from the closet near the door. There was no way she could put Brady's life in someone else's hands. No way she could trust that anyone else would look as hard or as long as she would. He was her son, after all. Her responsibility.

"The best thing you can do for your son is stay here and answer the captain's questions. The more information you provide, the faster we can narrow down our search." Austin walked onto the porch, and she followed.

He might not want her to help with the search, but she had no intention of staying behind. Brady needed her, and she needed to be there for him. That was the way it had been from the moment he was born, the bond between them so strong that she'd thought that nothing would ever tear them apart.

Something had.

Someone had.

She clenched her fist.

Brady was okay. He had to be.

Users Review

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As people who live in the particular modest era should be change about what going on or info even knowledge to make these people keep up with the era that is certainly always change and progress. Some of you maybe will update themselves by examining books. It is a good choice in your case but the problems coming to a person is you don't know what type you should start with. This Tracking Justice (Love Inspired Suspense) is our recommendation to cause you to keep up with the world. Why, because book serves what you want and need in this era.

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