

# **Commitment To Die**

*A Kristin Ashe Mystery*

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## PROLOGUE

My heart was breaking.

My brother David was dying, or maybe already dead.

It was midnight, and I was sitting in the intensive care unit at Denver Health Medical Center, reading a mystery aloud, hoping he could hear my voice through his coma.

Even there, between carefully pronounced, whispered words, I couldn't stop thinking about Lauren Fairchild and her "day to end all days."

It was probably the best day of her life.

Certainly, it was the most planned one.

After lunch with her sister and niece, she bought a book at the Tattered Cover, then stopped by her house to pick up a Walkman. She had already packed a picnic dinner of her favorite foods: wine biscuits with Brie, roasted chicken, au gratin potatoes, and raspberry cheesecake.

She drove west on I-70 for three hours to Exit 278, where she pulled off the highway, changed into boots, and hiked a mile, almost straight up. There, wedged between two mountains, she arrived at the edge of a blue-green lake, fed by three stories of water. She spread out a blanket and listened to music, perhaps leafed through the book, but never touched the food.

Instead, as the sun set over the adjacent peaks, she swallowed fifty painkillers.

In less than an hour, she felt no pain.

Thirteen hours later, in nearby Glenwood Springs, an early morning hiker hysterically informed authorities she had found a body on the brink of Hanging Lake.

Shortly thereafter, everyone who loved Lauren Fairchild began to suffer.

I know this because ten days ago, Patrice Elliott, Lauren's sister, hired me to determine why she committed suicide.

## CHAPTER 1

The morning I met Patrice Elliott, everything that could go wrong did.

The discombobulation began when I woke up in Destiny Greaves' bed thirty minutes after the alarm had sounded. I dressed hurriedly in clothes pulled from a duffel bag, kissed a naked Destiny, told her I'd see her in three days, and ran frantically out the door.

Halfway down the Capitol Hill street, I realized I was wearing two shoes but only carrying one. I glanced at my watch and debated whether I should hunt for the missing Reebok or arrive on time for my appointment.

Unwilling to forsake an afternoon bike ride, I chose the shoe and spent five minutes I didn't have searching for something I never found.

As I sprinted out the door the second time, Destiny's parting words left a distressing imprint on my brain: "Hey, Kris, maybe it's time to move all our stuff into one place!"

I glanced back and tendered a quick wave as an ineffectual reply.

I made the ten-minute drive from Destiny's mansion to my Washington Park office in eight. Harried, I opened up the thousand-square-foot studio that served as a base of operations for my part-time detective work and full-time marketing and graphic arts business.

None of the other six women who worked for me had shown up yet, therefore I performed the early-arrival chores. I turned on the track lighting, adjusted the air conditioner, and fired up the coffee maker.

Spotting no sign of my new client, I headed for the bathroom to finish my daily grooming. I brushed my short, thick brown hair and washed my tiny wire-rimmed, oval glasses, thinking for the hundredth time I should get contacts.

I was thirty-five, yet looked like I had in high school. The freckles didn't help, and neither did a perpetual lack of make-up. My driver's license had always read five-seven, 118 pounds, a lie even at sixteen. I still hadn't grown the extra inch or lost the fifteen pounds it would have taken to restore truth. That day, like most others, my dress was casual. Pressed white shorts, black leather belt, purple blouse, loafers with no socks.

After one last peek in the mirror, I returned to my glass-enclosed office at the front of the building and waited for Patrice Elliott to arrive.

Thirty minutes passed before she walked through the front door, flustered.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said in a young girl's voice. Dressed in a pink shirt, a navy blue jumper with matching mini-socks, and white sandals, the twenty-something woman looked as if she had recently completed a footrace. A bead of sweat dripped past her ear and into the unruly web of a home perm. She was inordinately thin, bordering on frail. The gray canvas bag on her left shoulder could have held a week's worth of groceries, and if it had, it would have toppled her.

I rose to greet her. "I'm Kristin Ashe."

Patrice removed taped-together sunglasses that were too wide for her narrow face and said, "I couldn't get my five-year-old daughter to cooperate this morning. I try to set a schedule, but she doesn't always follow it. Today was one of those days. It took so long to get her dressed, she missed the bus, and I had to drive her to pre-school."

"Come in, sit down." I steered her into my office and gestured toward the couch across from my desk. "Where's she go to school?"

I had asked the question to help put the woman at ease, but it seemed to have the opposite effect. "Children First," she said, brow furrowed.

I had never heard of it. “Can I get you something to drink? Coffee, tea?”

“Water would be nice,” she said, wringing slender hands that rested in her lap.

I left to retrieve refreshments, and when I returned, Patrice had again donned her sunglasses.

I handed her a mug of water.

“Thanks,” she said, grasping it tightly. “It’s really hot out there, especially for June.”

I sat behind a wooden desk and spun around in the swivel chair. Smiling, I said, “Would you mind taking off your glasses? Seeing my reflection is a little distracting.”

“I’m sorry.” She complied and, without the shield, looked even more lost and alone. An extra layer of cosmetics couldn’t disguise red and swollen eyes. “I’ve gotten used to wearing them, and I forget they’re there.”

“How are you holding up?”

“Better,” she began haltingly, speaking so softly I had to strain to hear her words. “At first, I couldn’t eat or sleep, but now I can, a little. At least I go through the motions, but nothing tastes good, and I’m tired inside. Calling you last week and setting up this appointment helped.”

The fingernails on her right hand dug into her other palm. “If my sister had do this, why couldn’t she have left a note? It wouldn’t have taken long to write,” she said anxiously.

“Maybe she didn’t know what to say, or it was too hard to explain,” I replied gently.

“Well, she could have tried!” For the first time, a hint of life sparked in eyes that registered events a moment too late. “If not for my sake, for Ashley’s.”

“Ashley?”

“My daughter.”

“The culprit who didn’t want to get dressed this morning?”

“The same one.” Patrice allowed herself a quick, slight smile. “I’ve told her Lauren’s gone, but she doesn’t understand. She has no concept of time. She thinks Lauren’s on vacation, like when she and Nicole go away for a few weeks. Every morning, as soon as she wakes up, she wants to know if Lauren’s coming over. Every day, I calmly say no, but sometimes, it’s all I can do not to shake her and say ‘She’s never coming over! Never! She’s gone for good! Don’t ask me again!’”

“Be patient,” I remarked mildly.

Patrice looked up from her feet and nodded. “I am. I would never hurt my daughter.”

“I meant with yourself. Be patient about the loss. Grieving takes time and energy.”

“It’s not that I can’t explain it to my daughter, it’s that I don’t have any answers myself. How could I not know my sister well enough to see the signs, to figure it out?” she asked, anger leaking into her tightly-controlled voice.

Before I could answer, she continued, “Everyone thinks I’m crazy, that I should accept Lauren’s death and let it go, but I can’t. I’ve finally accepted she died, and I’m making progress. I don’t think about her every minute anymore, and I don’t try to call her every time I want to talk. Still, I can’t leave it like this.”

“You have no idea why she committed suicide?”

“None, which makes it so frustrating! I had this picture of her, and now nothing fits. No one understands how important this is for me. They think I’m in denial, that this is my way of not dealing with it. My husband Stephen told me I need a therapist, not a detective.”

“Sometimes I’m both,” I said with a faint smile. “But I’m much better at investigating, which I’ll start doing if you’re ready to answer some questions.

“Go ahead,” she said uncertainly.

“We’ll tackle the easy ones first.” I took a legal pad out of the bottom desk drawer.

“What was your sister’s full name?”

“Lauren Ashley Fairchild.”

“Her age?”

“Thirty-five, she just turned thirty-five,” Patrice said jerkily. “She killed herself on her birthday.”

“Which was?”

“June 3.”

“What time of day?”

“The police think sometime before dark.”

“Where did it happen?”

“At Hanging Lake.”

I paused in my note-taking, peered at her, and raised one eyebrow. “Near Glenwood Springs?”

“Yes. You’ve heard of it?”

“My family vacationed near there every summer, and that was one of the day trips we took. I hated that hike — it was always hot and steep. Had Lauren been there before?”

“I’m not sure, but I know she’s hiked a lot of trails in Colorado.”

“You told me on the phone the cause of death was drug overdose, right? Tylenol with codeine?”



Patrice nodded, her hands clenching into fists.

“Where did she get the pills?”

“I don’t know.”

“She didn’t leave any notes?”

“None.”

“When did you last see her?”

Patrice bit her lip. “The day she died, she and my daughter and I went to lunch.”

“How did Lauren seem at the time? Was she depressed?”

“No, actually, I thought she was happy.”

“Happy, as in giddy?”

“No, more like peaceful or relaxed, which you never saw. Lauren always had a million things going on at the same time, and she never slowed down.”

“At lunch, did she say anything to indicate she knew she would kill herself?”

“No, just the opposite, which is what’s so confusing. As she was saying good-bye to us after lunch, she gave my daughter a hug and a kiss, which she always did, and turned to me and said, ‘I’ll take good care of her.’ Lauren’s birthday was on a Thursday, and every Friday night, she came to babysit Ashley while Stephen and I went out. I assumed that’s what she was talking about, but it’s odd. Why would someone say something like that if she was about to kill herself?” Hope flickered across Patrice’s drawn face. “Maybe Lauren was murdered. Do you think that’s a possibility?”

“Had anyone threatened her recently?”

“Not that she told me.”

“Do you think someone hated her that much?”

“No,” she said glumly.

“Is there anyone who profited from her death?”

“Nicole, maybe, her lover. Lauren made out a will a few years ago, but I don’t think she left much. Nicole called the other day to ask if Stephen and I could help with funeral expenses.”

“Do you think it would be okay for me to contact Nicole?”

Patrice squirmed uneasily. “I’m not sure. Nicole’s one of the people who thinks I’m crazy. She wants to get on with her life, as if nothing happened.”

“Would you be willing to call and see if I could interview her?”

She didn’t answer right away. “I guess.”

“If you can introduce me, I’ll take it from there. By the way, what kind of relationship did they have?”

“A good one,” she said, not entirely convincingly. “Lauren and Nicole fought a lot when they first got together, but less recently.”

“All right.” I leaned back in the chair and put my feet on the desk. “Tell me about Lauren: What was she like?”

“You mean what did she look like?”

“Well, that, too, but tell me what mattered to her, how she lived her life.”

“Let’s see... she was about my height, a little over five feet. She had the same brown hair as I do, except lighter, and pale blue eyes. She was seven years older, and I always thought she was the perfect sister. She was pretty and smart and extremely thoughtful. She was kind of a protector, ever since we were kids, when she looked after me and my

brother. She was very social, really good with people, and confident. Oh, and she was athletic. She loved soccer, softball, mountain climbing, almost everything outdoors.”

“Anything else?”

Patrice became animated. “I think what I’ll remember the most is how she lit up around children, especially Ashley. Lauren was so patient with her. They would play for hours on end, being silly until I made them stop.”

“What did your sister do for a living?”

“She worked in the deli at Choices.”

“The health food supermarket in Cherry Creek?”

Patrice nodded. “She started there about three years ago.”

“Could she have been in any kind of financial trouble?”

“Lauren?” Patrice laughed for the first time, a tentative, forced sound. “She knew more about money than anyone. She made every dime seem like a dollar, and she was extremely generous with what she had.”

“Could your sister have been sick, had an illness she didn’t tell you about?”

“I don’t think so. She looked healthy, and she never went to the doctor. Sometimes, I tried to get her to go, but she believed more in holistic medicine.”

I quit writing, and my eyes met Patrice’s. “Do you have any idea why your sister would deliberately kill herself?”

“Maybe she didn’t,” she stammered, avoiding my gaze. “Maybe her death was accidental.”

Quietly, I noted, “No one takes fifty pills accidentally.”

“I’m sure it was a mistake. It had to be,” she rattled on. “Otherwise, how could she leave like this, without a note or a good-bye or a reason why? She would never do this to me again, especially not on that day.”

The hair on my arms stood up. “What do you mean again? Did your sister try to take her life before?”

“No....” Patrice’s head slumped forward until her chin touched her chest.

“What then, what day are you talking about?”

She fought to maintain control but lost as tears mixed with hysteria-edged words.

“When Lauren was nine and I was two, our mother committed suicide.”

I gasped.

Before I could offer condolences, she collapsed into sobs.

It took her a long time to add, “On her thirty-fifth birthday!”

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