

Existing Soutions

A Kristin Ashe Mystery

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PROLOGUE

We spread her ashes over Vail Mountain.

I didn't cry. Not that day anyway.

A rage froze my tears.

One that began the day Destiny Greaves asked me to find her biological father — the man who had raped her mother.

CHAPTER 1

It was a Friday in early September, just a month before my thirtieth birthday. Weather-wise, the afternoon was perfect: one of those days you later recall when it's miserably cold outside, and you think you'll never see the ground again, much less sit on it. Destiny and I had agreed to meet under a pair of majestic oaks in Cheesman Park. The spot we chose was the best around: close enough to the pavilion to feel a light spray from the fountain and on high enough ground to catch a glimpse of the freshly dusted, snow-capped Rockies.

I saw my friend before she saw me.

She looked fantastic — refreshed, tanned, and relaxed — which wasn't surprising given she had taken a leave of absence from her job at the Lesbian Community Center and spent the summer in Europe.

Deep in thought, she approached. When her eyes caught mine, a slow grin crossed her face, and she quickened her pace.

I wanted to run toward her, but I was afraid of looking too eager.

We didn't say anything when we reached each other. We simply hugged, an embrace hampered by the picnic basket she held.

"Here, let me put this down," she said, tossing aside our lunch before hugging me again, this time more tightly. In that one long, full-body press, I finally let myself feel how much I had missed her.

The intensity of her touch was comforting and frightening.

"You look great," I said after we reluctantly let go.

"God, I've missed you, Kris."

“I know,” was all I could say. If I had said anything more, I would have cried.

“You look like you’ve lost weight.”

“Actually, I’ve gained, but it’s muscle. I’ve exercised all summer long.” Obsessively. Every day. Sometimes for hours. To avoid a complete breakdown.

“I like your hair,” I added. Her long blonde hair was pulled back into a thick, elaborate braid.

“I like yours, too.” She brushed a chunk away from my forehead.

“It’s the same,” I said, smiling and shaking my short brown locks.

“I know. I’ve always liked it, but I never told you before.” She looked at me intently, the seriousness of her stare belying the lightness of her tone.

“Thanks,” I said, not quite sure what to do next.

The awkward pause became even heavier after she said, “Wow, your eyes are blue. I’d forgotten how blue they are.”

“They change color in different light,” I explained, trying to mask my nervousness. My stomach had been doing flip-flops since early morning, and this conversation wasn’t helping.

I had been waiting for her for so long.

Really, since the day she left.

In addition to running a marketing and graphic arts business, I also did detective work for women. Earlier in the year, Destiny had hired me to do some investigating for her. Through the ups and downs of the case, we became close friends. At different points, each of us had half-heartedly propositioned the other, but the timing was never right, and nothing came of it. Then, with little warning, she left for Europe.

Over and over in my mind, I had played out the moment we'd first see each other. My imagination had been productive, but no version of the scene had been this charged.

"How've you been?"

"Okay," I answered automatically. "How was your trip?"

"It was incredible! You should have come with me."

"Did you meet any women?"

"I met a lot." Destiny paused deliberately. "But, if you mean did I sleep with any, no. Quite a change for me, celibacy, but I like it. It feels more honest than sleeping with women I'll never see again. Actually, I could get used to it."

"You might not want to get *too* used to it."

"Don't worry, Kris," she said, flashing me a lopsided grin. "How about you, are you seeing anyone?"

"No. None of the women in Denver interested me this summer," I said pointedly.

"Too bad," she answered without conviction.

She sat down and began unpacking the lunch she had picked up at a nearby gourmet shop. I joined her on the cool ground, and we settled in to eat. Through most of the meal, we sat close enough for her knee to lightly touch my thigh.

Between bites of turkey sandwiches and German potato salad, we talked easily, as if it had been four days, not months, since we had last seen each other. After a dessert of chocolate mousse, I took off the crew-neck sweater I had bought the day before and lay down, letting the sun soak into my polo shirt. Almost as an afterthought, I removed my glasses.

"Have you thought about your father at all?" I asked.

“The rapist?”

I nodded.

In the spring, Destiny had hired me to help reconstruct the parts of her childhood that she couldn't remember. In the course of the month-long investigation, I had uncovered a horrible truth: In college, her mother had been violently raped. Nine months later, she had given birth to Destiny.

I was the one who had to break the news to Destiny; understandably, she didn't take it well. An already distant relationship with her mother became more so. Soon after, she flew across the Atlantic.

“All the time,” she said quietly.

“Really?”

“I think of him every single Goddamn day!” She enunciated each syllable of the last four words. “I keep thinking time will make my curiosity pass, but it doesn't. It only seems to get worse. Sometimes, I lie in bed for hours on end, trying to imagine what he's like. Believe you me, the images I conjure up aren't good ones. I wish I could get them the hell out of my head!”

“Why didn't you say anything in your post cards or letters?” All the correspondence she had sent over the summer had been unfailingly upbeat. It made me believe she had put the horror of her family tree behind her, if only for a few months.

“How could I? What was I going to say in a letter? My thoughts were too demented to send four thousand miles and wait weeks for a reply. For my own sanity, I kept a daily journal, but I can't even bring myself to read any of the entries.”

“Someday you might be able to.”

“Maybe,” she said, distracted. “Anyway, one day I was sitting in these beautiful gardens in France, and I came to an important decision. I want you to find the rapist for me.”

“You can’t be serious!” I bolted up, groped until I found my glasses, and stared at her in disbelief.

“I’m dead serious.”

“Why?”

“Because I won’t rest until you do. Will you help me or not?”

“I don’t know,” I said, stunned. I rubbed my forehead as if trying to erase an indelible spot. “When you said that, I got this terrible feeling in my stomach, like something awful would happen if I found him.”

She threw up her hands. “At this point, something awful will happen if you don’t find him! I’ll slowly go crazy from the haunting visions. I’d much rather know about him and deal with it than constantly wonder what he’s like. It’s become a sickness, like driving by a car accident and having to look. I’ve got to know! My mother did nothing. She didn’t even attempt to press charges. She knew exactly who he was and where he lived, and she did nothing. For all we know, he could have raped again. He walked away a free man, and she’s been in a mental prison for thirty years. I’ve got to do something about that!”

“But if he’s raped again, he might be in jail.”

“If he is, and I hope he is, you’ll find him there, and I’ll go talk to him,” she said matter-of-factly.

“You actually want to meet him?” I wiped sweat from my eyebrows.

“Of course I do. That’s the whole point. I want to see inside him, to know how he could do this.” Her voice rose, and her clenched fists moved up and down with every word. “I want him to see me, too — the living, breathing result of one night of terror. I want him to have to look at me in a way he’ll never forget. I want him to know how my mother and I have suffered.”

“This might not be a good idea, Destiny. Maybe you should think about it some more.”

“Does that mean you won’t do it? Are you afraid to help because of what it’ll bring up with your own father?”

“Of course not!” I said too quickly.

She looked at me but didn’t say a word.

She knew my past too well.

Six months ago, I had discovered — or rather, admitted — some truths about my own parents. My mother had emotionally abused me, and my father had sexually molested me.

I more truthfully amended my answer. “Maybe.”

“Did you do anything about your father while I was gone?”

“No.” Destiny was the first person I had told about the incest; after I did, I had felt such hope, a deep-rooted belief that simply acknowledging it would dramatically improve my life. But it didn’t. And all the time Destiny was gone, I did nothing except think about my options.

I could wait for my father to die, as if that would help. I could confront him, but that seemed too unnerving. I could cease all contact with him. Or, I could do what I did:

continue on in a superficial vein, pretending my bad father had died and been replaced by a new one.

“Did you see him this summer?”

“Once. In June for his birthday,” I said, with a trace of shame. Given what I knew, the outing had felt like a personal betrayal.

“How was it?”

“Really uncomfortable. I couldn’t quite put the images of the two men together. One is of this nice guy he is today. Remarried, happy, congenial. The other is of a midnight visitor. At night, when other kids slept soundly. . . His footsteps, his underwear, his touches. . . Each feeling seems completely genuine, but they don’t go together. They’re split apart, and it’s almost like they’ve split me apart. It’s all so vague. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve wanted to rip inside my skull and pull out the memories.”

“Are you still having nightmares?” Destiny asked, referring to the terrifying dreams I had once had — sexual horrors from my childhood played out against a surreal backdrop of the present. Ironically, they were the most vivid memories I had, the only solid proof.

“No, those stopped.” But the fear remained. Sometimes, it came through as early morning headaches, caused by insomnia and teeth grinding. Other times, it returned in the form of coughing that turned to gagging. The episodes came at odd times, and I had learned to prepare for the terror of them by likening them to food poisoning: a short period of unbearable pain that passed fairly quickly.

“I’ve even managed to overcome my worry that too many incest memories would come back and cause me to crack up.” I smiled slightly.

“That’s good.”

“Things with Ann have been kind of strained, though.”

My sister Ann and I had worked together comfortably for ten years at the business I owned. However, there had been a shift after I told her I thought we had been incested.

The first few months after I talked to her about the incest, she wanted to discuss it every day at the office. She started to put out fewer and fewer jobs, with more and more mistakes. She claimed the incest was affecting her work, which it probably was. In August, I had hired a consultant to help figure out how we could work through the tension. The woman had given us some decent advice, but still, things remained awkward.

“I’m here for you, Kris.” Destiny gripped my hand as she saw tears form.

“I know. I’m glad you’re back.”

We sat there silently, and I took in the surroundings, realizing it had been a long time since I had been in the park at lunch. These days, I only visited it in the early morning hours, preferring to avoid the strange male ritual that took place at all other times.

Each day, hundreds, or maybe even thousands, of men came to Cheesman to cruise. They drove in, parked on the side of the road, and waited for others to circle the park. Eventually, cars travelling at erratic speeds and drivers gawking at everything in sight led to the desired encounters: Sex for the sake of sex. It didn’t seem to matter much who was on the receiving end.

I suspected most of the visitors were men who lived very different lives in the faraway suburbs. My first clue came from their appearances. They didn’t look gay — they looked like men you normally see accompanied by the requisite wife and child. They

didn't act gay — they acted dishonest and furtive and desperate. And they didn't drive gay cars — they drove Volvos and Blazers.

I was particularly struck by the hypocrisy when I saw a man sitting in a car with child restraint seats in the back. Somehow, I couldn't believe his wife knew about his forays into what some disdainfully called "Sleazeman Park." And I wondered if the occupants of those little seats would ever grow up to know the truth about their father.

Two teen-age girls walked by, arm in arm, as I said, "I'll help you find the rapist, Destiny."

"Really?"

Overriding feelings of dread, I nodded.

"Thank you." She hugged me. "Maybe you could start by talking to my mom. I'll call her for you."

"Do you want to come along when I meet with her?"

"I can't."

"Are you afraid of her?"

"A little, but also, I don't think I'm ready to hear about the rape."

"Okay, I'll go alone. But you know, once we set this thing in motion, there's no turning back."

"I didn't make this decision lightly, Kris," she said, mildly offended. "I even wrote down the pros and cons."

"What are they?"

"The pros are peace of mind and resolution. It's not like me to avoid things. I've always been fairly confrontational — "

“No kidding!” This understatement came from a lesbian activist who measured the success of her publicity campaigns by the number of death threats they generated.

“Maybe even too feisty at times — “

My vehement nodding made her smile.

“But I think I’m more afraid of what I don’t know than I am of what I’ll discover.

Also, on the plus side, it might help my mom move on with her life. She’s so bitter about what happened. I can’t stand the thought of her being tormented by this the rest of her life.”

“We could find your father, and your mom might still be miserable, or even more so.”

“I know,” she said defensively.

“Okay, so those are the pros. What are the cons?”

“I could only think of one.”

“Which is. . .?”

She furiously rubbed her hands together, and it took her a long time to answer. When she did, her words sent a chill up my spine. “I might kill him.”

Unfortunately, she wasn’t kidding.

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