

If No One's Looking

A Kristin Ashe Mystery

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PROLOGUE

I looked down and saw drops of blood.

Wiping my hand on my jeans, I continued to push through the stand of oak brush, scarcely mindful of the sharp limbs. A light drizzle had begun to fall, and lightening flashed in the distance, but neither slowed me.

Miles into my circuitous search, I'd crossed wetlands, cut through copper-colored fields of tall grass and thistle and hiked in and out of gullies. For the most part, though, I'd stayed on the hard-packed dirt trails which followed and intersected the meandering of Plum Creek.

All the while, my eyes rarely left the ground as I shifted them from left to right, and back to left again, in meticulous twenty-foot sweeps. After more than four hours, I had yet to come across another soul, and with darkness soon to fall, it seemed unlikely I would.

What a contrast this was to five days earlier...to the day when it seemed as if every lesbian in Denver was looking for Kayla Martin.

CHAPTER 1

“Got a good feeling about this,” Fran Green said on that Sunday morning in mid-September.

I squinted and bit my lower lip. “I don’t.”

She nudged me on the arm. “Worried I forgot something?”

I looked around Founders Park. “That’s not it.”

Fran reached into her backpack and handed me a tube of sunscreen. “Lots of balls in the air. Might have overlooked a detail or two.”

“I can’t believe you coordinated this on such short notice,” I said, squeezing out a ribbon of cream.

“Telling you, Kris, wasn’t easy.” Fran sighed and made a swooping gesture. “Called in every marker and then some. Be in arrears for years.”

“You won’t owe anyone anything. It’s for a good cause.”

“True enough.”

“Where did all this come from?”

“All corners of Denver. Muffins and breads donated by our favorite bakery on Sixth Avenue. Fresh fruit and power bars chipped in from the organic market downtown. Bottled water and ice, compliments of our insurance agent. Hiking club brought the coolers. Hope they marked whose is whose. Always getting ’em mixed up on our outings. DJ from that new nightclub, Oblivion, brought the sound system. Also, hooked me up with event planners. They hauled in the tents, tables and chairs.”

I eyed the crowd that was growing by the minute. “How’d you get so many women to show up?”

“Put out a call to every group I know. Got the bikers, chorus members, softball players, golfers, bowlers. Good showing from the Metropolitan Community Church. Global positioning hobbyists, too. They’ll come in handy.”

“You knew someone from each of those circles?”

“Most. Otherwise, knew someone who knew someone. Thumbed through the Rolodex, then let viral marketing take over. Even got a group to come down from Cheyenne. Over there in the cowboy hats,” Fran said, pointing to a cluster of women standing on concrete, under a metal pavilion. “Wish I could’ve made an announcement on my radio show Thursday, but word didn’t come down till end-of-business Friday. Hit the phone lines hot and heavy yesterday. So amped up, didn’t catch two winks of sleep last night.”

“You don’t look tired.”

After a sleepless night, my business partner, at sixty-seven, looked more vigorous than most of the women who had gathered at the park, many of whom were decades younger than Fran. Dressed in cargo shorts, thick wool socks, 1970s-style hiking boots and a yellow T-shirt with black lettering, *Keep It Real*, Fran had covered her nose in a white cap of sunscreen. Beneath her safari hat, she wore aviator, mirrored sunglasses, and around her belt, she’d clipped a can of bear spray, a six-inch hunting knife and a fanny pack with two water bottles.

“That’s just it. Don’t feel tired. Not at all.” Fran clicked her two walking sticks together. “Got more energy now than I had five years ago. Must be those vitamins I been taking.”

“Mmm,” I said as I watched an attractive, long-limbed woman with shoulder-length, blond hair climb onto a picnic table and motion for the crowd to quiet.

“Good turnout. This much manpower, bound to find something,” Fran added.

“Shh.”

“Could I have everyone’s attention, please?” the woman in front called out.

“Thank you. I’m Destiny Greaves, the executive director of the Lesbian Community Center, and on behalf of Gwen Martin and Tracey Reid, I’d like to thank you for coming on such short notice. I’ve never seen this degree of support and commitment from the community. Unfortunately,” she said after a pause, “we need all of it. A three-year-old’s life could depend on you.”

Destiny held up a flier with a picture of a bright-eyed girl in a princess costume. “We’re here today because Kayla Martin went missing three days ago. She was last seen around one o’clock in the afternoon, on Thursday, September thirteenth. She was in her home on South Pine Lane, which is a block east of here. At the time of her disappearance, Kayla was wearing a pink tank top with flowers, blue jean shorts and Little Mermaid underwear.”

Destiny took a deep breath. “Kayla has blond hair and blue eyes, weighs thirty-five pounds and is forty inches tall. We’re operating on the assumption that she was abducted from inside the house, sometime between one and four, while her mother, Tracey, was sleeping. We also have to consider that she might have wandered into the street and been picked up by a stranger. The Highlands Ranch Police Department has issued a statewide Amber alert, but no significant leads have come in.”

“Who’s that bombshell next to Destiny?” Fran whispered.

I shot her a look as my answer.

“That makes what we’re doing today extremely important,” Destiny continued. “We anticipate registering more than two hundred volunteers, which will allow us to search a sizable area. I’m going to turn this over to Lieutenant Hillary Longhorn, our liaison from the Highlands Ranch Police Department, and let her explain how we’ll coordinate the search. Again, on behalf of Gwen and Tracey, thank you for your time and show of support. Both mean the world to them.”

Destiny pointed toward two women who were standing off to the side of the pavilion holding hands. Both looked to be in their late twenties, and they waved limply at the crowd, their blank expressions never changing. I wondered which one was Tracey, the mother who had “lost” Kayla. Was she the tall, slightly overweight, matronly one with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, a row of bangs almost touching her eyebrows? Or the lanky one, with a grim set of her jaw and medium-length curly hair partially tucked under a baseball cap?

The police officer climbed onto the picnic bench and took the microphone from Destiny. “Folks, we all have the same goal in mind. Find Kayla as soon as possible. Today, however, we need to make our focus more narrow than that. Find anything that might tie to Kayla. The smallest clue can lead to a further development, and multiple clues can be assembled into a trail of clues. I’ve seen that happen before in cases, when the efforts of volunteer searchers have led straight to the doorstep of a perpetrator.”

I suppressed a yawn and glanced at my watch. It was barely six o’clock, and the sun was beating down, without a cloud in sight.

“But I don’t want to get your hopes up,” Hillary Longhorn said in a deep voice. “Searching can be dull, tedious work, and you need to stay alert during every minute of it. If your team clears an area, that will be the last time that particular section is searched. Accuracy matters more than speed. By day’s end, we hope to have canvassed fifty-five areas that we’ve identified as high-priority, and we’ll fan out from there if time permits. You’ll be going block by block, step by step, focusing on the medians and edges of streets.

“We’re going to ask that you mark or pick up everything you see, which means you’ll be gathering trash. Lots of it. Fast food wrappers, water bottles and caps, cigarette butts, beer cans, lids, straws—you’ll bag it all and bring it back here to central command. Don’t rule out anything. Something that might seem commonplace could be a piece of the puzzle, and we won’t necessarily know immediately which ones are relevant. We have to assume they all are. Every item will be examined and held as evidence. If you come across anything that seems particularly unusual, have your team leader mark the location with a flag and call it in. This isn’t a scavenger hunt, so don’t be discouraged if you don’t find anything. Information that comes from elimination can be just as valuable to an investigation.”

“Man, oh, man, she’s hot,” Fran said out of the side of her mouth. She pointed her thumb at Lieutenant Longhorn, who stood with her weight on her left foot, her right hand in the pocket of creased, black slacks. Her ear-length, salt-and-pepper hair was parted in the middle, and she had a broad face, square jaw and no-nonsense demeanor.

I muttered, “Try to stay focused.”

Fran shrugged and grinned sheepishly.

“We’ve divided you into groups of eight, and you’ll be under the direction of team leaders. Each leader is equipped with a map, GPS unit and cell phone. As you search a grid, the eight of you will fan out, and you need to make sure there’s adequate overlap between searchers. For those of you who are still filing in, we need you to check in at the registration table first. Everyone needs to have filled out a liability form, had a copy of their Driver’s License taken and been assigned to a team before we can allow you to join the search. Without the proper paperwork, we can’t have you assisting us. Department rules.”

Hillary turned to her left, toward a table underneath a blue tent. “That’s our registration area. It’ll be open until dark, so we can accommodate people who arrive throughout the day. Each foot-search shift will last two hours or less, with a thirty-minute break in between. Don’t push it. See how you feel at the end of your shift before you sign on for another. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Don’t get carried away with adrenaline.”

“Here.” Fran tossed me a lavender bandana after I wiped sweat from my face with the back of my hand.

“One final note. I received word last night that our department has suspended all ground-search operations until further notice. That means you’re it. You’re our eyes and feet, an invaluable asset to this investigation. We couldn’t do it without you, and we appreciate you coming.”

“You’ve given up!” a woman with a nose ring and a Mohawk shouted.

Her outburst was followed by someone yelling, “Kayla doesn’t count!”

Hillary had started to hand the microphone to Destiny, but she pulled back, and her features hardened. “Kayla Martin counts. In the first hour after notification of her

disappearance, we made reverse nine-one-one calls and had sixty officers assisting in door-to-door and yard searches. We covered this neighborhood with helicopters, planes with infrared technology and bloodhounds. On Friday, officers returned and retraced their steps, combing a one-mile radius from the point of origin. We haven't given up. We've merely narrowed the scope of our investigation in accordance with the evidence we've been presented. Other crimes have continued to occur in Highlands Ranch in the past three days, and we need to balance moving forward in this investigation with our current caseload."

Fran, who had hustled through the throngs, reached up and grabbed the microphone. "Fran Green here. Easy there, ladies. Get your heads in the game. We're here for one reason and one reason only. Kayla Martin. Keep that in mind."

With the exception of scattered rumblings, the crowd calmed.

"Couple more points to make," Fran added in a kinder tone. "Keep it clean today. Be respectful of the neighbors and neighborhood, and take care of yourselves with the sunscreen and water. Temperature might reach triple digits out on the asphalt. Don't want anyone wilting. Wear those orange safety vests. Might not look sexy, but could save your life. That's all I got. Be safe out there!"

I turned to head toward the search status board, where I'd been assigned for the day, but I pulled up when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

Destiny leaned in close, and I could smell her mango body wash. "After everyone's been sent out, come find me," she whispered.

I looked at her searchingly. "Is everything okay?"

She shook her head. "I need to hire you and Fran."

“Now?”

“As soon as possible.”

“For what?”

“To keep Gwen and Tracey from being arrested.”

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