

Selective Memory

A Kristin Ashe Mystery

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PROLOGUE

They think I can't remember, but I can.

Every weekday afternoon, I vow never to come again.

I sense I have reached a point beyond all reason, but I can't stop.

Watching her.

Wanting her.

*In the waning light of winter, I stay for hours, often until long past the moment of
darkness.*

I feel helpless to do anything but stare, stare at her silhouette.

These are the last images I remember before millions of my brain cells died.

CHAPTER 1

“They think I’m crazy, but I’m not.”

“Who thinks you’re crazy?” I said neutrally.

“Stacey and my mother.”

I smiled. “What do partners and family know?”

Alexandra Madigen frowned. “I don’t trust Stacey’s impressions.”

“Were the two of you close before the accident?”

“After eleven years, we must have been, but why does she feel so far away?”

“Do you remember anything about your life before the accident?”

“Fragments, but I can’t tell if the random memories belong to me or someone else. I hear dissonant sounds. Crickets chirping. Sheets of rain falling. Weeping. Bells ringing. A bathroom stall door slamming. But I’ve lost all sense of time and place and belonging.”

“It takes time—”

“That’s what I’ve been told, but I don’t have time. Stacey hugs me, and I recoil. A relief nurse comes in, and I feel at ease. My mother recounts stories from the past, and I disconnect. Strangers stop by, and I connect. I need to trust someone.” She pointed at me, almost stabbing me in the forehead with her finger. “I choose you.”

“Why me?”

“Because you don’t know me. You never have.”

“You’re not afraid of what I’ll find?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I nearly died nine months ago.”

“Meaning nothing scares you anymore?”

“Meaning, I’m more terrified of not knowing.”

I took a deep breath. “Fair enough.”

“Next month I’ll be released from Sinclair and sent to live with Stacey. I need to prepare myself.” Alex studied me. “Do you think I’m crazy?”

I tried not to flinch under her gaze. “Ask me again in a few weeks.”

“Are you always this honest?”

“No,” I said truthfully.

I would have employed more tact, but something about Alex Madigen had stripped away my pretenses. In our first minutes together, she’d shown me the marks on her body from her high-speed car crash and nine operations, a matter-of-fact demonstration devoid of self-pity. She pointed out the shallow depression in the back of her head from drilling to relieve pressure on her brain, the line in her throat from placement of a ventilator, the tracks on her stomach from emergency surgery to save her liver and the scars on her back from the insertion of titanium rods and pins. Her invisible inventory included a broken femur, cracked ribs and bruised kidneys.

Remarkably, her oval face and flawless complexion had been untouched by the impact. Her small mouth housed an arrangement of perfect teeth, and her brilliant blue eyes conveyed a stunning clarity.

I shifted my weight on the folding chair, causing a loud squeak amplified by the linoleum. “Kelly tells me you owned your own advertising agency. Do you remember any of that?”

“Odd jingles run through my head.” Alex ran a hand through her blondish-brown hair, which was cut in a textured style that barely covered her ears. She sang under her

breath, “Don’t groan if you can’t get a loan. All you need is a name that’s good, come on down to Henny’s ’hood.”

I laughed. “I’ve seen that one on TV. A commercial for Henny Carmichael’s dealership. Did you enjoy your work?”

“I don’t know. Did it pay well? Does Stacey want my money?”

I hesitated. “I don’t know why she would.”

“How old am I?”

“Thirty-seven.”

“How old are you?”

“The same age.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Need to get around town, but no money down? Never fear, no payments till next year. Do I love Stacey?”

“You must have, or you wouldn’t have stayed together.”

“What unusual logic.”

“Thanks,” I said, opting to interpret the remark as a compliment.

“Are you in a relationship?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“With Destiny Greaves. She’s an activist who runs the Lesbian Community Center. We’ve been together four years.”

“Did you follow her before you met?”

“Her career? Somewhat. Destiny’s hard to miss. She’s in the news all the time.”

“Do you still love her?”

“Of course.”

For the hundredth time, Alex waved to a resident twenty feet away who was stringing red, white and blue beads on safety pins. “Do you love her as much?”

“As what?”

“As before?”

“Yes.”

“Has she hurt you?”

I squirmed. “At times.”

“Irreparably?”

“I hope not.”

“Have you harmed her?”

“Not on purpose.”

“If you’ve loved, you’ve damaged,” Alex said without inflection.

I cleared my throat. “We’re getting a little off track. Were you always like this?”

“Like what?”

“Adept at deflecting attention away from yourself?”

She released a cynical smile. “Yes, I believe I was. Do I have friends?”

“I’m sure you do.”

“Why haven’t they come to see me?”

“Kelly told me Stacey and your mom thought you’d do better with less stimulation.”

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They think I can't remember, but I can.

Stacey was a counselor.

She took care of people in their hour of torture, a calling that had exacted a toll on her. Sometimes, I wondered what she would have been like if she'd become a midwife, participating in the beginnings, not the endings.

Every year we stayed together, she closed another part of herself to me. I tried to reopen them but soon moved on to lamenting the lost pieces of her. One day, without realizing it, I stopped missing what was missing. The person I'd met, fallen in love with and committed to had left, but I settled for the one who remained.

Her clients and colleagues received the best of her, and who was I to fight with death? What just reason gave me the right to demand the same caring and compassion she showered on others when I wasn't in crisis? I never sent Stacey letters of appreciation or bestowed a service medal on her. I simply believed that our time together should have been reward enough.

Until one day, I stopped believing that.

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After a ten-second silence, Alex said, "Why have I been forbidden stimulation?"

"You're recovering from major injuries, including a closed-head trauma."

"My brain was hurt?"

"Yes, and the injury causes you to become easily confused or agitated."

She cocked her head. "Do I seem confused or agitated?"

“Not now, no.”

“I used to stare into space for hours.”

“Immediately after the accident?”

“Immediately before. Did you know I had a dog? Cooper. I met him this weekend, on my home visit with Stacey. He seems to like me.”

I smiled. “Dogs are great judges of character.”

“I want to see my friends.”

“Okay,” I said easily. “I’ll clear it with Stacey.”

Alex stared at me. “Does her name have to be on our contract?”

“No. The agreement I draw up can be between you and me. An hourly rate, plus expenses.”

“Nothing gets cleared with Stacey. Is that clear?”

I showed no emotion. “Clear.”

“Who are you again?”

“I’m Kristin Ashe. I’m a private investigator. Kelly Nagle introduced us an hour ago, and you decided to hire me.”

“Who’s Kelly Nagle? Is she qualified to make a referral?”

“She should be. She’s your case manager, and her specialty is neurological injuries.”

“I see.” She extended her hand, and we shook again. “Why am I hiring you?”

“To help you recover your memories,” I said, suppressing a sigh.

This wasn’t going as well as I’d hoped.

When Kelly Nagle had called the day before, I’d expressed skepticism about helping a brain-injured woman. “Just meet her,” Kelly had implored, and I’d acceded, an

agreement I regretted shortly after stepping into the activities room at Sinclair Rehabilitation Center, a facility located on the northern edge of Denver.

Alex Madigen had been playing classical music on a battered upright piano. Dressed in a tuxedo shirt, pearls, jeans and no shoes, she seemed unaware of the residents and staff around her. As they engaged in computer training, quiet conversation and games, Alex played on flawlessly, as if she'd been hired to provide background music.

This won't be too bad, I thought, and then the music had stopped.

When Kelly stepped forward to compliment Alex on her playing, Alex wouldn't acknowledge her. Instead, she pounded the keys and broke into a harsh, sarcastic rendition of a jingle. "Turn your crash into cash. You have the right to sue. Yes, you do. Yes, you do. Call our office today. We'll make someone pay."

After finishing the jingle, she stood and stretched, tilted her head toward the sunlight streaming in through the windows behind her and rested her hands at her sides. Eventually, with Kelly's gentle persuasion, Alex reclaimed her seat at the piano bench and accepted that I'd come to see her, not someone else at Sinclair.

Since Kelly had left us alone, Alex had hired me, fired me and forgotten me three times.

Alex suddenly closed the piano with a bang. "What did Kelly Nagle tell you about me?"

"Only that you've made an amazing recovery."

"So they say, but no one can predict how I'll turn out. Least of all me. When will I remember everything?"

“Everything? No one does, with or without a brain injury. Is it important that you do?”

She pumped the piano pedals, as if testing their tension for the first time. “It’s essential.”

“Why do you think you need memories?”

“To remind me of who I am. Without them, I’m forced to rely on other people’s impressions.”

“Or you can be whoever you want to be, completely free of expectations—your own or anyone else’s.”

She shook her head. “I refuse to make the same mistakes. I need my memories back. All of them.”

“Even with visits from friends and information from the interviews I’ll conduct, that won’t necessarily happen,” I said cautiously.

One by one, Alex placed sheets of music into a large, plastic folder, her movements stiff and awkward. “Kelly says that’s the hardest loss I’ll face, loss of identity. But I refuse to let go.”

“You might not have a choice, if—”

Her voice rose. “If I don’t get my memories back, how will I know who I am?”

“Was,” I said quietly.

“Am. Can I hold on to the illusion that I lived my life completely and honorably?”

“Tell me what you remember.”

Alex pressed the folder of music to her chest. “Some memories I clutch until I’ve strangled them. Others I dodge in order to evade injury.”

“Injury?”

“I remain still for hours, and nothing appears. Other times, I’m in the middle of an activity and something interrupts.”

“You’re probably more sensitive to the randomness, but that’s how memory works. A sound, smell, phrase—anything can trigger it. This morning at Starbucks, I smelled a perfume that reminded me of my first girlfriend.”

Alex broke from watching a patient wheel into the room and turned idly to look at me. “Did you lose yourself in her?”

I started. “My first girlfriend? Yes, I did.”

She tried to disguise a wince of pain. “I believe I did, too.”

...

They think I can't remember, but I can.

I sat in my car, staring at a three-story, brick building, waiting for the woman who lived in the southeast corner of the second floor to arrive.

This wasn't my first vigil, nor my last.

At five o'clock, a late-model Volvo pulled up and parked five car lengths ahead of my Toyota.

When the dark-haired woman stepped out of her car, my pulse quickened, and I lowered myself in the seat, fearful of a glance that never came.

On this day, not unlike many others, the woman never looked around. She reached into the backseat, retrieved a purse and walked briskly into the building. From a box that

hung in the tiny space between two glass doors, she gathered her mail, correspondence I'd already scanned.

Moments later, she entered her apartment, turned on a light in the front room and, behind sheer curtains, moved gracefully.

If only she would have turned so that I could see her face.

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“Alex!”

Alex opened her eyes wide. “What?”

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Am I sure...” Her voice faded, and she closed her eyes again.

“Did a memory come back to you just then? Was it about your first girlfriend?”

“I must have drifted off.”

As the noise in the activities room intensified, I leaned forward to hear her. “Does that happen often?”

She slid back reflexively, almost tumbling off the bench. “Apparently. I dream frequently, but I don’t know whether the images come from my life or someone else’s.”

“Can you talk about them?”

She blinked rapidly. “The time isn’t right for articulation.”

“Maybe you could keep a journal. Write down everything as it comes to you.”

“A chronicle of the life I’ve lost. I’ll consider that,” she said, before transferring her attention to a handwritten note on the piano. *Take music back to room.* She seized the bright green piece of paper and tucked it below her leg.

“I use notes myself sometimes,” I said.

She avoided my gaze. “The reminders sustained me in the beginning, but I’m striving to decrease my dependency. I suppose it’s a victory that I no longer have to tell myself to chew before swallowing.”

“It probably helps to focus on the gains.”

“On moving forward, always forward. Three weeks in intensive care. Another month in the hospital. Seven months at Sinclair. Next month out.”

“Nine months of working on your body—that can’t be easy.”

“It seems like longer, as if my other life never existed.”

“Kelly tells me you’re one of the most motivated people she’s met, that you have an intense desire to get healthy.”

Alex shrugged indifferently. “I need my independence back.”

“Do you feel ready to go home?”

She shivered violently. “Home? I can’t go there.”

“Why?”

“I lost it. Shortly before the accident. I’d been...with a...”

I waited, but when she didn’t finish the sentence, I prompted, “A friend? A relative?”

Her face turned ashen. “With her.”