

# **Unbearable Losses**

*A Kristin Ashe Mystery*

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## PROLOGUE

I had never felt so cold in my life.

Here I lay, three days before Christmas, on an elf stakeout, the only dark spot among 25,000 twinkling lights.

If I'd thought to dress for the elements, lying in the bushes wouldn't have felt so painful. But who knew? Earlier in the day, I'd worn a windbreaker on an afternoon bike ride. Four hours later, a cold front had moved in, the temperature had dropped thirty degrees, and I'd started to have serious doubts about this assignment.

Two weeks earlier, the case had looked simple when the Crumpler sisters had hired me to find out who was filching from their Christmas display.

A couple of munchkins had been stolen, plus Mrs. Claus. And okay, baby Jesus, too. Yet, that evening, as two buses and a steady stream of cars had pulled up to the holiday extravaganza, none of the sightseers had seemed to miss what was missing.

How could they—they still had Santa and his reindeer on the roof, dozens of oversized candy canes, an army of snowmen, five circling trains, a flock of angels in the trees, and three nativity scenes.

Not to mention the continuous loop of holiday tunes. If Santa Claus came to town one more time or another chestnut roasted on an open fire, I knew I'd lose it.

As I fidgeted on the frozen ground, I thought I couldn't possibly experience any deeper misery when the cell phone in my pocket began to vibrate.

Holding the plastic away from my numb ear, I whispered, "Hello."

The response came in a chilling wail, "Kris, she's gone!"

## CHAPTER 1

The whole mess began on December 7, the morning Fran Green talked me into solving “The Case of the Missing Christmas Decorations,” as she called it.

Fran convinced me to meet that evening with the Crumplers, two elderly sisters whose award-winning display had started to shrink. Even as the ladies added new figurines, lights, and cut-outs, mean-spirited holiday vandals made off with a few pieces each year, and the twin sisters were fed up.

As I organized files on my desk at work, Fran explained all this over the phone, between loud bites of Grape Nuts and crisp toast, which she enjoyed from the comforts of her apartment.

I suppose I agreed to take on the Christmas case for three reasons.

First, I rarely found the words to say no to Fran Green. An ex-nun thirty years my senior, she had a way of shaming me into accord.

Second, I was in the thick of a pre-holiday stupor, the likes of which only a post-holiday depression could rival, if this year unfolded as most before it had.

Probably, though, I agreed to care about a garish light display because Fran was the main source of referrals for my part-time detective business.

In fact, she’d put me in touch with Lori Parks, the head of the Children’s Academy, the most elite daycare center in the Denver metro area. From what scant information Fran had revealed, the director’s quandary promised to be a challenging one.

I had to offer a rushed good-bye to Fran when I saw a late-model Volvo station wagon pull up in front of my office.

Unaware of my observance, Lori Parks exited the car, looking as if she had flown in from New York. While most of us slog through Colorado winters in hiking boots and parkas, this woman had selected an entirely different look with a black overcoat, cream wool scarf, and conservative heels.

I rose to greet her as she stepped into the office. “Hi, I’m Kristin Ashe.”

“Lori Parks.”

After she peeled off leather gloves, we shook hands.

“It smells like snow, doesn’t it?” I said conversationally.

She looked at me quizzically. “You smell it? I used to be able to, but I haven’t in a long time.”

I nodded. “Something’s in the air.”

“They haven’t forecast any storms.”

“It’s coming,” I said, as I placed her coat and scarf on the rack next to the door.

She moved to tidy the garments, absentmindedly patting the fabric of her coat.

Throughout most of Lori Parks’ life, she probably had turned heads, men’s and women’s, with her tall, shapely figure. Her broad forehead complimented round eyes and thick lashes, and her cheekbones were prominent enough to render the spaces below them concave. In her younger years, her cascading hair—now stiffened with dye and spray to reach the desired “natural” effect of flowing, auburn hair—had probably been her trademark feature. She still took pride in it, if her frequent, absentminded ministrations were any indication.

She wore a charcoal gray business suit, a white scoop-neck shell, black hose, and pearls. Fran had told me Lori Parks was forty, but light make-up couldn’t conceal years

spent outdoors. I made a mental note to start wearing more sunscreen, but I would have given anything for one full day of her unmistakable self-assurance.

As it was, I rose each morning and bemoaned a chest that was two cup sizes too large for my liking, bushy eyebrows I had to pluck into submission, and freckles that splayed all over my body in random patterns. On my last birthday, my thirty-sixth, I'd added gray hair to my list of woes. While only a few were scattered among otherwise dark-brown short hair, their numbers had grown beyond what I could realistically pull.

On the plus side, I could have answered honestly a “weight-in-proportion-to-height” ad, my eyes were an unusual shade of blue when caught in the right light, and my cut calves could have qualified as models for a Title 9 clothing catalogue. Title 9, Eddie Bauer, Land’s End—these were my main sources for clothes. That day, in jeans, turtleneck, and fleece vest, I hoped Lori Parks wouldn’t notice the loafers with no socks.

I led her down a short hall, invited her into my private office, and offered up the couch across from my desk. “Can I get you anything? Coffee?”

“No, thank you. I’ve had a pot already.”

“You must get up early or drink fast,” I said, taking a seat across from her on my favorite well-worn chair that swiveled.

She pinched a half-smile. “Both.”

“So, your partner Donna is a friend of Fran Green’s?” I said, in hopes of easing the tension I could see in her eyes.

“Friends might be overstating it. Donna and Fran met in a women’s snowboarding class four weeks ago. Donna’s instructing on weekends, at Loveland. As she tells it, Fran’s a natural.”

“Hmm,” I said. When Fran had announced her latest passion, my vision included more of a crab crawl across the mountain. The helmet, hockey pants, knee pads, and wrist guards she wore to protect her short, compact body completed the mental picture. This new information didn’t compute. “She’s that good?”

Lori must have heard the skepticism in my voice, because she smiled ruefully. “According to Donna. Who would have guessed a lady in her sixties could impress my forty-year-old athletic partner?”

“Don’t let Fran’s age fool you. She’s sixty-six going on twenty.”

“Donna’s quite taken with Fran,” Lori said, almost snidely. “In fact, she can’t stop talking about her.”

“Have you met her?”

“Only by phone, but Donna’s planning a get-together sometime soon. Off the slopes.”

“You don’t snowboard?”

She shook her head. “I had my fill of cold-weather sports growing up.”

“Did you ski?”

“A bit when I was younger.”

“Cross-country or downhill?”

“Both.”

“Were you any good?”

A shadow crossed her features. “Quite, but none of that mattered when...” Her voice cracked and she paused. “It was a long time ago. Could we please address my issues with the Academy?”

“Of course. Right away,” I stammered, aware I’d touched a nerve but unsure why.  
“Fran hasn’t told me much, only that strange things have happened. How about filling me in from the beginning?”

Lori took a deep breath. “First, I need your assurance that this won’t go any farther. I can’t afford to let word leak to the media. Last year, *USA Today* featured the Children’s Academy in an article, and this year, we celebrated our fifteen-year anniversary.”

“I’ll be discreet, and Fran is my only associate.”

Lori’s shoulders relaxed. “At any rate, I don’t think what’s happened amounts to anything more than pranks. The first occurred about two months ago, in October.”

I pulled a pad from the top drawer of my desk and began to take notes. “What time of day?”

“Around five o’clock in the morning. I was coming into work, and as I crossed the playground, I saw clothing strewn about. I brought them inside before anyone could notice.”

“How did you notice them in the dark?”

“Floodlights surround the building and grounds.”

“What kind of clothes did you pick up?”

“All outerwear. A coat, snow pants, mittens, a scarf, a hat.”

“New or used?”

“Used. Some a little torn.”

“Dirty or clean.”

“Clean and organized. An outfit. Not matching exactly, but complementary colors.”

“What size?”

“Adult medium, I suppose.”

“Where were they on the playground?”

“All around. At the bottom of the slide, on the merry-go-round, on the bars of the climbing gym.”

I dutifully recorded the facts. “Is the playground locked at night?”

“No. It’s fenced but never locked.”

“What was the weather like?”

Lori Parks paused to reflect. “It must have been warm, because I remember thinking there was no need for winter garments. The children hadn’t begun to wear coats to school yet.”

“What did you do with the clothes?”

“I put them in a box in our lost and found, hoping someone would claim them. Thus far, no one has.”

“Are you always the first to arrive in the morning?”

“Yes.”

“So someone may have directed this at you?”

“Possibly,” she said carefully. “But the next incident makes even less sense.”

“What happened?”

“About a week ago, I came to work and found a picture taped to the front door.”

“A drawing?”

“A photograph. A black and white snapshot of a young girl.”

“How old is she?”

“About three or four.”

“And the era of the photo?”

“The sixties or seventies, I’d guess.”

“Did you recognize the girl?”

Lori hesitated. “No.”

“You’re sure?”

“Something struck me on an intuitive level when I saw her smile, but no, I couldn’t place her.”

“Was she posed in winter clothes?”

“No, more of an Easter outfit.”

“By herself?”

“Yes.”

“Anything in the background?”

“Part of a brick home, but nothing distinguishable.”

“Did you keep the photo?”

“Yes,” she said, reaching into her purse. “But it’s a bit marred. Ink from the back bled through to the girl’s dress on the front.”

I raised both eyebrows. “Something is inscribed on the back?”

“If you could call it that, scrawled in block letters.”

“What’s written?”

Lori Parks retrieved the photograph and read from the back, methodically, as if announcing the winner of a prize. “Still, you believe no harm will ever come to your children...”

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