

VANISHING POINT

LISA

A
NIKKI BOYD
NOVEL

HARRIS



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Lisa Harris, *Vanishing Point*
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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Harris, Lisa, 1969– author.

Title: Vanishing point : a Nikki Boyd novel / Lisa Harris.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2017] | Series: The Nikki Boyd files

Identifiers: LCCN 2017029618 | ISBN 9780800728489 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Women detectives—Fiction. | Government investigators—Fiction. | Serial murder investigation—Fiction. | GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Mystery fiction. | Suspense fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3608.A78315 V36 2017 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017029618>

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Published in association with Joyce Hart of Hartline Literary Agency, LLC.

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To those who have loved and lost.
May you find peace in Him.

2004

1

January 23

6:17 a.m.

Sumner County, Tennessee

Special Agent Garrett Addison snapped a photo of the freshly dug grave located inside the yellow roped-off crime scene. He would have preferred to avoid looking at the magnified details of the body half buried in the patch of soft earth, but his camera lens wouldn't let him. Instead, it only emphasized the state of the young woman.

She lay in the ground where a couple of hikers had discovered her, posed with her hands on her chest as if she were sleeping. If not for the bullet hole and a single trail of dried blood running across her forehead, he could almost imagine she was simply sleeping. Sixteen, maybe seventeen years old, with long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore minimal makeup and there was a smudge of dirt on her left cheek next to a row of freckles. Her faded jeans were ripped at the knee, and the thin black T-shirt she wore wouldn't have been warm enough for the six inches of snow forecast to fall in the next twelve hours.

If she were still alive.

Five years on the force might have made responding to 911 calls

routine to him, but even experience couldn't completely prepare him for days like this.

What kind of person does this to another human being, God?

He drew in a deep breath as he snapped another photo. If it had been in the middle of a hot summer, the body would have already started to smell. Instead the cold January weather had prolonged the decaying process. He shook his head, wishing he could shake away the eerie feeling that always came with cases like this. A young life brutally cut short.

He glanced toward the other end of the blocked-off crime scene at the couple who'd called in the discovery. They'd been out hiking the wooded trails when they stumbled across the girl. The woman was crying again, her shoulders shaking, while the man had his arms around her, trying to comfort her. Images like the one they'd just stumbled across didn't simply fade away. They lingered in the back of your mind, resurfacing when you least expected it. He knew that from firsthand experience. Things like this should never happen.

Some first week on the new job working homicide.

He pushed back the growing sense of unease and went back to snapping photos. As a criminal investigator now, he expected to deal with the underbelly of society. That he could handle. It was the innocent loss of life that churned his gut. The heavy consequences of crime had just forever marked this young woman's family. But he couldn't make this scene personal. His only hope was that he'd be able to bring justice to victims like the one lying in front of him. But how could there be justice when it was too late and the scent of death already filled the air? She'd been so young . . . so vulnerable. Someone's daughter. Someone's sister.

Holding back the bile in his throat from the images in his viewfinder, he shifted his position and took another shot.

"Hope you didn't have any plans for tonight."

Garrett looked up at Special Agent Sam Bradford, his new boss for the past forty-eight hours. The man was somewhere in his late

fifties, balding on top and graying around the edges, but he was still as fit as someone half his age.

“Nothing important,” he said, reminding himself he was no longer a seasoned cop on the street but the newbie on Bradford’s team.

“Good. Because we need to wrap this case up as soon as we can. The public gets nervous when they find out a young girl’s been murdered.” Bradford knelt down next to the body, then rubbed the back of his head. “Make sure you get close-ups of her hands and face as well as multiple shots of the perimeter when you’re done here. And be careful not to disturb any of the evidence while you’re at it.”

Garrett started to say something, then decided not to mention that while he might be new on the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation’s payroll, he wasn’t exactly lacking crime scene experience. “Will do, boss.”

A second man, at least a decade younger than Bradford, stepped up beside him. At six foot two, Garrett was used to towering over people, but the ebony-skinned agent had at least an inch or two on him, as well as ten-plus pounds.

“Garrett Addison, I’m guessing,” the man said, holding out his hand.

Garrett nodded. “And you must be Special Agent Michaels.”

“Welcome to homicide. I’ve heard a lot about you. You made your way up the ranks pretty fast.”

“Not before putting in my time on the streets,” Garrett said, brushing off the familiar implications that friends in high places had gotten him his promotion.

One of the patrol officers who’d been first on the scene hollered something at Michaels.

“Excuse me a sec.”

Garrett took another step back from the body as Michaels walked off, then flipped back through the photos he’d just taken, ensuring he photographed every angle. They might have the rookie

do the grunt work, but he wasn't going to give them any reason to perpetuate the rumor he was here because of his grandfather.

"I met Senator Addison back in '92 when he was running for office," Bradford said. "Heard he went back into law after retiring."

"Yes, he's at the family firm now. Addison, Addison & Green."

"I've heard of it. And I'm guessing you were supposed to be the third Addison?"

Garrett started on the terrain surrounding the body, wishing he could avoid the topic. "Yes."

"So how does an up-and-coming lawyer with a prestigious firm decide to become a criminal investigator with TBI?" Bradford asked.

"I got fed up defending the bad guys."

The older man nodded. "As far as I'm concerned, I'm glad you're on board, no matter who your grandfather is. We could use some new blood around here. Some fresh ideas and perspective. In the meantime, what about an ID? Anything on her before the ME gets here?"

"Nothing's been found so far."

"Keep photographing the scene. Hopefully something will turn up."

Five minutes later, Garrett was still making his way systematically through the crime scene. He took another photo, then paused to check the view screen. Something partially buried beneath a clump of dirt caught his eye. He knelt down in front of the object. It was a Polaroid photo of their victim.

He called out to his boss, who was still studying the body. "I've got something you're going to want to see. It's a photo."

Garrett studied the picture. The girl's expression was haunting. As if she knew exactly what was going to happen to her. His gut clenched. She'd looked her abductor in the eye, and he'd killed her.

Bradford crouched down beside him, picked up the photo with his gloved hands, then brushed off a layer of dirt, his face paling with the action.

“What’s wrong?” Garrett asked.

“I worked a case about eighteen months ago, before I transferred to this department’s homicide division. A sixteen-year-old girl named Jessica Wright went missing. Her body was found five days later in an unmarked grave about ninety miles from Nashville.”

“Did you ever find her killer?”

“No, but a Polaroid photo of the victim was found. Nine months later a second girl, Becky Collier, vanished under similar circumstances. She was supposed to have spent the afternoon at the library. Her body hasn’t turned up, but authorities found a photo of her, near where she was taken. A Polaroid.”

The sense of unease returned. Garrett snapped a photo of the Polaroid. She’d been terrified. He could see it in her eyes as he tried not to imagine what she’d been thinking at that moment. “I remember hearing about both cases, but I don’t remember hearing anything about the Polaroid photos.”

“That information was intentionally left out of our reports to the media.”

“Any witnesses or a description of the abductor?” Garrett asked.

“We’ve got a police sketch from a witness in the first case who saw Jessica arguing with someone after school. We never could identify the man and the artist’s sketch is pretty generic. Could be anyone. And on top of that, no matchable DNA was found at the crime scene, which means that even after all this time, we still have no idea who the perpetrator is.”

“What about trying to track down the buyer of the camera?” Garrett asked. “Polaroids aren’t used that much anymore.”

“You’d think a vintage camera would be easy to track, but it turns out there are dozens of sellers on eBay alone. We never could narrow it down.” Bradford ran his fingers through his thinning hair. “What about the couple who found this body? Did they see anything that might help?”

“Not as far as I know. One of the first officers on the scene took their statements. Apparently they were here watching for eagles.”

Bradford frowned. “Eagles?”

“While winter isn’t the best time to be out camping and hiking, apparently it’s the best time for eagle sightings.”

“So they didn’t see anyone hanging around this morning?”

“No, but the area’s slow this time of year. They said even the parking lot was empty.”

Bradford shook his head. “And it’s possible she’s been here for days.”

Garrett turned around as the medical examiner slipped under the yellow tape and headed toward the body with his equipment.

“Sam Bradford.” The ME stopped next to them. “I thought I heard you were heading out of town to celebrate your anniversary.”

“I was.”

“Irene’s going to kill you for this. We can handle it, you know.”

“And miss breaking in a newbie?” Bradford glanced at Garrett. “This is Special Agent Garrett Addison, by the way. And as for Irene? She’s been putting up with me for thirty years. This won’t change anything.”

“JB Philips,” the examiner said, giving Garrett a nod. “Why don’t you show me what you’ve got?”

“You’re not going to like this, Philips,” Bradford said as the ME crouched beside the victim.

“Another young girl losing her life far too early?”

“It’s more than that. Do you remember the Wright case back in ’02? A sixteen-year-old was abducted while walking home. Five days later, a couple kids were playing and found her body in a shallow grave.”

“Sounds vaguely familiar.”

“I was the lead investigator on the case. And here’s the clincher. Not only is this body posed exactly the same way—like she’s sleeping—but there’s also the detail of the Polaroid photo found near her body. We never gave that information to the public. We later found a second Polaroid near the abduction point of another girl who’s never been found, Becky Collier.” Bradford jutted his chin

toward Garrett. “He just found a Polaroid taken of this girl before she was murdered.”

Philips straightened up. “I remember those cases. Someone from the local media started calling him the Angel Abductor, proposing we might be dealing with a serial killer, but besides the Polaroid, we didn’t have any evidence that tied the cases together.”

“Why the Angel Abductor?” Garrett asked.

“Because both girls had long blonde hair.” Philips took a step back and frowned. “Like this girl. Do you know what this means, Sam?”

“It means that reporter was on to something. We’ve now got three girls either murdered or missing in the past eighteen months. All with a similar MO.”

“What about suspects?” Philips asked. “Anything pointing toward whoever’s behind this?”

“No solid evidence,” Bradford said. “Nothing beyond the rough sketch a witness gave us after Jessica Wright went missing. We put out an APB around the time of her murder, hoping to get a hit on our killer’s ID, but nothing has ever come of it.”

Philips shook his head and started his examination. “Whoever did this to her can’t be that good. He had to have left some kind of evidence behind. Who handled the Wright girl’s autopsy?”

“Craig Brower from the Nashville ME’s office. He was never able to find anything solid pointing to her killer either. Tox screens all came back inconclusive, no fingerprints, no DNA matches . . .”

Philips shoved his thick glasses up the bridge of his nose. “When I’m done here, I’ll look over the files. See if something jumps out at me that might have been overlooked.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Bradford said. “If we’d already caught the psychopath who did this, this girl would still be alive.”

“What do you know about her?” Philips asked.

Bradford looked to Garrett for an answer.

“So far there’s been no trace of any personal effects, which

means we don't even have an ID. We're still waiting to see if we can get a match with Missing Persons."

"I need a time frame of her death," Bradford said.

"I'll know more after the autopsy, but I'd say she's already been here a couple days."

"What else can you tell me?"

Philips frowned. "On the surface, there are no defensive wounds on her hands, no scratches, or indications that her hands were bound. But there's a bruise here on her arm, and another one on her shoulder."

"Implying what?" Garrett said. "He forced her to walk here?"

"I can't answer that yet."

"Then just give us the bottom line at this point," Bradford said. "Should we be looking for another primary crime scene, or is this it?"

Garrett knew what Bradford was looking for. They needed to narrow the focus of the investigation. Which meant they needed to know if she'd been murdered somewhere else and then brought here, or if this was the actual scene of the crime. But until a proper autopsy was done, anything Philips gave them was primarily speculation.

"My best guess is that she was brought here by her assailant, alive." Philips tugged at his collar, then looked up at Bradford. "But like I said, I'll let you know as soon as I finish with my autopsy."

Bradford took a step away from the body. "And I think it's time we put in a call to the FBI."

"Do you really want to get them involved?" Philips asked.

"We're already going to have to explain to the media that we've got a third victim," Bradford countered. "Which is going to cause a panic and blow up in our faces if we're not careful. We need to find this guy."

Garrett felt a shiver brush over him as reality sunk in. "Because we've got a serial killer on our hands."