

Chapter One

You have to be the calm in their chaos.

Jax Diallo repeated the mantra in his head, the words he always reminded himself of when he was sent to the scene of a tragedy. Being an FBI Victim Specialist wasn't for the faint of heart.

As the FBI vehicle he was riding in slammed to a stop, Jax closed his eyes for a few seconds, tried to center himself. Tried to prepare to walk into the aftermath of a bomb.

"Let's go!" one of the Special Agents said, hopping out of the vehicle with his partner, two Evidence Response Technicians on their heels.

With the doors open, the bitter Alaskan wind penetrated the vehicle. So did the unnatural quiet of nature, as if all the animals had taken off. The silence was punctuated by staccato bursts of sobbing, from victims or family members still on the scene. Or maybe a first responder or law-enforcement officer who'd never seen anything like this.

In the distance a phone rang and rang, before going silent and then starting up again. A friend or family member searching for a loved one, desperately hoping for an answer to a call that would never be picked up.

"You ready, Patches?" Jax asked quietly.

His Labrador retriever stared up at him steadily, the soft brown eyes that always reassured victims also working their magic on Jax. She'd transitioned fast from a scared, abandoned puppy into one of the FBI's best therapy dogs. Right now she could read his mood as well as any victim's she'd been sent to help.

He gave her a reassuring pet, then climbed out of the SUV. Twenty feet ahead the beautiful greenery of a park was littered with the twisted metal skeleton of what had probably once been a park bench. Pieces of metal had blown into the street, and were still smoldering. Directly beside the park, a small freestanding building—maybe a bathroom—had collapsed, the front wall gaping open. Crumbled concrete, support beams and insulation spilled out of it. Around the edges of the park, one tree was pierced with a metal fragment, like a spear. Others were singed black and missing huge limbs.

As Jax got closer, he saw the detritus from first responders: abandoned needle covers, wrappers and blood-soaked gauze. The concrete walkway was stained a deep red.

The scent still lingered, too, burned metal and charred trees, and something worse underneath. A scent Jax recognized from too many other crime scenes.

The bomb had gone off just over an hour ago in the sleepy town of Luna, Alaska, on an otherwise peaceful Saturday morning. When it happened, Jax had been four hundred miles away, sipping his morning coffee on his back deck, with Patches asleep at his feet. Then his FBI phone had

gone off and he'd grabbed his go bag and raced to the tiny nearby airfield, where a jumper plane was waiting.

The briefing on the plane had been short and information-light. A single bomb had detonated. At least six were dead and thirteen more injured. Right now the tiny Luna Police Department had no suspects, no obvious motive and no idea whether to expect more bombs.

Jax looked around the small park, with butterfly-shaped benches around the edges and a couple of trails leading into the woods. It wasn't an obvious spot to set off a bomb. There'd been no events here, except for an impromptu soccer game. All locals, no news coverage. If the bomber had a specific target, the park seemed like an odd place to go after them, because a bomb here was too likely to miss that person and take out others. If he hadn't been targeting a specific person, it still seemed like a strange choice, without the volume of spectators that mission-oriented bombers favored.

Not your job, Jax reminded himself. The agents would search for the perpetrator. He needed to help the victims and their families.

Kneeling down, he slipped special shoes onto Patches's feet that would protect her from bomb fragments and other sharp items in the rubble. Ideally, they'd stay out of the blast zone entirely, but that wasn't always possible. Then he stood, holding his arm out straight, directing her toward the park. "Come on, Patches."

She followed his direction, walking past the gawkers on the outskirts of the scene. She headed straight toward the woman sitting alone on one of the intact benches, with a vacant gaze and blood smearing her sweatshirt. When Patches reached the woman, she sat next to her, and the woman—girl, really, Jax decided as he reached her—seemed to refocus. She reached out a shaky hand to pet Patches, who scooted closer.

Ignoring the chaos behind him as the FBI agents and evidence specialists coordinated with Luna police, Jax knelt in front of the girl. He pegged her at nineteen. The shock in her eyes suggested she still hadn't processed what had happened. The grass stains on the knees of her pants suggested she might have been part of the soccer game. Or maybe she'd skidded to the ground from the force of the blast or in desperation to help someone she loved. There were a couple of bandages visible on her arms where she'd rolled up her sleeves, but nothing that would have caused the amount of blood on her shirt.

"I'm Jax Diallo," he said softly, not wanting to startle her. "I'm a Victim Specialist with the FBI."

Her gaze skipped to his, then back to Patches. She pet his dog faster, and Patches moved even closer, putting her head on the arm of the bench and making the girl smile.

"What can I do for you?" Jax asked. "Is there someone I can call? Do you need to get to the hospital to see someone?" He hoped the person whose blood coated her shirt wasn't in the morgue.

She glanced at him again, surprise and wariness in her eyes. "You're not going to ask me about what happened?"

“We can talk about that, too, if you want. I’m here for you. So is Patches.”

Her gaze darted to his dog, at the mix of brown and black that had earned her the name, and smiled briefly.

“What’s your name?”

“Akna.” Her voice was croaky, quiet enough that he had to lean forward to make it out.

She’d inhaled smoke when the bomb went off. Or the blast was still impeding her ability to tell how loud she was speaking, even an hour later. Probably both.

“Akna, I’m a Victim Specialist. It’s my job to help you and anyone else who needs me today or in the future. Right now that means getting you any resources you might want, or helping you contact someone.”

She stared back at him, her gaze still slightly unfocused. But as she pet Patches, the fear and confusion on her face slowly started to fade.

Most people had no idea his job existed. But he was the lifeline between victims and their families and the Special Agents, who often didn’t have the time or know-how to manage victims’ many needs. Part of his role was to help victims navigate the criminal justice process, making it more likely they’d find the perpetrator and put that person behind bars. But the other part was simply helping victims get the resources they needed to move on with their lives.

“Akna, were you here alone?”

“Yeah.” She shook her head. “No. Sort of.”

“You were here for the soccer game?” he guessed.

“Yeah. We’ve got an online community board. Someone wanted to play.” She shrugged, a fast jerk of her shoulders. “It was a nice day. I wanted some exercise.” A strangled sob broke free. “How could this happen?”

“Is there someone you want me to call? To let them know you’re okay? Or to pick you up?”

“I helped carry her over there,” Akna said, gesturing vaguely toward the edge of the park. “I saw a couple of the players trying to lift her, carry her away from the rubble.” Her voice picked up speed, picked up volume. “She was right by the building and big pieces of it fell on her. We thought it would be better. But—”

“She was a friend of yours?” Jax asked, keeping his voice calm, letting Patches do her own work as Akna continued to pet her, probably not even aware she was doing it.

Akna shook her head. “I didn’t really know her. But she was on my team.” Her eyes met Jax’s and instantly filled with tears. “I think she was dead before we carried her over there.”

“I’m sorry, Akna.”

“Who would do this?”

“We don’t know yet. But we’re going to find out.”

“We were just playing the game. I was running down the field, heading for the goal—it was supposed to be those trees.” She pointed, her hand shaking uncontrollably. “No one thought to bring a net. And then...and then, there was this huge boom. It was so loud I could feel it. I don’t remember falling, but then I was on the ground and people were screaming and then...” She sucked in a violent breath.

“Akna, you’re okay,” Jax said softly, in the same even tone he’d used with hundreds of victims. “You’re okay. It’s over.”

“Akna!”

Akna leaped to her feet, making Patches stand, too. The tears she’d been persistently blinking back suddenly spilled over as she whispered, “Mom.”

Then a woman with the same dark hair, the same deep-set eyes, rushed over, enveloping her in a tight hug. “I heard about the bomb. And I couldn’t get a hold of you. Your phone kept going straight to voice mail.”

“It broke,” Akna sobbed. “I fell on it and it broke. And then I was trying to help Jenny and—”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” her mom soothed, smoothing back her daughter’s hair. “I’ll take you home.”

“Akna,” Jax said, holding out his card. “You call me if I can help you, okay? Anything at all. Anytime.”

She took the card with a shaky hand, nodded.

Akna’s mom looked at him questioningly, even as her gaze skimmed over his coat, emblazoned with FBI. “You’re investigating the bombing?”

“I’m a Victim Specialist, not an investigator. I’m here for your daughter. If she saw anything that could help the investigation, she can talk to me. Or if she wants information about the status of the case. Or if she wants help finding someone to talk to about what happened today. The same goes for you, ma’am.”

Surprise registered on the woman’s face as she glanced at the card in Akna’s hand, then back at him.

Akna swiped the tears off her face with the sleeve of her bloody sweatshirt, then whispered, “Thanks, Jax.” Then she gave his dog a shaky smile. “Bye, Patches.”

Woof!

Her happy bark made a handful of Luna police officers glance their way.

Akna let out a surprised laugh, then she left, her arm looped around her mom's waist.

Jax pulled out a notebook and jotted down the details Akna had mentioned, before tucking it back into his FBI jacket. Then he raised his arm to gesture toward the other group of civilians gathered at the edge of the park. "Let's go, Patches."

She headed toward them without pause, used to her role of calming people.

As he followed, snippets of their conversation drifted toward him.

"Why would anyone set off a bomb here?"

"...nothing here, man!"

Right now Jax needed to focus on the victims' immediate needs, on information he could gather to help them later and on the details that might matter in the investigation. But he had a background in psychology and he'd never quite been able to turn off the analytical side of his brain that sorted through why a person did the things they did. It had helped him back in his therapist days. As an FBI employee, it sometimes made him clash with the investigating agents.

But right now he couldn't stop wondering: What had a bomber been doing in this small park?

Jax had been to the sites of several bombs since he'd joined the FBI. Usually, they fell into two categories: big spectacles meant to cause widespread panic, or small explosives meant to kill a certain person. This didn't seem like either one.

This crime scene was different from anything he'd experienced. Even though knowing the motivation behind a crime didn't necessarily make it less scary, for Jax, it made it easier to comprehend. And usually, easier to comprehend meant a starting place for him, for the victims, even for the Special Agents in their investigation.

He squinted at the destruction in this once-beautiful place and dread settled in his gut. Was the bomber finished or was he just getting started?

BEING POLICE CHIEF in a remote Alaskan town was supposed to be quiet. It was supposed to be simple.

Today Keara Hernandez had spent the day reassuring scared citizens that they were safe in Desparre, that the explosion in the town next to them was under investigation. That she'd have more information over the next few days, that it would be solved soon. She hoped her reassurances were true. But she'd been unable to get through to her colleagues in the Luna PD all day.

So now, instead of going home to rest, she was on her way down the mountain that separated Desparre from Luna. Getting to Luna was a two-hour venture if you went around the base of the mountain. Trekking up and then down the mountain again took half the time. In winter that trip could be dangerous. Right now, with May a few days away and the snow melted except in the highest parts of the mountain, it was much easier. But Keara felt every minute of the drive.

Her throat was sore after talking to more citizens in a day than she usually did in a week in her town full of recluses. Her shoulder ached from one of her regular calls, close to her own house. A belligerent drunk who liked to scream at his wife. At least once a week Keara was out there, talking him down and occasionally tossing him in a cell. Today he'd taken a run at her and she'd had to cuff him, bringing him in the hard way.

She wanted to soak it off in a tub, relax in her quiet house, set apart from her neighbors by a few miles. She wanted to continue to live in the fantasy that a small town like Desparre would never face the same types of threats a big city like Houston saw.

The thought of her hometown made her chest tighten and Keara pushed it out of her mind, punched down on the gas. This was a fluke. She'd lived in Desparre for six years and although bar fights and domestic violence weren't unusual, big, complex cases were few and far between. Other than the kidnapping case that had given Desparre way more attention than it had ever wanted five years ago—and a rehash six months ago when one of the kidnapers reappeared—Desparre and its neighbor Luna were places people came to stay below the radar. Not to set off bombs.

The idea made her shudder as she navigated off the mountain and toward downtown Luna, toward the quaint little park where she'd come more than once over the past six years. The first time she'd seen it, she'd thought what a fun place it would have been to take kids. Which was irrelevant for her, since that part of her life had ended before it ever got started. But right now she prayed the park hadn't been hosting one of their toddler play groups when the bomb had exploded.

The news had reported six dead and at least thirteen injured, but they hadn't offered many more details. The hospital was keeping media out and police weren't talking, other than to say they were contacting next of kin and working with the FBI to investigate. And typical of the people who chose to live in this remote Alaskan area, the residents weren't interested in their own fifteen minutes of fame.

It had been twelve hours since the bomb went off, but Keara parked down the street, not wanting to get in the way of investigators if any were still on scene. As she hurried toward the site on foot, she pulled up the collar on her lined raincoat, wishing she'd opted for something heavier. The temperatures were already dropping into the thirties, the sun casting an array of pinks and oranges across the sky as it settled behind the trees.

Her footsteps slowed as the park came into view and the sharp scent of smoke invaded her nostrils. The front of the building housing the public restrooms was blown out, a metal bench shredded to pieces, the once-green field charred black in places. But it was the bloodstain splotches on the

ground, on the benches, even on the side of the building, that made her stomach flip-flop. Made memories rush forward that she ruthlessly pushed down.

The area was cordoned off, but she didn't see any evidence markers, suggesting all the obvious evidence had already been bagged up and taken to the lab. There was likely more searching to do. Bomb fragments could fly a long distance, into the woods behind the park or buried under the rubble of the building.

Keara scanned the park, her gaze moving quickly over the civilians on the outskirts of the scene. She was looking for an officer who would give her straight information about the status of the case. All she saw was one Luna officer she didn't know and another who didn't like anyone from Desparre PD after a debacle six months ago with one of her officers. She frowned, looking for friendlier faces, but she mostly saw FBI jackets, plus a handful of people covered from head to toe in white protective gear. Evidence technicians, probably more FBI. All of them flown up the four hundred plus miles from the FBI's Anchorage field office.

Movement off to her side caught her attention and then an adorable black-and-tan dog plopped down at her feet, staring up at her expectantly. Behind the dog was a man with dark curly hair, perfectly smooth light brown skin and hypnotizing dark brown eyes. He had more than half a foot on her five-foot-six-inch frame, was probably a few years older than her thirty-five years and he wore an FBI coat.

"That's Patches," he told her, in a smooth, deep voice that would have put her instantly at ease if it hadn't made awareness clench her stomach. "And I'm Jax."

He tilted his head, and she had the distinct feeling he was cataloging everything about her.

She stood a little taller, feeling self-conscious in her civilian clothes—comfortable jeans with a warm sweatshirt under her jacket, and a pair of heavy-duty boots that could kick in a door.

"Did you know one of the victims?" he asked as Patches nudged her hand with a wet nose.

Keara smiled at the dog, petting her head as she told Jax, "No. Well, I don't know. Maybe." She cleared her throat, held out her hand. "Keara Hernandez. I'm the police chief in Desparre." She gestured vaguely in the direction of the mountain. "We're Luna's neighbors."

His eyes narrowed slightly, assessing her without any of the visible surprise she was used to from Alaskans when they heard about Desparre's female police chief. Then his big hand closed around hers, warm and vaguely unsettling. "Jax Diallo. Victim Specialist for the FBI. Patches here is a therapy dog."

"Therapy?" She looked down at Patches, who stared back at her calmly. "I assumed she was a bomb-sniffing dog."

"Nope. Patches and I are here to help the victims."

“Well, maybe you can give me some details, as a professional courtesy.” She showed him her badge, just in case he thought she was lying, but he barely glanced at it. “I’ve got to answer to my citizens tomorrow. They want to know if they’re safe.”

“I can’t really answer that, Keara.” He drew out the e in her name slightly, Kee-ra. It was almost Southern, and it made her flash back to another case, another man, another time in her life entirely.

She’d been a brand-new patrol officer, assigned to partner up with a man who would eventually become her husband. Juan had frowned at her that first day, and although he hadn’t said anything, she’d seen it all over his face. He didn’t like being assigned to work with a woman.

Keara glanced away from Jax, not wanting him to see the emotions that were hard to keep off her face whenever she thought about Juan. But when she redirected her gaze to the right, all she saw was that blood.

It was a dark smear across the concrete, nothing like the thick, pooled mess that had surrounded Juan when she’d found him behind their house seven years ago. His eyes had been open, glassy, his cheek already cold to her touch.

“Keara?”

She jerked at the feel of Jax’s hand on her elbow, the concerned tone of his voice. Shaking off the memory, she forced her gaze back to the Victim Specialist. “Is there someone I can talk to about the case?”

“Not right now. But I’m here if you want to talk about—”

“Sorry. I’ve got to go.” Keara gave Patches one last pat, then spun back the way she’d come, suddenly uncaring that she’d driven all this way and hadn’t gotten any answers. Because right now what she needed most was to get out of here.

Away from the bloodstains and the bomb remnants. Away from the unexpected memories.

Hopefully, the FBI would do their job fast. Hopefully, the people of Luna would get the answers they deserved about the person responsible for this bomb, the closure that would help them move on with their lives.

Without it, they could try to move on. She’d tried damn hard. She’d left behind everyone in her life and moved across the country, given up the job she’d dreamed of as a detective to become the police chief in a sleepy little town where she might spend six months of the year snowed in.

But she’d never actually found the peace she’d desperately searched for, the peace she’d almost convinced herself she’d achieved. Not if the sight of one smeared bloodstain could bring it all rushing back like this.

She’d never found her own closure. Not with her husband’s killer still out there somewhere.

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