



The Protector's Mission (Alaskan Search and Rescue Book 3)

By Margaret Daley

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DEADLY EXPLOSION

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Alaskan Search and Rescue: Risking their lives to save the day

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Margaret Daley, an award-winning author of eighty-three books, has been married for over forty years and is a firm believer in romance and love. When she isn't traveling, she's writing love stories, often with a suspense thread, and corralling her three cats that think they rule her household. To find out more about Margaret visit her website at <http://www.margaretdaley.com>.

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Lydia McKenzie swung open the door to Melinda's Bistro and plowed right into a middle-aged man wearing a navy blue hoodie that shrouded his gray eyes and the scar slashing his cheek. "Sorry."

The guy, holding one of the restaurant take-out sacks, mumbled something and scurried away.

Lydia spied Bree Stone, a doctor and friend from childhood, and headed toward her table. "Sorry I'm late. Had an emergency at work. I hope you got my text." After several hours in surgery at the veterinary hospital, Lydia finally eased into a chair and relaxed.

"I certainly know what an emergency is. We're a doctor short at the hospital, so I'm taking an extra shift to fill in." Bree gathered her purse and put money on the table to pay her tab. "What kind of emergency?"

"It involved one of the rescue dogs from the bombing at the church. A police K-9." Right now she could use a neck and shoulder massage. Pain radiated down her back. "A few days ago, I tended to two rescue dogs that had been injured while searching for survivors at the church, but one of them took a turn for the worse this morning. I had to remove his left hind leg in order to save him. The decision broke my heart because it ends his career, but he'll live."

Bree started to rise but sat back down. "Jesse Hunt's Brutus?"

The mention of Jesse made Lydia's breath catch. She tried to avoid seeing him as much as possible, which was hard since she worked with Northern Frontier Search and Rescue and went to SAR sites to be there if a dog needed medical help. Jesse was often there with his Rottweiler. "No, Officer Nichols with the Anchorage K-9 Unit. He sometimes works with your husband at search and rescue sites."

"Yes, Nichols was brought into the ER last Friday. David was upset. He came to the hospital as soon as he could to see how he was."

"How's he doing?" Lydia shook the image of Jesse Hunt, once a friend, from her mind. When she returned to Anchorage last year, she renewed several friendships, but not with Jesse, whom she'd betrayed right after she'd graduated from high school.

"He's still on the critical list. His accident shows me how dangerous my husband's job is, but David wouldn't do anything else." Bree rose. "I wish I could stay. But I have to be in early because the other doctor is sick."

"We'll catch up later." Lydia rolled her shoulders and released a long breath.

Bree smiled. "When we both slow down. Tell Kate hi for me. She's been asking me about being a doctor."

"She has?" She should know that, but she and her seventeen-year-old sister had clashed a lot since she'd become her guardian last year.

"Yes, she doesn't think she can work with animals like you and your dad, but she's interested in the medical field. See you."

Lydia watched Bree weave through the tables starting to fill up with people coming in for an early lunch. She scanned the bistro, trying to decide whether to stay and eat or order and take it back to the Aurora Animal Hospital down the street, the veterinary practice she inherited from her father when he died last year. They treated large and small animals as well as the Northern Frontier SAR dogs and the K-9s that worked with the police.

Her gaze settled on Melinda, the owner of the restaurant, talking to a man with dark brown hair sticking out of a black ball cap. The guy took Melinda's hand and moved closer. Was this Todd, the boyfriend she'd been telling Lydia about this past month?

Lydia started to look away to give them some privacy when she spied the man lean toward Melinda, a furious expression on his face. Melinda jerked her hand from his grasp, and the guy pivoted and stormed away, passing Lydia's table.

She averted her look toward a man and a young woman sitting at the table next to her. She knew the guy. He worked at the drugstore—

"Sorry you saw that, Lydia."

She looked up at Melinda. "I'm the one sorry for staring. Are you all right?"

The bistro owner waved her hand. "Boyfriend problems. He isn't too happy with me at the moment." Melinda slipped into the chair next to Lydia. "How have you been?"

"Tired. I had to operate on one of the K-9 dogs that was hurt at the church bomb site. It's been all over the news."

"That's what everyone's been talking about. Two bombings close together."

Lydia shivered when she thought about the pictures she'd seen on the news. "I know some police officers, and they're working overtime."

"Yeah, I heard there's no connection between the hardware store and the church, but they were only ten days apart. Do you think it's the same person? Have you heard if it's the same MO?"

"It sounds like it. Both times there was a laugh track that sounded seconds before the bomb went off."

"What a sick person!" Melinda rose. "Are you going to eat lunch here or order takeout since Bree left?"

"Takeout. The veggie wrap."

"It shouldn't take too long." Melinda headed for the kitchen in the back.

Glad to be sitting for a few minutes, Lydia glanced at the different people coming into the bistro. Some she recognized because they were regulars, like herself, but a couple were new to her—a young, petite woman with an older gentleman, a young man with long brown hair and a bald man about thirty-five or forty. She loved to people watch. She'd once considered being a writer, but her love of animals clinched her decision to be a vet and follow in her father's footsteps. She'd hoped that decision would reconcile them. It hadn't.

Before Melinda brought her takeout, she made her way down a long hallway to the restroom. A man slipped out the exit door at the end of the corridor. Odd, it wasn't used much.

A few minutes later as she came out of the woman's bathroom and paused, she panned the dining area, pleased to see the restaurant doing so well. But one of the new customers had left. Maybe the bistro didn't serve what he wanted. She noticed Melinda carrying a takeout bag toward the table where she'd been sitting.

But before Lydia moved forward, a blast of maniacal-sounding laughter resonated through the restaurant. Melinda dropped the sack, a look of horror on her face. Lydia took only two steps back into the hallway before her world exploded.

Sergeant Jesse Hunt took Brutus out of the back of his SUV, secured his leash and walked toward the rubble of the church he attended. One person still remained missing and two were found dead in the bombing last Wednesday. He was on duty and had only stopped by to see David Stone, the head of Northern Frontier SAR, at the bombing site to assess it after the two people were hurt searching it Friday.

"Have they stabilized the structure?" Jesse asked as he approached David.

His friend turned toward him, a grim expression on his face. "Yes, this morning. At least this time I hope nothing else happens. I don't want any more people hurt, but we need to check thoroughly for the one missing."

"Yeah, I've seen people found days later and I heard of someone who lasted a week in the wreckage. That's why I'm here. I can help later after my shift."

"Good. It's nice that late August still gives us long days."

"Is Pastor Paul around?"

"No, he went to a parishioner's house. They're making plans for holding a church service here on Sunday."

"That sounds like him. Someone bombing his church isn't going to stop him from having worship services." Jesse surveyed the large mounds of debris, noting some were marked already searched. His church had been large and thriving. At first the authorities wondered if it had been a crime associated with religion, but as they investigated they discovered too many links to the hardware store destroyed a week and a half before the church. The establishments weren't connected, but the way the bombings were carried out indicated the same person or persons did both, down to the type of bomb, detonated with a timer and the sound of a laugh track.

"At the hardware store there weren't any deaths or injuries, but you and I know the two who died here."

"And the one missing." Jesse's cell phone rang. As he answered the call, he saw it was his commander. "Hunt here."

"There's been a third bombing at Melinda's Bistro, down the street from the Aurora Animal Hospital."

"I know the place. Brutus and I are on our way." Jesse hung up as David received a call, no doubt about the new bombing.

Jesse waved at David, then jogged with Brutus toward his SUV. Settled in his car, he switched on his engine and sirens. Fifteen minutes later he parked his car with other police cruisers and hurried toward the crime scene. The whole street was blocked off. So far, if this was the same MO, there had been only one bomb going off, but this bomber was escalating with each site, the amount of time between each bombing and from the look of the site the size of the bomb. Melinda's Bistro would have just started serving lunch, which meant probably more deaths than the previous one. Did the killer take it even further with the addition of another bomb?

When he arrived at the command post, he assessed the destruction up close. A shudder snaked through him. A cloud of dust hung in the still air where the restaurant had once been, a two-story building brought to the ground, except for one small area where the top floor remained, but heavily damaged. Cries floated to him, some from within the massive debris of concrete, wood and brick.

His gut knotted, and his determination to catch the perpetrator intensified. He'd ask Thomas Caldwell, the detective overseeing the first two bombings, if he could be on the task force the department was forming. He searched the police officers, found his longtime friend and headed straight for him.

"When can we start searching for survivors?" Jesse asked. The site had to be stabilized first to protect everyone, including the survivors.

Thomas shifted his attention to Jesse, his shoulders slumped as though he'd been up forty-eight hours, which was possible. A scowl carved deep lines into Thomas's face. "As soon as we get the okay that it's safe. Until then I could use you and Brutus to check for any other bombs in the area."

"Will do, and I want on the task force you're heading."

"I already put your name down. You were at the top of the list. I have two other K-9 officers searching this side of the street. One that way. The other opposite." Thomas pointed toward the buildings flanking Melinda's Bistro. "But if the bomber is getting more violent, it won't be long before we start seeing multiple bombs. All the shops have been evacuated, necessary personnel only, so be on the lookout for looters."

Jesse started at one end of the street and investigated anything that remotely looked suspicious. Most of the buildings' windows were blown out, and the structures suffered minor damage. He was acquainted with Melinda and most likely she had been in her bistro. Would there be any survivors? From what was left of the restaurant, he didn't have high hopes for anyone, even after hearing the faint cries.

At the other end of the street, he saw Bree Stone admitted into the blocked off area. She had some medical personnel with her. He detoured to meet her in the middle of the street. "Are you setting up a medical tent?"

"Yes. Have you heard of any survivors? I haven't been told anything."

"They're stabilizing the site and making sure there aren't any other bombs. As you can tell, it's pretty chaotic."

"David is coming."

"I know. I was with him when we both got the call."

Bree chewed on her bottom lip. "I was in that restaurant ten minutes before the bomb went off. I had to get back to work, but one of my friends was still there."

"Have you checked to see where she is?"

"Yes, and she hasn't returned to the animal hospital." Bree studied him. "You two dated in high school, if I remember correctly. Lydia McKenzie."

Lydia McKenzie. Jesse could feel the color drain from his face. His heartbeat slowed to a throb, and his breathing became labored. He thought if he kept his distance, even when they both were at the same SAR site, he'd be all right. He'd thought they would marry after high school. When she'd eloped with Aaron, one of his good friends, he had locked away the unbearable pain of rejection. Until she'd returned to Anchorage last year. Then the lid had lifted on that pain and leaked out.

"You need to report that. Thomas is over there." Jesse waved toward his friend, then before he said something he'd regret about Lydia, he rotated away and said, "I still have one more building to inspect."

With Brutus by his side, he hastened toward the last store. As his Rottweiler sniffed around, Jesse examined the clothing store, the large plate window gone in front. Through the opening, he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye in the appliance shop next door. He pulled on Brutus's leash and headed for the place. As he peered inside, he glimpsed a door closing at the rear.

He entered the appliance store with Brutus and un-snapped his leash. "Check it."

While his K-9 moved around the large open space, Jesse removed his gun and strode toward the back exit. When he opened the door, he spied a black Chevy driving out of the parking lot. He took down the part of the license number not covered by mud. All employees, shop owners and customers were evacuated an hour ago, so why did this guy stay behind?

Going back inside, he did his own search of the premise while Brutus finished. Nothing. That was a good sign, but a troublesome feeling about the man who left nagged at him. He headed back toward Thomas who was talking with David in low tones.

Thomas wore his deadpan expression that didn't give anything away if reporters were watching. "So far we think at least twelve people were inside. I imagine more names will come in as people wonder where someone is. We have four employees and eight customers we know of at this time. We have been given the go-ahead to search the left side of the building."

Jesse and Brutus started for that area, the one where the second floor had crashed down on the first one. There was little to shore up, and it was probably where the bomb originated as well as where most of the casualties would be.

The thought of finding Lydia dead soured his stomach. He might be angry with her, but he prayed to the Lord she was alive somewhere in the rubble.

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John Bradley:

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