

Chapter 1

“You have got to be kidding me,” I said, staring at the small hole in the chain-link fence. The little bit of grass on the other side was mostly dead, and the yard was full of debris. There was an old building not far from the fence that appeared to have been a small barn at one time. An abandoned pickup truck was nearby, but there wasn’t a house or other livable structure. The ground was damp and muddy as it had recently rained. I glanced down at my new, expensive tennis shoes before looking at my companion.

“Are you sure?” I asked. The only response was a sharp bark and pawing on the ground. Hero is a trained search-and-rescue dog, and he is very good at his job. He barked a second time and sat by the fence. I leaned over and gave him a brisk pat. “Okay, give me just a minute.”

Retrieving my phone from the pocket of my jeans, I placed a call. Although the property looked deserted, I wasn’t about to go traipsing around without verification. I may bend the law from time to time, but I try not to break it.

“Lost and Found Pets. This is Claire. How may I help you?”

Claire is my complete opposite. She is short and just a little chubby. She has long blond hair, pretty blue eyes, and a sweet smile. Her bubbly personality comes through with every word she speaks. She is friendly, kind, and supportive. How the two of us became friends is still a mystery to me.

“I need you to do a property search,” I said as soon as she finished her greeting.

There was a short pause on the line then Claire said in a calm controlled voice, “Hello, Alexandra. I’m so glad you called. How are things going?”

Closing my eyes, I silently took a deep breath. For years, she has been trying to get me to be more sociable. I tend to be short and blunt with people, having little patience with small talk and social convention. I can play the game. I just don’t see the point. Claire means well, but sometimes it irritates the hell out of me.

“Hello, Claire. Things are going well. Hero found Mr. Fluffy’s trail, but it leads to a fenced property.”

“Which is why you need a property search,” Claire said. I heard the laughter in her voice. “What’s the address?”

I gave her the particulars and waited while she performed the search. Mr. Fluffy was the lost cat that I was currently trying to locate. The Lost and Found Pets agency tries to live up to its name. We attempt to find lost pets. After working for a couple of private investigation agencies, I quickly learned I didn’t want to take pictures of cheating spouses or spy on someone suspected of insurance fraud. It was sleazy and unpleasant. At the time, I also needed a more flexible schedule. Having my own agency allowed me to take the cases I wanted and limit the number as needed.

I have always loved animals, and I discovered there was a need for someone to look for lost pets. People love their animal companions. They are willing to pay a great deal of money to find their furry friend. Our clientele consists mostly of those who have money to burn and prefer someone else do all the work. They may be young, up-and-coming professionals who want someone to come home to but don’t have the time to search for them should they get lost, or the elderly whose loss of a pet upsets them so much they have difficulty navigating a basic search for an animal. We also get clients who have exhausted all their own resources and turn to us as a last resort.

Lost and Found Pets is a licensed private investigations firm. We are just very specialized. Because I completed my training and passed the exam for my private investigator’s license, I

have access to certain search databases and other online resources the average citizen doesn't. I also have a hacker friend on speed dial should I need access to other, not-so-public resources.

"It looks like the last owner died about three years ago, and the property hasn't been claimed. There are a couple of years of back taxes on the books but nothing else. I'm surprised no one has claimed it. It's in a prime spot."

"Okay, that's what I needed to know. Thanks, Claire."

"Alex, will you be back by three o'clock?" she asked before I could hang up.

When I started Lost and Found Pets, it was a one-person shop, but my caseload increased quickly, and I found I needed help. After I'd gone through a couple of employees that didn't last long, Claire asked for the job. She had been a stay-at-home mom, but her youngest had started preschool and she wanted something to occupy her time and bring in a little extra income. Her only stipulation was that she came in at nine and left at three. This allowed her time to drop her kids off and pick them up from school. It works well for me. My hours vary based on which cases I am working. In the past, I often had to rely on voice mail for messages. Having set office hours helps with clients. They can call the office, and Claire can answer their questions, set up appointments, and do the online and phone searches. She is also much better with people than I am. We still get a lot of calls after hours, but having Claire available each day frees me up to just work the case and not worry about calls I might be missing.

"I should be," I told her, "but if not, just lock up."

"Okay. Talk to you later."

Hero and I were standing on what was probably once a gravel road. Now it was a long dirt path dividing several acres of land. Behind me was a new housing development consisting of high-end homes. Not quite mansions but pretty close. My current clients had recently purchased one. The property I faced was an eyesore. Like Claire, I was surprised that it hadn't been claimed.

I couldn't see a gate or opening anywhere. It was probably on the other side of the property. If we went around, Hero might have lost Mr. Fluffy's scent so I reached into my backpack and pulled out a pair of wire cutters. Searching for lost pets often takes me to hard-to-reach places. I carry a whole arsenal of tools. I made quick work of the fence. Hero bounded through first. He is a large brown German shepherd, but I had to cut the fence even more before I could squeeze through.

I am fairly tall, about five eleven. My body is lean and thin without being skinny. I have a runner's build but am very strong as part of my exercise routine is lifting weights to build upper-body strength. My arms aren't muscular or overdeveloped. I don't do that type of lifting. I simply try to be strong enough to pick up or move large animals or pull heavy objects out of the way. I keep my dark auburn hair cut short in a pixie style as it is easy to maintain. Luckily, nothing snagged as I wiggled my way in.

After stepping through the fence, I gave Hero the command, and he took off running. I followed a little more slowly, hoping to avoid the muddier areas. Hero headed to the back of the barnlike structure. It was small and falling down. Whoever had owned the place hadn't done any work on it in years. I heard Hero bark and sped up my pace. When I rounded the corner, I saw that I didn't need to hurry.

"Damn it," I said softly as I approached the doorway to the barn. The poor cat was dead. His collar had caught on a nail, and it looked like he might have choked to death. There were signs of a struggle. His collar was torn in places, but he hadn't managed to tear it completely. Mr. Fluffy had been an indoor cat, and his collar was pretty but not designed to break away or stretch. He

hadn't been dead long as his body was still intact. The owners had only realized he was missing that morning. They contacted me midday after a brief search. It was a typical scenario.

About 50 percent of the time, we are able to find the lost animal. Unfortunately, sometimes we find them too late. Like now. I blinked back tears as I pulled a plastic container from my backpack and gently placed Mr. Fluffy inside. Most of my clients don't want to see their dead pet, but sometimes they need proof the animal is actually gone. Hero whined softly. I handed him a treat, which he took but ate slowly, giving me a sad, troubled look. I rubbed his head.

"I know, boy. Me too."

As we started to leave, a sound came from behind us. I stopped and turned. Hero shot off toward the abandoned truck. He started barking immediately and was quickly joined by another dog. When I reached him, he was facing off with one of the largest dogs I had ever seen. The Great Dane was standing near the truck. He was barking weakly but not showing any signs of aggression. He appeared to be scared.

"Hero," I said sharply. My dog went silent immediately. Hero and I had attended weeks of search-and-rescue and obedience training. He is a well-behaved dog but very protective. Once Hero stopped barking, the other dog did too. I glanced at Hero who was still alert and poised for action.

"Sit," I told him firmly. He immediately obeyed. To my surprise so did the Great Dane. I studied that dog a moment as he leaned weakly against the truck. He was a little thin and very dirty. His coat was a beautiful blue gray. His ears weren't cropped, but he looked like he might be a purebred blue. One of his back legs had a large knot on it, like he had been hit or kicked, and he seemed to be favoring it.

Cautiously I moved closer, murmuring soft assurances. He made no aggressive move toward me so I continued. When I was within a few feet, I knelt on the ground. I placed the backpack next to me and waited a moment. The Great Dane didn't move but seemed calmer. I patted my leg and called to him. It took him a minute, but he made his way over to me. Slowly, so as not to startle him, I pulled out a bowl and a bottle of water. Pouring the water into the bowl, I placed it in front of him. He drank it quickly. I then handed him a dog treat. I don't carry a lot of food in my backpack but just a little something to coax an animal near.

The dog ate the treat, practically swallowing it whole. He was obviously hungry, but he had trouble chewing, and the left side of his mouth was swollen. I decided to try to get a better look once I got him back to the house.

I gave him another moment to get used to me. When I rose and turned to walk away, I patted my leg again to see if he would follow. He did. The three of us slowly made our way back to the fence. Ten minutes later, both dogs were bundled into the back of my Jeep, and I was headed home.