

The background of the book cover is a dark, atmospheric photograph of a forest at night. A bright red tent is pitched in the foreground on a rocky, mossy ground. A black backpack and a flashlight are visible near the tent's entrance. The tent's interior is lit, casting a warm glow. In the background, a river or stream flows through the dense, dark forest, with some light reflecting off its surface. The overall mood is mysterious and suspenseful.

THE LOST GIRL

AN ALLIE BISHOP FBI MYSTERY THRILLER

EVA SPARKS

The Lost Girl

An Allie Bishop FBI Mystery Thriller

Book 10

EVA SPARKS

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Chapter One

Wind whistled past the old Chevy's open window. Katie Morgan's hand found the current of air and slid across it in a smooth arc. She let her palm tilt and dip, riding the invisible wave like a bird testing the sky. Up. Down. Up, again. The wind pushed back playfully, tugging at her fingers as if it had somewhere it wanted to take her. Over the radio, a man crooned about his heartbreak and his fatal devotion to a rotten-hearted woman.

The dirt road was dappled with evening sunshine filtering through the thick branches of maples, still green and lush, despite the faint whisper of fall arriving in the early days of September. The song ended, and a new troubadour began his refrain in a tale of friendship and loss.

Katie balanced her chin on her hand and watched a rusty mailbox fade into the distance in the chrome side mirror. Her sunbleached hair twisted in the breeze as it fluttered over her forehead. Her green eyes studied her face in the cracked reflection. She lingered on the sight of her freckles.

"Jonas, do you think I'm pretty?"

"Don't be stupid." He glanced in the rearview mirror again, where their father's dog tags swayed above the dashboard.

Katie glared at him and jabbed at the radio. Silence filled the cramped space, permeated by the scents of sawdust, sweat, and cigarettes.

"What'd you do that for?" Jonas scowled.

"I hate that song." She crossed her arms over her body and sulked.

He glanced at her. "Come on, Katie, you know that's not what I meant. You're my little sister. You're not supposed to be pretty. Yet."

"I'm thirteen," Katie threw back at him. "If I don't start getting pretty soon, I'm not gonna."

"Who told you that?" Jonas let a tiny smile curl his lips.

"No one, I just know." Her leg jiggled. She shifted her weight on the cracked upholstery. "Are we there yet?"

"I told you, remember?" Jonas looked into the rearview mirror again and made a left onto a narrow country road that led deep into the dense forest. "If you wanted to come so bad, you have to hush and be patient."

"I didn't want to be alone."

"You're too old for that."

Katie ran the threads of her friendship bracelet between her thumb and forefinger. Her best friend, Alicia, had made it for her before moving to Phoenix to live with her older sister. Katie could feel her brother's watchful gaze as it flickered over her and back to the road. The silence between them grew, and so did Katie's restlessness.

She reached for the radio dial, hoping to find another station.

Jonas reached over and grabbed her wrist.

"Hey!"

"What happened to your hand?" He stared at the deep gash over her left knuckle.

Katie tried to wrench away from his vice-like grip. "Nothing!"

"Bull crap."

He wouldn't let go of her hand. His brown eyes bored a hole into her small body. "Katie, what did you do?"

"I punched Jim Rickens in the face."

Her brother released her hand and peeled off his faded blue Seahawks cap. He ran a hand through his sweaty blond hair that curled along his ears and over his collar. He pulled the hat back onto his head and glanced at her again. She tended to the bracelet on her wrist.

"Why?"

“Because he’s a jerk.”

“I know that. The whole town knows that. He was born that way. But why did you hit him?”

Katie didn’t make eye contact. Her face flushed. She stared at the toes of her sneakers. “He said he’d pay me five dollars to let him touch my boobs.”

Jonas swore and pounded on the steering wheel. “Did you?”

“No!” Katie looked up, her eyes sparking with anger. “That’s why I hit him. You idiot.”

“Good. Don’t let him, not ever. You hear me? Don’t ever sell yourself to anyone.”

“Mom does.”

Jonas slammed on the brakes. The rusty Chevy skidded to a stop on the lonely dirt road, the rear tires grinding into the gravel. “Katie, look at me. No, no, she doesn’t. Best she ever did was trade. And it’s different. Do you understand me?”

Katie nodded, scared. Then she shook her head in confusion.

Her brother sighed and glanced at the clock. He swore again and pressed the accelerator.

“Mom isn’t a good example, but trust me. She tries. Why do you think she’s always strung out? She can’t stand herself. She just wants to forget.” He was older than her by five years, and Katie couldn’t miss the weight of responsibility residing in his features.

She chewed her lip. “What does she want to forget?”

Jonas glanced at her and shook his head.

“Forget me?” Katie asked, the edge of desperation showing.

“No, not you.” He ran a hand over the top of her head. “Tradin’ herself, to try to take care of us. It makes her sick inside. It hurts too much, I think.” He glanced at his innocent little sister. “But you can’t want to forget something hard without losing something good too. Does that make sense?”

“Like Dad?”

Jonas nodded. “Yeah, remember how she always said he was the love of her life?”

Katie gave an easy smile. “He swept in from Texas bigger than the whole wide world.”

The pair had been raised on the refrain of their parents’ origin story. They enjoyed the moment of shared reverie and then glanced outside the window, watching the violet sunset bloom across the sky. Neither had the heart to continue the story. It soured far too quickly.

“Are you in trouble, Jonas?” Katie asked.

His jaw tightened. “Katie, I—”

“You promised Dad,” Katie pressed, trying to summon her father’s strength to keep the fraying edges of their family together.

“Yeah, so?” he barked.

Katie flinched. Jonas never yelled at her, but tonight he had already raised his voice twice.

“He’s in jail,” Jonas growled, “and you and I are taking care of ourselves now, so I don’t think I need to be worrying about keeping my word.”

The silence grew between them.

“Look, they cut back my hours at the lumber yard this month. And Mom never has enough money.”

Katie studied her brother’s edgy expression.

He sighed as he turned left onto a logging road. “Every single one of dad’s friends is either a drunk, in prison, or dead. Did you ever think about that? So I’m not sure how he really expects me to keep that promise anyway.”

“Promise me you won’t let them take me to foster care?” she blurted.

“What are you talking about?”

Katie touched the bracelet again. Alicia’s older sister had told her all about what happened to you once your family was split up. “I don’t want to go to foster care,” she said softly, terror welling in her eyes.

Jonas nodded and turned the radio back on. “Then you keep that left hook you got there and stay quiet when I tell you to, okay? I’m trying to do right by us.” He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and glanced at the instructions. Final Notice was stamped in red on the bill where his notes were scrawled.

“I can help,” Katie offered. He handed over the hand-drawn map and switched on the truck lights. They drove farther down the winding logging road.

“Wait, stop.” Katie pointed out the sign for County Road No. 57.

He slowed the truck and turned onto a desolate dirt road.

“Nice one, K.” The pair drove several miles more, and finally Jonas turned off in front of a red iron gate. A wide stretch of trees spread out on the other side.

Katie’s feet hit the dirt next to the truck. She moved quickly to untether the chains wrapped around the cattle guard and pressed it open. It shuddered from lack of use, but yielded slowly. She held it wide as Jonas drove through onto a dirt track. She closed the gate, secured the chain like she’d found it, and jumped back into the yellow-striped Chevy.

“It’s only about another half a mile,” he said as he followed the poor excuse for a road.

Farther down, a shallow stream cut across their path, and Jonas deftly drove the truck across it. Soon enough, there was no more road to follow, only the dense forest ahead.

He glanced at his watch and swore again. “Come on, we gotta move.” He jumped out of the truck, and Katie followed obediently. She watched her brother pull a heavy canvas rucksack from the truck bed, along with a flashlight. He listened to the night sounds for a moment and pointed to an unmarked dirt track between a pair of young elm trees.

He handed her the flashlight. “Listen, if we kick up anything nasty, you turn this on and make all kinds of noise. You hear?”

“You mean like a bear?”

He nodded soberly. “Or a wolf, or a bobcat. Anything hungrier than you.”

Katie gulped and glanced around. Her stomach clenched, but another thought invaded. “What about people?”

“Find a spot to hide, get real still.”

“Like a baby deer?”

“Right. Just like I taught you. Don’t move, and let me handle it. Okay?”

She nodded.

“I need to hear you say it.”

She crinkled her nose. “You just told me to be quiet, moron. Make up your mind.”

The pair moved down the track. Behind them, the sky was ablaze with flaming lavender as the sun slipped below the horizon. The siblings passed the time in conversation, alternating between sports, money, and their mother.

In the distance, Katie saw an outcropping of large boulders. “Look,” she pointed, “that rock looks like a grumpy old man.”

Jonas observed the formation. “Huh, yeah, I guess it does. Weird. Maybe he’s watching over us.”

Soon enough, the edge of her Converse was digging into her heel. They’d already hiked a couple of miles through thick vegetation and rocky terrain. The growing darkness swallowed up the dense forest around them. Occasionally, Katie caught a glimpse of a bright canopy of stars through the treetops.

“My feet hurt,” she groaned.

“Shhhh.” Jonas placed his hand on her shoulder.

Her body stiffened at the first scent of wood smoke that curled beneath her nose. They moved toward a ridgeline until they saw the glow of a campfire through the trees.

Jonas silently patted the thick trunk of a mature maple. Katie understood and squeezed his hand as he helped her scramble up into the crook of the tree. Nestled between its branches, she had an unobstructed line of sight to the scene below, where two men sat on fraying lawn chairs illuminated by the flicker of firelight. One had dark shaggy hair and wore a 49ers jacket draped over his wiry body; the other was dressed in black flannel, with shoulder-length dark hair that was graying at his temples. Behind them, a corrugated steel hut stood rusting against the hillside. Jonas made his way down the steep embankment cut into the valley by a tiny stream.

Katie's gaze roved over the rough campsite. The hut had been assembled piecemeal with several different types of material, including a faded Amoco sign nailed to the roof. A speed limit sign was tacked over what had once been a window, and a rusted yellow deer crossing sign had been used as target practice before it was added to the structure's simple fortifications. The scent of roasting meat made Katie's mouth water. Sparks drifted into the air above the campfire.

A murmur of low voices broke through the silence. The older of the two couldn't sit still. He ran a hand over his greasy hair and picked at his teeth while pacing the campsite, inspecting something inside the hut before returning to his chair and then back up again in a restless repetition. Katie watched as the man wore a path into the lush soil. The other sat quietly watching the fire, his eyes occasionally darting to his companion.

"Be careful, Jonas," she whispered.

Katie watched as the pair heard her brother's approach. They stood, bodies tense. She held her breath as he stepped into the circle of light with his hands up.

The younger man nodded to Jonas in friendly greeting, but their words were lost to a gust of wind. The older man ran another hand over his grimy hair. Jonas handed over the rucksack to him, and he pawed through it for several moments before he barked a question at her brother.

Jonas shook his head.

The shifty man dropped the bag at his feet. His raspy voice ricocheted off the steel hut. Katie couldn't see the contents of the bag, but she could sense her brother's fear.

Jonas lifted his hands and tried to explain. Katie strained to hear, but his words were muffled by the thick earth and the wind that danced through the clearing, pushing the smoke between them.

Quickly, the younger man moved to put his body between the two. He extended a hand and raised his voice in a call for calm. Suddenly, the older man pulled a gun out from the small of his back. He aimed it wildly as a

torrent of angry words spewed past his lips. Jonas took a step back and vigorously shook his head.

A shot broke through the night.

Katie screamed.

The man in the jacket crumpled to the ground.

Jonas's head turned suddenly in her direction. A second shot rang out, and she watched in horror as he dropped to the ground.

Katie's breath caught in her chest. Both bodies lay in a heap on the forest floor. The space between her and the man in black was empty. His eyes darted over her hiding place.

Finding breath again, Katie jumped out of the tree and charged into the night. Her arms and legs pumping with raw terror, she fled headlong into the darkness.

Chapter Two

*Residence of Jason and Victoria King
Tacoma, Washington*

A tiny hand curled around Allie's outstretched finger. She sat in the center of the cozy living room that was swallowed up by baby gear. The bleary-eyed parents had welcomed Allie into their Sunday morning cocoon, grateful for the company and an extra set of hands. They settled her onto the couch and entrusted her with little Joey, named in honor of Allie's late mother, Johanna.

No matter how often she visited, Allie was always overcome by the sight of the precious bundle that had invaded her friends' lives. Now the little one's brown eyes searched her face soulfully before breaking into a full-bodied smile.

Allie gasped, and her heart skipped a beat in response to the recognition. "She's smiling now? When did this happen?"

"A couple of days ago?" Jason asked his wife. He stood somewhat dazed in his oversized Loggers sweatshirt and plaid pajama pants. "It's kind of a blur."

"See, she likes you," Victoria crowed from the kitchen sink, where she stood washing a mountain of bottles. "Would you like to feed her?"

"I don't have any experience with babies."

“None?” Victoria prepared a bottle and pulled a warm cinnamon roll out of a pan cooling on the counter.

Allie searched her memory bank and shook her head, carefully watching the baby.

Balancing the plate in one hand, Victoria offered Allie a warm bottle and a burp rag with the other. “Well, they’re just tiny grown-ups.”

“Only louder,” Jason offered from the kitchen table where he drank his coffee and glanced over a map. “Lots of bodily functions and emotions, sort of like college.” He chuckled to himself and looked up. “That wasn’t your college experience, was it?”

Allie ignored him. Her sheltered upbringing was a running joke in their partnership.

Victoria licked icing off her fingers and settled on the couch beside Allie and her two-month-old daughter. “Look, you’re a natural. Children have instincts about people. See how comfortable she is?”

The pair stared at the baby in satisfied adoration.

“Thank you for coming by, especially on a Sunday,” Victoria continued. “We’re up anyway, and it’s nice to see you. And please thank Grams for the cinnamon rolls. They’re amazing. They warmed up to perfection.” She pulled apart the airy dough encrusted with cinnamon.

“Of course.” Allie awkwardly adjusted her hold on the floppy baby.

“I feel like I’m eating for a small army,” Victoria beamed. Her mahogany hair stuck up at odd angles. Despite the bedhead and the circles under her eyes, she radiated maternal beauty. Her vibrant hair, once short from chemotherapy, now fell just below her ears.

Jason stood up and grabbed some papers off a shelf. “Your route looks good.” He placed Allie’s thin stack of printed and highlighted papers back into their plastic sleeve. “I did part of that route with a buddy a couple of years ago. This time of year, it should be warm during the day but cool at night. You have rain gear and a good sleeping bag?”

Allie nodded.

“Good, I want to double-check your pack. Do you need my water purifier?”

“I brought iodine pills,” Allie explained. “I also have a water purification system. I’m not planning on going off the trail. I’ve been talking with Hannah, who’s an avid hiker, and doing my research.”

“Just make sure you register with park rangers and get the latest updates on weather and trail conditions.” He glanced over her packing list. “Food, hydration, fire starter, bug spray, first aid, headlamp, sun protection, emergency bivvy. This looks good.”

“Hannah recommended this route too. She said it’s perfect for my first solo. I’m looking forward to it. I could use a change of scenery.”

Victoria shook her head. “I don’t see why this has to be your new hobby. Can’t you join a book club or play softball? What about roller derby? I know a great team that would love your killer instinct.”

“See, hon. I think Allie’s trying to hike to shake off those instincts and find something a little more holistic.” Jason dropped into an easy chair across from them.

“Everything you suggested has one thing in common,” Allie told her. “People. You know me. I can’t handle small talk and too many questions, unless it’s for a case.”

Jason ran a hand over his neglected beard. “She’s right, it’s hard enough trying to tell people what she does for a living, let alone her past. No offense.”

“None taken.” Allie offered a simple shrug. “I’m not a loner by choice, but people don’t really like to play board games with someone who was raised by a serial killer.”

“I get it. But that’s the past.” Victoria shrugged and dabbed a cloth under the baby’s chin. “Not the present. You two should be very proud of what you do.”

“We are,” Jason said. “We’re not hiding, but it makes conversation with strangers a little uncomfortable, that’s all. You get two responses—people

who think it's all drama all the time, like on TV, or people who think you're reading their body language constantly. They get nervous and weird."

Allie nodded. "Mostly weird."

"Okay, fine. I get it. But Allie, a four-day solo hike? That much time alone with my thoughts would make *me* weird. And scared."

"She's a trained professional, babe." Jason tossed a leg over the side of the chair.

"Are you taking a gun?" Victoria asked.

Allie shook her head. "The point is to unwind, not think about work. I have bear spray and hiking poles. I think that's plenty of defense. I just need to escape humanity for a little while. Stare at the mountains and let nature heal me. I appreciate the concern, Victoria, I really do. Marze is always pushing us to take care of ourselves, and I like a challenge. For me, this feels like training for a marathon."

"But you don't run marathons alone in the middle of the wilderness," Victoria argued.

Jason snapped his fingers and stood. "Do you have a Garmin Messenger?"

Allie shook her head. "I'm taking my phone and an extra battery."

Jason padded into the hallway and rummaged around in the closet for several minutes. Allie finished feeding the baby, and Victoria helped situate the burp cloth over her shoulder while she rocked the infant and thumped her on the back.

"This is my satellite messaging system," he said as he returned and held out the pocket-sized device. "It's not like GPS. It runs off the Iridium satellite network. It's designed for off-grid use. The low-Earth orbit gives it a stronger, more reliable signal. It's almost fully charged, and the battery should last about a week. Please take it."

"Seriously?" Allie's brow furrowed. "I don't know, guys. The whole reason I'm doing this is to get away from technology. Clear my head and see the stars. It's just me and Dostoevsky."

Victoria nodded hopefully. "I forgot about the Garmin. He bought it for his last hike, just when I started to get sick. It's really easy to use, and I'll feel better knowing you can be located."

"There's an emergency transponder here." Jason showed her how to use the device. "If you're going to haul a brick of a book into the wilderness, you can take this little thing."

"Please, Allie," Victoria said. "Blame it on the hormones or the lack of sleep, but I don't need anything else to be anxious about. Do it for Joey?"

Allie raised her hand in concession. "All right, all right. I'll do it for you." She kissed the top of the baby's forehead and handed her back to Victoria. "I'll see you in four days, sweet girl."

"I'll walk you out." Jason slid his feet into a pair of sandals. Allie looked back and waved at the baby, soaking in the precious sight of mother and child curled up together.