

## The Show

It's a show about murder in Alaska.

Specifically, it's about the people who deal with the murders in Alaska: the law enforcement officers, the CSI guys, and the prosecutors.

On a really basic level, if you smushed *Law and Order* and *C.S.I.* together, you'd have the format of the show, in that a typical episode would have: (1) a body, (2) some investigators who go around following leads and interrogating people, (3) some cool C.S.I./Quincy stuff, and (4) a trial in which you hopefully convict the bad guy.

It's all plot, and all twists-and-turns. You think it's this guy, but he has an alibi, then it turns out his business partner was actually selling heroin to school kids. Regardless of what actually happens, it's all self-contained within the 60 minutes.

What's different about the show is where it's set. And I started doing more research, I found out that Alaska is really, really, really different.

**First off, the state only has 500,000 people.** That's the population of Long Beach, except that they're spread over a state the size of California, Texas and Montana combined. If you live there, the General Fund pays you about \$2,000 a year.

Less than one percent of the land is privately owned. Some of it is owned by the state, or by tribal corporations, or by the U.S., who bought it from Russia for about a million dollars. Literally, they just wrote a check.

Things are organized very differently. They don't have counties, they have **boroughs**. They don't have local judges, they have **magistrates**, who can basically settle things as they see fit. If you get caught shoplifting, there's no trial. You or your family just sort of negotiate for how many days in jail or whatever. There's four main **tribes**, that are organized into corporations that control millions of dollars, most of it from oil-drilling rights.

The biggest and most important difference for our show is that once you get outside of Anchorage, **Alaska doesn't have police** the way we think of them. It has the Alaska State Troopers, who are sort of like sherriffs, except they also handle fish and game. There are only 200 of them to cover the entire state.

If you saw *INSOMNIA*, it's set in this town "Nightmute" where Al Pacino comes into this little police station, and Hilary Swank is this go-getter police detective. That doesn't exist. Below State Troopers, the only thing a town might have is a **Village Public Safety Officer**, a part-timer who basically deals with the drunks and bears.

When a murder takes place, and about fifty a year do, the state sends in a team of State Troopers called **Major Crimes** who do all the investigation: there are a total of seven Investigators and one Lieutenant. For our show, these are these are the people we follow. If a body turns up, they have to get on a plane, a snowmobile or a boat or whatever to find out who did it.

If this were *Law and Order*, these guys would be Chris Noth and Benjamin Bratt, except they wear parkas instead of suits. They aren't dumb hicks. They're just as professional, except that the territory is so much more difficult. If you go out to interview a suspect and he starts shooting at you, there's no backup. Backup is like two hours away. So they have to be incredibly autonomous and self-sufficient.

The main guy we follow is **RAY MATHERS**. He's a state trooper. He's thirties-to-forties and has lived in Alaska most of his life. Through events in the pilot, he ends up heading the Major Crimes unit. We never see his house, we never meet his father. He's not married but sometimes characters will refer to his wife. Maybe ten episodes in we find out something about what happened to his wife, but we're very stingy with character stuff. He's just like the show is: all business, nothing personal.

Of course, if there's a body, there's always medical examiners, which in this case is called the **Crime Investigation Unit**.

It's headed by a guy named **PAUL VICO**, who shows up in pretty much every episode to tell us how the person died and get us moving in a new direction. He's a big burly guy in his forties, big fat beard, probably has all sorts of hobbies that we *never learn anything about* unless it pertains directly to the case. He's also a real medical doctor, sort of like Scully was on *X-Files*, which can become important when you're stuck on a glacier and somebody is bleeding to death.

So you have the law enforcement, you have the CSI, and final piece is the prosecutors who actually have to try the case and convict the bad guys. This is where Alaska is also really different.

In addition to the magistrates, who you have to deal with whenever you're trying to get a search warrant, there's a weird hierarchy of courts you have to contend with. In addition, **tribal courts** can do things their own way, so if your suspect is Native Alaskan, you may have to deal with the chief of the tribal corporation just to arrest him. You also share **borders with Russia and Canada**, so if a suspect flees, you have to deal with their legal systems as well. Finally, there are active military bases where the U.S. maintains full sovereignty, so if a soldier is involved with something, you have to deal with the military hierarchy.

Again, one of the most interesting things about Alaska is how difficult it is to do relatively simple things. I was reading this account of this one public defender, who got assigned a case where a guy had stolen someone's canoe. So she had to fly two hours, get picked up by some guy in a truck, drive four hours, then sleep on the floor of a laundromat because there was nowhere else to stay. She finally made it out to the shack where her client lived, which didn't have running water or electricity.

From the legal side, there's two main people we deal with. The first is **ALISON HARPER**. She's in her early thirties, newly arrived in Alaska, so she's sort of our eyes into the world at the start. She used to work for the Justice Department in D.C., now she's the Special Prosecutor for the State of Alaska. If this were *Law and Order*, she'd be both Jill Hennessy and Sam Waterston, in that she both deals with the field officers and does all the courtroom stuff.

Her boss is a guy named **ROGER PRESCOTT**, now in his fifties. He's the deputy attorney general. Five kids, Scout master, plans to become governor. If it's *Law and Order*, he's Dianne Wiest. He doesn't do a lot in most episodes, but sometimes he's the big gun you bring out.

From the description, it sounds like *Law and Order* without the suits and skyscrapers. Which it is. There's always going to be some investigation. There's always going to be some crime scene to check out. There's always going to be some kind of courtroom sequence. But structurally, you can get into an episode in lots of different ways.

It can be classic find-a-body, find-a-suspect, prosecute and convict. But sometimes an episode will start with the autopsy, or with prosecution of another case, that will spill into a whole new investigation. Any one of the four main characters can take the ball and run with it. Compared to *Law and Order* or *CSI*, there are a lot more gunshots fired, and sometimes there might be actual chase scenes, or a hostage crisis, or an earthquake. (Eight of the ten biggest earthquakes in the last century happened in Alaska.)

Basically, the audience always knows what kinds of things are going to happen, but not necessarily what order they're going to come. Every episode features the four main characters: Mathers, Vico, Harper and Prescott. There are other recurring characters—troopers, criminologists and clerks—but for the most part every scene is driven by one of the main four.

**OTHER EPISODES****VOIR DIRE**

In the process of selecting a jury for another case, one of Harper's jurors fingers another juror on the panel as a suspect in a series of unsolved rape/abductions several years ago. While parts of this woman's story rings true, her history of schizophrenia makes her unreliable, and the suspect himself is a former Trooper.

**FROZEN**

When climbers find a victim's body in a glacier crevasse, Vico's team is frustrated trying to come up with a match, only to discover that the body has actually been frozen there for over thirty years. The suspects are now older, and the trail much, much colder.

**PK**

The murder of an Anchorage high school student is linked to a multiplayer video game, and may be revenge for his history of p.k.-ing (player killing) other gamers. But is the killer another teenager, or one of the boy's teachers?

**HAPPY TOGETHER**

When a fisherman drowns, toxicology reports reveal massive levels of antidepressants. It could have been suicide, or an accident. Or was his wife, anticipating the abusive monster he became every winter as darkness fell, trying to protect herself?

**HIGHWAY ROBBERY**

When two drunken cannery workers steal a car, they find a decomposing body in the trunk. Trying to cover their own ass, they end up destroying crucial evidence that could lead Mathers to the real killer.

**POPULATION ZERO**

When a body is discovered in a remote Aleutian island, massive levels of radiation prove the man had been hoarding nuclear material from atomic tests in the 1950's. But what were his plans for it, and where is the material now?

**GOLD STRIKE**

A mine collapse kills two men, but one of the dead men has a history of assuming new identities. Without access to the bodies, Vico must prove the men were faking their own deaths, and Mathers must catch them before they turn on each other.