

Chapter One

“I’m still alive.”

Three simple words in a note. A note signed by the sister Kensie Morgan hadn’t seen in fourteen years had sent her in a frantic rush across 3,500 miles. Kensie had left a brief message on her boss’s voice mail, telling him she needed some time off, then called her family. They’d been less supportive.

But this time, Kensie had to believe, the lead could be real.

The hope had buoyed her from one layover to the next, warmed her as she stepped off the plane in Alaska. For early October, the temperature was way colder than she’d expected, and it had only gotten worse as she’d paid for her rental pickup truck and headed north.

Desparre, Alaska, was the kind of place you came to to drop off the map. The sort of place no one would think to look—and even if they did, they might never make it out.

After her GPS had given up and she’d made a half dozen wrong turns, she’d finally been able to get directions from a local into town. Now Kensie shivered as she stepped out of her truck for the first time in four hours. Her heavy down jacket was no match for the windchill, so she tugged up the collar as strong gusts whipped her long hair around her face. There was no avoiding the snow covering the walkways, so Kensie trudged through it. Her next stop after the police station was going to be for a new pair of boots.

Her fingers tingled from the cold and she clenched them into tight fists in her pockets, hoping the motion would also ease her nerves. She’d planned to make the store where her sister’s note had been found her first stop, but when she couldn’t find it, she’d given up and headed into the main part of town.

Kensie glanced around, taking in the assortment of buildings—post office, clothing store, bar, drug store, grocery store, church. She felt like she’d stepped back in time to the eighteen hundreds. The only

thing missing was horse-drawn carriages. But it was probably too cold for horses. Even the monstrous all-weather truck parked up the street seemed ill prepared for Desparre once winter descended.

Chicago got cold, but after not even one day in Desparre she was longing for the ridiculously cold-but-not-*this*-cold windchill off the lake.

With the exception of a guy playing with his dog down the road, she was the only fool outside. Kensie hustled, careful not to slide in the snow as she yanked open the door to the tiny police station. Her stomach churned as reality set in. She was finally here.

This time will be different, she told herself, trying to bolster her courage.

The officer behind the counter looked up as she entered, but she wasn't sure if the scowl on his face was for her or the blast of cold air she brought inside. "Can I help you?"

Desparre probably didn't get a lot of outsiders, so she was going to stand out here. Kensie had gotten the same questioning looks each time she'd stopped to ask for directions on the outskirts of town.

If her sister Alanna really was here, maybe she'd be the one to find Kensie.

If only it could be that easy. But fourteen years of bright, painful hope drawn out for days or years and then dashed in yet another dead end, in yet another godforsaken town, told her that nothing about finding Alanna would be easy.

But if the note was real...

The hope that bloomed inside her now brought tears to her eyes.

The officer stood and rushed to her side. "Are you okay? Do you need help?"

She blinked the tears back and prayed her voice would be steady. "I need to talk to someone about the note you found from Alanna Morgan."

Frown lines dug deeper, creating grooves across the officer's forehead. He looked like he belonged in a rocking chair with a couple of grandkids on his knee, not wearing a police uniform. "Why?"

"I'm her sister."

The flash of emotions on his face was quick, so quick Kensie might have missed them if she hadn't seen them so many times in her life. Surprise, discomfort and pity first. Then something hard and distant—law enforcement probably learned to compartmentalize to keep themselves from going crazy case after case, victim after victim.

“You shouldn't have come all this way. Didn't you talk to the FBI?”

The FBI had spoken to her and her family, of course. They'd been the ones to call and inform Kensie about the note found in Desparre in the first place. But that didn't matter. “I needed to see for myself.”

The frown was back, this time mixed with worry, but the officer nodded, patted her on the arm and then said, “I'll be right back.”

He disappeared through a door marked Police Only and Kensie took a deep breath.

You can do this, she reminded herself. She was just out of practice. It had been years since the last lead on Alanna.

Standing in a police station now took her back to her childhood. All those years of waiting in hard plastic chairs, her mom's hand clutching hers way too tight, as they prayed for any shred of good news. Her dad standing stiffly beside them, his arm wrapped around her brother, holding him close as if that could keep him safe. Officers catching her gaze and then looking quickly away. Kensie's palms damp and her heart thudding way too fast.

Missing Alanna. Knowing it was all her fault her little sister was gone.

“Ma'am?”

Kensie looked up, realizing her eyes had glazed over as she'd stared at the floor, getting lost in her past. She stiffened her shoulders, tried to look like the professional woman she'd become instead of the terrified thirteen-year-old who always reappeared whenever she heard Alanna's name.

She held out a cold hand, shook hard and stared the new officer directly in the eye. Let her know she couldn't be sent off with a “sorry” and a pat on the back.

“I'm Chief Hernandez.”

From the slight grin the chief gave, Kensie's surprise probably showed. She was young for a police chief, likely only a few years older than Kensie's twenty-seven.

But there was wisdom in her steady gaze and strength in her handshake.

"Kensie Morgan. I want to see the note that was left at the store."

Chief Hernandez held out her other hand and Kensie reached for the computer paper.

It was a photocopy, but her heart beat faster at the slanted cursive handwriting. She read it aloud.

"My name is Alanna Morgan, from Chicago. I'm still alive. I'm not the only one."

"You recognize the writing?" the chief asked, skepticism in her voice.

"Alanna's? No." How could she? Her sister had been five years old when she'd been kidnapped out of their front yard. At five, everything had been big sloppy letters, forming words that were often misspelled. There was no way to know what Alanna's handwriting looked like now. If she was really still alive, she'd be nineteen.

Nineteen. The very idea made pain and longing mingle. What would a nineteen-year-old Alanna look like? What had happened in all the years between? Kensie had missed all of her sister's milestones.

Focus on now, Kensie reminded herself. *Focus on what you can change.* "What do you know?"

Chief Hernandez shrugged, then frowned, like she regretted the motion. "Not much, I'm afraid. We don't know who left it. We can't be sure it's even real. It says—"

"I know," Kensie cut her off, not wanting to hear a repeat of the FBI's depressing analysis. "But you must know something. What about the store owner who found it?"

"It was in a stack of bills. He couldn't even say who put it there or when."

Chief Hernandez tilted her head in what Kensie had long ago come to recognize as a pity gesture.

"I'm sorry. You came a long way for nothing."

The tears surprised her. They rushed hard and fast to her eyes and Kensie ducked her head, trying to blink them back.

"Miss Morgan—"

“Thanks,” she said, handing back the photocopy of the evidence—the photocopy of what might be her little sister’s writing. Without another word, she rushed out the door.

This time, the cold was just what she needed. It slammed into her face, stinging her eyes and probably freezing the tears on her cheeks.

Get it together, she told herself. Ducking her head against the wind, she hurried for her rental, parked across the street.

It didn’t matter what the police thought. It didn’t matter what the FBI thought. It only mattered what her heart was screaming.

Alanna was still alive. And Kensie might finally be able to bring her home.

The gunning of an engine ripped her from her hopeful thoughts. Her head jerked up and right, toward the source of the sound.

A station wagon the size of a small boat was plowing down the street, spraying snow and coming straight for her.

COLTER HAYES DIDN’T know what happened.

One second, his retired Military Working Dog, Rebel, was goofing off, chasing a stick as naturally as she’d once tracked dangerous bombers back to their hideouts. The next, she was racing away from him so fast he knew her injured leg would be acting up later.

He heard the engine a second after that, spotted the old station wagon careening around the corner, cutting through the slippery snow way too fast. And a woman frozen in the middle of the street.

“Move!” he screamed at the woman, cursing the injury in his own leg—sustained at the same time as Rebel’s—as he raced for both of them.

He’d never make it in time.

The world around him seemed to move in slow motion as panic shot up his throat, mingling with the cold and making it hard to breathe. The car slip-sliding out of control. His five-year-old Malinois–German shepherd mix—the only friend he had left in the world—running straight in front of it.

Colter pushed his leg as hard as he could, trying to follow, trying to be of any use at all. But it was no good.

Rebel leapt up high, slamming into the woman's chest with her front legs, knocking both of them out of sight as the car raced past Colter. It slowed for a second, then sped off.

The panic dropped lower, making his chest hurt and his heart beat too fast. The memory of a year ago, of Rebel jumping on him as a bullet passed so close he felt its trajectory over his head, made it hard to breathe.

He tried to push it out of his mind, willed himself not to fall into that darkness as he raced across the street, sliding in the snow toward the two figures lying prone on the ground. He dropped to his knees, ignoring the *pop* in his knee and the pain that rushed up his thigh.

Another memory from a year ago, of surgery after surgery as he begged to know the condition of his unit. No one would tell him.

Colter blinked the present back into focus.

Rebel climbed off the woman, her movements a little stiff. She nudged her way under his arm, like she knew he was hurt.

Colter dug one hand into the soft fur on Rebel's back, reassuring himself she hadn't been hit.

Still lying flat, the woman groaned and reached a trembling hand up to the back of her head, poking around like she was searching for blood. But her hand came back clean and he helped her to a sitting position.

She stared at him with haunting brown eyes framed by dark lashes. Long, silky dark hair slid over her shoulders and across the back of his hand. The kind of woman he wouldn't have been able to resist once upon a time.

But she was as stupid as she was gorgeous.

"What were you thinking? Crossing the road without paying any attention?" His voice rose even as Rebel pushed her wet nose into his neck, something that usually made him laugh.

But nothing could make him laugh today. “You almost got yourself killed. You almost got my dog killed!”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered, sounding more shell-shocked than scared at her near miss. She reached a still-trembling hand out toward Rebel, gently stroking his dog’s brown-and-black fur.

Rebel ate it up, the little traitor, giving the woman a solid push with her nose as if to ask for more.

The woman laughed, a deep, rich sound that seemed to curl around his body.

Colter scowled at both of them, but tried to keep his anger in check. Stupid or not, she had almost died a few minutes ago. And she wasn’t a soldier in battle, but a civilian clearly out of place in Alaska.

To his surprise, his voice came out calm, almost soothing. “Let’s get you out of the street before another car comes through. Everyone’s going too fast today. Living here, they *should* know how to drive in the snow, but with the first snowfall of the season, it’s like everyone forgets.”

“Thanks,” she whispered in that same soft, slightly husky voice.

It would have been a voice for his dreams, back when he had dreams. These days it was nothing but nightmares.

“Come on, girl,” he told Rebel as he planted his hands in the snow and pushed himself clumsily to his feet.

“Are you okay?” the woman asked, her eyes even wider than they’d been a minute ago.

“Yeah, fine.” It felt like his knee was on fire, but experience told him it didn’t warrant a trip to the doctor. He’d just twisted it wrong and the rod and screws holding together his right thigh didn’t appreciate it.

He had a few nights of ice and elevation in his future, but he’d been through worse. Much worse.

“I’m so sorry.” Her voice wobbled, like she was on the verge of tears.

He prayed she’d keep them in check. “It’s not your fault. It’s a war injury.” He held out a hand to help her up, but she frowned at it, climbing slowly to her feet on her own.

Colter felt his face redden. At six foot two and 180 pounds of mostly muscle—even after his injury—people had always looked to him for help physically. The snub now hurt more than the hit to his knee had.

Once they were safely on the sidewalk, she shuffled her feet. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her too-thin coat, another dead giveaway she wasn't from around here. It looked warm enough, but it wasn't cut out for Desparre's coming winter.

Her gaze darted from him to Rebel and then off into the distance, as if she was afraid he was going to yell at her again.

Colter held in a sigh. Beautiful or not, he didn't have the energy to coddle her. But she was starting to tremble, and he figured it was as much the realization of her near miss setting in as the cold. So he tried for a smile.

It felt unnatural, as if those muscles had forgotten how to work, but she seemed to relax a little. "I'm Colter Hayes. And this is Rebel."

She held out her hand. "Kensie Morgan."

He had her hand in a firm grip before the last name sank in. It had been all over the news a few weeks ago. "Morgan. As in—"

"Yes. I'm Alanna Morgan's sister. I came here to find her."

Although he could feel the tremble in her hand, her voice was strong, almost daring him to challenge her ability. Not that he'd dare. If there was one thing he understood, it was loyalty to a sibling, blood related or not.

And hope. He understood how hope could keep you going, when everything inside you screamed it was time to give up. "I hope you do find her."

"Thanks," she replied as he reluctantly let go of her hand. "Rebel is amazing. I froze and then she just—she saved my life."

"She was a military dog. A Gunnery Sergeant, in fact." One rank higher than his own, because the military taught soldiers to respect their K-9 partners.

“Really?” Kensie’s gaze dipped to Rebel, whose tail wagged as they talked about her.

“Yeah.” He didn’t know why he’d shared that. Now that Kensie was looking less shaken up, he needed to get out of there. Away from the intensity in her eyes and the fullness of her lips. Away from the sudden physical attraction that took him by surprise.

“What did she do in the military?”

“Combat Tracker Dog,” Colter said quickly, knowing that, like most people, she’d probably have no idea what that meant. “You should get out of the cold. You’re not dressed for Desparre.”

Even though her lips were taking on the slightest tinge of blue, she didn’t seem to notice the cold—or his suggestion—as she stared at Rebel. “Tracker?”

There was too much hope in her voice. A dozen swear words lodged in Colter’s brain. “Not that kind of tracker.”

“But what—”

“She tracked back to perpetrators from explosion sites.” Just saying the words filled his mind up with images of a military convoy, blown to bits. Bomb fragments lodged in everything. Limbs not attached to people. Friends, gone in an instant.

An L-shaped ambush that had come in two waves, one for the people he’d come to help and one for the responders. His chest started to compress again, the edges of his vision dulling.

“But couldn’t she—”

“No,” Colter snapped, more harshly than he’d intended.

Even if he and Rebel did the kind of tracking she wanted, she had no idea what she was asking. If he tried to help her, he knew what would happen. He’d have a mission again. A reason to reconnect with the world.

And connections meant pain.

“I’m sorry,” he added over his shoulder as he spun away from her, whistling for Rebel to follow.

Copyright ©2018 by Elizabeth Heiter
Permission to reproduce text granted by Harlequin Books S.A.