

*Chapter One*

The whispers started the moment she stepped into town.

“It’s *her*. The kidnapped girl. The one from five years ago.”

“The one who almost got her real sister killed?”

Alanna tried to ignore the sidelong glances from the two women peering at her from the open door of the grocery store. In a place like Desparre, Alaska, the stares and chatter were likely to bring more people.

Alanna hunched her shoulders, trying to disappear into her heavy coat as she picked up her pace. Still, she felt their accusatory gazes bore into her. The pace of her breathing picked up, sweat breaking out all over her body. This was the side effect of sending the “parents” who’d raised her for fourteen years to jail and then returning to another state, to a family she’d tried so hard to remember but didn’t quite fit into anymore. The side effect of spending too long dodging reporters desperate to be the one to break her silence and get the inside story of her abduction.

The voices faded as the women disappeared back into the grocery store, one of a handful of buildings that lined Desparre’s small downtown area. It looked so tiny compared to the suburb on the outskirts of Chicago where she’d returned after living in the remote wilderness of Alaska with the family who’d kidnapped her.

Even after being gone for five long years, in many ways, Alaska still felt like home.

Alanna took a deep breath of the crisp, cool air and closed her eyes, letting the familiar sounds and smells and sights calm her. At her side, her St. Bernard, Chance, recognized her method for coping with anxiety and scooted up against her, then promptly sat.

A minute later, the sound of Chance’s low, sustained growl made her eyes pop back open.

The St. Bernard was definitely a gentle giant, more likely to thump his tail and wait for a belly rub than go after anyone. But his size and his warning growl never failed to make people who were a little too aggressive back up fast.

In the past, Chance had used that growl on a handful of particularly determined reporters who’d stuck with her for years, following her around and ambushing her at the most unexpected times, seeking a candid photo or a sound bite. Because no matter how much time passed, she was still one of *those* women. A name that had made national headlines. A story she could never outgrow. Today, Chance was using his growl on the police officer who’d somehow managed to get close while her eyes were shut.

His startling blue eyes darted to her dog, then back to her. “Miss, do you need hel—”

The words trailed off as those blue eyes widened slightly. In a face made up of sharp angles and pale skin, his eyes were especially compelling. His tone was less friendly, more suspicious as he said, “Alanna Altier?”

“Morgan,” she corrected. The name of her birth family, instead of the family who’d raised her for most of her childhood. After five years, the name Morgan was finally starting to feel less foreign on her lips.

“Morgan,” he repeated. His gaze swept the space behind her, as if the woman who’d raised her—who’d helped kidnap her and four other children over the span of eighteen years and then escaped from police custody five days ago—would suddenly appear.

Anxiety started to swell again and Chance scooted even closer, his warm fur pressing against her leg, his big head nuzzling her.

Absently petting him, Alanna kept her eyes on the officer. She didn’t recognize him. Not that she would—the Altiers had kept her and her “siblings” far from prying eyes, especially law enforcement eyes. She’d been to town before, but more often she’d stayed home, spending most of her days inside the house she’d helped build. Or in the dozen acres surrounding it that the Altiers owned, a buffer from them and the rest of the world. At times, it had felt like an oasis. At others, it had seemed more like a cage.

The officer’s narrowed eyes locked on hers again, unsettling in their singular focus. “I thought you’d moved back to Chicago, with your real family.”

It was somewhere between a statement and a question and Alanna tried not to fixate on the word *real*. She loved the Morgans, the parents who’d enveloped her in hugs the moment she’d stepped back through their door, who’d kept all her belongings from when she had disappeared from their lives at five years old. The big brother, who’d stared at her with huge, teary eyes before breaking into a shaky smile and whispering, “I can’t believe it. You’re finally home.” The older sister, who’d traveled across the country on the slimmest of leads, who’d almost died trying to save her.

“I did,” Alanna finally answered. “But—”

“But Darcy Altier is back to her old tricks. And you think...what? She’s coming back here?”

Darcy Altier. The woman she’d called “Mom” for fourteen years. Alanna had always known she’d been kidnapped, remembered with startling clarity the moment when Julian Altier had yanked her out of her yard in Illinois and into his car. But Darcy and Julian had never harmed her. They’d treated her like their own child, held her when she cried, smiled with her in happy times. They’d loved her. Despite everything else, she knew that.

Over those fourteen years, she’d grown to love them, too. She’d also grown to love the other children the Altiers had kidnapped, her “siblings.” She missed all of them with an ache that was hard to explain to anyone, least of all the family who’d waited and searched for her all those years.

“Well?” the officer pressed, shifting so his right side was angled toward her. The side where a gun was holstered at his hip.

Her anxiety ratcheted up again and Chance stood up, stepping slightly forward. Protecting her, the way he’d done since the moment she’d brought him home. He’d been a tiny, emaciated puppy then, who had somehow managed to survive in cruel conditions until he was taken away and eventually ended up in her care. Now, though small for a St. Bernard, he outweighed her by twenty pounds.

Alanna put her hand on his back, pressed down slightly. Telling him to stay put.

“I don’t know,” Alanna answered, her gaze darting to the police station behind him. She *was* here for Darcy, because from the instant she’d seen the news report about her “mother’s” escape, she’d known it deep down. Nowhere had felt like home to any of them the way Alaska had. But she wasn’t about to say that to an officer who’d stared at her with barely veiled suspicion since the moment he’d realized who she was.

Seeming to recognize her discomfort, the officer took a step backward. But he still held the odd angle and she couldn’t stop staring at that weapon.

“I think we got off on the wrong foot,” he said, the words sounding strangled. “I’m Peter Robak.”

Robak. The name floated around in her mind, vaguely familiar, and Alanna tried to place it. Before she could, he was speaking again.

“Why are you back in Desparre, Alanna?”

“I...” She was on a fool’s quest. One that would have horrified her family back in Chicago if she’d told them about it in person, instead of in the note she had left. One that had definitely frustrated her boss, when she’d called to let him know she was taking time off in the middle of the work week and wasn’t sure when she’d be back.

But who else knew Darcy Altier like she did? It was one thing that Darcy had escaped police custody. Alanna knew the woman belonged in jail, but that didn’t mean she liked the idea of the person who’d helped raise her being behind bars. If it had simply been an escape, Alanna would have stayed in Chicago. But when a child had gone missing...

Straightening her shoulders, Alanna told him, “I was actually on my way to the police station.”

Peter eyed her with distrust for another minute, then stepped slightly aside. He swept his hand forward, gesturing for her to lead the way.

She felt him close behind her for every step of the short walk into the police station. Opening the door, she led Chance inside with her, not caring how the officers would feel about that. Technically, he was a service dog.

Inside the station, a wall of warm air hit her, reminding Alanna of just how cold it was outside. In her years living here, she'd gotten used to it and when she'd made the trip back, she'd packed appropriately. Yanking the hat off her head and unwinding her scarf, she looked around.

It was a tiny station, with a counter up front and an officer who glanced up, then returned to his paperwork when he saw Peter.

Peter said, "Alanna Alt...Morgan is here. Is the Chief around?" And suddenly the officer looked a lot more interested.

"Hang on a sec," he replied, giving her one last look before he disappeared behind a door marked Police Only.

Alanna planted her feet in a wider stance, tipping her chin up. A trick she'd taught herself to help her feel more confident, more in control. Chance's familiar form pressing against her leg didn't hurt, either.

From a back room, the police chief appeared, leaving the door to the bullpen open behind her. She was young for her position, but strode through the door with a genuine confidence Alanna envied. With the chief's dark hair pulled back into a bun and her expression somehow serious and friendly at the same time, Alanna could see her both putting victims at ease and scaring criminals.

The chief nodded once at Peter, then held out a hand. "How can I help you, Alanna?"

The officer who'd been sitting behind the counter settled back in his seat, this time ignoring his paperwork, unabashedly interested. Another officer stared at them through the open doorway, curiosity on his face. Alanna tried to shut them all out and just focus on the chief. Focus on the reason she'd come all this way, back to a place she thought she'd never see again.

"I..." Clearing her throat, Alanna said, "I'm sure you are already aware that Darcy Altier escaped from custody when she was allowed to go to my fa... Julian Altier's funeral. And that a child went missing a few miles from where she escaped and she's a suspect in the case."

It was a bold, dangerous move, something Alanna had never felt Darcy was capable of. At least, not until the moment Darcy had picked up a shotgun and fired at Alanna's sister, Kensie, who'd flown to Alaska to try to save her.

Shutting that memory out, Alanna continued, "I think she might come back to Desparre. I want to help you find Darcy." She wanted to help them bring her in safely.

The chief smiled, the expression half pitying and half amused, and Alanna felt her cheeks flush deep red.

The woman reached out and put a hand on Alanna's upper arm. She squeezed gently, as if Alanna was the sheltered, scared nineteen-year-old from five years ago. Back then, officers from a

neighboring town had taken her away from the only family she'd known for fourteen years and brought her to the hospital, where her biological sister waited.

Now Alanna was twenty-four, in the process of getting her master's degree and catching up on all the things she hadn't really known she'd missed while she was hidden away in Alaska. But she suddenly felt nineteen again when the chief said, "We appreciate that, but I think we've got it handled."

The chief continued with words of sympathy about the man who'd kidnapped her, who'd been a father to her for so many years. The man who'd been buried five days ago, whose service Alanna had longed to attend, but hadn't, knowing how it would hurt the family who'd missed her since she was five.

Alanna barely heard the words. Instead, she heard the snicker from the officer behind the counter.

Humiliated, Alanna spun back in the direction she'd entered.

The officer who'd brought her into the station—Peter Robak, who she remembered suddenly as someone she'd seen on TV a few years ago, a war reporter who'd almost died covering a hostage release—stood in her way.

He stepped slightly aside as she pushed past him, back into the frigid Alaskan air with Chance at her side, like always. She hurried across the unpaved street toward the truck she'd rented when her plane set down at the closest airport, which was still hours away. Then she stopped, spun back around, and looked up and down the small street. Despite the fact that it was still only midday, it was empty now.

Her St. Bernard stared up at her with his soft brown eyes. Then his head pivoted at the sound of a hawk's call overhead. Chance wasn't used to the vast emptiness of Desparre compared to the suburb outside busy Chicago where they lived.

Right now, there was only a light sprinkling of snow on the Desparre streets. But that could change at any time. Winter came here early, hard and fast. Sometimes, it got hit with enough snow to make leaving Desparre impossible until spring came.

When Chance's gaze returned to hers, there was a question there, as if he was asking, *What are we doing here?*

Being in the police station had made coming back here feel like a big mistake. But somewhere nearby, Darcy and a small child were hiding. Alanna was sure of it. And that child—like some of the "siblings" she'd grown up with—was young enough not to remember his family if they didn't find him in time.

For fourteen years, Alanna had been afraid to speak up, afraid to try to get help. At first, that fear had been because she hadn't known how her abductors would respond. Would they hurt her? Would they kill her? Later, it had been because, despite everything, she loved the Altiers and the four

kids she'd called brothers and sisters. She'd become afraid of what would happen to all of them if she tried to sneak away and told anyone the truth.

For the past five years, she'd felt guilty about all of it. Seeing the pain she'd caused her biological parents and siblings Kensie and Flynn, wondering if some of the other kids wouldn't have been kidnapped if she'd spoken up sooner.

She couldn't change the past. But she could change the future.

This time, she wasn't staying silent. She wasn't going home and she wasn't staying out of this investigation, whether the police wanted her help or not.

"We're going to do this," she told Chance. "We're going to find them."

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"SHE'S GOT A lot of nerve, showing up here," Peter muttered to no one in particular.

As usual, his partner, Tate Emory, heard him. "I don't know. I feel bad for her. Imagine what she's been through. It can't have been easy to write that note and turn in the only family she'd known since she was five years old."

Peter shifted and scowled at his partner, who'd strode over to stand beside him, moving silently. Or maybe Peter just hadn't heard him, since Tate had come up on Peter's left side. The side where his hearing was mostly gone.

Being new to the force, new to policing in general, hadn't been a smooth transition for Peter. Most of the officers here still stared at him like the rookie he was. Worse, he knew plenty of them hadn't wanted him accepted onto the force in the first place because of his hearing disability. Some of them were still trying to push him out.

He'd never felt that from Tate. His partner had only been on the force for five years, just long enough to have been present for Alanna's dramatic rescue.

It had all started with a simple note, left between some money at a general store on the outskirts of Desparre. The note had been as straightforward as it was confusing, since at the time there'd been no indication Alanna was even alive, let alone that her kidnapers had taken other children. *My name is Alanna Morgan, from Chicago. I'm still alive. I'm not the only one.*

The FBI had done a quick investigation and called the note a hoax, yet another dead end in a more than decade-old cold case. But Alanna's sister had believed it, had traveled over three thousand five hundred miles across the country in search of a sister she'd only known for five short years. The rescue had been sensational, making national news and putting the sleepy town of Desparre in a spotlight it desperately wanted to avoid. Now that spotlight might be returning.

Back then, Peter had been overseas, doing something he thought he'd stick with until it was time to retire. The scandal of the kidnapping had caught his attention only because he grew up in Luna, the little town next to Desparre where Alanna had finally been reunited with the sister who'd come to Alaska to find her.

Peter stared at the closed door Alanna had disappeared through, trying not to picture the embarrassment in her eyes. Yeah, he felt sorry for what she'd gone through, but five years had passed. Enough time to create a new life for herself with her real family, people who must have gone through hell thinking she was lost to them forever. She should have been home with them now, not out looking for a kidnapper. Because no matter what she said, he didn't quite believe she was here to put Darcy Altier back behind bars.

Alanna Morgan might have started out as a victim, but now she could choose her path in life. And every nuance in her voice, the flickers of emotion he'd seen in her eyes, told him she was choosing all wrong. She was here for Darcy Altier, all right, but not to get her arrested. To help her hide.

"Why do you think she believes Darcy returned to Desparre?" Tate asked.

Peter shrugged, his gaze still fixed on that closed door. It was a good question. Darcy Altier had been granted furlough to bury her husband, who'd been killed in jail. She'd managed to slip free of her guards and run, but that had been in Oregon, back near the prison. A smart woman would head as far from the site of her original crimes as possible. So why did Alanna think that Darcy was here? Why was Alanna here?

"They've been in contact." Peter spoke his thoughts out loud. It was the only logical explanation.

"Seriously?" Tate scoffed. "Alanna's the one who turned her in. You really think Darcy would reach out to her after that?"

Peter turned to look at his partner. Tate was a couple of inches taller than Peter's five-foot-ten-inch frame, his skin and hair a couple of shades darker. From the moment they'd met, Peter had felt a strange kinship with Tate, a sense that both of them had known hardship they didn't speak of, that both of them had a restless desire to move past it.

"This woman raised her since she was five years old," Peter insisted. "Alanna spent most of her childhood with her. I bet she barely remembered her real family. How much do you remember from before you were five?"

Tate shrugged. "Enough. Obviously Alanna remembered them or she wouldn't have left a note for them to find her."

"Sure, but then she continued to hide with the people who kidnapped her."

"That's a little harsh. She was nineteen. How much freedom do you think they gave her? You, of all people, should understand—"

Peter let out a humorless laugh. “Understand what? The lengths people will go to in order to protect someone who hurt them?”

That was something he definitely understood. He’d gotten an up-close look at the unnatural attachment a hostage could develop for their captor. That experience had destroyed his career as a war reporter—had destroyed much of the hearing in his left ear, too. There was no chance of recovering his hearing, no surgery or hearing aid that could improve it.

Peter had no doubt that Alanna had a similar unhealthy attachment, that she was suffering from serious delusions about the woman who’d stolen her away from her family. It made her motives questionable. Worse, it made her dangerous.

Tate was shaking his head, but Peter kept going. “You’re right. I do understand. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter if Alanna has spoken to Darcy or she just knows her well enough to predict her movements. If Darcy is crazy enough to actually come back here, Alanna is the key.”

Speaking the words aloud made anticipation swell in his chest and his gaze dart back to the closed door. Alanna was the key—and not just to locating a fugitive and solving a kidnapping, but to Desparre’s reputation as a quiet, safe place to be left alone. And to Peter’s future on the Desparre police force.

“Uh-oh,” Tate said. “I know *that* look.”

“Alanna is going to lead us to Darcy Altier and the missing kid.” He headed for the door, gesturing for his partner to follow. “We’re not letting Alanna out of our sight until she does.”

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