

TRACKING A FUGITIVE

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ALASKA MOUNTAIN RESCUE

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Chapter 1

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. Al-

anna 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.