

Manhunt

Chapter One

Michael Casey strolled along the Juneau waterfront, enjoying the briny smell of the early morning mist and the screeching Keee of seabirds overhead. He rubbed his thumb across the dark stubble of beard on his chin, ruffled his unkempt sandy-colored hair, and admitted that he was a bum at heart. In an hour his cargo plane would be loaded with salmon, and he would be off to San Francisco, but for now, he was at leisure to do as he pleased.

He watched the Alaskan state ferry dock and swing its boarding ramps into place. Cars and campers began to trickle from the lower deck, and a few passengers hustled down the gangplank to stretch their legs while the ship went through the loading and unloading process. A young woman struggled along the ramp, dragging a mountain of a dog behind her. She was tall, maybe five-foot-eight, Casey guessed, and had the bones and slim angular beauty of a high-paid fashion model. She paused for a second to shove a mass of glossy red-brown hair behind her ears and to push the sleeves of her fuzzy cream-colored sweater above her elbows. Casey smiled unconsciously as he watched her, wondering about her destination, enjoying the spectacle she was creating as she tried to drag her reluctant dog down the gangplank.

Alex didn't notice the man watching her from the dock. She had more pressing places to direct her energy. Bruno was being a pain. She took a firm grip on his leash and silently cursed her grandfather for willing her a rottweiler. Why couldn't she have inherited a small, polite animal? A hamster, or a guppie, or a hermit crab.

"Listen up, Bruno," Alex said, gritting her teeth, "I've dragged you all the way from the cargo deck so we could take a walk while the boat is being loaded, and I'm not going to give up now. Either you haul yourself down that ramp, or I'll cancel your subscription to Dog World."

In all honesty, she couldn't blame him for throwing a temper tantrum. She'd carted the animal three thousand miles across the country in a two-seater sports car, and for the past four days he'd been kept in a kennel cage belowdecks.

The big black dog, obviously not impressed with the threat, settled in an uncooperative heap at her feet.

Alex narrowed her eyes and reached for the gold-chained Chanel purse slung over her shoulder. "Okay, I guess I'll have to use my secret weapon." She took a foil-wrapped package from her handbag and waved it under Bruno's nose. "A doughnut!"

The dog's ear pricked up. His eyes opened wide.

Alex unwrapped the doughnut, and Bruno heaved himself to his feet. He swayed side to side for a minute, contemplating the treat his mistress held high above his head, his

stump of a tail wagging vigorously, his tongue lolling at the side of his mouth in slobbering anticipation.

Alex smiled in smug satisfaction at her cleverness. "Be a good doggie and follow me down the ramp, and we'll have a picnic."

"Woof," Bruno said, planting two massive front paws on Alex's chest as he lunged for the doughnut, knocking her against the guardrail. The doughnut sailed off into space, and without a moment's hesitation Bruno jumped the rail in pursuit. He vaulted seven feet straight out, then dropped like a stone into the narrow space between the ship and the wooden slip. He hit the water with a loud splash and instantly sank below the surface.

Alex clung to the railing, unable to move, unable to feel anything but a numb astonishment. The air had disappeared from her lungs, and her stomach felt oddly suspended in space.

Suddenly the dog's black head reappeared, and he paddled around in confusion, searching for land and finding none. Alex could hear the labored breathing of the overweight animal. She closed her eyes for a split second, trying to pull herself together.

"Dear Lord," she whispered, "someone help him." She frantically looked around, but no one seemed to be moving toward Bruno. He was going to drown in the oil-slicked water.

Michael Casey couldn't believe his eyes. That crazy broad just deep-sixed her dog! She sent him sailing off to fetch The Big One. He saw the rottweiler bob to the surface next to the ship, and from the corner of his eye caught a flash of bare thigh as the woman hiked her skirt up and straddled the railing.

"Oh, man," Casey said, "what is she doing now?"

She was going to jump in after the dog! He broke into a run, reaching the dock's edge just as she went under. He kicked his boots off, uttered an expletive, and plunged in after her.

Alex gasped for air as she floundered in the freezing water and knew she was in deep trouble. This water was cold. She was going to be a Popsicle in twenty seconds, and her wet clothes felt as if they weighed four hundred pounds. She was going to die, no doubt about it. And she'd never get to wear her new raspberry cashmere sweater. Three hundred dollars, and she hadn't even worn it once.

A life preserver was forcefully thrust into her chest. "Paddle this to the ladder at the end of the slip," a masculine voice shouted in her ear.

"My dog--"

"I'll take care of your dog!"

Alex turned to face him, squinting into the sun just in time to see another life preserver drop out of the sky. There was a sickening thud as it hit her rescuer square in the face. He went slack beside her, and a dark red slick appeared on the surface of the water as blood poured from his smashed nose. Alex clawed at his shirt, pulling him toward her, dragging him partially over the preserver. She clenched her chattering teeth and kicked out with rubbery legs, praying she could make it to the ladder. There was a splash behind her, and strong hands roughly pushed her forward, then lifted her up onto the dock.

She lay there, gasping air for a moment, while Bruno was hauled up after her. Thank goodness he was safe, she thought. A blanket was draped around her and a cup of steaming coffee was thrust into her hands. She struggled to catch a glimpse of the bleeding man being helped onto the dock, but was thwarted by uniformed ferry representatives trying to get her warm. She heard the wailing siren of an ambulance somewhere in the distance, then the warning blast of the ferry getting ready to depart.

Her car was on that ferry! She grabbed Bruno's soggy leash and was swept along in a throng of people anxious to embark. She glanced back at the blanketed figure being given first aid and debated whether or not to go on. She didn't want to leave him. She needed to thank him. She shouted to him, but her voice didn't carry, and the man never looked her way. There was a hand at her elbow, propelling her forward, steering her toward the boarding ramp.

An hour later she sat on her bunk, feeling much better after a hot shower, and allowed her thoughts to return to the man who had tried to rescue her. It seemed callous that she'd gotten on the ship and left him behind. She hadn't thanked him. She didn't even know his name. Hadn't even gotten a good look at his face. Not a good beginning, she decided. She hoped it wasn't a forerunner of things to come.

She turned to her map of Alaska, hoping to take her mind off the incident. They'd be disembarking in Haines shortly. The town was nothing more than a small dot on the large map, but it was very important to her. It was where she'd pick up the highway that led to Fairbanks. A thrill of excitement coursed along her spine as she traced the route with her finger and wondered about the cabin and hardware store she'd bought, sight unseen, from Harry Kowalski.

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Two days later, Alex parked her candy apple red BMW sports car on the side of a deserted two-lane road. She made a hopeless attempt to tame her tangled hair and checked her directions. This was it. The gravel road up ahead should lead to Harry's cabin. Her stomach fluttered in a momentary rush of self-doubt.

She'd never done anything this impulsive. For many years her life had been tightly ordered, controlled by thoroughly thought-out decisions. As an executive, she'd been meticulous with details, researching all possibilities before making a commitment. It was all those damned perfect decisions that had finally done her in, she decided. She'd gone on cerebral overload, and somewhere along the line she'd switched from rational thought to gut feeling. One day she had awakened to a pounding headache and the overwhelming certainty that she needed to get away.

That was the day she met Harry Kowalski, and he suggested the trade. A hardware store and a cabin in the woods sounded heaven sent. Her lawyer had advised against it. No one in her right mind would quit her job and trade her condo for two pieces of unseen real estate in Alaska, he had told her.

Alex gently fondled Bruno's silky black ear. "He was right, of course," she told the dog. "But he didn't understand that I had to do this. The job, my condo, the closet filled with business suits and silk shirts... none of that mattered to me anymore. I didn't care if I was making a shrewd business investment. I just knew it was time to leave. I suppose I was afraid that if I gave this too much thought, I'd get cold feet."

Looking at it from her present perspective, she wondered if her gut feelings had been ill founded. Maybe she shouldn't have trusted an old sourdough like Harry Kowalski. Prettiest little place ever, he'd told her. Nice quiet neighborhood, too. And she wouldn't have to worry about traffic.

"He was right about the traffic," Alex said to Bruno. "We're the only ones on this road." For all she knew, she and Bruno might be the only ones left on the planet.

She squinted through her dusty windshield at the scrubby woods on either side of the car. "Where are the shopping centers? Where are the doughnut shops and convenience stores? Where are all the people?" She draped a comforting arm around the rottweiler and chewed on her bottom lip. "I don't want to alarm you, Bruno, but this is a little more secluded than I'd expected."

Bruno rested his head on her shoulder and snuffled.

"Hey, don't worry about it," Alex said, "there's probably a pizza place hidden behind the trees somewhere. I bet we just passed fast-food burgers and didn't even know it. This is Alaska. They probably try to keep it looking rustic."

Alex shifted her car into first and attacked the narrow drive that curved steadily uphill, away from the two-lane paved road. At thirty-five miles an hour the BMW raised a dust cloud that could be seen for miles. Horrified voles scurried to remove themselves from its path, hawks and jays took to the air, and the rottweiler covered in its seat as the sports car rattled over the dirt-and-gravel surface.

After the third hairpin curve, Alex slowed to barely creeping and watched the odometer. When it had measured off exactly two miles she pulled the car onto the shoulder and cut the engine. A twelve-foot-wide swath had been carved into the woods to her left, allowing an assortment of bushes and new saplings to grow in profusion alongside it. The twin ruts of four-by-four truck tires were the only indication that this was a traveled roadway.

Alex groaned and thumped her head against the steering wheel. "Don't tell me! This is my driveway!" She looked around. There were no other possibilities. Wonderful. She took a deep breath and got out stiff-legged from the car, Bruno tumbling out after her.

"Well, what do you think, Bruno? Should we follow this . . . driveway?" She stomped into the high grass and wished she could leave a trail of bread crumbs like Hansel and Gretel. Unfortunately, she didn't have any bread crumbs. Even if she did, she thought ruefully, Bruno would most likely eat them before they hit the ground.

Fifteen minutes later Alex struggled to catch her breath as she emerged from the woods into a large clearing. The parcel was almost perfectly square, the borders clearly delineated by stands of white birch and rugged fir. Alex felt her heart catch in her throat as she stared awestruck at the panorama surrounding her.

The slope of the land provided her with a broad, spectacular view of the valley. Muskeg stretched for several miles in front of her, its monotony broken by a few small ponds that sparkled in the waning sunlight. Beyond, the snowcapped Alaska Range rose pale and serene on the horizon. She owned seven acres and a right-of-way, but she felt as if she'd just bought the world. There was no visible indication of civilization... not a road, not a curl of smoke, not a neighboring house or power line.

She inhaled the pungent woodsy air, tilted her head toward the azure sky curving above her, and smiled bravely. "Boy, this is great, isn't it, Bruno? This is the last frontier. Good-bye smog. Adios, rush-hour traffic. Au revoir, pooper scooper. Look at that sky. Smell that air."

She lowered her head and glanced around. The smile lost a little of its bravery. "Look at that . . . house." It was a log cabin, stained dark brown by time and neglect, perched atop the highest point of her property. It had a tin roof and shuttered windows. Wild roses had grown over the cabin, giving it a fairy-tale quality. It looked like a troll's house, Alex decided. The idea struck her as so preposterous and, at the same time, so apt that she laughed out loud at the possibility.

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Michael Casey stalked into the clearing and stopped dead still. It was her! The woman he'd tried to rescue. Her and her big, dumb dog. What the devil was she doing here?

A protective reflex action brought his hand to his nose. He tenderly touched the Band-Aid and grimaced. Take it easy, Casey, he told himself. This is just some bizarre coincidence. Maybe she came to say thank-you.

He watched her take a quick survey of the land, then focus her attention on the cabin. She shook her head, and her low husky laugh carried over to him. "Well, don't just stand there with your mouth hanging open," he muttered to himself. "Say something!"

"If old Harry caught you laughing at his house like that, he'd feed you piecemeal to the raccoons."

Alex whirled around. She'd been so engrossed in the landscape that she hadn't heard the man approach. He had a knife stuck into his belt and a gun slung halfway down his leg. In her mind that placed him alongside New York street gangs and lunatics escaped

from Rahway prison. For the first time in her life, she felt genuinely threatened. A lump of fear rose to her throat when she realized he was standing between her and her car.

Casey grinned and shook his head, his eyes openly appraising the woman in front of him. She was a knockout. A little bedraggled, but lean and classy in her designer jeans and forest green silk shirt. She looked like a woman who was used to exercising authority, and he considered readjusting his opinion of her as a dingbat. There was intelligence behind those blue eyes and a grim determination to the set of her mouth. He was sure she had no idea who he was, and that her initial reaction to his sudden appearance had been fear, though that had quickly changed to something else. Something mysterious.

"You look like a woman who's just been cornered by a grizzly."

Not a grizzly, she decided. Grizzlies were big and shaggy with beady eyes. This guy was a ten. He wore a navy flannel shirt that had obviously been through many washings, but looked tailor-made to fit broad shoulders that tapered to a flat stomach and trim waist. The sleeves had been rolled to the elbow, displaying strong tanned forearms lightly covered with blond hair. He was narrow-hipped and lean-legged, and his faded jeans clung to his body in such a way that the hard muscles of his thighs were subtly displayed.

His sandy-colored hair was partially sun-bleached and in need of a cutting. When he smiled, his eyes were enhanced by laugh lines that testified to an outdoor life and a healthy sense of humor. A fresh scar slanted across his straight boy-next-door nose and angled across his left cheekbone. A Band-Aid stretched across the bridge of his nose, partially hiding a multicolored bruise. The impression of ferocity produced by the scar was counterbalanced by the generous, sensuous mouth that curved at the corners.

For a brief moment Alex smiled while she imagined him as a little boy. He would have been completely unmanageable and mischievous and totally irresistible. And he wasn't so different now, she decided, reaching the conclusion that his smile was probably more lethal than his gun.

Alex held her hand up. "Stop. Don't come one step closer, or I'll sic my dog on you."

Bruno looked at Casey and wagged his tail. The animal stepped over to him, sat on his booted foot, and smiled hello.

"You mean this ferocious beast?"

"He's very protective."

"Yeah. I can see that."

Alex narrowed her eyes. He was laughing at her. What nerve. She felt like punching him in the nose, but obviously someone had beaten her to it. And what was he doing on her property anyway? She should have him arrested for trespassing. "So who are you? And what are you doing here?" Alex asked.

"Michael Casey, and whoever you are, you're on private property. You drove that flashy car on my private road, scaring the daylights out of half the wildlife on this mountain. Now if you don't mind, I'd like you to take your big dumb dog and haul your cute little tush out of here."

Harry had told her about Michael Casey. He was her only neighbor, and he was supposed to be old. My good old friend, Casey, Harry had said. And so here was old Casey, insulting her dog and ordering her around.

"My dog is not dumb. My name is Alexandra Scott, and I'm going to leave my cute little tush here for as long as I like. This is my land and my cabin, and that pathetic excuse for a driveway is mine too!"

"That's impossible. Harry Kowalski owns this patch of land."

"Harry Kowalski sold it. He moved to New Jersey to live with his daughter, and I bought this land from him."

"Oh, swell. You probably own swampland in Florida, too."

"Something wrong with this property?"

"It's a beautiful piece of land, but it's a little . . . primitive."

"Actually, I was led to believe that it had a few more improvements," Alex said, casting a furtive glance at the driveway.

"Harry hasn't lived here for over three years. He moved into town when he broke his hip. The place has gotten kind of overgrown."

"Well, Bruno and I will just have to whip it back into shape. Won't we, Bruno?"

Bruno sat motionless on Casey's foot. He blinked in the fading sun and yawned.

"Boy, this dog can really handle excitement," Casey said, scratching Bruno's ear. "How old is he?"

"I think he's pretty old. He was my grandfather's dog. When my grandfather died last year, Bruno came to live with me."

"You should put him on a diet. He must weigh two hundred pounds. My foot is falling asleep."

"I wasn't home very much. He didn't get enough exercise." She made a sweeping gesture with her hand. "Harry said all the cleared land is mine."

"Yup."

Alex pointed to the cabin. "And that cabin. Is that the only cabin on the property?"

"Yup."

"Oh, boy."

Casey felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. "You weren't planning on living here, were you?"

"Yup."

"Oh, boy," he echoed, his eyebrows rising slightly. Harry Kowalski was an old scoundrel. He'd sent this woman on a five-thousand-mile wild-goose chase, knowing perfectly well that she'd never be able to live in the crude house. He almost felt sorry for her, but there was something about Alexandra Scott that discouraged pity. She seemed invincible.

"It looks . . . cute," Alex said hopefully.

"It's well built and still sturdy. So far as I know the roof doesn't leak. Those are the high points. After that it's pretty much downhill."

Alex thought of the four-hundred-thousand-dollar Princeton condo she'd just left and rolled her eyes. Of course it had a good-sized mortgage but, even so, the swap was a bad deal. She'd blithely traded a Jacuzzi for an outhouse, and the astonishing thing was that she felt little remorse over it. She'd been a victim of burnout. And then she'd had her biological clock to contend with. She'd found it increasingly depressing to pass by the baby-food section in the supermarket and know there wasn't a baby in her immediate future.

Alex smiled sadly. She had to admit, this had been just a tad too drastic. If her mother ever found out about this, she'd have her committed. The smile grew wider at the thought of her mother's reaction to a house without cable TV. Yes, indeed, her mother would definitely think she was crazy. But her mother would be wrong.

Despite the problems with her newly acquired property, Alex felt fairly sane and satisfied. She was simply walking to the beat of a different drummer, she told herself. Besides, she'd always rallied to a challenge, and this certainly was a challenge.

"Okay, Bruno and Michael Casey, let's go take a look at this wonderful cabin," Alex said.