

CHAPTER ONE

Skagit River, Washington (Day One)

Amazing how quickly a perfect day could veer off course ...

Dean McClure cast his fishing line and watched it lazily deliver his hand-tied fly to the exact location he desired, a deep pocket of still water. The ideal spot for steelhead to rest from the strong current of the rushing Skagit River.

Overhanging tree boughs along the shoreline offered shade, protection from predator birds and increased the chance fish lay beneath the surface. He smiled while working his rod and reel, the fly following the eddies of water. Indeed, Dean couldn't fathom a more perfect place to be than in his waders, knee deep in the surging stream of snow melt waters from the North Cascade Mountains of Washington, miles from civilization.

Sunlight warmed his back and danced upon the liquid crystal waters, creating a kaleidoscope of colored stars. With the white noise of the waters filling his senses, he had let his mind wander free of worldly concerns, and instead allowed a moment of bliss to settle around him.

But a persistent sound soon intruded and drew him from the fog of contentment back to the present. Reluctantly, he turned his head toward the commotion, only to spot a man on the distant shoreline. A man wildly waving his arms over his head and shouting Dean's name.

Well, that can't be good.

Dean focused his full attention on not losing his footing on the slippery rocks as he worked his way across the strong current of the river.

The man waiting on shore had ceased his arm waving once he had Dean's attention. Instead, he paced back and forth along the edge of the raised bank and stopped often to check on Dean's progress, only to resume pacing. Deep shadows under the trees kept Dean from being able to clearly see the man's features. But, based on the man's dress slacks and shirt, he wasn't there for the fishing.

Various scenarios ran through Dean's mind while he made as much haste as deemed safe under the circumstances. How had anyone even found him? And for what reason? He'd been retired from the Bureau for what seemed ages now. And his last consulting job had been a couple of years ago, when he'd worked with Fox Walker in Colorado to clear Matt Logan's name.

Dean mumbled under his breath in discontent while he navigated a particularly tricky spot in the river. Once he successfully cleared that section, he glanced up. Discontent dissolved into apprehension. Closer now, he recognized the man Steve Hicks, an FBI Agent from the Seattle Bureau. Dean stared a moment. He and Steve shared a history at the Bureau and had

become fishing buddies after Dean's retirement. But the case in Colorado had cemented their friendship.

Dean lowered his head to again concentrate on crossing the water. Steve tracking him down at his favorite fishing spot didn't bode well, considering Steve wasn't dressed for fishing. What could this be about?

When he made it to the shoreline Steve reached out a strong hand. The younger man hauled Dean up the steep incline of the riverbank until they stood facing each other.

Before Dean could catch his breath, Steve spoke in a rush of words.

"I can't believe my luck—that you're really here! I mean, what are the odds? But I had to try, since I was nearby."

He watched Steve take a breath and calm himself before speaking again.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your fishing, Dean, I really am. You know I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't urgent."

Dean still tried to wrap his thoughts around why Steve would be nearby, and what could possibly be so urgent. But what tumbled out of his mouth was, "How'd you know I'd be at this particular location?"

"I didn't. But I remembered you liked to frequent that little fly-fishing shop near Lost Lake where I happened to be. I stopped in there and the owner confirmed you'd been in earlier. He said you mentioned heading out to this spot. I still can't believe my good fortune."

Dean inhaled another gulp of air and straightened up. It wasn't that he'd not kept in shape in retirement, but more that his body liked to remind him of his age. "What's this all about, Steve? You know I'm retired and enjoying it."

Steve shifted his stance. “This isn’t a request from the Bureau. This is a request from me.”

He watched Steve’s eyes go dark with worry, but what concerned Dean more was the edge of panic he saw flickering along the edges. Not good. He waited.

“It’s my daughter, Dean. Katie’s gone missing.”

CHAPTER TWO

Elk Meadow, Colorado (Day One)

Fox Walker put aside his knife and the piece of wood he had been carving, brushed away the shavings, and stood to stretch. He and Nataya were enjoying a well-deserved break following a busy season of courses for their Wilderness Survival School. After an early morning breakfast on the front porch they decided to extend the relaxing moment by working on some projects, while savoring the late summer weather ... and the view.

He gazed out over the lake in front of the log cabin. Autumn would arrive soon enough. But for now, the waters reflected the intense blue Colorado sky as dark mountains reared up majestically from the surrounding meadows and woodlands. A scene he never grew tired of. And never took for granted.

Nataya looked up from her hand-sewing project and gave him a warm smile.

The years had not dimmed the love he saw reflected in her eyes and felt in his own heart.

Hard to believe three years had passed since he'd discovered her living alone in the wilderness with no memory of her past and no desire for a rescue. He'd had to gain her trust first before he could save her from a serial killer. But his greatest reward had been when she regained

her memories and decided to remain as Nataya. And to remain with him. She'd even managed to repay him by saving his life twice since they'd met.

He leaned over to study her work. "Looks as if you've finished."

"Yes, I just completed attaching the strap." She held up the shoulder satchel for him to examine.

His fingers brushed over the velvety soft, yet sturdy buckskin hide. "A work of art, yet functional. It's beautiful."

"Thanks. I'm pleased with how well it turned out." She stood, slipped the long strap over her head, and draped it across her torso, the satchel hanging at her left hip. "During our longer excursions into the wilds, I've often wished for something to store items in. Something smaller than a knapsack and less cumbersome than a carry basket. I think this will prove useful."

She removed the bag and held it to her face, inhaling the campfire aroma remaining in the hide from the smoking process. "My favorite part of working with buckskin is the wonderful smokey smell ... well, that and working with the soft, pliable hide. Of course, there's also the hand sewing part." She grinned. "Okay, so I love all aspects of it equally."

Walker smiled and nodded. Then noticed she waited, watching him with an expectant look, so he added, "I'm thankful you enjoy it so much." She smiled, but still watched him in silence. He'd seen this hopeful expression more often lately during their conversations. It was something new, and he didn't quite know what she expected but found himself continuing the discussion. "You know, over the years I've made lots of functional pieces from the hides I tanned, but you bring an entirely new level of artistry to it." He slid his arm around her shoulders.

She looked up at him. “I know it’s important to you, to not waste any part of an animal or bird that gives up its spirit that we might survive. Adding an element of beauty to the project is my gift of gratitude.”

Walker turned into her arms, seeing her smile of contentment. He lifted her chin, gazing into those lovely cornflower blue eyes, and leaned in for a kiss. A moment later he heard the phone ring inside. “Never fails, does it?” He grimaced. “I better get it.” They rarely received phone calls unless someone needed their help.

He opened the screen door and strode toward his corner desk. The ancient rotary dial phone had recently been replaced with a newer landline phone with voicemail and other fancy features. He hadn’t really made peace with it yet. He noticed Nataya followed him in.

“Walker here.”

“Walker, Dean McClure.”

“Dean, it’s great to hear your voice. It’s been a while.” He looked at Nataya, saw she had her attention.

“Yeah, too long. I hope you and Nataya are doing well? The Wilderness Survival School still keeping you busy?”

“Yes, and yes. Just finished our final summer course and have a break right now.”

“Good to hear, on both accounts.”

Walker waited for a heartbeat before he remarked, “Must be something pretty important that pulled you away from fishing?”

Dean chuckled, but it contained no humor. “You know me a little too well, and you have no idea how close to the mark you are with that comment. Yeah, I’ve got an urgent, time-sensitive request for you and Nataya.”

“Sounds serious.” He glanced at Nataya and switched to the speaker phone. “Fill me in.”

“We’ve got a twenty-eight-year-old missing female as of early this morning here in Washington, the North Cascade Mountains. More specifically the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.”

Walker grabbed a pen and paper and started to take notes.

Dean continued. “The missing woman’s father is Steve Hicks, an FBI agent I know. In fact, you might remember him. He’s the guy who brought in a team via helicopter to extract you, Nataya and Matt Logan from the wilderness.”

“Yes, I remember him. He made sure Matt made it to the hospital to see his brother and his teammate.”

“Yeah, that’s the guy.”

“So this is an FBI request?”

“No. It’s a personal request. Steve’s daughter, Katie, has been staying in a cottage on Lost Lake most of the summer. She was supposed to join her friends for a scheduled hike this morning at dawn. But when they arrived at her cottage, Katie didn’t answer the door. Her Jeep was still parked beside the cottage. One of the gals called Steve. He told them where the spare key was, so they could get in and check on Katie. She was gone, as well as her backpack and hiking boots. Steve and I are here at the cottage now and the scene definitely points to her having left for the wilderness.”

Walker paused in his note taking. “What’s the chance that Katie simply decided to take off by herself and forgot to let anyone know?”

“None. Steve says he and Katie have been super tight ever since his wife passed when Katie was in high school. They have a pact—one she’s never broken. Whenever she’s going into

the wilderness alone, she either signs in for the trail at a ranger station, or lets Steve or friends know where she's going. And her hiking buddies say she'd never take off like this without leaving them a note."

"But she did."

"Exactly. Steve is convinced something is seriously wrong. Katie's been exploring and hiking most of her life. She's never done anything like this."

"So I take it there are no signs of a struggle in the cabin, no reason to believe there was an abduction?"

"None. What I've seen coincides with what Steve believes. That Katie left on her own accord, everything neat and tidy ... maybe even a little too neat. Like she plans on being away for a while. I did see subtle signs that she was in a rush this morning ... a drawer not completely closed ... things like that. Nothing nefarious."

"Okay." Walker paused. "Dean, time is ticking, why lose precious hours calling us in from out of state? Don't you have anyone close by to pick up her trail?"

"That's just it. There *is* no trail."

"What do you mean?"

"No prints leave the cottage. Nothing. It's like Katie walked out the door and simply vanished. You're the best person I know for finding a trail without prints to follow. We need you, Walker."

He looked at Nataya, saw her nod in the affirmative. "You've got us, Dean."

"Thanks, Walker. Means the world to Steve and me."

"So, now what?"

“A private jet is already en route to Montrose Airport. Probably be there waiting by the time you make the drive.”

“Pretty sure we’d say yes to this, eh?”

“Had to take the chance, and as you stated, time is precious. Let’s say I was prepared to take desperate measures to get you both here.”

“It’s no problem, Dean. I understand.”

“Well at least with the time difference between Colorado and Washington, you’ll gain an hour. And Walker, just a heads up. When I meet you at the airstrip here in Washington, there will be someone with me. A Search and Rescue guy named Carl. He’ll be bringing all the gear and equipment the three of you might need while you’re in this environment.”

“The *three* of us?”

“I know you prefer to work alone or with Nataya, but this is out of my control. Steve set it up and insists on it.”

Before Walker could speak, Dean rushed forward to explain.

“Please understand, this is day five on a homicide case Steve’s been working. Took place on tribal land near Lost Lake. That’s why he was near the cottage where Katie went missing. He can’t leave the case and wants this SAR guy to take his place. But don’t worry, the Search and Rescue Team Leader says Carl is the most experienced and knowledgeable guy for the region you’ll be going into.”

“Sounds like we have no choice.”

“Sorry, Walker. At least you won’t need to pack up much, just your usual. Carl will be providing equipment, shelter, and food. Everything except warm clothing. Steve mentioned you

may end up in higher elevations, and you know snow is a possibility this time of year in the mountains.”

“Got it.”

“Any questions before I let you go?”

“None. But I do have a request.”

“Sure.”

“Ask Steve if he knows what brand and size of hiking boot Katie wears. Maybe one of her hiking friends knows. If so, I need a photo of the boot tread.”

“Got it. Will do, Walker. Thanks again to you and Nataya. Steve and I appreciate this. See you at the airstrip in Washington in a few hours.”

Walker hung up the phone receiver and turned to Nataya. “Guess we better hustle since the plane’s already in the air and we have a drive ahead of us.”

“So Dean isn’t flying into Montrose to meet us.”

“I think he hates flying as much as we do.” Walker hadn’t missed the fact Dean had twice mentioned they’d meet at an airstrip, not airport. Which probably meant they’d be transferring from the private jet to a small plane at some point. He decided not to call it to Nataya’s attention. Only a year ago she had learned that the small plane crash which killed her parents had not been an accident. Indeed, he’d try not to dwell on that fact himself.