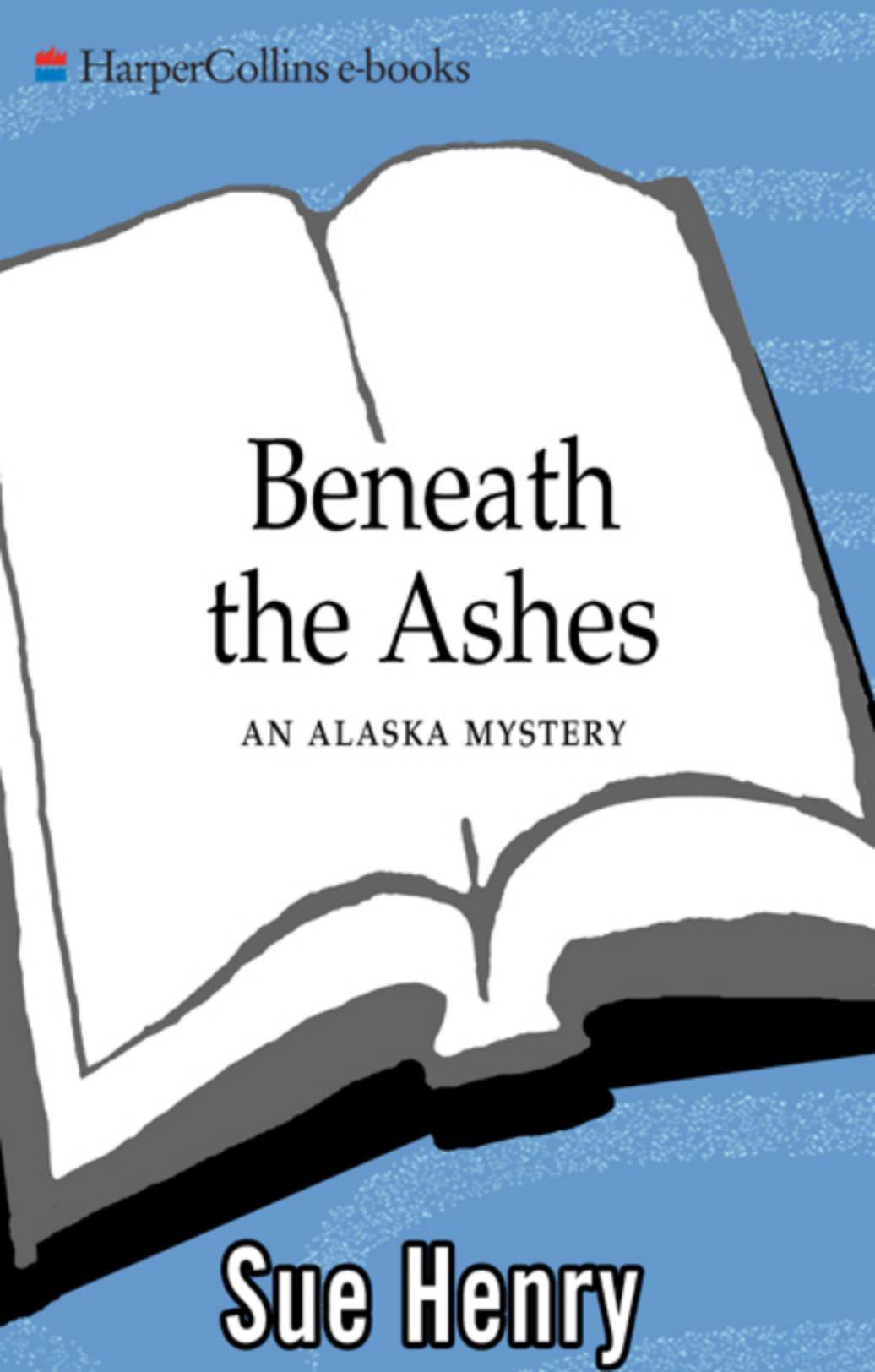




HarperCollins e-books



Beneath the Ashes

AN ALASKA MYSTERY

Sue Henry

SUE HENRY

**BENEATH
THE ASHES**

AN ALASKA MYSTERY



HarperCollins e-books

This one's for my sons, Bruce and Eric,
protagonists of my favorite,
most gratifying, intriguing,
and continuing
suspense stories

*The fire which seems extinguished often
slumbers beneath the ashes.*

—Pierre Corneille, *Rodogune*

Contents

Epigraph	iii
Prologue	
IT ISN'T DYING THAT FRIGHTENS MOST OF US, BUT THE...	1
1 ON AN EARLY EVENING IN MID-MARCH, JESSIE ARNOLD was sitting...	3
2 A FRANTIC POUNDING ON THE FRONT DOOR OF HER CABIN...	20
3 UP EARLY TO START FOR THE AIRPORT, JESSIE WAS DELIGHTED...	30
4 IN HER STOCKING FEET, JESSIE QUIETLY PACED THE WIDTH of...	43
5 THE TWO MEN HAD GONE, TATUM GIVING BOTH WOMEN A...	57
6 BY SEVEN O'CLOCK THE NEXT MORNING, JESSIE WAS loading dogs...	72
7 THOUGH SHE WAS TEMPTED TO TURN RIGHT AT THE HIGHWAY...	83
8 IN THE SOFT BLUE OF THE SAME EVENING, JUST AFTER...	97

9	PALE LIGHT FILTERED THROUGH CRACKS IN THE BOARDED-UP windows of...	110
10	JESSIE STOOD STARING DOWN AT THE TINY BONES, ANNE Holman...	123
11	IN THE DARK TWO O’CLOCK STILLNESS OF JESSIE’S CABIN, the...	134
12	“I WILL NOT HAVE TATUM ANYWHERE NEAR THIS FIRE—NOT one...	144
13	JUST LOOKING AT THE BLACK RUIN OF HER CABIN MADE...	158
14	BECKER AND MACDONALD HAD GONE, LEAVING JESSIE incensed and a...	170
15	GREG HOLMAN CAME CAUTIOUSLY INTO JESSIE’S TEMPORARY living space, moving...	182
16	RETURNING HOME LATE THAT AFTERNOON, JESSIE FOUND MacDonald writing a...	194
17	THE NORTH BY NORTHREST MOTEL, LOCATED JUST WEST of Wasilla...	205
18	THE DOG YARD, TENT, AND SHEDS LOOKED JUST AS SHE...	215
19	THERE WERE LINES OF PALE LIGHT, THIN VERTICAL LINES within...	224
20	THERE WERE NO LINES OF LIGHT WHEN JESSIE WOKE again—nothing...	234

21 AS IT TURNED OUT, THEY HAD QUITE A LOT STACKED...	246
22 WHAT JESSIE MEANT TO DO WAS GO BACK TO THE...	255
23 “SHE’S GONE AGAIN, PHIL.”...	265
24 MACDONALD WAS HAVING NO TROUBLE AT ALL REMEMBERING what he...	275
25 BELOW THE CABIN, ON THE FLANKS OF THE LITTLE PETERS...	286
26 THE SNOW SHE HAD FALLEN INTO FROM THE ROOF OF...	296
27 ON A WARM DAY THREE WEEKS LATER, JESSIE and HANK...	301

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[Other Books by Sue Henry](#)

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[Cover](#)

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Prologue



IT ISN'T DYING THAT FRIGHTENS MOST OF US, BUT THE IDEA of an agonizing death can give us shuddering cold sweats in the dark. Awareness of our vulnerability makes us gawk and wince at flaming pileups on the freeway, prompts us to entreat our gods for a painless departure in the ignorance of our beds. It is the nightmare notions that break us. And, of all fearsome concepts, the dread of fire is appalling in its ability to reduce us to gasping, gibbering, herky-jerky puppets.

If Joan the Maid had been nothing but a mad peasant girl who heard voices, she might have passed unremarked into the mists. It was the way of her dying that secured her a bright spark in the memory of man, for we remember fire. We may not instantly recall the names of our high school teachers, the current crop of politicians, or what we last watched on television, but we know the significance of Nero's fiddle, the MGM Grand, and Mrs. O'Leary's cow.

As necessary as it is to our daily well-being, fire is

never to be trusted, for it lives. It moves, speaks, breathes, consumes, stalks, and inspires in us a plea to drown, freeze, or even bleed.

Anything but burn.

1



ON AN EARLY EVENING IN MID-MARCH, JESSIE ARNOLD was sitting on the floor by her huge sofa, surrounded by a gang of half-grown pups from two different litters that she had brought into the house so they could become accustomed to handling and interaction with a human, as well as to the other dogs. The seven pups tumbled happily on and around her, staging mock battles, chewing each other's tails and ears, crawling onto her lap for rations of the affection she was happy to give them. They were still cute and babyish at this age, falling over the big feet they were quickly growing into, curious about everything, full of life, and beginning to display individual characteristics that she was assessing closely, looking for traits that would make them good working sled dogs later on.

Her racing lead dog, Tank, the long-suffering father of four of them, had been trying to take a nap near the wood-burning stove, but he found it impossible, as some of the pups that couldn't crowd onto Jessie's lap turned their focus on him. Jeep and his

smaller sister, Daisy, were being especially attentive to their dad. When they had run around and over him several times, faking attacks to encourage him to join their exuberant games, he finally grew tired of their nonsense and growled a warning in Jeep's direction. Jeep stopped in his tracks and growled back, which amused and interested Jessie. The young dog was showing independence and assertiveness, qualities that could indicate a possible leader in the making for a future racing team.

Socialization with humans early in the life of sled dogs was important. It established relationships while the pups were still imprintable and became a positive, normal part of their lives, making training easier and helping them develop skills for working with people and other dogs. She sincerely hoped Jeep had inherited the attitudes and abilities that made Tank the best leader she had ever had.

Jessie had been trying to read an article she had found in the latest *Mushing Magazine* on summer training for sled dogs. She tossed it onto the sofa when the adolescent gang of pups made it impossible to concentrate. Now, over their yips and immature growls, she glanced at the magazine longingly, then suddenly hesitated, looked toward the window across the room, and held her breath for a few seconds to listen intently. It had grown very quiet outside. The faint repetitious murmur of rain that had been a background for the last two days had stopped.

Shoving two pups from her lap in order to get up, she walked across to the window that overlooked her dog yard.

Snow. It was finally snowing again. Big white feathery flakes were falling thickly through the air, melting as they hit the wet ground. But here and there they were beginning to stick. The roof and hood of Jessie's pickup truck were already turning white. It would be wet, heavy snow, but at least it was not the unseasonable rain that had been turning the trails she used for training to slush.

Glancing at the large thermometer mounted outside facing the window, she saw the temperature had dropped from well above freezing to twenty-eight degrees. As she watched, it moved to twenty-seven. Still falling. No wonder the rain had turned to snow, and how welcome. Since it had started this late in the day, she thought it would probably continue into the night, replacing some of the old snow the rain had melted and, possibly, allowing her to take out a team or two tomorrow.

Finished with the Yukon Quest, the last race she would run this season, she and Billy Steward, the young musher who helped her at the kennel, had been working hard with mixed teams, one- and two-year-old dogs harnessed together with experienced ones. The days of rain had put a halt to that. Jessie, pleased with the progress they were making, was frustrated at being housebound. Running sled dogs in the rain was a miserable business that she and other mushers avoided when they could. It took all her attention to train inexperienced dogs without adding bad weather to the equation. Untangling the snarls they managed to get themselves into several times a day was work enough. It was fun to play inside with the pups who were not

yet close to real training age, but it was more challenging to be out on the trails.

Two of the pups had quietly followed her to the window, and she almost tripped over them as she turned back into the room but managed to step wide, missing both. Crossing to the phone on her desk, she dialed Billy's number. The pups trotted along behind her, not giving up their attempt to reclaim her attention, but they were quickly sidetracked by a patchwork pillow that had fallen from the sofa. With a long reach she snatched it away, knowing how soon its feathers would be floating around the room like the snowflakes outside if she left it to their sharp teeth.

"Have you looked out?" she asked Billy. "The snow's coming down like crazy. If it keeps up we can run tomorrow. Right—about seven. Yes. Okay."

Dropping the phone back in its cradle, she returned to the window to watch the falling flakes with satisfaction, unwilling to sit back down. She wished she could go out now but knew there wouldn't be enough new snow until morning, and the plastic runners on her sled would grind themselves to tatters on the rocks and bare ground the rain had uncovered.

Flopping down on the sofa, she ignored the pups for a minute and picked up the magazine again. When she realized she had reread a page for the third time and had no idea what it contained, she tossed it to the opposite end of the large sofa and stood up again.

"That's it," she declared. "Time for all you guys to go back to the puppy pens with your moms."

Tank raised his head, ears pricked, alert to the possibility of activity in the offing. The pups, as usual, ig-

nored her. Jeep and Daisy had settled into a semi-snooze, curled up next to Tank near the warm stove, but they scrambled up as he moved.

“Enough sloth. I’m going to Oscar’s for a beer and a game of pool.”

Tank was on his feet in a bound, tail wagging enthusiastically, recognizing the words *going* and *Oscar’s*.

“Okay,” Jessie told him, giving in with a grin. “You can come.”

A significant number of other mushers, who had also been unable to take their dog teams out, would probably drop into their favorite pub this evening to commiserate with each other at the rain-enforced intermission in their training runs. Some human company will do me good, she thought, gathering up the puppies, which she transported back to their pens in squirming, protesting armfuls.

Before leaving, she added a log to the stove and turned off all the lights but one in the kitchen. Standing for a moment in the driveway, she raised her face to let the snowflakes fall on it, stuck out her tongue, and tasted one. Delightful.

With Tank sitting beside her in the truck, she negotiated the potholes of the long drive to the highway and headed for Oscar’s, her mood lifting with the thought of going somewhere.

A little over five miles down the road she swung the pickup into the wide parking lot in front of Oscar’s Other Place, which she was pleased to find was full of vehicles as she had anticipated.

When he had built the semi-isolated rural pub a few

years earlier, Oscar Lee had called it the Double Dozen, for it was twelve miles from the main highway and just over twelve from where he lived, farther along Knik Road. The name, however, had never worked for the simple reason that most of his customers were already familiar with Oscar's first bar in the nearby community of Wasilla. With the possessiveness of regulars, they had referred to the new pub as Oscar's Other Place, ignoring anything to do with double pubs or dozens of miles. So it wasn't long until he bowed to the inevitable, replaced the sign out front, and made it official. "Oscar's Other Place" it became and remained.

From the day it opened, located in the middle of an area popular with racing aficionados where there were more sled dogs per square mile than people, Oscar's had quickly become a haunt for local mushers, handlers, and their followers. So many of them stopped by to warm up during training runs that Oscar kept a perpetual kettle of chili or stew steaming fragrantly in a huge slow cooker, and provided straw for their dogs to curl up on in back of the pub.

Year-round, something was always happening at the bar. Dart and pool tournaments were popular. Three or four tables of bridge players usually collected on Sunday afternoons. A large television set above the bar featured regular sports in their seasons, accompanied by potluck dinners and many friendly wagers. A pig roast became traditional on Super Bowl Sunday. Every summer the Other Place sponsored a softball team that carefully kept its error count just high enough to remain solidly in the B league, where the game was less intense and more fun.

The battered jukebox was packed with an astonishing collection of much loved easy listening and country-western oldies. When an unwitting serviceman delivered a new machine full of current hits—and the result was a unanimous insurrection of patrons who threatened to toss it and him into the nearby creek—the antique player and its old tunes were quickly restored.

The walls had gradually been covered with an enviable collection of mushing photographs and memorabilia donated by mushers and their followers—a fascinating history of the wide variety of modern races across the state, mixed with reprints of early twentieth century heroes of the sport.

Coming through the second door of the pub's Arctic entry, and shaking the snow from the blond curls above her gray eyes, Jessie was brought face-to-face with an image of herself on the opposite wall. It portrayed her now-legendary run down Front Street in Nome the year that she had finished the Iditarod in second place. Tall and slim, she smiled for the camera, her lead dog, Tank, beside her. Though the photo had always pleased her it now precipitated a slight frown at a figure on a snowmachine in the background.

Alex Jensen was the Alaska state trooper she had met during that race and with whom she'd shared a relationship until a month ago. The disappointment they had both experienced at the separation was a still-tender emotional bruise she consciously refrained from fingering.

She moved on into the warm, crowded interior of the Other Place, Tank walking politely beside her. The

large room smelled of rain-damp parkas, wool hats, and mittens; and it was noisily cheerful with conversation, laughter, the crack of pool balls sent flying around on two tables, and the thump of darts hitting a board in an out-of-the-way corner in the back.

The interior was decidedly informal, with little of what could actually be termed decor. The walls were concrete blocks painted a bright terra-cotta, the floor a worn gray-green commercial vinyl tile. About a dozen square pedestal tables sat among a functional assortment of plain metal chairs with padded plastic seats. The bar stools were of two different types, with and without backs.

Like many rural Alaskan pubs and roadhouses, the appeal of the Other Place had little to do with interior decor. It was a casual place where mushers could drop by in their working clothes—often grubby but warm parkas repaired with duct tape to retain their down—track snow or mud onto the floor without concern, and not worry about offending anyone with the smell of the dogs they drove and fires they built and hovered over.

“Hey, Jessie. Wondered if you’d show tonight. Pretty sad out there, isn’t it?” A friend put out a hand.

“It *was* sad, Hank—now it’s *snowing*. We can run tomorrow. *Yes!* Wanna play some pool?”

“Sure! Your turn to put up a quarter.”

Tank sat down beside her and looked around carefully for Oscar as Jessie paused next to the blond, bearded man who had swiveled on his bar stool to greet her, exhibiting the front of a dark blue sweatshirt that bore a Crabb’s Corner logo, one of the stops on the annual Yukon Quest, a race between Whitehorse and