

# Chapter One



The rope in my hand resembled a noose. “Sorry, pal, but it was all I could find.”

The stray doggy with the dewdrop eyes had found me earlier today as I jogged along the shores of Otter Bay while trying to shake off a tough weekend. I slipped the makeshift leash around his skinny neck. It was almost evening and our trot through the woods on the way to my sister’s house for Sunday supper would serve as my halfhearted attempt to find this dog’s owner.

Hopefully, they’re long gone, because until this pup’s arrival, I hadn’t realized just how hollow my house with its reclaimed wood flooring and single occupant had begun to sound.

It wasn’t supposed to be this way. By my age—and my mother’s calculations—I should be living quite comfortably as a wife and mother and keeper of a house surrounded by a

## A Shore Thing

white picket fence. “Men aren’t attracted to tomboys, Callie,” my mother always said, clutching her heart and peering into the sky. She’d always been dramatic like that. Probably a leftover from her days in musical theater, an aspiration she eventually gave up to raise children.

If only *I* understood the rewards of marriage and motherhood. We had this conversation every year.

At thirty years old, though, I understood it fine. I just never seemed to have enough time nor decent prospects—at least not since *The One* got away three years ago—as my mother often put it. I tried never to think about that, but whenever one of my ex-boyfriend Justin’s road-hog trailer trucks sped by on the highway, advertising the biggest and best interior plant design company the West Coast had to offer . . . well, a twinge of anger attempted to coil itself around my lungs and squeeze until I could no longer breathe.

I bought my cottage with the proceeds from selling that business to him.

My family contended that my living against the grain had kept my life from progressing to the place they deemed appropriate. And after a day like today, maybe it was time to slow down, to figure out what Callie Duflay’s life really *should* look like, to finally admit that, yes, while I often saw the world through a different set of lenses than the rest of my siblings, it didn’t have to stay that way.

I stepped it up, realizing that if I was late for supper again, my sister Sheila was going to be ticked.

Julie Carobini

In the few short hours since he wriggled his way into my unconventional life, Doggy here had already soothed a couple of newly opened wounds, starting with the one that happened soon after I arrived at the camp on the hill for my job as weekend assistant camp director.

I arrived early Friday morning to what might have been a grim discovery: a mouse had wedged itself inside a box of colorful two-by-three cards used for the night game. These things happen when cookies from the evening snack are packed away with games.

Fortunately, though, the little guy still had breath to breathe. So I headed back outside, trudged up a hillside until my calves burned, released him from his makeshift cell, and scooted him in a direction away from camp. He moved slowly at first as if still gasping for life and then his speed quickened as if he knew that sustenance was only one foraging session away. Although it was early spring, the air still held a chill, especially in the shady spot where my feet stood planted. Patches of frost clung to the ground.

I spied a large, wayward plastic disc half-buried in a nest of pine needles and the sand slide the counselors had made the previous week. Positioning the pink disc at the top of the gangly patch, I folded myself inside its tight borders and let go. Like an oversized junior camper, I scraped and slid along the sand, picking up enough speed to skip across cool earth and flatten new growth before landing at the bottom of the hill in a laughing heap.

## A Shore Thing

It never occurred to me that someone might be watching.

“Looks like someone has too much time on their hands.” Natalia Medina stood over me in a navy blue tailored suit, holding a clipboard and looking more like she was about to conduct a board meeting than visit camp.

I stood, wiped one hand down the side of my overalls, and reached out to the sole female board member of Pine Ridge Camp. “Hello, Natalia.” She shook my hand.

“I’m looking for Thomas. Have you seen him?” She glanced up the hill I’d just rocketed down. An amused smile tugged at her lips. “Then again, perhaps not.”

“Actually, Squid—I mean Tom—usually comes in by ten on Fridays. I had to, uh . . .” I turned toward the glistening hill not sure how a woman wearing red leather shoes would handle a mission of mercy for a mouse. “Retrieve a sand toy.”

She nodded. “I see that. Well, given your age now, I suppose it’s hardly easy to resist one last childhood fling.” Her shoulders lifted in a shrug and she laughed, but the squeak that escaped her mouth sounded more like a scoff.

I leaned my head to one side. “Excuse me?”

Natalia patted my shoulder. “I only meant that someone with as much education and years behind you will surely be moving on from here soon.” She wrinkled her nose and lowered her voice as if inviting me into her confidence. “Assistant camp director is merely a starter job, right?”

I leaned forward, my eyes fixed on hers. With one quick

Julie Carobini

draw of my verbal sword, Natalia would find herself backed against the hard trunk of a nearby pine. But did I want to jeopardize a job that allowed me so much freedom? “Actually, I don’t plan to leave anytime soon, Natalia. I *love* that this job allows me to work with kids and to be outside so much. Besides, it gives me time to volunteer for some great causes during the week.” I put on a smile. “Not many people can say that.”

A pause dropped like a taut bubble between us. Natalia cleared her throat and her eyes flitted around. “Perhaps you have a point.” She took a step back. “Well, I won’t take up any more of your valuable time. Please let Thomas know that I was here to meet with him. Ask him to call my office, would you?”

She didn’t wait for my answer.

By Sunday, after two packed days of camp, I had seen more bloody noses and blistered toes than even the most experienced mother would be called upon to care for in any given weekend. And this made Squid’s invitation to join him in leading the kids down to the waters of Otter Bay all the more welcoming. Nothing erased a troubling memory quicker than that view, unspoiled by civilization, framed in the clearing.

“Forward, ho!” Squid led the charge through dense pine and fragrant eucalyptus trees. Far above us, clumps of Monarch butterflies still clung together as they hung from laden branches. It was going to be a late spring.

As I stepped up the pace, ten-year-old Xander marched alongside me and his fellow campers, his rigidity a protest

## A Shore Thing

against the apparent torture of a nature hike. "It's a bunch of trees!"

His proclamation stirred within me the desire to prove him wrong, so I laughed and patted his back. "Just *wait*, mister. Once you get to where we're going, you won't ever want to leave."

He crossed his arms. "Doubt that."

Squid spun around and marched backward while still moving us forward. I took another look at our illustrious leader at the front of the pack. Charismatic and brilliant with the children, yet down-to-earth and humble, he defied my usual aversion to ordinary men. I'd been thinking twice about him lately.

His eyes connected with mine. "You pullin' up the rear, Seabird?"

I sent him a smile from my place at the back of the group of mostly ten- and eleven-year-old campers. "I'm pullin' it up!"

He nodded and winked at me, continuing to walk backward. "Watchin' for escapees?"

I tossed Squid a playful salute. "That I am." At about that spot the campers, mostly boys, often became distracted by the meandering stream that wiggled its way through this land. Dreams of gathering sticks and creating dams danced through their minds.

A rugged smile broke out across Squid's closely-bearded face. The brightness of his smile dazzled. "Well then, carry on." He spun back around, and faced forward as he led us through the forest.

Julie Carobini

My senses filled with the crispness of pine-infused air, the effect so cleansing that it almost wiped away the sting of condescension that pricked me at the start of this particular weekend. Not quite, but almost.

Even as I inhaled the cool breeze that tickled my cheeks while we moved along on the hike, I continued to replay my conversation with Natalia. Who knew that I could be a victim of ageism at such a young age? Most of the college-aged counselors working weekends at camp liked to give me good-natured ribbing about my *wisdom* and *experience*, while I teased them about wearing diapers and sucking pacifiers. It's always been in jest because—really—is thirty all that much older than those fresh-faced souls who walk the hallowed halls of academe?

Excitement interrupted my wallowing. “The beach!” Xander, who only moments before had dug in his heels, lit up, enthusiasm glowing on his young face. “Woo! Yeah! The beach!”

Squid caught my eye and I went on alert, ready to corral campers who tried to dart for the sea which lay at the foot of the cliff. Most of the kids lived too far inland to be able to visit the beach very often, let alone a protected cove so saturated with marine life like this. My heart leapt at the thought of sharing this place with the kids, one of the few panoramic vistas untouched by development.

We stood at the edge and gazed at the beach below. Etched rock formations and drenched peaks rose from the

## A Shore Thing

bottom of the sea. Soon the pitted and crevice-carved home of bountiful marine life would lie exposed in the sun. A perfect day for tide-pooling. Squid raised the bullhorn along with the camper's sign of respect displayed on one hand: the thumb, forefinger, and pinky. He waited, his stance unruffled, until every eye was on him. His sober expression may shake up the kids, but I knew better. Lines at the corner of Squid's eyes stretched gently toward his temples, belying a smile.

The campers quieted. "Okay, my friends, listen up." Squid put on his tough voice. I've heard it so often that I could replay it in my dreams. "Pretty soon, we'll head down those stairs and do some tide-pooling at negative tide. That means the water level is lower than average. While it is possible to walk out further than the boundary markers we'll be giving you—don't do it."

"A-ah!" Xander protested.

I held my forefinger to my pursed lips, urging Xander and his buddies to listen.

Squid continued. "After lunch, my assistant Seabird over here and I will be explaining the rules of exploring to you—"

A hand went up.

Squid nodded at Megan, the youngest of our campers here this weekend. "Hang on, Meggy, and I'll get around to you in a second. For all the rest, get into your preassigned groups. The lunch wagon has arrived compliments of Tidal Wave—aka camp cook. And the counselors will be handing out *de-li-cious*

Julie Carobini

ham and cheese sandwiches with all the fixins to the quietest groups first.”

Rustling and shushing went on all around us, the hungriest campers urging their group mates to quiet down. Squid was about to signal the counselors that it was time to serve the lunches when Megan’s petite hand rose above her curly brown hair again.

“Yes, Megan. Did you want to say something?”

Her grin barely fit across her face. “I was just wondering . . . is Seabird your girlfriend?”

The rest of Megan’s group—older girls whose counselors had been coaxed into welcoming the young one to join their cabin—giggled behind hand-covered faces. A couple of boys in the back stood and crashed back onto the ground as if they’d been shot by wayward arrows.

Squid smiled and nodded. “All right, all right.” He held up the sign of respect. “Seabird and *all* the counselors are my friends. Now eat your lunch or we’ll miss out on that super-low tide.” He shot me a wink that sent a quiver right down my leg.

Squid and I had been a team for more than a year. As my own duties had grown, though, I missed having more opportunities to participate in hikes like these—especially with him at the helm. Hiring Squid for camp director was the smartest decision the board ever made. At twenty-nine, he still wore youthful exuberance like a treasured baseball cap. And yet I’d have to be blind and stupid not to notice him as more than an

## A Shore Thing

energetic leader. How could I not notice the way his chiseled arms fit snugly against the flannel of his sleeves, or the way his white teeth flashed against dark facial hair when he smiled? Dare I admit how an unfamiliar warmth flowed through me when our eyes linked and I knew precisely what he was about to say?

“Sandwich?” Carp, one of the counselors, handed me a paper bag, and then another to Squid.

We stood, Squid and I, shoulder to shoulder while watching the children. He swallowed a bite. “Join me on that rock over there?”

I gave him a sideways glance. “Sure.”

Settled on the rock, our lunches on our laps, we continued to eat in silence while watching the campers. There really was no place I’d rather be, and yet sitting that close to Squid my mind gave way again to uncharted thoughts. The late morning breeze wrapped us in its coolness, and goose bumps rose on my skin. I’d forgotten how to act around someone so intriguing. Did our sudden wordlessness seem awkward to him too?

Megan tossed her lunch sack into one of the trash bags held by a counselor, and then skipped toward us. She plopped herself next to me. “You know what? I think you *are* boyfriend and girlfriend!”

Squid laughed through a bite of sandwich. “Why’s that?”

Megan giggled. “I know a lot of things. My sister is a teenager.”

Julie Carobini

I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and gave her a squeeze, laughter in my own voice. “Well, then, that explains it.”

Squid bumped my shoulder with his. “Shall we tell her then?”

My chin whipped to the side and I faced him then. I never realized the silver gleam in his eyes before this. “Tell her?”

Squid’s bright grin filled his face. He sent me one of his familiar winks before bending closer to speak directly to Megan. “Seabird here is just too old for me.”

GAGE

THE ALARM’S SHRILL ANNOUNCEMENT that daylight had come in all its complicated glory roused Gage from the warmth of rumpled sheets. He hadn’t slept well and couldn’t sleep now if he wanted to—not with young Jeremiah’s thunderous four-year-old footsteps to greet him.

Seven a.m. When had he begun to sleep in so late?

Gage smacked the alarm clock’s snooze button. It felt wrong to get up on a Sunday morning knowing full well he ought to be attending church rather than working. He hoped his friend Marc wouldn’t call under the guise of shooting the breeze when it was really a lame attempt to discover whether he had found a church yet in this little town.

He had, but no time today. Gage had work to do. He lolled in bed a minute more, listening to the commotion coming

## A Shore Thing

from the living room, trying to picture the scene. Jeremiah liked to roll his dump truck across the Spanish tile hearth before school. Suz, Gage's baby sister, would have the coffee brewing. Maybe there'd even be enough milk left for him to pour himself a bowl of granola to eat along with that coffee.

He startled at the soft rap on the door. "Gage? Coffee's on."

Gage pressed a weary hand to his face and rubbed his eyes. A slight smile raised the corners of his mouth at the sound of Suz's voice wafting in from the hall. "Thanks. I'm on it." He sat up in bed, determined to plant both feet on the floor in spite of the growing disquiet that had formed in his gut. He would not allow his anxiety to flourish, no matter what. If not for his own sake, then for the welfare of those he'd promised always to protect.