

Chapter One

Jo Caldwell planted her feet on the deck of her rescue boat and peered over the short windshield as she piloted it through the choppy waters of Lake Michigan. Her ranger hat blew off, leaving her brown hair whipping in the wind. Eyes narrowed on the overturned vessel ahead, she didn't give a damn about her hair.

Radio traffic, static mostly, buzzed at her hip. She focused on the silver hull of an aluminum boat and bobbing heads in the water. Five heads? The original call said four people flipped in the frigid water. Lake Michigan wouldn't be warm enough for swimming until the fourth of July, and any time spent in the hypothermic waters was too long.

She cut her speed, the bow lowering as she turned and came astern of the foundered craft. Popping the engine in neutral, she went into rescue mode. She flung a life ring at a woman in the water and yelled, "Take it!" The woman shoved it over to a little girl struggling beside her in a pink life jacket.

Jo tossed another ring to a man clinging to the hull, and immediately dropped her boat's anchor. She then flipped open a door in the back of her boat so she could pull the swimmers in. A girl and a boy, both younger than ten years old, were the first ones onboard. She spotted shaggy brown hair just on the other side of the aluminum boat. *Must be the family dog.* It would be the last thing rescued, but she wouldn't leave it behind.

"Thanks. Thank you so much," the woman gasped as Jo hauled her in next. "I'm never going fishing with that man again."

Jo smiled sympathetically and extended a hand to the sheepish husband, pulling him into her boat.

"Might have misjudged the waves a little," he said. He hugged his kids and wife close to his body as water from their clothing ran in rivulets onto the steel hull of Jo's red boat. "Can't thank you enough. When I couldn't get the boat righted, I thought we could swim to shore, but..."

"It's a lot farther than it looks," Jo said. Her strong sea legs kept her upright as the family teetered and sat abruptly. "And the water's rough today." She grabbed several rescue blankets and handed them to the woman. "You'd have to be a heck of a swimmer to make it. Speaking of which, I better see if I can get your dog on board."

"We don't have a dog," the little boy said.

Jo took another look, untangling the life ring from the rescued family. The swimmer she'd pegged for a brown Newfoundland came hand-over-hand around the side of the overturned hull. It was

definitely not a dog. Shaggy brown hair framed a long narrow face with intense dark eyes. Jo tossed the life ring automatically, years of Coast Guard training compensating for her momentary surprise.

“Was he in your boat?” she asked the dad behind her as she pulled the last swimmer toward the rescue vessel.

“No. He swam out from shore to help us.”

“Amazing,” Jo said as she lent a hand to the man scrambling over the stern. She considered herself an excellent swimmer, but she was glad to motor out to the accident in a boat, not on her own power.

Breathing hard, the last swimmer bent double until he caught his breath.

“Are you okay?” Jo asked, laying a hand on his arm in what she hoped was a professional manner. It was tough being professional when the bare-chested man in front of her had broad shoulders and chiseled abs. A cool breeze raised gooseflesh on his wet skin. “Freezing,” he said. “Forgot how cold this lake is.”

The same breeze raised hair on the back of Jo’s neck and she shivered, but not because she was cold. Jo lifted a hinged seat cover and pulled out another rescue blanket. “Sit,” she commanded, unwrapping the blanket and handing it to him.

“I’m not a dog,” he said, his expression losing an ounce of seriousness for a moment.

“Thought you were an animal of some kind. You swim like you’ve got webbed feet.”

The man pulled the blanket over his wet trousers and yanked off a dripping sock. “I don’t,” he said, gesturing at his toes. “See?”

The guy had a subtle sense of humor. *Nice.*

She returned her attention to the family where the parents huddled with their shivering offspring. “I’ll come back for your boat or send someone. Right now, you need to get warm.”

Jo hauled the anchor, all the while feeling the stranger’s eyes on her from his seat across from the family. Putting her boat in gear, she turned toward the Bluestone State Park Marina where she knew her boss would be waiting with an ambulance and a pile of paperwork.

Despite the stiff breeze, she burned with curiosity as she concentrated on steering past a sandbar at the mouth of the marina. The bare-chested man shivering under a blanket was someone she’d never seen before. He could be visiting the state park for Memorial Day Weekend, maybe even staying at the campground. She’d only worked there for a few months, so he could be a local she’d never run across. His eyes were warm enough to take the chill off Lake Michigan, and he had a body she’d like to warm up personally.

She'd find out more about him when she tackled the incident reports rippling from her boss's clipboard. Jo docked and secured her boat while Dan Shira, manager of Bluestone State Park, hustled the five passengers to a waiting ambulance. Several paramedics on hand asked questions and checked vital signs while Jo stalled, avoiding stepping off her boat.

Somehow, her boss would make this whole incident her fault. He'd made his lack of confidence in the only female ranger ever hired at the park perfectly clear. Maybe he didn't want to hire her, but she'd just pulled off a flawless rescue. He could kiss her polyester uniform pants.

Most days, Jo tolerated his attitude and attempted to win him over with textbook job performance. Her work was too important to be compromised by a small-minded boss who had no idea that she was more than just a green park ranger. Right now, though, she wanted to get her hair out of her face and figure out who the shaggy-haired man was.

No luck. One step off the boat, and Dexter Dickson, local reporter and general nemesis, oozed in front of her and blocked her path.

"Out of my way, Dexter. I'm busy."

"Quite a rescue," he said. "I'm here to get all the juicy details."

"I'm sure my boss will issue a statement."

Dexter laid a fat-fingered hand on Jo's forearm. "I had something much more interesting in mind." He leaned closer. "An emotional angle."

Jo flicked Dexter's hand away as if extracting a leech. "Touch me again and I'll flip you into the water. The only emotion you'll feel is cold fear."

"Thought you were supposed to serve and protect. Isn't that what you learned in the...uh...army?"

"Coast Guard," Jo said, her tone implying they'd had this discussion before. "I have skills you can't imagine. I know how to make things look like an accident."

Dexter stepped back. "One of these days, Ranger Jo, you're going to figure out we're on the same side."

"Not even asking what you mean by that," she said, her mouth a taut line. "You'll have to bait your hook with someone else." Jo shoved past him, eager to check on the rescued family and dispense with the inevitable string of questions from her boss. Finding out more about the dark-eyed man also topped her list.

But he was gone. While Dexter blocked her path and her view, the intriguing man who swam hundreds of yards to rescue strangers had slipped away. And she didn't even get his name.

Henry Bishop slid around the side of the ambulance and brushed past the paramedics. Refusing their aid, he was anxious to get home and into dry clothes. He also avoided being part of a big incident report by leaving the scene. Government agencies loved paperwork, a fact he despised.

He headed for the trail that would take him through the state park grounds to his temporary home and away from prying questions. He would be better off spending his time sending out résumés and angling for a new job. The icy shock of the cold lake was one more reminder that Bluestone was no place for him now any more than it had been a decade ago.

“Hurrying away? What kind of hero runs off before the congratulations have even been offered?”

Henry stopped, recognizing Dexter’s voice behind him.

“Cold and wet, Dex. Just want to get home.”

“Understandable. Just thought you might have a quote for my article. Going to be front page in the *Bluestone Register* tomorrow. Bystander saves family of four from freezing water.”

“Nice try,” Henry said, swallowing his irritation with his old friend. “I think the lady in the red boat is the one who saved the family.”

“You were there first.”

Henry laughed. “Yep. And I would have drowned right along with them without the pretty—”

“The what?”

“The...uh...pretty fast work from that fire woman or whatever she is.”

Despite screaming muscles and shivering skin under his rescue blanket, he’d watched her back all the way to the marina. Slim, a few just-right curves. Long legs. Shoulder-length brown hair whipping in the breeze. Combined with his gut reaction when she’d put her hand on his arm, catching his breath from his long swim had not been easy.

“Park ranger. Just hired this year,” Dexter said. “And she sure is pretty. I could arrange a little meeting for the two of you if you want. Still owe you for being the only guy in high school who was nice to me.”

Henry smiled. “I was the only guy in high school as lonely as you were.”

“True. So that’s a yes on a date with pretty park ranger?”

“No. I already told you I’m leaving town as soon as I get an offer. Park rangers, pretty or not, aren’t my style.”

“Never know,” Dexter said. “Who’d have thought we’d both be in Bluestone a decade after high school? And still living with our mothers.” He chuckled, his belly jiggling.

Henry did not laugh. He shoved his damp hair back. “Temporary,” he said. “Just a detour in the road.”

Dexter pierced Henry with a serious look. He opened his mouth and shut it again.

“What?” Henry asked.

Dexter inhaled noisily and blew it out through his mouth. “Nothing. Just wanted to make sure you picked up tomorrow’s paper. See you around.”

He turned and ambled toward the parking lot where an aging silver sedan sat alone. Henry imagined Dexter would still be living with his mother when he was old enough for a pacemaker.

Heading down the recreation trail, Henry disappeared quickly from view behind lush growth and trees. But he kept his eyes on the trail ahead, his thoughts on a perfect ass in green uniform pants.