

THE MYSTERY OF THE INDIAN CARVINGS

~ Chapter One ~



The Sea Star

Where was the ferry? It should have been here an hour ago—what could have happened to it? Julie stared at the handful of boats moored nearby, tempted to shout her question into the cool, salty air.

For the hundredth time, she searched the maze of islands that dotted the shimmering blue ocean.

For sure, one of those must be Bartlett Island! Aunt Myra and Uncle Nate lived there, and they'd said she could take the ferry.

An elderly man shuffled past, giving her a bright, inquisitive glance, and she pretended not to see him.

She sat down on her upended suitcase, smoothed out the worried frown from her forehead, and tried to look unconcerned. After all, this wasn't the first time she'd traveled alone. Her big brother had teased her about being a "seasoned traveler" when she went out to visit him in Texas.

This trip was different. She crumpled a pleat in the blue skirt her stepmom had insisted she wear. This time, she wasn't going to be met by a fond older brother. She didn't even know these relatives she'd been sent to visit, but no matter what happened, she had to get along with them.

"You'll do fine, Julie. I know I'll be proud of you," her father had said. He'd waved cheerfully as she boarded the bus in Victoria for the short ride up the island.

Vancouver Island was part of Canada, but it didn't seem as foreign as she'd pictured it. From the bus, the small towns they passed looked the same as most towns in the United States.

The bus driver had been kind. When she got off the bus at Chemainus, he'd told her that the town used to be an Indian village, and he pointed out the ferry dock. "Right down that hill, Miss," he said, and she noticed his Canadian accent.

Sure enough, the gravel road sloped toward the ocean, and it took her to the dock and a sign with red-painted letters: *Chemainus Ferry*.

She jerked upright as an explosion of sound broke the stillness, but it was only a speedboat, streaking out of the sleepy little harbor. Oily green waves slapped against the pilings of the dock and flattened into slow, rhythmic swells that ticked away the seconds, one by one.

What if the ferry didn't come? What would she do tonight?

Farther along the shore, a weather-beaten shack leaned into the hillside. Over its door hung a handwritten sign: BAIT. That's where the old man had gone. Maybe someone in there would know about the ferry.

She picked up her suitcase, a new blue one that Dad had bought her, and hauled it along the road to the shack. Fortunately, her trunk had already been shipped ahead. Anything else she needed would be sent later, if she could stay.

If she could stay.

She scuffed through the gravel, angry again. Why had her stepmom been so sure that she'd cause trouble on Bartlett Island? According to *her*, Julie should go to one of those horrible summer camps for problem girls, the kind where you lived in tents or something for months and months.

If it weren't for Dad, she'd be on her way to one right now.

She pushed past a sagging screen door and blinked in the store's cool, fishy-smelling gloom.

The old man behind the cash register peered over his glasses. "I was just about to come out and ask if you got a problem," he said. "Been sitting there a long time, eh?" He definitely sounded like a Canadian.

She made her voice dignified. "I'm waiting for the ferry to Bartlett Island."

"Oh-ho, the ferry? Well now, you do have a problem." The bait man pushed his glasses up onto his forehead and scratched his sparse gray hair. "Ferry schedule's been changed, and I'll bet you didn't know that. Yep, that's the way it is with them government boys. They keep changing things around to suit themselves."

He unfolded a yellow sheet of paper. "Let's see. Ferry goes to Bartlett on Mondays and Fridays. This being Tuesday, of course—no ferry."

"But they sent us a schedule, and it shows Tuesdays and Thursdays!"

"Now don't get upset," the old man said. "Happens all the time. Them government boys . . . We'll take a look and see if someone can run you across." He strolled to the doorway and peered out. "Nobody around."

She almost said, "So I noticed!" but she clamped her mouth shut.

"I'll be right back—don't go away," he said over his shoulder.

She leaned against the counter and eyed the ferry schedule. She certainly wasn't going anywhere. Not back to Chicago, to a stepmom who didn't want her getting in the way.

Her hand strayed to the necklace Dad had given her. He'd told her she had a cousin here, only a year older. Karin.

Maybe Karin was waiting for her at the ferry dock on Bartlett Island.

Her heart lifted. Maybe Karin would turn out to be like Melissa, her best friend back at home. No, nobody could be like Melissa. But maybe she and Karin could do things together, and Karin would tell her about the Indians—

“Hey, you must be Julie. “ A cheerful voice rang out, and a tall blond teenager followed the bait man inside.

“Looks like you weren’t forgot, after all,” the old man said with a chuckle. “Stan’s come over for you.”

“That’s right,” Stan said. “Your Uncle Nate asked me to pick you up.”

Before Julie could answer, an indignant voice exclaimed, “What kind of service is this anyway?”

A blond young woman, trimly dressed in green, marched up to the cash register.

She frowned at the dusty countertop and frowned at the old man. “Where is that Bartlett Island ferry? It’s over an hour late. I can’t sit in this backwater all day.”

The old man’s grin faded. “Ferry schedule changed, ma’am. Not my fault.” He glanced at the teenager. “Stan, seein’ as you’re taking the young lady over to Bartlett, maybe you wouldn’t mind another passenger, eh?”

“That would help.” The woman turned to Stan and flashed him a smile. “I’d appreciate it.”

Stan blinked at her with a dazzled expression. “Sure, no problem.” He picked up Julie’s suitcase and headed for the door. “Let’s get going.”

Julie thanked the bait man with a smile and followed Stan outside, glad to get back into the June sunlight. The blond woman came too, her quick footsteps crunching on the gravel.

“Your uncle had an emergency call,” Stan said. He waited for Julie to catch up. “The man who runs the general store on Bartlett fell and cut himself pretty bad. They called your uncle, even though he’s not really doctoring anymore.”

She accepted the news in silence. At least her uncle had wanted to come and pick her up.

She glanced sideways at Stan. He might be a couple of years older, and he looked as if he spent a lot of time outside. She liked his freckles and curly blond hair. Bartlett Island might be fun with Stan around.

At the dock, he leaped into a long white boat, set down Julie's suitcase, and turned with a grin. "Welcome aboard the *Sea Star*, ladies."

Julie took a reluctant step forward. The boat rose and fell in an unsettling way. How was she supposed to get into it without losing her balance and falling into a disgraceful heap?

Stan stretched out a hand, and she grabbed it.

She lunged into the boat, dropped onto the nearest seat, and hung on. The *Sea Star* was larger than some of the other boats, but it still looked awfully small to go out on the ocean.

The blond woman stepped in with ease and sat across from her. "I think we'd better get acquainted," she said with a smile. "I'm Vivian Taylor, and you're—?"

"Julie Fletcher." The woman must have decided to be friendly.

Vivian Taylor cocked her head at Stan and smiled her question.

"I'm Stan Caldwell," he said. "*Sea Star* here is the mission boat." He patted it affectionately. "My parents work for the mission on Bartlett, and I help around the place."

"A mission! That's interesting," Vivian Taylor said. "You'll have to tell me all about it. I'm a writer, and I'm going to do a magazine article about your island. Is it a Catholic mission, like on the other islands?"

Stan started the engine and raised his voice above its noise. "I don't think so," he said. "Mrs. Warner and her husband settled on Bartlett a long time ago. They built a church for the Indians and did some medical work too."

He guided the boat out into open water. "Since her husband died, Mrs. Warner just keeps up with the summer camp and church work. Some of the Indians work on her farm."

Julie found that she enjoyed the thrust of the boat skimming across the water, and she relaxed her grip. She lifted her face to the salty breeze that rushed through her hair.

Stan had pointed the boat toward a cluster of islands, and she studied them expectantly. Some were larger than others, but they all seemed alike, with rocky shores and prickly-looking green trees.

“That’s Kuper Island,” Stan said, waving to the left. “And that big one over there is Saltspring. Sometimes we go there on bike trips, or else we go to Chemainus and down to Victoria.”

He glanced at Julie. “You’re from the States, aren’t you? How did you come?”

“Dad and I flew from Chicago to Seattle, then to Victoria,” she said. “I didn’t realize there were so many islands around here.”

“We’ve got a bunch of them. There’s Bartlett now—way over there with the long point.”

He looked at Vivian Taylor, who was writing in a small notebook. “You can tell your readers it was named after Captain John Bartlett, an American sea captain who explored around here a couple hundred years ago. He was probably hunting sea-otter pelts, like everyone else.”

Julie gazed at the curving edge of Bartlett Island as it drew close. Her heart beat faster, and she stopped listening to Stan.

If her relatives were anything like Dad, she’d be okay. Her stepmom was the only person she had trouble getting along with—Barbara, with her red hair and her pert way of doing things that Dad thought was so cute.

Now Stan was pointing out the small settlement ahead of them. “See that red brick building? That’s the mission. The little white one is the church, and that long pier is where the ferry docks.”

He glanced at Julie. “You’d like our church,” he said. “We’ve got quite a bunch of kids there, and we have fun when we get together. Maybe you can get your uncle to bring you on Sunday”

“I’ll try.” Julie smiled to herself, remembering how church used to seem pretty boring.

Vivian Taylor interrupted her thoughts with an excited little squeal. "Oh, yes, of course! Your uncle must be Dr. Fletcher!"

Julie shifted uncomfortably, hoping she wouldn't have to answer questions about a relative she didn't know, but the woman went right on. "I've heard that he's a most unusual and talented man, and he's got a house full of Indian artifacts. I'd love to get an interview with him."

While she was wondering how to answer, Stan said, "I'll take you right over to the Fletchers' dock, Julie."

He swung the boat past a rocky point with only one house and turned down the other side of the island into a quiet cove. The boat's engine slowed to a purr as they approached a small floating dock.

Vivian Taylor gathered up her notebook and an expensive-looking camera. "Oh, I want to get off here too," she exclaimed. "It would be perfect!"

"No, you don't." Stan shook his head at her, his face serious. "Dr. Fletcher hates to be disturbed. And he doesn't like visitors. He won't even allow a telephone in the house."

Vivian Taylor frowned and sank back into her seat, but she took pictures of the shoreline while Stan eased the boat up against the dock. Again Julie was glad for Stan's steadying hand as she stepped from the boat onto the shifting wooden platform.

He carried her suitcase along the dock toward a path that disappeared into the trees.

As they reached the path, he turned to her. "Don't be surprised if things here seem a little unusual," he murmured. "Some people say the Fletchers are peculiar. I haven't figured them out yet myself, but if you need a friend, I'll be around."

Julie bit her lip. What was that all about?

He glanced toward the trees and added, "Looks like your aunt's on her way to meet you. See ya later."

He sent her a grin and turned back to his boat.