

Chapter 1

IZZY

THE COLORFUL BOATS and salt sea air of the busy Spanish port rallied Izzy's spirits after their long flight from San Francisco. "Can you believe it?" she asked her aunt Maggie as they strode down the long concrete dock. "We're actually in Almeria—in Spain."

"Yes, after thirteen hours of flight," Maggie grumbled as two men strolled by arguing in Spanish about the weight of the swordfish their client had just caught. "And we still have this one-hour boat ride ahead of us." Maggie frowned up at the ominous-looking clouds. "If we don't sink before we get there."

She's tired, Izzy told herself. And from the way she's leaning on that walking stick, her leg must be killing her. That said, a storm was definitely brewing on the horizon. Izzy could smell it in the air, and if that wasn't enough, a gusty wind had risen. She looked out past the harbor's protective seawall. The whitecaps were scattered and small, but that would change. Hoping they would arrive at her great-uncle Santiago's island before things got serious, she peered back at his private chauffeur, the middle-aged man toting all four pieces of their luggage.

"Are you all right, Hugo?" she asked him in Spanish. "At least let me carry one of the shoulder bags."

"Señor Del Castillo would have my skin," he told her. "But have no fear. That is his boat there ahead of us."

Izzy lurched to a stop in front of the most beautiful 1920s-era cabin cruiser she had ever scene. “This? This is his?”

“That’s right.” Hugo sidestepped past a pair of seagulls and called out, “Hello, the boat! Your guests have arrived!”

“Coming!” a deep male voice replied. A dark-haired man wearing a puffy black jacket stepped out of the main cabin area accompanied by an older man wearing dark glasses and a similar jacket. The younger man introduced himself as Captain Rafi. The older man’s name was Paco, and as Izzy guessed, Rafi’s father.

Hugo turned the bags over to Rafi who, after helping Maggie and Izzy onboard, hoisted their luggage over the glistening mahogany railing to his father.

“We’re still waiting for someone,” Rafi told them between bags. “But don’t worry. He’ll be here any minute.”

“That’s fine,” Izzy said, only half-listening. She ran her fingers across the shiny, wood paneling. “Geez, there must be ten coats of varnish on this,” she told Maggie, and was annoyed by how whiny she sounded. The boat she lived on was similar in age and model to Santiago’s, but after a year of sanding and polishing, she had achieved nowhere near this level of restoration.

Maggie shrugged. “Girl, Santiago is one of the richest men in Spain. His things are always going to be better than ours.”

Sadly, she was right. Izzy peered out at the ever-darkening horizon, amazed that anyone would venture out in such weather. Maybe Captain Rafi was used to piloting boats through rough waters.

A few steps away, Paco adjusted the straps he had crisscrossed over their stacked bags. But why was he still wearing those dark glasses if the sun was hidden by clouds? Was he trying to hide those scars on his face?

“So, who is it we are waiting for?” Maggie asked Rafi in Spanish.

Having moved down the dock for a smoke, he stepped closer. “Just one of the workers from the island. A young fellow named Tonio. Don Santiago sent him to pick up a few things.” He peered out at the horizon. “Looks like the rain will come sooner than I hoped. Maybe you ladies should sit inside. Papi, show them into the salon, would you please?”

“Of course.” Paco pulled something from his back pocket, and with a flick of the wrist, released a fully expanded white cane, which he used to sweep the area between himself and a sliding-glass door.

Well, that explained the sunglasses.

Paco slid the door open, and Izzy followed Maggie into a beautiful art deco-style salon. A cushy-looking velvet sofa rested beneath the window to their left. They chose the two overstuffed swivel chairs on their right.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” Paco said in Spanish. “We will get going as soon as Tonio arrives.” He slid the door shut behind him.

“Did you understand all that?” Maggie asked. She combed her fingers through her long wavy hair. “You’ve been practicing a lot with that Spanish app.”

“Yeah, I’m keeping up okay, but these guys aren’t fast talkers. My real test will come on the island when I meet my cousins.” Feeling the boat rock, Izzy swiveled her chair and saw that along with Rafi, a handsome young man with shaggy dark hair had come onboard and was now untying the boat’s stern line. Soon, the big cabin cruiser made its way out of the harbor.

“That must be Tonio,” Izzy said over the engine’s deep rumble. “Next stop, Santiago’s island.” She swiveled back and found Maggie sitting stiffly in her chair, her expression fearful.

“It’ll be fine,” Izzy said. “These guys are seasoned sailors.”

“Yes, but I’m not.” She peered out the window at the sea, now peppered with whitecaps. “Should we be worried?”

A little. Not that she would ever tell Maggie that. “Nah, we’ll get to the island long before things get serious. It only takes an hour, right?”

“Yeah, that’s what Santi told me.” But Maggie’s expression didn’t change.

“To be honest, it’s not just the weather that’s bothering me.”

“Oh? You’re not getting seasick, are you?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Then, what?”

“I’m sensing darkness on this boat. A death.”

“Are you saying someone’s been murdered here? Did you see another ghost or something?”

“No, not that. It’s just a feeling.”

“Because this murder happened a long time ago?” Izzy asked hopefully.

“No, because this murder hasn’t happened yet.”

“That can’t be. You talk to spirits. You have visions. But always after they’ve . . .”
Izzy stopped herself. Why argue? If Maggie says it’s going to happen, then it will happen. She leaned forward, hands gripping her chair’s tufted armrests.
“Is it preventable? I mean, if we know who the victim is going to be, we can . . .”

Maggie shook her head. “That’s just it. I don’t have a clue who it might be.”

“Well, great.” Izzy considered what the local police would do about Maggie’s vague yet ominous premonition. If Spanish cops were anything like American cops, they’d probably laugh her out of the station.

Wondering what, if anything, she might do, Izzy peered out the sliding glass door as the city of Almeria disappeared in the distance behind them. They were in open waters now, and the boat was gently rose and fell in a soothing rhythm. Rafi was up in the pilothouse, leaving Paco and Tonio seated on the bench beneath the stern’s canvas top. Its sides were open to the elements, but neither seemed bothered by the damp and cold, in fact, Tonio had a proud grin on his face. Having unzipped what appeared to be a garment bag, he guided Paco’s hand to what Izzy took to be the sleeve of a black leather jacket, its bright yellow price tag flapping in the wind.

Forget the kid. If this boat was to become the scene of a murder, who would the victim be? Rafi? Paco? Tonio? She slumped. Who was she fooling? If the boat was the main form of transportation between the island and the city, then tons of people. “Any idea when this murder will take place?”

“Soon, I think. Maybe this coming week.”

So, during their stay. “We could tell Santi. Suggest he shut the boat down for a few days.”

“Good suggestion. I just hope this isn’t the only transport to and from the island.”

Izzy glanced outside just as Tonio pulled a candy bar from his shopping bag. He offered it to Paco who shook his head. “Okay, but there is a storm coming, and who gets on a boat, knowing they might die any minute?”

“No one, but that’s if they believe me. And who will? I can tell you right now, it won’t be my mother—or Santi for that matter. They’ll just laugh and say I’m being silly.” Maggie’s face pinched. “Ugh. This rocking is beginning to make me queasy.”

“Looking outside might help.”

“Good idea.” Maggie tried to get up but lost her balance and fell back into her chair.

Moments later, Tonio popped his head in. “Buenos días, señoritas. My name is Tonio. I work at the island.” He stepped into the salon and made his way over to Maggie. “I noticed you were having some trouble, señorita. Would you like some help? Even standing can be tricky in seas like this.”

“What a thoughtful young man. Yes, please.” Smiling, Maggie shot Izzy a wink as Tonio helped her over to the window.

“That’s it,” Tonio said. “Keep a tight hold of that the railing, and you will be fine. We are nearing the island now.” He pointed. “There. That is where it will appear.” He turned to Izzy. “How about you, señorita? Want help?”

“Gracias, but I can do it.” Izzy waited until Tonio slipped outside, then wobbled over to the window where she and Maggie stood in silence as the engine vibrated up through the floor and the boat dipped and rose.

"I kind of like this up and down stuff," Maggie said proudly. "Does that mean I'm getting my sea feet?"

"I think you mean sea legs." Izzy chuckled. "You surprise me. I thought you'd be terrified."

"Meh." She tipped her head at the men outside. "Those guys don't look scared, so why should I be?"

"Good attitude." But the swells were getting bigger. To Izzy's relief, a dark mass appeared on the horizon.

Maggie nudged Izzy with her shoulder. "See, Isla del Castillo. Right where Tonio said it would be."

"Good," Izzy said, a little embarrassed at how eager she was to reach dry land. So, she lived on a boat. That didn't mean she had to take it out in seas like this. She forced a smile. "Now I get why Tito Santi volunteered to pay our way to Spain for his birthday party. What's a couple of airline tickets to a man who owns his own island?"

Maggie grinned. "Seriously, it's like everything he touches turns to gold." The island's features came into view: To the west, a rocky mountainside. To the east, green meadows scattered with trees. Separating the rocky area from the hills and meadows was a crescent-shaped bay from the left of which protruded a man-made breakwater. Stacked heavily with granite boulders, it curved out into the sea like the tail of a happy dog. A happy wet dog, Izzy thought as waves crashed over the rocks. Thankfully, the little cove on the other side was relatively placid. Come on Rafi. Just get us around those rocks.

Tucked safely within that little cove was a stretch of white sand, and to the right of it, a dock where two people stood.

“Look!” Maggie exclaimed. “There’s Santiago. And my mother.”

Tears welled in Izzy’s eyes. It had been over twelve years since she’d seen her great-uncle Santi. His once salt-and-pepper hair was now totally silver, but other than that, he seemed the same, as did her grandmother, Ofelia, who had lived two doors down from Izzy’s childhood home for several years until she moved back to Spain three years ago. A somewhat frailer version of Maggie, Ofelia locked arms with her much taller brother, and the pair steadied themselves against the wind and the light rain.

Finally, Rafi turned the boat into the cove, and its rocking all but ceased.

“Let’s go outside,” Maggie said excitedly. “And remember, Santiago barely speaks any English.” She tugged Izzy toward the door. “And don’t you dare repeat what I said about somebody dying on this boat—or me seeing ghosts for that matter. Especially in front of them.” “I know, I know.”