

Chapter 1

Police Officer Izzy Santos groaned. “Would you repeat that, please?”

Rhonda Ellis, Rocky Harbor PD’s dayshift dispatcher, did so, “Yes, Officer Santos. You heard right. I need you to head over to 784 Magnolia Avenue and chase a turtle off Mrs. Cassidy’s front lawn. She says it’s eating her azaleas.”

“A turtle?”

“That’s correct. A snapping turtle. And if I were you, I’d get going. That bag of bones has a history of complaints, and the longer you take getting there, the more ammunition she’ll have at the next city council.”

“Copy, dispatch. On my way.” Izzy clicked off the radio. Questioning her career choice, she pulled her rain-misted SUV into the left-hand turn lane.

Having grown up in Rocky Harbor, the idea of patrolling the streets of her hometown had always appealed to Izzy, especially after her father’s sudden death three years ago. A twenty-six-year veteran of the force, he’d often expressed how fulfilling his job was. But if Papi had ever wrangled any turtles, he hadn’t mentioned it.

In her short two months on the job, Izzy had handed out several speeding tickets, and on weekends, more than one DUI. But up to this point, her most memorable assignment had been to locate a stolen bike—which turned out not to have been stolen at all. After asking the owner a few questions, Izzy had located the man’s old Huffy chained to a lamppost behind JJ’s Bar, left there by the caller himself.

Not that Rocky Harbor was crime free. It wasn't. People sold and overdosed on drugs. There were domestic disputes. All potentially dangerous, and all assigned to male officers. Why? Because they had more experience? Well, how was she supposed to get that experience if she was never given the calls?

Izzy parked in front of 784 Magnolia Avenue. The pretty robin's egg-blue craftsman-style home was beautifully landscaped with a variety of colorful flowers, including several azalea bushes, all wet and dripping from the last night's rain, one of which was being munched on by a shoebox-sized snapping turtle.

She imagined Rhonda Ellis struggling to keep her face straight as she'd sent the little Spanish girl on her way, a half-dozen good-old-boys huddled behind her, their mouths covered so Izzy wouldn't hear their laughter.

"I'm barely twenty-five," Izzy muttered as she shifted her SUV into park. "That's not too old to change careers." She opened the car door and stepped out. But what else was she good at?

Rhonda hadn't been kidding about Mrs. Cassidy being a complainer. Izzy had barely closed her car door when the old woman came barreling out onto the porch. From four steps up, she peered down her nose at Izzy and then tipped her head at the turtle. The dispatcher's description of the woman had also been spot-on.

"You see it?" A skeleton in brown yoga pants and an orange knee-length sweater, Mrs. Cassidy waved her knobby arms. "That...that creature is vicious. I

tried to shoo him back to his yard with my newspaper, and he took a bite out of it!"

"Do you know who the turtle belongs to, Mrs. Cassidy?"

"Of course, those people." She wagged her hand at the house next door. "But they're not home."

"Do they keep it in a cage, or...?"

"No, it just creeps around the back yard." Her voice lowered. "I've heard they've got snakes too. Lord knows what I'll do if one of them gets out."

Slowly and casually, the old snapper tore off another mouthful of flowers. Curious as to how the creature had gotten out of its yard, Izzy gave it a wide birth and stepped around to check. Mystery solved. The neighbor's wrought-iron gate was wide open and swaying in the breeze. She trod back to Mrs. Cassidy and the turtle, which had moved to a new species of plant Izzy couldn't identify. "So, your newspaper didn't scare him?" Izzy asked her.

"Not a bit." She crossed one side of her cardigan over the other and held it in place with mantis-like arms. "Are you going to shoot it?"

"Maybe." If she wanted everyone in town to call her Officer Turtle-killer. "But let me try something else, first." Izzy unsnapped one of the little pouches on her belt and pulled out her expandable baton, not that Officer Turtle-herder would sound much better.

She extended the baton to its full eighteen inches and approached the fugitive. To her surprise, it turned from its meal and faced her. Do you know its name?" Izzy called up to the woman.

"It's Otis." Mrs. Cassidy descended one concrete step. "Why? Expect it to come when you call it?"

Izzy winced. That was kind of stupid. She'd barely passed the baton over Otis's head when his neck suddenly shot out. With a quick snap, he had it.

"Oh, come on." Izzy fumed as Otis strolled off toward the street, baton firmly clenched in its beak. "Not funny, El Chapo. That's resisting arrest."

"He's escaping!" Mrs. Cassidy sputtered. "Shoot him!"

"I just might," Izzy told her. The turtle was armed and dangerous.

"Be a pal," Izzy told the turtle as he plodded across the lawn. "Hey, my uncle Sergio kind of walks like you. Maybe we're related."

Failing to make friends, Izzy accompanied Otis as he stepped onto the sloped driveway, picking up speed. When he reached the sidewalk, she stepped between the snapper and the street.

Otis stopped, blinked and held his ground.

Izzy grabbed the baton handle and pulled.

Otis pulled back.

“Fine. Be that way.” She gripped the baton with both hands and lifted. Turtle dangling, Izzy lurched across the lawn toward the neighbors’ house. Having abandoned the safety of her raised porch, Mrs. Cassidy followed. But from a distance.

It was a good thing the woman was old. Anyone under fifty would be recording this.

Happy not to be the star of the next viral Tik Tok video, Izzy did her best not to jiggle Otis off the baton until she got him through the gate to the safety of his backyard. A few moments later, the snapping turtle, still in control of Izzy’s baton, was sitting beside an aluminum pie pan covered with browning apple slices.

“Okay, there’s your lunch,” she told the turtle. “Now, gimme my stick.”

Otis stared.

“Enough of this.” Izzy grabbed the baton again and lifted, just far enough for all four of Otis’s wrinkly old feet to leave the ground. “Let go, already.”

"You can still shoot him," Mrs. Cassidy called through the gate.

Angry but defiant, the turtle clawed the air with stubby legs.

She jiggled the baton. Were turtles ticklish? Maybe she should...

The doodly-doo of Izzy's cell phone startled her. The sound also startling Otis, who let go and landed with a thud on the soft grass.

Thank you, T-Mobile.

Battle lost, Otis comforted himself with apple slices as Izzy answered her phone, "Officer Santos."

"Isabel, Chief Garver here. You can forget that turtle. I've got a real case for you."