

Chapter One

"I thought it would be overcast."

I clutched the ship's guardrail in sweating hands and wondered how I, Frankie Chandler, had allowed myself to be talked into leaving sunny, ocean-free Arizona for a floating deathtrap. The pointless comment I'd just made was an attempt to keep my brain from noticing how far we were from land. Safe, dry land.

Penny Newcombe, my best friend since first grade and the optimistic half of our friendship, snorted a laugh through her nose. "Why would you think that?"

In my view from the back of the ship—the stern if you're a sailor and want to get picky about it—Seattle, Washington, had shrunk into a tiny, gray blob with miles of freezing cold water in between—kill-you-in-seconds-if-you-fall-in cold. Okay. Maybe minutes, but the farther north we traveled, the deadlier the water temperature would get.

"I looked it up," I said, referring to my point about the weather. "They get so much rain in Washington that it's the suicide capital of the world."

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Penny snorted again. "A state can't be a capital."

"And they breed serial killers there. I think I read that *all* serial killers are born in Washington. The depressing weather drives them mad. What if some of them got on the ship? We'll be trapped for the next seven days with the Manson brothers."

Penny let loose a laugh, squeezed my shoulders, and told me I was a card. Nothing short of murder could dampen her mood. We were on one of Finlander's finest cruise ships, the *Iso Kala*, on our way to Alaska, and in three days, my friend would step into a white dress and walk down the aisle to become Mrs. Kemper Mohr.

The decision to hold a destination wedding had come after stressful months spent trying to decide whose family to appease; Penny's kin lived in Wisconsin, Kemper's in New York. They went through pre-Cana at their own parish, St. Norm's in Wolf Creek, Arizona, and then, with Monsignor Robert's permission, they contacted the Apostleship of the Sea to find out the name of the priest who would be on board the September sailing of the *Iso Kala*. When asked if he would be willing to perform the ceremony, Father Basil Zimmerman responded with an enthusiastic thumbs up.

Because of the expense involved, the wedding would be an intimate affair, but afterward, the happy Mister and Missus would fly back to their home states in turn and have a reception for each set of family members and friends.

Lost in thought, I'd been staring at the white trail of turbulence that stretched out behind the ship without really seeing it, but then Penny gave a cry of joy and pointed to a

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school of dolphins keeping pace with us. Once again it came home to me that I was chugging through water that would be over my head should I fall in. I could swim, but so could large, carnivorous fish and creepy things that you wouldn't find in a sweet little pond, or even a lake.

"Have any of the Finlander cruise ships ever sunk?"

"No-ahhh!" Penny's response turned into a shriek as a tall man with the same shade of blond hair as my friend wrapped his arms around her shoulders and, leaning back, lifted her off her feet. She kicked and giggled, and when he put her down, she spun to face him.

"Robby!"

While he enveloped her in a bear hug, Robby Newcombe studied me through aqua-blue eyes. I felt my face flush. He had changed a lot in ten years. The lanky college kid who had remained in Illinois after graduation to work in banking had developed into a solid specimen with a square jaw and deep dimples.

"This *can't* be little, annoying Frances." All of Penny's family, including Penny, called me by my full name instead of my nickname, Frankie.

I grinned. "In person."

He pushed Penny aside and opened his arms wide. "Move over, little sister, and make room for a huggable female who isn't related to me."

When he lifted me off my feet, my face met with a solid chest, and as the cold air blowing off the ocean had covered my skin with tiny water droplets, I snuggled in to soak up the warmth.

"Marry me, Frances," he growled. "Everything has been

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paid for, so we can have a double wedding, cheap."

"You goof," Penny said, punching his arm. "Release my maid of honor."

He complied. "At least you can dance with me to celebrate my little sister's matrimonial bliss. Has anybody warned Kemper what he's in for?"

"We can do that now," Penny said as she hooked her arm through Robby's. "Mom and Dad said everyone should meet on the Lido Deck."

We took the elevator to the 9th floor, and the minute I stepped out onto the carpeting, I knew I'd found my home away from home.

Chapter Two

The Lido Deck was the food haven of the ship. Penny had used it as leverage to coax me into leaving dry land, something I wouldn't have considered if it weren't for the idea of an entire floor dedicated to offering me every kind of food imaginable 24-hours a day, free of charge. It worked.

The smells of sustenance wafted through the air and made me forget that I was one iceberg away from being fish food. I moved to enter the dining area, but Penny stopped me and pointed to a small sanitization station.

"I don't want anyone getting sick," she said with the sternness of a determined bride-to-be, so I squirted sanitizer onto my hands and rubbed them dry before returning my attention to the room that might turn this trip into Heaven.

Beige-and-brown diamond-patterned carpeting stretched out as far as my eyes could see, separated down the middle by food stations manned by employees dressed

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in white kitchen outfits. Tables and booths were filled, and people stood in line at each station clutching plates and browsing the selections. My feet moved forward, ready to join them, when I heard "Yoo-hoo!"

Penny's mom, Judy Doud, stood up and waved us over to a couple of small, square tables that had been pushed together. She was a pint-sized woman with gray in her curly blond hair, but her small stature never stopped her from being the chief organizer and executor of any gathering. She had the energy and drive typical of a farm woman. And the dress code. Her polyester navy-blue pants, matching vest, and long-sleeved blouse covered in large blue flowers were most likely sold as a set from the Country Delights catalog.

I recognized Penny's stepfather, Frank Doud, a large, husky man in beige slacks and a red golf shirt, and of course long, lanky Kemper, the groom. A man in his thirties sat on the other side of Judy. His shoulders were hunched, and his curly brown hair stuck to his forehead in a damp sweat.

"What's wrong with him?" I whispered to Robby.

"That's the best man, Tommy. He's seasick."

"Already? He must have a really sensitive tummy."

One woman sat with her back to me. Long reddish-blond hair hung down past the back of her seat, and when she leaned forward to catch something Kemper was saying, I caught a glimpse of her profile. I stopped walking.

"Gina." In that one word, I conveyed all the dread I had stored up in anticipation of my first encounter in decades with Penny's cousin, Gina Bradley. Just shy of six feet in seventh grade, she'd made every effort to make fun of me and my little side business reading my classmates' pets. This

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was long before I discovered that I had an ability to receive messages from animals. At the time, I was only using common sense to come up with my spectacular conclusions—but come on. If my customers were willing to pay a dollar for the privilege of not thinking things out for themselves, who was she to interfere? Then, in eighth grade, she'd stolen my boyfriend, and if her family hadn't moved away when she was a freshman, she probably would have destroyed my high school memories, too.

Gina looked over her shoulder at us, and I saw that the years had been uncommonly kind to her. The smattering of freckles on her ivory complexion gave her a wholesome look, and there wasn't a split end present in her silky hair. As she stood and spread her arms wide, I saw that she hadn't gained an ounce since high school, and her bust line hadn't dropped an inch with age.

"Frances!" she called out, and my eyes popped open in surprise. I had assumed the stretched-out arms and wiggling fingers, beckoning the fly to enter the spider's web, were for Robby or Penny.

"Who's that?" Robby asked.

"Gina," I answered, plastering a smile on my face before I approached the table. This was Penny's big trip, so I would have to play nice. When she pulled me close, I had to turn my head to avoid a face-full of boob.

"I can't believe it's you!" She shoved me back to take a good look, and I straightened my shoulders, which is supposed to take off five pounds. She looked over my shoulder at Robby and shoved me aside to hug her next victim.

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“Look at you! You’re finally taller than I am.”

Robby grinned down at her. “Wow. You look great.”

She flipped her hair over her shoulder. “You’re not so bad yourself, cousin. How long has it been?”

They launched into a comparison of which family events they’d each missed, since they had both resided in other states, and finally determined that it had been ten years since they’d laid eyes on each other. I grabbed the opportunity to get away, but Gina hooked her hand around my arm and stopped me. She had never shied away from physical contact, which was just one of the many reasons I avoided her.

"I've heard rumors," she sung out, wagging a slender finger at me. "Someone's had an exciting few years, and I want to hear all about them."

As she led me back to the table, I tried to decide if she was talking about the public failure of my one serious relationship two years ago, my pet psychic business, or the two murders I’d inadvertently become involved with, but none of them were topics I planned to discuss with Gina.

Sharon Bradley, Judy’s ex-sister-in-law and Gina’s mother, sat at the end of the table in her usual frozen-queen pose. Her soft, blond hair was pulled back into a loose braid, and she wore a pale-pink sweater that I guessed was cashmere. It wasn’t that she harbored any ill-will toward her brother’s ex or his children. She was simply a cold fish, except fish don’t have finely penciled eyebrows, and Sharon did. She raised one in my direction.

Two cheery faces smiled at me from either side of Kemper as if they had been waiting all day for the

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opportunity to meet me. Judy introduced them as Kemper's parents, Christina and Thomas Mohr. Kemper got his dark hair from his mother, but his six-foot tall, skinny physique matched that of his father, though Thomas had filled out with age. He wasn't fat, just more solid-looking than his son. And he had something else Kemper lacked. A sense of humor.

After Judy said his name, Thomas shook my hand in a tight grip and said, "And I've still got my head." He followed this with a hardy laugh, and I assumed he referred to Sir Thomas M-o-r-e, martyred for his faith by King Henry VIII. I'd seen *A Man for All Seasons*.

Christina groaned and patted her husband's arm with affection. "That joke never gets old." The thing is, I think she meant it.

I felt bad for Kemper. His side of the family was underrepresented. He had a sister due any moment with her third child. She had wisely decided not to give birth at sea and would instead take part in the New York reception. Kemper's younger brother, a lieutenant in the Air Force, couldn't get leave to take part in the festivities but would hopefully be able to make an appearance in New York.

I handed out hugs to everyone present except Tommy, who with his sweaty forehead and pasty pallor had as much appeal as a plague victim, and Sharon, who wasn't the hugging type. When Gina patted the seat next to her, I dropped into it.

"What have *you* been up to?" I asked, not because I cared but because I wanted the focus on her career so that she wouldn't have an opportunity to make fun of mine.

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"This and that."

Judy leaned in front of Gina. "She works as an interpreter for the U.N."

"Polish," Sharon clarified, as if that made all the difference in the world, and once again I was reminded that Sharon Bradley had always struck me as a woman in need of a happy-enema.

"Polish?" I said. Since she hadn't moved her critical gaze from me, I assumed she expected a response. "How...unusual."

Gina waved off her accomplishment, managing to show off her perfect manicure. "I guess that puts us in the same line of work. You translate for pets, and I handle the Poles."

She threw back her head and let loose a laugh that always reminded me of the annoying squeal of Gertie in *Oklahoma!* It was another thing that hadn't changed. Penny grinned at me from across the table, and I narrowed my eyes to let her know that I wasn't happy with the seating arrangement.

Kemper, who always became nervous at any mention of my pet psychic activities, darted a glance at his parents, but they hadn't heard Gina's comment. They were absorbed in conversation with Sharon Bradley about whether children should be allowed on cruises. Thomas and Christina thought it depended on both the parent and the child, while Sharon voted never, with a penalty of forty lashes.

Frank cleared his throat. "Our rooms are all on the fifth floor, though they're not all together. Since we booked so many cabins, the travel agent upgraded us." He gave us a

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pleased grin. "We've all got balconies."

"That is *so* generous!" Sharon said, and Frank blushed, probably because the way she said it made it sound as if anything less would have been slumming.

He handed out little cards as if he were dealing a round of poker. "We got everybody a drink card. You can use it at the coffee shop in the Lookout. I'm not sure if it works at the bars. There's sixty bucks there, but if you run out, you can go to the front desk on the first floor and reload. They don't take cash on this ship."

"Thank you," I said, grateful that I'd be able to have a morning latte, and everyone joined in and expressed appreciation.

Just then, an announcement came over the speaker system from a tenor voice with a slight accent. "Good afternoon. This is Captain Milo Koskela. Welcome to the *Iso Kala*. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask any of the crew members. We want to make sure that you enjoy your time with Finlander cruises without interruption, so everyone is invited to the Promenade Deck—that's the third-floor deck—for a safety drill in fifteen minutes. You will report directly under your assigned lifeboat, and you can find the number of your lifeboat on your room pass. This is not optional, and anyone who doesn't show will be invited to a private session, which will include laps around the Promenade Deck."

This announcement was followed by nervous giggles from the passengers who moved as one to opt for the public drill. As we went with the crowd toward the lobby that held the elevator and stairs, I clutched Penny's arm. "I thought

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you said these ships didn't sink."

She rolled her eyes. "It's required by law, like the seatbelt in your car. It doesn't mean they'll ever *use* the lifeboats."