



Chapter 3

Guilt soared through me. What if I'd had that EpiPen in time? Maybe I was at fault. Owen's words about how I dealt with things flashed through my mind. Did I endanger my new friends because of my empty nest issues?

Did Anna die because of me? Memories of Zack's death came roaring in on the heels of Owen's comment, and I groaned.

Sylvia and Owen joined us while Carmen picked her way down the stairs and tiptoed to us, staying far from the body. Anna's glasses lay on the ground, and I started to pick them up, but Shortie stopped me.

"We can't disturb the scene."

I gagged and clamped my hands over my mouth.

Tears ran down Owen's cheeks. "I wish I had talked to her more."

"I'm going up to the street to wave down the ambulance." Shortie's voice was raspy. He trudged up the yard and around the side of the house.

Sylvia's red face and narrowed eyes made me question my first impression of her as a mild-mannered woman enamored

with everything birds. Her clenched jaw and stiff stance told a different story. This reaction was beyond anger. More like rage.

Why?

“I’m sorry this happened,” I said, trying to make eye contact with her.

“It’s all right.” She shook her hands, inhaled, and blew out hard. “I’m fine. I am.” But her shoulders remained hunched, and she flexed her fingers.

“How?” Carmen’s high-pitched voice pierced my ears, and she fidgeted with her clunky necklace. “She’s dead.”

“Yes, I realize that!” Sylvia glared at her.

Owen put his arm around Carmen. “Let’s go back on the deck.” He tipped his head at me. “I’ll sit with her until the emergency crew arrives.”

“Sure.” I wiped my nose on my sleeve and swiped my eyes with the backs of my hands. While we waited, I checked out the bird feeders. One contained sunflower seeds. The feeder we stood by held the mixture Sylvia described earlier.

“Sylvia, nuts are in this mix. Peanuts.”

“I’m allergic to them, so I don’t buy that kind.” She peered at the seed and backed up. “Those are peanuts, though.” Her brows furrowed, and she examined the yard. Scattered seeds lay sprinkled in fallen pine needles, with more beside—and on—Anna’s lifeless body.

She stepped back until the ground under her was seed-free. “That doesn’t make sense.” She turned to me, shaking her head. “I don’t understand. I didn’t purchase that. If I touch it, I’ll break out and sneeze for hours.” Her voice rose, and she pointed at Anna. “Do you think that’s what killed her?”



WHEN THE AMBULANCE PULLED UP, followed by the police, I retrieved Anna's purse from the house to find her identification. Inside it was a medical alert bracelet indicating a peanut allergy and three extra EpiPens. At least we had a likely answer to what killed her, but not how that seed got into Sylvia's shed.

The female officer sat us apart from each other in the living room while the male officer called us outside to talk, one at a time.

Carmen went first, and her sobs reached us inside the house. Owen was interviewed after her.

When my turn came, I walked to the lower deck. Shortie was in the yard chatting with other police officers and the emergency crew who I guessed he knew from his time as military police. The EMTs loaded Anna's body on a stretcher, and I winced when they zipped the body bag shut. Yellow crime scene tape fluttered in the yard. A bird tweeted, and a magnolia warbler, just like Sylvia described, perched on a feeder.

Guess I can check that off my list. Goosebumps broke out on my arms.

The police officer—early fifties with gray flecks showing at his temples and deep dimples framing his downturned mouth—waited in one Adirondack chair with another facing him, the rest of the chairs shoved to the side. He waved me toward the empty seat. “Hello, I’m Detective Sharp. I’ve taken over the investigation for Officer Morris, and I have several questions for you.” He flipped his notepad open and wrote down my name, address, and phone number before asking, “Why did you start this birding group?”

“Well, it wasn’t to have people die.” I crossed my arms and then remembered what that indicated in body language and uncrossed them. I didn’t want to become a suspect.

Sharp leaned back and tapped his pen on his paper. “I didn’t accuse you.” His stern voice brought tears to my eyes.

“I know. I’m sorry. What an awful day. I wanted the group to be fun, to get out of the house and meet new people. Make friends, not be alone. It surprised me when Anna volunteered to fill the bird feeders. None of us realized she had a peanut allergy.” I brushed my cheeks dry.

“I’ve talked to Carmen Ables and Owen Walters, both of whom told me the same.” He consulted his notes. “Anna opened the bag of seed?”

“Yes.”

“Who told her to do it?”

“No one.” My words came out as a whisper, and I cleared my throat. “She volunteered.”

“Any idea why?”

“None. She came to our first meeting, but she didn’t talk much. I only knew her first name until I found her purse and driver’s license. Her medical bracelet told me about her peanut allergy.” I leaned toward him. “Did Sylvia tell you she’s also allergic to peanuts?”

“I’ll deal with Ms. Newman next.”

“She was so angry when it happened. Like she wanted to strangle someone.” Her rage still shocked and confused me.

“I’ll talk to her soon.” Sharp narrowed his dark brown eyes. He flipped to another page. “Back to you and the birding group. Who scheduled today’s meeting?”

“Sylvia. She’s been a birder for a long time.” I pointed to the yard below. “This was our first outing.”

“Did she insist you meet here?”

I thought back. “No, she wanted to share her joy of birding, that’s all.”

“Did she know any of you before that first meeting?”

Sweat rolled down my back, and I swiped at my brow. “If she did, I couldn’t tell.”

He tapped his pen against his chin. With the angry scowl gone, his dimples were attractive. I blinked at the random thought. *Concentrate, woman.*

“If Sylvia is allergic to peanuts, why did she have that kind of birdseed?” I asked.

His frown returned, lips pursed. “I’ll ask the questions. Let me deal with Ms. Newman.”

“Also, where is Mr. Newman?” I raised my eyebrows and smirked.

“Ms. Howard ...”

I crossed my arms. “Mrs.”

“Mrs. Howard.” He tipped his head back and inhaled. “I promise to ask the right things. Let me do my job, please.”

“Are you finished with me?” *Please let me go home and pretend this day never happened.* Scenes from the day Zack died kept flashing in my mind. I needed to get away from here.

The corners of his mouth tilted up. “Yes, I am. For now. But don’t leave Pensacola without letting me know.”

“Okay.” I stood and reentered Sylvia’s house, my stomach still churning. My purse was tucked in a corner, and I clutched it to my chest and hurried to my car.



I STOPPED for an iced latte on the way home, letting the cool, milky drink soothe me. This day, our first birding expedition, had begun with so much hope. New friends, new experiences. And it ended so fast. In death. How?

Why would quiet, withdrawn Anna volunteer to fill the bird feeders? And what did Sylvia mean when she said she

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never bought that kind of seed? If she didn't buy it, who put it in the shed? So many questions but no answers.

More memories of Zack's death returned, and the latte soured in my stomach. I don't know where I would've been without Lauree by my side, taking care of my kids. She would pull me off the couch every few days and shove me into the shower.

And, each month, on the anniversary of Zack's death, she sat with me and let me talk and cry. Eventually, I shared more positive memories and fewer tears. It took time, like I told Owen, but I got my feet back under me. Mamma Birds hatched, and I found my way as a widow and single mom.

Did Anna's family have someone like Lauree? Did she have people who cared, who would mourn her? How I wished I'd talked with her more.

I parked in the garage and pushed the remote to close the overhead door. Entering the house, I set my purse on the island, grabbed my phone, and settled into the corner of the couch. Drawing my legs up, I clutched my cup of coffee.

My cell buzzed with a text.

Did y'all have fun birding?

Ugh, Lauree must have seen me come home. My fingers trembled as I texted her.

Anna died.

My phone rang, and before I said hello, Lauree exclaimed, "What? She died? What happened?"

I swallowed hard and told her the story.

"Is it a crime scene?"

"Crime scene?" My voice squeaked. "Her body is gone. They put up that yellow tape, so yeah, I guess so." I sighed. "This has been the worst day."

“I’m sorry. How are you doing?”

“So-so. It brought back a lot of memories, but I’m trying to remind myself this is about Anna, not me.” I peeled the label from my plastic cup and rolled it up.

“I understand. Do you feel guilty?”

“No, confused, I think?” My friend knew how the guilt consumed me when Zack died. We argued before he left the house. A riptide killed him, but it’s hard to tell your heart that when you have regrets. I learned to put any misplaced guilt aside because it didn’t help me or my kids and wouldn’t change the fact Zack was gone. But it took a long time to get to that place.

“I hate to bring this up, but what will you say on Mamma Birds?”

“Hmm, I forgot I promised an update on our first outing.” I hit the phone’s speaker button, took a big gulp of my latte, grabbed my laptop, and navigated to my blog’s admin site.

“We have comments and questions about the birding group already.” I skimmed through them. The blog insights showed high traffic and interaction between my readers—most days that made me happy.

Key tapping sounded through the phone line.

“Want me to give a vague answer for now? Until you process what happened.” Lauree’s voice was gentle.

“Yes, please.” Processing was an overused word, but the best way to describe dealing with the emotions of death. “Post that it’s been an eventful day. I’ll add more tomorrow.”

More tapping. “Done.” The twins clamored in the background, asking her questions. Checking the time, I realized she needed to feed them.

“Go fix those kiddos some dinner. They need to eat.”

Lauree grunted. “You do too. Take care of yourself. I’ll call later.”

“I’m fine,” I assured her. “Catch you tomorrow.” I hit END on my phone and leaned my head back. Memories and feelings swirled. Heaving a sigh, I set my laptop aside and stood. The coffee would keep me awake. I might as well head to the pool to work off some restless energy.



SWIMMING at the university’s indoor, heated pool was the one exercise I enjoyed. Florida didn’t have long, cold winters, but the convenience kept me from using the weather as an excuse not to swim.

I showed my alumni pass at the check-in desk and headed to the women’s locker room. A quick shower to rinse off perked me up.

During the early summer, they offered long-course-style swimming, which equaled fifty meters, the length of the pool. After July, they switched back to its width, which worked fine for me. My favorite lane was open, so I set my towel on the diving block and pulled on my goggles. As my toes left the side of the pool in a somewhat graceful dive, someone called my name.

I spluttered to the surface and gripped the wall, pushing my goggles onto the top of my head. Shortie stood over me.

“Hey, Peg. Sorry to scare you.” His eyes crinkled when he smiled. Swim trunks—dark blue with bright yellow hibiscus flowers—hung on his narrow hips, and he’d slung a yellow-and-white-striped beach towel over one shoulder.

“Hi, what are you doing here?”

“Swimming?” He winked. “I needed to work off some energy after today. You too?”

I nodded. He sat on the side of the pool, dangling his feet in the water beside me. His hair glistened and appeared freshly

combed. I took off my goggles and raked back my short, red curls, hoping I didn't resemble a demented sea creature. The sea witch from a popular kids' movie came to mind.

I tipped my chin at him. "You've already been in?"

"Yeah." He ran his fingers through his short hair. "I came straight here from Sylvia's. Keep a towel and extra trunks in my car."

"I went home for a bit. But my adrenaline was still going."

"I can't believe what happened to Anna."

"Me either. I kind of feel guilty but more confused."

His gray eyes were sad, and his shoulders slumped. "I wish I'd found her EpiPen quicker."

I placed one hand on his knee. "It's not your fault."

"We did what we could." He patted my hand.

"True. What do you think of Detective Sharp?"

"Marcus? He's not the bumbling detective type. Very organized."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "He frustrated me. And he was so ... hard. He made me feel guilty, and I didn't do anything wrong. We know how Anna died, but not why that seed was in the shed."

"What do you mean?"

A man and young boy practiced swim strokes in the lane beside me, and I lowered my voice. I didn't want to scar the child by talking about someone dying. I repeated what Sylvia had said and added, "Sylvia is allergic to peanuts. She told me she doesn't buy the kind of seed that killed Anna."

"So, how did it get there?" he asked, brows furrowed.

"I'm not sure, but I'm going to find out. Sharp ignored what I told him."

"Peg, be careful. The police are investigating this as a suspicious death."

"I will."

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A lifeguard approached us. “Dad?” she said.

Shortie startled and jumped up.

“Honey, hi!” He gave her a side hug. “I didn’t know you worked tonight.”

“Yep, all week. Hi, Peg. Are you two friends?” She gestured between us.

“You know Kim?” Shortie asked.

I laughed. Of course, he was Kimberly’s dad. She resembled him in her tall build and kind gray eyes. I’d known her since my girls were in school. Two years younger than Chloe and a grade ahead of Cynthia, they all attended the same high school. She was one of the few permanent lifeguards at UWF.

“Yes, I do.” I turned to her. “Your father is in my new birding group. We’ve had quite the day.”

“Oh? Everything okay?”

He blew out a sigh and toed the pool deck. “A birder died today. At our first meeting.”

“What?” She squealed. “How?”