



## Chapter 2

“Hurricane Hazel has stalled out off the Texas coast,” the weatherman announced the next morning. “The spaghetti models all show it meandering over the state in the next few days, dumping plenty of rain. Tune back in tonight for an update.”

“Sure hope that spaghetti knows what it’s talking about,” I grumbled. My emergency kit wasn’t in the pantry, and I didn’t know where else to search. If the models were correct, I didn’t need it. Yet. September was the worst month for hurricanes in the Gulf, and I wanted to be prepared.

I switched off the television and grabbed my phone and purse. Sylvia volunteered her house for our first birding trip and strongly advised binoculars and sturdy shoes. My local big-box retail store should have both, and I could get a coffee while I was there.

Inside the store, I grabbed a buggy, got my iced mocha, stuck it in the cupholder, and headed to the shoe area. Sandals were my everyday footwear until October unless we got an early cold snap. I dug for the socks shoved in my purse.

A cute pair of baby blue canvas high tops with solid tread

beckoned me. I attempted to shove my foot into the shoes. Not happening. One more try. From the corner of my eye, I saw a set of men's boots appear next to me. But these had an owner. Glancing up, I found the oldest member of my new birding group.

"Hi, Owen." I attempted a wave and tipped.

He steadied me as I stood, still struggling to cram my foot into the shoe. "I'm not sure those fit."

"Ugh." I yanked it off. "I see these cute shoes and forget about my monster feet."

He snorted. "I don't think you have monster feet." His lips twitched.

"All right, fellow birder-to-be." I swung my arm at the rack of footwear. "What would you suggest?"

Lips pursed, he perused the selection. Even in madras shorts and a dark navy polo, the staple uniform of older men in Florida, he reeked of academia. "Hmm." He pointed. "Those should fit your mon—feet." He caught himself.

The rugged boots with thick and tire-like tread were not my style. "Um, no."

"No?"

"Yep, no. I'm not wearing those. You can wear them."

He gestured to his shoes. "I've already got a pair. Decided to break them in before Saturday. I don't want blisters."

"Yeah, I thought they seemed familiar." I sighed. "Do you think they are best for birding? They're clunky. And heavy." *And ugly.*

"Would you like them better if they came in light blue?"

The thought cheered me. "Yes! Where are the other colors?" I walked down the row of boots.

His deep belly laugh startled me. "They only come in black, Peg. And, yes, these will protect your feet, and keep them safe

from sticks, bugs, and other critters. Here, try them.” He pushed the box at me.

I plopped onto a bench and tugged them on. My feet slipped in with ease, and I trudged up and down the aisle.

“You’re right. These feel better. If only they weren’t so ugly.”

He ran his hand over his head and smirked. “You could paint them? Or cover them with duct tape?”

“Ha, ha, I don’t think either idea would work.” I added the boots to my buggy, peeled off the socks, and slipped back into my sandals. “Do you have binoculars?”

He walked beside me as I searched for the camping gear section. “Yes, my wife and I took an Alaskan cruise the year before she passed.”

I stopped and touched his arm. “I’m sorry.”

He flapped his hand. “Don’t be. It’s been three years, and I’m adjusting.”

“It’s been thirteen years for me.” We continued walking. “It does get less painful. My kids were still young when Zack died.”

“Tell me a little about your husband.”

When Zack first died, I came up with an automated script to tell people what happened. Brief and succinct. As emotionless as possible. People wanted the details, but they didn’t want the emotion. Only a select few could stand it. Lauree was the closest friend who stayed. Grief is the great divide, so to speak.

As the years passed, sharing positive memories and telling how his death impacted the kids and me became easier. I gave Owen a mix of emotions and specifics. His loss was too recent to provide much depth. Three years sounds like a long time to most people. In the world of widows and widowers, it’s like the blink of an eye.

“We were high school sweethearts and got married after college graduation. We enjoyed some amazing years before he died in a freak accident. He got caught in a riptide. He was an experienced swimmer, but he couldn’t escape it.” I stopped and thought back. Those first years afterward were so busy. Packed full of kids, tending to their needs. “My children were little. Carter was five, and I had to keep going. I didn’t have a choice, you know?”

He nodded. “So, you launched your blog?”

“You’ve seen Mamma Birds?”

“I’m surprisingly tech-savvy. I researched you online before committing to the meeting.” He imitated tapping on computer keys.

“I’m glad what you found didn’t turn you away. We have quite the mixed group, don’t we?”

“*Mm-hmm, eclectic.*”

Didn’t look like I’d get any snark from him. We continued walking.

“I am excited about our first outing, getting to know the others and being out in nature,” he said.

I sipped my iced coffee, enjoying the cold, chocolate deliciousness. “That’s why I started it.”

He stopped again and tipped his head, a curious light in his pale blue eyes. “It seems when something monumental happens in life, you find a way to get past it.”

His words startled me. I hadn’t thought about it like that. Was it wrong to try to deal with what life threw at me? I knew I always had to be busy and keep going. Too much down time gave me a chance to think. It never seemed like a bad thing. Before.

He touched my arm. “It’s admirable. You keep moving forward. You don’t let things stop you.”

We reached the sporting goods department, and he

pointed out binoculars in my price range. I added them to my buggy and took the opportunity to change the subject, reserving what he'd said to think about later.

Owen followed me toward the self-serve checkout.

I rooted through my purse for my credit card. "Aren't you getting anything?"

"Oh, your lovely company distracted me. I'll leave you be and do my shopping. My hurricane supplies need updating."

"See you Saturday." I scanned my purchases and made another mental note to search the pantry again for my kit.

"Make sure to wear those this week." He pointed to the shoebox. "Otherwise, you'll regret it."

I eyed the boots and shoved them into a plastic bag. "I don't want to wear them at all," I muttered. Owen knew what he was talking about, so I'd take his advice—better than blisters.



THE EMPTY NESTERS Birding Group met at Sylvia's on Saturday mid-morning. Her house was one I ogled when driving down a scenic highway along the bluffs of Pensacola Bay. A two-story, white brick traditional build. Nothing I would have pictured for her. Mild-mannered birder Sylvia in a million-dollar home—over five thousand square feet. It would dwarf my tiny eighteen-hundred-square-foot dwelling.

When she opened the door, I gasped. "This is beautiful."

Gleaming hardwood floors stretched down a spacious hallway. Fresh flowers in a cut-glass vase sat on a polished side table, dispersing a light floral scent.

"Thank you."

I waited, hoping for more. She hadn't mentioned a spouse,

and a peek at her left hand revealed no rings. That didn't mean much, though.

"Have you and your husband lived here long?" There weren't any family pictures hanging nearby.

The doorbell rang before she could answer. The other birders gathered in her living room, Anna ducking in at the last moment. Several footwear styles were present, from the ugly black boots Shortie, Owen, and I wore to the closed-toed pumps Carmen sported.

Carmen gushed about the house and even offered Sylvia her business card. "Just in case," she said, adding a wink. She asked for a tour, but Sylvia ignored her.

I wanted to explore too. I used the downstairs bathroom to see how fancy it was, and it did not disappoint. Everything gleamed and glittered. Designer hand soap, fingertip towels decorated with cardinals, a vanilla- and lavender-scented candle burning, and the end of the toilet paper folded in a triangle.

Sylvia offered coffee and tea, then opened the blinds covering the sliding glass doors.

My mouth dropped open. "Your house is beautiful, but this view ... wow!"

We followed her outside. The deck had two levels to accommodate the house standing on stilts. The first level held a round, glass-topped table surrounded by four chairs with thick cushions in natural beach tones. Four steps led to the lower section, where six soft gray Adirondack chairs with navy-blue cushions sat. Like the ones I drooled over in a trendy retail catalog. A steep staircase led down to the yard.

Sylvia smiled and sipped her tea. "Thank you. I've always enjoyed living here. I thought this would be a fun place for our first birding trip." She walked to the lower deck and gestured toward the chairs facing her tiny backyard, a spot of beach, and

the sparkling Pensacola Bay beyond. "Take a seat. We can see the bird feeders from here." She set her cup on the railing and passed out little pencils and a checklist of birds.

"I do need to put out some birdseed, though." She headed for the stairs. "I bought new bags yesterday."

Anna glanced up from the list. "I can do it."

Those were more words than she had spoken up to this point. Sylvia stepped back and explained where to find the bird food in the storage room underneath the deck. She cautioned Anna to watch herself on the stairs.

A few moments later, rustling came from below us. Anna called, "Do you have scissors in here?"

Sylvia leaned over the railing. "Yes, on the shelf by the extra pots. Do you see them?"

"*Mm-hmm.*" It was several minutes before we saw Anna with two buckets. Per Sylvia's directions, one held a mix of bird food while the other was full of black oil sunflower seeds. Anna sneezed twice, sniffled, and tried to wipe her nose on the shoulder of her shirt.

"Took me a while to open the bags." She set a bucket down and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Something's making me sneeze." She coughed, cleared her throat, and sneezed again.

While she filled the feeders, I skimmed through the list of birds and raised my hand.

Sylvia smiled. "Yes, Peg? You have a question?"

"I've seen pelicans before, but how do we identify a magnolia warbler?" I squinted and shaded my eyes. Typical hot, sunny Florida morning, and silly me, I had left my sunglasses at home.

"Oh, I forgot." Sylvia opened the sliding glass door, hurried inside, and returned with several paperback birding books. "I don't have enough for everyone. You'll have to share." She

opened a bigger book, thumbing her way through it. “Here it is.” She showed us a picture of a small bird with a yellow breast streaked with black and a gray back and head.

“How will we find it?” Carmen gestured toward the narrow span of grass and trees in front of the sandy beach below the deck. “In the water?”

“No, no.” Sylvia pointed to the few pine trees in her yard. “See those two bird feeders and the one on the shepherd’s hook? Watch them. The feed Anna is putting out attracts cardinals, woodpeckers, doves, and sparrows. Warblers prefer insects and spiders, but they, and other birds, will come to the feeders.”

Carmen patted her hair and rubbed her arms. “I hate spiders. Just the thought makes me itch.”

“They are important in the bird world.” Sylvia’s lip curled.

Carmen opened her mouth to respond, and I jumped in. “I’m not a fan of insects, period, but I know birds help keep them in check.”

Below us, Anna sneezed again and coughed, and her breathing sounded wheezy.

Shortie leaned over the deck railing. “Hey, Anna, you okay?”

“What’s she doing?” I asked.

A bucket fell from her hand, and she grasped the shepherd’s hook, her head hanging. She choked and gasped, sneezed again, and wiped her nose on her shirt.

“What’s going on?” Sylvia’s tone was harsh.

Below us, Anna plopped onto the ground next to the feeder. She clutched her neck, her face red. She fell over, knocking the bucket of seed onto herself. We all stared, speechless, before Shortie shot into action.

“Sylvia, call nine-one-one!” He rushed down the stairway, and Sylvia punched numbers on her cell phone. I followed him,



watching my step to avoid tripping. When I hit the ground, I ran to him as he checked Anna's pulse.

Her face had darkened and puffed up. Eyes open, breathing ragged and husky, she whimpered with each inhale.

He held her wrist. "It's an allergic reaction, I think. Her pulse is too fast." He leaned over and patted her cheeks. "Anna, Anna, can you hear me?"

She opened her mouth and made a faint sound.

Leaning closer I could just make out her words. "Sounds like she's saying 'purse.' What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure," Shortie said.

I touched her cheek, and her eyes opened. "What's in your purse?"

"Epi," she rasped.

Shortie and I stared at each other, and then he jumped up, took the stairs two at a time, and ducked into the house. I prayed as Anna struggled to breathe. Not much time had passed since she'd gotten the birdseed, but it felt like hours before he hollered, "Here! Give her this!" He leaned over the deck railing and tossed something to me.

An EpiPen fell in the dirt near my feet, and I scooped it up. One of Lauree's twins had a peanut allergy, and she'd taught me how to use the auto-injector. I popped off the blue safety cap and was about to jab it into Anna's thigh when I saw her face.

Her eyes were open, but no movement showed. Bile rose in my throat. I nudged her body with my foot. Nothing. I broke out in a sweat, dropped to the hard ground, and laid my head on her chest.

No heartbeat. Nothing.

Shortie skidded to a stop beside me. "Peg?"

I sat back on my heels. "I think she's dead," I whispered. "I listened, and her heart isn't beating. Look at her eyes." I

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pointed. My hand trembled so hard I clasped it against my chest. Spots filled my vision. “She’s gone, right?”

Birding wasn’t supposed to be a deadly hobby.

He checked her pulse. “I don’t know what happened, but she’s definitely dead.”