

# Where's the Quetzal?

An Empty-nesters Cozy Mystery: Book 2



# Jen Dodrill



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## Chapter 1

I woke, panting and sweating, sheets twisted around my feet. Eight months since the murders and the Keatons' escape, and I still suffered from crazy dreams. I pushed myself up in bed and brushed damp hair off my face. I did not want to experience any of it again, the nightmares or the murders.

Kicking off my covers, I padded to the kitchen. Morning sunshine filtered through the window over the sink and left soft shadows on the tile floor. I opened the dining room curtains and the blinds covering the back sliding door. A flicker of excitement wove through me, sweeping away the remnants of my bad dream. Today was the day—my baby's baby shower.

A glance at the clock kicked me into gear. No time to waste. "Things to do. Get moving, woman."

I started the coffee, showered, and dressed. When I returned to the kitchen, my mother-in-law, Hazel, sipped from her favorite purple mug. Charlie Brown, CB for short, sat beside her. I stroked the silky gray Weimaraner's fur.

"Morning, Peg. Are you ready for today? To celebrate my first great-grandchild?"

"And my first grandchild. Shortie will be here any minute,

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if you want to get dressed.” I gestured to her nightgown and robe.

She clutched her robe closed and headed for her room, CB on her heels.

Hope fluttered in my belly when Shortie arrived. It might have even been love. But I wouldn't be the first to say it. Today wasn't the day to figure out our relationship.

“You look very handsome.”

He winked and leaned down for a kiss. “Thanks. I like your shirt. It's ... colorful.”

I held out my pink and blue tie-dye I'm-the-Grandma T-shirt. “Thanks. I thought it appropriate for the day. I made it myself.” It had been a messy project, ending with pink and blue dye everywhere, which took forever to clean up. “Want coffee? We can watch TV until we need to put up decorations.”

“Sure.” He whistled at Roscoe, Hazel's yellow parakeet, then perched on the edge of my brown leather couch, purchased after the murderer broke in and slashed my old sofa to pieces last fall. I retrieved a mug from the cabinet, filled it, and picked up mine before settling in beside him.

Several commercials blared, followed by the newsman announcing, “Estelle and Roger Keaton, sought in connection with two murders committed last year, have been spotted in Pensacola. If you see them or have any information, please call the number below.” The couple's pictures and a Crime Stoppers number appeared on the screen.

“They're back? How did they enter the country?” My nightmare flashed through my mind. No way. I did not want anything to do with the Keatons again.

Ever.

Acid burned in my stomach, and it wasn't from my coffee.

Shortie ran his fingers over his hair. “They must have sneaked in. They're aware they are suspects.”

"Hazel!" I called to my mother-in-law, my tone sharp and shaky. I would love to protect her from the news, but she needed to hear this. The Keatons' return affected both of us.

She popped her head around the corner from her bedroom. "Yes? What's wrong?"

"The Keatons. They're here ... in town." Thinking about them stressed my brain and my heart. They'd hurt too many people.

Shock crossed her face, her eyes widening.

"Peg," Shortie said, an edge of anxiety in his voice. He stood, took my hands, and pulled me up. "You cannot be involved in this." His eyes filled with worry. "Please ..."

His fears were valid. First, Roger Keaton went to Guatemala, and then his wife left town. *After* she masterminded two murders of my birding group friends and threatened my and Hazel's lives. No one knew if she joined her husband in Central America or had gone elsewhere.

"But how can we not do something?" Hazel demanded. "If not for Estelle, Anna and Sylvia would still be alive. And Roger Keaton. All of Pensacola knows about him. He's like the black stain on our fair city." She crossed her arms with a disgusted huff.

My feelings went to war with the truth. Hazel was right. If it weren't for Estelle, no one would have died. I didn't want to be involved, but I had to do something.

Shortie's gray eyes bored into mine. "You want to search for them. I know how you are. Nope, not happening. You almost died last time." His words ended in a growl.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and squeezed. "Thanks for worrying about me. You're my favorite boyfriend."

I hoped for a smile, but he grimaced instead. "I have good reason to be concerned. You two are this dynamic duo

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determined to catch bad guys.” He gestured between me and Hazel.

She interrupted him with a raised hand. “Chloe’s shower is today, so let’s put this aside for now. We can discuss the Keatons after.”

Hazel had a point. We needed to lay out the food, decorate, and prepare the games. We had a big day ahead of us.

“I’ll bring in the rocker. It’s crammed in the back of my Jeep.” He shut the front door more forcefully than usual, his frustration loud and clear.

I blew out a breath. I didn’t want to start the day with this news, and I didn’t want it to dampen the party. *It’s time to focus, Peg.*

I dragged five wooden dining room chairs into a semicircle in the living room, took the sixth, and placed it in the corner by the back door. Pink and blue helium-inflated balloons bobbed in the breeze from the overhead fan. I grabbed their strings in one hand, climbed on the chair, found a solid stance on the worn seat, and eased up, my arms out to both sides for balance. “Hazel, can you hand me some tape, please?”

She stuck several pieces on my hand. “A stepstool would be safer, Peg. Your chair needs wood glue.”

I stood on my tiptoes and stretched as far as possible. “Nah, I can manage. Besides, I don’t own a stepstool.” Balloons tangled over my head. I wadded the strings and mashed them into place. “See? Ta-da!”

Roscoe echoed my words, and I chuckled. Laughing while teetering on the edge of a chair didn’t work in my favor. The chair wobbled, the front door opened, and the next thing I knew, I landed in Shortie’s arms.

“Perfect timing.” I kissed his cheek and burrowed my nose in his neck, inhaling his woodsy cologne. “Never thought catching me would be part of your boyfriend duties, did you?”



I tipped my head back and said to Hazel, "Roscoe's discovered a new word." The parakeet squawked again from his cage on my prized teak buffet, and my mother-in-law shot me the stink-eye.

"At least we know how he learned this one," she grumbled, still irritable after discovering last year's intruder taught him the expression, "Birds alive."

"Point taken." I straightened out my clothes when Shortie set me on my feet.

Hazel shook her finger. "You're about to be a grandmother. You shouldn't climb on things. Tell her, Shortie. She might fall and break a hip." She dragged the offending chair to where its mates stood.

"I'm not that old." I resisted sticking out my tongue and settled for wrinkling my nose.

"I don't have a dog in this fight," Shortie said.

"Coward." I winked.

He rubbed his hands together. "How can I help?"

My boyfriend, a master at distraction. "Decorations are up, and the living room is ready." I checked the time. "Let's put out the food. Everyone will be here soon."

"I'll get the games." Hazel marched off to her room.

Shortie leaned closer. His husky voice sent delightful shivers through me. "What's up with her? Her mood changed so fast."

I crooked my finger, and he followed me into the kitchen. "No idea. She's been like this for the last couple of weeks." I opened the refrigerator and passed him a veggie tray.

"It's been a long time since she moved in during the last hurricane. Has her roof been replaced? The news said the roofing business is finally catching up with claims." He placed the tray on the island and turned back for more food.

"Maybe so. I'll ask her. I've actually enjoyed her company,

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so I haven't thought about it much." I gestured to the counter. "Let's put the food on both sides of the island for easy access."

We laid out the snacks—the veggie tray next to a bright yellow fruit platter, a slow cooker of yummy barbecue meatballs, and two plates of tortilla roll-ups stuffed with avocado, turkey lunchmeat, and cheese— and I saved room for the cupcakes Lauree, my neighbor and BFF, would bring.

Hands on his hips, he surveyed the spread. "Do we need anything else?"

"Oh, I forgot the chips and dips. Thanks." I poured tortilla chips into one bowl, ruffled potato chips in another, and set salsa and onion dip next to them. "Now we have everything we need."

He put his arm around me and kissed my temple. "You've done a good job, Grandma."

I rechecked the time. "Chloe and Tom should be here soon."

"You mind if I watch more TV 'till everyone arrives?"

"No, go on. I have presents to put out." I retrieved several cute gift bags in various sizes and gender-neutral colors from my room, placed them on the floor by the back sliding door, and tipped the vertical blinds halfway closed. "Too dark?"

He shook his head.

I eyed the piles of presents. "Can you help me for a minute? I have two more things to carry out."

"Sure you got enough stuff?" he teased.

"Wait until the baby is born. I'll buy more." I bounced on my toes. "I can't wait to find out the gender. I wish the baby cooperated on the ultrasounds and showed us, but this is exciting." He followed me to my room, where a car seat and stroller set sat beside a long, wrapped box.

He tapped it. "What's this?"

"A portable baby bed, of course. It's bulky. Can you carry

it?" I rolled the stroller to the living room. He lifted the present and propped it in the corner.

"Why do they need a portable bed?"

I chuckled at his confused expression. "They don't. It's for me. For when I keep the baby. I plan to be 'that' grandma." I made air quotes.

His eyes softened. "I can't wait."

I squeezed his arm, snuggled closer, and imagined us being Grandpa and Grandma to the little one.

Hazel appeared with an armful of pink and blue bags and boxes. She stopped and stared, her bottom lip jutted out. "You didn't save room for more presents. Where should I put mine?"

I rearranged my gifts, and she set hers down. When she finished, I hugged her, held onto her arms, and studied her eyes. Usually, they were sparkling blue. Now, they were dim, filled with tears, and her lips quivered. "Are you okay?"

"My roof is fixed." A hint of desperation crept into her voice.

"It's taken a long time."

She stepped back and wiped her eyes. "Yes. Can we talk about it later?"

I nodded, accepting her decision to postpone our discussion. We needed to chat about her plans and the Keatons after everyone left.

A pizza commercial boomed, and Shortie lowered the volume, then sat to finish watching the news. Hazel showed me the games she planned, and we laid them out on the table. After a few minutes, Shortie called to us.

"What is it?" Not more about the Keatons, I hoped. I didn't want to think about them anymore right now.

"They found another ship near the de Luna wrecks," he said. "An extra one, not attached to his group—a caravel. It's smaller and lighter than the Spanish galleons de Luna used."

In the 1500s, Don Tristan de Luna, a conquistador, sailed from Vera Cruz, Mexico, to the northwest Gulf Coast with twelve ships and over a thousand people in an attempt to colonize the Pensacola area. A hurricane wrecked seven of the ships. Rumors said a rogue ship tailing de Luna's fleet carried gold, silver, and gems.

"I hope they find treasure this time." Hazel's eyes brightened.

A knock at the front door interrupted us, and Shortie clicked off the TV. Chloe and Tom entered, oohing and aahing at the decorations. My oldest daughter glowed, her baby belly shaped like a basketball, sitting high. From my experience as a mom of three, she wasn't close to delivery.

Lauree rapped once on the door and entered with a tray full of pink and blue cupcakes. She set them on the island and greeted us all, adding a thorough rub of CB's silky ears and a click of her tongue at Roscoe.

"How many others are coming?" She took a hair tie from her wrist and tied her long brown hair into a messy bun. "They can park in my driveway if they need to."

"A couple of Chloe's friends. Carter and his girlfriend should be here any minute. I'll let him know." I peeked at the time.

"Why do you keep checking your watch?" Shortie asked.

"There's a surprise for Chloe. Should be here soon." I tapped its glass face and held it to my ear. "Good, it's working."

He frowned, but I kept my secret. The front door opened, and my youngest, Carter, walked in.

I hurried over, tugged him close, and kissed his cheek. "I'm so glad to see you." I ruffled his auburn hair. "You've grown this out some."

"Yep. Mom, this is Mary, my girlfriend." He slipped his hand into hers, both of their faces beaming.

I hugged her, and Carter introduced everyone else. When Chloe's friends arrived, Hazel waved them to the living room before escorting Chloe to the new rocking chair situated under the balloons.

She ran her hands over the gleaming wooden armrests. "This is perfect, Mom."

I pointed to Shortie. "It's his gift to y'all."

"Aww, thank you." She struggled to stand.

He hurried to her and leaned over for a hug. "You stay here. We don't want the baby coming today. You have another month, I think."

Tom chuckled and shook Shortie's hand. "Soon would be nice. Thanks so much."

"Not too soon," I mumbled, peeking at my watch again. The doorbell rang—perfect timing. A glance at Chloe showed her deep in conversation with her friends.

The door opened, and there stood my middle child, Cynthia. Her brown bob framed her heart-shaped face, and her blue eyes, so like her father's, sparkled.

"Hi, Mom." She wrapped her arms around me. "It's so good to be home."

I kissed her cheek and released her, fanning my face and blinking back tears. "It's been over two years."

"I couldn't miss the birth of my first niece or nephew."

I studied her. "You look good, Cynth."

Chloe gasped, interrupting our quiet moment. Carter's mouth dropped open, CB barked, and Roscoe screeched, "Ta-da!"

Chaos ensued, followed by hugs, tears, and more introductions.

Cynthia caught me in the kitchen later and tipped her chin toward Shortie. "Tell me about this guy."

"I will, but let's start the party first."

We played games, Chloe and Tom opened gifts, and we ate most of the food and cupcakes, CB sneaking a few licks. Lauree went home, and Chloe's friends left. Exhausted by the celebration, Chloe lay on the couch, her feet propped up, while Shortie, Hazel, and I helped load the presents into Tom's two-door sedan.

I tapped its roof. "You need a bigger vehicle."

He made a face and deadpanned, "Yes, Mother."

"I'm just saying. Gotta have room for my grandbaby."

Hazel waved her hand. "I have plenty of space in my Bug."

"Chloe does, too, in her car." Tom attempted to close his trunk but had to rearrange several of the gifts. He tried again, and it clicked shut. "It's not like I'll carry nine thousand baby items around."

He didn't understand it yet, but his world would change soon, in a big way. They may not need nine thousand baby belongings, but they would have a lot. We entered the house and found Carter, Mary, and Cynthia in a semi-circle around Chloe, chatting and laughing. The dog sat at Carter's feet and enjoyed a back scratch.

"Guess what, Mom?" Chloe called.

"Wait, let me tell her." Cynthia ran her hands through her hair.

"What's happening?" I asked.

She stood, balled her fists, and inhaled. She exhaled and, in a rush of words, said, "I left the Navy. I brought my stuff home, and I want to stay here." Her eyebrows raised, and her voice wavered. "If it's okay?"

A million questions flew through my mind. "Of course. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I've thought about it for a while. I just decided for sure. I had to either reenlist for another term or get out." She shrugged. "So, I got out."

"Is everything all right?" I asked, concerned she decided too quickly.

"Yes, Mom, I promise." She turned to her siblings. "Can y'all help me with my things? Wait, not you, Chloe." She gestured to the couch. "You lay there. Mary, can you help Carter and me?"

The trio carried Cynthia's assorted totes and suitcases inside and piled them in the middle of my living room.

Shortie eyed the mound. "We took at least as much to Tom's car."

"Yeah ..." Where would I put her and all her belongings?

Hazel stood and headed for the room she lived in for the last eight months. "Let me clear out of your room."

"No, Grandma," Cynthia said. "I can take the middle bedroom. You're all settled into my old one."

"Hazel?" I paused, not wanting to hurt her feelings. "Are you moving home now that your roof is fixed?"

Hazel toed the carpet. "Well, I wondered if I could stay. Sell my house and live here. With you." She looked at me, hope shining in her eyes.

Okay then. My nest was growing.