



Chapter 3

Saturday morning, Cynthia was dressed and ready to accompany Hazel and me on our birding trip.

“I want to check out these people,” she said. “Too many weird things have happened.” She flexed her biceps. “I can be your protection.”

Her fierceness made me giggle, but not out loud.

On the drive, we discussed how the Keatons sneaked back into Pensacola.

“It’s amazing they did it. I can’t believe either of them would have the guts to return,” Hazel said, her lip curled.

“Explain to me their relationship to the murders last year,” Cynthia said.

“The killer, Pensacola’s mayor at the time, told Grandma how Estelle Keaton controlled the whole thing.” I took the exit from Interstate 10 to I-110.

“You two are dangerous.” In my rearview mirror, I saw Cynthia, arms crossed and shaking her head.

She had no idea.

I drove through Gulf Breeze, turned right at the colorful

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sailfish Pensacola Beach sign, and used my prepaid pass to zip on through the unmanned toll booth to the beach.

“Well, they may think it all died down, but the Pensacola police are on the search for both of them. Estelle, at least, is still a suspect.” I flipped on my turn signal to head right onto Fort Pickens Road.

“The mastermind.” Hazel curled her fingers like a witch and cackled. “Maybe they were involved with the missing quetzal. Last year, they were in Guatemala, and the news said a quetzal went missing from one of the zoos.”

“I wouldn’t put it past them. Shortie told me not to investigate.”

She wiggled her eyebrows. “We have no choice but to look into this.”

Cynthia heaved a noisy sigh.

We drove past the Pensacola Beach cross, my favorite spot. CB and I visited it months ago while we were embroiled in the murder investigation. I opened the windows and inhaled the scents of the Gulf, the sand, and the road tar. Sand dunes, some larger than others, blocked my view of the water. Sea oats waved in a gentle breeze. And crying gulls raced my car. I paid the entrance fee to the park and drove to the Visitor’s Center parking lot.

“There’s Owen and Carmen.” I waved.

Hazel narrowed her eyes. “Do you think she’s interested in him? They always ride together.”

I elbowed her, turned off the car, and unbuckled. “Come on. She’s too young for him. You, though, are the right age.”

She gave me the stink-eye.

Cynthia climbed out of my SUV and hooked her arm through her grandmother’s. “You are prettier, too, Grandma. And smarter.”

Hazel patted her hand. “You’re my favorite.”

Cynthia eyed me, and we broke into giggles.

Owen wore a tan sunhat on his head, strings tied in a knot under his chin.

“He’s prepared,” Hazel said.

“Always. That’s what makes him Owen.”

We joined them and entered the building. Shortie hustled in a few minutes later.

“Sorry, I’m late. I overslept.” He shoved his fingers through his still-damp hair.

I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Hazel snapped open a brochure and read aloud, “It took over five years to build the fort.”

“It served as a Union stronghold during the Civil War,” Owen added. He puffed out his chest and surveyed our group over his reading glasses. “I am a retired history professor, remember?”

Mild-mannered, gentle Owen didn’t often talk about his former job, teaching at the University of West Florida, but he still carried a professorial air about him.

Shortie picked up another brochure and flipped through it. “Aren’t you a Civil War buff?”

Owen beamed, his smile as bright as the overhead lights gleaming on his bald head. “Yes, I am, and this place in particular, with all of its history. They built Pickens after the War of 1812 to fortify the area and protect the bay and the Navy yard. In 1861, the Confederates attacked the fort, but the Union defended it.”

“Didn’t Geronimo stay here?” I asked.

“Yes, as a prisoner.” He shifted his feet and stood with his hands linked behind his back. “Geronimo was an Apache war chief and a medicine man. When the Apaches were forced onto reservations, he and his followers escaped and spent years

raiding and killing. After his capture in 1886, some Pensacola business leaders arranged for him to be sent here. They ‘claimed’ he would be guarded better.” He made air quotes around the word *claimed*.

“It didn’t work out like they said? Did he die at the fort?” I slipped my hand into Shortie’s, looking forward to spending the day with him.

“No, no. They put him and his band of men to work. Plus, he became a spectacle. One book I read indicated that an average of twenty visitors a day came to see him during his captivity. He ended up as a tourist attraction.”

Carmen stepped back and covered her mouth. “How awful. Poor man.”

Owen wiggled his hands back and forth. “Yes and no. They took advantage of him, true. He rode in President Teddy Roosevelt’s inaugural parade and visited the World’s Fair in St. Louis. But we can’t forget he led raids and killed people. He died in Oklahoma in 1909.”

“Where did they keep him here?” Cynthia asked.

“Good question, young lady.” Owen waved toward the Visitor’s Center exit. “Follow me, and I’ll explain. We can bird-watch after.”

Hazel walked beside him as we traipsed outside. He paused at the fort’s entrance and began our history lesson with a gesture at the brick archway. “This is the sally port. It’s the main entrance. Once, there were large oak doors and a wooden bridge leading to them.” He pointed to the pavement under our feet.

We followed him into the officers’ quarters. The interior walls, plaster-lined and chipped to expose the brick underneath, made it much cooler inside.

Hazel patted Owen’s arm. “How many bricks are in here?”

She’d read the brochure, so she knew. I admired her blatant

attempt at flirting and tried to catch her eye, but she ignored me.

Carmen spoke up. "Over twenty-one million bricks. It said it in the flyer."

Owen nodded at her answer. "She's right. Geronimo's housing was believed to be located here on the south wall. The prisoners were guarded, and although over the years rumors said Geronimo had a private cell, I don't think this was true."

Hazel's shoulders slumped at his dismissal. Cynthia joined Shortie and me, and we explored the area, wandering a few feet from the rest of our group. She peeked around a corner into another dimmer part of the quarters and stepped inside.

"Mom, check this out." She called me over and held out a long, iridescent green feather.

"Owen can tell us what this belongs to." I called his name. "What is this?"

Shortie chuckled. "It's a bird feather. I could have told you."

I elbowed him. "Smart man. Yes, but what kind?"

Owen removed a bird book from his vest and thumbed through it. Hazel peered over his shoulder. He turned the book toward us. "Hmm, okay, I think it's this one."

She gasped. "It's a quetzal tail feather."

"You're right." Owen read for a minute. "This says that in ancient Mayan culture, the Mayans used quetzal feathers as a kind of money because quetzals were considered sacred."

Shortie, Hazel, Cynthia, and I exchanged glances.

Carmen joined us. "Why are you looking at each other like that?" Her finely tweezed eyebrows crinkled, and she hooked her arm through Owen's. "Let's continue the tour."

"I haven't told you two, but the Keatons are back in Pensacola. Last year, they were in Guatemala, and a quetzal went missing," I said.

Owen barked a dismissive laugh. “You think this feather is from the missing quetzal? That’s quite a stretch, Peg.”

“Maybe, but quetzals don’t live in the United States.”

Cynthia tugged my shirt sleeve. “Mom?”

I turned at the fear in her voice. “What’s wrong?” I scanned her head to toe, alert for any problems.

She pointed. Several feet from where she found the feather was a pile of leaves with something—it looked like a black sneaker—poking out of them.

“Huh? Weird. Where did the leaves come from? There aren’t any trees outside this part of the fort,” I said.

Hazel stepped farther into the room and leaned down, brushing away more of the leaves. The shoe was connected to a leg, and she screamed.



“WHY ARE YOU HERE?” I asked. The man in front of me wore a dark brown button-down shirt and blue jeans. He rolled up the sleeves on his tanned, muscled forearms. I dragged my gaze from the sight.

“Nice to see you again, Peg.” Marcus Sharp’s sarcasm rang loud and clear. He shook Shortie’s hand. “They called me in because of the Keatons and their link to Sylvia Newman and Anna Thompson’s murders.”

I met Detective Sharp last September at the birding group’s first outing when Anna died from anaphylactic shock after she handled birdseed laced with peanuts. The peanuts, intended to kill Sylvia, resulted in Anna’s accidental death.

I reminded myself not to stare. When we first met, his dimples and dark brown eyes, the same shade as his shirt, attracted me. It didn’t take long before a harder and more

competitive side of him showed and discouraged any further relationship. He apologized, but we weren't friends anymore.

Now, we watched as EMTs loaded Roger Keaton's body into the coroner's van. I sighed. Another death, another murder.

Shortie introduced Marcus to Cynthia, who stayed glued to my side. Sharp acknowledged her with a nod and pulled a notebook from his pocket. He flipped it open. "What can you tell me?"

"You'll be surprised to hear this, but I didn't discover Keaton." I clenched my fists, my fingernails pressed into my palms.

"You didn't?" His words dripped more sarcasm. He turned to Shortie. "You?"

"Nope, not me. Hazel found him." He called my mother-in-law over.

She rushed to us, shielding her eyes with her hand. "I can tell you everything, Marcus. I was about to talk to those park rangers." She pointed to the group clustered nearby. Their cowboy-hat-style straw hats, tan uniform shirts, and sharply pressed olive pants indicated their identity.

He cringed. "Hazel, please call me Detective Sharp."

"You can call me Mrs. Howard." She popped her hands on her hips, her blue eyes blazing. "You want to hear what I found or not? Why aren't you in uniform? You were the last time we saw you."

Sharp's face flushed. He nodded and spoke through gritted teeth. "Detectives don't wear uniforms. When you met me then, I had just become a detective and hadn't switched over. Now, please tell me what you found."

Hazel explained Cynthia's discovery of the sneaker and how she herself found the body attached to it—Keaton's body. "I brushed off some leaves from him. I didn't turn or touch

him. He lay face up, and we identified him right away. He had a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead but no blood. Why wasn't there any blood?"

Marcus scribbled notes. "Thanks. I'll be in touch if I have more questions. You still live with Peg?" His gaze held mine.

"Yes, I do," Hazel said.

He slapped shut his notebook and marched off to join the national park rangers.

Shortie indicated the uniformed men and women. "They'll handle most of this, but Sharp has to figure out how Keaton got out here. And who killed him."

Hazel's mouth twisted to one side. "I want to know why there wasn't blood by Roger's body."

"I don't want to see any, but thanks. I wonder how long he's been out here." I blew out a long breath. "Do you think his wife killed him?"

Hazel gasped. "I bet she did. I'll go tell Marcus."

Shortie grasped her arm before she followed after the detective. "Hold on. He's aware Estelle is in Pensacola. It was on the news."

"Oh, yeah." She covered her face with her hands and released a deep sigh.

I slung an arm around her waist. "Let's round up the rest of the birders and go find some birds." I leaned closer to her ear and whispered, "We'll talk about this at home."

She perked up and mimed zipping her lips closed.

Our group remained subdued, but with Owen again leading the way, we hiked around the area and spotted several different kinds of birds—tiny warblers, orioles, and brown pelicans. The sun warmed us, and the breeze off the Gulf kept us comfortable. A brick retaining wall separated the road from the beach. We walked up and over several steps and tromped through the soft white sand to the shoreline.

Across Pensacola Bay, part of the sunken caravel stuck above the water. I pointed it out to Hazel.

"I wonder what kind of treasures they'll find," she said.

"Gold, silver, and gems, like the rumors say?"

Her eyes twinkled. "How exciting! It's more interesting than the artifacts they've found from the de Luna wrecks. Weapons, plates, and nails aren't as fun as gems."

Cynthia touched my arm and gestured to a pelican. "Look at him dive." She grinned and imitated his motion with her arm.

Her smile lightened my heart.

The bird plunged into the Gulf again, and Owen cracked open his book. "Brown pelicans are small, and unlike other pelicans, they plunge for their food.

A smallish bird with a yellow bill and legs and what resembled a black helmet caught my eye. As I watched, it took flight.

"What's that?" I asked.

Carmen stepped forward and spoke, "I can identify it. It's a least tern."

We all turned to stare at her.

"Have you been researching birds?" Hazel asked, her brows furrowed and one eyebrow cocked.

Carmen studied her nails and made a face. "Kind of. I wanted to contribute to the group. I'm not the typical birder type."

She told the truth. Most of us wore shorts—Owen, Cynthia, and Shortie sported the khaki cargo kind—an old T-shirt, and hiking boots. Carmen wore color-coordinated clothes: white capris with a dressy red, white, and blue top, red sandals, and a scarf tied around her neck.

Hazel mumbled, "Trying to impress Owen is what she's doing."

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I held my finger to my lips. “Shush.” Louder, I said, “I’m impressed, Carmen. What other terns have you learned about?”

She stood straight and delivered a lecture on the different terns in Northwest Florida. Hazel might have reason to worry about Carmen and Owen, but I loved seeing birder-Carmen, not the real estate agent persona she usually portrayed.

I led a round of clapping when she finished speaking. “You’ve learned a lot.”

“Thank you.” A blush worked its way up her neck.

I opened my mouth to ask her another question when Cynthia grabbed my arm and said, “Mom, look.”