

Chapter 2



Not quite a year ago, I owned and managed a thriving mom blog—Mamma Birds—but loneliness hit, and I formed the Empty Nesters Birding Group because of a reader’s suggestion. One birder, Anna, died by accident, and another, Sylvia, was murdered. Stabbed, to be precise.

My mother-in-law moved in with me when Hurricane Hazel changed from a Category 1 storm to a nasty Cat 3 and headed straight for Pensacola. She didn’t want to be alone during the hurricane, and she never left.

She and I bonded—a pair of widows connected by Zack, her son, and my deceased husband. Long story short, she joined me as my sidekick in the search for the killer.

In the back of my mind, I thought I would be an empty nester again once they fixed her roof and she returned home, taking her Weimaraner and parakeet. Carter would attend the University of South Alabama in Mobile. Chloe and Tom lived a short thirty-minute drive away in Gulf Breeze. And Cynthia would still be on active duty in the Navy.

Now, Cynthia and Hazel would live in two of my three extra bedrooms.

Carter waved his hand, a sheepish expression on his face. “Mom? Um, I plan to move back in a couple weeks. Finals ended, and my lease is almost up.”

Oh, I forgot about that. Okay then. *All* of my bedrooms would be full.

I stood before my family, arms spread wide, my emotions soaring. “You guys are all welcome here, all the time. Any time. You’re my people, and I love you. We’ll make this work.” I hugged them one by one.

Tom wiggled his eyebrows. “What if we want to move in?”

“It might be a bit tight, but you can if you have to.” My mind raced as I rearranged rooms and determined who could sleep where.

Shortie winked. “I’m staying at my place.”

“Good thing, buster, because I don’t see a ring yet,” Hazel chided him.

Uh-oh, time to change the subject. Fast. “Okay, anyone want pizza for dinner?” I picked up my cell and dialed the number. “How many pepperoni and mushroom, and how many deluxe?”

Shortie shook his head, lips turned up in a grin. We’d been dating seven months, at my count, and our relationship moved at a slow pace. I liked it and thought he did too. I cared about him, but neither of us had said the three little words, “I love you.” Yet. As my first boyfriend since Zack died well over a decade ago, he wasn’t a rebound boyfriend.

But I wanted to make sure it was real love. A lasting love.

Besides, now I had a houseful of kids, animals, and a mother-in-law to take care of, plus a grandbaby due soon. My hands itched to find a pen and paper and make a grocery list, and my brain whirred with all I had to do.

The Keatons, their return to Pensacola, and the Spanish caravel were put on the back burner.



I WOKE to the yummy aroma of bacon and coffee. After a long stretch and a jaw-popping yawn, I hopped out of bed and dressed. My walking boot sat in the corner of my room—a silent reminder of how close I came to dying last year. Thankful my ankle healed well, I slipped into sparkly red sandals and opened my bedroom door.

Cynthia stood at the stove and waved a spatula. “Morning, Mom.”

I kissed her cheek and poured a cup of coffee. “Those eggs look yummy. And you made bacon. When did you start cooking?”

“I’ve been on a boat for four years. In my spare time, I cooked. I watched online videos to learn what to do, and—” She shrugged. “It’s become a passion.”

She dished out our breakfast, and we ate at the island. CB, hope in his eyes, waited for a bite.

“I let him out to potty this morning. Grandma wasn’t up yet,” she said.

“Thanks. He’s a good fellow.” I rubbed his back with my foot and then dropped him a piece of bacon.

“You’re going to make him fat.” Hazel’s gruff voice startled me.

“He will never be fat. Weimaraners are sleek dogs. Right, CB?”

He woofed in agreement.

Cynthia stood and indicated her barstool. “Grandma, have a seat, and I’ll dish your food.”

Hazel scrutinized my plate. “She cooks? That’ll be handy.” She slid onto her seat.

True. I wasn’t Julia Child, but I made the basics. Other than the one time Hazel made spaghetti—denying it was my last

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meal before I went to the police station to be fingerprinted—she had zero kitchen skills.

“What will you do since you’ve quit the Navy?” she asked.

Leave it to her to ask the difficult questions. I held my breath and waited for my daughter’s answer.

She poured coffee for Hazel, filled her grandmother’s plate, and set it down. “I thought about going to culinary school. I didn’t quit. I needed to reenlist, and I decided not to.”

What else affected her decision? She entered the Navy right after high school through the delayed entry program. She’d dreamed about doing that forever. “I thought you liked serving?”

She leaned against the island and tipped her head side to side. “I did.”

“And?” Hazel asked.

“I loved being in the Navy. When we went to the North Atlantic—” Her expression grew wistful. “I enjoyed it. I liked my work as a yeoman. Sometimes. A lot of paperwork, though.”

“Were you bored?” I topped off my coffee and returned to the barstool. “Restless?”

“Both, I guess. PSC has a culinary arts program, and I’m interested in trying it.”

It took me a minute to translate PSC in my head. “I’m still not used to the name Pensacola State College. When I went, it was Pensacola Junior College.”

She made a face. “You’re old.”

“Funny girl.”

Cynthia rapped the counter with her knuckles. “Do y’all mind cleaning up? I’m going for a walk.”

I waved my fork and mumbled around a mouthful of eggs, “Sure. Be careful.”

Hazel helped clean the kitchen and left for the library. I

took my phone and laptop and headed for the back porch. CB followed me and stretched out in a patch of sunshine.

So far, May had been the epitome of a gorgeous spring with long, cool days, little humidity, lots of sunshine, and soft breezes. I enjoyed any time Pensacola had good weather. Not so hot and sticky, and my hair wasn't a frizzy, curly mess. Most of the year, I needed a lot of products to tame it.

I set my devices on a round wrought-iron table and curled up in a pale green Adirondack chair, a Christmas gift from Shortie. Its mate sat empty on the other side of the table, waiting for him to join me after work.

Several feeders hung from tall, skinny pine trees in my backyard. Red-winged blackbirds ate the suet from a square, flat feeder.

According to an old tale, red-winged blackbirds symbolize luck and protection. I didn't believe in luck, and God protected me, but I loved seeing them and all the other birds, squirrels, and occasional raccoons and bunnies that traipsed through the yard. CB didn't bark at the critters but closely observed their every move.

I closed my eyes and prayed. Last fall, I sat out here doing the same thing—mourning Carter leaving for college and that I was an empty nester. Now, I spent my time praising God for the new grandbaby to come and for my kids' health and happiness. And that I would have more time with Cynthia and Carter.

My phone rang, startling me from my prayers. I hit accept and the speaker button.

"Hey, lady."

My pulse ramped up at Shortie's husky voice. "Hi. How's your day?"

"Busy. These young guys, whew. I hope I wasn't so incompetent when I joined the Navy." After serving for over

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twenty years as an MP, Shortie now worked as a contractor at Naval Air Station (NAS) Pensacola.

“You’ve never been incompetent.”

“Thanks.” He paused. “I wanted to talk to you about something. Can I take you to dinner Sunday night?”

My stomach flipped at his serious tone. “Um, sure.”

“Don’t sound too excited, Peg.”

“No, I am, promise. I thought I’d schedule a birding trip out to Fort Pickens. How’s that sound?”

“Like fun. This Saturday?” he said.

“Yes, if everyone can make it. I’ll text them and let you know.”

“Okay, talk to you later.” He blew me a kiss and ended the call.

I set my phone aside and wondered what he wanted to discuss. It might be bad news or good news. I tended to be pessimistic and think the worst.

I looked up. “You got this, right? I’ll wait on You.” I would repeat the words over and over until Sunday’s dinner date. I found it challenging to pursue my own happiness, especially with Shortie. Several months ago, Hazel asked me to dream about what I wanted at this stage in my life, and it wasn’t only romance I struggled with.

From comments on my Mamma Birds blog, I realized many moms felt guilty about wanting a life apart from their kids. I encouraged them and said it wasn’t a bad thing. In fact, it was healthy. Why wouldn’t I do the same for myself? My kids didn’t require me to be “on deck” at all times. They weren’t kids anymore. They were grownups. I’d done my job. They might need me occasionally, but I didn’t have to wait around for them.

My thoughts were interrupted when Cynthia joined me.

"Hey, Mom." She plopped in the other chair, sweat trickling down her cheeks. She patted CB's head.

"Good walk?"

"More of a fast one, so I'm hot and sweaty." She wiped her face with a hand towel. "Much better now than in August, though."

"True. What are you up to today?"

"After I shower, I'm heading to PSC to apply and see if I can enroll in some summer classes. How about you?"

"I need to work on the blog a bit. Carter called, and he'll be home two weeks from yesterday, so I want to clean his room. And I'm going to text the birding group to arrange our next outing."

Cynthia stopped mid-wipe, eyebrow cocked. "I've heard all about the birders. Sounds like a dangerous group."

I chuckled at the thought of mild-mannered retired history professor Owen and the somewhat ostentatious realtor, Carmen, bearing weapons and looking fierce.

"They're not dangerous. Right now, it's me, Grandma, Shortie, Owen, and Carmen."

"Two people died last year. Like right off the bat."

Someone, Hazel or Chloe, had filled the child's ear. "There's a bit more to the story. Shortie played a big part in catching the killer. Wanna hear it?"

I told the tale, and she listened, most of the time with her mouth hanging open.

"I discovered Sylvia, the murdered birder," I said. "Then her killer pushed me down a flight of steep stairs, and I ended up with a broken ankle, and the killer tied up Grandma. Shortie saved the day by catching the bad guy." I didn't offer the new information on Roger and Estelle.

I finished, and she shook her head and stood. "Next birding trip, I'm going too."

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“Why?”

“Someone’s gotta keep an eye on y’all.” She headed inside, muttering about crazy old people and killers.

Hmm. The tables had turned. I caused my kid anxiety. I snickered at the thought.

I opened my laptop and navigated to my blog, Mamma Birds. Lauree now carried the weight of blogging and took care of the business end of things. Chloe planned to start a section for new moms after the baby’s birth. I covered what it was like to be an empty nester. Being a mom didn’t stop when your kids grew up.

Now, I’d experience them at home as adults. I jotted a note to blog about the subject, sure I wasn’t alone in this new phase.

Before writing, I texted Owen and Carmen about meeting at Fort Pickens on Pensacola Beach and received a “Yes” back from both. I texted Shortie to confirm 10 a.m. on Saturday. He responded with a thumbs-up emoji and a text.

No dead bodies this time, okay?

Like I intended to find dead people. I shot back the same emoji and shook my head. Last year brought enough bodies and killers. I wasn’t interested in discovering more.