

No Egrets

An Empty-nesters Cozy Mystery: Book 3



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Special thanks to my friend, Tonya Sloan, who helped me launch book 2 in the series and won the chance to pick an animal and name it for No Egrets. Tonya loves dogs and works with our local dog rescue. She chose a golden retriever mix puppy and named her Lucy.



Chapter 1

Even at 7:30 p.m., heat hung heavily in the air. Perspiration trickled down my back. This meeting, scheduled to last until nine, stretched before me like an endless road on a moonless night. I shouldn't have attended, and I wouldn't have, except for my mother-in-law's persistent badgering. When she told me to grab my purse, I did. To be fair, she mentioned cookies.

And here we stood, surrounded by the majority of Stone Creek Cove's homeowners, who waited to discuss the problem *du jour*—finding the missing egrets and making the creek a safer place—and no cookies in sight.

"This place has seen better days," I said, looking at the few pieces of decrepit wooden furniture scattered around the room.

Hazel scooted closer to me as more people crowded into the building. "It's been here as long as I've owned my house, Peg, and I've lived here for over forty years. Residents use it for everything from weddings to neighborhood association meetings."

Weddings? Imagining a pristine white gown swishing

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down the aisle after seeing the number of spider webs on the windows and the dirty, scuffed floor sent shivers up and down my spine. I shook off thoughts of festive nuptials and my own recent proposal. “That’s another term for homeowners’ association, by the way.”

She gave me the stink eye. Other curious neighbors entered, and we shuffled around the left side of the room. About thirty chairs sat in the middle, all of them full. The rest of us lined the sides like random sardines. The scent of hot, sweaty bodies grew.

“Order.” A woman of indeterminate age stood at the front of the room and whacked her hand on the rickety podium. Another slam might split it in two. She brushed her stylish gray hair behind her ears, repositioned her bright red cat-eye glasses, and leaned toward the microphone. “I said order. Now shut y’all’s mouths.”

Having grown up in Northwest Florida and now a resident of Pensacola in general, Stone Creek Cove specifically, the contraction of “you all” was considered perfect English. Northerners who moved to the area adopted the term to avoid being teased. This woman’s accent indicated she’d been born into it.

A slim, gray-haired man, sporting round silver spectacles propped on the end of his nose, sat beside the podium. He jumped up and pointed at several women clustered on the right side of the room. “My wife said y’all. That means you too.”

Gasps rang out, almost as one voice. The group surged forward and faced off with the African-American couple.

I bent toward my mother-in-law’s ear. “Should we leave? We don’t want to be tangled up in whatever this is.”

“We’re here for the birds, remember?” Hazel patted my arm. Her eyes brimmed with excitement.

I made a face but held my tongue. Since I formed the Empty Nesters Birding Group last year, birds consumed my every waking moment. I seemed to live and breathe for our feathered friends, from Hazel's yellow parakeet Roscoe to the rufous hummingbird and the resplendent quetzal. Now, the snowy egrets that used to live in the creek in the middle of the 'hood had vanished. No one knew why or how.

"The woman is Marilyn Croft. She's the head of the association. Derek is her husband." Hazel indicated the man who fussed at the women.

A woman in her late fifties, dressed in stonewashed capris and a graphic T-shirt depicting a '70s rock band, stepped out of the group and stamped her foot. "Derek Croft, you and your wife are not in charge."

Her version of "You're not the boss of me." I bit the inside of my cheek, stifling my giggles.

With a sneer, the man said, "Babs, sit down." His authoritative tone surprised me.

She approached the Crofts and locked eyes with Derek. "Hush. We should vote on this. We must find the birds, and we want better security at the creek."

Derek grabbed her arm as she passed him. "We can't afford that, remember?" he hissed.

She jerked away, a murderous expression on her face. She turned toward the crowd, hands on her hips. "I say we vote."

Marilyn and Derek exchanged glances. "This can't happen," he said in a panicked tone.

Two more women from Babs's group joined her. They linked arms. "Vote, vote. Vote, vote. Vote, vote."

"Hazel," I said. "What is happening?"

She shushed me again, and we waited while Marilyn called for a yay or nay answer on locating the errant egrets and

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installing lights and security cameras at the creek. Babs insisted on helping her count the responses.

“We have a stalemate.” Babs groaned. She raised her arms, palms up. “Come on, people. The birds need us. Let’s do this.”

Derek stood within a foot of her face. “Just because some birds disappeared doesn’t mean we must spend money.” He said *birds* as if they were a dirty word.

“Hazel, let’s go.” I didn’t know what was about to happen, but I didn’t want to be involved. “These people are a little over the top.” Their reactions didn’t sit right with me. What would they do next? My mother-in-law didn’t budge.

Derek and Babs argued and fussed until Marilyn smacked the podium again.

“Let’s appoint someone since we can’t agree.” She shaded her eyes from the glaring overhead lights and scanned the audience. She jabbed her finger in our direction. “There, them.”

And that’s how Hazel and I became lead investigators of Stone Creek Cove’s missing egrets.



“HOW DID that Marilyn lady know you two?” My daughter, Cynthia, broke off a piece of a chocolate chip cookie and dropped it in her mouth. She joined me on the overstuffed dark blue couch in Hazel’s living room.

I bit another chunk of my oatmeal raisin cookie. Lots of shouting took place at the meeting. Some of the words still rang in my ears. “Ask your grandmother.” I’d been promised sweets at the meeting, so when it ended sans cookies, I insisted we drive through our favorite sandwich shop and buy some before we went home. Cynthia happily volunteered to help us consume them.

Hazel sat across from us on a matching loveseat. She heaved a loud sigh. “Our reputation precedes us, I suppose.”

Considering how often our names appeared in the news, I agreed. “I think she handpicked us before we got there. How can we get out of it?” I picked out a raisin and chewed it. “Not that I don’t care about the missing egrets.”

My youngest, Carter, home for the summer from the University of South Alabama, showed me a picture of the beautiful white birds with skinny black legs and yellow feet. I felt sorry for the little things. They mattered to me, but perhaps not as much as to other people.

“I don’t think we can. You met Marilyn. She’s not the kind of person you want to go up against.” Hazel rested a pillow on her lap, smoothing the tassels around its edges. “And what she said at the end? I couldn’t believe it.”

“What did she say?” Cynthia asked.

“She must not have realized her mic was still on, and she mentioned Babs. She said, ‘When is she going to learn not to oppose me?’” I imitated Marilyn’s voice.

“Uh-oh,” Cynthia said. “How did that go over?”

“Not pleasant.” Hazel broke her cookie in half. “Babs Ferguson is a force to be reckoned with. Marilyn is well acquainted with her.”

Cynthia sat back, arms crossed, a strong-willed—dare I say bulldog—expression on her face. “I don’t think they can make you take over the homeowners’ association.”

“Neighborhood,” Hazel corrected her. “We don’t pay for anything, and no one wanted to, so we call it a neighborhood association. Besides, we only have to locate the birds and set up security.”

“Hmm.” My daughter shifted in her seat. “Did they spell out what you should do? How are you supposed to find them? It’s not like you can put out an APB.”

“Remember the letter Grandma Hazel received? The police know about the theft of the birds. That’s what started all of this.” I explained what else we had to do. “When are we meeting with the Crofts?” I asked Hazel. Perhaps Derek would be open to someone else taking charge.

“Marilyn invited us over for lunch tomorrow to talk about the walkway, security, and the birds.” Hazel stood and stretched. “I’m going to bed.” She gently snapped her fingers at her gray Weimaraner, Charlie Brown, and blew a kiss to her yellow parakeet, Roscoe. “Night, y’all.”

“Let’s check out the creek tomorrow before we go to their house,” I said.

She grunted in what I assumed meant agreement. CB trotted behind her.

“Bedtime for me too. Goodnight, Cynth. Sleep well.” I tossed my napkin in the kitchen trash can.

“Want me to wait up for Carter?” she asked.

“You don’t need to.” Her brother worked as a busboy at the beach, saving up for textbooks for his upcoming fall semester. “The restaurant doesn’t close until after midnight. He won’t be home anytime soon.” I covered my yawn.

“Okay. I’m staying up for a while.” She picked up the remote and clicked on the television. “Will this bother you?”

“No.” After hugging her goodnight, I headed for my room, plugged my phone into its charger, and got ready for bed. My cell rang as I got into bed, and I answered without checking the caller ID.

“Hi, Peg.”

Oh, boy, it was my boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend? I assumed he wanted an answer to his proposal.

“Hi, Shortie.” What else should I say? Ten days ago, he proposed. Two days before that, Marcus kissed me. Or I kissed him. Either way, kissing happened.

And I hadn't talked to either one since.

Shortie cleared his throat. "How are you? How're Hazel and the kids?" His voice, low and husky as usual, carried an edge of hesitation.

This man cared about me, Hazel, and my kids. An original member of the Empty Nesters Birding Group, he stayed by my side through all of the craziness, including when two birders died within months of each other and as another one confessed to murder last month.

Caught off guard by his proposal, I'd avoided him. My previous marriage of thirteen years ended when my husband, Zack, got caught in a riptide and died. My kids, still young then, were now grown-ups. Shortie was my first relationship since Zack. Relationships went through ups and downs, but his reactions to things sometimes bothered me. He'd become possessive in a way I didn't like and hadn't expected from him.

"We're fine. Hazel and I are now in charge of a project for her neighborhood association."

He snorted. "Not surprised by that."

Fair point. "Yeah, some egrets went missing."

"Y'all should open a private eye agency. A bird detective agency. You can call it Two Chicks." He laughed at his joke.

I bristled at the dig in Marcus's direction. When Detective Marcus Sharp and I first met, sparks flew. Then Shortie and I started dating. Marcus tried to run Shortie off, but his arrogant attitude ended up running me off. The handsome detective and I kissed less than two weeks ago. I tried to chalk it up to one friend comforting another since he was in the hospital. But those sparks ignited flames hard to ignore.

"Hazel might be open to your idea, but not me." I banished thoughts of Marcus from my head.

"She and CB can wear one of those old-fashioned detective

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hats.” He chuckled again. “Anyhow, I called to check on you. Any news from your insurance? Can they fix your house?”

“They called yesterday, and the plan is for a contractor to replace the roof after the integrity of the structure is checked. Then I can hire cleaners for the inside.” I stretched out my legs. “I still can’t believe Owen got involved with Estelle. And he and Gabby tried to burn down my house.”

“Yeah. He always seemed like a stand-up guy on our birding trips. Very smart. But I’m glad to hear the news about your house.” He paused, and my anxiety soared. “Hey, my timing the other day was bad. I’m sorry.”

Sorry he proposed, or sorry when he did it? I wouldn’t ask. “Yeah.” That’s all I could say. I felt raw from loss, and my brain still spun from recent events.

“I’ll let you go. Sleep well,” he said.

“You too.” I ended the call and lay back in my bed. Thoughts of Zack, Shortie, and Marcus floated through my mind. Closing my eyes, I prayed for wisdom and clear thoughts. It had been a while since I experienced either.