

Chapter 3



After changing out of my wet clothes and finding no critters in them or on my body, my attitude improved. I brushed my hair and found Cynthia in the living room, talking on the phone, with the baby sound asleep on the couch.

“Chloe called. She’s on her way here.” Cynthia readjusted Reese’s blanket.

“Did she mention how her appointment went?” I slipped my feet into my sandals.

“She said the doctor is happy with how she’s healed. She’s excited to get back to normal living.” Cynthia made air quotes. “Hey, I can keep this guy since you and Grandma are leaving. Harry said I could show up at the Center whenever I wanted.”

“Yes, please. That’d be helpful.”

Hazel entered the room and added some feed to Roscoe’s cage, made noises to him, and latched it closed. “You have to stay here again, CB.” She stroked the dog’s back.

We smothered Reese in kisses before leaving for Derek and Marilyn’s. Their house stood among several new builds in the neighborhood. While Hazel’s sat low and wide, an older one-story, four-bedroom brick ranch, the Crofts’

cream-colored stucco house loomed two stories high. A massive porch stretched across the front, with precisely trimmed shrubs forming a neat line. Waist-high stone pots, brimming with greenery, flanked the dark wooden front door.

“This is beautiful.” I touched the leaves of the closest plant.

“It is.” Hazel pushed the doorbell. “Marilyn is retired, but she held a high-up role in a tech company at one time. Computer programming, I think. Derek’s some kind of contractor.”

“Something lucrative for sure.” I continued to admire the front of the house. “I wish I had a green thumb.”

Derek Croft jerked open the door, a glare on his face. “What do you want?” His frosty voice matched his bright white button-down shirt.

Hazel and I stepped back.

“You invited us for lunch,” Hazel said, her eyes narrowing.

“We’re supposed to discuss the missing egrets,” I added, hoping to prompt his memory.

Marilyn joined us in the doorway. “Remember, dear? We’re working with them on the creek situation.” She patted his shoulder, and he relaxed.

“Oh, yes, I apologize.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes. The couple turned, and we followed them inside.

I pulled Hazel back. “You sure we should be here? He sounded mad.”

She shrugged me off and continued into the house. We entered a formal living area where Marilyn showed us to our seats on a sofa covered in a patterned brown chenille upholstery. I placed one of the fancy decorative pillows behind my back and reminded myself to sit up straight. Derek joined his wife across from us on a matching loveseat.

Hazel removed her notebook and pen from her purse and

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flipped to a clean page. “What do you want Peg and me to work on first?”

Marilyn’s eyes lit up, delight sparking across her face. “The missing egrets, of course. And better security at the creek. The walkway is crumbling.”

“We stopped by the creek on our way over. It definitely needs some work.” Hazel jotted notes.

Derek crossed his arms. “It will cost a pretty penny. Security isn’t a priority.” His mouth pulled down in a scowl.

“Now, dear, we talked about that.” Marilyn patted his leg. He shifted away from her and continued to argue.

They went back and forth for a few minutes, almost as if we weren’t in the room.

I raised my voice to interrupt their spat and try to refocus the conversation. “Why do you think the egrets are missing?”

Their bickering ended. Marilyn recovered first. “I imagine someone took them.” Her statement ended more like a question.

Hazel raised her hand. “If I may, we have some bird experience”—my eyebrow twitched—“and I think it would be hard for someone to steal as many as we had.” She twirled her pen in her hand.

Derek stood. “You can search for them if you want to. Go ahead.” He flipped his hand. “But we don’t have the money to pay for security or to install a new sidewalk.” He directed his last sentence at his wife in a growl and tromped out of the room.

Marilyn rose and motioned Hazel and me toward the front door.

“Please excuse my husband.” She stopped, her hand on the doorknob. “He hasn’t been feeling well.”

Her excuse didn’t ring true. I wanted more details.

Before I opened my mouth, Hazel said, “While we’re alone,

I wanted to ask about Babs Ferguson.” She stuffed her notebook into her bag. “She was irate last night.”

Marilyn’s brows drew together into a sharp V. “The woman threatened me.”

“What?” I didn’t hear any threats.

She huffed and crossed her arms. “Yes, when we locked up.”

“What did she say?” Hazel and I both asked.

Somewhere in the house, Derek called Marilyn’s name. “I ... I need to go. I’m overreacting. No worries.” She waved us out of the house and shut the door.

We turned to trudge down their driveway. “Not sure we found out much. They didn’t make this any clearer, you have to admit. And those two do not get along.”

“I agree. What she said about Babs interested me, though. Come on. Let’s check out the creek area again. It’ll be cooler in the shade.” Hazel took off down the street.

The term “cooler,” in Northwest Florida, at least in the summer, lacked definition. Heat and humidity ruled, and we didn’t find any shade on our side of the creek. Sweat poured down my face and pooled in my shorts’ waistband.

“That’s where you fell in.” Hazel pointed.

“Snake heaven. Yuck.” Sweat beaded on my upper lip, and I wiped it off. I turned, and a piece of white fluff caught my eye. Tucked into the side of the bank sat a small pile of twigs with several white fluffy things in it. Carter once showed me pictures of snowy egrets’ nests, and this one looked exactly like them.

I stepped closer, avoiding the grassy area where I’d slipped before. “Here’s proof the egrets lived here.” Crouching down, I lifted branches of a nearby bush. “That’s weird. Hazel, pass me your phone. Mine’s at home.”

She handed me her cell, and I snapped a picture. I

scrambled back up the side of the creek and showed it to her. She zoomed in, a frown covering her face.

“What is that?” she asked.

“Some kind of sticky substance? I didn’t touch it, but it appears gummy.” I glanced back at the nest. “Think it’s from the eggs hatching?”

“I don’t think so, but I’m no expert. We can ask Harry.”

I refrained from reminding her what she’d just told the Crofts about her expertise. “True. Let’s go home. We both need more water too.” My stomach growled. “Hey, weren’t the Crofts supposed to feed us lunch?”

Hazel texted Harry on our walk home, and by the time we downed water and cooled off, he knocked on the door.

“Hi, there,” I said. “Thanks for coming over.”

He hugged me. Our friendship had come a long way in a few short months. Getting kidnapped together and running from a burning house sealed it for both of us.

“What do you have?” he asked.

“You’ll have to come down to the creek with me.”

“Is Cynthia here?” He glanced into the living room. “She’s supposed to come by the Center today.”

“I’ll let her know we’ll be back soon. She can go when you do.” I knocked on her door and told her my plans with Harry. Returning to the living room, I picked up my phone. “Okay, take me to the creek, and I’ll show you what we’ve found. Hazel,”—I raised my voice—“are you coming with us?”

She peeked around the corner from her room. “Y’all go on without me. I’m going to lie down for a few minutes. It’s so hot today.”

As Harry drove, I explained what I found. He parked beside the walkway and followed me down the bank, where I showed him the egret’s nest. “There’s something weird in it. Sticky, I think, but I didn’t touch it.”

He pulled disposable gloves from his back pocket and slipped them on. "I'll take it back to the center and check it out." He lifted the nest and examined it. "Hmm. I see what you mean."

Since his hands were full, I supported his elbow as we climbed the slick incline up to the walkway.

"Thanks. There's a bag in my trunk if you can grab it." He tipped his chin toward his car.

I found the bag and helped him slide the nest inside. He placed it in the back seat and drove me back to Hazel's.

"I'll call you when I figure out what this is," he said. "Shouldn't take long."

I waved goodbye to the real bird expert.



WHEN THE KIDS WERE LITTLE, Zack and I took them to the Fourth of July fireworks at Pensacola Beach. But in recent years, my family and Lauree's family attended the Blue Wahoo baseball game in downtown Pensacola. When I dropped off the burgers on Friday, Lauree suggested we continue our annual tradition.

"Are you sure you're up to it?" I asked. Her pasty color and drawn face worried me.

"Yes, I want to do this." She reached out and gripped my hand. "Please, Peg."

"Of course. We'll meet you."

The next afternoon, we arrived right before the first pitch. A warm breeze floated off nearby Pensacola Bay, carrying the scent of saltwater and the sound of crying seagulls. John pushed Lauree in her wheelchair, and I bought her a fan with a water mister. It had only been a few weeks since she told me about her cancer. Seeing her in a wheelchair drove home the seriousness of her situation.

We settled into our seats. “Hey, Suzie, what do you like the most about baseball games? When they say, ‘Play ball,’ the smell of hot dogs, or the scent of fresh-cut grass?” I asked.

“I’m here for the dogs,” she said, her eyes sparkling.

“Me too,” Stevie said.

The first crack of the bat echoing through the ballpark caught our attention. The ball sailed high, and I held my breath as the center fielder scrambled back, his eyes locked on it. I flinched at the sharp *thwack* as it met his glove and jumped up to yell encouragement.

“Hey, Carter, buy me a hot dog.” Cynthia nudged her brother, who groaned but got up when she waved her credit card.

“Anyone else want snacks?” He took our orders and enlisted Stevie to help him carry the food.

While we waited, a vendor made his way through the rows, his cart piled high with stuffed animals and toys. I got his attention and bought a stuffed Blue Wahoo character. I handed it to Lauree, and she clutched it in her arms.

Stevie and Carter returned with the food, and we turned our attention to the game. The players pulled their caps down against the setting sun, rolled up their sleeves, and wiped their faces with team towels. We sipped lemonade and water to stay hydrated. After the third inning, John wheeled Lauree to the top and sat in the shade with her.

The ball soared again, slicing the air toward the right field line. The opposite team’s runner on second broke for third, and I hopped up to cheer for the Wahoo’s right fielder. He caught the ball in time to tap the runner out. Someone tossed free T-shirts into the audience, and Carter caught one. He ran up the steps to present it to Lauree. Tears filled my eyes at the affection and care he showed.

I followed and offered to help her put it on. She lifted her

arms, and I slid it over her head, straightening it at the bottom. “You look good, my friend.” I studied her face. “You okay?”

She shifted in the wheelchair. “Just tired.” She rubbed her arms.

I sat beside her and held her hand through the rest of the game. To continue the Fourth of July celebration, the local symphony performed when the game ended, followed by the Gulf Breeze High School marching band.

Afterward, with the day’s thick humidity clinging to us, the kids joined us at the top of the stadium. During the last moments of daylight, as the bay mirrored the fiery colors of the sunset—soft purples, orange, and glimpses of pink—we snapped several group pictures.

We found our seats when the sky darkened to an inky blue. Around us, people chattered while waiting for the fireworks to begin. The first crackle pierced the night air, and I held my breath for a split second before a blinding burst of color exploded across the sky. We gasped in unison as the colors bloomed and faded, silver sparks floating to earth.

Each round of fireworks seemed bolder than the last, painting the dark above in a red, white, and blue spectacle. The crowd cheered and hollered with patriotic pride. Lauree’s massive smile brought tears to my eyes. I blinked them back, thankful for another celebration with her.

The finale began. After a dramatic silence, a single streak of light shot into the air. Then came a series of rapid bursts, one after another. It reminded me of a kaleidoscope I owned as a little girl, full of reds, purples, golds, and blues. The ending came as one last deafening roar, fading into the night. We stood in stunned silence for a heartbeat before erupting into applause. The night might be still now, but the memory of spending time with my family and friends would linger in my heart.