



Chapter 2

The following day, my oldest child, Chloe, dropped off my first and so far only grandchild, Reese, on the way to her six-week postpartum checkup. I sat on the couch, snuggling him close, and soaking up his sweet newborn scent. Cynthia woke up and, after fifteen minutes, she demanded some “Aunt Cynth time.”

“How was Chloe this morning?” She cradled Reese against her.

“A little tired, but she looked content,” I said.

“Of course she is with this snuggly little guy.” She rubbed noses with him and blew raspberries on his neck. “Mom, I think he smiled. Do babies smile this young?” She continued to baby-talk to Reese.

I turned on the coffeepot. “It might be gas, honey.”

She followed me into the kitchen. “No, he adores me. Don’t you sweet boy.” She nuzzled him again.

“Do you want scrambled eggs?” I asked.

“Sure.” She adjusted the baby on her shoulder. “I’m going to the Center later. Dr. Harry is starting a new project.”

His previous research at the Bird Rescue and Care Center

included overseeing the care of rare resplendent quetzals and protecting their eggs. The quetzals played a role in last month's murders and the arson that almost destroyed my house.

"The birds and their eggs were sent to the aquarium in Texas, right? Invite him over for dinner tonight. He doesn't eat enough." I scooped the food onto a plate and handed it to her, motioning for her to give Reese back.

She passed him over and dug in. She chewed and swallowed before saying, "Yes, they arrived, and Harry thinks they'll be fine. He's hoping they'll continue to reproduce. I'll be sure to ask him over."

"What is his next project?" My voice sing-songed to Reese as I swayed.

"He hasn't told me." She took another bite. "I'm going to talk to him about cheering up his office."

"Take down the black curtains and open the blinds first." Memories of the first time he showed me his dark and forbidding office surfaced. I widened my eyes and pretended to be afraid.

She giggled. "And put away some of those creepy jars that hold whatever they hold." She scrunched up her nose.

Hazel entered the kitchen, CB trotting behind her. "Smells yummy in here." Her eyes lit up when she spotted Reese in my arms. "Hand me my boy."

She cooed and made silly faces. "Aren't you just the handsomest fellow?" CB woofed and nuzzled into her thigh.

"Your dog is jealous," I said. In reality, it might have been me. But I had a plan. "Want some breakfast?" It had worked with Cynthia. Maybe food would entice my mother-in-law, and I'd get my grandson back. My phone rang as I plated Hazel's breakfast. I held up my finger. "He's mine after this."

My BFF greeted me when I answered.

“Hi, Lauree.” I held out my cell. Hazel and Cynthia hollered hello, and I returned it to my ear. “How are you?”

“Not too bad. I’ve only had one treatment. It’s experimental, so I’m now a human guinea pig.” She let out a short, sharp laugh, devoid of genuine pleasure.

“You’re my favorite guinea pig. Tell me how I can help.” I hated not living next door to her anymore. Hazel’s house was only fifteen minutes away, but after years of being neighbors and best friends, I missed living close enough to help her, John, and the twins during her cancer treatment. I prayed my house would be ready to move back into sooner rather than later.

“The meal train Carter and Cynthia set up has been a tremendous help. Please tell them.”

“They’ll be glad to hear that.” Lauree stayed by my side when Zack died and acted like my kids’ second mom. She didn’t give up on us or let me stop moving forward. Every day she pushed me. She helped me and the kids stay intact as a family.

“I’m grilling burgers tonight. I’ll drop some by tomorrow.” I pulled another package of meat from the freezer.

“Yum, John will be happy. We’ve eaten a lot of chicken casseroles lately.” She snickered. “Can’t wait to see you. We should plan a beach day too.”

My insides twisted remembering our last trip to the beach when she told me about her aggressive breast cancer diagnosis. I shoved the thoughts from my mind and cleared my emotions from my throat. “Sounds fun. Give the twins hugs from me. John too. I’ll be over tomorrow.”

We said our goodbyes, and I scribbled a sticky note to remind me to take her food. After finding out about her cancer, I vowed to be available for her and her family. I wouldn’t let her down.

“You’re a good friend, Peg. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Hazel's words and her hand on my shoulder startled me. "What ...?" I asked.

Her gentle smile touched me. "She loves you for who you are," she said.

True as that was, I didn't want to fail her like in the past.

"What have y'all decided to do about Mamma Birds?" Hazel asked as she put her plate in the kitchen sink.

"I sent out an email saying we're taking a short summer break. I haven't been away from it this long since I started it after Zack died. I'll get back to blogging soon, and Chloe will be ready to share her experience as a new mom."

Lauree, my former social media manager, took over most of the business duties before her cancer diagnosis. Changes were coming. I'd have to wait and see.

Hazel handed Reese to me. "I'm sure Chloe will do a fine job. Did she remember the stroller? We have the meeting at the Crofts soon."

I nodded, ready to change the subject. "We can check out the walking path and creek before we head there. Wonder if there are any lights already?"

"I can't remember. I'll go get ready."

As I waited for her, tires crunched on the gravel out front. When I peeked out the dining room window, my face flushed. "Detective Marcus is here," I told the baby. Reese and I stood on the front porch while Marcus, one leg in a cast, winced with each step as he balanced on his crutches.

My gut clenched. Because of me, he had a broken leg. Two breaks, actually. He stopped and studied the step up to where we waited.

"Do you need help?"

Without answering my question, he gathered the crutches in one hand, leaned them against the railing, and lowered himself to sit. "Don't want to attempt steps today."

I settled beside him. Reese shifted and stretched as only newborns can.

“Look at him.” Marcus grinned and rubbed Reese’s tiny foot. “What a beautiful guy.”

“He sure is. Want to hold him?”

He held out his hands, and I passed the baby over. My heart warmed as he studied Reese and stroked his head. The baby whimpered. Marcus shifted him to his shoulder like a pro.

“You’re good at that.”

“Yeah.” His eyes clouded. “It’s like riding a bike.”

Was he thinking of his little girl and wife, who both died in a car accident several years before? I touched his shoulder. “You okay?”

He studied me, his dark brown eyes full of an emotion I couldn’t figure out. “Yes.”

My raised eyebrow showed my doubt. “How’s the leg?”

“Doing fine. I’ll be on crutches for several more weeks before I get a walking boot. I’m on desk duty till then.” His brows drew together. “Lots of paperwork from your last escapade.”

I leaned back on my palms and stretched out my legs. “Don’t forget, I didn’t want what happened. I’d much rather be safe and sound in my house.” I related the news from my insurance company.

“Hope you can move back in before too long.” He handed Reese back. “It’s hard to hold him and brace my leg at the same time. He’s a big fellow.”

I laid the baby over my knees and patted his bottom.

There were a lot of apologies going around today. But I owed Marcus one. “I’m sorry.” The day Shortie proposed, Marcus arrived at the same time, and I shut the door in both men’s faces, not ready to deal with either of them.

Marcus touched my chin, and I turned to face him. “I won’t apologize for kissing you, Peg.” His thumb grazed my lips.

“I’m not sorry for that.”

His eyes darkened, and he leaned toward me.

I held up my palm. “Shortie and I have to talk. You saw what he did.”

“You didn’t tell him yes, or I wouldn’t still be here.” He brushed my hair behind my ear.

He made a valid point, but I needed to make decisions. Kissing him wouldn’t help. No matter how much I wanted to.

I did enjoy the one kiss we’d shared. Too much. Is it hokey to say it sent tingles through my body? Well, it did. Sparks, too, head to toe. I didn’t have that with Shortie. But was being a great kisser the answer to my problems?

Probably not.

Marcus left, and minutes later, Hazel opened the front door. “Are you ready? I told CB he can’t come on our w-a-l-k,” she said, spelling out the word to avoid igniting the dog’s excitement.

She scooped Reese off my lap and settled him into his stroller. Soon we were well on our way to the path. The July heat enveloped us, and I regretted forgetting my sunglasses. We reached the walkway and followed it as it wove beside the creek, birds twittering and tweeting from the trees. Several flew off at our approach. Hazel showed me the egrets’ normal nesting area. I left the sidewalk and tiptoed closer.

“You’d better be careful,” she said. “It’ll be marshy.”

I turned, hands on my hips. “Yes, I imagine so.”

She pointed to my feet. “Snaky too.”

“What?” Just then, something slithered into the bushes near me, and I jumped, windmilling my arms as I attempted to run in the damp grass. When my feet landed, they slipped, and my wild arm movements propelled me backward. I landed

with a splash and quickly flipped over onto all fours before pushing up to stand.

Stomping from the water, I made my way up to the walkway. A chill ran through me as I imagined all the creepy crawlies in the creek.

Hazel handed me a baby blanket.

“Thanks.” I wiped my face and arms.

“Are you okay? Is your ankle all right?”

I wiggled my foot. In the months since my stress fracture, it had healed well. “It’s fine. It’s more my heart.” I headed toward home, eager for clean, dry clothes.

“Your heart?” Hazel screeched. “What’s wrong? Should I call nine-one-one?” She whipped out her cell phone.

“No, I’m joking. You don’t have to call anyone.” Goosebumps broke out again. “It’s the snake.”

“You’re afraid of snakes? You have seen dead people, Peg. Dying people.”

I laughed at Hazel’s wide-eyed expression. “True. But snakes? I hate them.”

She drew a slithery shape up my back. “I’ll have to remember that.” Her eyes glittered with glee.

“Come on. I have to change, and Reese needs a bottle—and maybe a change.” No more creepy crawlies for me.