

## *The Cozumel Cuckoo*

### Chapter 1

“Mimil, mi amor, come quickly,” I called to my three-year old son, who came racing toward me, our little dog Pek following close behind.

When he was within a few feet of me, Mimil smiled slyly and climbed onto a fallen log. Then, with a shriek, he jumped into a pile of dry leaves and twigs. The ensuing racket caused a rustling in the trees. Both Mimil and I looked to the sky as dozens of startled birds took flight.

I’d made the mistake several months ago, when Mimil first started coming on bird-watching hikes with me, of admonishing him for making noise that disturbed wildlife. From my parenting guides, I now knew that in order to assert his independence, he had to do anything that I told him not to do. It was part of separating from me, a developmental process that would continue well into young adulthood and was as natural and normal as baby birds fledging and learning to fly.

I now brought him to the jungle only in the afternoons when most species had performed their critical tasks for the day and could return to resting mode when the threat level—caused in this case by a small human’s shriek—returned to normal.

I took Mimil’s sly grin as a good sign, proof that he understood what quiet meant and how to accomplish it—if he were so inclined, that is. The hope in my heart that my boy would one day become a fellow naturalist bumped up a notch.

Mimil careened toward me and, when he was within reach, I scooped him up and plopped him into his seat on the back of the three-legged bike, which looked like a tricycle for adults. I used the tricycle for transportation between my small home in the Yucatan tourist town of Tulum and my treehouse observation station located in the jungle three kilometers outside of town.

Pek stood watching, tail wagging, as I buckled Mimil in and strapped on his helmet. Next it would be Pek's turn to be lifted and tucked into the basket on the front of the tricycle. Finally, I secured my own helmet and then steered down the trail.

When we reached the point where the trail bisected the highway that led to Tulum, I checked for traffic and then merged slowly onto the shoulder. Slow was my only choice with the tricycle, but I loved the safety it provided when transporting such precious cargo as Mimil and Pek. The tricycle also reminded me of another beloved person, Ana, the elderly Maya woman who had been my neighbor and friend. After her death a few years earlier, Ana's son had offered me the tricycle he'd bought to make her own trips into town safer and I had gratefully accepted.

When we reached the sidewalk at the main entrance to La Dolce Vita, the beachfront resort owned by my friends Massimo and Chiara, a young voice called from the beach where several children were making sand constructions. "Mimi—ven a jugar!"

"Mama, I want to jugar con los kids," Mimil said.

I smiled at the ease with which Mimil mixed Spanish and English even as I wondered what made his young brain decide which language to use for which word.

I was in-progress with unbuckling Mimil when another young voice shouted, "Mimi—ven!"

"Rapido, Mama!" Mimil said.

I finished releasing Mimil as quickly as I could and then set him onto the sidewalk, watching as he scampered off to play with the other children.

Ian Smith sat on a bench sipping coffee. He and his wife Eleanor are two of my two favorite humans and have been since my childhood. Ian was the father I would've chosen for myself, and he had chosen himself to be a grandfather to Mimil.

“Hazel, did I hear those children call my grandson Mimi? Are they putting on a sandbox version of La Boheme?”

I bent down and bussed Ian’s cheek. A retired linguist, he knew better than I that early speakers often omitted the final sounds of words.

“I know, I know,” I said. “I should have just named him Ian Junior.”

“It would’ve made things simpler, love.”

Even though it sounded vaguely Mayan, Mimil’s name was an acronym I’d created to honor the men who’d stepped up to serve as father figures even before my son was born: M for my lover, Manuel; I for Ian; another M for Massimo, who was also a grandfather of choice; L for my actual father, Lyle. From the moment each of these men became aware of Mimil’s existence, they showered us with love and support in spite of significant disruption to their own lives.

As for that second I in Mimil’s name, it was not simply to make my son’s name pronounceable as I claimed to anyone who asked. It recognized a man who had *not* stepped up; a man who had refused even to take the paternity test that would prove he was Mimil’s biological father; a man I once believed was the love of my life and with whom I still owned a business, Yucatan Experts Tours, or YET, for short. I no longer loved Ignacio Medina but I could never hate him. And I would always love his face. Whenever I gazed into my son’s eyes, Iggy’s eyes—or at least a replica—gazed back.

My reverie ended when I heard Ian call out, “Tony! Can you swing by here on your way back, please? I’ve got a deposit for you.”

Ian was calling to a young man wearing the uniform of La Dolce Vita’s bus boys who was emptying the trash bins on the front of the property into an enormous plastic bag.

“Tony!” Ian called again, louder this time.

“Why not use your Spanish?” I said.

“Because this kid is from the States. He’s new. I met him yesterday.”

Eventually, Tony noticed Ian and sauntered over, pulling out an ear bud as he did so. Without saying a word, he held open the garbage bag and Ian deposited the remnants of his picnic breakfast.

“Did I mention he’s a kid of few words?” Ian said.

“Surly is the word I’d use.”

Ian patted the bench inviting me to join him but I shook my head. “I’ve got to watch Mimil. I shouldn’t have let him run off to play with the other kids. I’ve got a list of things to get done before the welcome dinner tonight.”

“Does Mimil assist you in those efforts?” Ian asked.

“No, of course not. He’s underfoot and demanding and gets whiny when I don’t—”

Ian took my hand and squeezed it. “I was joking about Mimil assisting you. Go do whatever you need to do. I’ll watch the boy play with the other children and, when he’s tired, I’ll take him home. Ellie and I will look after him.”

I lifted his hand to my mouth and gave it a quick kiss. “Thank you.”

“De nada, love.”

At my desk in the home Massimo and Chiara had made for Mimil and me in one of their cabanas, I logged into email and opened a message from Iggy.

“I got a guest who wants to leave my tour and go birding with you. Do you have room? Let me know quick, okay? Thx, Iggy”

It didn't happen often that Iggy and I launched tours on the same day but his Highlights of the Maya Riviera tour kicked off tomorrow morning as did my Introduction to Birds of Yucatan and Cozumel.

"Yes, I have room," I typed back. "Please send the guest's name and contact information."

I put a bean burrito in the microwave and then ducked into the shower. As the not-quite-warm water splashed over me, I listed the tasks I needed to accomplish before the welcome dinner at five o'clock: Wash a load of clothes, create and print out name tags for the guests, make the list of bird species we were likely to see at each stop. Guests expected a list from me that they could cross-check against their life lists, lists of birds they hoped to see at least once in their lifetimes. Life lists and the accompanying competitiveness are my least favorite things about leading birding tours. For me the joy of bird observation comes from spontaneity. Sometimes a species turns up in a location you never expected. How had the bird gotten there and why? Was it a weather refugee? Had food become scarce in its previous home? Was the bird visiting or had it found a permanent habitat? Most birders on my tours are interested in these questions, but first and foremost are their life lists. And, while I tried to quietly instill the joy of spontaneity in my guests, I also respected their desire to place checkmarks in boxes on their life lists.

I was eating the burrito at my desk when a follow-up message from Iggy came in. He'd attached the tour application form from Eduardo Alejandro. The body of the email contained this brief message:

*"The wife, Teresa, is staying on my tour. Thx, Iggy"*

I pondered why Iggy had chosen to tell me that detail and decided it was his way of warning me not to ask Eduardo Alejandro about his marriage. Iggy never gave any indication that he cared about me or Mimil but he did care about the business. If I caused awkwardness that garnered a bad review, it might affect YET's profits.

That Iggy could still annoy me as much as he had through this brief message gave credence to what my friend and former therapist, Anne, believed, that in spite of my genuine affection for Manuel, in spite of how much Iggy had hurt me, I still had feelings for him.

I shrugged off the thought and scanned Eduardo Alejandro's application, learning that he was a sixty-three year old resident of Mexico City. An Internet search informed me that he had recently sold a cell phone business that had made him a billionaire.

Eduardo was a man who could afford great luxury. Why had he chosen our little company for his tour of Yucatan?

## Chapter 2

I was in the bathroom braiding my recently washed hair when my phone beeped. The text from Fernando Chavez, manager at La Casa del Pajarito, the eco-hotel where my birding group would stay tomorrow night, read: *Please to call at your earliest convenience.*

*That sounds ominous,* Worrying Wanda, buzzed in my head. Wanda was the name I'd assigned to my anxiety, which had been my constant companion since childhood. I'd learned through therapy that personifying anxiety helped me to cope with. And so, when I was in graduate school studying for comps, Wanda was born and had taken up residence in my frontal lobe.

"Ms. Zellman, hello," Fernando said. "Thank you for returning my call."

"Please call me Hazel."

"Of course. Hazel. Thank you." Fernando took a breath. "I'm afraid I have some disappointing news about your group's stay tomorrow night. We have only five rooms available for your party—"

"But we need eight," I said.

"Yes, I know. Fortunately, I have been able to secure three rooms at Hacienda Uxmal."

"But that's fifty kilometers away," I said.

"Sixty," Fernando said. "Not a tremendous distance."

"Not under ordinary circumstances," I said. "But we head out to watch birds very early in the morning. We are in the van by four-thirty. An extra ninety minutes to gather members of our group is unacceptable."

"Yes, Ms.... Hazel. I am aware of the inconvenience and I'm very sorry."

"We have a contract," I said. "We are guaranteed sufficient rooms."

“I am aware of that, as well. But typically you do not use all the rooms you request. We hold them in reserve for months and then...”

“And then what?” I said. I heard the annoyed tone in my voice.

“We never charge you for the unused rooms even though contractually we are allowed to do so.”

This was true. The service we received from La Casa del Pajarito had always been great.

“What if we switched everyone to Hacienda Uxmal?” I said. The journey to the birding site would be longer but more straightforward if we were already together.

“I checked on that possibility,” Fernando said. “The Hacienda can spare three rooms but only three. And if you want them, I must reserve immediately.”

“I’ll call you back.”

I texted Iggy about the situation. He replied with: *Where are you?*

Me: *In my cabana.*

Iggy: *Meet me in the bar in five.*

I still had packing to do for the trip but at least I was showered and dressed for the welcome dinner. I pulled out the unfinished braid and shook out my hair. Then I grabbed the items I needed for the welcome dinner and dashed out the door.

“Look at you!” Iggy said when I joined his table at the bar in La Dolce Vita.

I shot him a quizzical look.

“Your hair. I’ve never seen it down like that. Not since you grew it out.”

He held up his hand as if he were about to take a strand in his fingers but stopped himself. “You look good,” he said, returning his attention to his phone.



The frisson of sexual tension that occasionally bubbled up between us dissipated. Relieved, I took the chair opposite him and logged into our company website with my phone. Iggy said, “I see you got another singleton—besides Eduardo Alejandro.”

Singleton was the term we used for guests who preferred to have a private room for which they paid an upcharge. “Yes,” I said, “Paul Lemon.” I recalled that he was a British citizen, in his mid-forties, who had not answered any of the questions about preferences, including which birds he was hoping to see. He’d registered for the tour just two days ago and his background check hadn’t come back yet.

“He doesn’t claim to have a medical reason for needing a private room,” Iggy said.

“He skipped that checkbox. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t have one.”

This was important because our contract stipulated that if a guest who requested a single room did not have a specific medical condition that required one, YET had the right to place them with another single traveler in situations that were out of our control. This situation qualified.

“Eduardo doesn’t have a medical condition,” Iggy said. “He and Lemon could room together.”

“That gives us only one more room,” I said. “We need three.” I heard the return of annoyance in my tone.

“Hazel, I’m trying to help,” Iggy said.

“I know. Sorry.” Trying for lightness, I said, “I could sleep in my tent.”

“Actually, that’s not such a crazy idea. The weather’s going to be fine. And Esteban could sleep in the van.”

“Esteban? Goddammit, Iggy.”

“When did you start cursing?”

“Today.”

Iggy laughed but then, perhaps because of the expression on my face, he choked it back.

He folded his lips under his teeth, in an attempt I was sure, to stop himself from smiling.

Eventually, he said, “Esteban’s been doing odd jobs to make money. He needs real work.”

“So you assigned him to drive *my* tour? Why don’t you use him?”

“I could but...”

“But what?”

“His driver’s license is provisional. If he gets another DUI, he’ll never get it back. I figured that if he’s driving out in the sticks with you, he’ll be away from temptation.”

*He’ll be away from you, I thought, the biggest source of his temptation.*

“I figured you wouldn’t mind since you’re the one...”

Iggy wisely didn’t finish the sentence but I knew what he was going to say. I was the one who’d said we could no longer hire Esteban to drive our guests until he dealt with his alcohol problem.

“He’s trying, GG,” Iggy said. “Will you give him a chance? Please?”

I was angry with Iggy already, and now his trying to charm me by using that old nickname, short for Girl Genius, made me furious. But I had a welcome dinner to host, guests to make a good first impression on, an accommodation problem to solve.

“Yes, I’ll give him a chance. Who’s your driver? Oh, wait, let me guess, it’s Olivia.”

Iggy nodded. “She does a good job.”

I'd heard rumors about the eighteen-year-old Maya girl and Iggy, and I thought it was unseemly for a man who would soon turn forty to carry on with her. But it was none of my business.

We both turned when we heard a whistle. Headwaiter Juanito was standing in the doorway to the patio gesturing for me.

"My guests must have started arriving."

"Go. I'll figure this out," Iggy said. "Don't say anything to the men yet, okay? I'll talk to them when I have a plan."

Meeting people for the first time was one of the things that tripped my anxiety, but, over the years of welcome dinners, Wanda had gotten used to it and I had, too. But today's complication with hotel rooms brought a return of the welcome dinner jitters. The good news was that two of the couples were repeats from previous tours. Which left only six strangers to meet.

"Hello," I said, holding out my hand to a stout woman in her fifties, whom I already knew from googling was Louise Mangione, a cinematographer from Los Angeles. "I'm Hazel. It's great to have you on tour."

"I'm Lou. And this is my partner, Ariel Hawkins."

The six-foot tall, model-slim woman took my hand and squeezed it. "I'm so glad to be here," she said in a Cockney accent. "I've been wanting to go on a birding tour for years."

I was so beguiled by the huge smile and the warm brown eyes that it took me a moment to notice that she was dressed in a canary yellow romper, the legs of which reached only one-fourth of the way down her thighs.

“I’m glad as well,” I said. “First-timers are fun on a tour. Their excitement is contagious.”

Lou slipped her arm through Ariel’s. “Let’s get some food, babe.”

Most eyes in the room were trained on Ariel—or perhaps just her legs—as she moved to the salsa and chips bar.

I introduced myself to the recently retired Francis and Helena Chen from Denver and then greeted repeat guests, Janice and Wayne Estes from Minnesota, and Les and Renee Rodriguez from New Jersey, wrapping each of them, in turn, in long, tight hugs.

“We’re going to see the Cozumel cuckoo this time. I just know it,” Janice said.

“I hope so.” The Cozumel cuckoo, an endemic species of the island twelve miles off the coast of Yucatan, was thought to be extinct but had not yet been completely written off. I wasn’t hopeful we would see one but I was glad that Janice planned to put her formidable energy toward the effort. If we found evidence that the species still existed, it would be a coup for nature, and, I had to admit, for me as an ornithologist.

Two men were seated at the table, plates of untouched chips and salsa in front of them, as they read their phones. When I approached, both stood and we introduced ourselves.

Paul Lemon was a medium height man with bristly short hair. I’m not sure I’d have noticed that his accent seemed more South African or Australian than British if I hadn’t just been chatting with Ariel Hawkins. What was impossible to miss was the well-muscled physique, clad as it was in Lycra bike shorts and tank shirt.

Except for his watch phone, that he checked every thirty seconds or so, Eduardo Alejandro was not a stereotype of a business tycoon. He was short, thin, balding and wore ill-fitting wire-framed glasses that slid down the bridge of his nose at regular intervals.

As one who'd been labeled a nerd throughout my life—in my case, “bird nerd”—I recognized a fellow socially awkward person when I met one. Eduardo presented as a full-fledged member of our tribe. But, when I said to both men, “Thank you for honoring my company by choosing YET for your birding tour,” Eduardo surprised me with a warm smile that seemed genuine.

“I have heard great things about your tours, Hazel. I’m delighted to be here.”

“Here, here,” Paul said, raising his beer bottle in salute.

Per tradition, at welcome dinners each guest introduced themselves and described what they hoped to see on the tour.

“You know me,” Janice Estes said when it was her turn.

“I do and so does Wayne,” I said with a nod to her husband. “But everyone else would like to know about you.”

“Well,” Janice began. “I’m a retired social worker. Wayne and I have always lived in Minnesota. We are lucky enough to have a nature preserve behind our home. Our love of birds started with feeding the ones that showed up on our deck. When we retired, we decided we wanted to really get into birding. And of course to get out of Minnesota in the winter. We love Hazel’s tours. We’ve learned so much from her.”

I smiled at her and, placing my hand over my heart, mouthed “thank you.”

Wayne, an unusually tall and big-framed man, kept his introduction short. In his loud, deep voice, he said, “Ditto everything Janice said. Except that I’m a retired pipefitter, not a social worker. Oh, and I also teach water aerobics at the Y.” He made a few dance moves which made the group laugh.

Through the introductions, I learned that Renee and Les Rodriguez had taken an Arctic birding cruise the previous summer. Francis and Helena Chen had discovered a fascination with birds through mountain hiking outside their Denver home. Lou Mangione said, “Ariel is the bird lover in our family. I’m hoping to get some good photos for her. I love a photography challenge.”

“Birds will provide plenty of those,” Les said.

Eduardo Alejandro told the group, “My wife and I planned to tour Yucatan together but, when we arrived, we decided separate vacations would be best.” A few guests laughed nervously but most, like myself, found ourselves staring at our plates.

Paul Lemon was the last to speak. Birdwatching was a new hobby for him. “I moved into a flat with a birdbath in the garden last year and I found I liked looking at ‘em. Birds are so pretty, aren’t they?”

“Thanks, everyone,” I said. “We’ve got a great group. And before we dig into this delicious dinner, I have an announcement. Tomorrow is our late start day. Our *only* late start day. We get on the bus at nine. But for those of you who can’t stand to sleep in, I’ll be leading an optional tour in the jungle outside Tulum at,” I smiled before adding, “you guessed it, five AM. We’ll meet outside La Dolce Vita at four-thirty.”