

DROP DEAD ORNAMENTS

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ONE

I stared at my bandaged wrist before zeroing a sigh-punctuated scowl at my front door. “I can’t deal with them right now,” I told Zack. A moment ago we had pulled into my driveway and now sat with the engine running. Both my arm and my head throbbed—my arm due to the local anesthesia wearing off, my head undoubtedly from the stress of the last few hours.

Earlier today I’d found myself in a life-or-death struggle with a deranged killer. As we fought for possession of her gun, she’d sunk her teeth deep into my wrist, hitting bone. With any luck Virginia Owens would spend the remainder of her life in an orange jumpsuit, not only for attempted murder but for several heinous crimes that spanned half a century.

After the police hauled Virginia away, Zack drove me to the hospital where I received a few dozen stitches and a tetanus shot. We had arrived back at my house to find Harriet Kleinhample’s VW minibus parked at the curb, which could mean only one thing: Lucille, the Communist mother-in-law from Hades, and her Daughter of the October Revolution sidekick had made bail. Both had spent the last two nights as guests of the county after Harriet was charged with hit-and-run and Lucille with assaulting an officer.

“You don’t have to,” said Zack. He turned off the engine. “Stay there.” He then came around to the passenger door and helped me from the car. With my woozy-from-painkillers body leaning against him, we made our way up the stairs to his apartment above my garage.

When life hands you lemons, you have two choices—either accept the sour turn of events or add sugar. Lucille was my lemon; Zachary Barnes was my sugar.

When Zack walked into my life nearly a year ago, I had no idea how instrumental he’d become in preserving my sanity and helping me survive the tsunami that hit me head-on when Karl Marx Pollack, my duplicitous husband, dropped dead in a Las Vegas casino. In the blink of an eye my kids and I went from firmly entrenched in the middle class to one step away from residing in a cardboard box. To make matters so much worse, I was also now saddled with Karl’s mother, a woman who has never uttered a kind word to me, as a permanent houseguest.

My name is Anastasia Pollack, and I’ve had more than my fill of sour lemons—not to mention murders and near-death experiences—lately. I often ask the universe why it’s picking on me. So far, the universe has kept mum.

Although I must admit, the chaos has certainly moved the needle of my life from humdrum to way over-the-top. Personally, I’d settle for moderately interesting, especially if it meant fewer encounters with deadly weapons.

Once inside the apartment, Zack settled me onto the sofa and helped remove my coat. I glanced longingly toward the kitchen cabinet that housed the adult beverages. “A glass of wine would definitely hit the spot right now,” I said.

He shook his head. “Bad idea.”

I sighed. “I know.” Along with the pain meds, the doctor had given me an antibiotic to ward off any possible infection. I wouldn’t be imbibing in anything stronger than coffee for the next week.

Zack placed a throw pillow behind my head. Then he removed my shoes, swung my legs up onto the sofa, and tossed an afghan over my body. “How about an omelet instead?”

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I must not have answered Zack, let alone sampled even a single morsel of omelet, judging from the rumbling protests emanating from my stomach. With my good arm I leveraged myself into a seated position and glanced around the empty room. Moonlight played peek-a-boo through the clouds, intermittently streaming in from the window above the sink.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and yawned, wondering how long I’d slept. My purse sat on the coffee table. By the dim light I dug out my phone and checked the display. No wonder my stomach wouldn’t shut up. I hadn’t eaten anything since eight o’clock that morning—nearly twelve hours ago!

I blindly swept my feet across the floor in front of the sofa and under the coffee table until I found my shoes. Then I hunted around for my coat, which I found draped over the back of the sofa. After gingerly slipping my injured arm into one sleeve, I contorted my body in such a way as to shove my good arm into the remaining sleeve without the use of my mauled wrist. After a quick pit stop I opened the door and stepped onto the landing.

From my second-story perch I noticed red, white, green, blue, and yellow lights twinkling throughout the neighborhood. Stringing up the Christmas lights had been an item on today’s to-do list—before the homicidal maniac bit into my schedule.

With a death grip on the handrail, I carefully made my way down the exterior staircase. The temperature had dipped considerably since Zack and I arrived home, and a light dusting of flakes coated the steps. However, my body no longer wobbled, and I noted my head no longer throbbed. Too bad I couldn’t say the same for my wrist. If anything, it hurt more. One thing I knew with certainty—any woman who’d ever swooned over a sexy fictional vampire had never experienced the excruciating pain of a skin-puncturing bite.

When I opened the back door, I was greeted by a cacophony of teenage chatter fighting for dominance over the latest Imagine Dragons album. I followed the noise into the dining room. A half-dozen teens were spread out around my dining room table; another six sat in a sheet-covered circle on my living room floor. A plethora of craft materials and stacks of plastic boxes holding clear glass Christmas balls surrounded each group.

“Hey,” I said, slipping out of my coat.

“Mom!” Alex jumped up from his chair and raced around the table to greet me. He clasped my good hand in both of his and stared down at my bandaged wrist. Worry spread across his face. “Are you okay?”

“I will be. Zack told you what happened?”

He nodded. “Does it hurt?”

“Only if I play racquetball.”

He leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Good thing you don’t play racquetball.”

Someone lowered the volume on Imagine Dragons. The other kids had stopped chatting and were now listening in on our conversation. A girl I didn't recognize, who resembled a curly-haired, petite Nicole Kidman, was the first to speak. Her eyes glued to my gauze-wrapped wrist, she asked, "What happened to you, Mrs. Pollack?"

Given the murders that had recently occurred on our street, I thought it best to downplay this morning's events. I squeezed Alex's hand, hoping he understood I didn't want the gory details emerging. "I tripped in the foyer this morning and injured my wrist."

Not a complete lie, although I hadn't tripped as much as I'd launched myself at Virginia Owens, tackling her to the ground in an attempt to pry the gun from her hand. And technically, *she* was responsible for the injury to my wrist, not me.

My gaze darted around the living room and into the foyer. I found no signs of the struggle, not even the bullet holes in the walls. Someone (if I had any money, I'd bet on Zack) had putted over the telltale evidence, swept up the plaster dust, and removed the shattered remains of a living room lamp felled by a bullet intended for Ralph, my Shakespeare-quoting African Grey parrot. I didn't know if the crime scene unit had needed to dust for prints while we were at the hospital, but if so, Zack had cleaned those up as well.

I turned my attention back to the explosion of craft materials covering my living room and dining room, a perfect opening for changing the subject. "What's going on? I thought you were finished with all the ornaments for your community service project."

The community service project was a high school graduation requirement. This year's committee had decided to volunteer at and raise money for the county food pantry. However, the students balked at the traditional fundraisers that placed a huge percentage of the profit from candy, candles, popcorn, or wrapping paper sales into the coffers of professional fundraising companies. Alex, as chairman of the committee, came up with the brilliant idea of enlisting the aid of a magazine crafts editor—otherwise known as his mother.

How could I say no?

I suggested the students make Christmas ornaments and created various projects easy enough for even the non-craftiest kid in the school to execute perfectly, yet elegant enough to hang on a professionally decorated tree. I then tapped my industry contacts to donate the necessary supplies. The kids would net one hundred percent of the profit from the sales.

On a Friday afternoon in late September I left work early to teach Ornaments 101 to a cafeteria filled with four hundred seniors. And because I believe in killing two birds with one craft project, I photographed the session for an article in next December's issue of *American Woman*, thus also avoiding having to take half a vacation day.

The kids were disappointed to learn they'd have to wait a year to see themselves in the pages of the magazine, but production schedules are set months in advance. By late September I was already swimming in Easter chicks and bunnies. Right now I'm working on a Father's Day spread. I did, however, arrange for some local press that should entice shoppers to stop in Westfield over the coming weeks for some of their holiday gifts.

Each of the students was responsible for making three ornaments. They set the price at ten dollars a piece. If all sold, the seniors would make twelve thousand dollars, which would go a long way toward stocking the county food pantry through the winter.

All the ornaments were completed and boxed up several weeks ago, some designated for this weekend's Holiday Crafts Fair and Bazaar, others distributed to the various downtown shops and businesses that had agreed to display and sell them without taking a cut of the profits.

Mini-Nicole sidled up next to Alex. "My dad offered to match dollar-for-dollar whatever we raised from the ornament sales."

"So we decided to make as many extra ornaments as we could with the leftover supplies," added Alex. "This is Sophie Lambert, by the way, Mom. She moved here over the summer."

Which explained why I didn't recognize her. And judging from the smitten, puppy dog expression on my son's face, I pegged her as the new girlfriend Alex's younger brother Nick had mentioned the other day. According to Nick, she worked with Alex at Starbucks. Not that I had a clue when Alex found the time for a girlfriend between his studies, sports, and part-time job. I plastered a friendly smile on my face and said, "Nice to meet you, Sophie. That's quite a generous offer."

She shrugged. "Dad's that kind of guy, always stepping up for a good cause."

"We're lucky we had so many glass balls left over," said Alex.

I had requested fifteen hundred clear glass ornaments from the manufacturer, expecting a certain percentage of breakage as the kids handled them. After the committee had collected the finished ornaments, nearly a hundred unused glass balls remained. I scanned the two rooms once again. In various states of completion, the ornaments covered every available flat surface of my dining room and living room.

"How did sales go today?" I asked. The fair was a two-day event held at the National Guard Armory and included outside vendors.

"Great," said Sophie. "We sold nearly all five hundred ornaments we'd designated for today's sale. We're hoping we'll do even better tomorrow. That's why we wanted to make more ornaments tonight."

"I'd better let you get back to work, then," I said before heading off in search of Zack and Nick. As I made my way toward the den, someone cranked Imagine Dragons back up to ear-piercing volume.

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I found Zack and Nick engrossed in a chess match. Ralph sat perched on Zack's shoulder, his parrot gaze locked on the chessboard, absorbing every move. Given his total recall of all things Shakespeare, I wondered if we'd soon be adding chess Grand Master to his list of talents. After all, if Watson, the IBM computer, can win a million dollars on *Jeopardy*, anything is possible. "Think we should enter Ralph in a few chess matches?"

Zack glanced up from the board. "Didn't you see my note?"

"What note?"

"The one I left on the coffee table, telling you to text me when you woke up."

"I never turned on a light."

"I didn't want you navigating the steps by yourself."

"I'm fine." I lifted my arm and scowled at my wrist. "Except for this."

A loud doggie snore drew my attention to Manifesto—AKA Mephisto, AKA Devil Dog—my mother-in-law's French bulldog, snoozing underneath the coffee table. That's when I realized Casa Pollack was shy one family member. "Where's Lucille?"

"She and her minion stormed out once Alex's friends arrived," said Nick.

“Before or after dinner?” I asked.

“What do you think?” asked Zack. He stood and waved me toward the sofa. “Sit down. I’ll heat up some dinner for you. I set some aside before Lucille and Harriet wolfed down every last crumb.”

Zack had had a busy day. He’d saved my life, cleaned up a crime scene, and judging from the telltale aromas of something Italian still lingering in the air, apparently cooked dinner for everyone.

After Karl, I probably would have built an impenetrable fortress around my heart if not for the universe dropping Zachary Barnes into my life at the most opportune moment. The guy was definitely a keeper.

I settled onto the sofa. Zack headed toward the kitchen, Ralph still on his shoulder, probably because he knew he could cajole a treat from his moveable perch once they entered the kitchen.

Nick moved the chessboard out of the way and curled up next to me, his head on my shoulder. “You scared me,” he said. “Stop doing that.”

I ran the fingers of my good hand through his shock of sandy-colored hair. “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“None of this stuff ever happened before Dad died.”

“I know.”

“This is all his fault.”

I sighed. “Your father had nothing to do with what happened this morning.”

“He had everything to do with Ricardo trying to kill you.”

“True.” Ricardo had been Karl’s loan shark. When Karl gambled away all our money and left us with debt that rivaled the GNP of most Third World nations, he also left me to deal with Ricardo, who was nowhere near as understanding as the mortgage company or my other legitimate creditors.

“And it just keeps happening,” said Nick. “It’s like his death whisked us into some weird alternate universe where people are always trying to kill you.”

I couldn’t refute his observation. Our lives had certainly turned surreal in the aftermath of Karl’s death.

“I want our old life back,” said Nick.

Did I? My old life hadn’t included Zack. I wouldn’t mind going back in time to when I had no debt, no communist albatross of a mother-in-law around my neck, and no one trying to kill me, but that life was built on a foundation of lies. The debt was there; I just didn’t know it existed until Karl died and all the bricks came crashing down on me.

Along with losing my financial security, I’d lost any love I once had for my husband. I could never forgive him for what he had done to our kids and me, but I tried to keep my resentment and bitterness from Alex and Nick.

“Your father had an addiction he couldn’t control, Nick. Addiction is an illness. You can’t blame him for that.”

“Lots of people are addicts,” he said. “The smart ones seek help. I don’t blame Dad for his gambling addiction. I blame him for not getting help, for not telling us, for putting his need to gamble above his family and screwing up our lives.”

Hard to argue with that, as well. I felt the same way. “We’re managing, though, right? Life is better than it was last winter, isn’t it?”

“Thanks to Zack.”

“Yes. But also to you and your brother for the sacrifices you’ve made.”

“We didn’t have much choice, did we?”

“You had a choice of attitude, Nick. I’m extremely proud of how both you and your brother have handled the adverse changes to our lives.”

He wiggled out from under my arm and turned to face me. “So when are you and Zack going to get married?”