

Scrapbook of Murder

An Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mystery, Book 6

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ONE

“Lupe called me at work this afternoon,” I told Zack. We had escaped after dinner to his apartment. Situated above my detached garage, it afforded us a spot out of earshot of my mother-in-law Lucille, whose contempt for Zack grew exponentially with each passing day. Being permanently saddled with the woman was hard enough on a good day. Today was not a good day.

Zack finished pouring two glasses of chardonnay and handed one to me. I wandered over to the sofa and curled up in the corner. He followed, taking a seat next to me. The seconds ticked by. He shifted his body to face me. I suppose he was waiting for me to say something further, but my brain had stopped sending signals to my mouth.

Zack continued to wait. And wait. And wait some more. Finally he asked, “Should I run an errand during this extremely long, pregnant pause, or are you planning to elaborate sometime soon?”

I heaved a sigh, then polished off half my wine before answering him. “She asked if she could come over this evening to talk.”

“About?”

I speared him with my best *duh!* look. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“You have to stop blaming yourself, Anastasia. You’re not responsible for what happened.”

Right. And the captain of the Titanic wasn’t responsible for steering his ship into a giant iceberg. “Carmen is dead because of me. How can Lupe not blame me?”

Lupe Betancourt is Carmen Cordova’s daughter. She grew up down the street from me. Years ago she occasionally babysat my boys. Now they often babysit her kids. Or they did. I doubt Lupe will want any of us Pollacks in her home ever again.

Two-and-a-half weeks ago Lawrence Tuttnauer, my mother’s sixth and latest husband, was arrested for orchestrating the cold-blooded murders of two of my neighbors, Lupe’s mother Carmen and Betty Bentworth. He’d never met either of them. His hit man had chosen them at random because Lawrence wanted my attention diverted from the suspicious death of his daughter Cynthia. I didn’t know it at the time, but I’d poked my nose into the wrong person’s business.

As it turned out, so had Cynthia, but she’d gone a step further and threatened her old man. So Lawrence did what any connected guy in New Jersey would do—he took out a contract on her. No Father of the Year Award for him.

Although I had no regrets over the role I’d played in bringing Lawrence Tuttnauer to justice, guilt consumed me regarding the deaths of Betty and Carmen—especially Carmen. Not that nasty Betty Bentworth deserved a bullet to the skull, but no one had shed any tears over her demise, unlike the neighborhood’s reaction to Carmen’s gruesome death days before Halloween.

It doesn't help that every time I look at Lupe, I see a younger, thinner version of her mother. She's a living reminder of my culpability in her mother's death.

Mama and Lawrence married a month ago after a whirlwind courtship. She said he owned a commercial laundry. Turns out his enterprise laundered greenbacks, not linens, and he serviced only one client—the mob.

My name is Anastasia Pollack, and less than a year ago I led the life of a typical suburban, middle-class working mom. That all changed the day my husband dropped dead in a Las Vegas casino. I thought he was at a sales meeting in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. I also thought we were debt-free with a comfortable nest egg squirreled away.

Instead, I discovered Karl Marx Pollack, now dubbed Dead Louse of a Spouse, had carried on a long-standing affair with Lady Not-So-Lucky. Karl not only gambled away our savings and our teenage sons' college funds, he'd taken out a second mortgage on the house, failed to pay our taxes for the last few years, maxed out our credit cards, and allowed his life insurance policy to lapse.

Strapping me with debt equal to the gross national product of Uzbekistan wasn't the worst of his sins, though. Nor was the homicidal loan shark he'd stiffed for fifty thousand dollars who demanded I pay up—or else. No, Karl's worst sin was sticking me with the communist mother-in-law from Hades.

I stared into my half-empty wineglass, avoiding eye contact with Zack, and forced my brain out of stall-mode. "I asked Lupe to meet me here."

"In my apartment?"

"I hope you don't mind."

The apartment used to be my home office. Zack is an award-winning photojournalist. Possibly a spy. Probably both. Anyway, prior to moving above my garage, he lived in Manhattan. However, he'd suffered through one too many police raids due to suspicious neighbors claiming he was operating a meth lab in his darkroom. He was on the hunt for a quiet suburban location without shared walls; I was desperate for rent money. The apartment over my garage fulfilled both of our needs.

Less than a year ago we were complete strangers. Now we're much more—the one and only good thing to come out of Dead Louse of a Spouse's betrayal.

"Do you want me to stay, or should I go run that errand?" asked Zack.

"You really have an errand to run?"

"No, but I'm sure I can find something to do."

"Are you kidding? Don't you dare leave me alone. I need all the moral support I can get."

Zack wrapped an arm around my shoulders and drew me closer. "You've got me, but have you thought about what you're going to say to Lupe?"

Lupe and I hadn't spoken since Carmen's funeral, which occurred days before I connected the dots leading to Lawrence's arrest. Once that line intersected directly through me, I morphed into a yellow-bellied coward. I didn't exactly go out of my way to avoid Lupe, but I hadn't reached out to her, either. "Like what? *So sorry I got nosy, and to throw me off, my mother's psychotic husband paid a homicidal maniac to kill your mother?* What are the odds of that conversation ending well?"

"Slim to none."

"Exactly."

“Maybe the best thing to do is accept whatever verbal tirade she hurls at you. She has a right to be angry.”

“Of course, she does.” If our roles were reversed, and Lupe had caused Mama’s death, I’d want to throttle her. “But what if she wants to do more than scream at me?”

“Are you worried she’ll turn violent?”

“I’m more worried she might file a wrongful death lawsuit. She could, couldn’t she?”

Zack shrugged. “I’m not a lawyer.”

“Neither am I, but even if a judge tossed the suit out of court, I’d still have to hire an attorney.” I was barely making ends meet as it was. Paying down the Mount Everest of debt Karl had saddled me with took every discretionary penny I could claw out of my meager weekly budget. Damn him! After nearly a year, even with taking on a variety of moonlighting jobs, I’d only made little more than a miniscule dent, thanks to the devil known as compound interest. I couldn’t afford to add legal fees to my teetering tower of monthly bills.

“This is all Karl’s fault,” I said.

Zack raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“Don’t you think it’s a bit too coincidental that murder victims started showing up in my life shortly after Karl dropped dead? I’ve morphed into the Jessica Fletcher of Westfield, New Jersey.”

Zack attempted to cover up a chortle with a forced cough. He failed miserably. “A bit of a stretch, not to mention a whopper of a rationalization.”

“Is it?” I heaved a sigh and shrugged. “How about when all else fails, blame someone else?” Not that doing so made me feel any less guilty over Carmen’s—and Betty’s—deaths.

Our conversation halted at the sound of footsteps on the staircase leading up to the apartment. As Zack rose to answer the door, my pulsed raced. He opened the door at the first knock and said, “Come in, Lupe.”

I rose from the sofa as Lupe stepped into the living room. She hugged a large, worn suitcase to her chest. Her eyes darted around the room. When they landed on me, she said, “Thanks for seeing me, Anastasia.”

Normally I’d utter something like *my pleasure* or *no problem*, but in this case I anticipated a lack of pleasure and a multitude of problems. Still, not wanting to appear defensive, I forced a smile even if appropriate words failed me.

Zack came to my rescue. “Have a seat, Lupe. Would you like a glass of wine?”

She hesitated for a moment before settling into a chair opposite the sofa. As I resumed my seat, Lupe placed the suitcase on the floor beside her chair and said, “I’d love a glass. Thank you.” Then she heaved a shuddering sigh, not the body language I’d expect from someone with an antagonistic agenda.

I glanced at the beat-up suitcase, classic striped tweed from the nineteen-forties or earlier. The leather trim and handles were gouged and scuffed, the brass hardware pitted and aged to near black. Even though I’d never been on the receiving end of a lawsuit, I was fairly certain they arrived in thin envelopes from process servers, not in vintage suitcases from the wronged party.

For the briefest of moments another thought flitted through my brain. I gave myself a mental slap to dispel the unwelcome wave of paranoia. If Lupe wanted me dead, she

wouldn't blow herself up in the process. Besides, I sensed no evil vibe radiating from her, no invisible poisonous daggers shooting from her eyes. Lupe's face showed only sadness, certainly understandable considering she'd recently lost her mother to a violent crime. But a crime she could justifiably lay at my feet.

I should learn to mind my own business. Yet how could I have known the lengths Lawrence would go to protect his secrets? Ignoring the red flags may very well have put my own family in danger. After all, the man had married my mother. If he was willing to kill his own daughter, how safe were the rest of us?

As heartbroken and guilt-ridden as I was that Carmen had paid the ultimate price just for living down the street from me, my actions may have saved countless other lives. Cold comfort but it was all I had at the moment.

Zack returned with a glass of wine for Lupe, along with the open wine bottle. He refilled my glass and topped off his before joining me on the sofa. "How are you holding up?" he asked Lupe.

She took a sip of wine before saying, "I think I'm still too numb to process my own emotions."

I knew I had to shake off that proverbial cat that had snatched my tongue. My silence had grown awkward. I took a swig of chardonnay for fortification, then asked, "Is there anything we can do to help you?"

Lupe glanced down at the suitcase. "Actually, that's why I'm here. I've been sorting through Mami's possessions, getting the house ready to sell."

"That must be hard for you," I said, knowing Carmen's murder occurred in her home.

"Extremely." Her eyes filled with tears. "All the love that filled that house, all those memories, they're now forever tainted by such horrific evil. I can't wrap my head around it. So for now I push it aside and keep busy sorting through everything, deciding what to keep, what to toss, what to donate. The day I walk out of that house for the last time will be the day I give myself permission to start dealing with my grief and hopefully begin healing."

I inhaled a ragged breath. "You shouldn't have to take care of the house on your own, Lupe."

"Strangely enough, the busywork and minutia keep me from dwelling on the murder. I suppose I'm still in the denial phase. I have had help, though, from my husband, my aunt and a few other relatives."

She hoisted the suitcase off the floor and placed it on the coffee table between us. "I can handle sorting through kitchen cabinets and bookcases, even going through Mami's clothing and jewelry, but I came across something I can't handle. Not now. Maybe not ever. That's why I'm here, to ask a huge favor."

A huge favor? No accusations? No lawsuit? I could do a favor, the huger the better. Heck, I'd do a dozen huge favors for Lupe. A score. A hundred, even. Whatever it took. Not that any amount of favors would ever eradicate the guilt I felt over Carmen's death.

"I found this suitcase up in the attic." Lupe leaned forward, released the latches, and opened the lid. The suitcase was brimming with yellowed newspaper clippings, tattered envelopes, and old black-and-white photographs, some square, some rectangular, all with white deckled edges.

“From what I can tell,” said Lupe, “these are family photos and assorted papers from before Mami and her family fled Cuba after the revolution. Mami led me to believe they left with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. I had no idea any of this existed.”

“Have you gone through the contents?” I asked.

Lupe shook her head. “I couldn’t bring myself to do more than glance at a few of the snapshots on top.”

Zack picked up a photo of a young couple, both dressed in crisp white linen, the man in a suit, the woman in a sundress. They stood under a palm tree against a background of ocean waves lapping a sandy shore. He flipped the photo over and read the inscription.

“*Maria y Miguel Ortiz, 1947.*”

“My mother’s parents,” said Lupe.

“What is it you want me to do?” I asked.

Lupe inhaled a deep breath, releasing it in a rush. “I know it’s asking a lot, Anastasia, but I’d be so grateful if you’d organize all of this into a scrapbook for my children. It would provide them a connection to their Cuban heritage.”

I stared into the suitcase, admittedly overwhelmed by the prospect of making sense of the contents. Where did I even begin? “How? I have no idea who any of these people are.”

“I’m hoping most of the photos are labeled. The ones I looked at were.” She rooted in her purse, pulled out a folded sheet of paper, and handed it to me. “My aunt created a family tree a few years ago. I made a copy for you.”

I perused the ancestral genealogy, which went back generations prior to the invention of photography. According to what I could decipher with my rusty high school Spanish, Lupe’s relatives originally hailed from northern Spain and arrived in Cuba in the late eighteenth century. I’d only have to deal with the family members whose images filled the suitcase. Still, the task was daunting and would take weeks, if not months, given my limited free time.

I glanced up at Lupe. She sat on the edge of her chair, worrying her lower lip as she awaited my answer. How could I say no? Hadn’t I just told myself no favor would be too huge an imposition, given the amount of guilt I carried with me?

“You realize this isn’t something I can accomplish in a few days,” I said.

“Take as much time as you need. And I’m more than happy to pay you, Anastasia.” She paused for a moment before adding, “Rumor has it you’ve had some financial setbacks since Karl died.”

My jaw dropped. I’d worked hard to keep my neighbors from finding out about the mess Dead Louse of a Spouse had dumped on me. “How did you—?”

“Your mother told Mami what happened.”

Thank you, Mama! How many other people had she blabbed to about my indebtedness? Heck, she probably took out a full-page ad in the *Westfield Leader*, which I never would have known because I’d cancelled my subscription as one of my many cost-cutting measures.

As if reading my mind, Zack squeezed my hand. I’d deal with Mama later. She’s just lucky she’s no longer living with me or there would be fireworks at Casa Pollack tonight.

“Will you do it?” asked Lupe.

“There are people who specialize in this sort of thing,” I said.

Lupe shook her head. “I can’t trust total strangers with this. They didn’t know Mami. To them this would be just another job. You were my mother’s friend. I trust you, Anastasia, and with your crafts background, I know you’d create something beautiful that my children will treasure.”

I carefully leafed through some of the papers and photos in the suitcase, taking care to avoid touching the newspaper clippings. They looked so brittle I feared they’d disintegrate in my hands. Many of the photos weren’t in much better condition. Few people had knowledge of archival preservation back when one of Lupe’s relatives dumped all of these memories into a suitcase. Time and the chemical composition of the suitcase interior had faded and yellowed the photos. Many bore brown spots from residual fingerprints. Being stored in a non-climate controlled attic for decades had added insult to injury.

Lupe sat on the edge of her chair, her eyes pleading, as she waited for my answer.

“Of course, but given the fragile nature of most of these items, I’m not sure how long a scrapbook would last.” I gently picked up a church program from Carmen’s first communion. As careful as I was, a corner flaked off in my hand. “See what I mean?”

She nodded.

Zack peered into the suitcase and sighed. “Anastasia is right. Unfortunately, most of the originals won’t last much longer. Another few years in the attic, and you probably would have opened the suitcase to find a pile of confetti.”

“Is there anything you can do?” asked Lupe.

“We could scan the originals to create printed photo albums,” said Zack. “That way we could also remove some of the discoloration.”

We? I turned to him. “You’d be willing to help?”

“If I don’t, I won’t see you for several months.”

“You two are the best,” said Lupe. A tear slid down her cheek. “I can’t begin to tell you how much this means to me.”

“Anything for you, Lupe,” said Zack, but when he squeezed my knee again, I knew his offer was more about me than Lupe. The God of Second Chances had certainly smiled down on me the day Zachary Barnes decided to rent the apartment above my garage.

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The next day genius struck as I sat in morning rush hour traffic on my way to work. If I incorporated Lupe’s scrapbook into a magazine spread, I’d be able to spend time on the project during office hours and kill the proverbial two birds with one stone—or in this case, two craft projects with one scrapbook.

As the crafts editor for *American Woman*, a third-rate monthly magazine sold primarily at supermarket checkout counters, I was tasked with developing themes and projects that wouldn’t intimidate our readership. Quick and easy reigned throughout the pages of each issue of our magazine.

A week remained before our monthly staff meeting where our editors planned the issue five months down the road, as well as provided status updates on the various other issues in the works. I’d already put together my presentation, but I could easily save that idea for the following month, substituting a feature on scrapbooking crafts for the upcoming issue. What better way to commemorate all the graduations and weddings that fill the spring calendar than to create lasting memories of them? Why hadn’t I thought of that earlier?

Since such brilliance definitely warranted a reward, once I arrived at work I detoured toward the break room before heading to my cubicle. One of the perks of working at *American Woman* is a never-ending supply of yummy edibles from companies hoping for endorsements from our Cloris McWerther, our food editor, who graciously shares her bounty with the rest of us. We're also the beneficiaries of the delicacies she whips up in our test kitchen.

Cloris isn't the only editor who receives swag from vendors. Manufacturers constantly send me their latest products, eager to see them featured in craft projects in our magazine. However, unlike cookies, cupcakes, and croissants, you can't eat pompoms, felt squares, and glitter paint. On the upside, pompoms, felt squares, and glitter paint contain no calories. Between Cloris, my lack of willpower, and my aversion to any form of exercise, after seventeen years, I've given up hope of ever shedding my post-maternity pounds.

I'd probably hate Cloris if she weren't my best friend. She's a Size Two with a metabolism that treats calories like water, flushing them from her system before they ever have a chance to attach to her stomach, hips, or thighs. I, on the other hand, only have to breathe in the aroma of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies to add five pounds, ten if I actually take a bite.

Pushing all thoughts of weight loss aside, I entered the break room to find that the pastry gods were smiling down on me this morning. A large platter of meringue-topped, mystery tartlets sat next to the coffee pot. With the meringue covering the entire top of the tart, I had no idea what lay beneath, but I didn't care. Cloris never failed to provide out-of-this-world delights. I grabbed a paper plate and helped myself to two tartlets before my fellow editors and the support staff discovered them. After pouring a cup of coffee, I continued on to my cubicle.

"You make these?" I asked Cloris, stopping at the entrance to her cubicle, located directly across from mine, and pointing to the goodies on my plate.

She nodded. "You're all my guinea pigs today. If everyone likes them, they go on my Thanksgiving menu."

I groaned.

Cloris's eyes widened. "What's wrong? You haven't even taken a bite."

"I'm sure they're scrumptious. It's the mention of Thanksgiving. I keep putting off thinking about it."

"You can't put it off much longer. It's only three days away."

I groaned again. "Don't remind me."

"Are you cooking?"

"Ira invited all of us to his place." Ira Pollack was my deceased husband's long-lost half-brother. He'd been married to trophy wife Cynthia before her father had her whacked. Look up *needy* in Webster's, and you'll find a picture of Ira. He's been wheedling his way into our lives ever since he discovered our existence last summer. Unfortunately, he's got the money to buy whatever he thinks will accomplish this.

I've tried declining his generosity, but I'm often guilt-tripped into accepting, either by Ira himself, my mother, or my sons. He's currently trying to make up for introducing Mama to Lawrence—not to mention for Lawrence nearly killing us.

"Ira's cooking?"

"I doubt he knows how to boil water. I'm assuming he's having the dinner catered."

Cloris wagged her finger at me. “You need to learn to say no.”

I shrugged. “I tried, but part of me feels sorry for him. He’s like a lost puppy.”

“And you’re a softie.”

“Maybe, but he’d only invite himself and his spoiled brats over to my house if I declined his invitation.” Ira’s first wife died of cancer, leaving him with three hellions who are experts in the art of wrapping their father around their pinkies.

Cloris shook her head. “*No* is usually one of the first words kids learn. You must have skipped the terrible twos.”

“I doubt Mama would agree with you. Anyway, at least at Ira’s house I won’t have to listen to his kids whine about Casa Pollack’s lack of amenities.”

“What’s wrong with your house? Last time I looked, you had indoor plumbing.”

“But no flat-screen TV, which places us squarely in the Dark Ages.”

“It’s a wonder you survive.” Cloris pointed to the pastry in my hand. “Eat a tart. You’ll feel better.”

I placed my coffee cup on the edge of her desk, lifted one of the tarts off the paper plate, and devoured half of it in one bite. Pumpkin, cranberry, pecan, and meringue exploded on my taste buds, creating a full-blown gastronomic orgasm in my mouth.

Cloris had created a shell made of brown sugar, butter, and crushed pecans. On top of the crust she’d spread a thin layer of cranberry compote, then filled the tart with lighter-than-air whipped pumpkin custard drizzled with more cranberry. She’d topped that with a perfectly flamed meringue. A bite later I’d devoured the entire tart without coming up for air.

“That was incredible,” I said, licking my fingers. “How could anyone not love these?”

She grinned. “Just had to be sure.”

I eyed the second tart. Before devouring it, I said, “Your false modesty would be extremely annoying if you weren’t such a fabulous baker.”

Before Cloris could mouth a comeback, her office phone rang. “I’ll let you get to that,” I said, grabbing my coffee cup and scooting across the hall.

As I settled into my desk chair I heard her say, “That’s odd. I’ll be right down.” Five minutes later she returned, but instead of going into her cubicle, she stormed into mine. Wildly waving a fistful of papers in the air, she screamed, “I don’t believe this!”