

Seams Like the Perfect Crime

An Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mystery

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ONE

Mama birds boot their little tweeters out of the nest as soon as they learn to fly, hanging around only long enough to make sure the wee ones learn to fend for themselves. However, as I stood on the sidewalk, watching my oldest son walk off into the next chapter of his life, my eyes filled with tears. A sense of abandonment washed over me, as if the cosmos had flipped the script, and I was the one forced from the protective nest.

I choked back a hiccupping shudder. Zack looped an arm over my shoulders and drew me into a side hug. He planted a kiss on my temple and said, “He’ll be fine.”

The rational side of my brain agreed, not that it seemed to matter. Besides, I wasn’t the only person currently battling emotion upheaval.

“What about him?” I whispered, nodding toward the third adult making up our parental threesome. Shane Lambert appeared even more distraught than I was. I had Zack, who had bonded with Alex and Nick, becoming their de facto dad from nearly the moment the three had met. As a single parent, Shane had no one besides his daughter Sophie, no significant other to offer a hug and remind him that his child was now an adult and that he’d done an excellent job of raising her. That she’d be okay. More than okay. Thanks to him.

Of course, Zack had given the same speech to me countless times during the last few weeks. At times like this, though, even the most rational parent can become an irrational basket case.

Zack followed my gaze. “You will both be fine,” he said, his free hand patting Shane on the back. “And so will Alex and Sophie.”

With Alex and Sophie Lambert attending the same college, we had rented a super-sized SUV to transport the bolting offspring and their multitude of boxes to Cambridge, Massachusetts. The kids were now moved into their rooms, but whether unable or unwilling to let go of that last apron string, Shane and I had made one excuse after another to delay our departure as long as possible.

Zack had humored us, but the kids, antsy to get on with their new adventure, had finally given us one last hug before they headed to the dorm with not so much as a backward glance. Like it or not, the time had come to make the return trip to New Jersey. Reluctantly, I hoisted myself into the SUV.

“I suppose this officially makes me an empty nester,” said Shane from the back seat as Zack pulled away from the curb.

Zack chuckled. “Feel free to borrow Lucille any time the house gets too quiet.”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass. That woman scares me.” He nodded toward me and said, “Your wife has the patience of a saint.”

“I think I’m more like a glutton for punishment,” I muttered.

My name is Anastasia Pollack, and Lucille Pollack is the gift that keeps on giving—in the worst possible ways. When Karl Marx Pollack, my first husband, dropped dead in a Las Vegas casino nearly two years ago, he’d bequeathed me his communist mother as a permanent houseguest, debt greater than the GNP of

Uzbekistan, and a bookie demanding fifty-thousand dollars. The jury is still out on which of the three was the most horrific shock.

Through moonlighting, side gigs, and more than a little serendipity (albeit, often involving corpses and killers), the bookie is now a permanent resident of a government facility, and my Uzbekistan-sized debt is now closer to the GNP of Djibouti.

However, I'm still stuck with Lucille, 'til death do us part. My only hope being that she predeceases me. Hopefully, from natural causes, but with Lucille, that isn't necessarily a given. The woman excels at rubbing people the wrong way, and I feared someday someone might rub her out. Especially since we live in New Jersey, a state known for a certain element of the population adept at rubbing out those they deem in need of permanent elimination.

Zack glanced at me before responding to Shane. "My wife has a heart of gold, but if the roles were reversed, I've no doubt Lucille would have kicked Anastasia and the boys to the curb the moment Karl died."

I couldn't disagree with his assessment. Lucille had loathed me from the moment Karl introduced us, but that doesn't keep her from continuing to take advantage of nearly free room and board at my expense.

Zack did his best to cheer us up throughout the trip home and a short dinner stop in Connecticut, but for most of the journey, we drove in silence to an accompaniment of a classical jazz playlist. I spent much of the drive with Shane's empty nest comment rattling around in my brain. In two short years, Nick would also take flight. This mama bird was suddenly having a tough time confronting the circle of life.

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After dropping Shane at his house, Zack cut through downtown Westfield toward home. As we turned onto our street, I groaned at the sight of a police car, its lights flashing, parked in front of our house.

I wasn't worried about Nick. He'd texted earlier to say he was going to the movies with friends and would be home by ten o'clock. It wasn't quite eight-thirty. I knew he'd still be sitting in a darkened theater watching the latest edition to the Marvel universe.

After Karl's demise, my life took multiple unwelcome and often chaotic turns, some involving a propensity for finding dead bodies. All others involved my mother-in-law. Since I hadn't stumbled across any murder victims so far today, by process of elimination, a visit from the police meant only one thing. And that begged the question, what had Lucille done now?

Harriet Kleinhample, my mother-in-law's Mini-Me, had blocked the entrance to our driveway with her circa nineteen-sixties VW minibus. When Zack parked behind the patrol car, I noticed two of Westfield's finest standing at the front door. In the waning light, I recognized both officers.

Officer Harley pounded on the door and loudly demanded Lucille open it. Officer Fogarty, Harley's junior partner, had turned his head at the sound of our car doors closing. After waving us over, he tapped Harley on the shoulder. Harley turned, took one look at us, and ceased his pounding and shouting. As we approached, he said, "Boy, am I glad to see you."

I frowned at my front door. Not knowing what to expect on the other side, I wanted details before we entered. "What's she done now?"

"Possibly nothing," admitted Harley. "An avocado green VW minibus was spotted in the vicinity of a jewelry store smash

and grab earlier today. Not many of those vehicles on the road these days, especially around here. We put two and two together and—”

“Surely, you don’t think—”

Harley dismissed my question before I finished asking it. “No, we’re looking for a gang of five or six individuals, late teens or early twenties. Possibly both men and women. Looks like it might be the same gang that struck in Summit and several other nearby towns the last few weeks.”

“We only want to ask your mother-in-law and Mrs. Kleinhample if they saw anything,” said Fogarty. “To help in identifying the suspects, but they refuse to answer the door.”

Nothing new there. The only people Lucille hated more than me were members of law enforcement. The feeling was mutual. I’ve no doubt every one of Westfield’s finest would relish locking her up and jettisoning the key fifty miles offshore into the murky depths of the Atlantic Ocean.

Zack moved to the door and inserted his key but stepped back to allow the officers to precede us inside. “Police,” shouted Officer Harley as he and Fogarty entered.

Before we could follow, Fogarty yelled, “Look out!”

With his left arm, he shoved his partner to the side while his right hand grabbed hold of the hooked end of Lucille’s cane. Both women let loose a string of insults as Harriet fought Fogarty for possession of the cane. However, she was no match for someone half her age, more than a head taller, and with the physique of someone who spends hours working out each week.

Fogarty yanked the cane from Harriet’s grip, but she lost her footing and tripped over Lucille’s feet as my mother-in-law came to her aid. Both women hit the hardwood floor in a tangled mess

of limbs, Lucille smacking her head and Harriet landing on her hip.

Between moans, Lucille ranted about police brutality, excessive force, and lawsuits, slapping Harley's hand away when he tried to help her up. Meanwhile, Harriet screamed in pain the moment she attempted to move and immediately passed out.

Harley cursed under his breath and radioed for an ambulance.

Fogarty stood paralyzed, staring down at both women. "I was only trying to keep her from attacking us," he mumbled.

"No one's blaming you," Zack assured him.

"You were defending us from an assault," I added. "You hadn't drawn your gun. No shots were fired. My mother-in-law and Harriet are entirely responsible for what happened. At least Harriet's weapon of choice was Lucille's cane and not a carving knife."

Fogarty scrubbed at his jaw. "Doesn't mean I won't face possible suspension while the incident is under review."

"You have witnesses," said Zack.

"Not to mention those two have a long list of priors," I added.

Hearing that, my mother-in-law hurled a litany of rambling, semi-coherent insults at me.

The ambulance arrived minutes later. After assessing the situation, the EMTs announced that Lucille showed signs of a concussion and Harriet may have fractured her leg, hip, or both. Once the two women were strapped to gurneys, the EMTs transported them into the ambulance. Zack and I followed the ambulance to the hospital.

On the way, I texted Nick with an update. Of course, Nick being Nick, he texted back: *Grandmother Lucille lost her wheels? We're stuck with her 24/7? For how long?*

I scowled at the scowling emoji he'd added to the end of his text. Our only respite from my mother-in-law occurred when she was off fomenting Marxist uprisings and insurgency with Harriet and the eleven other Daughters of the October Revolution.

A revoked driver's license hadn't stopped Harriet Kleinhample from continuing as the group's chauffeur, but I'd think a broken hip or leg would put her out of commission for some time, although I had no experience with either. "What do you know about recovery from broken hips?" I asked Zack.

"Nada. Ask Siri."

I pulled out my phone and posed the question, specifically narrowing the search down to driving. Instead of speaking to me, Siri responded with a series of website links. As Zack continued to drive, I tumbled down the Internet rabbit hole, finding answers that ranged from as few as five days to upwards of several months. A caveat suggested full recovery might take as long as a year. "Not helpful," I huffed, relaying the various answers to Zack.

He reached over and squeezed my thigh. "Harriet is one feisty old bat. She'll haul herself up behind the wheel of that antique hunk of junk the day she's released from the hospital."

"One can only hope." Even though I viewed Harriet as a menace on the road, so far, she'd miraculously steered clear of *most* pedestrians and other vehicles.

However, she'd taken out more than one curbside tree on my street and probably countless others elsewhere. She'd also unwittingly rid the world of an assassin when she recently plowed into a parked car.

For selfish reasons, I stood firmly in Nick's camp and wished Harriet a speedy recovery. Otherwise, I feared a convoy of Ubers depositing the Daughters of the October Revolution at our house each day with me arriving home every night to find they'd cleaned out my fridge and pantry and trashed my house. Bad enough when it occurred once or twice a week.

If it happened daily, could I throw myself on the mercy of the court and plead justifiable homicide after I killed all of them?

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We spent the next several hours in the hospital waiting room as various healthcare professionals poked, prodded, and tested my mother-in-law. Lucille was finally admitted at nearly two in the morning with a confirmed concussion. Given her advanced age and her previous stroke, the doctor advised admitting her for observation. Luckily, Lucille was too doped up on pain meds to object.

"What about Mrs. Kleinhample?" I asked. "I'm assuming you can't divulge any medical information to us, but I believe my mother-in-law may have been her health care proxy. Is there someone else you were able to contact?"

The doctor nodded. "I can tell you we've admitted her. She listed a daughter as a secondary proxy, but she's not answering her phone." He glanced at his watch. "Given the hour, most likely she's sound asleep and will contact us first thing in the morning."

"Is Mrs. Kleinhample still unconscious?"

Maybe even divulging that much violated HIPAA laws because he responded with only a cryptic, "She's resting comfortably."

With no further reason for us to remain at the hospital, Zack and I dragged ourselves home. Mr. Sandman was waiting, and we both conked out the moment our heads hit the pillows.

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Sometime later, a discordant racket of metallic clanking, thudding, thumping, bellowing, and shouting, accompanied by the roar of an engine, startled me awake. Either I was dreaming, or I'd somehow been transported to midtown Manhattan during 4am trash pickup.

I pried one sleep-deprived eye open and stared at the alarm clock. My body might feel like I'd only recently fallen asleep, but the digital display registering through my one bleary eye claimed I'd slept five hours. Every cell in my body screamed that someone had messed with the space/time continuum. Although I was in my own bed and not somewhere in Manhattan, I refused to believe it was seven-thirty.

I groaned, rolled over, and pulled the quilt over my head, but it did little to drown out the noise. "What is that racket?"

Getting no response, I swept my arm across the sheets in search of Zack, only to find his side of the bed empty. My other senses had awakened, though, and the aroma of coffee—not to mention my full bladder—forced me from the bed.

Two minutes later, I dragged myself into the kitchen. At the table, Nick sat wolfing down pancakes, scrambled eggs, and sausage while Leonard camped out at Nick's feet, impatiently waiting for any scraps that might fall from Nick's fork. Around a mouthful of food, my son managed a mumbled greeting.

Zack stood at the stove. After taking one look at me, he stopped flipping pancakes and poured me a large mug of coffee. He added a generous amount of half and half before handing me the much-needed infusion of caffeine along with a quick lip peck.

I stared at him with eyes still refusing to focus completely. "How can you look so wide awake after so little sleep?"

Nick answered for him. "Spy training, Mom."

Zack frowned and shook his head. “It’s way too early in the morning for conspiracy theories.”

From his perch atop the refrigerator, Ralph flapped his wings and squawked, “*O heinous, strong and bold conspiracy.*” *Richard the Second*. Act Five, Scene Three.”

In my opinion, it was also way too early for editorial commentary from our resident Shakespearean scholar. However, Zack was more of pushover than I when it came to the African Grey I’d inherited from Great-aunt Penelope Periwinkle. He rewarded Ralph with a sunflower seed.

I had never quite figured out if my sons delighted in teasing me or if my suspicions about my husband were correct. From nearly the moment I’d met Zack, I suspected his career as an award-winning photojournalist was a cover for his true calling as a member of one of the alphabet agencies. Of course, he categorically denied my suspicions, claiming I had a wild imagination. But don’t all spies deny that they’re spies?

Zack turned his attention back to the stove, filled two plates, and brought them to the table. All the while, I continued hearing the noise that had awakened me. “What’s going on outside?” I asked, taking a seat.

“Our new neighbors are moving in,” said Zack.

Both our bedroom and the kitchen were situated at the back of the house, yet the decibel level sounded more like the noise emanated from our backyard, not the front. “I’ve never come across such loud movers, much less ones that begin work this early.”

“That’s far from the weirdest thing going on across the street,” said Nick.

“Meaning?”

“Mom, you’ve got to see this for yourself.”

I raised one weary eyebrow, silently conveying that nothing short of an alien invasion would get my rear in gear at the moment.

Nick persisted. “Trust me, Mom. You’re going to want to see this with your own eyes.”

I glanced at Zack. “Is it really worth the effort?”

He shrugged. “A picture’s worth a thousand words.”

Reluctantly, I hauled myself out of my chair, grabbed my coffee mug, and headed for the living room with Zack and Nick following. Nick pulled the cord to open the blinds.

I stared gape-mouthed at the odd sight across the street.