

Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mysteries, Books 1-2

Assault With a Deadly Glue Gun

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ONE

I hate whiners. Always have. So I was doing my damndest not to become one, in spite of the lollapalooza of a quadruple whammy that had broadsided me last week. Not an easy task, given that one of those lollapalooza whammies had barged into my bedroom and was presently hammering her cane against my bathroom door.

“Damn it, Anastasia! Hot water doesn’t grow on trees, you know!”

Some people can’t start the day without a cigarette. Lucille Pollack, Monster-in-Law from the Stygian Swamp, can’t start hers without a sludge load of complaints. As much as I detest cigarettes, I’d much prefer a nicotine-puffing mother-in-law, as long as she came with an occasional kind word and a semi-pleasant disposition. Unfortunately, marriage is a package deal. Husbands come with family. And mine came with a doozie to end all doozies.

My mother-in-law is a card-carrying, circa 1930s communist. When she met me, it was hate at first sight. I bear the name of a dead Russian princess, thanks to my mother’s unsubstantiated Romanov link—a great-grandmother with the maiden name of Romanoff. With Mama, the connection is more like sixty, not six, degrees of separation, and the links are coated with a thick layer of rust. But that’s never stopped Mama from bragging about our royal ancestry, and it set the tone for my relationship—or lack of it—with my mother-in-law from Day One.

I suppose I didn’t help the situation by naming one of my sons Nicholas and the other Alexander, even if they were named after my grandfathers—Alexander Periwinkle and Nicholas Sudberry.

“My kingdom for a bedroom door lock,” I muttered. Not that I had much of a kingdom left. So it would have to be a really cheap lock.

“About time,” said Lucille as I exited the bathroom amidst a cloud of warm steam. “Some people have no consideration of others.” Raising one of her Sequoia-like arms, she waved her cane in my face. “Those boys of yours have been camped out in the other bathroom for half an hour doing what, I can’t imagine.”

Lucille always referred to Nick and Alex as *those boys*, refusing to use their given names. Like it might corrupt her political sensibilities or something.

“Three minutes,” she continued ranting. “That’s all it takes *me* to shower and all it should take any of you. I’m the only person in this house who gives one iota of concern for the earth’s depleting resources.”

She landed an elbow to my ribs to push me aside. Manifesto, her runt-of-the-litter French bulldog—or Mephisto, the Devil Dog, as the rest of the family had dubbed the Satan-incarnate canine—followed close on her heels. As he squeezed past me, he raised his wrinkled head and growled.

As soon as they’d both muscled their way into the bathroom, my mother-in-law

slammed the door in my face and locked it. God only knows why she needs her dog in the bathroom with her. And if he does know, I hope he continues to spare the rest of us the knowledge.

My Grandma Periwinkle used to say that honeyed words conquered waspish dispositions. However, I doubted all the beehives in North America could produce enough honey to mollify the likes of Lucille. After eighteen years as her daughter-in-law, I still hadn't succeeded in extracting a single pleantry from her.

Of all the shocks I sustained over the past week, knowing I was now stuck with Lucille topped the list. Two months ago, she shattered her hip in a hit-and-run accident when an SUV mowed her down while she jaywalked across Queens Boulevard. Her apartment building burned to the ground while she was in the hospital.

Comrade Lucille put her political beliefs above everyone and everything, including common sense. Since she didn't trust banks, her life savings, along with all her possessions, had gone up in flames. And of course, she didn't have insurance.

Homeless and penniless, Lucille came to live with us. "It won't be for long," my husband Karl (Lucille had named him after Karl Marx) had assured me. "Only until she gets back on her feet."

"Literally or figuratively?" I asked.

"Literally." Karl liked his mother best when two rivers and an hour's drive separated them. "I promise, we'll find somewhere for her to live, even if we have to pay for it ourselves."

Trusting person that I am—was—I believed him. We had a moderately sized nest egg set aside, and I would have been more than happy to tap into it to settle Lucille into a retirement community. Lucille had recovered from her injuries, although the chances of her now leaving any time soon were as nonexistent as the eggs in that same nest.

Unbeknownst to me—formerly known as Trusting Wife—Karl, who handled the family finances, had not only cracked open, fried, and devoured our nest egg, he'd maxed out our home equity line of credit, borrowed against his life insurance policy, cashed in his 401(k), and drained the kids' college accounts.

I discovered this financial quagmire within twenty-four hours of learning that my husband, who was supposed to be at a sales meeting in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, had dropped dead on a roulette table at the Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas. The love of my life was a closet gambling addict. He left me and his sons totally broke, up the yin-yang in debt, *and* saddled with his mother.

If he weren't already dead, I'd kill him.

Without a doubt, a jury of my peers would rule it justifiable homicide.

With Ralph, our African Grey parrot, keeping a voyeuristic eye on me from his perch atop the armoire, I dried myself off and began to dress for work.

They say the wife is always the last to know. For the past week I'd wracked my brain for signs I might have missed, niggling doubts I may have brushed aside. Even in retrospect, I had no clue of impending cataclysm. Karl was that good. Or maybe I had played my role of Trusting Wife too well. Either way, the result was the same.

Karl and I hadn't had the best of marriages, but we hadn't had the worst, either. We might not have had the can't-wait-to-jump-your-bones hots for each other after so many years, but how many couples did? That sort of love only exists in chick flicks and romance novels. Along with the myth of multiple orgasms. Or so I'd convinced myself

years ago.

Besides, after working all day, plus taking care of the kids, the shopping, the carpooling, the cooking and the cleaning, who had the energy to put into even one orgasm most nights? Even for a drop-dead-gorgeous-although-balding-and-slightly-overweight-yet-still-a-hunk husband? Faking it was a lot quicker and easier. And gave me a few extra precious minutes of snooze time.

Still, I thought we'd had a pretty good marriage compared to most other couples we knew, a marriage built on trust and communication. In reality what we had was more like blind trust on my part and a whopping lack of communication on his. Most of all, though, I thought my husband loved me. Apparently he loved Roxie Roulette more.

Could I have been more clueless if I'd tried?

The theme from *Rocky* sang out from inside the armoire. Dead is dead only for the deceased. The widow, I'm learning, becomes a multitasking juggler of a thousand and one details. Our phone hadn't stopped ringing since the call from the hotel in Las Vegas.

But this wasn't the home phone. I opened the armoire and reached for the box of Karl's personal items the funeral director had given me. No one had bothered to turn off his phone. The display read *Private Call*. "Hello?"

"Put Karl on."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't play games with me, Sweet Cheeks. Hand the phone to that slippery weasel. Now."

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

"Make it possible. You tell him Ricardo's run out of patience, and *he's* run out of time."

As an auto parts salesman for a national wholesaler, Karl dealt with his share of lowlife Neanderthals, but Ricardo sounded lower than most of the run-of-the mill Neanderthals in the auto industry.

I wasn't in the mood for any macho-posturing *Soprano* wannabe. "If this concerns an order you placed, you'll have to get in touch with the main office in Secaucus. Karl passed away last week."

Silence greeted my statement. At first I thought Ricardo had hung up. When he finally spoke, I wished he had. "No kidding?"

"Your sense of humor might be that warped, but I can assure you, mine isn't."

"This his missus?" He sounded suspicious.

"Yes."

"Look, I'm sorry about your loss," he said, although his tone suggested otherwise, "but I got my own problems. That *schmuck* was into me for fifty G's. We had a deal, and dead or not, he's gotta pay up. *Capisce?*"

Hardly. But I now sensed that Ricardo was no body shop owner. "Who are you?"

"Let's just say I'm a former business associate of the deceased. One you just inherited, Sweet Cheeks. Along with his debt."

I glanced at the bathroom door. Thankfully, Lucille's three-minute shower was running overtime. I lowered my voice. "I don't know anything about a debt, and I certainly don't have fifty thousand dollars."

Although both statements were true, after what I had recently learned about my husband's secret life, he probably did owe Ricardo fifty thousand dollars, the same fifty

thousand dollars the casino manager in Las Vegas said Karl gambled away shortly before cashing in his chips—literally—at that roulette table.

But what really freaked me out as I stood half-naked in nothing more than my black panties and matching bra, was the thought that there could be other Ricardos waiting to pounce. Lots of other Ricardos. Behind my husband’s upstanding, church-going, family-oriented façade, he had apparently hidden a shitload of secrets. What next?

Ricardo wasn’t buying into my ignorance. “I happen to know otherwise, Sweet Cheeks, so don’t try to con me. I’ll be over in an hour to collect.”

There are five stages of grief. I’d gone through the first stage, denial, so fast, I hardly remembered being there. For most of the past week, I’d silently seethed over Karl’s duplicity. With each new deceit I’d uncovered, my anger grew exponentially. I knew Stage Two, anger, would be sticking around for a long time to come, sucking dry all the love I once had for my husband.

Ricardo became that proverbial last straw on my overburdened camel’s back. “You’ll do no such thing,” I screamed into the phone. “I don’t know who you are or what kind of sick game you’re playing, but if you bother me again, I’m calling the police. *Capisce?*”

Ricardo’s voice lowered to a menacing timbre. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Sweet Cheeks.” The phone went dead. Along with every nerve in my body.

And I thought I had problems before?

“*If you have tears, prepare to shed them now,*” squawked Ralph. “*Julius Caesar. Act Three, Scene Two.*”

No *Polly wants a cracker* for this bird. Ralph spouts Shakespeare and only Shakespeare, thanks to several decades of listening to Great-aunt Penelope Periwinkle’s classroom lectures. When Aunt Penelope died two years ago, I inherited the parrot with the uncanny knack for squawking circumstance-appropriate quotes.

Could have been worse. At least Aunt Penelope wasn’t a closet rap queen with a bird who squawked about pimpin’ the hos in the ‘hood. I’m also grateful Ralph is housebroken, considering his ability to pick the lock on his cage.

“I’ve already cried enough to replenish New Jersey’s drought-lowered reservoirs, Ralph. So unless you know of some way to transform tears into twenties, I’ve got to move on and figure a way out of this mess.”

He ignored me. Ralph speaks only when *he* wants to, and right now his attention had turned to grooming himself. Like I said, I hate whiners, but jeez! How much simpler life would be if my only concern was molting feathers.

Death by Killer Mop Doll

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ONE

Upstairs, the front door slammed with enough force to register a five on the Richter scale. Dust dislodged from the exposed basement rafters and drifted down like polluted snow, settling over the basket of clean laundry I’d been folding. The ensuing shouting, barking, and yowling drowned out my muttered curse of choice and yanked my attention away

from the now Dalmatian-spotted white wash.

“*Once more unto the breach, dear friends,*” squawked Ralph, the Shakespeare-spouting African Grey parrot I’d inherited when Great-aunt Penelope Periwinkle died two years ago. “*Henry the Fifth*. Act Three, Scene One.” He spread his wings and took flight up the basement stairs to check out the action. I raced after him, eager to prevent World War Three from erupting in my living room.

“Muzzle that abominable creature, or I’ll have the pound haul him away,” shrieked Mama. “He’s traumatizing Catherine the Great.”

“So shove some Prozac down her throat,” said my mother-in-law Lucille. “What the hell are you doing back here? And don’t you ever bother to knock? Just barge right in like you own the place.”

“I have more right to be here than you. This is my daughter’s house, you...you *pinko squatter*.”

As I hurried through the kitchen, I glanced at the calendar tacked next to the telephone. Mama wasn’t due back from her Caribbean cruise for another three days. Damn it. I needed those three days to steel myself for the inevitable explosive reaction that occurred whenever Flora Sudberry Periwinkle Ramirez Scoffield Goldberg O’Keefe, my mother and the former social secretary of the Daughters of the American Revolution, locked horns with Lucille Pollack, my mother-in-law and current president of the Daughters of the October Revolution. I’d been swindled out of seventy-two hours.

By the time I entered the living room, Mama’s and Lucille’s voices had reached glass-shattering decibel range.

“Crazy communist!” yelled Mama. She stood in the middle of the room, cradling Catherine the Great, her corpulent white Persian with an attitude befitting her namesake.

Manifesto, my mother-in-law’s runt of a French bulldog, stood inches from Mama’s Ferragamos, his bark having switched to growl mode as he glared up at his nemesis. With a hiss and a wowl, Catherine the Great leaped from Mama’s arms. Showing his true cowardly colors, Mephisto, as we always called him behind his back and often to his snout, scampered to safety behind my mother-in-law’s ample girth.

Lucille barreled across the room, waving her cane at Mama. “Reactionary fascist!”

“How dare you threaten me!” Mama defended herself with a French manicured backhand that would have done Chris Evert proud. The cane flew from Lucille’s grasp and landed inches from Mephisto’s nose. Demon dog yelped and dove between Lucille’s orange polyester-clad legs.

My mother-in-law’s rage multiplied into Vesuvian proportions. Her wrinkled face deepened from a spotted scarlet to an apoplectic heliotrope. “You did that on purpose!”

Mama jutted her chin at Lucille as she rubbed the palm of her hand. “You started it.”

“And I’m stopping it.” I stepped between them, spreading my arms to prevent them from ripping each other’s lips off. “Knock it off. Both of you.”

“It’s her fault,” said Mama. She jabbed a finger at Lucille. Her hand shook with rage, her gold charm bracelet tinkling a dainty minuet totally incompatible with the situation. “And that vicious mongrel of hers. She sic’d him on us the moment we walked through the door.”

Highly unlikely. “Mephisto’s all bark and bluster, Mama. You should know that by now.”

“*Manifesto!*” shrieked Lucille. “How many times do I have to tell you his name is

Manifesto?”

“Whatever,” Mama and I said in unison. It was an old refrain. *Mephisto* better suited demon dog anyway. Besides, who names a dog after a Communist treatise?

Behind me, Ralph squawked. I looked over my shoulder and found him perched on the lampshade beside one of the overstuffed easy chairs flanking the bay window. A chair occupied by a cowering stranger, his knees drawn up to his chest, his arms hugging his head. I glanced at Mama. Glanced back at the man. “Who’s he?”

“Oh dear!” Mama raced across the room, flapping her Chanel-suited arms. “Shoo, dirty bird!”

Ralph ignored her. He doesn’t intimidate easily. Mama was hardly a challenge for a parrot who had spent years successfully defending himself against Aunt Penelope’s mischievous students. “Anastasia, I told you that bird’s a reincarnation of Ivan the Terrible. Do something. He’s attacking my poor Lou.”

Her Poor Lou? Okay, at least the man had a name and someone in the room knew him. I stretched out my arm and whistled. Ralph took wing, landing in the crook of my elbow. *Poor Lou* peered through his fingers. Convinced the coast was clear, he lowered his hands and knees and raised his head.

“Are you all right, dear?” asked Mama, patting his salt and pepper comb-over. “I’m terribly sorry about all this. My daughter never did have the heart to turn away a stray.” She punctuated her statement with a pointed stare, first in Lucille’s direction, then at Ralph.

Lucille harrumphed.

Ralph squawked.

Mephisto bared his teeth and rumbled a growl from the depths of his belly.

Catherine the Great had lost interest in the family melodrama and dozed, stretched out on the back of the sofa.

Before Mama could explain *Poor Lou*’s presence, the front door burst open. Fourteen-year-old Nick and sixteen-year-old Alex bounded into the living room. “Grandma!” they both exclaimed in unison. They dropped their baseball gear and backpacks on the floor and encircled Mama in a group hug.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on a cruise?” asked Nick.

“Who’s this?” asked Alex, nodding toward *Poor Lou*.

Poor Lou rose. He wiped his palms on his pinstriped pants legs, cleared his throat, and straightened his skewed paisley tie. “Maybe I should be going, Flora. The driver is waiting.”

I glanced out the front window. A black limo idled at the curb.

“Yes, of course.” She walked him to the door without bothering to make introductions. Very odd behavior for my socially correct mother.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” *Poor Lou* told Mama.

She raised her head, batted her eyelashes, and sighed. *Poor Lou* wrapped his arms around my mother and bent her backwards in a clinch that rivaled the steamiest of Harlequin romance book covers. His eyes smoldered as he met her slightly parted lips. Mama melted into his body.

I stared at my etiquette-obsessed mother, my jaw flapping down around my knees, and wondered if she had eaten any funny mushrooms on her cruise. Out of the corner of one eye, I saw my two sons gaping with equally bug-eyed expressions. Behind me,

Lucille muttered her disgust. Even Ralph registered his amazement with a loud squawk.

Over Mama's shoulder, *Poor Lou* stole an anxious glance toward Ralph, broke the kiss, and darted out the door.

Mama fluffed her strawberry blonde waves back into place, smoothed the wrinkles from her suit jacket, and offered us the most innocent of expressions as we continued to ogle her. "Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? Why? Just because my mother was doing the Tonsil Tango with a total stranger?"

Lucille stooped to retrieve her cane. "I suppose this means that trashy hussy is moving back into my room."

"*Your* room?" asked Mama.

"Hey, it's *my* room!" said Nick.

Poor Nick. He was none too happy about having to give up his bedroom to his curmudgeon of a grandmother. He didn't mind the occasional upheaval when Mama came to visit because he knew it was temporary. Besides, the boys and Mama had a great relationship. Lucille was another story. When she moved in with us to recuperate after a hit-and-run accident and subsequent hip surgery, none of us had expected a permanent addition to the household. Then again, I had suffered from quite a few delusions back then.

Lucille scowled at me. "You should teach those boys some respect. In my day children knew their place."

"Don't you speak to my daughter like that!"

Lucille scoffed. "Look who's talking. A fine example you set."

"What's that supposed to mean?" demanded Mama.

"Strumpet." Lucille pounded her cane once for emphasis, then lumbered from the living room, Mephisto following at her heels. Lucille habitually pronounced judgment with a pounding of her cane, then departed.

"At least I'm getting some," Mama called after her. "Unlike a certain jealous Bolshevik who hasn't experienced an orgasm since Khrushchev ruled the Kremlin."

"Mama!"

Nick and Alex grabbed their middles and doubled over in hysterics.

Mama brushed my indignation aside with a wave of her hand. "For heaven's sake, Anastasia, I'm a grown woman."

"Then act like one. Especially in front of your grandsons."

She winked at the boys. "I thought I did. Besides, if they don't know the facts of life by now, they've got a lot of catching up to do."

I glanced at my sons, not sure how to interpret the sheepish expression on Alex's face or the feigned innocence on Nick's. After the initial shock of seeing their grandmother in the throws of passion, both seemed quite amused by the drama playing out in our living room. "They know all about the facts of life. What they don't need is a graphic demonstration from their grandmother."

The corners of Mama's mouth dipped down. "Honestly, Anastasia, just because I'm over sixty doesn't mean I'm ready for a hearse. When did you become such a stick-in-the-mud, dear?"

I suppose right around the time she morphed from Ms. Manners into Auntie Mame. Other sixty-five year old women might behave this way in front of their daughter and

grandsons, but up until today, Mama wasn't one of them. Was *Poor Lou's* last name *Svengali*?

Alex spared me from defending myself. "So who's the stranger dude, Grandma?"

"Lou isn't a stranger. He's my fiancé."

"Your *what*?" Surely I hadn't heard her correctly. Had some of that rafter dust settled in my ears? "What about Seamus, Mama?"

"Seamus?"

"Yes, Seamus. Remember him?"

Mama heaved one of those sighs reserved for children who need repeated instruction and explanation. "Seamus died, Anastasia. You know that."

Of course I knew Seamus had died. He'd suffered a cerebral aneurysm while kissing the Blarney Stone. "But he *just* died. Three months ago." Within days of losing my own husband, Mama had lost hers.

"Well, it's not like we were married very long. He died on our six-month anniversary. Besides, I'm not Merlin. I don't grow younger with each passing year."

Ample justification for getting herself engaged to a total stranger, no doubt. "Where did you meet him?"

"On the cruise, of course."

"So you're engaged to a man you've known for all of one week?"

Mama shrugged. "Time is meaningless when soul mates connect."

Soul mates? The now-departed Seamus had been soul mate Number Five for Flora Sudberry Periwinkle Ramirez Scoffield Goldberg O'Keefe. When Mama finally met her maker, she'd have a line of *soul mates* waiting for her at the Pearly Gates. She'd better hope St. Peter allowed polygamy up in Heaven.

"Besides," continued Mama, "at my age, I have to grab happiness when it presents itself. Advice you'd do well to heed." She glanced down the hallway toward the bedrooms. "Unless you want to wind up like *her*."

"No, not that!" Nick grabbed his throat and made gagging noises. "Not my mom!"

Alex fell to his knees in front of Mama, his hands clasped in supplication. "Please, Grandma, save our mom!"

Comedians. I tossed them a mom-sowl. "If the two of you have so much time on your hands, you can vacuum and do a load of wash before dinner." Nearly seven and I still had to prepare a meal, finish a project for a photo shoot tomorrow, and figure out a way to rob Peter to pay Paul before the bill collectors came knocking. Again.

Alex grabbed his backpack. "Sorry, Mom. Got an economics paper due tomorrow."

"Bio test," said Nick, retrieving his backpack from the floor.

"Dibs on the computer," called Alex as he sped down the hall to the bedroom they now shared. The boys used to have their own computers, but Nick's died last month. A replacement would have to wait until I won Mega Millions or Powerball.

Nick raced after Alex. Neither bothered with the baseball gear they'd dumped on the carpet. Apparently, it had become invisible to all but me.

I stooped to pick up the discarded duffels of sports paraphernalia. "I'm still in mourning."

Mama snorted as she followed me into the kitchen. "For a no-good gambling addict who left you without two nickels to rub together?"

"Karl and I were married eighteen years," I said softly as I hung the duffels on pegs

in the mudroom off the kitchen. “He’s only dead three months.”

Mama regarded me with an expression that hovered somewhere between pity and skepticism. “You don’t still have feeling for him, do you?”

I grabbed the leftover chicken and broccoli casserole from the fridge. There was barely enough left for four, let alone five people. “Not exactly,” I said, reaching for a box of mac and cheese to supplement the casserole. Not after what Karl Marx Pollack had done to his kids and me. I mourned for my former life. Before lies and deceit and death shattered the illusion of our perfect middle-class world.

I brushed my desperately-in-need-of-a-styling-but-can’t-afford-it hair out of my face and turned to confront Mama. “Besides, I don’t have time for romance. I’m too busy paying off Karl’s debts.”

Three months ago, my husband of eighteen years had permanently cashed in his chips at a Las Vegas roulette table—after also cashing in his sizable life insurance policy and 401(k), maxing out our home equity line-of-credit and numerous credit cards, *and* draining our teenage sons’ college accounts.

Besides the mountain of debt, my dearly departed had saddled me with both Ricardo The Loan Shark and Comrade Lucille, the communist mother-in-law from Hell. Karl had also stolen his mother’s life savings, thus leaving Lucille and Mephisto ensconced in Nick’s bedroom where they’d remain—short of an act of God. Considering Lucille didn’t believe in God and I had the luck of an excommunicated leprechaun, chances of her leaving any time soon were slim to none.

At least I no longer had to worry about Ricardo. He now resided at a federal facility. Permanently. No chance of parole, thanks to a trail of dead bodies three months earlier.

“A life without romance isn’t worth living,” said Mama. “Which reminds me, how’s that sexy tenant of yours?”

“Zack?” asked Nick, bounding into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and began to survey the contents. “He’s cool. Don’t you think he and Mom—”

I cut him off before he could finish his sentence. “I thought you had a test to study for.” I yanked his head out of the fridge and closed the door.

My sons shadowed Zachary Barnes like unweaned puppies. More often than not, I arrived home from work to find Zack sitting at my kitchen table, regaling Nick and Alex with his latest adventure. Lucky for me, the too-sexy-for-my-own-good photojournalist traveled frequently.

“I’m hungry.”

“You’ll have to wait until dinner.”

He glanced at the clock over the sink. “Jeez, Mom, it’s after seven. When are we going to eat?”

I tossed the box of mac and cheese at him. “If you’re so hungry, you can help.”

He tossed the box back. “Can’t. Have to study.” He snagged an apple from the bowl on the kitchen table and hustled out of the kitchen.

“So what’s with you and Zack?” asked Mama as I filled a pot of water and placed it on the stove.

When Mama first met Zack, she tossed her hair, batted her eyes, and preened in front of him like a svelte Miss Piggy trying to woo Kermit the Frog. When Zack didn’t take the bait, she decided I should have him. This all took place within days of both of us entering the ranks of widowhood.

I handed her a half-empty bag of carrots and a vegetable peeler. “Nothing.”

She raised an eyebrow as she began scraping carrots. “He’s a very handsome man, Anastasia. Unattached. Good job.”

“Forget Zack. Let’s talk about you. Why are you home three days early?”

Mama had a knack for marrying grasshoppers—men who lived life to the fullest without any regard for tomorrow. When they died, as each of them had, they left her with fond memories of a good time and little more than pocket change. So between husbands, she camped out at *Chez Pollack*. Although also a grasshopper, Seamus O’Keefe had had the foresight to purchase a small life insurance policy prior to his and Mama’s Irish sojourn—a life insurance policy Mama had discovered only by chance weeks after returning from Ireland. Behind my back she paid off twenty thousand dollars of my inherited debt, then treated herself to a post-Seamus first-class cruise with the remaining five thousand dollars.

Mama waved a raggedly peeled carrot in the air. She was as useless in the kitchen as the rest of my brood. “The ship had some sort of mechanical problem in Antigua. Since there were severe storm warnings, Lou and I decided to fly home before the storm hit.”

“And just who is this Lou?”

A dreamy look settled over her face. The corners of her mouth turned upward into a beatific smile as she exhaled a long sigh. “Lou? He’s the answer to my prayers. And yours.”

“Want to run that by me again?”

Mama rose from the table and tossed the carrot scrapings into the sink. “Lou is Louis Beaumont, Anastasia.”

I waited. And waited. I crossed my arms, tapped my foot, cocked my head, and waited some more. “And?”

Mama’s eyes grew wide. “Surely you’ve heard of Louis Beaumont.”

“Can’t say as I have.”

“He produces *You Heard It Here First with Vince and Monica*.”

That explained so much. I offered Mama a blank stare.

“The morning talk show with Vince Alto and Monica Rivers? Surely you’ve watched it.”

“Television?” I laughed. “Right. Every morning while I loll around at the spa. In the afternoon I sip champagne, eat bonbons, and watch the soaps.”

“There’s no need for sarcasm, dear. It’s a popular show. Even if you haven’t watched it, I’d expect you to know about it.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, Mama. I’m a single parent. I’m juggling a full-time job, two teenage kids, a house, a parrot who thinks he’s the reincarnation of William Shakespeare, a semi-invalid mother-in-law, and her spawn of Satan dog.

“*And* when I’m not dealing with all of that, I’m trying to figure out ways to earn extra income because I’m up to my patootie in debt. I’ve never heard of Louis Beaumont. And you’ve heard *that* here first.”

“Well, you’d better make an effort to watch *You Heard It Here First*, dear, because you’re going to be a regular on the show.”