

Guilty as Framed

An Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mystery

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ONE

“I know it sounds trite,” I said, “but I feel like a kid in a candy shop.” Zack and I stood over my dining room table as I ogled three dozen different wall and floor tiles spread across a white sheet being used as a neutral backdrop. Marble. Porcelain. Ceramic. Stone. Glass. Polished versus honed. Solids and patterns. Squares, rectangles, hexagonals, and honeycombs. We had spent the afternoon at a local decorating center, narrowing down thousands of choices to the ones currently spread before us. Now I had to settle on my picks for the two bathrooms and a kitchen backsplash.

My tired nineteen fifties suburban rancher with its peeling linoleum floors and cracked Formica countertops was about to undergo a much-needed facelift. Not that I could afford even a minor update, let alone a major renovation. I’d reluctantly agreed to the costly overhaul that someone else was footing.

Two someones, to be precise. My fiancé Zachary Barnes and my neighbor Jesse Konopka.

Zack was paying for the materials as an early wedding present, even though we still hadn’t firmed up a date. Jesse, a contractor, was providing the labor. He insisted, as his way of thanking me for figuring out who had tried to kill him a few months ago.

“Any we can eliminate?” asked Zack.

I stacked the half-dozen twelve-inch patterned tiles. “As much as I like these, the designs and colors are not only too trendy, I think they’re too busy for such small bathrooms.”

When he exhaled what I interpreted as a sigh of relief, I spun to face him. “You hate those! Why didn’t you tell me?”

He offered me a sheepish grin. “I didn’t want to influence you.”

“But you’re paying. You should have a say.”

“On the contrary. It’s why I’m keeping quiet.”

From his perch on top of the breakfront behind us, Ralph squawked. “*To the contrary, I have express commandment. A Winter’s Tale, Act Two, Scene Two.*”

“That makes no sense.”

Zack chuckled. “Are you speaking to Ralph or me?”

At the mention of his name, the Shakespeare-quoting African Grey parrot I’d inherited from my great-aunt Penelope Periwinkle flew to Zack’s shoulder and nuzzled his cheek.

I scowled at man and bird. “Both.”

Zack reached into his shirt pocket and offered Ralph a sunflower seed. “If I told you which ones I like, you’d choose them whether you like them or not.”

Busted. My guilt runneth over. I returned a sheepish grin of my own.

My name is Anastasia Pollack, AKA Clueless Wife. A little more than a year ago I learned my deceased husband had gambled us into destitution before conveniently dropping dead in a Las Vegas casino. Convenient for him. Not so convenient for me. Instead of a sizable life insurance policy, Karl Marx Pollack left me with the ultimate trifecta—his communist mother, debt equal to the GNP of a Third World nation, *and* his loan shark.

If I allowed him, Zack would wipe out my debt and move us to a new home. I won't let him. My Karl-induced debt is my problem, not his.

Maybe that's why I'm having such difficulty choosing tiles.

But at that moment the doorbell rang, postponing any further conversation on decision-making. I strode from the dining room, through the living room, to the foyer. I swung open the front door and came face-to-face with an elderly man dressed in a moth-holed topcoat and well-worn dark brown old-fashioned fedora. Deep wrinkles crisscrossed a sallow complexion in need of a razor. At the sight of me, a puzzled expression settled across his face.

"May I help you?"

He spoke around an unlit cigar stub clenched in the corner of his mouth. "I'm looking for Johnnie D."

"You have the wrong house."

"I don't think so."

"No one by that name lives here."

He stared over my shoulder into the hallway and shook his head. "No, this is definitely the house where Johnnie D. lives." Then he turned his attention back to me. "He's got something of mine. I've come to collect it."

"Look," I said, moving to close the door on him, "I don't know any Johnnie D. If he lived here at one time, he's long gone."

He grabbed the door and started to push his way inside. His strength belied his advanced age. Zack came up behind me and grabbed the door to prevent the man from entering. In a forceful tone he asked, "Do I need to call the police?"

Ralph flew off Zack's shoulder, emitted a menacing squawk, and transitioned from mild-mannered pet to protective predator. The guy's eyes grew wide with fear. He dropped his hand and backed away from the entrance. "That won't be necessary." Then he spun around and made a hasty retreat toward a late model black SUV idling in front of my house. After he jumped into the rear passenger seat, the car sped away. Zack waited until the vehicle had turned the corner before closing the front door.

"What was that all about?"

"Beats me," I said.

"Any chance he was looking for Karl?"

I shuddered. Had Karl used multiple aliases to borrow money from more than one loan shark? How many more of these cockroaches would eventually show up at my door? "I hope not, but from my limited experience with loan sharks, they want their money yesterday. They don't wait a year or more to collect."

Zack nodded. "Valid point. There's another possibility."

"Such as?"

"Someone named Johnnie D. may have lived here decades ago. If this guy suffers from dementia, he might think he's still in the twentieth century."

"Someone else was behind the wheel of that car."

Zack pulled out his phone. "Could be an Uber."

"Uber didn't exist in the twentieth century."

He shrugged. "Time isn't linear for people suffering from dementia."

"Who are you calling?"

"Spader. If the guy has dementia, someone is probably looking for him."

"Spader works homicide."

“I’m aware of that, but after your latest escapade, he asked me to notify him whenever anything odd occurs. That guy showing up strikes me as odd.”

“*Whenever?* Not *if?*”

He quirked an eyebrow. “You do have a track record.”

“It’s not like I go around searching out dead bodies.”

“And yet you keep finding them.”

“That guy isn’t dead.”

“But you can’t argue that his showing up here wasn’t odd.”

“Extremely. Call Spader. I’m going back to mulling over tile.”

A few minutes later Zack rejoined me in the dining room. “There are no open Silver Alerts anywhere in the tri-state area, but Spader said that could just mean no one has reported the guy missing yet. He asked me to send him a photo from our security camera in case an alert comes in.”

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Now it’s time to make a commitment.”

I smiled and pointed to my engagement ring. “I already did.”

“To tile.”

I grabbed three samples off the table. “I think we should go classic. Carrera. Basketweave for the bathroom floors. Subway tiles for the showers. Herringbone for the kitchen backsplash.”

He squeezed my shoulders. “See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“You really like them?”

He grinned. “You know me, I’m a classic kind of guy.”

I gave him a once-over. “Indeed, you are.” Classic good looks, definitely. After all, the guy’s DNA had emerged from the same primordial pool as that of Pierce Brosnan, Antonio Banderas, and George Clooney.

Still, *classic* was not the first adjective to spring to my mind in describing photojournalist Zachary Barnes, unless perhaps classic referred to classic spy, completely secretive regarding a side gig he swears is a figment of my overactive imagination. But I bit my tongue. No matter how much I suspected Zack also worked for one of the D.C. alphabet agencies, he’d only deny it, as he had on numerous occasions. This was a can of slimy wrigglers best left unopened. At least for now. I offered him a smile accompanied by a nod.

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As we prepared to sit down for dinner later that evening, the doorbell rang once again. “I’ll get it,” said Alex.

I stopped him. “Let Zack.”

He glanced from me to Zack, then exchanged an odd look with his brother before shrugging. “Sure. Go for it.”

“I’ll explain later,” I whispered as my mother-in-law lumbered into the dining room, scowling as she passed Zack.

“Got it,” said Alex. He shot a quick side-eye toward his grandmother, then placed the garlic bread on the dining room table. Nick followed with the green beans as I settled the lasagna onto a trivet.

A moment later Zack returned with Detective Samuel Spader in tow. “Didn’t mean to interrupt your dinner,” he said, eyeing the spread on the table.

“Would you like to join us, Detective?” Knowing Spader, if he didn’t accept, he’d most likely grab a fast-food burger for dinner. He’d never said one way or the other, but I suspected there was no Mrs. Spader or potential Mrs. Spader in his life. “We have plenty,” I added.

“You always have plenty,” muttered Lucille, “except when I invite my friends.”

I ignored her. Lucille and her friends, all Daughters of the October Revolution, were one-direction communists, always taking without asking. In their eyes, what's mine—or anyone's—was theirs. Which is why we kept everything from office supplies to wine and liquor locked in the apartment above my garage. Although tempted, I hadn't yet padlocked the refrigerator or pantry. Which was why I often arrived home to find both nearly empty.

While Detective Spader debated whether to accept my invitation, Zack headed into the kitchen, momentarily returning with an extra plate, glass, and utensils, and set them at the one available spot at the table. "Have a seat, Detective."

Spader pulled out the chair and sank into it. "Thanks. Been awhile since I've had a home-cooked meal."

I didn't doubt it.

Lucille glared at him from across the table. We were all cognizant of my mother-in-law's disdain of law enforcement, especially local law enforcement, given her constant run-ins with them, and specifically with Detective Samuel Spader. The feelings were mutual.

Spader never just dropped in. Our relationship had improved since we first met last summer when he suspected Lucille of the strangulation murder of her roommate at the Sunnyside of Westfield Assisted Living and Rehabilitation Center. Hence, her overt animosity.

Several dead bodies later, Spader's attitude toward me had moved from antagonistic, to reluctant acceptance, to an admiration of my sleuthing skills. However, our interactions had never crossed over into friendship. Spader never stopped by just to say hello. If he was here, it was because he had information about our earlier visitor.

He held my gaze for a moment, offering me an almost imperceptible nod as I served him a large helping of lasagna. I glanced at Zack. He also nodded slightly, a silent consent among the three of us to postpone our discussion until after dinner when we could adjourn to the apartment for privacy.

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Half an hour later, ignoring her dog's needs, Lucille trundled off to camp out in front of the television in the den. "I guess he's officially my dog now," said Nick, grabbing Devil Dog's leash.

"You've been adopted," said Alex as he loaded the dishwasher.

"If he's my responsibility from now on, I'm officially changing his name."

Lucille, the diehard commie, had dubbed her French bulldog Manifesto after the communist treatise. From Day One we had all refused to use the moniker, opting instead for a name more suitable to the dog's personality. We alternated between Mephisto and Devil Dog. Although in recent months, the pooch had mellowed, turning his back on his mistress, and taking a shine to Nick. Neither Mephisto nor Devil Dog now fit his new personality.

"Have something in mind?" asked Zack.

Nick cocked his head and studied the subject in question. Devil Dog looked up at him with mournful eyes. "I'll think of something. Right now, he's telling me he's really got to go."

"My brother the dog whisperer," said Alex.

"You're just jealous of my talents," said Nick, clipping the leash to the dog's collar.

"Grab a jacket," I said as he headed for the back door.

"It's been spring for weeks, Mom."

"Not according to the thermometer." I pointed toward the mud room. "Jacket. Now."

He pulled a hoodie off a hook and shoved his arms into it. "Happy?"

"Ecstatic. Don't forget a poop bag."

After Alex finished loading the dishwasher and switched it on, he asked the three of us, “So what’s going on with you guys? You haven’t found another dead body, have you, Mom?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Then what?”

I told him about the stranger who’d come to the door earlier. Then I turned to Spader. “I’m assuming you have some information on him?”

Spader nodded. “Should we talk here?”

We could hear the television blaring from the den. “Once Lucille settles into an evening of *90 Day Fiancé*, the house would have to go up in flames for her to budge.”

Spader barked out a laugh. “You’re kidding! That old commie bat is a reality TV junkie?”

“As strange as it sounds,” said Zack. “You on the clock, Detective, or can we offer you an after-dinner drink?”

Spader checked the time. “I was officially off-duty twenty minutes ago.”

When we first met, I was convinced the overweight, middle-aged detective with a fondness for both nicotine and alcohol wouldn’t survive to retirement. However, in the last few months Spader had trimmed down, no longer reeked of cigarettes, and had lost the telltale ruddiness often associated with alcoholism. I’d probably never know what had inspired his newfound healthy-living regime, but I no longer viewed him as one beer and a drag away from a massive coronary.

Still, I’m not sure I would have tempted fate by offering him a drink.

Zack handed Alex the apartment key and asked him to retrieve a bottle of brandy. Spader raised an eyebrow. I explained why we didn’t keep anything alcoholic in the house. “With the meds she’s on, my mother-in-law isn’t allowed to drink, but that doesn’t stop her.”

“She hasn’t tried to raid the apartment when you’re not home?”

“She can’t manage the stairs.”

“I’ve never known an alcoholic to let a flight of stairs stop her,” said Spader.

Was he speaking from personal experience?

“She also doesn’t have a key,” added Zack. “And she never will.”

When Alex returned with the brandy, Zack splashed a generous amount into glasses for the adults while my son nuked a hot chocolate for himself, then settled into one of the kitchen chairs. I debated asking him to leave, but depending on what Spader had to say, decided he should probably be made aware of the situation.

Spader took a sip of brandy and smacked his lips. “Smooth.”

“Can I assume you’ve learned the identity of our visitor?” I asked.

“And then some. His name is Cormac Murphy. He was recently released from federal prison after completing most of a twenty-year sentence.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “For what?”

“This time? Counterfeiting and forgery. He’s a career criminal connected to the Boston mob. The Feds once suspected he had information on the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum art heist in Boston back in 1990.”

“He was a suspect?” I asked.

Spader shook his head. “Not exactly. Turns out he had an ironclad alibi.”

“And they believed him?” asked Zack. “We all know alibis can be bought.”

“Not this one,” said Spader. “He was doing time in Leavenworth. The guy’s been in and out of lockup most of his adult life. Back then, he was serving a three-year sentence for armed robbery.”

“Then why did they think he had information on a burglary in Boston?” asked Alex.

“They bandied about dozens of theories trying to solve the crime and find the missing artworks. Most centered around Boston’s various mobs. One theory suggested members of Murphy’s gang pulled off the heist, but Murphy denied any knowledge of the crime.”

“Prison sentences have never deterred mob bosses from continuing business as usual,” said Zack. “Murphy could have orchestrated the heist from behind bars.”

“I’m sure the cops thought along those lines,” said Spader, “but neither they nor the Feds could find enough evidence to prove that theory or any of the others.”

“I’ve been to the Gardner Museum,” I said. “They display empty frames where the stolen paintings once hung. It’s considered history’s greatest art theft.”

Spader nodded. “Half a billion dollars’ worth of masterpieces, and they’re all still missing.”

Alex whistled under his breath. His eyes bugged out. “You mean they’ve never found any of the paintings?”

“No,” said Spader. “And most of the suspects are now dead. The case is still open, but it’s going nowhere for obvious reasons.”

“Why would Murphy show up here?” I asked. “Do you have any information on this Johnnie D. he claims lived here?”

“Maybe. Johnnie D. could be John Doyle. One of the prevailing theories is that Murphy’s mob stole the artwork to leverage his release. His driver was Robert “Bobby” Doyle, one of the FBI’s prime suspects in the heist. They believe he hid the artwork until the manhunt for the thieves waned and he could negotiate Murphy’s release.”

“Which obviously didn’t happen,” I said. “What went wrong?”

“Doyle was brutally murdered about a year and a half after the heist.”

“Who killed him?” asked Alex.

“No one knows,” said Spader.

“Had Doyle begun negotiations?” asked Zack.

Spader shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. According to my sources, the Feds remain mum on the subject.”

“John Doyle is a common Irish name,” I said, “but if Johnnie D. is John Doyle, how does he fit into all of this?”

“Bobby Doyle had a cousin named John Doyle.”

“I’m willing to bet there are dozens of Robert Doyles throughout the Boston area,” said Zack, “and many of them probably have a cousin named John.”

“Agreed,” said Spader.

“Besides,” I said, “we’re nowhere near Boston. Why would Murphy think he’d find the guy he’s looking for here?”

“Do you know the name of the family who owned this house before you?” asked Spader.

“Not offhand. It wasn’t Doyle, though. I’m sure of that. I’d have to look through our records.”

“I’ll save you the trouble,” said Spader. “It was Gallagher. Kellen and Shauna Gallagher.”

“That sounds about right. We never met them. They had moved before we made an offer on the house. Their attorney handled settlement for them.”

“If I were a betting man,” said Spader, “I’d put money on the Gallaghers and their young son having entered Witness Protection.”

“What makes you think that?” asked Zack.

“Because there’s no trace of them since Murphy’s conviction, and Shauna Gallagher was Johnnie Doyle’s sister.”