

# 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 yowl, 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.”