

Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mysteries

Books 5-6

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A Stitch to Die For

ONE

Two weeks ago my mother, Flora Sudberry Periwinkle Ramirez Scoffield Goldberg O'Keefe, took her sixth trip down the aisle to become Flora Sudberry Periwinkle Ramirez Scoffield Goldberg O'Keefe Tuttnauer. The groom's daughter was a no-show. At the time of the ceremony her body was being fished out of the Delaware and Raritan Canal in Lambertville, New Jersey.

Ira Pollack, my half-brother-in-law and the groom's son-in-law, had just finished a toast to Mama and Lawrence Tuttnauer when two men in dark suits entered the backyard catering tent and headed straight toward him. Given all my dealings with the police over the last few months, I easily made them for detectives, a suspicion confirmed when I spotted them flashing their badges. Ira nodded and followed them out of the tent.

I followed Ira.

He and the two men made their way to the patio at the back of his house. I stopped at the entrance to the tent. The men stood with their backs to me, Ira facing me. From my vantage point I couldn't hear their words over the conversations and music going on behind me, but I saw the color drain from Ira's face. He shook his head violently and yelled, "No!" loud enough for me to hear.

I raced across the lawn as fast as I could in three-inch heels. Once at the patio, I placed my hand on Ira's arm. In a voice that trembled as much as his body, he said, "Cynthia. They found her floating in the canal."

I gasped, then led Ira over to one of the patio lounge chairs. He collapsed onto the cushion and buried his head in his hands as he choked out huge sobs.

I turned to the detectives, waiting for more of an explanation, but both ignored Ira's grief to fixate on the party across the lawn. "What's going on here?" one of them asked.

"A wedding," I said.

"Whose?"

"Ira's father-in-law married my mother."

Both detectives knit their brows together and glared at Ira. "Your wife doesn't show for her father's wedding, and you're not worried?" asked the older and taller of the two men.

Ira tried speaking between sobs. His mouth opened and closed several times, but no words came out. I answered for him. "Cynthia didn't approve of her father marrying my mother."

"And you are?" asked the second detective, whipping out a notepad and pencil.

"Anastasia Pollack. I'm also Ira's half-sister-in-law."

Both detectives repeated the twin eyebrow knit, but neither said anything. Also, up to this point I had no idea how Cynthia had died, so I asked, "What happened to Cynthia?"

“The medical examiner will have to determine cause of death,” said the older detective. “We’re waiting on an autopsy.”

“Do you suspect foul play?”

“Why would you suggest that?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I can’t imagine how Cynthia would land in the canal on her own. She isn’t...wasn’t the canal-strolling type.” Dirt and extremely expensive designer duds don’t mix.

“What type was she?” asked the younger detective.

Cynthia the Trophy Wife was more the spend-all-day-spending-Ira’s-money type. I thought for a moment, not wanting to say anything that might be misconstrued. If Cynthia hadn’t died of natural causes, Ira would wind up at the top of the suspect list. “I only met her once,” I said, “but I’d describe her as someone more interested in indoor activities than communing with nature.”

The spouse is always the prime suspect, but Ira was no killer. The man didn’t even have the backbone to discipline his bratty kids. If Cynthia had met with foul play, my money was on the pool boy she’d run off with weeks earlier. “Ira, you have to tell the detectives what happened with Cynthia.”

The two men practically pounced on Ira. “Do we need to haul you into headquarters, Mr. Pollack?” asked the older detective.

“It’s nothing like that,” I said. “Cynthia ran off with her lover.”

Ira lifted his tear-streaked face and nodded in confirmation.

“When?” asked the older detective.

“Several weeks ago.”

The younger detective headed back to the tent and returned a few minutes later with Mama and Lawrence in tow. Mama had no love for Cynthia, but she was visibly shaken upon learning of her death.

Lawrence, on the other hand, exhibited more anger than grief. “I’m not surprised,” he said, shaking his head. “She was always a wild child. Drugs. Cocaine mostly. And alcohol.”

Cynthia a cokehead? Maybe that’s how she maintained her size zero figure.

The narrow canal path, out of the way and nearly hidden within the wooded area separating the canal from the Delaware River, would make for a perfect spot to deal drugs. I turned to Ira. “Did you know?”

He shook his head. “I had no idea.”

“Why didn’t you tell him?” I asked Lawrence.

“I had hoped that was all behind her, but...” His voice trailed off. He wrapped an arm around Ira’s shoulders. “I’m sorry.”

“Do you suspect drugs?” I asked the detectives.

“We’ll know more after the autopsy,” the older one said. “For now we need Mr. Pollack to make a positive ID of the body.”

Ira shuddered, turning green at the thought, but he didn’t protest and left willingly. I was surprised the detectives didn’t issue a *don’t leave town* order to the rest of us before departing, but maybe that only happens on TV and in the movies. Lawrence’s bombshell regarding Cynthia’s drug habit had put an entirely new spin on their investigation. Ira was probably no longer Suspect Numero Uno.

Even more surprising was Lawrence and Mama’s decision to go ahead with their honeymoon. Drugs or not, Lawrence had still just lost his daughter.

“What kind of father takes off on a honeymoon hours after learning of his daughter’s death?” I asked Zack on the ride home from the wedding.

Zachary Barnes, professional photojournalist and possible spy, had rented the apartment above my garage last winter shortly after my husband Karl dropped dead in Las Vegas, leaving me with his semi-invalid communist mother and gambling debts equal to the gross national product of Uzbekistan.

Zack looks like Pierce Brosnan, George Clooney, Patrick Dempsey, and Antonio Bandares all contributed to his gene pool. I'm a pear-shaped, middle-aged mom of two teenage boys. You'd think we'd have nothing in common. Maybe we don't, but no one told that to our hormones.

This past summer I decided I'd mourned Dead Louse of a Spouse long enough and let nature takes its course with Zack. We'd both been enjoying the trip ever since.

"People handle grief in all sorts of ways," he said.

"I suppose. But it seems rather callous."

Mama hasn't had much luck with husbands since my father drowned while scuba diving in the Yucatan on my parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Each of her subsequent husbands has met with an unfortunate death not long after their nuptials.

George Ramirez made the unwise and deadly mistake of running with the bulls at Pamplona. Oscar Scoffield succumbed from an allergic reaction to shellfish. Arnie Goldberg lost his footing at the Grand Canyon and plunged to his death. Seamus O'Keefe suffered a fatal cerebral aneurysm when he tried to kiss the Blarney Stone. Lou Beaumont never made it as far as *I do*. Several months ago, shortly after he and Mama announced their engagement, a deranged coworker stabbed him in the heart with one of my knitting needles.

Given her track record, you'd think my mother would be gun-shy about wading into matrimonial waters yet again. Not Mama. Her cockeyed optimism puts Nellie Forbush to shame. She and Lawrence knew each other all of three months before they tied the knot.

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After two weeks in Paris, Mama and Lawrence returned from their honeymoon, the trip—along with the wedding and their new condo—paid for by Ira. At least this time the groom had survived the honeymoon.

In true Mama fashion they showed up to retrieve Catherine the Great, Mama's corpulent Persian cat, in time to invite themselves to stay for dinner. Mama had also invited Ira and his triple terrors—the interchangeable eleven-year-old twins Melody and Harmony (neither of whom knew a C-sharp from a B-flat) and their nine-year-old brother Isaac. All had arrived before I'd had a chance to kick off my heels after a long day at work.

Luckily, I didn't have to figure out how to stretch a tuna-noodle casserole for four to accommodate an additional six mouths. Ira arrived with enough Chinese take-out to feed half of Westfield. As much as I didn't want a houseful of company on a Monday night, at least I'd have leftovers for the remainder of the week.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" I asked Mama.

"Hardly." She sighed. "I spent the entire trip holding my breath, worrying that something would happen to Lawrence."

"But nothing did," he said, "I told you nothing would."

Mama squeezed his hand. "You can't blame me, given the series of unfortunate events that have plagued my marriages. I swear I'm cursed."

"And now the curse is broken," he said, stooping to plant a peck on her cheek.

I certainly hoped so. Mama deserved some lasting happiness. She and Lawrence made quite the couple, too. My mother bears a striking resemblance to Ellen Burstyn, and Lawrence, with his full head of silver hair, could easily pass for the reincarnation of Cary Grant.

I also harbored ulterior motives for the continued coupling of the newlywed couple. I deserved one less person living under my roof. Mama has moved in with us each time she's lost a husband. My house is a small three-bedroom mid-century rancher, and I'm already stuck with Lucille, the communist mother-in-law from hell. With Mama claiming descent from Russian nobility, the Russian Revolution is still very much alive within the walls of Casa Pollack.

"Have you heard anything further regarding Cynthia's death?" Lawrence asked Ira.

While he and Mama had cavorted along the Seine, the police continued their investigation. Ira had provided me with periodic updates. "You were right about the drugs," he said. "The autopsy results showed massive levels of cocaine and alcohol in her system."

Lawrence shook his head. "I knew it. What about the pool boy? Did he supply her with the drugs?"

"The police don't know."

"Why not?" asked Mama. "Haven't they questioned him?"

According to what the police told Ira, Cynthia and Pablo the Pool Boy had checked into the Lambertville Inn a week before her death. They never checked out. "He's missing," said Ira.

"Of course, he's missing," said Lawrence. "Why would he stick around after killing my daughter? By now he's probably basking on a beach in Venezuela."

"Is that where he comes from?" asked Mama.

Lawrence shrugged. "Who knows?"

"You seem to, dear. Why else would you mention Venezuela?"

"Because it makes perfect sense. He's Latino; he'd head for a Spanish-speaking country. And given the political climate, Venezuela would be a safe haven."

"Why is that?" asked Mama.

"Because they'd most likely ignore an extradition request," said Alex, entering the living room. He kissed his grandmother, waved to Ira and Lawrence, and ignored his cousins who, as usual, were engrossed in their hand-held devices of choice. "Venezuela and the United States haven't been the best of friends the last few years," he explained.

"Someone's been paying attention in civics class," said Lawrence.

"Alex pays attention in all his classes," I said. Before his father had screwed him out of his future, Alex had hoped to attend Harvard next year. Now, thanks to Dead Louse of a Spouse, even community college tuition would be a struggle.

Alex grabbed the bags of food from Ira and followed me into the kitchen. "Why are they all here?" he whispered.

"Your grandmother invited them."

"I have a ton of homework tonight."

"Then you have a perfect excuse to make yourself scarce after dinner."

When Ira first entered our lives a few months ago, my sons had been excited to learn they had cousins. I'm an only child, as was Karl—or so we'd thought. But it turned out Karl's father married and had another son after he and Lucille parted ways. Unfortunately, the excitement of additional family quickly wore off once Alex and Nick met Ira's spoiled brats.

"Where's Nick?" I asked.

"Soccer practice. I finished early." Alex glanced over at the clock on the microwave. "He should be home any minute."

While Alex set the table and I grabbed serving utensils for the food, I wondered what connections, if any, Zack had in Venezuela, assuming he really did work for one of the alphabet agencies. Broaching the subject would get me a swift denial, but that didn't mean he wouldn't look

into it on the sly. Spy or not, he seemed to have all sorts of connections in both Washington, DC and around the world.

At the crack of dawn this morning he'd headed to Newark Liberty Airport, supposedly on his way to Amphipolis, Greece to photograph what some scholars argued might be the tomb of Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great. I had no doubt he'd return with plenty of photographic proof of his destination. What I'd never know was where else he'd gone and what else he'd done.

I try not to ponder the possibilities, but I'm rarely successful. Marriage to the deceitful Dead Louse of a Spouse had ground my Trust gene to pulp, spit it out, and replaced it with a huge dose of skepticism.

Anyway, even though Cynthia had ranked high on the Bitch-O-Meter, no one should get away with murder. So I mulled over a way to bring up the subject with Zack upon his return.

Nick arrived home, and a moment later, like Pavlov's dog, Lucille hobbled into the dining room the instant I placed the first carton of food onto the table. My mother-in-law greeted Ira and his brood with a scowl.

Lucille refuses to believe Ira is her precious Karl's half-brother, even though Ira could almost pass for Karl's twin. Then again, she refuses to believe her precious Karl gambled away his sons' futures and left his family one step away from living in a cardboard box on the street.

She muttered under her breath as she maneuvered herself into a chair at the head of the table, then leaned forward to snag two cardboard containers—a pint of fried rice and a quart of shrimp in lobster sauce, both of which she proceeded to dump onto her plate. Lucille had definitely skipped the section on sharing in *The Communist Manifesto*.

I hadn't taken my first bite of moo goo gai pan when Ira's cell phone rang. As he reached into his pocket, Melody or Harmony (I'd yet to figure out the difference between the two,) pointed at me and declared in a loud voice, "She said no phones at the table."

I handed down that edict on a previous visit from Ira and his hell spawns after their lack of manners had gotten the better of me. When they at first not only ignored me but gave me lip, I'd grabbed the phones out of their hands and refused to return them until after dinner. I'm glad to see they remembered the rules of the house.

Ira glanced at his phone's display and shrugged. "Sorry, I have to take this call. It's important."

"So are my calls!" His daughter jabbed a finger in my direction. "It's not fair. If I have to follow her stupid rules, everybody has to."

Ignoring her outburst, Ira rose and answered the call as he headed toward the living room.

"If you can, I can," Melody/Harmony shouted after him.

"Me, too," said her sister.

Both girls whipped out their cell phones. Lawrence rose, strode around the table, and plucked the phones from their hands.

"Hey!" said one.

"You can't do that!" said the other.

"I can, and I did," he said, pocketing the phones. "You'll get them back after dinner."

"I hate this stupid house," said Melody, smacking both hands on the table. Or was it Harmony? "And I hate all of you. I don't know why we have to keep coming here."

Lucille glared at her. "The feeling is mutual." Then she targeted me. "This is all your fault, Anastasia. I know you only keep inviting that imposter and his juvenile delinquents to annoy me."

"That's right," said Mama. "The entire world revolves around the commie pinko."

Isaac wadded up his napkin and hurled it at Lucille. It bounced off her head and landed in the middle of her mound of shrimp.

“How dare you!” Lucille picked the soggy napkin from her plate and glared at Isaac. Had he been sitting closer, I have no doubt she would have mashed it into his face. Luckily, he sat beyond her reach. Instead, she growled like her French bulldog Manifesto (AKA Mephisto or Devil Dog) as she dropped the napkin onto the table.

“You have no right to call us names,” said Isaac. “We’re not juvenile delinquents, you ugly old bitch.”

Lucille grabbed her cane and raised it in his direction.

“Go ahead,” Ira’s son taunted her. “Hit me. I’ll call the cops and have you arrested for child abuse. Then I’ll sue you for everything you’ve got.”

Mama laughed. “Don’t waste your time. She’s dead broke, thanks to her son.”

Lucille whipped her head around toward Mama. “You leave my son out of this!”

“Open your eyes, you Bolshevik cow. Karl was a lowlife scumbag who screwed you, his wife, and his kids.”

“Mama!”

Lucille thought the money she’d kept in shoeboxes under her bed (because she didn’t trust banks) had been lost when a fire reduced her apartment building to ashes. According to Ricardo, Karl’s loan shark and accomplice, my husband had deliberately set that fire—after he absconded with his mother’s life savings. I had never divulged this fact to anyone—especially not to Mama or Lucille. Had Mama somehow found out, or was she simply taking the opportunity to bait her arch nemesis?

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” she asked in a voice dripping with innocence.

“How dare you sully my son’s good name!” said Lucille.

“He sullied his own name long ago,” said Mama.

I ignored both my mother and mother-in-law, instead directing my comments to Isaac. “Eat your dinner. You’re not old enough to file a lawsuit.”

“You’re not a lawyer,” he said. “And you can’t tell me what to do.”

“Enough!” Lawrence pounded his fist onto the table. Plates rattled. Water sloshed around in glasses. “You kids can either behave yourselves or go sit in your father’s car until he’s ready to leave.”

He then turned to Mama, “Flora, dear, I suggest you and Anastasia’s mother-in-law bury the hatchet once and for all for everyone’s sake.”

Mama glared at Lucille. “She started it.”

I didn’t need to be a mind reader to see the thought bubble hovering above Mama’s strawberry blonde waves. She’d be happy to bury the hatchet—right in Lucille’s skull.

“Actually, dear,” said Lawrence, “you started it.”

Mama gasped. “You’re supposed to take my side, not that leftist pinko’s!”

Lawrence patted her hand. “Only when you’re right, Flora. Now I suggest we all calm down and finish our dinner.”

Mama looked as though Lawrence had slapped her across the face. Lucille smirked before turning her attention back to her mound of shrimp. I guess Ira’s kids enjoyed the Chinese food too much to give up dinner because the three of them remained at the table. By the time Ira returned to the dining room they all sat silently hunched over their plates while they gobbled down egg rolls and shoveled huge forkfuls of lo mein into their mouths.

“The police found Pablo,” said Ira.

“In Venezuela?” asked Mama.

“In a Dumpster in Camden. He was strangled with a bicycle lock.”

Scrapbook of Murder

An Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mystery

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 a 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 toward me.

The light had gone out of Lupe’s once-luminous dark eyes. Her hair, normally lustrous ebony waves that bounced upon her shoulders, hung flat and limp against her head. Her 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 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 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’ll 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.

~*~

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 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, her eyebrows arching up toward the gingerbread-colored wispy bangs of her pixie haircut. "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!”