

A STITCH TO DIE FOR

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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 stepbrother-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 stepsister-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 Tajikistan.

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 Mephisto 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.”