

Assault With a Deadly Glue Gun

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ONE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As soon as they’d both muscled their way into the bathroom, my mother-in-law slammed the door in my face and locked it. God only knows why she needs her dog in the bathroom with her. And if he does know, I hope he continues to spare the rest of us the knowledge.

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

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

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

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

"Literally or figuratively?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Besides, after working all day, plus taking care of the kids, the shopping, the carpooling, the cooking and the cleaning, who had the energy to put into even one

orgasm most nights? Even for a drop-dead-gorgeous-although-balding-and-slightly-overweight-yet-still-a-hunk husband? Faking it was a lot quicker and easier. And gave me a few extra precious minutes of snooze time.

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

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

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

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

"Put Karl on."

"Excuse me?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"This his missus?" He sounded suspicious.

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

Although both statements were true, after what I had recently learned about my husband's secret life, he probably did owe Ricardo fifty thousand dollars, the same fifty thousand dollars the casino manager in Las Vegas said Karl gambled away shortly before cashing in his chips—literally—at that roulette table.

But what really freaked me out as I stood half-naked in nothing more than my black

panties and matching bra, was the thought that there could be other Ricardos waiting to pounce. Lots of other Ricardos. Behind my husband's upstanding, church-going, family-oriented façade, he had apparently hidden a shitload of secrets. What next?

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

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

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

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

And I thought I had problems before?

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

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

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

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

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