

# A SEW DEADLY CRUISE

*An Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mystery, Book 9*

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## ONE

I stood in the bedroom and stared at the snow-covered street and twinkling Christmas lights.

“Something wrong?” asked Zack, coming up alongside me and offering me a glass of wine.

“Of course not.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Then why are you standing there worrying that ring back and forth on your finger?”

I glanced down at the ring on the third finger of my left hand. “Was I?”

“You were. What’s on your mind?”

“I was thinking about everything that’s changed over the past year.”

Twelve months ago *normal* best defined my life. That changed the day my husband dropped dead at a casino in Las Vegas and turned my world upside-down, inside out, and seven ways to sideways. Clueless me thought he was at a sales meeting in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

My cluelessness soared to galactic heights in the days that followed as I learned the true extent of Karl Marx Pollack’s deception. He had gambled away our lives, leaving me to deal with astronomical debt, his murderous bookie, *and* his communist mother.

I’ll probably be paying off the debt for decades to come, but thanks to surging adrenaline, pure survival instincts, and my trusty X-acto knife, I survived the bookie. Unfortunately, as my unwelcome permanent houseguest, Lucille, the communist mother-in-law from Hades, is the gift that keeps on giving.

My name is Anastasia Pollack. I’m the mother of two teenage boys, the crafts editor at a third-rate women’s magazine, and as of a few minutes ago, newly engaged. The engagement ring represents the only good thing to happen in my life since Karl’s death.

“Not to mention the last twenty-four hours,” said Zack, pulling my attention from the past back to the present.

“Worst Christmas Eve ever,” I said.

“I thought I’d lost you.”

Tears began to pool in my eyes and spill onto my cheeks.

Zack clasped my left hand and held it up between us, the diamond’s sparkle vying with the Christmas lights. “I hope my timing wasn’t off. Maybe I should have waited.”

“As if Alex and Nick would have let you.” My fifteen and seventeen-year-old sons had been in on the surprise proposal. For all I knew, they’d bullied Zack into it.

Zack chuckled. “True but even if they had, Ralph never would have forgiven me. You don’t mess with a master of the Bard of Avon.”

“I’m not sure he’ll ever forgive either of us when we board him with the vet for a week while we’re on our cruise.”

Ralph was the African Grey I’d inherited from my great-aunt Penelope Periwinkle. After spending decades in her college lecture hall, the parrot was nearly as much a Shakespearian scholar as his now-deceased mistress. Having an uncanny knack for spouting situation-appropriate Shakespearian quotes, Ralph hadn’t disappointed when earlier this evening Zack

went down on one knee, whipped out a small velvet box from behind his back, and flipped it open to reveal the antique engagement ring now encircling my finger.

“Come to think of it,” I said, “I’m not sure who actually proposed to me, you or Ralph.”

“Very funny. I don’t think it’s legal to marry a parrot in New Jersey.”

I raised myself up on my toes, lifted my chin, and planted a kiss on Zack’s lips. At the same time—and not for the first time—I wondered what a guy who looks like he emerged from the same genetic stew as Pierce Brosnan, Antonio Banderas, and George Clooney sees in a cellulite-riddled, pear-shaped, slightly overweight, debt-ridden, middle-aged suburban mom like me. After all, the guy had dated supermodels and Hollywood celebrities.

“Your proposal couldn’t have come at a better time,” I said after our lips parted.

“So you only agreed to marry me because a psycho kidnapped and nearly killed you last night?”

“A psycho and his psycho wife.”

“The psycho wife made the difference?”

“Let’s just say I’ve come to realize life is too short to postpone happily-ever-after any longer.”

Zack knit his brows together as he scrutinized me, his tone growing more serious. “Ever-after will last a lot longer if we can keep you away from any future psycho killers.”

“I’ll admit, it is getting a bit redundant.”

“Is that what you call it? Redundant?”

I took a sip of wine and shrugged. “For lack of a better word. You do realize I don’t go searching for dead bodies, right?”

He heaved an enormous sigh as he shook his head. “And yet you keep finding them.”

“Blame Karl. I never stumbled across a murder before he died.”

Along with the debt and the communist mother-in-law, ever since Karl dropped dead, I’ve found myself in the unenviable position of reluctant amateur sleuth. I’ve lost count of how many murder investigations I’ve gotten sucked into the last year, beginning with the ones committed by the murderous bookie. At least he’s now spending the remainder of his days in a federal facility—the kind with bars and barbed wire.

So are the other killers I’ve come in contact with, but at some point I feared my luck might run out. Better to quit while ahead. I’d promised my sons. I’d promised Zack. Yet somehow those dead bodies continue to find me and pull me in.

Zack tapped a finger against my temple. “I get the sense something else is churning around upstairs. Out with it.”

“How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Read my mind.”

He cupped my chin, caressing my cheek with his thumb. “Not your mind, your eyes and mouth. The expressions on your face make you an open book.”

*Good grief!* “I know I can’t lie with a straight face, but—”

Zack laughed. “Relax. Not to everyone. Just me. My career training makes me extremely observant.”

I wondered which career he meant—the one he admitted to or the covert one I suspected. I hesitated, chewing on my lower lip, before saying, “There is something.”

“Aha! Does it have to do with alphabet agencies?”

From the day I first met Zachary Barnes, I suspected he led a double-life. Why would a world-renowned photojournalist want to move from a Manhattan high-rise to an apartment above a garage in a New Jersey suburb? He'd claimed he needed more privacy when he wasn't globetrotting and continues to deny any affiliation with covert government organizations. Still, he does own a gun, makes frequent trips to our nation's capital, and has a habit of taking off to places like South America and Madagascar at a moment's notice.

But there was something besides his possible James Bond secret identity gnawing at me. "You've never mentioned anything about your family. Why haven't I met any of them?"

"You've met Patricia."

"She's *ex*-family." Zack had been married briefly in his twenties. Realizing their youthful mistake, he and Patricia Tierney parted friends and continue to remain friendly. Her kids even call him Uncle Zacky.

Zack grew thoughtful for a moment before indicating the bed with a tilt of his head. "Have a seat."

Once I perched myself on the edge, he joined me, taking my hand in his. "Like you, I'm an only child, and like you, both my parents were only children. I have no aunts, uncles, or cousins. My mother died when I was eleven. Her parents raised me. They both died years ago."

"And your father?"

"Out of the picture since my mother died."

I gasped. "He deserted you?"

Zack's jaw tightened as he shrugged. "No great loss. He wasn't much of a father when he was around."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. My grandparents gave me a good life. I never missed him." He placed our wine glasses on the nightstand and changed the subject. "So how should we celebrate our engagement?"

"I'm assuming you have something in mind?"

"You better believe it."

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The next morning my sons ambled into the kitchen and greeted us with the subject I'd been dreading ever since Ira surprised us with cruise tickets for Christmas. Ira is the half-brother Karl never knew existed. He and his three extremely spoiled kids entered our lives last summer. They were far easier to tolerate when they lived on the other side of the state. However, wanting to be closer to us (his choice, not mine), Ira had recently purchased a McMansion on the other side of town.

"How do we survive a week stuck on a ship with Uncle Ira and his brats?" asked Alex.

"Not to mention Grandmother Lucille," added Nick. Unfortunately, he didn't notice the commie in question had arrived in the dining room and taken her seat at the table where, in her usual fashion, she waited to be waited on.

"I can hear you," she roared. "Why are you talking about me?"

"This is going to be fun," I muttered under my breath as I headed into the dining room. I pasted a smile on my face and said, "Ira is treating us all to a cruise, Lucille."

"How does that concern me?"

"He also bought you a ticket."

She knit her bushy steel-gray eyebrows together and snorted one of her trademark harrumphs. "Why would I accept a gift from that man?"

Lucille refuses to believe Ira is her beloved Karl's half-brother. Even a DNA test wouldn't change her mind, not that one is needed since Ira is the spitting image of my deceased husband, although several years younger, more than a few pounds thinner, and still in possession of a full head of hair.

Instead, Lucille has decided Ira is scamming me. To what end I have no idea, given that Ira is extremely wealthy and generous to a fault, while I'm up to my eyeballs in Karl-generated debt—something else Lucille refuses to believe.

"So you're not going?" asked Nick, joining us in the dining room and doing little to contain his delight.

"Absolutely not!"

My son turned to me and grinned ear-to-ear. "Well, that solves one problem, Mom."

I answered with a Mom Look that needed no translation.

"I'll grab the orange juice," he said, quickly ducking back into the kitchen.

Lucille's refusal to go on the cruise might have made Nick's life easier, but it added one more layer of complication to mine. I didn't trust my mother-in-law alone in my house for more than a few hours, let alone seven days. The woman couldn't toast a bagel without risk of setting the kitchen on fire.

Three alternatives sprang to mind. "If you're not going to come with us, Lucille, you and your dog can move to Sunnyside for a week."

The Sunnyside of Westfield Assisted Living and Rehabilitation Center owed me big time. If Medicare didn't cover the cost of housing Lucille for a week, I'd remind the director that I'd saved their reputation by catching a killer for them last summer.

"Absolutely not!" said Lucille, smacking her palm on the table.

"Then you can cover the cost of someone moving in to care for you and Mephisto while we're gone."

This time Lucille curled both her hands into fists and pounded the table with such force she not only rattled the silverware and plates, she knocked over her glass. Luckily, Nick hadn't yet returned with the carton of orange juice. "His name is Manifesto!" she bellowed at the top of her lungs.

If looks could kill, Zack and the boys would now be planning my funeral. But really, who names a dog for a communist treatise? My mother-in-law, that's who.

I ignored her outburst and continued. "Your third option is to move in with Harriet." Harriet Kleinhample was Lucille's second-in-command in the Daughters of the October Revolution. The organization consisted of thirteen octogenarian communist rabble-rousers who blindly followed my mother-in-law. Reason escapes me as to why.

She answered me with a growl that I optimistically took as agreement to the third option.

"What makes you think Harriet won't bring her back to the house?" asked Alex after I returned to the kitchen.

"She probably will, but I plan to steal your grandmother's house key so she can't get in."

Nick offered me a high-five. "Way to go, Mom!"

"I'm marrying one extremely devious lady," said Zack, shaking his head as he plated the scrambled eggs onto a serving dish.

"What if she breaks a window to get in?" asked Alex.

I hadn't considered that. The alarm would go off, alerting the police, but Westfield's finest all knew Lucille lived here. They'd picked her up on various transgressions from jaywalking to

vandalism to protesting without a permit on an almost weekly basis, locking her up on more than one occasion.

However, they'd believe her when she said she couldn't find her key. As a favor to me, they'd probably even repair the broken window.

Now I had to worry if my house would be standing when we returned from a cruise I didn't want to take. Or worse yet? I might come home to find twelve squatters residing within Casa Pollack.