

# Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mysteries

## Books 9-10

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### A Sew Deadly Cruise

#### 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.

bookmark:About Stitch, Bake, Die!

## Stitch, Bake, Die!

### ONE

"Solve any murders over the weekend?"

Cloris McWerther, AKA *American Woman* food editor and my best friend, entered the break room as I helped myself to a cup of coffee, my second since arriving at the office half an hour ago. It was one of those mornings. I scowled into my mug. "Monday morning gallows humor? Definitely not appreciated, especially today."

"Uh-oh! Do tell."

I glanced at the large bakery box she clutched in her hands. "Only if you're about to bribe me. And it better include chocolate."

She quirked an eyebrow. "Or?"

"I refuse to take responsibility for my actions."

Cloris shoved the box into my outstretched arms. "In that case, take the entire dozen. I don't want to be charged with accessory to whatever crime you're contemplating this morning. Or worse yet, wind up your victim."

"Smart woman." I placed the box on the table and lifted the lid to reveal twelve chocolate éclairs. I grabbed one and took a huge bite. An explosion of raspberry pastry cream mamboed around my mouth, mingling with chocolate ganache and sending my taste buds into gastronomic bliss.

After rinsing the mouthful down with a swig of coffee, I said, "I'm nominating these for a Nobel Peace Prize."

"I don't think they give Nobels for food," said Cloris, helping herself to an éclair.

"Well, they should. If given a choice between these and war, peace would reign supreme."

Cloris consumed the éclair and helped herself to another. I forced myself to exert massive self-control as I stared longingly at the remaining nine éclairs. Superior metabolism is Cloris's superpower. No matter what she eats, she remains a Size Two. Me? I probably gained three pounds staring into the box.

"So?" she asked.

I nibbled at the remainder of the éclair in my hand. Best to make the pleasure last as long as possible. "My Lucille reprieve ended yesterday. She's back home."

Cloris frowned as she pushed the bakery box toward me. "When dealing with the mother-in-law from Hades, one éclair is never enough."

I definitely deserved to lose myself in éclair heaven, but with a courage I normally lacked, I shook my head and slid the box back to her. If I caved, I'd regret my weakness when I stepped

on the bathroom scale tomorrow morning. Besides, with a wedding on the horizon, I should be eating escarole, not éclairs.

“Are we talking general Lucille belligerence, or something specific?”

“No point boring you with details. You’ve heard it all before in one form or another. Let’s just say the reprieve was far too short, and she spent yesterday making up for lost time.”

When my husband, Karl Marx Pollack, so named due to his mother’s communist convictions, died suddenly in Las Vegas a little more than a year ago, Lucille Pollack became my permanent houseguest and albatross—along with her French bulldog Manifesto. The dog’s ill-tempered disposition was most likely the result of his political moniker. I’ve yet to meet a commie with a pleasant personality, and thanks to my mother-in-law, I’ve met far too many.

If I could, I’d set Lucille up in an assisted-living facility. Unfortunately, thanks to a well-hidden gambling addiction, Karl left me in debt greater than the GNP of the average Third World nation.

My name is Anastasia Pollack. I’m a widowed mother of two teenage boys, a women’s magazine crafts editor, caretaker to a Shakespeare-quoting parrot, and ever since Karl’s death, a previous member of the middle class and reluctant amateur sleuth. Don’t ask me how many dead bodies I’ve stumbled across. I’ve lost count. Seriously.

Lucille had spent the last three weeks convalescing at a rehab center, the result of a car accident that saw the demise of a misguided assassin. Said assassin had taken it upon herself to eliminate several people she deemed problematic to me and my family, including my fiancé’s father, my mother’s ex-husband, and a boorish misogynist. We believe Lucille was her next intended target.

Cloris left the remaining sinful confections in the break room for nine lucky coworkers. Coffee cups in hand, we headed down the corridor to our cubicles, which lay across the hall from one another. Before we arrived, we heard our names called from behind.

We turned to find the ever-efficient Kim O’Hara, our editorial director’s assistant, waving to us. As usual, she held a stack of file folders cradled in one arm, her phone clutched in her other hand as she held it overhead and continued waving. A curtain of straight auburn hair whipped around her face as she race-walked toward us, Manolo Blahnik’s clicking a staccato beat along the terrazzo floor.

Half-Chinese, half-Irish, Kim had lucked out in the gene lottery, inheriting the best features from both branches of her family tree, but unlike our self-absorbed fashion editor, Kim was as sweet as she was gorgeous. When she caught up to us, she said, “Naomi wants to see you both, ASAP.”

“About?” I asked, fighting back the trepidation growing inside me. Although the best of friends, Cloris’s work and mine rarely overlapped, and with our monthly staff meeting still two weeks away, we certainly hadn’t forgotten to show up for an issue planning session. For the life of me, I couldn’t imagine why Naomi wanted to see both of us at the same time unless we were about to be fired.

Rumors concerning major editorial changes constantly whipped around the office at 5G speed. We’d had several upheavals since the hostile takeover that had absorbed us into Trimedia a few years ago. With so many magazines on life-support, I immediately expected the worst. I glanced at Cloris and saw the same thought reflected in her eyes.

Kim merely smiled cryptically as she shrugged and said, “You’ll have to ask Naomi.”

“Spoken like a true acolyte,” said Cloris.

Kim chuckled as she zipped past us on her way to carry out her next task.

“Never let it be said that Kim allows any moss to grow under her designer stilettos,” I said, amazed at her ability to stay upright in five-inch heels as she jogged down the hall. “I’d twist an ankle before I managed two steps.”

“You and me both.” Cloris took a deep breath and exhaled with a rush. “I suppose we’d better see what Naomi wants.”

A minute later we stood outside the office of our editorial director. Cloris raised her hand and rapped twice. From the other side of the door we heard Naomi call, “Come in.”

We found Naomi Dreyfus seated behind her desk. She waved us forward, directing us to take the two seats that faced her.

Naomi had recently turned sixty, but you’d never know it by looking at her. Statuesque and regal with emerald green eyes and silver hair always styled in an elegant chignon, she gave off an aura of old money and finishing schools. She reminded me of Grace Kelly—back before the former actress-turned-princess had added the menopause pounds that robbed her of her waist. At sixty, Naomi still maintained her girlish figure, not to mention her flawless, wrinkle-free complexion.

She offered us a warm smile as we settled into the chairs. I took that as a positive sign. If you’re about to be canned, you might receive a malicious smirk from the boss, but a friendly smile? Not likely.

Without any chitchat-filled prelude, Naomi got right to the point. “Are either of you familiar with the Stitch and Bake Society?”

“I think so,” said Cloris. “Aren’t they a women’s social group similar to the one where members wear purple and sport red hats?”

Naomi nodded. “Similar but different. The Stitch and Bake Society began several years ago when a recent retiree realized she’d spent her entire life as a single, workaholic executive and now had few friends and fewer pastimes to occupy her days.”

I stole a quick glance at Cloris and caught her eye. I could think of dozens of activities we’d enjoy if only we had both the free time and funds of a financially well-off retiree.

Naomi continued, “She remembered how her mother, grandmothers, and aunts had always enjoyed needlework projects and baking, activities she’d deemed as old-fashioned and a waste of time.”

“Why make what you can easily buy?” asked Cloris.

“Exactly.”

“That’s not why people pursue hobbies,” I said.

“You and I know that, but she didn’t,” said Naomi. “Anyway, out of boredom, she took a few classes and found herself falling in love with the very hobbies she’d eschewed her entire life. Through social media, she connected with other retired professional women in similar circumstances and eventually founded an organization devoted to women exploring these shared passions in their golden years.”

“Are we giving them a write-up?” I asked.

“More than that. The organization has grown to include chapters across the country. The New Jersey chapter is holding their first mini-conference next week, a three-day event at the Beckwith Chateau Country Club.”

Cloris whistled under her breath. “These ladies are definitely not getting by on only their IRAs and Social Security checks.”

“Not by a longshot,” said Naomi. “Of course, it doesn’t hurt that Marlene Beckwith is president of the New Jersey chapter.”

“Nothing like having well-placed friends,” I said. Marlene’s family owned the most

exclusive country club in the state. Rumor had its membership was by invitation only, and if you needed to ask the initiation fee and annual cost, you couldn't afford to join.

"*American Woman* has agreed to be one of the sponsors," said Naomi, "which leads me to both of you. Along with hosting speakers, as part of the festivities they're holding a baking competition and a needlework show. The two of you will each give a one-hour talk once a day and also judge the two competitions."

"Which three days?" I asked. "Are we talking giving up a weekend?"

"Tuesday through Thursday," said Naomi.

"That's a relief," said Cloris.

"Something doesn't add up," I said. When Naomi raised an eyebrow, I continued. "This conference is scheduled a week from tomorrow, and they're just now requesting speakers, judges, and corporate sponsorship? Most conferences take a year to plan and execute."

"Most conferences don't have Beckwith resources behind them," said Naomi. "But you do have a point. It does seem odd the way this was thrown together so suddenly."

"Not to mention," said Cloris, "if they have Beckwith backing them, why do they need our sponsorship?"

"For the publicity we'll give them in an upcoming issue," said Naomi. "We're not supplying any funding, only corporate merchandise, like the tote bags and other publicity items left over from last year's consumer show at the Javits Center."

"Still, it would have been nice to have more time to prepare," I said. "Judging a cooking and crafting competition doesn't require planning. But working up three one-hour presentations will take hours, if not several days."

"Not to mention the three days we'll be away from the office not getting our regular work done," added Cloris.

"Exactly," I said, glad Cloris had broached the subject.

"Would it help if I comped you both three days?" asked Naomi.

"Definitely," said Cloris, "given that we'll have to work nights to meet our deadlines."

"Overtime would be preferable," I said. The way to this impoverished craft editor's heart is always through her depleted bank account.

Naomi grew silent as she weighed her options. On the one hand, she was aware of my financial situation. On the other, I was aware of the magazine's financial situation. Finally, she clasped her hands on her desk and said, "I'll see what I can do. No promises."

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"You think she'll come through with the money?" asked Cloris a few minutes later as we made our way back to our cubicles.

"Hard to say. I guess it depends on how much her discretionary fund was slashed in this year's budget."

"At least we've got three comp days if nothing else."

"All in all, not a bad negotiation." Yet I still couldn't help wondering why an organization would throw together a conference with so little prep, not to mention scheduling it for March. Even though the conference began on the first day of Spring, historically, New Jersey had suffered through some of its worst snow storms the end of March. If one hit the day of the conference, the chapter would wind up hosting an event devoid of attendees.

"Unfortunately, I can't even think about the conference right now," said Cloris. "I'm spending the day mentoring culinary students at the local vo-tech." She glanced at her phone. "I have to leave shortly."



“My day is already booked,” I said. “I’ve got a photo shoot this morning and an interview with a breakout Etsy crafter this afternoon. We’ll have to start brainstorming tomorrow morning.”

Cloris made a face. “Which leaves us one less day to get everything done before next Tuesday.”

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I arrived home to find that my mother-in-law and several of her Daughters of the October Revolution octogenarian comrades had taken over my dining room table. In assembly line fashion, they folded neon yellow flyers and stuffed them into envelopes that others then sealed, labeled, and stamped.

I glanced at the stack of flyers, curious to see if they were planning yet another protest regarding who-knew-what in Downtown Westfield or preparing to flood Congress with a massive letter-writing campaign on the topic of your-guess-is-as-good-as-mine.

One of Lucille’s minions noticed me and smacked her hand on top of the stack of flyers. “This is private business!”

I shrugged, having satisfied my curiosity. The over-the-hill commies were launching a fundraising campaign to finance their next tilting-at-windmills cause du jour. Good luck with that. Whatever the project, if past efforts were any indication of future success, they wouldn’t raise enough money to cover their printing and mailing costs.

Previously, Lucille thought nothing of helping herself to my office equipment and supplies. In true communist fashion, she believed what was mine (or anyone’s) was hers. Yet the philosophy never extended in the opposite direction. Go figure. But with Zack now living in the house, the apartment above the garage was once again an office, one we now shared and kept under lock and key. Problem solved.

“You need to remove all of this before dinner,” I said with a nod to the mess covering my dining room table.

Harriet Kleinhample, Lucille’s second-in-command, tore her attention away from her folding and scowled at me. “We won’t be finished by then.”

“Too bad,” I said. “And before you assume otherwise, you’re not invited to stay for dinner.”

“I’ve already invited them,” said my mother-in-law in a voice that brooked no defiance.

“Then I suggest you make other plans. I don’t have enough food to feed five extra mouths tonight.”

One of the other women glared at me. “Lucille is right. You’re not a very nice person, Anastasia.”

I glared back. “You have fifteen minutes to clean up and clear out.”

Contrary to communist propaganda, I’m actually a very nice person. Just ask anyone besides my mother-in-law and her fellow rabble-rousers. Or the various killers I’ve had a hand in catching. Or the identity thief who preyed upon my elderly neighbor. Or the kidnapers in Barcelona who mistook me for someone else. I wouldn’t expect any of them to think kindly of me. But Lucille? If not for me, she and her dog would reside in a homeless shelter. You’d think that would count for at least an occasional kind word. It hasn’t so far, and I doubt it ever will.

With virtual daggers shooting toward me, I exited the dining room, walked into the kitchen, and stared at the slow cooker on the counter. Could I trust the Bolshevik Brigade not to help themselves to dinner? Probably not. Instead of heading to the apartment, I texted Zack and the boys that I was home and needed their help.

Then I released Ralph from his cage. “What should we do about these unbidden guests?” I asked him.

He squawked once, lifted his wings, and took flight. As he flew into the dining room, he channeled the Duke of Bedford, "*Unbidden guests are often welcomest when they are gone. Henry VI, Part One, Act Two, Scene Two.*"

The women jumped from their seats and made a mad dash for the coats they'd piled onto my living room sofa, their shrieking drowning out Ralph. You'd think I'd unleashed the Kraken instead of a housebroken African Grey parrot with a knack for situation-appropriate quotes from The Bard of Avon.

After the last Daughter of the October Revolution had fled, my mother-in-law hoisted herself out of her chair and waved her cane at me. "You did that on purpose!"

Yes, I had.

"Did what?" asked Nick, ambling into the house, Mephisto, one of our nicknames for the commie dog, close on his heels, Alex and Zack bringing up the rear.

My two sons and my fiancé took in the apparent standoff and formed a protective phalanx around me. Ralph, spying his favorite human, flew to Zack and settled on his shoulder.

Outnumbered, Lucille's mouth tightened. She turned her attention to her dog. "Come to mother, Manifesto."

Devil Dog refused to budge. At some point over the last few months, he'd transferred his allegiance to Nick.

Lucille stomped over to Nick and grabbed the leash out of his hands. "Give me back my dog!" When she yanked on the leash, the dog responded by sitting on his haunches. Nick bent down and unhooked the leash from the dog's collar.

"He doesn't want to go with you," said Alex, stating the obvious.

Drawing her eyebrows together and narrowing her gaze, Lucille pounded her cane once, then pivoted and clomped toward her bedroom.

Zack kissed me hello, then motioned to the coat I still wore. "You staying?"

He grabbed the coat as I slipped it off my shoulders. "Just one of those days. I was hoping to come home to a drama-free house."

Alex snorted. "Really, Mom? In this house?"

"Well, at least a house with only one belligerent Bolshevik."

A sudden loud crash brought further conversation to a halt.