

Mosaic Mayhem

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ONE

Not again! I stared down the barrel of a big black bad-ass gun pointed at my chest. Ever since last winter when Karl Pollack, my not-so-dearly-departed husband, died suddenly, people have been trying to kill me. First, Karl's loan shark. Then a crazy co-worker. Most recently, a hired assassin.

My name is Anastasia Pollack. I'm a debt-ridden, pear-shaped, middle-aged single mom, and crafts editor at a woman's magazine. I'm also apparently a killer magnet, not only in my home state of New Jersey but also across the Atlantic Ocean in Spain.

Worst of all, unlike my three previous run-ins with killers, I had no idea who this guy was or why he wanted me dead. He apparently didn't speak English, and my Spanish is limited to a few words and phrases picked up from watching *Sesame Street* years ago with my kids. My Catalan is non-existent.

So much for a quick getaway to Barcelona.

After the relief of finding that my passport hadn't expired, I thought my biggest problem would be arranging extra care for my semi-invalid mother-in-law during my three-day absence. Silly me.

I landed in this situation thanks to Zack. When Karl dropped dead, leaving me with debt that rivaled the gross national product of an average third-world country, I was forced to rent out the apartment over my garage and move my studio to my dingy, unheated basement. Little did I know at the time that my new tenant, award-winning photo-journalist and possible spy (although he vehemently denies the latter) Zachary Barnes, would segue from renter to lover.

Zack looks like his DNA cavorted in the gene pools of George Clooney, Pierce Brosnan, Patrick Dempsey, and Antonio Bandares. What he sees in me, I'll never know, and yet here we are—a couple. I'm not complaining.

I'd spent most of the summer working a second job every weekend, and I was beyond exhausted. So when Zack invited me to tag along with him while he photographed architect Antoni Gaudi's Parc Güell for a *National Geographic* spread, I cashed in some of my comp time and packed a bag.

We arrived in Barcelona early in the morning, dropped our luggage at a hotel off Plaça de Catalunya, and headed to the park, a fairytale inspired masterpiece that resembled a miniature city. While Zack took a meeting with the director in Torre Rosa, the park's museum and former Gaudi home, I wandered the enchanting grounds and buildings, snapping photos of the whimsical Hansel and Gretel gatehouses, the Sala Hipostila marketplace with its multi-domed ceiling, and the main terrace, ringed with an intricately decorated serpentine bench—all embellished with Gaudi's trademark mosaics. I

planned to use the photos as part of a feature on mosaic art for a future issue of *American Woman*, the magazine where I worked.

Afterwards, I set off on one of the many trails weaving through nearly forty acres of steep hillside in order to enjoy some of the spectacular views of the city spread out below. I was in a secluded area with no one else around when a bear of a man with a short dark beard that did little to hide his acne scarred cheeks stepped from the wooded area onto the path in front of me. Like so many other men on the streets of Barcelona, he wore a red and gold soccer jersey, but unlike all the others, this guy accessorized his outfit with a deadly weapon.

A gasp froze in my throat.

He might as well have been speaking Swahili for all the good my *Sesame Street* Spanish did me. Zack had warned me that pickpockets trolled the streets of Barcelona, preying on hapless tourists. He hadn't mentioned anything about armed gunmen, but common sense told me I was being robbed.

"Take it," I said, dropping my handbag at his feet. But this was no robbery. He didn't scoop up my bag and run. Instead, he grabbed both the bag and my arm.

With the gun jabbing me in the ribs, he wrapped his other arm tightly around my shoulders and forced me back down the path and across the courtyard filled with oblivious tourists who ignored me as I tried to make eye contact and silently mouthed, "Help me."

As he led me through the main gates onto the street, several self-defense options came to mind—stamping my heel into his instep, twisting my body to knee him in the groin, screaming at the top of my lungs. Preferably all three at once. The gun barrel poking my midsection forced me to discount all of them, even after he marched me down a deserted alley, zip-tied my hands behind my back, placed a sack over my head, and shoved me into the back of a mud-spattered black panel truck.