

**Handmade Ho-Ho Homicide**  
*An Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mystery*  
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**ONE**

Ira, the unwelcome elf, had struck again. At least, I assumed Ira was the culprit. Who else would fill my postage stamp front lawn with more than a dozen enormous inflatable cartoon characters? I sat in my car and stared out the window in disbelief. The entire Peanuts gang, half a dozen yellow Minions, and a smirking neon green Grinch, all decked out in Christmas finery, swayed and bounced to a recording of “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.” The music was so loud I heard it through my Jetta’s closed windows—with the engine running and the radio currently giving the four-day weather forecast.

Two-and-a-half weeks ago I’d arrived home from one of the worst days of my life (no hyperbole, given someone had tried to kill me and nearly succeeded) to find my house ablaze with enough Christmas lights to be seen by the astronauts on the International Space Station. Now this.

Enough was more than enough. I’d asked. I’d pleaded. I’d demanded. Nothing got through to Ira Pollack, the half-brother-in-law who’d shown up at my front door last summer and who continued to try to weasel his way into my life with unwelcome gifts.

But Ira can’t take a hint, even when you club him over the head with it, and although I’ve repeatedly asked him to stop, I can’t bring myself to go full rhymes-with-witch on him. Being too nice is one of my many failings.

Besides, Ira means well. And I have to admit, albeit grudgingly, I am indebted to the man. Case in point, my used Jetta, which he insisted on selling me at cost when I was forced to put my Hyundai rust bucket out to pasture. Given my precarious financial state, I don't know what I would have done if not for Ira's generosity. However, he's but one more complication I don't need in my already overly complicated life.

My name is Anastasia Pollack. Look me up in Webster's, and you'll find I'm defined as the epitome of the clueless wife.

Speaking of my Jetta, the vehicle's interior filled with light as another car pulled behind me. I killed the engine and stepped out into the frigid December night, my boots crunching on the driveway's packed snow, to find Zack exiting his Boxster.

Zachary Barnes is the one good thing that has happened in my life since my husband dropped dead in Las Vegas last winter—after raiding our joint piggy bank and racking up a Mt. Everest of debt.

In one of my first cost-cutting measures, I rented out the apartment above my garage, formerly my home office/studio, to Zack. He's since become considerably more than a tenant.

"Ira?" he asked, simultaneously hooking his backpack over one shoulder and cocking his head toward the lawn circus.

I shrugged. "Who else?"

Zack crunched his way over to me, and we headed toward the back door. "Seems odd he'd wait so long. I

wonder why he didn't include these when he surprised you with the light display.”

“Don't know, don't care. I'm pulling the plug as soon as I figure out where it is.” Which would probably entail scrambling through the snow-covered shrubbery to find the power source. I'd deactivated more than half the lights first chance I got. I didn't care if they were the eco-friendly LED variety. They'd still run up my electric bill.

“Here.” Zack handed me his backpack and retraced his steps to the front of the house. He crossed onto the snow-covered lawn and headed for the rear of Snoopy's doghouse. Bending down, he found the spot where the power cord connected to the doghouse. With a quick yank he dislodged the snow camouflaging the cord as it snaked toward the house. He then followed the cord to where it plugged into an indoor/outdoor power strip nestled under an azalea bush. A second power strip sat beside it. Zack flipped the switches on both. The music died, and the characters slowly melted into the snow.

“Thank you, Dorothy!” I said as he retraced his footsteps.

He chuckled. “I suppose that makes you one of the Flying Monkeys?”

“This flying monkey is freezing her tootsies off. Let's get into the house.”

We stripped out of our coats and boots in the mudroom and stepped into the kitchen where I inhaled the inviting aroma of roasting chicken with onions and carrots. At least one of my sons had arrived home ahead of us and remembered the text I'd sent to take dinner out of the refrigerator and place it in the oven at five-thirty.

We found both boys doing homework in the bedroom they now shared, thanks to their father permanently sticking us with his semi-invalid mother, an octogenarian communist who'd never had a kind word for me. Karl Pollack was the gift that kept on giving, though certainly not in a good way.

"Where's your grandmother?" I asked Nick and Alex, noticing her dog camped on Nick's bed. Ralph, the Shakespeare-quoting African Grey I'd inherited from my great-aunt Penelope Periwinkle, kept watch from atop a bookcase under the windows, but as soon as he spied Zack, he flapped his wings and made a beeline—or should I say parrot line?—for him, landing on his shoulder and nuzzling his beak against Zack's five o'clock shadow. Zack reached into his shirt pocket and offered the bird a sunflower seed.

"Haven't seen her," said Alex.

"*Would I had never seen her,*" squawked Ralph after devouring his treat. "*Anthony and Cleopatra. Act One, Scene Two.*"

*Ditto, Ralph.* The parrot had an uncanny knack for spouting the Bard's most appropriate quotes for any given situation.

"She wasn't here when we got home," said Nick.

"Did either of you walk Devil Dog?" Devil Dog, aka Mephisto, was my mother-in-law's French bulldog, although she'd named him Manifesto after the communist treatise. However, when he first invaded our home, he acted more like a hell-raising devil. So I dubbed him Mephisto. The boys simply called him Devil Dog.

Lately Lucille has abdicated all responsibility for her pet and spends most of her time with her fellow Daughters of

the October Revolution. I suspect she's punishing the dog because he now prefers our company to hers. So be it.

Although his nicknames have stuck—mostly because we all refuse to call him Manifesto—he's mellowed in his old age, which is more than I can say for his owner. I'll take Devil Dog over Lucille Pollack any day.

"I took him out about an hour ago," said Nick. "Those blow-up cartoon characters in the yard scared the crap out of him."

"They didn't do much for me, either. Do you know how they got here?"

"Uncle Ira?" asked Alex.

"That's my guess."

"They were up when we got home," said Nick.

"They're down now, and they're staying down," I said. "After dinner I'm returning them to him."

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Lucille hobbled into the house within minutes of dinner coming out of the oven. Worse yet, Harriet Kleinhample, her mini-me minion, followed close behind her.

*So much for a peaceful dinner.* Of all Lucille's cohorts, Harriet, who bears an uncanny resemblance to the actress who played Maude's mother in *Golden Girls*, was her staunchest ally. As such, she was second only to my mother-in-law in her contempt for me.

Harriet was also the primary mode of transportation for the Daughters of the October Revolution, all the others having given up driving—either voluntarily or involuntarily—before I met them. Since Harriet had recently been involved in a hit-and-run, she should no longer have a valid driver's license. She probably didn't,

but that wouldn't stop her from getting behind the wheel of her ancient, battered VW minibus.

Nick had already set the kitchen table. As he scooped up the plates and utensils to move everything to the dining room table, Lucille poked her head into the kitchen.

"Harriet is joining us for dinner," she announced.

"Of course she is," Nick muttered behind her departing back as I quietly indicated he should leave the plates on the stove.

Luckily, Lucille hadn't heard her grandson. She was already off on a rant about the tacky deflated Christmas decorations littering my front lawn.

"We didn't put them up," I heard Alex tell her. "Besides, they're not staying."

"So this is the work of that imposter?" she asked. "The lights weren't enough of an abomination? He has to turn us into a sideshow exhibit?"

"If you mean Uncle Ira, probably. We don't know for sure."

"That man is no more your uncle than I am," she said. All evidence to the contrary—including the fact that Ira looked the spitting image of Karl in his younger, thinner, less bald days—Lucille refused to believe that her beloved Isadore had walked out on her and subsequently married and fathered a second son.

According to my mother-in-law, J. Edgar Hoover had abducted and murdered Karl's father. She even once claimed the FBI had buried his body under the goalposts at Giants Stadium. Isadore may have been a union activist once upon a time, but he was no Jimmy Hoffa. Besides, no bodies were ever discovered buried under the goalposts or

anywhere else in the stadium—not Karl’s father and not Jimmy Hoffa.

Lucille and Harriet settled themselves at the dining room table and waited. “What if you don’t serve them?” asked Nick.

Lately I’ve noticed both boys becoming more intolerant of their grandmother. Not that I blame them. We’d all enjoyed a recent, if short-lived, reprieve when Lucille and her scofflaw cohorts went on the lam and headed for Cuba. Unfortunately, they never made it.

Lucille was never supposed to become a permanent resident of Casa Pollack. Of course, when she temporarily moved in with us, I still thought my husband was a fine, upstanding human being. Live and learn.

I turned to my son. “Really, Nick? I need to instigate World War III over roast chicken?”

“Sorry, Mom. I—”

Before he could finish his thought, Lucille bellowed, “We have no plates, Anastasia!”

“Should I bring out the plates?” asked Alex.

“Not yet,” I said.

The last time I’d served family style, Lucille and Harriet had helped themselves to half the food before the rest of us had taken our seats around the table. For a woman who stood several inches shy of five feet tall, Harriet Kleinhample could eat us all under the table and come back for seconds. And thirds. Only Lucille packed away more food at each meal than her diminutive disciple. Tonight I’d turn the tables on them.

As soon as Zack had finished carving the chicken, I placed a slice of breast meat and a normal serving of

carrots and roasted potatoes on two plates. Handing one to each boy, I said, “For your grandmother and Harriet. Then come back to help yourselves.”

Nick glanced down at the plate in his hands. “They are going to be so pi—angry,” he said, before carrying the plate into the dining room.

True, but everyone would have a fair share of dinner this evening.

From the dining room I heard Lucille ask Alex, “What’s this?”

“Dinner,” he said.

“We’re not children,” said Harriet. “We can serve ourselves!”

“Not tonight,” said Nick.

I heard an undercurrent of grumbling from Lucille and Harriet but couldn’t make out what they said.

Nick and Alex returned to the kitchen without engaging further with the curmudgeonly commies. “How much should we take?” asked Alex, picking up a plate and serving spoon.

“As much as you’d like,” I said. “Just leave enough for Zack and me.” After serving themselves, the boys headed into the dining room.

Zack and I filled our plates with the remaining food and carried them into the dining room. If looks could kill, those octogenarian vultures would be picking at our bones.

Lucille and Harriet maintained a torrent of complaints throughout the meal. The four of us refused to respond until Zack pounded his fist on the table. “Enough! One more complaint, and I take your plates away.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” cried Lucille.



“Try me.” He stood and reached across the table for Lucille and Harriet’s plates. Both women grabbed hold of their dishes and held on as if they were in the siege of Leningrad instead of my dining room. Zack returned to his chair. “That was your final warning.”

Sullen silence commenced, broken only by the sounds of silverware clattering on dishes. I turned to my sons and initiated normal dinnertime conversation. “How was school today?”

Nick grinned. “Pretty cool, Mom. We learned all about the collapse of the Soviet Union in history class.”

I nearly choked on a carrot. Was he deliberately trying to get a rise out of his grandmother and Harriet? I glanced over at the two women. Both had turned a deep shade of purple. At any moment I expected to see steam shooting out from their ears.

“What did you learn?” asked Alex.

Had they rehearsed this act of defiance? If so, it worked. Lucille and Harriet shoveled the last bits of food on their plates into their mouths and stormed out of the dining room. A moment later the sounds of some inane reality TV show blared through the house.

“How much longer do we have to put up with her?” asked Nick.

“’til death we do part,” I said, silently adding *thanks to your father*.

“Can’t that be arranged?”

“Nick!”

“Chill, Mom. I’m just kidding.” He grinned sheepishly before adding, “Although we do know a guy who knows a guy, right?”

More than one, actually, including Karl's former bookie and my mother's ex-husband. Both now resided in federal prisons on murder convictions.

"This is New Jersey," said Zack. "*Everyone* knows a guy who knows a guy."

Including my sons' father who'd arranged a hit on his mother a year and a half ago, only to have her survive. But Alex and Nick didn't know half of what I'd learned about their father after his death, and if I had my way, I'd take those secrets to my grave.

As for Lucille, she'd never believe me anyway. She refused to accept what little I'd told her about Karl gambling away our life savings and sticking me with debt equal to the GNP of Uzbekistan. In her eyes, Karl was the communist equivalent of a saint—if there is such a thing.

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After dinner the boys, Zack and I bundled up in our winter gear to wrestle the Grinch and his now-deflated fellow inflatables into the trunk and backseat of my car. They barely fit. Leaving Alex and Nick at home, Zack and I headed across town to Ira's new McMansion.

Ira had surprised us a few weeks ago with the unwelcome news that he'd bought a home in Westfield. I didn't care all that much for Ira when he lived on the other side of the state. I'd prefer he lived on the other side of the country. Having him not only on the other side of town, but on the same street as Alex's girlfriend Sophie Lambert and her father Shane thrilled me no end. At least the two houses were about a mile apart.

Ira had closed on his five thousand square feet of new construction last Friday and moved in over the weekend.

He'd driven me past the house before he took possession. When he'd called on Sunday to invite us over for brunch and a tour, I'd begged off with the standard sorry-but-we-have-plans excuse, even if the only item on my schedule for the day was to avoid Ira and his brood.

We hit traffic shortly before passing the Lambert house. Vehicles crept along as though we were stuck on the Garden State Parkway in the middle of rush hour instead of the normally quiet residential area. Parked cars lined the curb on both sides of the street for as far as we could see.

"What gives?"

Zack shrugged. "Beats me. An accident? I see flashing lights up ahead."

"Must be a bad one. I'm not willing to spend an hour in traffic to return the Grinch and his pals to their rightful owner."

"Agreed. I'll turn at the next intersection."

However, before we inched our way to the cross street, we saw Shane and Sophie standing on the sidewalk in front of their house. Zack tapped the horn and pulled into their driveway.

"Come to see the show?" asked Shane when Zack killed the engine and we stepped from the car.

"Show?" I asked.

"Can't you hear the music?" asked Sophie.

Now that she mentioned it, I did hear what sounded like a brass band playing Christmas carols. "Is something going on at the elementary school tonight?"

"Not the school," said Shane.

"You don't know?" asked Sophie.

I didn't like the sound of that. "Know what?"

“You have to see it to believe it,” said Shane. “Up for a crisp moonlight walk?”

“Is it worth it?” I asked.

“Trust me,” said Shane. “You’re going to want to see this.”

I turned to Zack. “I’m game if you are.”

He nodded to Shane. “Lead on, Macduff.”

Sophie giggled. “You sound like Ralph.”

“They’ve developed a symbiotic relationship,” I said. “If Zack and I ever split up, he’ll probably sue me for custody.”

“I guess you’d better not split up, then,” said Sophie. “I’d miss Ralph.” When I raised my eyebrows, she added, “And Zack, too, of course.”

“Of course.”

As we walked up the street, the lights grew brighter, and the music grew louder. Multi-colored lasers arced across the sky.

Several families passed us, heading in the opposite direction. The adults shook their heads and muttered comments like, “Unbelievably tacky” and “This is Westfield, not Staten Island.” But the children had huge grins on their faces.

“How much farther?” I asked after we’d hiked along the sidewalk for about ten minutes.

“About half a mile,” said Shane.

I was beginning to have a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. It had nothing to do with dinner and everything to do with my half-brother-in-law. I stopped short and confronted Shane. “Tell me we’re not headed to Ira’s house.”

“I wish I could.”

“Didn’t he just move in?” asked Sophie. “Dad and I spent half a day decorating the outside of our house, and we only strung lights and hung some wreaths on the windows and front door.”

“I’m sure his employees handled the installation,” said Zack.

“Or he hired a profession decorating crew,” I said.

After the unwelcome surprise he left at my house, it didn’t shock me that Ira was a card-carrying member of the Over-the-Top Christmas Decorators Club. Although I suspected his motivation had less to do with impressing his neighbors and more to do with his need to impress his kids. Whatever Melody, Harmony, and Isaac wanted, Melody, Harmony, and Isaac got.

The closer we drew to Ira’s house, the louder the music and brighter the lights became, launching a full out assaulted on my senses. A bass drum keeping time to “The March of the Toy Soldiers” reverberated in my head, nearly drowning out an undercurrent of shouting. Not the happy shouts of excited children in awe of a spectacle that belonged on Main Street in Disneyland but angry adult shouting, punctuated with four-letter name-calling.

We pushed our way through a crowd that had gathered on the sidewalk to find Ira surrounded by a group of extremely irate adults, wildly gesticulating as they verbally bombarded my extremely perplexed-looking half-brother-in-law.

“Neighbors,” said Shane, raising his own voice to be heard over the commotion.

Exceedingly unhappy neighbors from the looks of it. Not that I blamed them. Ira had turned his home into a three-ring circus. Row upon row of multi-colored string lights wrapped around every vertical surface of his house, snaked up and down his roof, and wound around the porch columns and railings. More lights blanketed the shrubbery in front of the porch. If my house had blazed with enough lights to be seen from the International Space Station, Ira's would be visible to aliens in the outer regions of the solar system.

Larger-than-life mechanical nutcrackers festooned with more lights stood at attention, saluting along either side of the path leading to the house. Inflatables of every cartoon character imaginable filled the lawn. Laser lights, choreographed to the music blaring from speakers, shot into the sky.

But the coup de grace was the railroad track that encircled the house. At a break midway between the nutcrackers, it crossed over the path leading from the sidewalk to the porch. On it ran eight life-sized mechanical reindeer pulling a sleigh. Inside the sleigh a waving Santa bellowed "ho-ho-ho" every few seconds. And of course, the reindeer, Santa, and sleigh were also covered in hundreds of twinkling lights. Luckily, the reindeer pranced at a slow enough pace that no one heading to the house risked getting trampled—as long as they stopped, looked, and listened before crossing the tracks.

"I've seen enough," I said, turning to inch my way back through the crowd of gawkers. No way was I getting involved in Ira's battle with his neighbors. As far as I was concerned, they had every right to be annoyed with him.

What was he thinking? Then again, Ira doesn't think. He constantly acts on impulse, assuming his actions will be appreciated.

I had nearly cleared the mass of onlookers when a bulldog of a man barreled into me and kept going without so much as an "excuse me" or an "I'm sorry." Luckily, he'd shoved me into Zack, who broke my fall.

"Hey!" I yelled, but he ignored me as he continued on his path, shoving aside anyone who didn't move out of his way.

Seconds later the crowd gasped. A woman screamed. All at once the music died, and darkness descended over the house and yard. The night filled with the sound of air simultaneously rushing from dozens of deflating cartoon characters—and blaring sirens growing louder by the second. People grabbed their children and quickly disappeared into nearby homes while others, protectively clutching their offspring, hurried down the street toward parked cars, leaving Ira flat on his back across his snow-covered lawn.