

Embroidered Lies and Alibis

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ONE

“Conflicted?” Zack eyed me with concern as we exited the Union County Courthouse.

“Why do you ask?”

“You’re frowning.”

Was I? I considered his question for a moment before answering. “Not conflicted so much as sad. And disappointed. It never should have come to this.”

He looped his arm across my shoulders and offered me a side-hug. “You tried your best to make the situation work. I hope you’re not blaming yourself.”

Myriad clichés bounced around in my brain. I’d bitten my tongue. Silently counted to ten (Although, I doubt even ten thousand would have worked.) And bent over backwards. All with the goal of making the best of an untenable situation. Nothing had worked. After heaving a sigh, I explained, “I don’t feel guilty. I’m at peace with my decision.”

Until a few months ago, my name was Anastasia Pollack. When Zack and I married, I became Anastasia Barnes. Last month, after my former mother-in-law defaced my property, then called a press conference to accuse me of elder abuse, I’d finally—and reluctantly—reached my limit. The woman had never had a kind word for me from the moment her son, my deceased first husband, had introduced us.

When Karl Marx Pollack dropped dead at a casino in Las Vegas nearly two years ago, he’d left me and our teenage sons, Alex and Nick, with an unwelcome surprise—gambling debt that rivaled the GNP of many a Third World nation. Yet another cliché that has infiltrated my life: The wife is always the last to know.

Through moonlighting and a series of unusual circumstances, I’d whittled down my Uzbekistan-sized debt to a more manageable Djibouti-sized number in the debit column. However, Karl had also stuck me with his semi-invalid communist mother. I still haven’t decided which was more of a shock.

Some ex-daughters-in-law would have tossed the harridan out to fend for herself on her meager pension and monthly Social Security check. Maybe I’m too nice. Perhaps, I’m a glutton for punishment. Either way, I couldn’t kick Lucille Pollack to the curb. I had gritted my teeth and continued to put up with her ongoing verbal abuse, as well as the constant home invasions from the twelve other members of the Daughters of the October Revolution, a group of geriatric commies with the annoying habit of descending on my pantry like a horde of locusts.

However, even the most accommodating daughter-in-law will eventually reach her breaking point if pushed far enough. With her latest stunt, Lucille had shoved me too far. Her son had left me with little more than my reputation, and I refused to let his mother hijack that. I immediately filed a temporary restraining order against her.

Court hearings in New Jersey are normally held within ten days after a TRO is issued. But thanks to a combination of summer flu running rampant through the ranks of county personnel, an already jam-packed docket, and my usual bad luck, we'd had to wait four weeks for our court date.

Moments ago, with Lucille failing to appear in court to defend herself, the judge had issued a final order that declared the TRO permanent. It didn't hurt that I had produced affidavits from many witnesses, included members of both the Westfield and Union County police departments.

In the three years since Lucille had moved in with us, she'd acquired an extensive rap sheet that included demonstrating without a permit, filing a false police report, destruction of private property, and assaulting a member of law enforcement. Her failure to show today was also not the first time she'd defied a court order, all of which explained why there is no love lost between the local men and women in blue and my mother-in-law.

I inhaled a stress-free deep breath of air that teased the pending arrival of autumn. For the first time in a long time, my cortisol levels were dipping back toward normal range. Sixteen days ago, I'd unexpectedly received the means to pay off Djibouti, and today, I'd freed myself of one huge Bolshevik thorn in my tush. Amazingly, only one of those events had involved yet another murder.

Did I mention that shortly after Karl's untimely death, I'd stumbled across my first murder victim, forcing me into the role of reluctant amateur sleuth? Or that ever since, the dead bodies continue to pile up?

"You're still frowning," said Zack.

I forced a smile, even as my brain warned me against getting too cocky. I'm all too aware of what they say about Karma.

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Not knowing how long the court proceedings would take, I'd opted to work from home today, but Zack had a meeting scheduled in New York this afternoon. After grabbing brunch at a local diner, I dropped him off at the Elizabeth train station and headed home.

When I turned onto my street ten minutes later, I was surprised to find a large box truck parked in the driveway of the house across the street. Two men were carrying a sofa out the front door. After pulling into my driveway, I watched from my rearview mirror as they placed the sofa inside the truck, then headed back into the house.

I'm not a nosy neighbor, but their actions looked suspicious to me. Gloria Forester and her son Billy had flown to the West Coast two weeks ago, shortly after the arrest of her husband's killer.

The last I heard, she hadn't decided whether they'd return to the mini-McMansion she'd only recently purchased. Logic suggested perhaps a realtor had hired Joe's Junk Removal to cart away the furniture before staging the house prior to listing it.

Still, scammers didn't limit themselves to cybercrime. For all I knew, Joe's Junk Removal was cover for a ring of thieves who targeted empty homes in upscale communities. But if so, unless they suspected the sofa cushions were stuffed with hundred-dollar bills, I would have thought they'd take one look at the secondhand furnishings in the home, turn around, and leave.

Perhaps Gloria had decided to return to Westfield and planned to buy new furniture. She no longer needed to worry about her deceased husband's volatile personality and penchant for breaking various household items when his temper got the best of him.

To be sure, I decided to text her: *Are you aware a junk removal service is carting away your furniture?*

A minute later I received a thumbs-up emoji. No further explanation. Not that she owed me one. Satisfied that I'd done my civic duty to protect the neighborhood from would-be thieves, I entered my blissfully commie-free home.

Before releasing Ralph from his cage, I clipped Leonard's leash onto his collar and ushered him outside for a doggie pitstop and some much-needed exercise—for both of us. As we reached the sidewalk and turned toward Unami Park, both Joe's Junk Removal men exited Gloria's house.

While Leonard stopped to sniff out a suitable spot to pee, I watched the two men lug a battered bookcase down the front steps and slowly make their way toward the truck. They shoved the bookcase into the back of the truck, which I now saw was completely jammed with assorted furniture and dozens of stacked cartons.

Once one of the men rolled down and latched the truck's door, he hopped into the driver's seat. The other man bounded up the front steps of the house and closed the front door. After he returned to the truck and settled into the passenger seat, the driver backed out of Gloria's driveway and drove toward Central Ave. Leonard and I continued toward the park.

Half an hour later, after several loops around the walking path, Leonard made it clear he'd had enough exercise for the day. He sat back on his haunches and refused to budge.

I once had to wrestle Leonard into my arms, then haul him a few yards across a paw-burning blacktop parking lot to my car. No way would I survive lugging the

overweight pooch back to the house. I yanked on his leash and gritted my teeth. “Get up, Leonard.”

He swiveled his head, issued a low growl, and shot me the French bulldog equivalent of the evil eye. Ignoring his attempt to make me cower, I pulled a doggie treat from my pocket and dangled it just out of his reach before tossing it in the direction of the spot where we’d entered the park. Leonard scurried to his feet and took off, yanking me through the wooded area as he raced off in search of the bone-shaped biscuit. Luckily, his short stubby legs allowed me to keep pace.

After he sniffed out and devoured the biscuit, he turned his attention back to me. It didn’t take a dog whisperer to read the canine’s mind. He expected another bribe.

I once again reached into my pocket. This time, though, I didn’t dangle the treat in front of him. Instead, I reared back my arm, wound up, and let loose, hurling an imaginary biscuit through the break in the shrubs that led to the sidewalk. Leonard raced through the opening and down the street. When he arrived at the end of the block without having found the treat, I repeated the ruse, and he fell for it again.

At the end of the next block, he eyed me suspiciously. I pulled a second biscuit from my pocket. “Is this what you want?”

He barked.

“When we get home.”

I ignored his pitiful whimper. After another standoff, he finally realized his whining wouldn’t sway me. He issued a doggie huff and slowly plodded toward home.

As we turned the corner onto our street, I heard rock music and spied a different truck parked in Gloria’s driveway. Its twin sat at the curb in front of her house. The signage announced the company name as *Mr. Repurposeful* with a globe in place of the “o.” Underneath the logo, a tagline read “*Keeping treasures out of landfills.*”

Laudable sentiment but what were they doing at a newly built home? From what I’d seen earlier, Joe’s Junk Removal had already emptied all the furniture and household items from the house.

As the question darted across my mind, a man exited the garage. He pushed a heavy-duty hand truck with Gloria’s brand-new stainless steel washing machine strapped to it. A second man followed behind him with the matching clothes dryer strapped to another hand truck.

Curious, I decided not to cross to our side of the street. Instead, Leonard and I headed down the block toward Gloria’s house. As we drew closer, the decibel level of the music increased, and I realized it was flowing out from Gloria’s open windows. The unmistakable sounds of hammering, drilling, and sawing accompanied the Foo Fighters.

With Leonard channeling his inner sloth, we eventually arrived at Gloria's driveway as the two men emerged from the truck. Leonard decided nature once again called, and he began sniffing the weed-infested strip of grass at the curb. While I waited, I made eye contact with the men and offered them a friendly smile. I was dying to find out what was going on without coming across as a busybody neighbor.

Zack has often said that I wear my emotions, not on my sleeve, but plastered across my face. Most likely, my features telegraphed my curiosity because the older of the two men sauntered down the driveway toward the curb. "Morning, ma'am."

"Good morning."

"I'm guessing you're wondering why we're stripping the insides of this house."

Stripping? As in gutting? "It had crossed my mind. The new owner took possession only a few weeks ago."

"You know her?"

I wondered how well he knew Gloria. "We've met. And you?"

Before answering, he removed the black ball cap emblazoned with the truck's blue and green logo. Then, he used the hem of his matching company T-shirt to swipe the sweat from his brow before settling the cap back on his head. "We've never met in person. Darnedest job I've ever gotten, though. You have any idea why she wants the house completely gutted?"

"No, it's a newly built home."

He rolled his eyes. "I know. Crazy, right? And it doesn't even look like anyone's ever lived here."

No one had. At least not for very long. "Are you saying the owner hired you to remove everything from inside the house?"

"Everything reuseable. Cabinets, countertops, appliances, toilets, sinks, gas fireplace insert. Even the hardwood floors, doors, and windows. We're deconstructing the entire house."

My jaw dropped as his words sunk in. "And doing what? Why?"

In the short time I'd known Gloria, I'd quickly learned that she suffered from Leap Before You Look Syndrome. Had her grief over Barry's murder caused her to lose all sense of rationality?

"As for the *what*, she's donating everything to Habitat. The why?" He shook his head. "Beats me. She didn't say, and I didn't think it was my place to ask."

I stole a glance at the house. In a matter of hours, it would be reduced to nothing but a skeleton. "Then what?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I was only hired to do what I'm doing." He followed my gaze, then scoped out the other houses on the street. "I've had jobs from people with too much money who redecorate every few years, but this..." He pivoted

back to Gloria's house and indicated it with a sweep of his arm. "This is downright nuts. Besides, anyone with that kind of money, wouldn't be living on this street."

When he realized what he'd said, he added, "not that this isn't a nice neighborhood, it's just—"

"A typical middle-class neighborhood," I finished for him.

"Exactly."

Leonard had finally finished sniffing. Having discovered the ideal spot, he squatted and made his deposit. I offered the man a shrug before bending to bag the stinky poo. "I have no explanation for you. I suppose the owner has her reasons, but I'm as baffled as you."

He returned my shrug with one of his own. "A job's a job. Her check cleared. That's really all I care about."

"And you're sure you were dealing with the owner?" I asked. "With Gloria Forester?"

For years, Gloria had paid off bullies who egged Barry on, then threatened to file assault charges against him. Upon Barry's death, the lucrative cash stream had dried up. What if one of those bullies had found a way to get even?

I pulled out my phone, tapped my photos app, and scrolled to a picture of Gloria and her son Billy that Zack had taken at our Labor Day barbecue. I showed Mr. Repurposeful the photo. "Is this the woman you dealt with?"

"Yeah, that's her. We video chatted two or three times. I wanted to make sure she wasn't pulling a fast one. Maybe getting even with an ex. You never know these days. Even had her send me a copy of the deed to the house and her license so I could make sure the job was legit, and she was who she said she was."

With that he tipped the brim of his cap. "Anyway, time I got back to work. You have a nice day, ma'am."

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The Repurposeful crew worked throughout the remainder of the day like a legion of rainforest army ants. By the time Zack arrived home in the late afternoon, the house across the street was reduced to a hollow carcass with gaping holes where the windows and front door used to be.

After kissing me hello, he tilted his head in the direction of Gloria's house—or what was left of it—and said, "I'm guessing you have a story to tell me."

I filled him in on what had transpired across the street throughout the day. "Given the arrival of the Mr. Repurposeful crew, once Joe's Junk departed, I would have expected a more detailed response than an emoji from Gloria."

Zack stared out the living room windows at the mini-McMansion. "Odd. Then again, in the short time we've known Gloria, odd is an apt description of her." He turned back to me. "You're sure the house is completely gutted?"

“I can’t imagine that anything is left, given the list the salvage guy rattled off to me.”

Zack reached for my hand. “There’s one way to find out.”

A minute later we stood in the doorway of the empty shell of a house. We didn’t dare step inside. I glanced down through the rafters into the basement. Not only had Mr. Repurposeful removed the hardwoods, but they’d also removed the subfloor.

“At least they left the drywall,” I said.

“Only because it would have no value. It would be next to impossible to remove spackled and painted drywall for use in another home.”

I hadn’t meant Zack to take my comment literally. The floors were a different issue, though. “Why would they remove the subflooring? Wouldn’t the contractor be able to reuse it when laying a new floor?”

Zack nodded. “Assuming the builder had installed a floating floor system. A glued floor might rip up the subflooring too much to be of any use. However, I doubt Gloria’s planning to renovate.”

I gaped at him. “You think she’s tearing down the house, don’t you?”

“I do. Don’t you?”

“I suppose it’s the only logical explanation for what happened today. Why else would she direct Mr. Repurposeful to remove the windows and doors?” Not that there was much logic in destroying a brand-new home. If Gloria had no plans to return, why not just put the house on the market? Then again, we were talking about Gloria Forester, a woman lacking a logic gene.