

Crafty Crimes

A trio of Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mini-Mysteries

By Lois Winston

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Crewel Intentions

An Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mini-Mystery

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About *Crewel Intentions*

Crafts editor and reluctant amateur sleuth Anastasia Pollack receives a desperate phone call from former *American Woman* fashion editor Erica Milano. Erica is now in Witness Protection and living under a new identity in Western Pennsylvania. But someone is stalking her, and Erica has compelling reasons why she can't go to the police or notify her Witsec handlers. Anastasia is the only person she can trust to help her, and she knows Anastasia won't let her down. After all, Erica once saved Anastasia's life. But will Anastasia be able to return the favor before the stalker strikes?

ONE

"Anastasia, I need your help."

I recognized the voice at once. "Erica? You shouldn't be calling me."

"I had to. I don't know where else to turn."

"Hold on." I poked my head out of my cubicle and found the hall empty. Quickly I darted down the corridor to the models' closet, a walk-in storage area where I kept arts and crafts supplies and models from past magazine issues.

Once inside, with the door closed and keeping my voice to a whisper, I said, "Are you crazy? You'll get kicked out of the program." Although I had gleaned my knowledge of WitSec one hundred percent from a now-canceled TV show, I assumed breaking the *No Contact With Anyone From Your Past* rule was definitely grounds for expulsion.

"I've taken precautions."

"What kind of precautions?"

"I'm on a burner phone. No one will know."

Erica Milano, former *American Woman* fashion editor and daughter of crime boss

Joey Milano, now lived under an assumed name in an undisclosed city, compliments of Witness Protection. Several months ago, she'd provided a federal prosecutor with evidence against her ex-boyfriend after he tried to kill me. Attempted murder was only one of the many crimes that permanently relocated Ricardo to a federally run establishment with bars on the windows and razor wire landscaping.

In addition, Joey Milano now awaited trial on more than two dozen counts. Thanks to Erica, the feds had enough information to cripple her father's organization and put him in standard-issue neon-orange jumpsuits for the rest of his life—unless his goons got to her before she testified against him.

"I really shouldn't be talking to you, Erica. For your safety and my own." This call not only put her in jeopardy, but might also lead to a couple of Neanderthals with baseball bats showing up at my front door. And they wouldn't be asking directions to Yankee Stadium.

She panicked, her voice trembling as she sniffed back tears. "P...please don't hang up, Anastasia."

I caved. After all, Erica had played a major role in saving my life. I owed her. "What's going on?"

"I need to see you. Can we meet?"

"Is that such a good idea?"

"I'll make sure no one finds out. You're the only person I can trust."

"What about the U.S. Marshals? Aren't they supposed to protect you?"

"If I tell them what's going on, they'll relocate me."

"So?"

"I can't leave."

"Why not?"

"I've met someone."

Translation: *I have a new boyfriend*. "Won't they relocate him with you?" Again, my source of knowledge was totally television-based.

"He wouldn't be able to move with me."

"Why not?"

"It's complicated."

Isn't everything? I sighed. "I don't think meeting with you is a good idea, Erica."

"I'll pay you."

Bull's eye. Erica knew all about Karl Pollack, my not-so-dearly departed husband, leaving me in debt that rivaled the gross national product of many a small third-world nation. Ricardo had been Karl's bookie, a fact I learned only after Karl dropped dead at a roulette table in Las Vegas when I naively believed he was at a sales meeting in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Since then, my life has been reduced to scrounging for whatever additional money I can earn to supplement my paltry craft editor's salary.

"Three thousand dollars," she added.

A sum much too large to pass up, even though I had no clue what she needed from me. Too many bill collectors had me on speed dial, and every day my sons inched closer to college. Right now I couldn't even afford to send them to the local community college. Hoping I didn't regret whatever I was about to dive blindly into, I said, "Okay, where do you want to meet?"

"First, swear you won't tell anyone."

Was she kidding? “Of course, I won’t tell anyone. You shouldn’t even be telling me where you are.”

A huge heave of relief made its way through the phone line. “Thank you. I knew I could depend on you. I sent you a plane ticket.”

“You were pretty sure of yourself. What if I turned you down?”

“I knew you wouldn’t.”

“And why is that?”

“I saved your life.”

My mind flashed on an image of Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye from *White Christmas*, my favorite holiday movie. Throughout the story, Danny Kaye’s character manipulates Bing Crosby’s character with the same argument. Visions of me plummeting into a similar, non-ending situation with Erica swam around in my head. Would I wind up running to her aid for years to come, risking my life each time she dangled a few thousand dollars in front of me? Probably. Thanks to Karl, I had little choice.

“And what happens once I arrive at this as yet undisclosed location?” I asked.

“I’ve arranged for a car service to pick you up at the airport.”

She hung up before I could say anything else. An hour later the mailroom sent up a FedEx envelope that had arrived for me. Inside I discovered a roundtrip ticket to Pittsburgh and a money order for three thousand dollars.

I stared at both in disbelief. Erica had me booked on a flight leaving out of Newark Liberty the following morning and returning Sunday night. A note indicated that a car service would pick me up at the crack of dawn to drive me to the airport.

Mosaic Mayhem

An Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mini-Mystery

by Lois Winston

About *Mosaic Mayhem*

So much for a romantic getaway...When cash-strapped mom and reluctant amateur sleuth Anastasia Pollack is offered an all-expense paid three-day trip to Barcelona, her only worries are whether her passport is still valid and arranging care for her semi-invalid mother-in-law during her absence. However, within hours of landing in Europe, she finds herself staring down the barrel of a gun and needing to convince a Spanish crime syndicate they’ve kidnapped the wrong person. Why do people on both sides of the Atlantic keep trying to kill this pear-shaped, middle-aged single mom, and magazine crafts editor?

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.

Better alive and kidnapped than bleeding out on the street, I figured. But why me? I had no money, no political connections that might figure into the Catalan separatist movement. Had he wanted to rape or murder me, he could have pulled me into the woods back at the park. No one would have seen or heard anything. I don't know whether it was intuition or past experience, but something told me I didn't need to fear for my life.

After a bruise-inducing ride around sharp turns, the truck finally came to a stop a few minutes later. My abductor hauled me out and dragged me up a flight of steps into a building. When he yanked the sack off my head, I found myself standing in front of an ornately carved massive desk in a room reminiscent of a nineteenth century American robber baron's library. Floor-to-ceiling stained glass windows filled the one wall not covered in floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

Behind the desk sat a man with a full head of silver hair and a matching goatee. Dressed in a charcoal gray three-piece pinstripe suit, he exuded a cultured, sophisticated air that reminded me of certain James Bond villains—until he smiled, showing off a mouthful of nicotine stained teeth. "Welcome, Señora."

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Who I am is not important. What I want is the ransom your husband will pay to get you back unharmed."

"You obviously have me confused with someone else. I don't have a husband."

He made a tsking sound with his tongue and shook his head in a gesture of disappointment. "There's no sense lying to me, Señora Naiman. I know very well who you are. And I know your husband will pay handsomely to have you returned safely."

"Would that be the no-good deadbeat who died last winter? Because that's the only husband I've ever had, and his name wasn't Naiman."

Anger settled over his face. "Enough games!" He slammed his hand on the desk. "We will call your husband."

"Good luck with that. Unless, of course, you have a direct line to hell."

He reached for his phone, punched in a number, and pushed the speaker phone button.

"Hello?"

In a calm, controlled voice my captor said, “Señor Naiman, listen carefully. I am holding your wife. You will deposit one hundred million Euros into the Swiss bank account I’m texting to your phone to secure her safe return.”

“I don’t know who you are or what kind of scam you’re running, bub, but my wife is standing right beside me.” He then disconnected the call.

“Your husband has little regard for you welfare,” he said to me. “That is troubling. For you, especially.”

“That wasn’t my husband.”

“Señora Naiman, Elaine—”

“My name is not Elaine Naiman!”

He snapped his fingers and pointed to the bag my kidnapper still held.

When his goon deposited my handbag on the desk, he upended it to retrieve my passport. His mouth tightened and his eyes narrowed as he stared at the information. He slammed the passport onto his desk and launched into a rapid-fire Spanish tirade directed at the goon.

Goon Guy whipped out his phone, pointed to the screen, then pointed to me while he argued his case. His boss wasn’t buying it. He grabbed the phone and hurled it across the room, shattering a large porcelain urn—Renaissance era if I remembered my art history lessons. I cringed at the senseless destruction of such a valuable artifact. Then he pointed to the door and screamed something that I didn’t need translated. Goon Guy beat a hasty retreat.

My silver-haired captor placed the items spilled across his desk back into my handbag. “I am sorry for the misunderstanding, Señora Pollack. Juan will bring you back to Parc Güell.”

He rounded his desk and tucked my bag between my torso and my still bound arm, then exited the room. Juan the Goon reentered, placed the sack back over my head, and dragged me out the building, down the steps, and back into the van.

A few minutes later I once again walked through the entryway of Parc Güell, the red welts on my wrists the only evidence of my short but harrowing ordeal. I’ve lived through far worse. I parked myself outside the entrance of Torre Rosa and waited for Zack to finish his meeting.

In my experience, most guys are less than observant, but Zack zeroed in on my sore wrists the moment he stepped from the building. I should have kept my hands behind my back.

“What happened?” he asked.

Before I’d uttered more than two sentences, he whisked me into the museum office, quickly explained the situation to the director, then placed a call to the police. While we awaited their arrival, the director accessed an article from the *London Times*. “Take a look at this,” he said, pointing to a photo on his computer screen. “Definitely a striking resemblance.”

With a few major exceptions. Elaine Naiman looked like I might look if I could afford a live-in trainer, daily spa treatments, and the occasional nip/tuck. I could be her frumpy cousin—maybe—definitely not her twin. Anyone who mistook me for her needed an eye exam.

I scanned the article which detailed a charity auction held a week earlier. Mr. and Mrs. Michael Naiman had donated a Brancusi to an auction to raise funds for the removal of landmines in Somalia.

“If they have that kind of money, it certainly explains why someone is trying to kidnap her for ransom. Who are these people?”

“Michael Naiman owns Global Armament,” said Zack.

Why was I not surprised he knew of the man? “Is that as frightening as it sounds?”

“GA manufactures missiles and bombs.”

“Holy irony.”

“More so than you realize,” said the museum director. He turned to Zack. “That opening I invited you to this evening at the Museu Picasso?”

“What about it?”

“The paintings are from the Naimans’ private collection.”

“How much money does this guy have?” I asked.

“Rumors estimate his net worth as greater than that of Trump, Soros, and Buffet combined,” said Zack. “But they’re only rumors. No one knows for sure because the company isn’t publicly traded.”

“How come I’ve never heard of him?”

“People who make their money dealing in the tools of warfare usually keep a low profile.”

I rubbed my sore wrists. “Apparently, not low enough.”

When the police arrived, they confirmed that Mr. Naiman had received a phone call from a would-be kidnapper. With Zack acting as translator—who knew he spoke fluent Catalan?—the police asked if I’d be able to pick out my kidnappers from mug shots.

“Definitely.”

After the police escorted us to the station, I spent the next half hour flipping through mug shots until I found both men. As a trained artist, I’m used to noticing details. Each man had enough distinct facial features that I had no trouble identifying them. Juan Balaguer, AKA Goon Guy and Esteve Laporta AKA the older guy with the silver hair, goatee, and brown teeth.

“These men are part of a local crime syndicate run by Carlos Perella,” said another officer who joined us. He introduced himself as Captain De la Riva. Tall and thin with a high forehead, receding hairline, and a jet black pencil-thin mustache, he spoke in flawless English. “Balaguer is a low-level enforcer; Laporta is higher up the organization’s chain of command. Señor Perella has never gotten involved in kidnapping for profit before—at least not that we know of—he’s mostly into smuggling and money laundering, but I suppose there’s a first time for everything.”

“What happens now?” I asked.

“That’s up to you, Señora Pollack. We can pick up Balaguer and Laporta and charge them with kidnapping, but you’d have to be available to testify in court.”

“We’re only here for two more days.”

“Even so,” De La Riva continued, “given Perella’s resources, the charges probably wouldn’t stick. He’s like your Teflon Don back in the States.”

“Hardly. John Gotti died in prison. Perella is very much alive and walking free.”

“We can offer you police protection while you’re here.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. They won’t make the same mistake twice. But what about Elaine Naiman? She’s their real target.”

“Her husband declined our offer. He has his own private security force to protect them both.”

“Then our business here is done,” I said.

“That blew a sizable chunk of our first day in Barcelona,” I said as Zack and I left the police station.

He squeezed my hand. “It could have been a lot worse.”

“I know.” An involuntary shudder ran through me at the thought of the gruesome alternatives. I’d been damn lucky.

Patchwork Peril

An Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mini-Mystery

by Lois Winston

About Patchwork Peril

After rescuing her elderly neighbor Rosalie’s quilts from a rainstorm, Anastasia discovers Rosalie unconscious at the bottom of her basement stairs. Rosalie’s estranged niece Jane flies east to care for her during her recovery, but Rosalie suspects her motives are less than altruistic and even accuses Jane of drugging her. Is Rosalie’s paranoia a result of her head injury, or is there something more to her accusations? And can Anastasia uncover the truth before it’s too late?

ONE

I glanced through the windshield at the ominous black sky. Accuweather called for a Nor’easter to hit within the hour. The brooding cloud cover suggested otherwise. With the rate the wind had begun to pick up, I figured I had three minutes tops to arrive home before a deluge of Diluvial proportions. A minute later the first large drops of rain splashed onto my windshield. By the time I turned down my street, sideways sheets of rain buffeted my car.

I pulled into my driveway, parked the car, opened the door, and darted for my back porch. That’s when I caught a glimpse of bright colors frenetically flapping above the azalea bushes that separated my backyard from the one directly behind my house. Rosalie Schneider’s award-winning patchwork quilts clung precariously to her clothesline. At any moment the gale force winds would sweep them off to parts unknown. The crafter in me couldn’t let that happen.

With one quilt already hanging by a single clothespin, I had no time to grab my Wellingtons from the mudroom. I sandwiched my purse between my back door and storm door, then raced across the yard. Thick muck oozed up from the grass, sucking my shoes off my feet.

Welcome to the life of Anastasia Pollack, where no good deed goes unpunished.

By the time I reached Rosalie’s clothesline and bundled the three waterlogged quilts into my

arms, I was drenched from head to stocking-covered toes and spattered up to my armpits in mud. The quilts hadn't fared much better.

Huddled under the overhang, I banged on her back door. No one answered. I tried listening for some signs of activity inside the house, but the wind and rain drowned out all other sounds. Rosalie probably couldn't hear me. Shivering from the icy rain, I slogged my way back across both yards. As I bent to scoop up my now ruined Nine West pumps, I imagined my elderly neighbor, warm and cozy, curled up in front of her television, oblivious to my heroism on her behalf.

But if Rosalie were home, why hadn't she brought her quilts in before the storm hit?

"Holy cow, Mom!" Alex stood in the kitchen, Ralph, our Shakespeare quoting African Grey parrot on his shoulder. Both stared bug-eyed at me as I dropped the quilts, my shoes, and purse onto the mudroom floor. "What happened to you?"

"I was searching for Noah's ark."

Ralph squawked. "*There is, sure, another flood toward, and these couples are coming to the ark. As You Like It. Act Five, Scene Four.*"

"Huh?" Alex ignored Ralph and directed his confusion toward me.

"Never mind. Please get my bathrobe for me."

When he returned, I closed the door separating the mudroom from the kitchen, stripped down to my undies, and slipped on my robe. Before heading to a hot shower, I brought my clothes and Rosalie's quilts down to the basement. Those quilts would need washing before the mud stains set. Three more loads of wash to add to my Friday night chores. My punishment for being a nice neighbor was multiplying exponentially.

Back in the kitchen I tried calling Rosalie but got her answering machine. Maybe she'd gone out to dinner with friends. I left a message telling her I had her quilts.

As I headed to my bedroom, Nick poked his head out from the room he shared with his brother. "Hi, Mom. What's for dinner?"

"Mud pies."

He plucked a twig from my hair and handed it to me. "I'll take mine with a side of bark."

"You've got it." Sarcasm is high on my list of flaws, one my teenage sons inherited from me, along with their honesty, integrity, sense of justice, and ability to score high grades. You can't have everything, right? Luckily, all they inherited from their father was his good looks. I'm clueless about their athletic ability. Those genes must have lain dormant for generations.

My weekend off to a stellar start, I locked myself in my bathroom, finished stripping off my remaining clothes, and stepped into the shower. Rivulets of mud and muck streamed from my body and swirled down the drain. If only all my problems washed away so easily.

~*~

By the next morning the fast-moving storm had traveled up into New England, and a bright autumn sun streamed through the windows. An unfamiliar quiet blanketed my normally chaos-filled home.

Alex and Nick had risen early to leave for a two-week all-school community service project, helping Habitat for Humanity build new homes for Hurricane Sandy victims. Mama now lived in a condo two miles away with her sixth husband and Catherine the Great, her portly Persian cat.

Lucille, my semi-invalid communist mother-in-law, was probably off fomenting a revolution somewhere with the twelve other members of the Daughters of the October Revolution. I hadn't seen her since yesterday morning. Apparently, she'd taken Manifesto (AKA Mephisto, AKA Devil Dog,) with her, because I hadn't seen the grumpy French bulldog since

Friday morning, either. As long as Lucille didn't get herself arrested again, I really didn't care where she was or what she was doing. With any luck, she'd stay away all weekend.

I wasn't used to having the house to myself. Well, myself and a Shakespeare-quoting parrot. Too bad Zack was off either shooting indigenous flora and fauna with his Nikon or terrorists with his bad-ass Sig Sauer. (My boyfriend claims he's a photojournalist; I think he's a spy.)

I still hadn't heard from Rosalie Schneider. Her freshly laundered quilts sat folded on my dining room table. After breakfast I called her, only to have her answering machine pick up again. Had she gone away for the weekend and forgotten she left her quilts hanging on the line? To my knowledge she'd never exhibited any lapses of memory, but she was pushing eighty-five.

I decided to check to see if her car was parked in front of her house or in her garage, but I took the long way around the block rather than trudging through both soggy backyards.

In its wake, the storm had left a crisp breeze, enormous puddles, and a multitude of fallen branches throughout the neighborhood. Luckily, my property had sustained no damage, only a yard full of debris to clean up. Given my precarious finances, the last thing I needed was a huge repair bill. As I walked down the street, I realized some of my neighbors hadn't fared as well. An uprooted tree leaned against the roof of one house on the next block. Another tree had crushed two cars parked on the street.

When I arrived at Rosalie's house, I found her car parked in her driveway. I tried both her doors, ringing the front doorbell and knocking on the back door. Once again no one answered. However, this time I heard the television blaring from her living room. A sense of foreboding shuddered through my body. Ignoring the backyard muck, I kicked off my shoes, and raced home to phone the police.

"9-1-1. State your emergency."

I quickly explained the reason for my call and rattled off Rosalie's address. "She's quite elderly. You need to send someone right away."

"Are you certain she's in the house, ma'am? Did you see her lying on the floor?"

"No, but—"

"Many people leave their televisions on to fool would-be burglars into thinking someone is home. It's also possibly she just didn't hear you. She may have been in the bathroom."

"Or she's injured and can't get to the door."

"I'll dispatch an officer as soon as possible, ma'am, but it will take time."

"Are you kidding me? A woman could be dying."

"No officers are available right now. Have you seen what's going on in town? We've got ruptured gas mains and downed power lines all over the place."

"And an elderly woman who may be in need of medical attention."

"You might want to see if any neighbors have a key to her house. Or get in touch with one of her relatives."

If Rosalie were going to give anyone a key to her home, I was the candidate-of-choice. Since I didn't have a key, I knew no one would. Rosalie didn't get along with either of her next-door neighbors. She and I had bonded over crafts when I moved into my house years ago and one day spied her quilts flapping in the breeze.

As for relatives, as far as I knew, there was only a niece living somewhere in the Midwest. Rosalie mentioned her once years ago when I asked about her family. Then she abruptly changed the subject.

"Just get someone there as soon as possible, please." With that I hung up. Maybe I was panicking over nothing, but my gut told me something was seriously wrong, and I needed to do

something.

After pocketing my cell phone, I headed down the basement to grab a hammer and screwdriver. Then without bothering to wash the grass and mud from my feet, I stepped into my Wellingtons, traipsed back across the soggy yard, and squeezed through the azalea hedge.

Once at Rosalie's back door, I tried to jimmy the screwdriver in-between the door and the jamb, hoping I could pop the lock. When that didn't work, I looked around for some other way to get into the house.

The kitchen window seemed the likeliest candidate. If I could get enough leverage by standing on Rosalie's picnic table, I might be able to jimmy it open and climb through. If not, I'd have to resort to breaking the glass with the hammer.

Moving the picnic table proved extremely difficult. One of those old redwood varieties popular back in the middle of the last century, it weighed a ton. Pushing and pulling no more than an inch or two with each shove, I finally maneuvered it under the window. My arms and legs shook from the exertion, but I couldn't take time to recover. I grabbed the screwdriver, and climbed onto the table.

Much to my surprise, the window was unlocked. I slid the pane open, and attempted to hoist myself up, not an easy task, given my disdain for any form of strenuous physical exercise, a fact made obvious by my slightly overweight, pear-shaped body. On my third attempt I gained enough purchase to swing one leg through the window—right into a sink of dirty dishes.

At that moment I knew something was definitely wrong with Rosalie Schneider. An obsessive-compulsive neat freak, she'd never leave a single dirty dish unwashed for longer than five minutes.

I scrambled out of the sink and grabbed a dishtowel to wipe down my boots. Rosalie would have a fit if I left footprints of mud and mashed potatoes all over her pristine hardwood floors.

"Rosalie?" I called her name as I made my way into the dining room. The last thing I wanted to do was give the woman a heart attack—assuming she hadn't already had one. She didn't answer.

Rosalie lived in an expanded Cape Cod-style house with a living room, dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and a bathroom on the first floor, plus two additional bedrooms and another bathroom on the second floor. As I walked through the dining room into the living room, I yelled louder, "Rosalie? It's Anastasia. Are you all right?"

I poked my head into the downstairs bedroom she used as her quilting room, the other bedroom, and the bathroom. I then made my way upstairs. No Rosalie anywhere. Back in the living room, I grabbed the remote from her coffee table and switched off the Home Shopping Network.

By now dread had settled into every corpuscle of my body. The only place left to look was the basement. I headed back into the kitchen and opened the door leading to the basement stairs. Rosalie lay sprawled and unmoving at the bottom of the steps.