

# **Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mysteries**

## **Books 7-8**

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### **Drop Dead Ornaments**

#### **ONE**

I stared at my bandaged wrist before zeroing a sigh-punctuated scowl at my front door. “I can’t deal with them right now,” I told Zack. A moment ago we had pulled into my driveway and now sat with the engine running. Both my arm and my head throbbed—my arm due to the local anesthesia wearing off, my head undoubtedly from the stress of the last few hours.

Earlier today I’d found myself in a life-or-death struggle with a deranged killer. As we fought for possession of her gun, she’d sunk her teeth deep into my wrist, hitting bone. With any luck, Virginia Owens would spend the remainder of her life in an orange jumpsuit, not only for attempted murder but for several heinous crimes that spanned half a century.

After the police hauled Virginia away, Zack drove me to the hospital where I received a few dozen stitches and a tetanus shot. We had arrived back at my house to find Harriet Kleinhample’s VW minibus parked at the curb, which could mean only one thing: Lucille, the Communist mother-in-law from Hades, and her Daughter of the October Revolution sidekick had made bail. Both had spent the last two nights as guests of the county after Harriet was charged with hit-and-run and Lucille with assaulting an officer.

“You don’t have to,” said Zack. He turned off the engine. “Stay there.” He then came around to the passenger door and helped me from the car. With my woozy-from-painkillers body leaning against him, we made our way up the stairs to his apartment above my garage.

When life hands you lemons, you have two choices—either accept the sour turn of events or add sugar. Lucille was my lemon; Zachary Barnes was my sugar.

Zack walked into my life nearly a year ago when he rented the apartment over my garage. At the time I had no idea how instrumental he’d become in preserving my sanity and helping me survive the tsunami that had hit me head-on when Karl Marx Pollack, my duplicitous husband, dropped dead in a Las Vegas casino. In the blink of an eye my kids and I went from firmly entrenched in the middle class to one step away from residing in a cardboard box. To make matters so much worse, I was also now saddled with Karl’s mother, a woman who has never uttered a kind word to me, as a permanent houseguest.

My name is Anastasia Pollack, and I’ve had more than my fill of sour lemons—not to mention murders and near-death experiences—lately. I often ask the universe why it’s picking on me. So far, the universe has kept mum.

Although I must admit, the chaos has certainly moved the needle of my life from humdrum to way over-the-top. Personally, I’d settle for moderately interesting, especially if it meant fewer encounters with deadly weapons.

Once inside the apartment, Zack helped remove my coat, then settled me onto the sofa. I glanced longingly toward the kitchen cabinet that housed the adult beverages. “A glass of wine would definitely hit the spot right now,” I said.

He shook his head. “Bad idea.”

I sighed. “I know.” Along with the pain meds, the doctor had given me an antibiotic to ward off any possible infection. I wouldn’t be imbibing in anything stronger than coffee for the next week.

Zack placed a throw pillow behind my head. Then he removed my shoes, swung my legs up onto the sofa, and tossed an afghan over my body. “How about an omelet instead?”

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I must not have answered Zack, let alone sampled even a single morsel of omelet, judging from the rumbling protests emanating from my stomach. With my good arm I leveraged myself into a seated position and glanced around the empty room. Moonlight played peek-a-boo through the clouds, intermittently streaming in from the window above the sink.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and yawned, wondering how long I’d slept. My purse sat on the coffee table. By the dim light I dug out my phone and checked the display. No wonder my stomach wouldn’t shut up. I hadn’t eaten anything since eight o’clock that morning—nearly twelve hours ago!

I blindly swept my feet across the floor in front of the sofa and under the coffee table until I found my shoes. Then I hunted around for my coat, which I found draped over the back of the sofa. After gingerly slipping my injured arm into one sleeve, I contorted my body in such a way as to shove my good arm into the remaining sleeve without the use of my mauled wrist. After a quick pit stop I opened the door and stepped onto the landing.

From my second-story perch I noticed red, white, green, blue, and yellow lights twinkling throughout the neighborhood. Stringing up the Christmas lights had been an item on today’s to-do list—before the homicidal maniac bit into my schedule.

With a death grip on the handrail, I carefully made my way down the exterior staircase. The temperature had dipped considerably since Zack and I arrived home, and a light dusting of flakes coated the steps. However, my body no longer wobbled, and I noted my head no longer throbbed. Too bad I couldn’t say the same for my wrist. If anything, it hurt more. One thing I knew with certainty—any woman who’d ever swooned over a sexy fictional vampire had never experienced the excruciating pain of a skin-puncturing bite.

When I opened the back door, I was greeted by a cacophony of teenage chatter fighting for dominance over the latest Imagine Dragons album. I followed the noise into the dining room. A half-dozen teens were spread out around my dining room table; another six sat in a sheet-covered circle on my living room floor. A plethora of craft materials and stacks of plastic boxes holding clear glass Christmas balls surrounded each group.

“Hey,” I said, slipping out of my coat.

“Mom!” Alex jumped up from his chair and raced around the table to greet me. He clasped my good hand in both of his and stared down at my bandaged wrist. Worry spread across his face. “Are you okay?”

“I will be. Zack told you what happened?”

He nodded. “Does it hurt?”

“Only if I play racquetball.”

He leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Good thing you don’t play racquetball.”

Someone lowered the volume on Imagine Dragons. The other kids had stopped chatting and were now listening in on our conversation. A girl I didn't recognize, who resembled a curly-haired, petite Nicole Kidman, was the first to speak. Her eyes glued to my gauze-wrapped wrist, she asked, "What happened to you, Mrs. Pollack?"

Given the murders that had recently occurred on our street, I thought it best to downplay this morning's events. I squeezed Alex's hand, hoping he understood I didn't want the gory details emerging. "I tripped in the foyer this morning and injured my wrist."

Not a complete lie, although I hadn't tripped as much as I'd launched myself at Virginia Owens, tackling her to the ground in an attempt to pry the gun from her hand. And technically, *she* was responsible for the injury to my wrist, not me.

My gaze darted around the living room and into the foyer. I found no signs of the struggle, not even the bullet holes in the walls. Someone (if I had any money, I'd bet on Zack) had putted over the telltale evidence, swept up the plaster dust, and removed the shattered remains of a living room lamp felled by a bullet intended for Ralph, my Shakespeare-quoting African Grey parrot. I didn't know if the crime scene unit had needed to dust for prints while we were at the hospital, but if so, Zack had cleaned those up as well.

I turned my attention back to the explosion of craft materials covering my living room and dining room, a perfect opening for changing the subject. "What's going on? I thought you were finished with all the ornaments for your community service project."

The community service project was a high school graduation requirement. This year's committee had decided to volunteer at and raise money for the county food bank. However, the students balked at the traditional fundraisers that placed a huge percentage of the profit from candy, candles, popcorn, or wrapping paper sales into the coffers of professional fundraising companies. Alex, as chairman of the committee, came up with the brilliant idea of enlisting the aid of a magazine crafts editor—otherwise known as his mother.

How could I say no?

I suggested the students make Christmas ornaments and created various projects easy enough for even the non-craftiest kid in the school to execute perfectly, yet elegant enough to hang on a professionally decorated tree. I then tapped my industry contacts to donate the necessary supplies. The kids would net one hundred percent of the profit from the sales.

On a Friday afternoon in late September I left work early to teach Ornaments 101 to a cafeteria filled with four hundred seniors. And because I believe in killing two birds with one craft project, I photographed the session for an article in next December's issue of *American Woman*, thus also avoiding having to take half a vacation day.

The kids were disappointed to learn they'd have to wait a year to see themselves in the pages of the magazine, but production schedules are set months in advance. By late September I was already swimming in Easter chicks and bunnies. Right now I'm working on a Father's Day spread. I did, however, arrange for some local press that should entice shoppers to stop in Westfield over the coming weeks for some of their holiday gifts.

Each of the students was responsible for making three ornaments. They set the price at ten dollars apiece. If all the ornaments sold, the seniors would make twelve thousand dollars, which would go a long way toward stocking the county food bank through the winter.

All the ornaments were completed and boxed up several weeks ago, some designated for this weekend's Holiday Crafts Fair and Bazaar, others distributed to the various downtown shops and businesses that had agreed to display and sell them without taking a cut of the profits.

Mini-Nicole sidled up next to Alex. “My dad offered to match dollar-for-dollar whatever we raised from the ornament sales.”

“So we decided to make as many extra ornaments as we could with the leftover supplies,” added Alex. “This is Sophie Lambert, by the way, Mom. She moved here over the summer.”

Which explained why I didn’t recognize her. And judging from the smitten, puppy dog expression on my son’s face, I pegged her as the new girlfriend Alex’s younger brother Nick had mentioned the other day. According to Nick, she worked with Alex at Starbucks. Not that I had a clue when Alex found the time for a girlfriend between his studies, sports, and part-time job. I plastered a friendly smile on my face and said, “Nice to meet you, Sophie. That’s quite a generous offer.”

She shrugged. “Dad’s that kind of guy, always stepping up for a good cause.”

“We’re lucky we had so many glass balls left over,” said Alex.

I had requested fifteen hundred clear glass ornaments from the manufacturer, expecting a certain percentage of breakage as the kids handled them. After the committee had collected the finished ornaments, nearly a hundred unused glass balls remained. I scanned the two rooms once again. In various states of completion, the ornaments covered every available flat surface of my dining room and living room.

“How did sales go today?” I asked. The fair was a two-day event held at the National Guard Armory and included outside vendors.

“Great,” said Sophie. “We sold nearly all five hundred ornaments we’d designated for today’s sale. We’re hoping we’ll do even better tomorrow. That’s why we wanted to make more ornaments tonight.”

“I’d better let you get back to work, then,” I said before heading off in search of Zack and Nick. As I made my way toward the den, someone cranked Imagine Dragons back up to ear-piercing volume.

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I found Zack and Nick engrossed in a chess match. Ralph sat perched on Zack’s shoulder, his parrot gaze locked on the chessboard, absorbing every move. Given his total recall of all things Shakespeare, I wondered if we’d soon be adding chess Grand Master to his list of talents. After all, if Watson, the IBM computer, can win a million dollars on *Jeopardy*, anything is possible. “Think we should enter Ralph in a few chess matches?”

Zack glanced up from the board. “Didn’t you see my note?”

“What note?”

“The one I left on the coffee table, telling you to text me when you woke up.”

“I never turned on a light.”

“I didn’t want you navigating the steps by yourself.”

“I’m fine.” I lifted my arm and scowled at my wrist. “Except for this.”

A loud doggie snore drew my attention to Manifesto—AKA Mephisto, AKA Devil Dog—my mother-in-law’s French bulldog, snoozing underneath the coffee table. That’s when I realized Casa Pollack was shy one family member. “Where’s Lucille?”

“She and her minion stormed out once Alex’s friends arrived,” said Nick.

“Before or after dinner?” I asked.

“What do you think?” asked Zack. He stood and waved me toward the sofa. “Sit down. I’ll heat up some dinner for you. I set some aside before Lucille and Harriet wolfed down every last crumb.”

Zack had had a busy day. He'd saved my life, cleaned up a crime scene, and judging from the telltale aromas of something Italian still lingering in the air, apparently cooked dinner for everyone.

After Karl, I probably would have built an impenetrable fortress around my heart if not for the universe dropping Zachary Barnes into my life at the most opportune moment. The guy was definitely a keeper.

I settled onto the sofa. Zack headed toward the kitchen, Ralph still on his shoulder, probably because he knew he could cajole a treat from his moveable perch once they entered the kitchen.

Nick moved the chessboard out of the way and curled up next to me, his head on my shoulder. "You scared me," he said. "Stop doing that."

I ran the fingers of my good hand through his shock of sandy-colored hair. "I didn't do it on purpose."

"None of this stuff ever happened before Dad died."

"I know."

"This is all his fault."

I sighed. "Your father had nothing to do with what happened this morning."

"He had everything to do with Ricardo trying to kill you."

"True." Ricardo had been Karl's loan shark. When Karl gambled away all our money and left us with debt that rivaled the GNP of most Third World nations, he also left me to deal with Ricardo, who was nowhere near as understanding as the mortgage company or my other legitimate creditors.

"And it just keeps happening," said Nick. "It's like his death whisked us into some weird alternate universe where people are always trying to kill you."

I couldn't refute his observation. Our lives had certainly turned surreal in the aftermath of Karl's death.

"I want our old life back," said Nick.

*Did I?* My old life hadn't included Zack. I wouldn't mind going back in time to when I had no debt, no communist albatross of a mother-in-law around my neck, and no one trying to kill me, but that life was built on a foundation of lies. The debt was there; I just didn't know it existed until Karl died and all the bricks came crashing down on me.

Along with losing my financial security, I'd lost any love I once had for my husband. I could never forgive him for what he had done to our kids and me, but I tried to keep my resentment and bitterness from Alex and Nick.

"Your father had an addiction he couldn't control, Nick. Addiction is an illness. You can't blame him for that."

"Lots of people are addicts," he said. "The smart ones seek help. I don't blame Dad for his gambling addiction. I blame him for not getting help, for not telling us, for putting his need to gamble above his family and screwing up our lives."

Hard to argue with that, as well. I felt the same way. "We're managing, though, right? Life is better than it was last winter, isn't it?"

"Thanks to Zack."

"Yes. But also to you and your brother for the sacrifices you've made."

"We didn't have much choice, did we?"

"You had a choice of attitude, Nick. I'm extremely proud of how both you and your brother have handled the adverse changes to our lives."

He wiggled out from under my arm and turned to face me. "So when are you and Zack going to get married?"

# Handmade Ho-Ho Homicide

## 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 crunched his way across the snowy 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 Isidore 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. Isidore 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 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 reside 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."

I had no idea Ira celebrated Christmas. Then again, we'd never discussed religion. Perhaps his father had jettisoned the "opiate of the masses" indoctrination and returned to the religion of his youth when he and Lucille split. However, those particular religious beliefs aren't supposed to include Christmas. Since I knew nothing about Ira's first wife, other than she'd passed away, perhaps he'd converted when he married her.

"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 professional 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 assault 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, interspersed with four-letter name-calling.

We pushed our way through a crowd that had gathered on the sidewalk. More people wandered around the display, even coming and going from the backyard, where I assumed there were more decorations.

Ira stood in the middle of his front lawn. A group of extremely irate adults surrounded him. They wildly gesticulated 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.