

# "Hamptons Heartthrob," Fiction by Susan Saiter Sullivan

Laney could be miserable. A nasty birthday was coming up. Couldn't someone make them illegal? After all, they're hazardous to your health and eventually they kill you. Add to that her daughter's departure for the Peace Corps, then her husband's announcement that he was in love with his cycling gal pal, Yi-Yi Fong. Laney had packed off to their Springs cottage and begun the grueling process of sending out résumés.

Yet, she wasn't miserable. She was now back with her first love, journalism. So what if it was a fluffy assignment from One-Percenter magazine, and her background was hard news? She was lucky; it had been a long time since she'd switched from mild-mannered reporter in a Midwestern metropolis to supermom in New York City.

On a hanger dangled the sample-size Hervé Leger "bandage dress" her friend Roz, a buyer for Saks, insisted on loaning her, lecturing, "If you're interviewing Fashionistas at a polo match, you have to look like one." The pre-order price was \$1,100, a thousand dollars above Laney's dress budget. The Spandex figure-eight shape stared at her, bragging, "I may be tiny, but I'm going to show your body who's boss."

After a 10-minute wrestling match with it and panting before the mirror, she admitted to herself it was kinda nice to feel glamorous again. Which made her wonder if, under the V.I.P. tent, she might run into the illustrious Mr. Lex Garfield. His financial firm sponsored fancy events. Seeing her in this getup, maybe he'd regret not calling her as he'd promised at that Newtown Lane art opening.

"Like it?" he'd said as she viewed a pasture landscape. "I love horses," she'd said. "But, honestly, I think it's..."

"Never mind, you can stop right there. I just bought it."

"Oh well, I know nothing about art."

"Neither do I. I invest in artists. Up-and-coming ones. Especially local."

"That's very smart. And very laudable."

The slightly defensive expression left his face, and he asked how her family was. Their girls had been BFFs at camp. Still reeling from it, she mentioned her separation without intending to, and ended up asking if his

company handled people in her income bracket.

The amused look he gave her! She went off for a dignity-boost-in-a-plastic-cup, windshield wiper fluid they passed off as wine. On his way out, as she was choking down a hot pepper-laden cheese cube with the even worse red, he asked for her phone number, saying he'd get her the number of a Sag Harbor accountant friend.

"You okay? C'mon, you need real food." Across the street, she devoured a plate of rigatoni marinara, which was followed by cappuccinos, followed by a little kiss on Main Street. Well no, not so little.

Anyway, she could find her own accountant, and she didn't want him to call — he was married! To a prominent socialite equestrian, Chloe. Rumors that their marriage was shaky floated occasionally, but Laney needed no messes; she was just getting out of a humdinger.

Stuffing notepad and phone into her purse, she noticed her fingernails. Had tiny elves used them as hockey rinks while she slept? Ransacking drawers, she found an ancient bottle of Red-Hot Hampton Heartthrob. She'd work on it in the car.

At the polo grounds, she applied clots of the thickened Hampton Heartthrob. More like Hampton Heart Attack, to go with the bandage dress, which felt more like a tourniquet.

An updated press alert came across her phone announcing that Chloe Garfield would do the toss-in. Chloe had never been especially friendly, but surely she'd give a few quotes. Now Laney felt hypocritical. And nervous. What if Chloe had heard gossip about rigatoni night? What if Lex was with her, his surprising empathy of that night vanished, replaced by his normal I-own-the-world swagger? Stop being paranoid, she scolded herself. Relax and take a deep breath.

Are you kidding? In this dress?

Waving her drying nails, she joined the V.I.P.-tent-bound women in floaty gowns or va-va-voom numbers like her own, men in dark or pastel blazers. The dress made her stalk as stiffly as Frankenstein, but then it scared a whistle out of a security guy and a "bonita mamacita" from a groom.

Laney stepped into the Hermès boutique, wowed by

the vibrant scarves and shawls. A woman maybe in her mid-80s, coiffed in a Betty Ford swoopy-do, watched. Her pinched nostrils arched, slowly turning head, reminded Laney of the aristocratic hauteur of a llama.

A bit intimidated, Laney said she was a writer for One-Percenter. A-jangle with gold jewelry that probably weighed more than she did, the lady said, "I'm Anastasia Cruickshank," adding, "do send my best regards to my old Greenwich friend, Reginald."

"Reginald who?" Laney said.

"Why, your publisher, of course!"

"Oh, that Reginald. Sure," Laney said, though the only contact she'd had with the magazine had been via email with a low-level editor.

"May I say you look like a little angel in that bordeaux dress, which sets off your fair coloring to perfection? My own days of wearing Hervé Leger are over."

So will mine be after today, Laney thought as Anastasia, actually a sweet lady, stiffly reached for scarves. She should offer to help, but then you didn't want to insult. Anastasia unfurled one and traced the pattern with perfect pearly nails. "This is Les Léopards Oiseaux Fleuris." She flourished another with stirrups and bridles on a white background. "Our exclusive design for Island Polo. Do try it on."

"It's a little piece of heaven," Laney said. "Can I mention prices?"

"This one-of-a-kind is \$4,275, half the price of the leopard design," Anastasia said.

Laney affected an "is that all?" expression, and Anastasia went to get a mirror.

And then, Laney saw with utter horror that she'd left long swipes of Red-Hot Hampton Heartthrob on the white of the scarf.

Laney tried to rub off a blob, but it only spread. In desperation, she went into her purse for Kleenex, only to see that the polish had leaked and was all over her fingers now. She ripped off the scarf, spreading more red. She slapdash folded it, stuffing it under others. Maybe Anastasia wouldn't notice. Or she'd think all that red was a part of the design she hadn't been aware of before. Yeah, fat chance.

Or Laney could exclaim, "Oh no! It looks like someone smeared nail polish on it." But then Anastasia would say, "Yes, and it's the same color you're wearing."

She could ask to see more and when Anastasia turned away, she'd stuff it into her purse and disappear into the crowd. Her mind raced ahead of that one... she saw herself being led off the grounds in handcuffs, Lex Garfield walking by.

She'd say she did it absentmindedly.

The cops would get a big laugh out of that one.

Whatever happened to the old reporter who wouldn't accept even a free coffee at a press conference? Her corrupted self should slither home and curl up in a ball. Tomorrow, go back to New York, make friends with Li-Li, and never return to the Hamptons.

No, New York was too close for comfort. She'd join her daughter in Africa and sleep on a straw mat, dedicate herself to good deeds. "Thanks, Anastasia. I have to go now," she said.

"I must show you Cheval sur..."

She should just confess. But Anastasia would likely make her pay for the scarf. Four thousand-plus dollars, for a scarf she couldn't wear. Even if Anastasia just decided to damage it out, she'd tell Reginald. Laney, say hello to the end of your career with One-Percenter.

End? She hadn't even said hello to the beginning.

"Take down my email," Anastasia suggested.

Laney didn't want to bring her hands back into the picture. "I'm out of battery," she said.

"I'll send it to you. What's your address?"

An even stronger scent for the bloodhounds. "I'll recharge my phone, then come back," Laney said, squeezing her eyes shut so she didn't have to look at that trusting face.

It was then that Anastasia let go with an ear-shattering scream.

TO BE CONTINUED

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