

Revenge of the Wrought-Iron Flamingos (Meg Langslow Mysteries)

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Every year, Yorktown, Virginia, relives its role in the Revolutionary War by celebrating the anniversary of the British surrender in 1781. This year, plans include a re-enactment of the original battle and a colonial craft fair. Meg Langslow has returned to her home town for the festivities--and to sell her wrought-iron works of art. Except, of course, for the pink-painted flamingos she reluctantly made for her mother's best friend--she's hoping to deliver them secretly, so she won't get a reputation as "the blacksmith who makes those cute wrought-iron flamingos."

Besides, she has taken on another responsibility--making sure none of her fellow crafters ruin the historical authenticity of the fair with forbidden modern devices--like wrist watches, calculators, or cell phones. She's only doing it to keep peace with the mother of the man she loves. And Michael himself will don the white-and-gold uniform of a French officer for the re-enactment--what actor could resist a role like that?

Meg's also trying to keep her father from scaring too many tourists with his impersonation of an 18th century physician. And to prevent a snooping reporter from publishing any stories about local scandals. Not to mention saving her naive brother, Rob, from the clutches of a con man who might steal the computer game he has invented. It's a tough job--at least, until the swindler is found dead, slain in Meg's booth with one of her own wrought-iron creations.

Now Meg must add another item to her already lengthy to do list: "Don't forget to solve the murder!"

Fortunately, the more trouble Meg faces, the more fun the reader will have--and Meg faces plenty of trouble in this lighthearted and funny novel.

Donna Andrews is the author of the Meg Langslow mysteries, including *Stork Raving Mad* and *Swan for the Money*. She has won the Agatha, Anthony, and Barry awards, a Romantic Times award for best first novel, and two Lefty and two Toby Bromberg Awards for funniest mystery. When not writing fiction, Andrews is a self-confessed nerd, rarely found away from her computer, unless she's messing in the garden. She lives in Reston, Virginia.

REVENGE OF THE WROUGHT-IRON FLAMINGOS

Chapter 1 "I'm going to kill Michael's mother," I announced. "Quickly, discreetly, and with a minimum of pain and suffering. Out of consideration for Michael. But I am going to kill her." "What was that?" Eileen said, looking up and blinking at me. I glanced over at my best friend and fellow craftswoman. She had already unpacked about an acre of blue-and-white porcelain and arranged it on her side of our booth. I still had several tons of wrought iron to wrestle into place. I scratched two or three places where my authentic colonial-style linsey-woolsey dress was giving me contact dermatitis. I rolled my ruffled sleeves higher up on my arms, even though I knew they'd flop down again in two minutes; then I hiked my skirts up a foot or so, hoping a stray breeze would cool off my legs. "I said I'm going to kill Michael's mother for making us do this craft fair in eighteenth-century costume," I said. "It's

absolutely crazy in ninety-degree weather." "Well, it's not entirely Mrs. Waterston's fault," Eileen said. "Who knew we'd be having weather like this in October?" I couldn't think of a reasonable answer, so I turned back to the case I was unpacking and lifted out a pair of wrought-iron candlesticks. Eileen, like me, was flushed from the heat and exertion, not to mention frizzy from the humidity. But with her blond hair and fair skin, it gave the effect of glowing health. I felt like a disheveled mess. "This would be so much easier in jeans," I grumbled, tripping over the hem of my skirt as I walked over to the table to set the candlesticks down. "People are already showing up," Eileen said, with a shrug. "You know what a stickler Mrs. Waterston is for authenticity." "Yes, everyone in Yorktown had long ago figured that out. And Martha Stewart had nothing on Mrs. Waterston for attention to detail. If she'd had her way, we'd have made every single stitch we wore by hand, by candlelight. She'd probably have tried to make us spin the thread and weave the fabric ourselves, not to mention raising and shearing the sheep. And when she finally pushed enough of us over the edge, we'd have to make sure our lynch mob used an authentic colonial-style hemp rope instead of an anachronistic nylon one. Of course, my fellow craftspeople would probably lynch me, too, while they were at it, since I was her deputy in charge of organizing the craft fair. And in Mrs. Waterston's eyes, keeping all the participants anachronism-free was my responsibility. When I'd volunteered for the job, I'd thought it a wonderful way to make a good impression on the hypercritical mother of the man I loved. I'd spent the past six months trying not to make Michael an orphan. Speaking of Michael ..." "Where's Michael, anyway?" Eileen asked, echoing my thoughts. "I thought he was going to help you with that." "He will when he gets here," I said. "He's still getting into costume." "He's going to look so wonderful in colonial dress," Eileen said. "Yes," I said. "Lucky we don't have a full-length mirror in the tent, or we wouldn't see him for hours." "You know you don't mean that," Eileen said, with a frown. "You're crazy about Michael." I let that pass. Yes, I was crazy about Michael, but I was a grown woman in my thirties, not a starry-eyed teenager in the throes of her first crush. And Michael and I had been together a little over a year. Long enough for me to fully appreciate his many good points, but also long enough to notice a few shortcomings. The thing about costumes and mirrors, for example. And the fact that getting dressed to go anywhere took him two or three times as long as it took me. Not that I complained, usually; the results were always spectacular. But at the moment, I'd have traded spectacular for available to help. I wrestled an eight-foot trellis into position and sat back, panting. "Maybe I will wait until he gets here to finish this," I said. "But Mrs. Waterston wants us all set up by ten!" Eileen said. She rummaged in the wicker basket she was using instead of a purse, then shot a guilty glance back at me before pulling out her wristwatch. "It's 9:30 already," she said, thrusting the watch back out of sight beneath the red- and white-checked fabric lining the basket. Familiar gestures already: the furtive glance to see if anyone who cared--like me, theoretically--was looking before someone pulled out a necessary but forbidden modern object. And then the hasty concealment. Eileen should have figured out by now that as long as nobody else spotted her, I didn't give a damn. Then again, we'd found out this morning that Mrs. Waterston had enlisted a dozen assistants, whom she'd dubbed "the Town Watch." In theory, the watchmen were under my orders, available to help with crowd control and prevent shoplifting. In practice, they were the reason I was running late. I'd spent all morning trying to stop them from harassing various frantic craftspeople about using modern tools to set up, and keeping them from confiscating various items they'd decided were "not in period." The crafters had started

calling them "the Anachronism Police." "I'm nearly finished with my side," Eileen said. "If you like, I could--" A loud boom interrupted her, seeming to shake the very ground. Both of us jumped; Eileen shrieked; and her pottery rattled alarmingly. We could hear more shrieks and oaths from nearby booths. "What on Earth!" Eileen exclaimed, racing over to her table to make sure none of her ethereally delicate cups and vases had broken. "Oh, Lord," I muttered. "I thought she was kidding." "Kidding about what?" Eileen asked. "What the hell was that, a sonic boom?" shouted Amanda, the African American weaver in the booth across the aisle. "The artillery," I shouted back. "Artillery?" Eileen echoed. "The what?" Amanda asked, dropping a braided rug and trotting over to our booth. "Artillery," I repeated. "For the Siege of Yorktown. That's what this whole thing is celebrating, you know--" "Yeah, I know," Amanda said. "October 19, 1781. The British finally throw in the towel and surrender to George Washington and the Revolutionary War is over. Whoopity-do. Let freedom ring, except for my people, who had to wait another eighty years. So what's with the sound effects?" "Another of Mrs. Waterston's brainstorms," I said. "She hired a bunch of guys to fire a replica cannon to add to the authenticity of the event." "You mean, like a starter's gun to open the fair?" Amanda asked. "Demonstrations for the tourists, maybe," Eileen suggested. "Actually ..." I said. Another thunderous boom shook the encampment. This time we heard fewer shrieks and more angry yells. "Actually," I began again, "she's going to have them firing continuously, to simulate the siege. Washington's troops shelled the British nonstop for a couple of weeks before attacking their entrenchments." "She's going to have them doing that all day?" Eileen asked. "Probably all night, too, unless someone can find an obscure county ordinance to stop it." Someone like me, probably. I'd already promised half a dozen townspeople who'd seen the artillery setting up that I'd find a way to silence the cannons at bedtime. Now that the shelling had actually begun, I'd be swamped with complainers any second--and no matter how irate they were, none of them wanted to tackle Mrs. Waterston directly. "Bunch of loonies," Amanda muttered. No argument from me. "Bad enough I have to dress up like Aunt Jemima," she said, as she returned to her own booth. "And now this." "Oh, but you look ... wonderful," Eileen called. "So authentic!" Amanda looked down at her homespun dress and snorted. She was right, unfortunately. I'd always envied Amanda's stylish urban wardrobe, with its vivid colors and offbeat but sophisticated cuts. I'd never before realized how well her chic outfits camouflaged a slightly plump figure. And when you threw in the cultural associations an African American woman raised in Richmond, Virginia, was bound to have with colonial-era clothing ... "Oh, dear," Eileen murmured. From the sudden crease in her normally smooth forehead, I could tell that the last point had just dawned on her. "This must be awful for poor Amanda! Do you think we should--" "Look sharp!" hissed a voice nearby. "Here she comes! Put away your anachronisms!" Copyright © 2001 by Donna Andrews.

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