

Sorry, Knot Sorry
An Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mystery, Book 13
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ONE

“Have you signed the contract?” asked food editor Cloris McWerther.

We stood in the break room, taking part in our morning ritual of coffee and whatever sugar and calorie-laden goodie Cloris had whipped up overnight. Breakfast of champions. Or sustenance for a magazine crafts editor who rarely had time to eat before rushing out the door each morning.

I shook my head as I swallowed a mouthful of blueberry lemon muffin. “Not yet.”

“Why not? It would wipe out your remaining debt, wouldn’t it?”

“But at what cost?”

My name is Anastasia Pollack. I’m the crafts editor at *American Woman*, a third-rate women’s magazine sold at supermarket checkout counters. A year and a half ago, thanks to the death of my duplicitous first husband, I was yanked out of my comfortable middle-class existence and deposited into the Land of One-Step-Away-from-Living-in-a-Cardboard-Box-Over-a-Subway-Vent.

As a single parent, I barely cover essentials, leaving nothing to whittle down the unexpected and unwelcome debt I’d inherited. If I had any extra cash, I’d have *Clueless Wife* tattooed in reverse across my forehead. Every time I stared into the mirror, I’d have a stark reminder of my obliviousness and naiveté.

Good thing too many creditors are queued up with their hands out. I already have too many regrets. I don’t need to add a graffitied forehead to the list.

However, through a combination of luck and moonlighting, I’d managed to whittle down a sizable chunk of that debt. Unfortunately, the whittling tool came with strings attached. Deadly strings that had forced me into the role of reluctant amateur sleuth.

Prior to the death of Karl Marx Pollack, every dead body I’d ever encountered had reposed peacefully in a silk-lined coffin at a funeral home. And thankfully, each of the deceased had succumbed from natural causes.

Post Karl? All had died at the hands of others. Worse yet, those corpses continue to arrive in my life on a far too regular basis. In the past eighteen months, my encounters with murder victims (and by extension, murderers) has exceeded the career totals of the average suburban homicide detective.

The one bright spot in my life has been my new husband, photojournalist Zachary Barnes. But even he arrived with strings. I’m convinced photography is a cover for his real gig, spying for one of the government alphabet agencies. Zack laughs away my suspicions, claiming I have an overactive imagination, but isn’t Deny and Deflect the first chapter in the *Official Book of Spying?*

Anyway, this all brought me back to Cloris and her question about the contract.

Two weeks ago, while on our honeymoon in Tennessee wine country, Zack and I stumbled across—wait for it—*another* dead body. Bad enough that I can’t even get away from murder on my honeymoon. But while in the bucolic hamlet, I also became aware of an unauthorized true crime podcast that featured *me* and my reluctant crime-solving exploits.

Naturally, I blew a Vesuvian level gasket.

I'd worked my tush off to keep Karl's financial maleficence limited to as few people as possible. Although the results of my sleuthing occasionally wound up on local news, none of the stories had gone national. Until the Sleuth Sayer podcast.

Five days ago, I'd learned the identities behind the Sleuth Sayer—my own two sons, Alex and Nick, and Alex's girlfriend Sophie Lambert. They exposed my life to every true crime junkie in the world because they'd wanted to help dig me out of debt. Talk about vying emotions!

But the shock didn't end there. Their honorable intentions had paid off beyond their wildest expectations. Flix Entertainment wanted to option the podcast and my life as a reluctant amateur sleuth for a TV series.

Hence, the still unsigned contract, which Alex had snatched from the mail and hidden from me. The teens had decided to wait until the right moment to spring the news on me. They'd fessed up a few days later at a dinner celebrating Alex and Sophie's high school graduation.

"Seems to me," continued Cloris, "you have two choices. Either sign the contract—"

"Which strips me and my family of whatever privacy we have left—"

"Or take Zack up on his offer to pay off the remainder of the debt. It's not like he can't afford it."

I scowled at her. "I don't suppose there's a Plan C?"

Cloris shrugged. "Lottery tickets?"

"Really?" Karl's gambling had created my problem. No way would I ever gamble so much as a dollar. Besides, before his death broadsided me, I'd occasionally bought a lottery ticket. I'd never won more than seven dollars. Most of the time, I didn't even hit one number. Lottery tickets were hardly a sound fiscal plan for erasing massive debt.

Cloris topped off our coffees. As we headed to our cubicles, she said, "I guess we can scrap Plan C. If I think of a Plan D, I'll let you know."

"Much obliged. Anyway, nothing is happening until Zack's agent speaks with the production company, and that's not happening until she returns from vacationing in the Greek Isles."

Zack had connections and not just in areas that added credence to my spy theory. He'd taken one look at the contract and called his representative, who wore a dual hat as an intellectual property attorney.

"I thought you said Sophie's dad had his lawyer look over the contracts."

"Shane's lawyer handles his charitable trust. Zack convinced me we needed advice from someone whose law expertise is in entertainment and publishing."

We had arrived at our cubicles and were about to part ways when both our phones simultaneously pinged incoming texts. "This can't be good," I said, staring at the message on my screen.

Cloris pulled her gaze from her phone and shot me a worried look. "We already have our monthly meeting scheduled for later this morning. Why would Naomi call a surprise last-minute meeting hours ahead of time?"

I'd already suffered enough physical and emotional whiplash in June to last an entire year. And we still had a week remaining in the month. The last thing I needed was another lollapalooza whammy. I could think of only one reason for an unexpected meeting, and it sent panic coursing from my split ends down to toenails. "Do you suppose those layoff rumors are more than rumors?"

Cloris groaned. "With the state of the publishing industry in general and magazines in particular? What else could it be? We're dead editors walking toward our execution."

With that somber thought ringing in my ears, we headed for the conference room.

Silence reigned as the various *American Woman* editors, their assistants, and ancillary staff crammed into the small conference room. With nearly every seat already filled, the overflow leaned against the walls. Cloris and I squeezed in next to decorating editor Jeannie Sims. Expressions glum, no one made eye contact. We all braced for the expected bad news.

Finally, Naomi Dreyfus, our editorial director, and her ever-present assistant Kim O'Hara entered the room. Naomi settled into the seat at the head of the table, Kim took a position standing slightly behind her. All eyes turned to Naomi.

Naomi took a moment to settle her gaze on each one of us, then cleared her throat before speaking. "As I'm sure you all know, Trimedia, our parent company, has gone through some difficult times of late."

Understatement of the century. Murder is never good for the bottom line, and Trimedia had had its share of both murders and murderers among its ranks since moving us from Manhattan to the middle of a cornfield in Morristown, New Jersey.

"Here comes the axe," mumbled Cloris, low enough that only I heard her. Or so I thought until Naomi paused and raised an eyebrow in our direction.

She turned back to the full room and continued. "For the past several months, Hugo has been in negotiations with a group of investors."

Hugo Reynolds-Alsopp had been the head of the family-owned Reynolds-Alsopp Publishing Company prior to Trimedia's hostile takeover. He had remained at Trimedia as publisher in name only, relegated to a closet-sized office with no windows and no responsibilities. He was also Naomi's longtime partner outside the office.

Ever since, Hugo had plotted to regain control of what was left of his company. Trimedia had already folded nearly half our publications. But why would Hugo be talking to investors if we were all about to lose our jobs?

"Now that things have been finalized," said Naomi, "I'm at liberty to tell you that *American Woman* will be moving in a new direction."

"What sort of direction?" asked Tessa Lisbon. "I haven't heard anything."

Tessa's uncle held a seat on the Trimedia Board of Directors, which explained why the position of fashion editor had gone to someone with neither editorial nor fashion industry experience. She was also the only staff member with a sizable trust fund, making her the sole person in the room not worried about receiving a pink slip.

In an extremely calm but imperious voice, Naomi stared down Tessa and said, "I wasn't aware all corporate decisions passed through you."

Tessa's jaw dropped, then immediately slammed shut. She crossed her arms over her chest and silently speared Naomi with an evil eye.

Naomi picked up where she'd left off. "Hugo has partnered with Creativity Books."

"I've heard of them," I said. "They specialize in craft and hobby publications."

"And culinary," added Naomi.

A boulder thudded into my stomach. Creativity Books was located somewhere in the Midwest. Did Naomi expect us all to relocate?

She continued. "*American Woman*, along with several of the other magazines that fall into the craft, hobby, decorating, and culinary categories will be merging with them. As of next week, Trimedia is officially out of the magazine business."

"Are we staying in the cornfield?" asked beauty editor Nicole Emmerling.

Naomi nodded. "Part of the negotiations included assuming the remainder of Trimedia's lease on this building. Until the lease expires, which isn't for several years, we're stuck in the cornfield."

But she didn't mention where we'd relocate after the lease ended. Would we trade a New Jersey cornfield for a Nebraska cornfield?

"Does this mean we all still have jobs?" asked Cloris.

"The only change for now will be the new company name on your paychecks."

Naomi really hadn't answered Cloris's question, and I didn't care for the ominous sound of *for now*. I bit my tongue, though.

Naomi stood, indicating an end to the meeting. However, before she exited the conference room, she turned to Jeanie, Cloris, and me. "I'd like to see the three of you in my office."