

Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mysteries

Books 3-4

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Revenge of the Crafty Corpse

ONE

“If that damn woman doesn’t shut up, I’m going to strangle her!”

My mother-in-law had been settled into the Sunnyside of Westfield Assisted Living and Rehabilitation Center for all of ten minutes before she began carping about the accommodations. Uppermost on her list of complaints was her roommate, a woman we’d so far only heard, due to the mauve and burgundy floral print curtain separating their beds and a one-sided phone conversation detailing the latest episode of some cable soap opera—in a syrupy sweet southern accent quite at odds with her blunt vocabulary. At least, I hoped she was summarizing a soap opera. I’d hate to think, given the X-rated play-by-play, that she was gossiping about actual people.

“Shh. Lower your voice, Lucille. They can hear you in Hoboken.”

“Don’t you shush me! And I don’t care if that prattling twit or anyone else hears me. This is unacceptable. I want a private room.” She tightened her hand into a fist and pounded it against the arm of her wheelchair, but given her weakened state, the punctuating gesture left negligible impact.

“Medicare won’t cover a private room,” I told her, forcing my voice to remain calm as I unpacked her suitcase.

Three weeks ago Lucille had suffered a minor stroke. Subsequent tests revealed a brain tumor, which may or may not have accounted for some of her more bizarre behavior over the last few months. With my mother-in-law, it was hard to tell.

Lucille had weathered the stroke and surgery remarkably well for an eighty-year-old. The tumor proved benign. After a brief hospital stay, she was now ready for some minor rehab to help her regain her strength and coordination. Hence, today’s resettlement.

“If my son were alive, he’d never let you dump me in this hell hole.”

She should only know that her son had tried to kill her to get his hands on her life’s savings—which he then proceeded to gamble away, leaving me to clean up the mess after he conveniently dropped dead at a roulette table in Las Vegas. Trusting wife that I was at the time, I thought Karl was at a sales meeting in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Given his knack for pulling off such a duplicitous life, Karl should have been a CIA operative instead of an auto parts salesman. At least then our sons and I would be receiving a fat government pension. As it was, Dead Louse of a Spouse left me in stratospheric debt and at the mercy of both an army of bill collectors and Ricardo the loan shark. Not to mention his mother and Manifesto, her French bulldog, AKA Mephisto the Demon Dog to the rest of the family.

Ricardo now resides in a federal facility. However, barring some philanthropic leprechaun gifting me with his pot of gold, I’m stuck with the bill collectors, Lucille, and Mephisto. The bill collectors treat me better. And yet I continue to refuse to divulge to Lucille the truth about her precious Karl, no matter how much she goads me.

My name is Anastasia Pollack, and I'm a glutton for punishment. Welcome to my dysfunctional world. I hope the universe is taking note because as far as I'm concerned, I definitely qualify for sainthood at this point.

"Hell hole?" I glanced around Lucille's half of the generous, well-appointed room, equipped with abundant creature comforts, including her own flat screen TV, a leather recliner with heat and massage, and wi-fi. "Hardly."

"You're not the one stuck here. If you possessed an ounce of consideration, you'd allow me to remain at home and drive me to rehab every day," she said. "But I know the truth. This is all part of your grand scheme to get rid of me permanently."

I wish. Sunnyside was more exclusive country club than a hell hole, right down to its exclusive country club-like fees. I placed the last of her circa nineteen seventies polyester pantsuits in the dresser, slammed the drawer shut, and spun around to confront her.

"How exactly am I supposed to shuttle you back and forth to rehab *and* go to work? Are you suggesting I quit my job? Alex, Nick, you, and I can live out of my eight-year-old Hyundai and Dumpster dive for our meals just so Lucille Pollack, the diehard communist, doesn't have to share a room with a talkative stranger for a month? Very politically correct of you, Comrade Lucille."

"How dare you mock me!"

I needed to get out of there and back to work before I did some strangling of my own. And it wouldn't be the faceless voice currently detailing her skepticism over the supposed sexploits of one Mabel Shapiro, whom, according to Lucille's roommate, couldn't satisfy a man twenty years ago, let alone now.

"I told you, Lucille, between Medicare and your supplemental insurance, you're only covered for a month's stay. After that, whether you're ready to come home or not, you're back living under my roof."

"This is all your fault!" she continued.

"My fault? Just what about your situation is my fault? Did *I* force you to jaywalk across Queens Boulevard? Did *I* drive the SUV that mowed you down? Did *I* make you keep your life's savings in shoeboxes under your bed instead of in a bank? Did *I* torch your apartment building, leaving you homeless and penniless? How is any of that *my* fault, Lucille? I'm the one who opened my home to you when you had nowhere else to go."

"Charging me exorbitant rent! You're no better than a slumlord."

"You're paying exactly what you paid each month on your apartment in Queens. Not a penny more. And for that you're receiving a place to live *and* all you and your dog can eat. Besides, I only asked you for room and board *after* your son left me broke and up to my eyeballs in debt, but I suppose that's my fault, too?"

She glared straight ahead, refusing to make eye contact with me, her lips pinched into a straight line, her post-surgery shaved head making her look even more like Mephisto than usual.

Of course, she blamed me. She's been blaming me for everything since the day Karl introduced us. Hell, she probably even blamed me for her stroke and the brain tumor. So much for hoping the removal of that tumor would improve her personality. "If you don't like the arrangements, you're free to make your own at any time."

Which, unfortunately, she wouldn't because Lucille had it far better at *Casa Pollack* than anywhere else she could afford. And she knew it.

"What are you gawking at?" she demanded.

I glanced over my shoulder and followed her laser glare to the middle of the room where I found myself staring at Laura Ashley. Or what Laura Ashley might have looked like had she lived

into her nineties, complete with pink tinged white pin curls, poorly applied makeup caked into the crevices of deep wrinkles, and transplanted from Wales, UK to Westfield, NJ.

I hadn't seen so many ruffles and such an over-abundance of Cluny lace since my cousin Susannah Sudberry's English garden-themed wedding back in 1992. The most god-awful lace-edged, pouf-sleeved floral print bridesmaid's dress ever created still resides in my attic. However, I might have to hand over that designation to Lucille's roommate's outfit. At least my bridesmaid's gown didn't have the addition of a coordinating yo-yo trimmed cardigan sweater.

At some point the soap opera play-by-play had ended. How long Lucille's roomie had been eavesdropping on us was anyone's guess, but before Lucille could hurl another barb, I crossed the room and held my hand out to the woman. "Mrs. Wegner? I'm Anastasia Pollack." I knew her name from the nameplate tacked to the wall outside the room. Lucille's name had already been added beneath that of Lyndella Wegner.

She took my hand in a surprisingly firm grip for such a petite and elderly woman. "Pleased to meet you, sugar. And call me Lyndella. Mrs. Wegner was my mother-in-law, bless her hard-hearted soul."

Looks like I'd found another loser in the mother-in-law lottery. I nodded in Lucille's direction. "And this is my mother-in-law Lucille Pollack, your roommate for the next month."

Lyndella nodded toward Lucille. "Not too happy to be here, are you, sugar?"

A part of me (the nasty part I kept tamped down as much as possible) wanted to tell her that *happy* wasn't in the commie curmudgeon's lexicon, but she'd learn that for herself soon enough. Instead, I said, "I'm afraid Lucille has been through quite a bit the last several months."

She directed another question to Lucille. "So what's your story, sugar?"

I stifled a giggle. Lyndella Wegner's strong accent seemed right at home juxtaposed against her Laura Ashley-meets-Blanche Dubois demeanor but totally at odds with twenty-first century Westfield.

"Mind your own business," muttered Lucille. "And I'm not your *sugar*."

Lyndella ignored the rudeness. Or maybe she hadn't heard Lucille. Modern hearing aids are so tiny, I couldn't tell if Lyndella wore any underneath her pink pin curls. She glanced at her watch and said, "I'm afraid we'll have to postpone our get-to-know-each-other chat until later, girls. It's time for my needlework class, and I can't be late. Those other women, bless their Yankee hearts, would be lost without my expert guidance." Then she ducked behind the curtain divider.

Lyndella reappeared a moment later. In one hand she held a ball of pink crochet cotton. She cradled a length of finely crocheted extra wide pink lace and a crochet hook in her other hand.

"That's exquisite work," I said.

"Of course, it is, sugar."

I held out my hand. "May I?" She placed the delicate lace across my fingers. I examined the stitching closer. "Did you also crochet the lace on your dress?"

She executed a flat-footed pirouette to show off her workmanship. "I make all my own clothes. Always have. And they're of a far better quality than anything you'll find in any department store."

And how modest of her to say so. I had to admit, though, the dress fit her like couture, and her attention to detail rivaled anything strutting down New York's Fashion Week catwalks.

Lyndella flipped up the hem of her skirt and held it out for me to inspect. "See here, sugar. French seams. I dare say, you won't find any of those hanging on a rack at Macy's or Lord & Taylor."

“Probably not,” I agreed, although I failed to see the need to French seam poplin when pinking shears worked just as well and took much less time and effort. However, I kept that judgment to myself.

“I’ll tell you a little secret, sugar. Handwork keeps both the mind and body sharp.” She tapped her temple with an index finger. “Mark my words, you young people will regret your store-bought ways when you get older, but it will be too late. You’ll wind up doddering old fools, sipping Ensure and drooling into your mashed bananas.”

I certainly hoped not, but I had no desire to engage in a debate of my generation’s future with this woman.

“Believe it or not,” she continued, “I’m ninety-eight years young.”

“What’s not to believe?” asked Lucille.

Lyndella heard that comment loud and clear. She shot Lucille a glare of contempt. “For your information, I still have all my teeth *and* all my faculties. People tell me I don’t look or act a day over seventy. I credit that to my creative talents. Among other things.”

I couldn’t resist. “What other things?”

“Sex and whiskey, sugar. As much of both as I can get.”

I should have exercised better restraint.

How often did Lyndella hit the whiskey, and when had she last looked in the mirror? The roadmap of deep wrinkles lining her face made her look every one of her ninety-eight years, if not more.

As for the sex, were ninety-eight-year-olds even capable of having sex? Wouldn’t everything have shriveled up and dried out decades ago?

But what did I know? My own mother still claimed to have an active sex life at sixty-five with no signs of stopping anytime soon. As for me, let’s just say it had been a while. A long while.

However, whether Lyndella Wegner was actually getting any action or merely thought she was getting some, who cared? Every woman should be that alive at her age. It certainly beat the alternative.

As I studied the delicate lacework, an article for a future magazine issue began to germinate in my brain. “Mrs. Wegner, I’m the crafts editor at *American Woman* magazine. I’d love to do a profile on you and perhaps some of the other women in your needlework class.”

“Well, bless your heart, sugar! You mean I’d have my name and picture in a magazine?”

“Yes.”

“I’d be famous?”

“In a manner of speaking. Our circulation is upward of three hundred thousand.”

“Three hundred thousand?” She placed her hand on my arm. “Trust me, sugar, you don’t need anyone else. My work is far superior to that of anyone else around here and far more creative.”

“I thought I’d showcase a variety of crafts.”

“When it comes to handcrafts, you name it, and I’ve done it. Tell me, sugar, how many people do you know who can create museum quality paintings using dryer lint?”

Dryer lint? “Not a single one.”

“Well, now you do. My re-creation of Michelangelo’s *David* in lint will blow away your little Yankee mind.” She winked, then added, “In more ways than one.”

I’ll bet it would. “May I see it?”

“Later, sugar. I have my class now.” Her face took on an almost wicked grin. “Wait till Mabel Shapiro hears this. Bless her frigid Yankee heart, that woman will positively crap in her Depends!”

Soap opera Mabel “can’t please a man” Shapiro?

From behind me I heard a loud *harrumph*.

“Must go,” said Lyndella, removing her crocheted lace from my hands. “We’ll talk later.”

“Insufferable!” said Lucille after the door closed behind Lyndella. “How do you expect me to live with that woman for a day, let alone a month?”

“You’ll just have to make the best of it. You’ve had plenty of practice living with someone you don’t like.”

“Thanks to you.”

An old argument. When Lucille first came to live with us, Nick was forced to doubled-up with Alex in order to give Lucille a room. Whenever my mother arrived for a visit, she and Lucille became reluctant roomies. Lucille and Mama got along as well as Mephisto and Mama’s corpulent Persian kitty Catherine the Great got along. In other words, they fought like cats and dogs.

I suppose that’s to be expected when a blazing Bolshevik is forced to shack up with a self-proclaimed descendant of Russian royalty. Given that Mama makes a habit of extended stays whenever she’s between husbands, Lord only knows how they’ve kept from murdering each other to this point, not to mention how I’ve managed to maintain my sanity.

“Would it kill you to be civil?” I asked Lucille.

“These places are nothing but dumping grounds run by mercy killers.”

“Give it a rest, Lucille. Sunnyside has an excellent reputation. No one is going to murder you in your sleep.”

“And if you’re wrong? It will be no skin off your teeth, but I’ll be dead. I demand you take me home at once!”

“That’s not going to happen. Not until you’re permanently out of that wheelchair and capable of managing entirely on your own. You can barely brush your teeth right now, let alone dress yourself. You’re just going to have to tough it out.”

“I’ll sign myself out.”

“And go where?”

“To one of my sisters.”

The *sisters* in question—no blood relations—were the dozen other members of the Daughters of the October Revolution, all like-minded, octogenarian communists who followed my mother-in-law, their Fearless Leader, like lemmings. However, had any of them wanted Lucille on a permanent basis, I would have gladly provided a means of transportation to deliver her. Lucille’s *sisters* might love their Fearless Leader, but much to my dismay, none had come forward to offer Lucille a home after she lost hers. So much for the communal spirit of communism.

“I’ll stay only if you bring Manifesto here,” said Lucille.

Who but my mother-in-law would name a pet after a communist treatise? As previously mentioned, the rest of us had dubbed him Mephisto the Devil Dog. Lucille cared more about that dog than she did her own grandsons, whom she never referred to by name. They were always *those boys*.

And no, I didn’t name them after dead Russian czars out of spite. The boys were named for my grandfathers—Alexander Periwinkle and Nicholas Sudberry. “Sunnyside won’t allow you to have Mephisto here,” I said.

And yes, I said *that* intentionally. So sue me. I’m not perfect. And I’d reached my limit.

“Manifesto! His name is Manifesto!” She pounded the arm of the wheelchair, again not producing the impact she intended. “And you’re lying. I hear dogs barking.”

“Their owners are permanent residents, capable of caring for their pets. You’re here for rehab and not even capable of caring for yourself at this point, let alone a dog.”

“I’ll manage.”

“I’ll ask if I can bring him for a visit, but he won’t be allowed to stay.”

Lucille folded her arms over her sagging boobs and jutted out her chin. “We’ll see about that.”

Yes, we would. I didn’t bother to respond, though. Why bother? Besides, we were interrupted by a knock, followed by the door opening.

“Mrs. Pollack?” Shirley Hallstead, Sunnyside’s director, stepped into the room and nodded hello to me. I’d met her previously when I scoped out the facility for Lucille and made arrangements for her month-long stay. “All settled in?” she asked Lucille.

“I’m not staying.”

Shirley turned to me. “What’s going on?”

“She’s staying,” I said.

“I see.” She turned back to Lucille. “Your reaction is normal, but we here at Sunnyside will do everything within our means to make you as comfortable as possible and facilitate a speedy recovery.”

She sounded as though she were parroting from the *Assisted Living Director’s Manual, Chapter One: Dealing With Problematic New Arrivals*. However, even though her words conveyed kindness, Shirley Hallstead’s body language suggested otherwise. From her not-a-hair-out-of-place jet black waves to her double-breasted cherry-red power suit, down to her four-inch designer stilettos, the fifty-something Shirley Hallstead reminded me more of a cutthroat executive than a benevolent assisted living center director.

I do believe Lucille may have met her match.

“Let’s get some light in here,” said Shirley. She stepped around Lucille’s bed and yanked the curtain divider back to the wall.

“Lovely,” said Lucille, her tone thick with sarcasm. Not from the sunshine now spilling across to her side of the room but from what the drawn back curtain revealed.

Holy crafts overload!

No denying Lyndella Wegner’s love of the handmade. Every square inch of vertical space held crafts, some framed, some taped or pinned to the walls—needlework, string art, quilling, scherenschnitte, stenciling, calligraphy, quilted and appliquéd wall hangings. An enormous ivy plant hung from a macraméd plant holder in the far corner of the room. Stained glass sun-catchers dangled in front of the windows. Fabric yo-yo dresser scarves covered a bureau and nightstand. On them stood an assortment of painted ceramic and polymer clay figurines, mosaic and decoupage covered boxes, and a variety of soft-sculptured dolls in various sizes. An intricately patterned appliquéd quilt was draped over Lyndella’s bed, a crocheted afghan, folded at the foot. A latch hook rug covered part of the floor.

However, the *pièces de résistance* were the lint reproductions hanging on the wall above her headboard. “She wasn’t kidding about doing it all.” I stepped closer to inspect a three-foot tall, two-dimensional rendition of *David*. Sure enough, Lyndella had recreated Michelangelo’s masterpiece, down to every anatomical detail, completely in dryer lint and minus any censoring of a certain body part. “I don’t know whether I’m impressed or horrified.”

Thank goodness Lucille couldn’t see these from the vantage point of her wheelchair. I’d never hear the end of it.

“Picasso had his Blue Period,” said Shirley. “And Lyndella has her *Blue* Period.” She indicated the polymer figurines. I took a closer look. Many were reproductions of ancient fertility gods, complete with oversized members.

“I think she creates these just to drive me crazy,” said Shirley. “And this lint kick of hers? Heaven knows where she came up with that, but she insisted the laundry save every scrap of dryer lint for her. She spent weeks sorting and bagging colors, then months working on those—” She paused for a moment to clear her throat. “Pictures. Thankfully, she became bored with lint after awhile and moved on to *smaller* pursuits.”

I examined the rest of the lint paintings, half a dozen in all and each, replicas of some of the most graphically anatomical and erotic art of the ancient world, including a series of paintings from the bathhouses of Pompeii.

“As you can see, Lyndella doesn’t do anything in moderation,” continued Shirley. “She’s our very own X-rated Martha Stewart.”

“With a personality to match,” muttered Lucille.

My mother-in-law knew who Martha Stewart was? Lucille considered television too lowbrow a form of entertainment for someone of her intellect. Did she secretly indulge a daytime TV addiction when no one else was home? Maybe I should ask Zack to set up a granny cam to catch the hypocrite in action, considering how she mocked what I did for a living.

Shelving that idea to explore later, I pulled out my camera and started capturing Lyndella’s handiwork.

Shirley stepped between the camera lens and a quilted wall hanging I’d focused on. “What are you doing?”

I quickly explained my idea of a feature article for *American Woman*.

“Absolutely not,” she said.

“Don’t worry. I won’t use any of the racier pieces.”

“You won’t use any of them. Period. I don’t want my facility looking like Kitsch Central. You’ll irreparably harm my reputation.”

Her facility? *Her* reputation? If Lyndella and some of the other residents agreed to an interview, I didn’t see where Shirley Hallstead had any veto power. I was about to tell her so when the door swung open.

An extremely thin girl in her late teens shuffled into the room. She kept her head down, watching her feet as she methodically placed one in front of the other, as if making a concerted effort to keep from tripping herself. Her Minnie Mouse print scrubs hung over a nearly skeletal frame that screamed anorexia.

“About time you got here,” said Shirley.

The girl mumbled a nearly inaudible apology, something to do with a Mrs. Grafton and a missing shoe, but she stopped mid-excuse when Shirley grabbed her by one thin arm and spun her around to face Lucille.

“This is Reggie Koltzner. She’s one of our aides and will be taking you on a tour of the facility.”

“I don’t need a tour,” said Lucille. “I told you I’m not staying.”

“Your doctors say otherwise.” Shirley again addressed Reggie, ignoring Lucille’s very loud harrumph of protest. “When you’re done with the tour, take her to physical therapy. She’s got a ten o’clock appointment with Alvarez. Don’t be late.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Reggie pulled on the wheelchair handles, but Lucille didn’t budge.

Shirley shook her head and sighed loudly. “The break, Reggie?”

Reggie bent and fumbled with the break release, then wheeled a very pissed Lucille from the room.

“Damn vo-techs,” said Shirley. “Can you believe this is what they’re turning out? Our tax dollars at work.”

If she expected a nod of agreement from me, she wasn’t getting one. I’d suffered my share of bullies over the years, first as a child and later in the workplace. Reggie Koltzner had my sympathies. “Maybe she needs a mentor,” I suggested.

“A mentor? The last thing I need is tying up one of my nurses to hand-hold an incompetent aide. That girl’s already on probation after the stunt she pulled last week. One more strike and she’s out of here.”

“Stunt?”

Shirley waved my question away. “Sorry. Patient confidentiality. But nothing you need to worry about as far as your mother-in-law is concerned.”

Her assurance aside, I wondered about the wisdom of leaving Lucille in Reggie’s obviously less-than-competent hands but reasoned Shirley wouldn’t risk Lucille’s well-being. She’d be crazy to set herself up for a lawsuit. Whatever the *stunt*, I doubted it had anything to do with patient safety.

I took my leave of Shirley Hallstead with the excuse of having to get to work. We walked out of Lucille’s room together; Shirley turned left toward her office, and I headed right for the exit. As I passed the front desk, though, I stopped. “Which way to the needlecraft class?” I asked the receptionist.

“Down that hall, through the double doors,” she said, indicating the direction with a wave of her pen. “It’s the second room on your left.”

“Thanks.” Shirley’s objections aside, if I checked out the class for an article, I was on Trimedia’s dime. All in the name of research. I wouldn’t have to give up half a day’s pay for picking up Lucille at the hospital and transporting her to Sunnyside this morning. I’d used up my few personal and sick days for the calendar year way back in February when my not-so-dearly departed husband left Las Vegas in a pine box.

The door was propped open, so I stood in the hall and surveyed the room, a space at least three times the size of a normal classroom and divided up for different purposes. One corner was dedicated to drawing and painting, another to sculpture and pottery. Four large worktables with chairs filled the center of the room.

At the opposite end of the room two dozen elderly women, ranging in age between early retirement all the way up to ancient, congregated around four more tables and worked on a variety of needlework projects. Three women hunched over whirring sewing machines positioned along the far wall.

I spied Lyndella Wegner holding court amid a group of three other women. Both her mouth and her hands worked at warp speed. I don’t think I could crochet that fast if my life depended on it, and I was more than half her age.

“May I help you?” A very pregnant woman with a riot of strawberry blonde curls and a face full of freckles waddled toward me from the side of the room. When she stood about three feet away, she stopped and stared. Her jaw dropped; her eyes grew wide. “Anastasia Periwinkle?”

I stared back, wondering how this woman knew me.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?”

I shook my head. “Afraid not.”

She spread her arms wide. “It’s me. Kara Kennedy.”

Kara Kennedy? I knew that name. Then it hit me. Kara Kennedy. Oh. My. God.

Decoupage Can Be Deadly

ONE

“What happened?” I stopped short at the entrance to our exhibition booth. My fellow *American Woman* editors and I had spent all day yesterday at the Jacob Javits Convention Center, setting up for the *Celebrating Women* weekend consumer show. Now half our booth had been usurped, our carefully coordinated displays missing.

“Not what. Who,” said food editor Cloris McWerther.

“Philomena.” Travel editor Serena Brower practically spat out the name.

“Obnoxious people deserve a slow, painful death,” said fashion editor Tessa Lisbon. She stood with hands on hips. Her perfectly painted, collagen-enhanced scarlet lips, deep in pout mode, matched the anger flaming on her cheeks.

Cloris turned to me and stage-whispered, “Not to spout clichés, but doesn’t that fall under the heading of the pot calling the kettle black?”

Having an obnoxious personality was pretty much a pre-requisite for the job of fashion editor at *American Woman*. However, Philomena Campanello, the target of everyone’s ire belonged in the category of über-obnoxious.

“It’s called *chutzpah*,” said health editor Janice Kerr.

“Brass balls,” added decorating editor Jeanie Sims.

“Same difference,” said finance editor Sheila Conway.

I corrected them all. “No ladies, it’s called sleeping with the CEO.”

“Score one for our crafts editor,” said Cloris.

I, Anastasia Pollack, being the crafts editor in question, executed a mock bow, then turned to Naomi Dreyfus, our editorial director. “So what do we do now?”

Naomi threw her hands up in the air. Little ever rattled the Grace Kelly perfection of our serene editorial director, but even she sported deep frown lines as we surveyed the devastation. “We make the best of a crappy situation for the next two days.”

Trimedia, our parent company, was a major sponsor of the *Celebrating Women* show, with a display area that spanned both sides of the long center aisle at the convention center. *American Woman*, the monthly magazine responsible for our weekly paychecks, had been assigned four consecutive spaces, forty linear feet, on one side of the aisle. The remaining space was divided up between the rest of Trimedia’s holdings that catered to women TV viewers, radio listeners, and magazine readers.

Each of our eight editors had received five feet of space. We’d spent the better part of the last two weeks coordinating our efforts to create a cohesive display where we’d each meet and greet attendees, hand out free copies of the magazine, do demos, and offer make-it/take-it projects. With schematics in hand, we’d spent most of yesterday setting up the booth.

Now, with the show opening to the public in a matter of minutes, we stood in the aisle, our mouths agape at the destruction of all our hard work. Overnight our forty feet had shrunk to twenty, half our booth appropriated by Philomena Campanello, the self-proclaimed Queen of Bling, otherwise known as Trimedia’s newest star and CEO Alfred Gruenwald’s newest arm candy.

When we'd finished setting up the *American Woman* booth late yesterday afternoon, Philomena hadn't even arrived. An army of minions must have worked late into the night to create the flashy extravaganza now occupying half our space plus her originally allocated forty feet.

Philomena had begun her career as Philly-Mean-A, a twenty-something white *gangsta*, often called the female Eminem. Whether through savvy business advisors, her own smarts, or sleeping with the right people, the potty-mouthed street rapper from Philadelphia had morphed into the first-name-only Philomena and parlayed herself into a business empire replete with her own line of perfume, fashions, and accessories, plus a multitude of endorsements.

Now, thanks to the help of one besotted CEO who'd convinced the Trimedia board to buy into her *Bling!* concept, the first issue of *Bling!* was on newsstands. A combination fashion, lifestyle, and entertainment monthly, the magazine featured ten percent fashion, ten percent lifestyle, and ten percent entertainment. The remaining seventy percent consisted mostly of ads for the various products Philomena hyped, thanks to her lucrative endorsement deals. But as anyone who has ever worked in the magazine business knows, advertising trumps content. Big time. Ads pay the bills and keep the company in the black.

Philomena's *Bling!* bling currently encroached over half our designated exhibit space.

"Where's our stuff?" asked Serena.

I stepped into the booth and ducked behind the eight-foot tall back panels, each covered with a larger-than-life blow-up of a page from the current issue of *American Woman*. Half were now missing, along with half our models and hand-outs. Just as I suspected, I found everything heaped on the floor in haphazard piles.

Retrieving the smashed remains of a Potichomanie decoupage bowl, I returned to the gaggle of editors and held up the shards of broken glass. "Five hours to create, five seconds to destroy."

"Good thing it was already photographed and appears in the current issue," said beauty editor Nicole Emmerling. "At least you don't have to pull an all-nighter to make another."

I'd been down that road before when a psychopath had fixated on my mop dolls and used them as props in an act of vandalism and a couple of murders. However, even though the bowl had already been featured in the magazine, I had planned to keep it. You never know when a Potichomanie decoupage bowl might come in handy as a prop. Or as a gift.

Given that our current issue featured decoupage crafts, I wondered if any of my other missing models had survived intact, but I didn't have time to dig through the mound of discarded items. Within minutes the doors would open, releasing a stampeding horde of women into the exhibition hall.

"Speaking of the *blinga donna*," said Cloris. She cocked her head, directing our attention down the aisle where a blinged-out Philomena strutted toward us as if she were on a Fashion Week catwalk.

Looped over one arm she held a behemoth of a chainmail-draped and gold sequin-studded red patent leather bag, a relatively tame statement compared to the rest of her streetwalker chic outfit of skin-tight turquoise leopard leggings, red-sequined bustier, and a pair of purple stiletto high top sneakers. Peacock feathers sprouted from her platinum pouf hairdo. A large script *P*, covered in diamonds, hung from her neck, the bottom of the letter disappearing into her massive cleavage.

A Marilyn Monroe impersonator stood beside Philomena. Her toned body wore an extremely short tiger print silk sheath like a second skin. She towered over the vertically challenged Philomena, who was barely five feet tall minus her stilettos, by at least a foot and a half. Something told me Marilyn was actually a guy. Even so, I'd kill for his hourglass figure.

Philomena's other arm looped through the arm of CEO Alfred Gruenwald who apparently had

lost whatever common sense he once possessed as he approached his seventieth birthday. Behind them strutted Philomena's entourage and Gruenwald's combination driver/gopher boy. The guy's intimidating stature alone would keep the riffraff at bay.

"Are you going to say something to him?" I asked Naomi.

"Would it matter?"

"No, but we'd all feel better if you let him know how pissed we are," said Jeanie.

"Once more unto the breach," muttered Naomi, reminding me of Ralph, my Shakespeare quoting parrot. She stepped to the center of the aisle. The rest of us closed ranks on either side of her, blocking the conquering army's path to the *Bling!* display. With no easy way to maneuver around us, they were forced to stop.

"I'd like a word with the two of you," said Naomi.

Philomena set her mouth into a tight line and stared straight ahead, ignoring Naomi. I think. It was hard to tell. For all anyone knew, hidden behind her enormous rhinestone encrusted sunglasses, she may have been spearing Naomi with the Evil Eye.

Gruenwald offered Naomi one of those affable businessman smiles that really means he knows he's top dog, and you'd better not mess with him. Ever. "Certainly," he said. "What's on your mind?"

"After my editors spent all day yesterday setting up our booth, your girlfriend here pranced in last night and helped herself to half our space."

Gruenwald the Clueless turned to Philomena. "Really?"

"You said you wanted to make a statement," said the Blinged One. "How the hell do you expect me to make a statement with a measly forty feet of booth space?"

"Yes, but—"

I noticed that activity had halted in the surrounding booths. Various Trimedia staffers inched closer, some with smart phones in hand, already snapping photos and sending the latest Trimedia gossip out into the Twittersphere.

"No buts about it, sweetie. What's more important to Trimedia, a third-rate supermarket rag or *Bling!*?" She waved her arm toward her sixty feet of prime exhibit space. "Now *that's* a statement!" Then she turned to Marilyn. "Am I right, or am I right?"

"Right on!" shouted Marilyn, punctuating her agreement with a fist bump. The rest of Philomena's entourage echoed the sentiment.

"She made a statement, all right," said Serena.

"At our expense," added Cloris.

I studied the garish *Bling!* booth. A giant disco ball, centered over the display, hung from a steel girder. As it rotated, pulsating laser lights within the ball flashed the *Bling!* logo across the convention center. I'm sure the other exhibitors loved that. Was *gangsta* chic really the sort of statement Trimedia wanted to make?

"So couthouse couture is the next big trend?" asked Tessa. "I must have missed that memo."

Philomena got up too close and too personal with Tessa's nose, dragging Gruenwald along with her. "Are you calling me what I think you're calling me?"

Tessa didn't flinch. She held her ground and offered Philomena a smile that was anything but friendly. "If the Manolo fits..."

"Why you—! Alfred, you gonna allow her to diss your woman like that?"

Gruenwald finally extricated his arm from Philomena's and inserted himself between her and Tessa. "Now let's all calm down." He then addressed Naomi. "Your magazine has an established readership. We're trying to tap into a new demographic with *Bling!* To do so, we need to go big

and splashy.”

“That doesn’t give her the right to trash our booth,” I said. “If you wanted to give her more display space than us, we should have been told about it weeks ago, not ambushed this morning.”

Gruenwald glanced over at our reduced space, then down the aisle to Philomena’s enlarged area. “Well, what’s done is done. You’ll have to make do with the space you currently have. The show is about to open, and there’s nothing I can do at this point.”

With that, Philomena did exactly what I’d expect a spoiled brat celebrity to do: she flipped us the bird. Then she looped her arm back through Gruenwald’s and they, along with the entourage and Gopher Boy, proceeded down the aisle to the *Bling!* display.

“There’s no fool like an old fool,” muttered Naomi.

The rest of us cast sideways glances at each other. Naomi’s longtime significant other had made a similar spectacle of himself not that long ago with our magazine’s former fashion editor. Marlys Vandenburg now resides six feet under, thanks to my not-so-dearly departed husband’s loan shark.

In Naomi’s case, Hugo Reynolds-Alsopp, the former publisher of *American Woman*, had come to his senses, and the two had gotten back together. I wondered if Mrs. Gruenwald would be as forgiving of her husband’s lapse of sanity.

“What do you think he sees in her?” asked Sheila. “She’s so crass and low-class.”

“Beats me,” I said. “Maybe she’s stroking his ego. After all, he’s old enough to be her grandfather.”

“Oh, she’s stroking something all right,” said Tessa, “but I guarantee it’s not his ego.”

“Thank you very much,” said Janice. She screwed up her face and shuddered. “That’s one image I really didn’t want imprinted into my cerebral cortex.”

“So the old geezer’s a horn dog,” said Nicole. “What the hell does she see in him?”

“Can’t be his money,” said Serena. “She’s worth millions on her own.”

“Well, it’s certainly not his looks,” said Tessa.

“That’s for sure,” said Sheila. “The guy resembles Ernest Borgnine. On a bad day.”

“Who’s Ernest Borgnine?” asked Tessa.

“*Marty? From Here to Eternity?*”

“Huh?”

“*McHale’s Navy?*” I offered.

When Tessa remained clueless, Sheila rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Google him.”

Further conversation concerning Philomena and Gruenwald halted with the onslaught of the first wave of show attendees making their way down the aisles.

Naomi clapped her hands together. “Show time, ladies.”

Since our space had been chopped in half, we quickly revised our game plan for the day. Half the editors grabbed copies of *American Woman* and stepped toward the edge of the booth to hand them out as people passed by in the aisle, the job Naomi had originally assigned herself. The rest of us took up positions behind our remaining podiums where we proceeded to demonstrate various techniques or dispense information. We’d switch off hourly.

While I decouped, Cloris decorated cupcakes, Tessa demonstrated scarf tying techniques, and Janice handed out refrigerator magnets listing the various signs of heart attack in women under forty. Oddly enough, chest pain wasn’t one of the symptoms. “Reading *American Woman* might save your life,” she told the women reaching for the magnets.

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By six o’clock when the show closed for the day, I remembered why I hated working trade and

consumer shows. “My aches have aches,” I said to no one in particular. My feet burned from standing for hours in heels, but I knew if I slipped my shoes off for some relief, I’d never get them back on.

I also knew from experience that we’d wait at least an hour in the cab or bus line to transport us to Penn Station. Hoofing it would get us on a train home much faster. If my feet survived the nearly mile-long walk. I meant to bring a pair of sneakers with me to switch into after the show, but I forgot to grab them as I rushed out the door that morning to catch the train into the city.

“Did you notice the only booth space where Trimedia coughed up the extra dough for thicker carpet and padding is *Bling!*’s?” asked Jeanie.

I hadn’t, but sure enough, when I glanced down the row, the *Bling!* carpeting rose a good two inches above the carpeting under our feet—including the twenty feet that used to belong to us. “Must be nice to have that kind of pull,” I said.

Philomena and her entourage had darted out the moment the show officially closed for the day. The *Bling!* booth had been jammed non-stop throughout the day. Even when I walked past during a break, I hadn’t seen much of it, given the crowds of women gathered in and around the booth. Now that people were streaming out of the convention center, I wandered over to take a close-up. The others followed my lead.

The décor matched the tackiness of Philomena’s outfit. “She makes Vittorio Versailles look sedate,” said Nicole.

Vittorio Versailles was an over-the-top designer our former fashion editor had sliced and diced in an issue last winter. He’d threatened to sue Trimedia, but Ricardo the loan shark got to Vittorio before Vittorio’s attorneys had a chance to draw up the papers.

“This booth seems more appropriate for one of those adult expos,” said Jeanie.

“Oh?” asked Janice.

“Not that I have personal experience,” Jeanie quickly added.

“You think *Bling!* will be successful?” I asked Naomi.

She shrugged. “Eventually people will wise up to the fact that the magazine is mostly ads. They’ll stop buying copies. Once that happens, ad revenues will dip, and the magazine will fold. I give it a year tops.”

“Even with most of the ads for products Philomena’s endorsing?” asked Tessa.

“Advertisers are fickle,” said Naomi. “As her contracts near expiration, the advertisers will be courting the next hot spokesperson. Philomena has no staying power.”

“Yet she’s raking in megabucks right now,” said Serena.

“I’d kill for an endorsement deal,” said Tessa. “I wouldn’t care if it only lasted a year or two.”

“One can only hope Naomi is right,” said Sheila. She glanced around the garish exhibit. “I feel dirty just standing here.”

“And yet her booth was mobbed all day,” I said.

“For what? Lollipops?” She picked one up out of a large fishbowl on the back counter. “Omigod!”

“What?” We all turned to stare at her. Sheila’s normally peach complexion was now as flaming red as her hair. “These aren’t lollipops.” She passed one to each of us.

“They certainly aren’t,” said Tessa. “I wonder if the Trimedia board knows she’s passing out condoms with the *Bling!* logo emblazoned on them.”

“Maybe you should put in a call to your Uncle Chessie,” said Cloris.

Tessa’s Uncle Chester Longstreth sat on the Trimedia board. The connection had scored her the fashion editor position but hadn’t helped her when Trimedia forced us into what amounted to

indentured servitude last spring.

Tessa grabbed a handful of rubber lollipops and slipped them into her purse. "I might just do that."

"So what's with the Marilyn Monroe impersonator?" I asked no one in particular.

Tessa's eyes grew wide. "You don't know who that was?"

"If I knew, would I be asking?"

"That's Norma Gene," said Tessa.

"You're kidding."

"You've never heard of Norma Gene?"

"I know Norma Jeane was Marilyn Monroe's real name, but she died decades before you were born."

"And she didn't stand nearly seven feet tall," said Sheila.

Tessa rolled her eyes. "Do you people live under a rock?"

"Hey, you didn't know Ernest Borgnine," said Cloris, sticking up for Sheila and me.

Tessa turned to her. "Has Ernest Borgnine been on the cover of *Us* and *People* lately? Is he mentioned on *Page Six*? Or on *TMZ*?"

"Doubtful, considering he's dead."

"Well, Norma Gene has. Several times over the last few months."

"So, are you going to tell us who she is or not," asked Janice.

Good to know I'm not the only clueless editor on the *American Woman* staff when it comes to Norma Gene.

Tessa heaved a huge sigh before answering. "Norma Gene is Gail to Philomena's Oprah. They're BFF's."

"Is she a he?" I asked, curiosity winning out over political correctness.

"Norma Gene is in the process of gender reassignment. Everyone knows that. You should really keep abreast of current events, Anastasia."

"I'll add it to my to-do list." I picked up a copy of *Bling!* and started leafing through the pages. Even though I'd been aware of Trimedia's newest baby, I hadn't paid much attention to the birth. The *Bling!* staff occupied offices on another floor of our building, and this was the first time I'd had a chance for an up-close-and-personal with the newest corporate rugrat.

A quick scan of the Table of Contents piqued my curiosity. "What in the world is Vajazzling?" I asked as I flipped pages to find the article.

"They've got an article about Vajazzling?" asked Nicole. "Are they including pictures?"

"Oh yeah!" I stared at the eight-by-ten glossy depiction of a certain normally covered-up section of Philomena's anatomy. "This makes rubber lollipops tame, ladies."

"Let me see." Serena grabbed the magazine out of my hands. Everyone else clamored around her to ogle.

"Why would anyone want to do that to themselves?" asked Sheila.

"I wonder if it's painful," said Cloris.

"Not the Vajazzling," said Tessa, "but the full Brazilian you get beforehand hurts like hell."

We all turned to stare at her. "You know this from personal experience?" I asked.

She executed another eye roll directed toward me. "How can you work at a women's magazine and not know about the latest trends in beauty and fashion?" She glanced up and down the aisle to make sure no one else was around. Then she unzipped the fly front of her designer trousers and pulled down a scrap of pink silk fabric to show off her own Vajazzling, a series of crystals decorating the upper area of her hairless nether region.

“That’s sick,” said Jeanie.

The rest of us concurred except for Nicole who seemed more than a little interested. “How long does it last?”

“About five days,” said Tessa as she zipped up her pants. “Then they start falling off.”

“And you paid how much for this?” asked Sheila.

“Nothing. Many spas are giving them away free with a Brazilian, but it depends where you go. I’ve heard of places charging up to a hundred dollars.”

“What a waste of money!” proclaimed our finance editor.

Cloris elbowed me in the ribs. “So when are we going to see a column on the hot new craft trend of vagina bedazzling?”

Naomi answered for me. “When hell freezes over.”

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My mother ambushed me the moment I arrived home. “Anastasia, we need to talk.”