

A CRAFTY COLLAGE OF CRIME

An Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mystery

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ONE

Food editor Cloris McWerther stared bug-eyed at me, nearly dropping the coffee cup she held as I entered the break room. “Aren’t you supposed to be in Barcelona on your honeymoon?”

“Change of plans,” I said, grabbing a chocolate and raspberry croissant from the bakery box on the table.

Her left eyebrow disappeared under her wispy pixie bangs. “Should I be worried?”

“Only for my waistline.”

“Said the woman currently scarfing down a croissant.” She resumed pouring coffee and handed me the cup. “Why is there a correlation between your weight and a postponed honeymoon?”

“Not postponed, just slightly altered.” I settled into one of the four molded plastic chairs around the circular table that took up much of the small room. “We’re leaving tomorrow.”

Cloris poured a second cup and took the seat opposite me. “Why the change?”

Zachary Barnes, photojournalist and possible spy (although he vehemently denies the latter), and I had married nine days ago in an intimate backyard wedding attended by close family and friends. Originally Zack and I had planned to jet off to Barcelona this morning for a bicycle tour of the city and surrounding towns. It had the makings of the perfect trip. I could eat tapas and various local delicacies to my heart’s content, knowing I’d bike off the calories between meals. Or at least some of the calories. Given my aversion to exercise, I’d opted for a multi-speed bike that promised no huffing or puffing as we toiled around the Catalan countryside.

Last year I’d accompanied Zack to Barcelona for a weekend photo assignment. However, shortly after we had arrived, a couple of clueless kidnapers put a crimp in our mini vacation. At least my abductors had released me once they realized they’d grabbed the wrong woman.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t so lucky with my more recent run-in with kidnapers. As much as I tried to put the harrowing incident behind me, the trauma continued to replay every night in nightmarish episodes of REM sleep.

I added a generous splash of half-and-half to my coffee and took a swig before answering Cloris. “Given recent events, Zack and I decided to postpone Barcelona for something quieter and more secluded.”

“Where are you going?”

“Middle Tennessee.”

Cloris nearly snorted into her coffee. “Don’t tell me you’re going to Nashville.”

When I nodded, she squinted as she eyed me. “Who are you, and what have you done with my best friend?”

“What do you mean?”

“The Anastasia Pollack I know is more Broadway Baby than Honky-Tonk Woman. Besides, I’ve been to Nashville. Quiet and secluded are hardly adjectives I’d use to describe the place.”

“We’re only flying into Nashville, and we’re not going for the music.”

“What else is there?”

“Wineries.”

“Tennessee wine?” This time Cloris couldn’t hold back her snort. “Are you sure you don’t mean whiskey? Aren’t Tennessee and Kentucky known for their distilleries?”

I shrugged. “Who knew, right?”

“Apparently, not me.”

“Or me. But it turns out winemaking was a big industry in the area before Prohibition, and it’s made a huge comeback.”

“Good for them, but if you want to spend your honeymoon touring wineries, why not fly to Napa?”

“Because Zack accepted an assignment from *Vine* for a photo essay on the wineries of Middle Tennessee.”

Her eyebrows knit together as she digested that nugget of information. “Isn’t *Vine* one of the magazines that’s part of our new acquisition?”

I nodded. Along with the other magazines headquartered with *American Woman* in an office building situated in a former cornfield in Morris County, New Jersey, Trimedia had recently acquired an Atlanta-based publisher of consumer food and beverage magazines.

“And they can afford to hire your Pulitzer prize-winning husband?” continued Cloris.

“Not only can they afford it, but they’re also paying him a premium for squeezing them into his schedule.”

“If Trimedia is so flush with cash, we should demand a raise.”

“Yeah, I can just see the suits in the corner offices agreeing to that.” I held my hands out in front of me, palms up, imitating a set of scales. “*Vine* revenues,” I said moving my right hand above my head. Then I lowered my left hand below my waist. “*American Woman* revenues. I’ll bet *Vine*’s operating budget is at least five times what ours is.”

“Or more,” she grumbled before changing the subject. “So, Zack is going to work during your honeymoon?”

I shrugged. “He was scheduled to do the shoot after we returned from Barcelona but moved it up when I suggested we change our plans. We’re staying at one of the wineries that includes half a dozen guest cottages.”

“Compliments of the magazine, I presume?”

“Presumption confirmed.”

“Hmm...maybe I should see how Gregg feels about moving to Atlanta. I just might ask for a transfer to one of our new food magazines.”

“Except that knowing Trimedia, they’ll merge magazines, layoff personnel, and hire new, less experienced staff at much lower salaries.”

“There is that.” Cloris sighed. “Now is probably not the time to make waves.”

“Now is never the time to make waves when it comes to Trimedia.”

Cloris frowned. “True. Anyway, I suppose, minus Zack spending part of his time working, you’ll have a romantic honeymoon.”

I offered her a mischievous wink. “Count on it.”

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The next day found Zack and me in a rental car driving through the rolling verdant hills of Williamson County, Tennessee on our way to Three Sisters Winery. I was used to New Jersey, where, with few exceptions, most towns and cities abut one another, and the only way to tell you’d crossed from one community into another was either a change in street sign color or the occasional “Welcome to Insert-Name-of-Town-Here” roadside plaque.

That was hardly the case for the towns we passed once we headed out of Nashville. Forested acres, parks, and farmlands separated each community. Interspersed among these areas were newer subdivisions, ones under construction, and billboards announcing future subdivisions. Starting prices rivaling metro New York suggested the area's farms were quickly becoming a dying breed. At some point in the not-too-distant future, Middle Tennessee might look like North Jersey.

This made me wonder if Trimedia was really footing the bill for Zack's services. Perhaps the local wineries had cut a deal with *Vine* to hire a world-renowned photographer to best promote their businesses. A favorable spread in a widely circulated and well-respected wine magazine would draw wine connoisseurs from across the country to the region, boosting the bottom line of the wineries as well as local tourism, thus keeping land-grabbing developers at bay.

"Is this shoot editorial or advertorial?" I asked him.

"Beats me. Does it matter?"

"I suppose not, but it seems odd that Trimedia would hire you when they could send a staff photographer. Especially since they rattle off a litany of excuses every year when we complain about our annual raises. The last few years haven't even kept up with cost-of-living increases."

And I needed every penny I could scrounge.

When Karl Marx Pollack had dropped dead at a Las Vegas casino a year and a half ago, I'd learned both my happy marriage and my comfortable middle-class existence were both figments of my imagination. Rather than a sizable life insurance policy, I'd inherited my husband's gargantuan gambling debts, a Mount Everest of past-due bills, his mob-connected loan shark, *and* his communist mother.

You'd think I would have had a clue that something was rotten in Westfield, but I was ensconced in blissful ignorance throughout my entire marriage.

That's how Zack and I met. As one of my cost-cutting measures, I'd rented him the apartment above my garage, which I'd previously used as my home office and studio. Zack had needed a place to crash between assignments and wanted to move out of the city.

What a guy who looks like he shares DNA with the likes of Pierce Brosnan and George Clooney sees in a pear-shaped forty-something widow with two teenage sons is beyond me, but who am I to question fate? I figured the universe owed me bigtime after the lollapalooza of a whammy it had recently dumped on me.

Although Zack could wipe out my monetary woes with one swipe of his pen and had offered on countless occasions, I repeatedly refuse his generosity. It's not his responsibility to assume the debts of my deceased deadbeat louse of a spouse. Of course, if he'd like to buy me a winning Powerball or MegaMillions ticket, I wouldn't turn down his two-dollar investment in my bottom line.

"You're suggesting advertorial, then?" he asked.

"Makes sense. Did you receive any guidelines for the shoot?"

"None."

"Isn't that unusual?"

He took his eyes off the road to offer me a quick wink. "My work speaks for itself."

"And yet you remain ever so humble."

"Always."

An understatement. The guy personified humility. It's one of his many charms. With no pithy retort on the tip of my tongue, I chuckled, then returned my attention to the scenery.

Several minutes later the disembodied woman living within the rental car's GPS announced, "You've arrived. Your destination is on your right."

A carved and painted wooden sign, reminiscent of Tiffany stained glass windows, sat at the entrance of a narrow tree-lined road. A border of deep green and purple grape-laden vines surrounding fanciful gold script announced *Three Sisters Winery*. As Zack drove along the winding lane that climbed upward through gently rolling hills, I caught glimpses of acres of neatly spaced rows of grapevines peeking through the stately red maples. Every so often, hints of a creek glistened in the distance.

Eventually, the road led us to a circular driveway in front of a two-story Southern-style plantation home reminiscent of Tara from *Gone with the Wind*. The road then forked to the left of the building. One fork led to a parking lot while the other continued toward a series of out-buildings. A path to the right of the house disappeared into an expansive manicured garden.

Before Zack had a chance to kill the engine, three women, dressed in matching deep purple bib aprons sporting the winery logo, stepped through the double-door entrance and onto the porch. One look at them told me they were the eponymous three sisters of the winery.

As we stepped from the car, they greeted us in unison with, "Welcome to Three Sisters Winery," punctuating their words with identical smiles.

We left our luggage and Zack's camera equipment in the trunk and crossed the short distance to the porch steps as the three women descended to meet us. "Thank you," said Zack. "We have a reservation under Zachary Barnes."

"Yes, the photographer," said one of the women offering Zack her hand. "We're looking forward to working with you, as are the other local wineries. We were so excited when you accepted the magazine assignment," she continued, placing her other hand over his. "You were the first choice of all the owners."

Definitely advertorial. Part of me was happy knowing Trimedia wasn't playing favorites with the corporate purse strings, but another part of me quickly realized the information meant none of the *American Woman* staff could use Zack's huge freelance fee as leverage when it came time to negotiate salary increases.

Zack laced the fingers of his free hand through mine and gently squeezed, having either read my mind or heard the sigh that escaped my lips. Then he tilted his head toward me and said, "And this is my wife An—"

"Oh, we know who *you* are," said one of the other sisters, cutting him off. She offered me a wide grin. The three women, all appearing to be somewhere in their late-forties to early-fifties, nodded vigorously. Now that we stood face to face, I could read their individual names, embroidered under the winery logo of their aprons. Each was named for a type of wine. The woman who claimed to know me was Marsala.

"Anastasia Pollack," said her sister Roussanne, reaching out to grab my free hand. "We're huge fans."

Zack and I shared a quick glance. Usually, he's the one swarmed by admirers, not me. After all, he's graced the cover of *People* magazine more than once. I pinch myself every morning as I wake up next to a former Sexiest Man of the Year. "You ladies are crafters?" I asked.

"Oh, my, no," said Constantia, the third sister. "Our only crafting is the art of crafting delicious wine and assorted wine products."

"Our lives are far too busy running the winery and B&B to have time for other endeavors," added Marsala.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," I said. "Then how do you know me?"

“From the podcasts, of course,” said Constantia.

Now I was really perplexed. “I’ve never appeared on a podcast.”

American Woman had recently ventured into podcasts for some of our editors. The medium lent itself more to discussions about health issues, travel, and fashion trends. We’d even recently bandied about the idea of starting an online book club with the editors and other staff choosing a favorite book to discuss each month.

However, Cloris and I needed visuals for recipes and craft projects. We connected better with our readers by producing short video demonstrations that were posted on our website and the magazine’s YouTube channel.

“Perhaps you’re confusing me with another Anastasia Pollack,” I added. “It’s not that uncommon a name.”

“But there’s only one Anastasia Pollack from New Jersey who’s an amateur sleuth,” said Roussanne. “That is you, isn’t it?”

My mouth dropped open. “Are you saying someone has created a podcast about *me*?”

All three nodded. “*The Sleuth Sayer*,” said Marsala. “You were the first sleuth she featured.”

“She’s already devoted three episodes to you,” said Roussanne. “You really haven’t heard of it?”

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“How did I not know about that podcast?” I asked Zack after the sisters had checked us in and shown us to our guest cottage.

Our accommodations consisted of one large room with a king-size bed, a sitting area with two overstuffed chairs with matching ottomans, and an attached bathroom, complete with clawfoot tub.

The décor was quintessential *Southern Living*. Comfortable, inviting, and inspired by nature in both its color palette and the decorative elements scattered around the room, many of which, according to a framed sign on the dresser, were for sale in the gift shop. A large collage that incorporated old wine labels, photographs, and newspaper articles hung over the bed. If I wasn’t currently so annoyed, I would have enjoyed studying the collage rather than giving it little more than a cursory glance.

“Maybe I should Google myself more often, but you’d think someone would have known a true-crime podcaster was blabbing about me all over cyberspace.”

Zack dropped an armful of T-shirts into a dresser drawer and turned to face me. “Such as?”

“I don’t know.” Frustrated, I threw my arms up, then slapped my thighs. “Someone had to know. Tino? Spader? Ledbetter? All of them?”

Tino Martinelli worked in cyber-security. I once thought he was trying to kill me. I was dead wrong. Pun intended. The guy had had my back on more than one occasion and had become a dear friend.

Detective Samuel Spader worked Union County Homicide, and Agent Aloysius Ledbetter was with the FBI. My reluctant amateur sleuthing had brought me in close contact with both men far more times than any normal law-abiding citizen would have cause to interact with law enforcement.

“How is this not an invasion of my privacy?” I asked, pacing along the hardwood floor from one end of the room to the other and back again.

“I don’t know. Maybe it is, but I’m not a lawyer.”

I stopped short and stared at him. “You think I should call a lawyer?”

He placed his hands on my shoulders and in a soothing tone said, “Why don’t we first listen to the podcast before jumping to any conclusions?”

Why hadn’t I thought of that? I inhaled deeply, then slowly released the air in my lungs in an attempt at manifesting a calming breath. It didn’t help much. I’ve never been very good at the Zen thing. But Zack was right. Maybe this was all a nothing burger. Although, I failed to conjure up any scenario where such a possibility seemed feasible.

“When we drove in, I noticed a dirt path with a sign indicating the creek and a walking trail,” he said.

“So?”

He grabbed his camera and pulled a set of earbuds from his pocket. “Let’s take a stroll and listen to what this Sleuth Sayer has to say about you.”

Zack handed me one of the earbuds and placed the other in his ear. Then he found the podcast on his phone. As we headed toward the path, a few bars of music played before a woman began to speak.

An old African proverb states it takes a village to raise a child. Sometimes, though, it takes one woman’s courage and determination to protect the people of that village from those who would do them harm.

I tried to identify the narrator’s voice, but I couldn’t think of anyone I knew who spoke in a rich dulcet British accent.

Throughout our country and the world, unremarkable women are doing remarkable things—solving crimes and bringing the perpetrators to justice, often with little or no recognition of their accomplishments.

In fiction these women are called amateur sleuths, but there are many of them walking among us, unsung heroines with no law enforcement training who find themselves in unusual situations where they’re spurred into action.

I’ve made it my mission to tell the world about these courageous modern-day Miss Marples. I am the Sleuth Sayer, and this is Season One of The Sleuth Sayer Podcast.

Another group of chords followed before the narrator continued.

The Crafty Sleuth, Episode One. Our story begins not quite two years ago in Westfield, New Jersey, a quiet suburban commuter town outside of New York City, where one woman’s world is unexpectedly turned upside down when her husband suddenly dies, and she discovers the secrets he’s hidden from her throughout their marriage. One day Anastasia Pollack is living a typical middle-class life as a mother and magazine editor; the next day she’s not only a widow but the prime suspect in the murder of one of her coworkers. And what a murder it was!

When I stopped short and reached for Zack’s arm, he paused the podcast. “Had enough already?”

I couldn’t answer. I stood frozen in my tracks. Through a break in the trees and dense shrubbery, at the bottom of a steep slope, I saw a body sprawled along the edge of the creek.