

EXCERPT

DECOUPAGE CAN BE DEADLY

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“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 cathouse 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, bitch?”

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.”