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GILT

A SAMANTHA KIDD MYSTERY

TRIP

GILT TRIP

Book 14 in the Samantha Kidd Mystery Series

A Polyester Press Mystery

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GILT

A SAMANTHA KIDD MYSTERY

TRIP

DIANE VALLERE



Polyester Press

For Carol Jean Ferguson

“THIS ISN’T WORKING,” I said.

“Come on,” Nick replied. “You can’t give up so soon. There’s a lot of good here.”

“Yes, and there’s a lot of bad too. I never thought we’d be here. I never expected to be in this position.”

The door to the supply closet opened, and the toastmaster for the award ceremony, Delia Stone, caught Nick and me in flagrante delicto. I didn’t know much about Delia other than what had been printed on the press release: shoe designer, board member, and first female toastmaster in the history of the awards ceremony. I’d expected a joyful woman with a radiant personality, not the scowling one in front of us.

Unlike Nick and me, Delia was fully clothed. She wore a black tuxedo and a white tux shirt, both of which were either expertly tailored to her female frame or from

Ralph Lauren's latest androgynous collection. Instead of a bow tie, at her collar, she wore a yellow-gold necklace with a pear-cut aquamarine cabochon accented with diamonds. The light from the hallway bounced against the facets of the precious stones and reflected back at us. Delia appeared surprised at the sight of us, at least for a moment, and then disgusted by our behavior. In situations like these, I tend to catch the brunt of the judgment, but it was Nick's night, and she focused her attention on him.

"This behavior is unbecoming of an award nominee," she said. "The doors open in five minutes. Nominees are expected to be available for mingling and photo ops." She took another moment to scan us from head to toe and back—which involved some side-to-side scanning as well, as my foot was lodged on the shelf that held boxes of parchment paper—then slammed the door in our faces. The closet had seemed roomy enough for, well, you know, before she found us, but now it seemed painfully cramped.

"She knows I'm your wife, right?" I asked. "I don't want people thinking I'm some random shoe designer groupie."

"I don't think that's what bothered her." Nick buttoned his tuxedo shirt and shook out his jacket.

It wasn't every day I snuck off to a supply closet to share some quality time with my husband, but in recent months, our lives had gotten... let's call it "complicated."

Nick and I were what you'd call a power couple. He was a shoe-designer-turned-sneaker-designer-turned-award-finalist for the annual *FootPrints* Shoe Design Awards. I was an occasional style reporter for the *Ribbon Eagle* and co-owner of a local boutique. Our busy lives kept us from being busy in the Urban Dictionary sense of the word, so we seized the opportunity when we could.

With a little maneuvering, I removed my foot from the shelf and lowered it to the ground then smoothed the creases out of my gold satin dress. "We seriously need to get a room."

Nick pulled a key card out of his pocket. "I did. I wanted it to be a surprise after the awards." He flashed the hotel logo—a gold crown—at me.

"You mean we can go to sleep and not have to think about your dad in the room down the hall?"

"Sleep? It's official. The romance is gone," Nick lamented.

I put my arms around him and rested my head against his chest. "I wouldn't fool around in a closet with just anybody," I said. "Especially now that you're up for Collaborator of the Year."

Nick allowed himself a small grin. His company had been a success before he was born, having been established by his dad. A kerfuffle with some former investors who'd learned business strategies from the Corleone family had sent Nick into a different design direction, and for the past couple of years, he'd been working toward

the launch of Saint Nick, his designer sneaker collection. A recent collaboration with Blak Friiday, professional-football-player-turned-hip-hop-sensation-turned-code-signer had been what the doctor ordered (if doctors cared about sneaker design), and together, they knocked their collaboration out of the park. (And now that we had a former pro athlete in our lives, I got an extra kick out of mixing sports metaphors.)

Nick kept the key card in his hand while he pulled on his tuxedo jacket and then dropped the plastic card into his pocket. “We’ll see how the night goes before we make any final decisions about where we’re staying tonight. It’s hard to predict these things. Is my bow tie straight?”

It was slightly askew, so I reached up and adjusted it. “There’s no sense playing hard to get now. If you already have the key card, then you’ve already checked in.” I ran my finger under my lower lip. “How’s my lipstick?”

“Your lipstick is fine, but your hair’s a little wonky on the left.” Nick adjusted the cuffs of his tux shirt while I looked around the supply closet for a reflective surface. The closest thing was a stainless-steel mixing bowl, which was as effective as a funhouse mirror. We should have thought this out better. The Ribbon Shoe Design Awards ceremony was being held at the Regal Crowne Hotel (“the gold standard in hospitality”). (I couldn’t speak for their hospitality standards, but their supply closet was in tip-top shape.) I’d been looking forward to the awards banquet ever since the nominations were

announced. Nick downplayed the importance of the event, but of the two of us, his professional passion was more clearly defined. He'd been a shoe designer for as long as I'd known him. I'd been the buyer of ladies' shoes for Bentley's New York at the time of our meet-cute but since then had held numerous positions in the fashion industry with varying levels of success. If not for an anonymous benefactor who appreciated my involvement in the same mystery that nearly destroyed Nick's business, I might still be wondering how to pay the mortgage. As it was, my bank account was safely full of Benjamins, and I lost hardly any sleep wondering who was behind my newfound financial security.

I'd recently cropped my nearly black hair into a Louise Brooks bob after discovering *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*, and I'd had my curls professionally blown straight for the night. I smoothed random flyaways (and that wonky left side) with my hands. "How's that?"

Nick tucked one side behind my ear. "It's the bees' knees."

The supply closet, which Nick and I exited, was located on the other side of the kitchen where the evening's dinner was cooked. As guests, we had no business in the kitchen (nor in the supply closet), but the crew had been busy preparing our meal when we walked past them, and no one had told us to leave. The same thing happened on our return trip.

We entered the banquet hall and headed to the cash

bar, where a crowd had congregated. I spotted a woman with shocking red hair on the other side of the room and waved.

“Cat’s here,” I said. I took Nick’s hand and started in her direction, but he didn’t move with me. I turned around. “Don’t you want to say hello?”

“You go ahead. I’m going to make sure my dad is staying out of trouble.”

I gave him a quick kiss and headed toward the crowd.

It had been a long time since I attended a fashion-industry event, and being the wife of an award nominee gave the evening an extra luster. The day after Nick had learned about the nomination, I bought out a table and invited my closest friends. I should have talked to Nick first, because we had different ideas about who should sit at our table, which led to some ruffled feathers and damage control. But still, the night had arrived, and if we were lucky, Nick and Blak would be celebrating their win among friends.

As I made my way through the crowd, I stepped around two people arguing over their table decorations. I was a woman on a mission, so I kept my head down. I couldn’t hear their hushed words, but their tense body language was the opposite of what Nick and I had displayed in the supply closet and stood out in contrast. It wasn’t until I lifted a glass of champagne from a table and turned around that I identified half of the arguing couple.

It was Delia, the female toastmaster who'd caught me and Nick. Moments later, Cat joined me.

Cat Lestes was a friend I'd met through less-than-favorable circumstances. Since then, she'd moved to Philadelphia and had a baby. Aside from some trouble that happened when she was nine months pregnant, she made motherhood look easy.

Cat's interest in fashion made mine look amateurish. Tonight, she wore a form-fitting black one-shouldered gown with mesh panels. Cat had shed her maternity weight shortly after giving birth and traded it for toned arms, which her gown showed off expertly. Her vivid red hair was cropped in an Edie Sedgewick pixie, and a delicate gold Y necklace, spotted with diamonds so understated that they needed the overhead light to reveal their presence, was the only piece of jewelry she'd added.

"I wasn't sure you'd make it," I said.

"The wind was picking up when I left Philadelphia, but the storm hadn't started. I hope it holds off until tomorrow."

She clinked champagne glasses with me, and we each took a sip. I spit mine back out, attracting unwanted attention.

"What is this?"

"Apple juice," Cat said. "They prefilled those glasses so people could help themselves. I thought you knew. If you want champagne, you have to go to the bar. Eddie's in line, so if you hurry, you can add your drink to his order."

“Eddie. Right.” I glanced over my shoulder at the line. “I’m fine with this for now.” I took another sip of the sweet golden juice, this time swallowing. “Did you have any trouble finding a sitter?”

“No. My brother solved that problem. After Nick rescinded my plus one, Dante was available to babysit.” There was an edge to her voice, and I didn’t miss the subtle emphasis she put on Nick’s name.

“I thought your plus one was Detective Madden,” I said.

“Does it really make a difference?”

“And Nick didn’t uninvite anybody.” Cat’s brother and I had engaged in a flirtation from time to time, but jealousy wasn’t the reason I’d had to rescind Cat’s plus one. “He just—we miscalculated the number of seats at our table, and Nick thought—”

“Hi, Samantha,” said a woman I hadn’t seen approach. It was Nick’s long-time friend Amanda Ries. I hadn’t told Cat that Amanda was the reason we needed that extra ticket, and now didn’t seem the time.

Amanda was glossy perfection. She had straight black hair that fell down to the middle of her back, porcelain skin, and precisely applied red lipstick. Tonight she wore a black velvet jumpsuit with a gold sash knotted at the waist. Amanda had graduated from I-FAD, the Institute of Fashion, Art, and Design, with Nick, though her business had never achieved the same level of success as his.

“Hi, Amanda,” I said. “Do you know Cat?” I turned to

Cat, who looked less interested in this introduction than in the invisible lint on her black dress.

“Hi,” Cat said. When she looked up, it was at me, not Amanda. “Would you excuse me? I see someone else.” Before I replied, she was halfway through the crowd.

I forced a smile and turned back to Amanda. “Don’t mind her. She had some trouble with her babysitter.”

“Whatever,” Amanda said. She sipped her champagne. “I had to cancel my own plans so I could be here tonight. It would have been nice to have some advanced notice.”

“I’m sorry. Nick and I got our signals crossed with the invites, but it was important to him that you be here.”

“Sure it was.” She jutted her chin past me. “Here comes your other friend. Hey, Eddie.”

A chill raced up my spine. I’d forgotten that Amanda and Eddie knew each other from before I moved back to Ribbon, Pennsylvania. I felt like a juggler, keeping everyone happy or at least content, reminding them all that we had come together to support Nick. Eddie was the one person I could be myself around. Aside from Nick, he was the person here who knew me the best, and in some ways, he knew me better.

“Hi, Eddie,” I said.

“Bite me,” he said back.

YOU KNOW how the experts advise you not to go into business with friends? It turns out that's sound advice. It also turns out I prefer to learn my lessons the hard way, which was why Eddie and I were no longer on speaking terms.

"Our table is at the front of the room," I said, taking a cue from Amanda and pretending I hadn't heard what Eddie said. I pointed to the left of the platform. "We're number five."

"I'm surprised you didn't take the number down and put your name on the table," Eddie said. "You *do* want everybody to know you sponsored it, don't you?"

Amanda, initially slow on the uptake, seemed to detect the tension. She stepped backward and then said, "I'm going to get another glass of champagne before the bar closes. Do either of you want anything?"

I raised my glass of apple juice, but Eddie interjected first. “If Samantha wants something, she’ll get it for herself. That’s how she rolls.”

Amanda looked back and forth between us and then turned and walked away.

I grabbed Eddie’s arm and pulled him from the crowd. “You can be as mad at me as you want tomorrow, but tonight, you will be on your best behavior. Tonight’s about Nick. Got it?”

“Do *you* get it?” he replied. He sipped at his cocktail, something that definitely wasn’t apple juice in a champagne flute. “Why am I not surprised you think you can tell me how to behave? It’s just like the mod shop. I can’t believe I didn’t see this coming.”

Like I said, Eddie was my best friend. At least he was until nine months ago when we became co-owners of a clothing boutique that specialized in mod fashion. Eddie’s professional experience was in visual design. Mine was in retail buying. We thought our varied skills would make us perfect partners for the venture, but we forgot to take one important thing into consideration: neither one of us wanted to be locked into a day job.

Eddie was a creative. He designed visual displays, first (and for a long time) for Tradava, the local department store chain where I worked for about four days, and most recently for the city of Ribbon. But after too many calls about graffiti and broken streetlight fixtures, he wanted the freedom that comes from being your own boss.

The problem was I wanted that kind of freedom too. He was mad because I expected him to be at the store during the day. Call me crazy, but I didn't think that was too much to ask. Buying the mod shop was Eddie's idea, and after we learned we weren't compatible as business partners, I never missed an opportunity to point it out. Come to think of it, that might not be my best strategy.

"I know you're mad at me," I said, "I don't care if you avoid me for the rest of the night, but you're Nick's friend too. Don't spoil his evening because of me."

"Fine, Bossy Pants." He turned his shoulder to me and stirred the contents of his drink while he scanned the room.

"Don't call me Bossy Pants."

"What do you prefer, Your Highness?"

"Stop it."

Eddie looked for a moment as if he were having a good time. "The queen? Il Duce? Master of Ceremonies?"

"You can buy me out anytime you want," I said.

"You know I can't afford to buy you out. I put everything I had into the purchase."

And like every argument, we ended with a stalemate.

When I'd first contacted the Ribbon Shoe Design Association about sponsoring a table at the award banquet, it seemed like a good idea. Get our friends and family together for a night out. Celebrate Nick's professional milestone in style.

Nick claimed not to care about the award, but I

understood how these things worked. Winning would give his collaboration extensive coverage in an upcoming issue of *FootPrints* (“all the shoes that’s fit to print”), an updated press kit, and buzz around his and Blak’s next sneaker drop. The world of sneakers didn’t revolve around a shopping season or a themed capsule collection like the fashion market. It centered around the release of a new style. If enough buzz went into a launch before a new shoe dropped, it could sell out in a day, driving resale values up on the secondary market and boosting the frenzy for the next time.

Eight seats, the banquet organizers had advised me. That was how many seats I’d have to fill at our table. I had friends. How hard could it be to get eight of them together for a night?

Nick and me, that was two. Blak Friday, Nick’s collaborator, was third. Nick’s dad was fourth. Somewhere around there was when the wheels came off.

On the same day Eddie and I decided to buy the mod shop, Nick’s dad returned from Italy with a surprise: a five-year-old Italian girl he claimed was his daughter. From the moment Nick told me, I had questions, not the least of which had to do with the vasectomy Senior had after Nick was born, but Senior would say nothing more than the fact that Chiara’s mother was having an operation, and she needed someone to watch Chiara until she recovered. It seemed an awfully big favor for a strange Italian woman to ask of a seventy-five-year-old man she

hadn't seen for five years, but in terms of you-owe-me-this, she had leverage.

So Chiara was seat number five.

Nick invited Eddie because he knew I wouldn't. I invited Cat plus one because I thought we had seats to fill. Nick invited Amanda, which caused me to uninvite Cat's plus one, leaving us with a big hostile mess. (Aside from Blak, who was the most jovial former pro football player I'd ever met.) (I admit it's a narrow sampling.) I wondered briefly whether he'd pick up on our friction or we'd be able to keep it in check for the night.

Over the loudspeaker, I heard a fuzzy thumping sound. Delia Stone, looking no happier than she had when she discovered Nick and me in the supply closet, stood on the stage with a microphone. In a room of women dressed in party clothes of silk, velvet, and sequins, she stood out in her stark masculine attire. Much had been made about the appointment of a female toastmaster, and not all of it had been complimentary. She hadn't shied away from controversy with her choice to cross-dress for the evening. Either she was baiting her critics, or she was trying to downplay her gender. I wasn't sure which.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said, "the cash bar will close in fifteen minutes, and then dinner service will begin. If you need another drink to get through the night, please get it now."

"That was in poor taste," I said.

“Maybe you should take charge,” Eddie said, “seeing how you like to tell people what to do.”

“Bite me,” I said.

“Original.”

I needed something stronger than apple juice.

I headed back to the bar. Eddie followed. A thirty-something man in a black-and-gold-paisley tuxedo jacket stood at the front of the line, arguing with the bartender. The bartender actively tried to keep his voice down, but the man opposite him had no similar compunctions.

“I don’t care what the hotel policy is,” the man said. “I don’t plan to drink whatever swill your manager deemed acceptable for tonight. My dad paid for this whole thing. Either pour me a glass of the bourbon I brought, or give me a glass, and I’ll do it myself.”

“Who is that?” Cat asked.

“Stavros Papadopoulos,” Eddie said under his breath. “His house in Los Angeles was profiled in *Architectural Digest*. He’s got an outdoor hot tub that overlooks the whole city.”

“I don’t care who he is,” I said. “The hotel has a strict no-outside-booze policy. I asked them myself.”

I was ready to start a scene of my own, but we’d been joined by Senior, Nick’s dad, who held the hand of Chiara. Chiara looked up at me with wide brown eyes. She was the picture of innocence, not strictly because she didn’t understand English but because she was five and dressed in a mini me version of my gold dress. (I’d

bought it for her so we could match. I'd taken flak for that too.)

"Hi, Chiara," I said. I looked up at Nick's dad with relief at his timing. "There's a scene happening at the bar. We were just discussing whether someone should get involved."

"Don't look at me," Senior said. "I'm just an old man. It's not like I started a shoe company or anything. You do it, kid. You like to be the center of attention."

OF ALL OF the squabbling that had taken place after the award nominations were announced, Nick's dad had the best motivation for being annoyed. He'd started the company before Nick was born and turned it over to Nick when he was old enough to manage it. Since then, Senior had acted in an advisory role then retired. It was under Nick's leadership that the company became the designer powerhouse it did, before Nick bought back his rights, scaled back his distribution, and moved his base of operations to Ribbon. For a few years, his dad remained in New York City, until a broken hip required him to change his lifestyle. Shortly thereafter, he moved in with Nick, and shortly after that, Nick moved in with me. (I never before realized the role Senior played in the accelerated pace of Nick's and my relationship over the past few years.)

Senior was the youngest seventy-five-year-old I knew. He drove a Maserati, had an active social life, and until recently, lived in a comfortable apartment safely on the opposite side of Ribbon. I volunteered to water his plants while he accompanied Nick on a recent trip to Italy and accidentally got him evicted. I hadn't thought much about moving him into my spare bedroom at the time, but now that he'd returned with the surprise addition of Chiara, the house was starting to feel like a designer version of *The Waltons*.

"Your son is up for collaborating on a sneaker design," I reminded him. "The company didn't make sneakers when you started it."

"Right. And it's not like he had an existing shoe company to fall back on to make it all happen."

"Nick spent the better part of the last three years traveling back and forth to China to work out production details. He's eaten, breathed, and slept sneakers for three years! Nick barely had time to—" I caught myself and glanced at Chiara to see if she was paying attention. She had one hand wrapped tightly around Senior's bigger one, and another hand reached out to touch the gold filigree bracelet dangling from the wrist of the woman next to her. "No, Chiara," I said.

Chiara withdrew her arm and looked up at me. She stepped closer to Senior's leg.

He leaned over and said something in Italian, and she

nodded. He turned back to me. “I guess we might as well go find our table,” he said. “At least they put out water.”

I put my hand on his arm as he turned away, and he turned back. I held out my beverage. “It’s apple juice,” I said. “I thought it was champagne. Somebody”—I tipped my head toward the little girl—“might like it.”

Senior’s expression softened. His beef wasn’t with me, and we both knew it. He took the flute of juice and held it out to Chiara, who eagerly grabbed it with her small hands. A couple nearby who should have minded their own business *tsk-tsked*.

“Put a sock in it,” Senior said to them. He guided Chiara to our table at the front of the room.

I turned back toward the cash bar. Delia stood with the hotel manager, and neither of them seemed particularly happy. The hotel staff wore black tonight: black suits, black shirts, and gold neckties on the management staff, and white shirts, black trousers, and gold ties on the waitstaff. A gold name tag was pinned to the breast pocket of the hotel manager’s jacket, though I was too far away to read it. The bottle of Michter’s bourbon that had caused the fuss now sat on top of the bar, open, and the man in the gold-and-black-paisley tux jacket, who’d demanded a glass of it, walked away with a satisfied look on his face.

Four hours. I could make it four hours.

I unsnapped my clutch handbag and pulled out my

phone to check how much of that four-hour timeframe was left.

“What are you doing?” demanded the hotel manager. He pushed his way through the crowd and approached me. “You can’t have that in here.”

“What do you mean? I’m just checking the time.” I glanced around and realized this was the first time in recent memory I’d been in a crowd of people who weren’t scrolling through social media or swiping right. I put my phone away. “Sorry. I didn’t realize nobody else had a phone. How’d you get everybody to agree not to use theirs?”

The manager, whose name tag read Harry, held out his hand palm-side up. “This is a tech-free event. No cell phones, no cameras, no recording devices.”

“Sure,” I said. I snapped my clutch closed. “You won’t see my phone again.”

“I’ll need to take it.”

“There’s no way every person in here gave you their phones.”

“You’re right. Most of them didn’t bring them inside.”

Reluctantly, I opened my handbag and handed over my phone. “Tech-free event, you said? I’ve never heard of that before.”

“The toastmaster demanded it. She said signing the contract was contingent upon that clause.” Harry dropped my phone into his suit jacket pocket.

“You’d think she’d want the opposite. Press for the event, social media presence, the works.”

Harry shrugged. “Ms. Stone said she had a big surprise planned for the evening and didn’t want any distractions. She’s prepared a press release that we are to update with the winners and send at the end of the night.” He pushed back his cuff as if checking the time on his watch, but his wrist was bare. “That’s odd,” he said. He looked down at the carpet then to the left and to the right. “I must have left my watch on my desk.”

I raised my eyebrows at him and pointed at his suit jacket pocket. He surreptitiously pulled out my phone and glanced at the screen. “I hope you weren’t waiting in line to get a drink,” he said. “The cash bar just closed.”

“Won’t drinks be served with dinner?”

“Only if the person who sponsored your table made those arrangements. I can check for you, if you’d like.”

“No, thanks,” I said with a sigh. “That won’t be necessary.”

I made my way to the front of the room, where my former friends had gathered. Along the way, I passed chatting cliques of attendees laughing and hugging, clinking glasses, and wishing each other well. Several of those tables had uncorked bottles of wine sitting by the centerpieces. A general air of merriment cloaked the room. The buzz of a party atmosphere combined with the upcoming awards had put people in a festive frame of mind.

But not at my table. Cat and Amanda sat silently with an empty seat between them. Eddie was building a tower of pink sugar packets. Someone had given Chiara a pen, and she drew directly on the white tablecloth. Nick stood off to the side and scanned the room, and Blak's chair was empty.

I circled the table and stood next to Nick. "Blak isn't here yet?"

"No, and I have no way of calling him to see if he's okay."

"Yes, that tech-free thing is crazy, right?"

"It's the wave of the future. People are too busy to get out and network, but there's a lot of money and talent in this room. Look at them. People are interacting. I bet some collaborations come out of this event."

"Sure, right. There's a slight problem." I leaned closer. "I, um... The hotel manager just told me there won't be wine with dinner."

"We don't get any wine?" Eddie asked loudly. His hand bumped his sugar packet tower, and the pink rectangles fell to the table.

Amanda pointed at the party of eight next to us. "How come they have wine?"

Cat pointed at another group. "They have wine too."

Senior picked up a bottle of Martinelli's apple juice from under the table and refilled Chiara's empty flute. He looked at me and shrugged. "I made a deal with the bartender," he said.

Even Nick seemed unhappy about the news. Senior called me over to him and pulled a hundred-dollar bill out of his wallet. “Go back to the kitchen and ask for Tod. Tell him the apple juice man sent you. See if he can hook you up.”

I took the hundred-dollar bill. “Tod, you said?”

Senior nodded. “White shirt, gold tie, like the rest of the staff.”

“I’ll be right back.”

The last time I’d walked through the door to the kitchen, it was with Nick. We were looking for—well, you already know we were looking for someplace private for a moment of intimacy—(don’t *you* judge me too!), so I knew the general layout of the back of house. I knew the kitchen would be full of staffers preparing our salads, appetizers, and dinners and pastry chefs putting the finishing touches on our desserts.

I knew I wasn’t supposed to be back here, but I also knew no matter how much the staff might want me to leave, they couldn’t be as hostile as the people at my table.

The kitchen was empty save for a petite woman with purple hair peeking out from under a pink knit hat. She wore an oversized chef’s jacket, and she was busy writing names on squares of chocolate with a piping bag. “Excuse me. I’m looking for Tod. Do you know where he is?”

She glanced up from the task at hand, first at me and then past me toward the exit into the hallway. “He went

with the woman in charge.” She looked back down at the chocolate square. A blob of icing had dripped from the nozzle of the piping bag and landed on the chocolate. She glanced up again, and this time, her expression matched those at my table out front.

“I’m Samantha. Make that mine.”

I left the kitchen in search of the bartender and ended up in the hallway outside the supply closet. A somewhat familiar man in a white shirt, black pants, and gold tie fumbled with the keys to unlock the door.

“Excuse me. Are you Tod?” I asked.

The man looked up. “Yes.” He wiggled the key in the lock. “Can I help you?”

“I hope so. I need wine at my table. I’m the sponsor, and I didn’t arrange it ahead of time, but my father-in-law—he’s the juice man—said you could hook me up.” I remembered the hundred-dollar bill and waved it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

At that moment, the lock released, and the doorknob turned. The bartender pulled the door open and stared inside. The door blocked my view, but whatever he saw, it took him by surprise.

A moment later, he snapped out of it. He leaned toward me and snatched the C-note from my hand. “The wine’s in the closet. Help yourself to whatever you need.” He turned around and disappeared around a corner.

Buzzy feelings cascaded through my arms and legs and not because I’d chosen to go bare legged for the

night. I recognized the fear in his face. I recognized the I-need-to-get-out-of-here expression. And even though I knew the interior of the supply closet lacked reflective surfaces, I knew if I could look in a mirror, I'd recognize that expression on myself.

Eddie had accused me of wanting to be right all the time, and he wasn't wrong. But this one time, I wouldn't have minded it. I held the door open and moved to peer into the closet Nick and I had occupied half an hour earlier and saw the body of Delia Stone with a shiny gold knife jutting out of her chest.



END OF EXCERPT. Find out more at dianevallere.com/gilt-trip.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Four-time award nominee and national bestselling author Diane Vallere writes smart, funny, and fashionable character-based mysteries. After a career in luxury retailing, she traded fashion accessories for accessories to murder. Diane started her own detective agency at age ten and has maintained a passion for shoes, clues, and clothes ever since.

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