



Pink-Collar

by Tricia Pimental

Boodle's bark meant trouble. Amanda Wright had balked at the name at first, but the word, a slang term for money, fit her mother's elegant pet quite well. A Standard Poodle, she had taken more than one Best in Show award and lavished love on everyone, from groomers, handlers, and judges to mailmen and tract-toting door-to-door evangelists.

Well, almost everyone. If Boodle was upset, there could only be one explanation: Desiree Devonshire, Amanda's cousin, had arrived. Amanda grabbed a gunmetal gray jacket, buttoned it up like a suit of armor, and headed downstairs.

At the front door she found her mother, a delicate woman with graying hair swept up and fastened by a comb, holding Boodle by a rose-colored collar. The dog was quiet now, but stood tall and wary.

"Aunt Lily, we're here!" squealed Desiree at a pitch that got Boodle started again. "This is Dr. Lech Tiborsky, but you can just call him 'the Professor.' Everyone does." She looked past them into the living room, sighed and tilted her head. "Gosh, it's been so long since I've been back in Virginia I'd forgotten how...simple everything is."

Amanda felt her jaw clench as she bit back a retort, then let it fly. "If anyone can recognize simple, it's you," she said, surprised she felt only the faintest whiff of shame.

"Now, Mandy, don't be defensive," Desiree said. Her lips coyly pushed into a pout but the steely eyes said much. "It's just that New Yorkers notice the difference, don't we, darling?" She slipped a silk-covered arm through the Professor's, smug in her big game trophy ownership.

Amanda grimaced. So now that Desiree lived in Manhattan, she was a New Yorker?

Amanda felt disgust at the affectation, but was more rankled by her cousin's use of her nickname. She never failed to pick that scab.

Lillian Wright had been a young widow raising her daughter in a small town in southeast Virginia. Her sister Jenny lived nearby, and like Lillian, had one daughter, Desiree. The girls grew up together as sisters.

They were a study in differences. Flaxen-haired Desiree was the creative one, writing and starring in school productions. Conventionally pretty and mildly dyslexic, Amanda possessed debating, math, and linguistic skills combined with a keen sense of observation and memory for the minutest of details. She lacked, however, the self-confidence to make the most of those talents in the shadow of her cousin.

But when Jesse Mansard asked her out, Amanda knew she would never again feel unimportant. He was the first and only person to call her Mandy, in a voice so warm and husky she was afraid sometimes she would cry with pleasure. Crying did come, when Desiree eloped with Jesse, only to divorce him two years later. Why couldn't she have left him alone, Amanda had thought bitterly, if she weren't going to keep him?

"I'll see about some tea," Amanda's mother said as she steered Boodle—now emitting a continuous rumbling growl—toward the kitchen.

"Don't bother, Aunt Lily. We'll just have a drink. Mandy, do you have any vodka?"

Without replying, Amanda moved to the sideboard and produced a bottle from the cupboard, setting it down on the coffee table with two glasses. "I'll get some ice," said Lillian, grateful to still have an excuse to leave the room.

Amanda was intrigued by the appearance of her cousin's unlikely friend. A balding, apparently neckless man in an expensive but rumpled suit stretched across his substantial paunch, he was the antithesis of Desiree's former husbands. He wore an expression of polite boredom on his florid face as he watched Desiree flounce toward the couch and collapse onto it.

She patted the cushion next to her and winked at him.

Lillian returned with a small ice bucket and tongs. "So, tell me, exactly why are you two here?" she asked. "Amanda said your voicemail message was choppy."

"Well, you know I'm on a book tour," Desiree replied, drawing out "know" in a singsong voice for a full three seconds. She gazed piercingly at Amanda. "You certainly haven't forgotten that, have you?" Her tone was mock disbelief seasoned with subtle threat.

Amanda often wondered at the discernment of modern readers who voraciously snapped up the commercial pap her cousin promoted as literary excellence. With the release of her latest novel, Desiree's face was on every public media outlet imaginable. Amanda resisted asking her cousin if she could spell o-v-e-r-e-x-p-o-s-u-r-e. She settled for a withering smile.

"And the Professor has been asked to speak in D.C. at a conference on International Finance. What's the name of your talk again, darling?"

Amanda studied the man, who had been sprawled over much of the couch, but was now pouring a tumbler of vodka, appearing to Amanda like a rhino attacking a watering hole. He coughed, cleared his throat, and took on a temporary air of questionable dignity.

"Implications of the World Banking Crisis for the European Economic Union and Asian Markets."

"Sounds intriguing. I'd love to hear more." Something about the man had struck a nerve and Amanda decided to press on. "Have you been in banking long? You must be published. I'll have to Google you." She smiled disarmingly as she saw the man begin to glow, warming to the subject of himself.

"My cousin is a librarian," Desiree interrupted, sighing dramatically. She stirred her drink with a slender finger, its nail painted a startling blood-red. "Pink-collars are condemned to lead such a dull existence," she continued, referring to occupations in the service industry. "I write, travel, and make public appearances. She reads. You write, lecture, and broker deals. She reads."

Desiree finished her monologue with a porcine snort followed by a hiccup.

The Professor smiled slyly and then responded in a voice so low Amanda had to lean forward to hear him. She had always considered it a cheap, if effective, tactic to garner attention.

"I have been with the International Monetary Fund for many years," the Professor intoned. He sat back and protectively laced his stubby fingers high on his chest. And in that distinctive movement, the video Amanda had seen months ago came to mind, a thrilling confirmation of her suspicion. Sometimes, she thought,

life takes a turn every bit as satisfying as a creation by John Le Carré.



Later, as Amanda prepared to leave the house, she told her mother she would be home late. "We're beginning a new research project at work. I think it's going to get intense."

Lillian's expression changed from surprise to fond acceptance. It seemed to her there was a degree of exaggeration about the importance of this library job. But she was grateful that in recent years, Amanda finally appeared to have developed a sense of purpose in life. If it was all about reading, books, and research, so be it.

"Okay, honey. See you in the morning." Lillian hung the kitchen towel to dry and picked up Boodle's leash.

Amanda scratched the dog's head, touched her neck, and leaned down to whisper, "pink-collar indeed."

Outside, she slipped behind the wheel of her car and headed toward Fairfax. It would not be long before she drove up to the familiar check gate, flashed her badge, and slipped into her parking space. The sign never failed to thrill her: Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Counterintelligence Division would be busy tonight. ■



Born in Brooklyn, **Tricia Pimental's** first book was a memoir about her circuitous path to faith in Jesus: *Rabbit Trail: How a Former Playboy Bunny Found Her Way*. It was followed by a novel, *Slippery Slopes*. A second memoir, *A Movable Marriage*, was published in 2016. All three books have received Royal Palm Literary Awards in the annual competition sponsored by the Florida Writers Association.

Other work has appeared in *A Janela* (the quarterly magazine of International Women in Portugal), anthologies compiled by the Florida Writers Association and the National League of American Pen Women, and elsewhere. She writes for *International Living Magazine* since signing on in January 2017 as Portugal Correspondent.

Tricia and her husband live near Lisbon with their Maltese who, like them, has learned Portuguese. A member of the SAG-AFTRA and a former Toastmaster, she blogs at www.triciapimental.com. Find her on Facebook at www.facebook.com/amovablmarriage and on Twitter: @Tricialafille.