

# **BUBBLES REBOOTS**

## CHAPTER ONE

*Who'd have ever thunk that I, Bubbles Yablonsky, bleached-blond hairdresser/newspaper reporter, graduate of the esteemed Two Guys Department Store Community College, and single mother, would end up atop a slick blue 1976 Cadillac Eldorado convertible waving to my adoring subjects.*

*It is a perfect day. Coronation day. Or, as the locals call it, PolkaFest. The yeasty aroma of fried dough sweetens the thick summer air punctuated by the stirring drumbeat of the famous Liberty High Grenadier Band. The Fitch Fuel thermometer on the Hill-to-Hill Bridge reads 99 degrees and Main Street is lined with gooey, melting Tootsie Rolls. All is right in the world.*

*"Bubbles!" a woman shouts, eager to catch my royal attention. "Over here. Over here!" Her curly locks are gathered in a peach bow and she is be hopping up and down in...would those be wooden clogs?*

*Rotating my raised hand in noble greeting, I am taken aback by the sudden appearance of a hulking blue-haired figure in a camo muumuu and matching support hose brandishing an antique musket.*

*"GET THE HELL DOWN FROM THERE, SALLY!" she bellows. "YOU AIN'T NO PRINCESS!"*

*I am shocked. This is an outrage and quite possibly treason since I have a certificate printed off the internet that proves I am, indeed, the long lost Duchess Bubbles of Lithuania.*

*(Also, point of clarification, my name is not Sally.)*

*My seatmate, Her Royal Highness Britney DeGuza who, according to her purple sash, is Queen of the Upper Macungie Fire Department, looks up from her phone, alarmed by the rude outcry. She is a pampered sort. A whiner, if you will, forever griping about the heat, the dirtiness of the car, the humidity ruining her makeup. She often declares the parade “lame” and “lame ass.” I - or, rather, we - are not impressed.*

*“Hey, you,” she snaps. “Quit gawking like an idiot. You’re supposed to be fixing my tiara before we get to the judge’s stand.”*

*It is then that I notice the brush in my hand and that between my lips are several bobby pins. My vision tunnels as I grapple with an all-too-familiar sickness and loathing that comes from realizing that these episodes are harbingers of evil. I slip into fantasy only when I’m in danger - or about to be.*

*This time the aura is worse than ever. I am dizzy and nauseous. The crowd is spinning. Britney’s powdered face looms large and white, her gigantic teeth bare like a Dentyne commercial on crack.*

*Whatever is about to happen is bad. Really bad. I need to get of here before it’s too.....*

*\* \* \**

“Crap.” I sat up, rubbing my temple, blinking in the bright summer afternoon light. My skull felt like a pressure cooker about to explode. Where the howdy do was I?

Not in a coronation parade, that was for sure. And I wasn’t a long lost Lithuanian royalty, either. I was on the Cadillac because, because.... Oh, right, because Britney’s mother, Donna DeGuza, had drilled the tip of her red acrylic nail into my spine and ordered me to climb up here and save her daughter from a hairdo malfunction.

That explained the woman in the peach bow having a fit. She wasn't some adoring subject; she was Sandy, my best friend and boss at the House of Beauty which had been hired for a flat fee of \$125 to make sure Britney was crowned Princess of PolkaFest.

Mortified, I quickly got down to business, mumbling my apologies as I slid the bobby pins into Britney's tiara and secured the back with a rhinestone hairpin. The bagpipe section of the Grenadiers was winding down *Waltzing Matilda* which meant soon we would start moving toward the riser of judges. Time was of the essence. I could not stop and dwell on the swell of dread engulfing my lungs and heart making it almost impossible to breathe.

I produced a small can of Final Net, popped off the top and depressed the nozzle. "Close your eyes. I'm gonna shellac this sucker stiffer than the clients down at Wysocki and Sons."

"Aaaaaagh!" Britney belted out a blood-chilling scream.

At first I thought she was freaking out about me mentioning the funeral home and then I decided she'd had a bad reaction to the Final Net. (Though an aversion to hairspray was unheard of among my people, I'd read about such strange phenomena in the professional journals.)

"I told you to close your eyes!"

"I can't believe it," she whisper hissed, her gaze fixated on a distant point in the crowd behind us. "It's *her*."

*Her*, I'd assumed, was Mrs. DeGuza, infamous for slinging insults at her daughter in public, barking at her to sit up straight, smile more, lose a few pounds. I could relate, as on more than one occasion I, too, had been heckled by my own mother.

"Don't worry about your mom. Just stay still," I said, pointing the nozzle for another coat. Britney's lips began to tremble. "My ultimate enemy."

Poor girl. She was flipping out from all the pressure. Geez. Stage mothers. What a pain. I applied one last spritz and shoved the Final Net into my purse. “Just try to keep yourself together for the judges. They’re right up ahead.”

Britney clutched my arm, her fingers digging into my flesh. “See for yourself. She’s staring at me, messing with my head.”

I followed her line of sight to the middle of the spectators and spied a wispy blond glaring at us - or, to be more exact, at Britney - with the hunger of a long-haul trucker pulling up to a Mickey D’s drive-thru. She wore tiny jean shorts and, despite the dripping humidity, a white fleece. She was not Donna DeGuza. I could tell because Donna’s hair was the color of inflamed hemorrhoids.

“Who is *that?*” I asked, slightly aghast myself.

Britney slumped into the corner of the car and put her face in her hands. “The worst person in the universe. Kara Starrett.”

It clicked, then. Kara Starrett was Britney’s bitter rival in the Greater Northampton County beauty pageant circuit. The two girls had been neck and neck in almost every contest since age five. If Britney came in first, Kara came in second and vice versa. They hated each other with such a passion that Dame DeGuza refused to hire anyone who had so much as touched-up Kara’s lip gloss. That’s how the House of Beauty landed the plum PolkaFest gig, because Sandy had once (wisely) declined to trim Kara’s bangs.

“What’s with the hoodie?” I asked.

“It’s her beauty secret. No sun.” Britney chewed a fake nail. “I don’t stand a chance of winning now, not if she’s here. Everyone will say it’s a miracle.”

The Caddy engine roared expectantly. Britney could sulk later.

“Get a grip,” I said, rubbing her arm soothingly. “Let Kara be Kara. For now, just focus on playing the best *Yankee Doodle Dandy* ever to be performed on a yellow plastic kazoo.”

“Ugh, the kazoo. That’s nothing compared to Kara’s talent, Rachmaninoff.”

“Pshaw. Anyone can do Rachmaninoff. My own mother made it for dinner last Wednesday with homemade noodles. All you need is a packet of onion soup mix.”

Britney furrowed her brows. “Huh?”

We could swap recipes later. “Anyway, if you don’t get up soon and start acting like a princess, your mother’s gonna read both of us the riot act.”

But even this fearsome threat had no effect. Britney simply crossed her arms and seemed to deflate, the tiara I’d glued to her head slipping over her right ear as if it, too, had thrown in the towel. “This is impossible. It can’t be Kara. It just can’t. I mean, she was supposed to be out of the picture!”

The girl was becoming unhinged, babbling to herself about nothingness. Donna would demand a refund on her deposit if I didn’t do everything in my power to get her to perform. “Look. Maybe you’re mistaken and the person you think is Kara might be someone else. Hard to tell under that hood.”

Britney managed a hopeful smile. “Really?”

“Sure.”

“Go check again.”

I stood and scanned the crowd but Kara had vanished into the morass of sweaty spectators and bobbing cones of pink fluffy cotton candy. “No sign of her. Whoever she was has disappeared.”

“That’s a relief.” Britney readjusted her tiara, the color returning to her cheeks. “Of course you’re right. It couldn’t be Kara. What was I thinking?”

“It was just the stress getting to you. And the heat.”

She wiped off her kazoo and crawled back to the seat, adopting perfect posture as I adjusted the crown one last time. “Good luck, Brit. You’re gonna knock it out of the park.”

“Thanks, Bubbles.”

A base drum thumped indicating the Grenadiers were done. The crowd roared in appreciation. This was my cue to exit. With one last encouraging nod to Britney, I was lifting a leg to climb over the Cadillac door when I was stopped short by a shout.

“Hey, Yablinko!” called a man who was not too shabby, at least by Lehigh standards. He wore a white Oxford cloth shirt that set off his rugged tan and dark hair. His hands were casually stuffed in the pockets of his worn jeans and he was smirking like he was well aware of my preference for purple lace thongs.

I hesitated, confused, since I’d never seen him before in my life. “Do I know you?”

He grinned. “Stop kidding around. Why don’t you come down from there so I can give you a big ole kiss?”

Absolutely not! He was a total stranger, albeit an attractive one in delightfully worn jeans. “Thanks, I’ll pass.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked, frowning at my rejection. “I’ve crossed three continents to get to you. I had to break out of an Uzbeki prison.”

Uh oh. My ex-husband/ legal counsel, Dan the Man, had warned me to be on guard for cons trying to scam me out of my prospective millions. I couldn’t risk leaving the car, not with this crook a few feet away ready to get his hands on my assets. “Scram, punk.”

“Wait. Are you serious?”

I threw down my trump card. “If you don’t leave me alone, I’ll call my friend Mickey Sinkler, the chief of police. He’s right over there.” I pointed to where Mickey was leaning against

the judges' stand, eating a chocolate-covered frozen banana and wiping his missing chin with a paper napkin.

He checked Mickey and burst out laughing. "Oh, c'mon. That doofus couldn't catch a cold."

I cupped my hands to my mouth. "Yo..."

"All right. All right. If that's the way you're gonna be, then screw it. Sorry I made the effort." Then he turned and, with one last pained glance, melded into the crowd.

Good riddance, scum. Three continents my ass. Uzbeki prison indeed. Hah! Who did he think he was?

*Stiletto.*

The word popped into my mind with such crystal clarity, my whole body froze.

*Stiletto!*

I didn't know who Stiletto was, exactly, except that every fiber of my being suddenly craved him with a passion. My soul mate. Yeah, that was it. The dude the universe had joined me with forever. And I had just let him walk off.

"Stiletto!" I stepped onto the car door right as the Caddy lurched forward. This caused me to totter a bit, sending my stomach into a spiral and my arms wind-milling. Then the driver hit the brakes and I was done for.

"Aaah!" I cried, covering my already damaged skull with my arms thinking, *oh no, not again!* Curling myself into a ball, I braced for the crushing impact of bone and flesh against concrete and, much to my surprise, was rescued by a dashing man with biceps of iron.

I wish. That stuff only happens in books.

In reality, I fell into the snake-belly arms of a spindly short man who managed to hold me for about a minute before his legs buckled and he collapsed, taking me with him. The next I knew,

he was under me on the sidewalk, squealing in protest. “Get off me you big blonde thing. Oh, my god. I can’t breathe. Someone help! I’ve been squished by some zaftig Barbie!”

Zaftig Barbie. Pretty sure Jane got that model for Christmas when she was ten. Hair in braids. Lederhosen. Miniature apple pie and a pet pooch named Gunther. Not a big seller, as I recalled.

I rolled off him and got to my knees, distressed to see that the contents of my bag had been scattered under the Cadillac. “Sorry,” I said, as I scrambled to collect my brush and hairspray, assorted tampons and lipsticks, gum, and, oh lord, my phone. “And I’m not Barbie, I’m Bubbles.”

The little man stood and brushed himself off. The first thing I noticed about him was his hair and not just because that’s my professional interest. It was in a ‘fro, like from the 1970s, and it was devoid of color.

“And I’m not Stiletto, I’m Josh.” Seeing my shock, he explained, “That’s what you were yelling when you mosh pitted me just now. Stiiii-leeeee-toooo! What is that, the new kowabunga?”

“No. At least, I don’t think so.” Honestly, I was so mortified by the scene I must have made that I desperately wished for a sinkhole to swallow me whole. “I’m so sorry. I have no idea what came over me.”

He pushed up his wire rims. “That was the most unsafe move I have seen, ever. You could have killed me.”

I stood and slung my bag over my shoulder. His nose came up to my boobs. “Look, I just thought I saw someone I knew and I was trying to get hold of him.”

“Have you ever thought of calling?” He wiggled his bushy eyebrows. “How about a tap on the shoulder? A good old-fashioned letter in the mail. You don’t need to be throwing yourself into the crowd like a Flying Wallenda. You could have broken my glasses.”

“Yoo hoo, pretty boy! How about a picture with the hero?” A woman was holding up her phone and waving it back and forth.

Two bright pink dots appeared on the pallid cheeks of my savior. “No, no. That’s fine,” he demurred, waving her off. “Let’s not make a scene.” Turning to me, he grumbled, “See what you’ve done? I *hate* attention.”

“But you *were* a hero,” I said. “If you hadn’t caught me, I might have hit my head again and that would have been bad. You saved my life.”

“You obviously haven’t met my brother. No doubt he’ll blame me for making a spectacle of the family name by standing in the wrong spot at the wrong time.” He massaged his forehead. “Squashed Josh. That’s what he’ll call me.” He sighed. “Guess that’s a step up from Josh the Loser.”

That was ridiculous. For starters, Josh the Loser didn’t even rhyme. I felt outraged on his behalf. “You’re a grown man. You shouldn’t let him push you around.”

Someone bellowed, “That’s the guy who saved her. It was crazy. He’s half her size!”

“He did!” I echoed in agreement, pointing down at his ‘fro. “Take his picture. The last gentleman in the Lehigh Valley.”

Two women squealed and demanded selfies. I tugged my pink tank over my pierced navel and stood on tiptoe, trying to peer over the mass of hot, sweaty bodies for a glimpse of my one true love. But it was no use. He was gone.

I almost burst into tears.

“Ooooooh, catch me next!” A portly woman in green shorts hoisted her butt onto the stopped Caddy.

That’s when I noticed something really disturbing. The back seat was empty. Where was Britney? Last I left her, she was smiling and checking the tissue paper in her kazoo.

“Ready?” The woman in green shorts threw out her arms and perched on the door.

“Jenna. Get this on video. I wanna put it on Facebook.”

Jenna did a thumbs up. “Gotcha covered, Agnes.”

Wait. This was all wrong. Britney was supposed to play, *Yankee Doodle Dandy* followed by *Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania, Mighty is your Name*. If she failed to wow the judges with her musical mouth skills, she’d be hard pressed to go home with the Princess of PolkaFest crown this weekend.

“Please, don’t. You’ll hurt yourself.” Nevertheless, Josh crouched under the shadow of Agnes who was poised to execute a dramatic swan dive and extended his arms stiffly. He shut his eyes, tight.

“Atta boy. Be a sport.” Agnes nodded to Jenna with the phone. “Okay. One...two...three....”

There was scream, a piercing cry of distress that came directly from the alley next to the Boyd Theater. I knew that scream, having heard it only minutes before.

“Help!”

The voice was unmistakably Britney’s. She was in trouble.

Agnes catapulted off the Cadillac onto Josh who began his own caterwauling while I headed upstream through the sea of perspiring humanity, thrusting my elbows into various guts and bare shoulders. So absorbed were these gawping spectators by the sight of this slim man teetering under the weight of the enormous Agnes, that they were oblivious to the sound of a young woman’s cries of terror.

“Please, someone!” whimpered Britney.

I broke through the last line of defense and spotted a woman in a purple sash in the shadows of the alley, twisting and turning, trying to escape the clutches of a figure in a white

hoodie. Kara Starrett had Britney by a lock of Final-Netted hair and was dragging her down the dark passage, toward the parking lot behind the theater.

With all my might, I hollered her name until my lungs burned. If only people would pay attention. If only they'd listen!

Just when I managed to fight my way to the alley entrance, a car at the other end peeled off with a deafening screech of tires. I called for Britney, but she was gone.

So was Kara.

I leaned against the cool granite wall of the Union Bank building drained and heartbroken that I'd failed in a task that shouldn't have been very hard. Britney had been kidnapped in broad daylight, in front of dozens of people. And it was all my fault.

There was only one choice, as useless as it would be; I had to call Lehigh's finest (which wasn't saying much.) But no sooner had I pressed the first 1 in 9-1-1, then Sandy appeared, her brown eyes wide in concern. "Where's Britney? The car arrived at the judges' stand empty and now everyone's talking."

I pointed down the alley. "I followed her here but couldn't get her before she got in the car."

"She drove off?"

"More like she was taken against her will."

Sandy peered into the passageway. "Get outta here. Are you sure?"

I relayed Britney's fit upon seeing the girl in the white hoodie giving her the stink eye and how it turned out to be her arch enemy, Kara. "Next you know, Kara's dragging her away by the hair, Three Stooges style."

Sandy slapped her chest. "You don't mean...Kara *Starrett*."

“Talk about extreme competition, say?” In our part of Pennsylvania we end sentences with “say,” to keep the conversation going. “Being Princess of PolkaFest must be even bigger than being Miss Northampton County.”

“Impossible.” Sandy started shaking her head, like she didn’t want to hear it. “It can’t be.”

“I dunno. You get a \$10,000 scholarship a lifetime of Mrs. T’s pierogis when you win PolkaFest. What do you get when you’re crowned Miss Northampton County? A cheap plaque and five hundred bucks from the Rotary. I’d go with the unlimited pierogi any day.”

“What I’m saying is that if the person you saw really was Kara, then that’s huge!”

“I know, right? I’m pretty sure felony assault is grounds for disqualification under the PolkaFest guidelines.”

“No, I mean because during a snowstorm right around Christmas, while you were recovering from your coma, Kara lost control of her Kia Sorento and ended up in the frigid Lehigh River. She hasn’t been seen since.”

I let that sink in. Christmas was a long time ago and while Kara did look pale, she didn’t look dead, either. “You’re making that up.”

“Am not. It was all over the news.”

If what Sandy said was true – and Sandy rarely lied unless it was about the excess pounds belonging to her and others - then I was flummoxed. Ten minutes ago, Kara had been right in front of us giving Brit the heeby jeebies. The only reasonable explanation was that she was back. “I’m telling you, I saw her.”

Sandy exhaled a long whistle. “If that’s the case, then call the casino. That’s where they held the Miss Northampton County Pageant and the owners have offered a \$50,000 dollar reward for information leading to Kara safe return.”

“I also saw Stiletto.” Since we were catching up about things we’d spied with our little eyes, I decided to throw this in. “He called me Yablanko and said he’d broken out from an Uzbeki prison. I told him to buzz off until I realized who he was, though it was too late because by then he’d disappeared.”

A shade shrouded Sandy’s expression, transforming her face into a careful mask. It was the look of someone who is trying to appear neutral when deep down she is very, very disappointed that her once reliable best friend was off her rocker.

“So, you remember him now?” she asked quietly.

“Kinda. Lately, I’ve been having...glimpses.”

She studied her hands. “And how soon before or after seeing Kara did you see him?”

“I dunno. Maybe a few minutes. What are you getting at?” Though, much to my growing irritation, I knew. The question was whether she’d have enough nerve to answer me honestly.

“Earlier in the parade you clearly were having one of your episodes. Genevieve and I were calling to you and you were in la-la land, waving your hand like the queen and blowing kisses.”

I held my breath, waiting for it.

“And now that you claim to have seen Stiletto, I’m wondering if Kara was one of your, you know, hallucinations.”

Son of a gun. She went there. She actually said it.

“Not that any of this is your fault,” she rushed to add. “You’re still recovering from a head injury. Everyone understands.”

“*Everyone?*”

“Not everyone. Some people are simply too thick in the skull to see your problem is physical, not mental.”

“Great. So the whole town either assumes I’m temporarily bananas or permanently bananas. No matter how you cut it, I’m as bananas as Bubblegum Sal.” Bubblegum Sal had been a Lehigh institution when we were kids. Even though she’d been pushing seventy, she used to dress up in a cowgirl outfit with white go-go boots and stand on the corner of Dech and Linden handing out free pieces of Bazookas. Perfectly harmless, though the gum was stale. “That’s so unfair.”

Sandy pursed her lips just like my dreaded Kindergarten teacher used to do when she found I’d been playing a different type of show and tell with Michael Utard. “Must I remind you of the night you went down Easton Avenue wearing nothing but a crown of Reynold’s Wrap?”

Like she would ever let me forget that momentary lapse in judgment.

I didn’t care what Sandy suspected. I’d seen Kara drag a screaming Britney into a car against her will. And I’d seen Stiletto. They were not random spitfires from my damaged brain and I would show up the gossips in this crap small town by finding them both.

After all, if once I’d been able to smash the stereotype of being just another dumb bottle-blonde with a passion for Spandex and Maybelline, then proving I was a *sane* bottle-blonde with a passion for Spandex and Maybelline should be as easy as falling off a moving Cadillac.

