

Designed to Kill

by Jane K. Cleland

“Gloria’s a doll,” Blaine said. “You’ll like her a lot, Josie. You won’t get to see Miles, which is too bad because he’s a doll, too. Really, he’s such a nice guy, I can’t believe she left him. But there’s no accounting for Cupid’s arrow, right?” Blaine sighed. “I just got off the phone with him. He thinks Gloria’s infatuated and that she’ll fall out of love as quickly as she fell into it. He hasn’t given up hope.”

Blaine Anderson, the founder and CEO of BA Designs, the seacoast region’s most successful interior design and decorating firm, and Reggie Connor, her head carpenter, had stopped by to give me an update about the Austin’s divorce. Blaine had recommended my company—Prescott’s Antiques & Auctions—to her clients, the Austin, since it wasn’t kosher for her to do the appraisal herself. Reputable dealers never appraise objects they sold or hope to buy.

As Blaine explained it, when Gloria announced that she’d fallen hard for another man, her husband, Miles, had been completely blind-sided and was still reeling. But whether Miles’ continuing efforts to patch things up constituted stalking, or whether it was merely admirable persistence, was no longer open for debate—Gloria had just been granted an order of protection, and effective immediately, he had to stay away from her and their house.

I shook my head in mute empathy—to both of them—but especially to Miles. It was awful being dumped. Five years earlier, before I moved from New York City to New Hampshire to open Prescott’s, a jerk name Rick broke up with me two weeks after my

father's death. I wasn't bouncing back fast enough, he told me. I'd been crushed. And though I'd never told a soul, even though I hadn't wanted to see his miserable face ever again, it was months before I'd stopped loving him.

I glanced at them. Blaine was charming and vivacious. She was about my age—mid-thirties. From her every-hair-in-place, blonde updo to her Channel suit and Salvatore Ferragamo pumps, she defined elegance. Reggie Connor was older, in his forties. He was big and brawny and taciturn. He wore old jeans, a tartan plaid flannel shirt, and work boots, and he looked as if he would have been more at home on a shop floor than an antiques-filled office. Blaine was waiting for my reaction. Reggie looked bored. When I didn't comment, she did.

"I know, I know... you're thinking I'm just a gossip. But I'm not." She laughed, a merry sound. "Or rather, I am, but I'm not gossiping now." She leaned forward, her expression earnest. "You need to know, Josie. When I first told you that Gloria and Miles Austin were divorcing, they were perfectly civil toward one another. No longer. I wanted to give you a head's up so you don't walk into a... a situation... unaware."

I appreciated the warning. Without question, emotions were likely to run high. Civility can degenerate into malevolence, with or without cause, over time or in a flash of a second.

"Who's Gloria's new fellow?" I asked, wondering if he was already living in Miles' house, sleeping in Miles' bed.

"Vern someone. I've never met him." Blaine shrugged. "Talk about different types—Vern's a high school math teacher, serious and scholarly. Miles is a furniture salesman, a gregarious, hail-fellow-well-met sort." She sighed. "They're two good men."

She shook her head, then smiled. “You’re going to love this, Josie. Want to guess how Gloria and Vern met?”

“No idea.”

“At one of your tag sales. Picture it—she’s looking at jugs and he’s deep in chisels and planes—their eyes meet—and the rest is history.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope. Isn’t that a hoot?”

“Small world, right? Amazing! I should use that in my new ads... meet the man of dreams... come to Prescott’s.”

“I’ve heard worse ad campaigns!” Blaine said, laughing.

Reggie sat with his legs stretched out, his expression unchanged.

“So,” I said, “what am I going to find at the Austin’s house?”

“Gloria is into French country,” she said. She must have seen something in my expression, because she added, “What is it? You’re a fan, too?”

“It’s not that—it’s that I had to put off an auction I was planning for this spring. Frisco’s beat me to the punch.” Frisco’s, the famous New York City antiques auction house where I’d worked for years, was holding an auction next week featuring a stellar collection of French country furniture and artifacts. Reading their catalogue had made me gnash my teeth, I was so jealous.

“I’ll mention it to Gloria in case she wants to sell anything.”

An empty offer—any antiques dealer will tell you that it’s harder to buy quality items than it is to sell them, so on the face of it, Blaine’s proposal was welcome, but I knew better. Everything Gloria had purchased from BA Designs was likely to have been

adulterated, and as such was off limits to Prescott's. We never refinished, repaired, or repainted anything. To serious collectors, refurbishing antiques is verboten, akin to gourmets eating fast food. To most people, it's no big deal, but among those who care about such things, it's just not done. Blaine took a different approach. She'd once confided that her clients came to her for fantasy, not reality. I didn't admire Blaine's methods, but I was a business woman and a pragmatist, and there's no crime in making the old look new again; the crime would be in lying about it.

"Any chance you can join me in my walk-through, Reggie?" I asked. "The way I work is to go through the house, video recording everything I'm appraising, annotating as I go. If you talk about what was done to each object, that would be a real time-saver."

Reggie looked at Blaine, his boss. She nodded, and he said, "Sure. Tomorrow at four, right?"

"Yes. I'm guessing that it'll take at least a couple of hours. Let's meet at the Austin's house, okay."

He agreed and Blaine extracted a key from her clutch purse. "Gloria asked me to give you this—she's taking the afternoon off from her job—she works in a doctor's office—but she has some errands, and she was concerned that she might run late. If she's not there, you're to go in and get started."

I nodded and pocketed the key. "Sounds good," I said.

* * *

The next morning, as I sat in my car waiting for it to warm up—it was 28 degrees, fully 20 degrees colder than average for April, and way too cold for my taste—my cellphone rang. I had just bought a collection of old books—reading copies, good for the tag sale,

but nothing special—and was en route back to Prescott’s. I glanced at the dash clock. It was just ten-thirty. From the caller ID display, I saw it was Blaine. I slipped in my earpiece.

“Josie,” she said. “I swear I have a memory like a sieve! I put together a binder of all the antiques I sold the Austin, then forgot to leave it with you. God, can you believe it? I’m on the road heading to Boston, but I can drop it off this afternoon after I get back—about three, I’m guessing. I left it at the shop.”

“A binder! That’s terrific. You’re so organized, Blaine!”

She laughed, a pretty tinkling sound. “I’m like a doctor... I keep up-to-date charts.”

“Smart. It will definitely help. But there’s no need for you to deliver it. I can stop by your place now if someone’s there to give it me.”

“Are you sure, Josie? That would be a huge help, but I hate to ask.”

“You didn’t ask—I volunteered.”

We ended with her promise to call her receptionist, Jasmine, right away to alert her that I was coming.

Ten minutes later, I parked on Main Street in Rocky Point, only two doors down from BA Designs’ sleek and understated shop. As I was reaching for my tote bag, I saw Reggie walk out of the shop wearing only a black flannel shirt, and I shivered on his behalf. His shirt was wholly insufficient for the cold snap. He slid behind the wheel of a BA Designs van that was parked in back of me. He didn’t notice me. I watched through my rearview mirror as he adjusted his side mirror, then drove off toward Route 95.

Inside, Jasmine sat at a Regency-style desk positioned kitty-corner to the front. Six-foot high partitions divided the back into two private design studios. Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* played softly. Jasmine, a voluptuous brunette, smiled as I entered and told me she'd be right with me. She was chatting with a man I didn't know.

"No problem," I said.

The man turned to look at me and I nodded politely. He was close to forty, tall and thin, with a long, sad face. He had a buzz cut. He wore a black windbreaker over a white shirt. His tie was pink with an optical-illusion pattern, very mod.

I stepped aside and stood by the front window.

"Whatever my wife gets, I want a copy of. Do you understand?"

He sounded like he had a chip on his shoulder and was hoping for a fight.

"Yes, sir," Jasmine said.

"You can send it to my lawyer. Here's his card."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her slide it under a crystal pyramid paperweight. "I'll be sure and give it to Blaine."

After he left, I approached the desk and asked, "Was that...?"

She nodded. "Miles Austin, yes. A little awkward, huh?"

"I'll say."

She handed me a padded envelope. I peeked inside and saw a white three-ring binder. I thanked her and headed back to work.

* * *

Fred, one of my two appraisers, was reading something on his monitor as I stepped into the office. I held up the binder.

“New appraisal starting today. Mostly French country.”

Fred swiveled to face me, his eyes lighting up with interest. He wore a gray suit and a black skinny tie, 1950s rat-pack cool. His black, square-framed glasses slid down his nose, and he pushed them up.

“One of Blaine Anderson’s clients,” I added.

“Oh,” he said, his interest waning as quickly as it had waxed. Fred was an antiques snob, and he knew how Blaine’s company worked.

I sat near the front window and thumbed through the binder. Each page showed two or more photos of an object, the date of sale, and the price the Austin had paid. There was no mention about what, if any, restoration, renovation, or modification had been done. I shook my head. *Not only do they muck with antiques*, I thought, disappointed, but not surprised, *they don’t document their work*.

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I got to the Austin house early, about quarter to four. The house sat on a corner lot and faced Ocean Avenue. Brambles and tall grasses grew along the sandy shoreline. I turned onto Tucker Road, and parked next to the Austin’s driveway.

Three cars were lined up, a white Toyota, a blue VW, and a black SUV. The Toyota was in the garage. The VW and the SUV were in the driveway. I wondered if either one was Reggie’s, or if he was driving the company van.

I walked to the beach and side-stepped up a dune. Standing at the top, I spotted a tanker far out, heading north. Close in, the surface was dotted with whitecaps. Waves roiled into shore, casting seaweed onto the sand. The sky was pale gray, thick with

clouds. It smelled like snow. I flipped up my hood to cut the wind, glad I wore a winter coat. I shivered and dug my hands deep into my pockets.

After awhile, I turned around, and with my back to the ocean, looked at the Austin's house. It was a beauty, a three-story Colonial with a wrap-around, screened-in porch. A widow's walk jutted up from the roof. Replica antique statues of lions in repose sat atop fieldstone columns at the entrance. High hedges surrounded the property.

Back at my car, I checked the time. It was just four o'clock. I got the video gear, and walked around the corner, mounting the steps to the front entrance, and rang the bell. A tinny-sounding buzzer echoed inside and a car engine started from somewhere outside. No one drove by. The door opened and I stood facing a man in his early forties, a stranger. He had light red hair, cut short. A smattering of freckles covered his nose. His eyes were dark green. He wore a black-and-red checked shirt and black slacks.

"Hi," I said, wondering if this was Vern or someone else, a friend, perhaps. "I'm Josie Prescott. Is Gloria here?"

"No," he said, and from his eyes, I could tell that he was upset.

I wondered what was wrong.

"I'm scheduled to meet a man named Reggie here. Has he arrived yet?"

"No."

I wasn't imagining things—he looked worried. He was waiting for me to explain what I wanted. I didn't know whether I should reveal my purpose or not. I didn't want to make a misstep and find myself involved in someone else's love triangle. It was possible that he was Gloria's boyfriend, or her brother here to take up her cause, but it was just as likely that he was Miles' best buddy or brother out for blood. While I was still trying to

decide how to reply, Reggie drove up in the BA Designs van, tapped his horn, and when I turned, waved. *Saved by the honk*, I thought. Reggie made a right onto Tucker and his car disappeared from view behind the hedge.

“There’s Reggie, now,” I said, smiling. “May I ask your name?”

“Sure. Vern Milbank. I’m a friend of Gloria’s.”

“Nice to meet you, Vern. Reggie and I are here to take a look at the Austin’s antiques.”

“Right, right. Gloria mentioned something about hiring an appraiser. Come on in.”

“Thanks,” I said. I stepped into the big square foyer, leaving the door slightly ajar for Reggie. A massive staircase straight ahead curved up toward the left. Double-wide arched doorways opened to the living room on the right and the dining room at the far end. The hallway floor was oak, recently refinished, and gleaming. Botanical prints—19th century repros, good, but not great, examples of the art form—lined the walls. A French country bench was positioned on the right and covered with a blue and yellow fleur-de-lis patterned cushion.

“I’m sure Gloria will be back any minute,” Vern said. He looked at his watch, then back at me. “Today was a half-day for me.”

“A half-day?” I asked, uncertain what he was referring to.

“I teach at Rocky Point High. Whenever they schedule administrative meetings, we get sprung at noon. Anyway, I came over thinking I’d surprise Gloria.”

Reggie knocked and the unlatched door swung wide. I introduced the two men, then told Vern, "I was given a key so we could come in and get started even if Gloria wasn't home."

"Sure, sure. But I mean, where could she be? Her car's here."

I shrugged. "With a friend, maybe."

"Yeah, probably," he said, unconvinced.

I glanced at Reggie, standing beside me, his face revealing nothing.

Vern took a deep breath. "Okay, then. I'm going to take off. If you see her, tell her I'll be at Cocheco." Seeing my blank expression, he added, "In Dover. I have a little fishing shack on the Cocheco River."

I nodded. Dover was a small town about 12 miles northwest of Rocky Point.

"Do you live there?" I asked, curious about how he was using the term "shack." In some circles, a shack meant small, not decrepit, and I wondered whether Gloria, who lived in a mansion, was hooking up with a man who lived in some version of a hovel.

"No. Not in the shack itself. Don't get me wrong... it's a great little place, but it's not winterized. Mostly I use it to store my fishing gear and do a little woodworking."

"I fly fish there. It's still catch-and-release, right?" Reggie asked.

Vern nodded. "For one more week."

"What kind of woodworking do you do?"

"Marquetry." He shrugged. "It's just a hobby."

"I'm a carpenter. Marquetry's a great technique. What kind of wood do you use for the inlays?"

"Mostly rosewood, but I just got a hold of some cocobolo."

“Really? Where did you—?”

I’d never seen Reggie so engaged and I had a vision of them settling in for a long conversation about carpentry.

“Sorry to interrupt, but we really should get started,” I said, smiling, hoping neither man would resent the interruption. To Vern, I added, “I’ll be glad to give Gloria your message if she comes back while we’re still here.”

“Thanks.” Vern said, his anxiety resurfacing at my mention of her name.

“I parked in the driveway,” Reggie said. “If that VW is yours, I’m blocking you in.”

It was. Vern and Reggie left together to juggle their cars. I tossed my coat on the banister and pulled the video camera from its case, then surveyed the antiques I’d be recording.

“Josie?” Reggie called a few minutes later.

“In here,” I replied. “In the dining room.”

“Sorry I was a little late,” he said, rolling up his jean shirt sleeves, a working man preparing to work. “Route 108 was a bear.”

“You were barely late—don’t worry about it at all.” I waggled the video camera.

“Ready?”

“You bet.”

“How about if I describe what I see, then ask you to comment?”

“Sounds good.”

I began recording, starting with a highly polished, French country buffet. It sat against the dining room wall near a similarly styled table with square tapered legs and

end drawers, both of chestnut. A matching hutch stood nearby. The hutch featured hand-carved bunches of grapes on the door fronts and sturdy shelves. It reminded me of an object I'd just read about in Frisco's catalogue, a provincial hutch with, if I was recollecting properly, similar carvings on the cabinet doors.

"At a guess, the buffet dates from about seventeen-fifty," I said. "Are the drawer pulls original?"

"No. We fabricated them. Replaced the drawer end panels, too."

I opened a drawer to examine the end panel. To the naked eye, it was indistinguishable from the original. "How did you get such a good match?"

"We used sand paper to create the wear lines."

I didn't comment. I couldn't think of what to say. It was as if he were a food photographer, casually commenting that the rich-looking gravy on the mashed potatoes was brown shoe polish, not food. Using artifice to create mouth-watering photographs was one thing—using master craftsmanship to create quasi-fake antiques was another can of worms entirely. To me, it smacked of duplicity, even if openly done.

"How about the hutch?"

"All original except the legs and pulls. The legs were pretty scratched up, so we refinished them. The pulls were missing, so we took modern brass ones and antiqued them with acid."

I removed the top shelf to record the joint. It was a clean machine-sawn blind dado joint, well-aligned and stable.

"And the table?" I asked, grimacing inside, braced to hear the worst.

"Everything but the drawers and one leg is original."

I recorded every object from all sides, including every drawer, cabinet, cubbyhole, and nook. The detailed examination was tedious, but necessary. By the time we finished the first floor, close to five o'clock, I was inured. There was no object the Austin had purchased from BA Designs that was unsullied. Reggie detailed his ways and means in a matter-of-fact tone that made my skin crawl.

I opened a door, thinking it might be a pantry, and found the stairs to the cellar. "Is there a finished basement, do you know?" I asked.

"I don't think so. I've never been downstairs."

"Let's check it out."

I stood on a small landing. The steps were narrow, the pitch, steep. I flipped the light switch and a low-watt bulb hanging from a length of black wire lit up. Long shadows striped the side walls.

"It's pretty dark." I shone the small flashlight I always keep hooked on my belt down the stairs.

A pile of clothing was heaped at the bottom. I spotted a pink laundry basket on its side about two feet from the bottom step, a celery-green sheet spilling out of it onto the concrete floor.

"What is it?" Reggie asked, leaning over my shoulder, peering into the darkness.

"It looks like Gloria tossed the laundry, basket and all, down the—," I said, stopping mid-sentence, gaping.

I saw hair. Long chestnut-colored hair, splayed out. I gasped and instinctively stepped back, running into Reggie.

"Let me see," he said.

I could feel his breath on my neck.

“I’ll go check.” he said.

I pressed into the wall so he could squeeze by. I aimed my light at the place a face ought to have been. He moved aside the hair and there it was—a face in profile. It was a woman. Her skin was ashen.

“It’s Gloria,” he said.

My stomach clenched. “She must have fallen,” I managed. The beam of light began shaking and I realized my hands were trembling. I took another look. Garments and towels were scattered over and around her and socks were tangled in her hair. Her arms stretched over her head, her fingers spread, palms down. It looked as if she were about to do a push-up.

“Is she dead?” I asked, whispering.

“I think so.”

“We need to call the police.”

“Yeah.”

I leaned against the kitchen sink and listened to Reggie make the call. I couldn’t stop shaking. My heart was pounding against my chest. I felt sick. One minute Gloria was alive and planning her future with her new lover, and the next minute she was dead.

To read the rest of the story, ask for the June 2009 issue of [Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine](#).