A Crafter's Guide to Malice and Murder

An Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mystery

By Lois Winston
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ONE

Three weeks had passed since my last near-death experience at the hands of a deranged killer. This one was taking longer to shake. Even desserts, my go-to remedy for every stressful event life threw at me, had failed to work their usual magic. How unfair was that? Hadn't the universe handed us the perfect remedy by creating such a unique anadrome? Why else would "stressed" spelled backwards transform into "desserts," if not for the ultimate therapeutic purpose?

Given that this latest episode had occurred at work, our publisher had not only brought in counselors to help us deal with the emotional trauma but had also offered all employees a week of paid leave, urging we use it for a vacation.

The counseling sessions hadn't helped much. Neither had triple-layer black forest cake, much less chocolate anything. As for vacation, I kept dragging my feet over scheduling one. History had proven – especially in my case – that leaving New Jersey didn't mean leaving murder and mayhem behind.

Zack came up behind me as I stood in front of the living room window, staring across the street at the site of the most recent murders. He wrapped his arms around me and asked, "What can I do?"

"About what?"

"Helping you find a way out of your depression."

I sighed. "I just need time."

"Time either heals wounds or buries you beneath them."

I cocked my head to look up at him. "You're worried I've descended into the latter."

"The thought had occurred."

"Any suggestions?"

"One." He handed me a sheet of paper.

I glanced at the computer printout of a ski lodge in upstate New York, wrinkling my nose at the prospect of freezing my patootie off on a snow-covered slope. Skiing had never been my idea of an enjoyable getaway, but prior to the death of their father, my sons had loved taking to the slopes. That was, of course, before our descent into near destitution, thanks to Karl's secret gambling affair with Lady Not-so-Lucky.

"We can't go skiing. Alex and Sophie will be home on break soon, and I already invited Shane and Sophie for Thanksgiving dinner."

"Two birds, one stone. A Thanksgiving getaway. Shane recommended this place, and I think it's just what the doctor ordered."

I stared at my husband. "You've already booked this?"

“As much as you might think otherwise, Sweetheart, you’re not Superwoman. You’ve experienced acute trauma and need time to recover. It’s not helping that you’re obsessed with constantly staring at the scene of the crimes.”

I couldn’t argue with him. He was right. I needed something to drag me out of the miasma of ennui that had wrapped its tentacles around me.

I glanced at the printout again. “Why skiing? And why upstate New York?”

“The kids want to go skiing during their break.”

“They can ski in New Jersey.”

“New Jersey can’t compete with New York when it comes to ski slopes. Besides…” He pointed to a line on the printout.

My gaze landed on the words above the tip of his index finger. He had me at five-star luxury spa. I hugged my husband. “I guess we’re hitting the slopes.”

“That’s my girl.”

My eyes widened as I released him. “What about Mama?”

“I invited her, but she declined. Apparently, she and your future Stepfather Number Six have plans for Thanksgiving.”

Flora Sudberry Periwinkle Ramirez Scoffield Goldberg O’Keefe Tuttnauer always needed a man in her life, but Mama had been without a husband since divorcing Lawrence Tuttnauer nearly a year ago, her longest dry spell to date.

So far, she had refused to introduce us to Franklin Bond, a man she’d only recently met. “Let me guess, they’re going on a cruise?”

Zack graced me with a look that translated to “What do you think?”

Mama was so predictable.

Sometimes it pays to hand over decision-making to someone else, especially when that someone else often knows me better than I know myself. I turned my attention back to the printout. Apparently, Bliss Mountain Lodge was no run-of-the-mill ski resort. It billed itself as a luxurious intimate experience situated on its own private mountain.

I handed the paper back to Zack. “I have one caveat.”

“What’s that?”

“There’d better not be any dead bodies.”

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A week later, Alex and Sophie arrived back from college to begin their weeklong break. The following morning, three adults, two almost adults, one growing-like-a-weed teenager, a French bulldog, and an African Grey parrot piled into a rented Jeep Wagoneer. Assorted luggage filled the cargo space with overflow stuffed into a roof rack carrier.

I had suggested boarding Leonard, our French bulldog, and Ralph, our African Grey parrot, but was outvoted. Bliss Mountain Lodge had a pet-friendly policy with no disclaimers regarding parrots or other exotic fauna. I wondered if Ralph would be the least unusual pet we’d find at the lodge. I had visions of accidentally stepping on an axolotl or tripping over a potbelly pig.

“You never know when a situation will arise requiring the talents of a Shakespeare-quoting African Grey,” suggested Alex during the debate.

“Especially one with an intimidating stare and an even more intimidating wingspan,” added Nick.

I eyed Alex and Nick, then glanced at Zack. Were we discussing the pros and cons of bringing pets on vacation, or was this more about adding an extra layer of protection for their mother, should the need arise?

I was probably the only person on the planet whose life had been saved by an African Grey parrot and a French bulldog. On more than one occasion. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to bring them along. Another glance at my son and husband told me they obviously thought so. "Just make sure you remember to pack enough kibble and sunflower seeds."

Bliss Mountain Lodge was situated south of Rochester and west of the Finger Lakes. The farther northwest we drove, the more the landscape transformed into the perfect winter picture postcard. The ski report had predicted a light overnight snowfall with an additional two inches of fresh powder on the slopes by tomorrow morning.

Four hours after departing, we arrived at a gated private road at the base of Bliss Mountain. After Sophie's father Shane punched in the security code he'd received, the gates swung open, and we slowly began winding our way toward the top of the mountain.

Along with an extensive list of amenities, the resort website contained glowing reviews but little else. Not even online booking. Only a phone number. "How did you learn about this place?" I asked Shane.

"My financial advisor recommended it. He said it was one of the best vacation experiences he and his family had ever had."

Only a select number of people knew that the unassuming Shane Lambert was a billionaire, having won one of the largest lotteries in U.S. history several years ago. However, that windfall had forced him and daughter Sophie to change their names and move across the country to protect their privacy. We met when Alex and Sophie began dating. Shortly afterwards, Shane became the prime suspect in his ex-wife's murder. That's when he took us into his confidence.

"Sounds ultra-exclusive," I said.

"Definitely."

Which explained the website's lack of online booking. They probably employed a forensic accountant to check out the investment portfolio of anyone wishing to make a reservation.

The only photo on the one-page website had been the banner with a generic mountain view of a pristine ski slope. Bliss Mountain Lodge had conjured up an image in my mind of a rustic log cabin setting. However, when the main building came into view, I saw a structure more reminiscent of a Newport, Rhode Island Gilded Age mansion than an upstate New York ski lodge. Several smaller homes in a quasi-antebellum style dotted the landscape. A massive barn and ski lift off in the distance completed the compound. "Interesting hodgepodge of architectural styles," I said. "Either of you know anything about the history of this place?"

Shane shook his head. No surprise. He and Sophie had moved to New Jersey from North Dakota.

"Not about the property," said Zack, turning from the front passenger seat to speak to me. "However, in the mid-nineteenth century, some of the local homes and churches in the region were stops on the Underground Railroad. During Prohibition, locals transported bootleg whiskey and beer instead of slaves."

When I arched an eyebrow regarding his arcane knowledge, he explained, "Honors U.S. History junior year class trip. A few of the local homes and churches are now museums. If you'd like, we can visit them while we're here."

"Instead of hitting the slopes?" asked Nick. "I'll pass."

"Me, too," said Alex.

"Me, three," added Sophie.

Even though we were still four days away from Thanksgiving, the grounds and all structures were already decked out for Christmas, including an enormous blue spruce in the center of the circular drive that led to the porte cochère of the main building.

Three bellhops stood waiting for us at the entrance, greeted us by name, then immediately jumped into action. Before two of the men hopped into the SUV and drove off, Zack grabbed Ralph's cage, and Nick snapped a leash on Leonard's collar. The third bellhop then ushered us inside.

Bliss Mountain Lodge was unlike any hotel or resort I'd ever encountered. The massive foyer held no registration desk, no concierge station, only discreet signage directing guests to the restaurant, spa, gift shop, and ski lift. Whoever had converted the lavish mansion into a boutique resort appeared to have maintained all aspects of the former home.

We were led into a parlor filled with overstuffed chairs and couches upholstered in burgundy and forest green, a perfect backdrop for the Christmas greenery and tasteful holiday decorations adorning the room. An assortment of beverages and a spread of sandwiches, salads, and pastries awaited us on a buffet against one wall.

A massive oil painting hung above the buffet. My jaw dropped open as I realized I was staring at an original landscape by Thomas Cole of the Hudson River School. "That painting is worth millions," I whispered to Zack.

"It's probably a reproduction."

"I don't think so."

"In that case, I hope they have a good security system and even better insurance."

When I glanced toward the entrance, Zack followed my gaze. "I hope you're not thinking of walking off with that painting."

"Don't worry. It wouldn't go with our décor. Besides, we don't have a wall big enough."

"Then what are you looking at?"

"I half expected the lord and lady of the manor to glide down that sweeping staircase and enter the parlor to greet us."

However, no lord or lady or anyone else joined us until a young woman in a black and white maid's uniform appeared after we'd finished eating. She smiled and introduced herself as Estella. "I'll be your personal maid during your stay with us. If you'll follow me, I'll escort you to your lodgings."

Instead of leading us up the winding flight of stairs, she guided us to an elevator hidden under the staircase and pushed the down button. *Were our rooms situated in the basement?* I glanced at Zack, then Shane. Both seemed to share my surprise.

After we descended and the doors opened, Estella led us down one of several thickly carpeted corridors that branched off in different directions. Mahogany wainscotting and richly colored William Morris wallpaper covered the walls. Sconces lit the way with signage directing us to various locations, including emergency exits, along with reminders to avoid using the elevators in case of fire.

Behind me, I overheard Sophie whisper, "Do you think runaway slaves used these tunnels?"

Alex whispered back, "Maybe, but I doubt they looked like this back then."

At the end of the corridor, we entered another elevator and ascended rather than descended farther into the bowels of the mountain. When the elevator stopped, the doors opened onto a small marble-tiled foyer. I suspected we now stood in one of the antebellum homes I'd noticed earlier.

"Welcome to Auden House," said Estella with a flourish of her arm. "I've unpacked your luggage and stored your suitcases. Mr. Lambert, you and your daughter are in rooms in the east

wing. Mr. and Mrs. Barnes, you and your sons are in the west wing." She then handed Zack and Shane sets of key cards for all of us.

Before leaving, she waved toward one of the rooms off the foyer. "Information regarding everything about the lodge is located on the desk in the library. Cocktails are served at six in the solarium, dinner at seven with a presentation to follow this evening on the history of Bliss Mountain Lodge. I think you'll find it fascinating."

She paused a beat before adding, "Please let me know if you need anything. Each room has a phone that directly connects to me or another member of our staff if I'm not available. Our goal is to make your stay as carefree and pleasurable as possible."

"Are we free to explore the tunnels?" asked Nick.

Estella hesitated. "Tunnels? You mean the lower-level corridors? There's nothing to explore. They lead to the various homes on the property and the barn, which is also where you catch the ski lift. We ask that you respect the privacy of our other guests by only moving between your accommodations and the public areas."

As soon as Estella left, we toured our home for the week. Auden House had a definite Southern antebellum vibe to its décor. Except for the gathering room with its massive fireplace and fully decked out kitchen, complete with an Aga stove, the rooms were small and cozy. Each contained a working fireplace that had been converted to gas.

Instead of bedrooms, there were suites, each with a sitting room, most likely once a dressing room from the looks of the massive wardrobe in each, and an attached bathroom. Although the fixtures looked period, closer observation showed they were modern-day reproductions.

Afterwards, we allowed Ralph time to spread his wings while Nick took Leonard outside for a piddle and a romp. The six of us then gathered in the library to pour over the information packet.

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After changing for dinner, we returned to the lodge in time to wander around and familiarize ourselves with the various public areas. At six o'clock we entered the solarium for cocktail hour.

Lush foliage, entwined with twinkle lights and interspersed with multiple varieties of orchids, filled the glass-enclosed solarium. A string quartet provided background music as guests mingled, sipping champagne and nibbling on a variety of hors d'oeuvres offered by tray-toting, tuxedo-clad waiters. "We've either stepped back in time or onto the set of a Julian Fellowes period piece," I said.

Because our confirmation had mentioned guests were expected to dress for dinner, I'd packed a black cocktail dress and told the boys to pack their suits. However, glancing around the solarium, I noticed some guests had entirely ignored the directive while others had gone full glitz and glam formal. The men wore tuxedoes, the women in full-length gowns with an abundance of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires sparkling from their necks, earlobes, and fingers. Some even wore tiaras.

I raised my chin to indicate two men to our left. "If it weren't for those guys in Bermuda shorts, I'd feel positively naked."

Zack grinned at me and chuckled.

"What?"

"Just that I was right." He reached for two champagne flutes from a passing waiter and handed one to me.

"About?"

"We only arrived a few hours ago, and your sense of humor is returning."

"Are you gloating?"

“Wouldn’t think of it. Drink your champagne.”

I took a sip of bubbly and helped myself to a caviar canape from another waiter. “Free-flowing Moet and Baluga. Do I even want to know what this place costs?”

“Probably not, but would you feel better if I told you that it isn’t even putting a slight dent in our savings?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Not even a *slight* dent? I find that hard to believe.”

“A tiny dimple at most.”

Thanks to Zack, I no longer worried about residing in a cardboard box over a subway grate, but that very real fear, courtesy of Karl’s duplicity, had left a permanent mark on me. I suspected the cost of tonight’s Moet and Baluga-fest would feed a family of four for a year. “Maybe instead of BlissMountainLodge.com, they should have chosen IfYouHavetoAskYouCantAffordIt.com for the URL.”

Zack wrapped his free arm around my shoulders and kissed my temple. “And she’s back.”

“I’m forcing myself to counter the Lucille-like thoughts currently filling my head.” I shuddered to think my communist mother-in-law and I had anything in common, but I suppose in this instance, we did.

“About?”

“Let’s just say I hope Bliss Mountain Lodge donates their leftovers to local homeless shelters and food banks.” Although the absurdity of serving champagne and caviar to the homeless didn’t escape me, it made more sense than assigning the leftovers to a Dumpster.

“Trust me, Sweetheart, you’re nothing like your former mother-in-law and never will be, but I do share your concerns. This place is certainly over the top. I won’t object if you feel so uncomfortable that you want to leave, but after what you’ve been through, you deserve a few days of nonstop pampering. No matter the cost.”

I glanced across the room to where my sons and Sophie sat eating and laughing at a small glass-topped wrought iron table. “Before the kids ski a single downhill run? They’d never speak to me again.”

“Good call.”

At precisely seven o’clock we were ushered into a dining room that resembled a set from *Downton Abbey*, complete with ancestral portraits lining the walls. One long table with assigned seating ran the length of the room. I counted twenty-two chairs.

In keeping with the traditions of the Gilded Age, families were broken up, I suppose to encourage conversation. In my experience, those conversations usually resulted in awkward small talk that quickly petered out into even more awkward silences. I hoped the seat assignments were only for this first dinner and wouldn’t continue throughout our stay.

I found myself assigned to a seat in the middle of the table between two portly gentlemen. I pegged them both as somewhere in their seventies. One looked like he was rapidly closing in on eighty with the other appearing several years younger. Besides the minor difference in age, the older man sported a shiny bald spot circled by a closely cropped white fringe. The younger one tried to mask his balding pate with a gray comb-over.

The two men alternated sipping an amber liquid on the rocks while conversing. When I took my seat, they each nodded to me but continued their conversation, speaking around me.

As we waited for the remaining guests to take their seats, the older man drained his cut crystal double old-fashioned glass and signaled to a nearby waiter. “Another round for both of us.”

“Certainly, sir. And you were drinking?”

“Macallan. The good stuff.”

"Yes, sir."

Zack sat across the table from me, Shane at the end nearest the head of the table. Toward the opposite end, I spied my sons and Sophie surreptitiously swapping out place cards, then quickly taking seats together before their assigned dinner companions entered the room. *Why hadn't I thought of that?*

Once all guests took had taken their seats, minus a conspicuously empty chair at the foot of the table and one directly cattycorner to it, the woman at the head of the table rose. She tapped her wine glass to get everyone's attention. "I want to welcome all of you to Bliss Mountain Lodge. My name is Vivienne Bliss. I'm the current owner of Bliss Mountain Lodge and the great-great-great granddaughter of Cornelius Bliss, the original owner of this property. Since some of you are first-time guests, I'll provide you with a brief history of the lodge during the dessert course. Meanwhile, I hope you'll enjoy the delectable meal our internationally renowned chef and his staff have prepared for you this evening."

I pegged Vivienne as somewhere in her early to mid-thirties. As she spoke, both her bearing and the precise choreography of her head and upper limbs reminded me of a ballerina. Her swanlike neck and the severe chestnut bun at her nape added to the imagery.

Vivienne took her seat, and the gentleman to my left finally introduced himself as Carson Woodruff, a retired pharmaceutical CEO. Not to be outdone, the gentleman to my right introduced himself as Griffin Harker, also a retired CEO but from the insurance industry. I forced a smile and buried my teeth in my tongue as I wondered how much each had contributed to my burgeoning prescriptions and insurance rates.

I introduced myself as Anastasia Barnes. With a wave of my hand, I indicated Zack across the table. "My husband Zachary."

The two men acknowledged Zack with nods of their own as the liveried waitstaff began serving the first course, salad greens with pistachios, honeyed goat cheese, and a Champagne vinaigrette. As I ate, my dinner companions continued to bend my ear in an odd game of *Can You Top This?*

I was not impressed. Since neither man seemed at all interested in learning anything about me, I listened with half an ear, smiling, and nodding at appropriate intervals while eating my salad and writing both men off as blowhards from a bygone era.

Across the table, a reverse tableau was taking place with the two women on either side of Zack practically drooling over him. Perhaps they'd recognized him, thanks to that Sexiest Man of the Year magazine cover from several years before we met. From the look on his face, I suspect my husband probably wished we'd stayed at Auden House and ordered room service.

A quick shared glance with Zack conveyed volumes. Never again would we rely on vacation advice from Shane Lambert's financial advisor. Perhaps his glowing review of Bliss Mountain Lodge had more to do with the number of wealthy new clients he'd gained from his stay and less about the skiing and other amenities.

Studying my fellow dinner guests, I found the group consisted of many senior citizens, a few with athletic bodies that suggested they spent much of the winter on the slopes. Perhaps they came for the other amenities. A sprinkling of thirty or forty-somethings, all looking like they'd learned to ski before walking, rounded out the table.

An older woman sandwiched between the Bermuda shorts men had buried her nose in a book. She held what at first glance looked like a polar bear cub on her lap. After squinting, I identified the furball as an American Eskimo dog. The pup wore a rhinestone collar around its neck and an iridescent silver bow clipped to the fur on its head.

At least the food lived up to expectations. The entrée consisted of poached lobster tail with roasted cauliflower, asparagus, and risotto drizzled with a lobster butter sauce. A berry Pavlova with mascarpone Chantilly cream, raspberry compote and an assortment of fresh berries capped off the meal.

Once the waitstaff had served Pavlovas to everyone, Vivienne rose and launched into her presentation. "My Great-great-great grandfather Cornelius was a fervent abolitionist. During the mid-nineteenth century, his home, a modest saltbox situated on this mountain, was a stop on the Underground Railroad."

"Heard it all before," muttered Griffin Harker. He signaled the waiter for another round of Macallan, then whipped out his phone and began scrolling.

As I concentrated on Vivienne's words, a woman two seats down from Zack caught my attention when she pulled a ball of yarn and crochet hook from her purse. She appeared to be in her early thirties. The plunging neckline of her amethyst satin gown left little to the imagination, and the diamonds that sparkled from her earlobes, throat, and the tiara adorning her blonde retro beehive hairdo presented a stark contrast to the granny square she deftly stitched.

When our eyes briefly met, hers registered surprise. She leaned forward to draw the attention a woman seated two chairs down, then pointed toward me. The second woman, also blonde and about the same age, wore an equally revealing gown and lavish jewels but had chosen rose chiffon and a combination of sapphires and diamonds for the evening. Instead of a tiara, a jeweled clip adorned her updo.

The second woman also exhibited surprise when she looked my way. She immediately retrieved a small needlework canvas from her beaded clutch and waved it in my direction. Even from across the table, I recognized it as one of my *American Woman* designs.

In a demanding tone, a shocked Carson Woodruff turned to me and asked, "How do you know our wives?"

Their wives? Both women looked young enough to be their granddaughters. "I don't."

"Well, they seem to know you," huffed Griffin, switching his gaze back and forth several times between me and the two women.

"They must recognize me from *American Woman*."

"What's that?" asked Carson. One of those insipid reality TV shows?"

"It's a women's magazine. I'm the crafts editor."

He snorted. "So you're the one responsible for all the crap cluttering my house."

"And mine," added Griffin. "Between them, those two could open their own crafts superstore."

When I refused to respond – or take the blame – Griffin returned to his phone and Carson whipped out his. I turned my attention back to Vivienne.

"At the turn of the century, Cornelius's oldest son Ambrose, my great-great-grandfather, made a fortune in oil exploration. He purchased the entire mountain, tore down the original home, and built this grand Beaux-Arts mansion for his family, naming it Bliss Manor. In addition, he later erected the surrounding cottages, for his five sons –Tobias, Auden, Jonah, Caleb, and Ezra.

I'm told the nod to antebellum architecture of the cottages was to appease my Southern debutante great-great grandmother. She'd requested a plantation style home, but Ambrose had wanted something more befitting his wealth. After Ambrose died, leaving Bliss Manor to Tobias, my great-great grandmother lived out the remainder of her days rocking on the columned porch of one of the cottages."

I'd hardly depict our accommodations as a cottage. I remembered the same label had described the auxiliary homes on the grounds of Beckwith Chateau, the New Jersey estate that was now a country club and conference center. The wealthy, it seemed, had a much different definition of *cottage*.

"Unfortunately," continued Vivienne, emphasizing her words with a drawn-out sigh, "every barrel contains a rotten apple. In the Bliss barrel, that was my Great-Grandfather Tobias.

"After he lost most of the family fortune during the Depression, Tobias partnered with Solomon Diamond, a local gangster. They turned Bliss Manor into a private gentlemen's club – complete with speakeasy, casino, and bordello – and built an illegal brewery beneath the barn.

"In 1932, government agents raided the property. They arrested Tobias Bliss, Solomon Diamond, and twelve other men. Both my great-grandfather and Diamond died in prison.

The property passed on to Tobias's only son, my grandfather Jasper. In the nineteen-eighties, he and his son, my father Virgil, transformed the property into this ski resort with Bliss Manor becoming Bliss Mountain Lodge. They transformed the ballroom into an indoor tennis court and handball court and added a wing to house an indoor swimming pool and spa facilities."

A man seated next to Alex pushed back his chair and stood. In a booming voice, he said, "Thanks for the history lesson, but you left out a major chapter in your tale."

Confusion crossed Vivienne's face. "I've told you everything I know."

"Really? What about the murders?"