

# Cliffhanger



*AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR*

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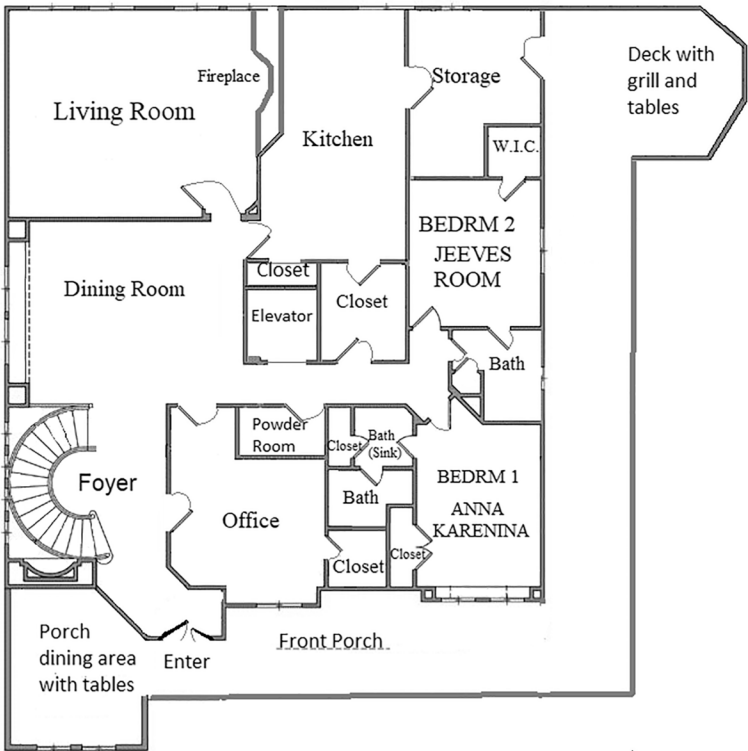
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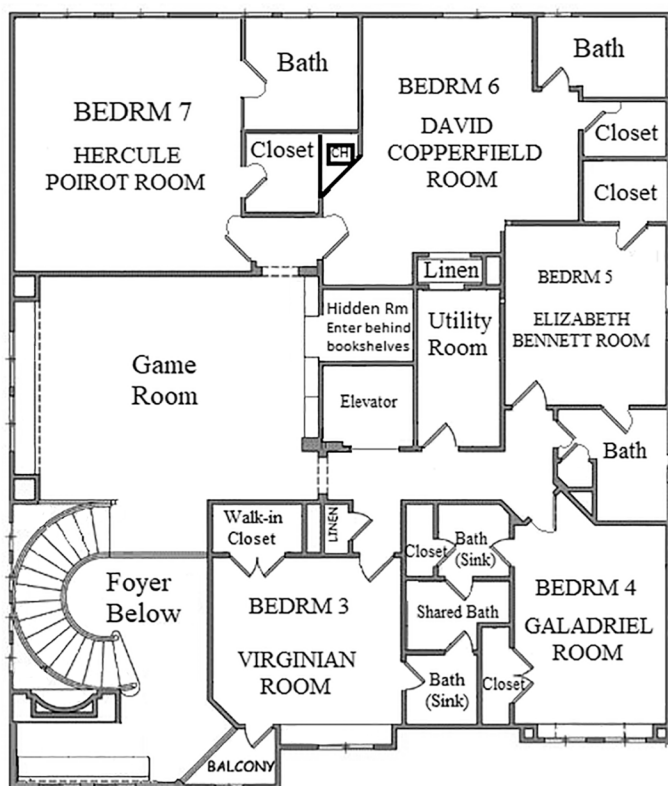
FIRST STORY - NOVEL INN

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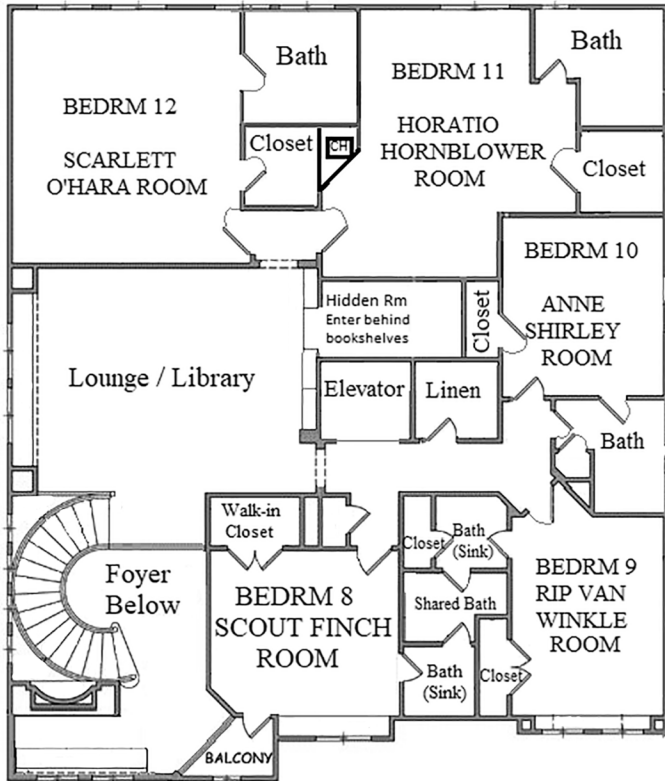


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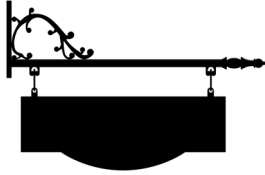
SECOND STORY - NOVEL INN



THIRD STORY STORY - NOVEL INN



## PROLOGUE



**D**anielle called up the stairs, “Bailey! Hurry up, we’ve got to leave.”

Her sixteen-year-old daughter appeared in the upper hallway, pulling a wheeled suitcase slowly behind her.

“Get a move on,” her mother said.

Bailey stopped at the top of the stairway, scowling as she pushed down the long handle on the luggage and picked it up by the top strap. “I’d be fine here by myself.”

“We’ve had this conversation,” Danielle replied. “It’s not happening. Now, put your suitcase in the car.”

Bailey’s lips kept their sullen twist as she bumped the heavy bag down the flight, one step at a time. “I don’t see why you have to go to Maine.”

“That’s where the reunion is.”

“Why can’t I at least go with you?”

“Oh, please. You’d hate spending an entire weekend with a bunch of women twenty years older than you.”

Bailey didn’t deny it.

“Come on.” Danielle put on her sunglasses, slung her purse

over her shoulder, and grabbed the handle of her own luggage. She eagerly anticipated this trip. The Maine coast, old friends, relaxation. No worries.

“Hold on.” Bailey stopped halfway down the stairs and leaned on the railing, exaggerating her breathing.

“Oh, stop it. You’ll be fine at Aunt Natalie’s.”

“I don’t even know where you’re going.”

If Danielle hadn’t known better, she’d have thought her daughter was deliberately delaying their departure. She let out a big sigh. “It’s a little town called Skirmish Cove, Maine. A hotel run by one of Emma Glidden’s old teachers.”

“Sounds boring.”

“I knew you’d think so.” Danielle threw open the door to the carport. “I’ll unlock the trunk. You’ve got your phone. You can call me if there’s an emergency, but I expect to have a carefree—” She froze with one foot on the top step.

Bailey reached the bottom of the stairs and came up behind her. “What’s the matter?”

“The car. It’s gone.”

“Wha—” Bailey peered over her mother’s shoulder.

Danielle stepped down into the carport and yanked off her sunglasses. Her pulse raced as she looked fruitlessly down the driveway. “I can’t believe this.”

“Maybe Dad moved it before he left,” Bailey said.

“No, his truck was parked behind it.” Danielle sighed. She should have gotten up when Paul did and seen him off for the fishing trip, but she just couldn’t pry herself out of bed at 4 a.m. And besides, he’d told her not to bother. She’d slept until seven thirty. The car must have been there when he left or he would have woken her up.

She shook her head and pulled out her phone. She’d never called 911 in her life, but now seemed to be the time.

“Boxborough Police Department.”

“Hello, this is Danielle Redding, and I’d like to report my car has been stolen. That’s right. Can you send an officer to my house?” She rattled off the address while Bailey tugged at her arm. “What?” she snapped.

“How do you know it was stolen?” Bailey asked.

“That’s the only possible explanation.” The dispatcher spoke in Danielle’s ear, and she turned her attention back to the phone. “Yes, thank you. I’ll be here.” She disconnected and searched her phone for the information she needed.

“I guess you can’t go to Maine,” Bailey said in a little-girl voice.

“Don’t be silly. Of course I’m going.”

Bailey gulped. “Should we call Dad and tell him to come home?”

“Are you joking? He’s been looking forward to his fishing trip for months.”

Bailey’s hangdog look made her relent.

“Okay, I’ll try him.” She pulled up Paul’s number on her favorites, but it rang six times then went to voicemail. “He’s got to be out of the service area.” Just what she’d expected. She renewed her online searching. “Aha!”

“What are you doing?” Bailey asked.

Danielle tapped an icon. “Calling that rental place out by the highway.”

“R-rental?”

A brisk voice responded to her ring, and Danielle said, “Hello, I need a car for the weekend.” She quickly gave the information the rental agent needed.

“Your car will be waiting, Mrs. Redding,” the voice said.

“Thank you. It may be an hour or so. I have to deal with the police about my stolen vehicle.”

She signed off and turned to her daughter. “Let’s get the



luggage near the front door. We'll take a taxi to the rental place after we talk to the police."

"Mo-om."

"What?"

"*Please* don't make me go to Aunt Natalie's."

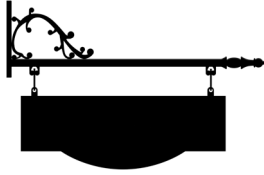
"Oh, sure, like I'd leave you here alone when a thief stole my car right out from under our noses during the night."

"I could stay at Caitlyn's. Her mom said I could."

"No, my sister is expecting you in Portsmouth." Danielle frowned at her daughter. "I don't know what's the matter with you. You *like* Aunt Natalie. She's probably got something fun planned for you this weekend."

Bailey scowled and jerked the handle of her suitcase around.

# 1



Jillian Tunney grabbed her clipboard and followed her sister out the door of the carriage house. A light breeze off the water ruffled her short hair. Walking the few yards to the Novel Inn, she pulled in a deep breath of sea air.

As they mounted the steps, she looked back and paused. Beyond their little house, she couldn't quite see their nearest neighbor's home. Only the top of his flagpole peeked over the trees.

"Kate," Jillian said.

Her sister reached the side door of the inn but turned back, her eyebrows arched.

Jillian pointed. "Zeb has raised a signal."

Kate came to stand beside her, staring past the snug carriage house. The bluff on which their home and the inn sat grew higher to the north, with the shoreline below more rugged and inhospitable. A hundred yards away, a rock-lined crevice sheltered a stream that tumbled down to meet the cove. On the other side, Zeb Wilding's squatty little house

hugged the bluff like a cabin on the deck of a ship, a flagpole out front like a mast.

“What’s it say?” Kate squinted at the distant banners fluttering in the breeze.

“Y-Z-J,” Jillian said, reading the flags from top to bottom.

“You’d better go.” Kate reached for her clipboard.

Jillian hurried along the path that had formed between the two houses when her parents owned the inn. Her father had built a bridge to span the stream, and her steps echoed as she strode over it.

It was probably nothing, but she didn’t take their elderly friend’s signals lightly. Zeb had been an officer in the Navy Signal Corps decades ago. Set in his ways, he refused to buy a computer and used his flagstaff to run up messages. The Y-Z flags announced that what followed was not a distress signal, but represented a plaintext message, in this case the letter *J*, for Jillian.

Zeb sat on his front deck, a compact, rounded form wearing a wool pea jacket against the early May sea air. She waved when she was still twenty yards away. He waved back and nudged a deck chair with his foot.

Jillian mounted the steps and sat down beside him. “Morning, Zeb.”

“Morning, Jillian.”

“I saw your Yankee-Zulu-Juliett.” Not that many people could read the international flag signals Zeb habitually flew, but he’d given Jillian a list. They’d agreed a couple of weeks ago that this array meant he wanted to talk to her.

“What’s up this morning?” she asked. “Everything all right?”

“I keep hearing on the news about those antique thieves.”

“Yes, that’s concerning.” Jillian studied his face. “You’re not afraid they’ll break into your house, are you?”

“What? No. I don’t have anything valuable.”

She shrugged, knowing that wasn’t completely true. Zeb had some fine specimens of old brass compasses, quadrants, and an astrolabe he’d collected because of his love of sailing ships.

“But you do,” he said.

She laughed. “Oh, I suppose we have a few antiques, but most of the furniture in the inn is functional, not old and valuable.”

“But you have a lot of artworks. Collectibles.”

“We do. Memorabilia, I guess you could say. But most of it is modern stuff or reproductions.”

Zeb grunted. “Still, someone who loved the Horatio Hornblower books, or Sherlock Holmes, they might want to steal what you’ve got.”

“I suppose so, though we don’t have a Sherlock Holmes room.”

“You don’t? Why not?”

She smiled. “That’s not a bad idea, if we decide to change the décor in one of the rooms. Right now we have Hercule Poirot, though, and Rip Van Winkle.”

“There, you see?”

Jillian nodded, thinking about early editions her parents had acquired of some of the books whose characters the Novel Inn rooms were named for, and the framed book illustrations that hung in a couple of the rooms. Those were worth something. “I suppose, to the right collector, some of it would be attractive.”

“Of course it would. That’s why people come and stay at your inn. They love it! And some might love it enough to filch it.” Zeb made a displeased face.

“But it’s not really the type of thing those thieves have targeted.”

“Don’t kid yourself. Those crooks will take whatever they think they can sell. And don’t forget that poor woman in Bucksport. She came home early and interrupted a heist.” Zeb nodded sagely. “Look what it got her. Dead, poor woman.”

She studied him closely for a moment. “We’re careful, Zeb. We very rarely leave the inn empty, and we keep someone at the front desk day and night.” The hired night clerk was an expense she and Kate had debated doing away with, but they’d decided the risk was too great. “I really think we’re safe. And we go over the rooms after every guest checks out, to make sure nothing’s missing.”

“Oh. Well, I guess you’re doing all you can do. What about the carriage house, where you live?”

“There’s nothing in there worth stealing, honestly.”

He nodded grudgingly. “All right. Oh, I wondered if you could join me for supper tonight.” Zeb’s pink face was full of hope. His bald pate hid beneath an old yachting cap. Jillian was glad he kept his head covered, even this early in the day. His white hair had mostly abandoned ship years ago, leaving him susceptible to sunburn.

“I’m afraid not, Zeb. We have eight new guests coming in today, and we’ll be nearly full this weekend.”

“Wow, that’s a lot.”

“It’s the fullest we’ve been since we reopened last month. But it is getting closer to Memorial Day.” Every Mainer knew the tourist season ran from Memorial Day to Labor Day, with a surge of leaf peepers in the fall when the foliage colors peaked. “Maybe we can get together when things start to quiet down?”

“I guess.” He was hiding his disappointment, Jillian could tell.

“Would you like to come over to the inn Sunday and have dinner with us after church?” she asked.

His expression brightened. “Aye, now that sounds acceptable.”

Jillian laughed. “Good. I’ll see you then, if not before.” She stood. “Sorry to dash off, but Kate and I have eight rooms to get ready.”

He saluted her gravely, and Jillian returned the gesture.

“Bon voyage,” he said.

She hurried over the bridge, smiling.

Kate had relieved the night desk clerk, Don, and he waved to Jillian before he got in his car. Though the sisters had agonized over his salary, he was worth it.

“Dad always said someone had to be at the desk if there were guests,” Kate had reminded her.

“I know, it’s for their safety,” Jillian had admitted. “And we don’t want a late traveler to stop in and find no one on duty.” So they paid Don to doze in a chair in the lobby five nights a week, and a college student on weekends. At least she and Kate were able to sleep soundly each night.

Kate stood behind the check-in desk in the small lobby, consulting the computer. “No one came in during the night, and all is calm, but Room 7 is checking out early.”

“Ready to go to work?” Jillian asked.

“I’d rather be walking the beach, but yeah. We’ve got a lot to do.”

They prepared breakfast for the current guests—two couples and two singles—and set food out on the dining room buffet.

They had developed a system in the last month. Jillian cooked the scrambled eggs, bacon, and biscuits. Kate made sure the milk and juice cooler, coffeemaker, and hot water dispenser were full, along with the covered plastic bins of muffins, doughnuts, Danish pastries, and cereal. Then she checked the dishes and other supplies. Most of the racks and

bins were already full enough for today's small contingent of breakfasters.

As Jillian carried the pan of hot eggs to the warming table, a couple entered the dining room.

"Hi," she called cheerfully. "Good timing. I'll be right out with the bacon and hot biscuits."

"You realize this weekend we have more rooms booked at one time than we have since we re-opened," Kate said as the sisters tiptoed up the stairs twenty minutes later. The early rising couple had checked out with disposable coffee cups in hand and lavish praise for the Novel Inn—especially the Hercule Poirot Room, where they'd stayed.

"I know," Jillian said. "We can handle it. I hope the guests all like us and tell all their friends." They went through the second-floor utility room to the main linen closet. While they were choosing the supplies they would need, the maid they hired as needed arrived.

"Oh, hi, Mindy," Kate said as the young woman walked past the washer and dryer to join them. Mindy was a single mom with two children in primary school, so the inn's hours suited her.

"Good morning. Looks like you two are hard at work."

"We've got eight new guests arriving this afternoon," Jillian said.

"How many?" Mindy's carefully shaded eyebrows shot up. She never came to work without full makeup.

"Eight singles," Jillian said.

"No couples?"

"No, they're all women. No one asked to be roommates, but if they change their minds when they get here, we can accommodate them."

"Is it some kind of retreat?" Mindy looked from one sister to the other.

Kate grinned. "They're cheerleaders."

"Former cheerleaders," Jillian corrected her. "They were a squad in high school, but that was almost twenty years ago. One of them is a former student of mine, and she told me about it when she made the reservation. She also said she wasn't sure who got along with whom nowadays, so she booked a room for each of them, and no one has complained yet."

"Great." Mindy pulled a bandanna from her pocket and tied it over her shoulder-length brown hair. "How many of the guests we already have are staying over?"

Kate looked up at the ceiling as though the old house had a chalkboard up there with the registry printed on it. "Mr. Philson is staying the weekend. He was eating breakfast when we came up, and he said he was going out after, so you can do up the Virginian Room anytime. The couple in 7 is gone already. Mr. Miller is checking out later, and the Littens are staying until tomorrow."

"Got it."

Jillian handed her a clean set of towels. "Go ahead with Mr. Philson's room. We'll start prepping the ones for the cheerleaders."

"Most of them should be all done up," Mindy said. She opened the louvered doors to the closet where they kept the cleaning cart and put the towels on it.

As she moved away, Jillian said to Kate, "She's right. The ones that haven't been used this week will just need a little dusting. Let's start with Liz Bennett and Galadriel."

"We'll have to give them two rooms with men's names, you know," Kate said. The twelve guest rooms were named for fictional characters, half male and half female. It seemed natural to put six of the arriving cheerleaders in the rooms named for feminine characters.



Jillian pursed her lips as they walked toward the hallway. “I’m thinking David Copperfield. No one’s in there now, so it’s clean. What about Rip Van Winkle, when Mr. Miller is gone?”

“I like the Hornblower room better. It’s bigger, and it’s got that wonderful ship’s cabin décor, and the telescope for watching boats.”

“The Littens are in there.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

“I was thinking we should keep the Poirot Room free after Mindy cleans it, in case other guests come in.” Jillian stopped before the door marked “Elizabeth Bennett” with a hand-painted, flower-strewn plaque.

“I guess that makes sense. If a couple came with a kid or two, we’d need a big room for them,” Kate said. “Okay, Rip Van Winkle it is. Just remind the guest—no wakeup calls in that room.”

Jillian laughed. She unlocked the door to Room 5, and they went in. The canopied bed and period furnishings could have come right out of a Regency Era country house. This was one room that had not been redecorated in the fifteen years her parents had owned the inn, and it was one of the most popular, even though it was one of their smaller rooms.

Crocheted gloves, dance cards, an old London map, and an unfurled fan made a collage in a large picture frame. A period corset and an Empire-waist dress hung on the wall as decorations, along with framed posters from two movie versions of *Pride and Prejudice*.

The bed was ready. Kate plied the dusting brush while Jillian went through a checklist they kept for each room. Towels, extra pillows, facial tissue, bath tissue, hair dryer, coffee maker, coffee, disposable cups, shampoo, and on down the column.

Then she checked that room’s special list. They always

made sure all of the artworks and theme decorations were in place before a guest checked in, so that if something went missing they would know when it disappeared. Most small items were protected in display cases or secured to the walls in their frames.

Nothing had vanished since they'd inherited the Novel Inn from their parents. Her dad used to tell stories about items walking out the door with past guests. Over the years of her parents' ownership, there were a few embarrassing encounters with departing guests, and twice Dad called the police. As Zeb had implied, some folks just couldn't resist the special decorations.

Twice in the fifteen years they'd run the place, Jillian reflected. That wasn't so bad. She hoped she and Kate never had to ask a guest to open his suitcase before he walked away.

The Galadriel Room was far different from Elizabeth Bennett. Instead of Regency-era furnishings and crocheted doilies, it held a queen bed with a carved teak headboard and frothy hangings. Ethereal curtains hung at the windows. The framed prints were of scenes from the elven country in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The dresser's drawers had carved pixie faces on the front. On the desk sat an inkwell in the shape of a curved horn, held steady in a pewter base, and quills trimmed to be used as pens. A garden gazing ball stood on a heavy wrought iron stand in one corner. The round mirror's frame was a lacy gold creation. Looking into it, Jillian could almost imagine a scene from a faraway land showing up in the glass.

"I love this place," Kate said.

Jillian smiled. "I agree. This room is perfect."

"I meant the whole place. I've loved it since Mom and Dad bought it. I only ever got to live here summers, while I was in

college, but I've always thought it was the coolest hotel in the world."

"I know what you mean."

Kate was only eighteen when their parents bought the Novel Inn, but Jillian had been married to Jack for several years by then.

"I'm glad we decided not to sell it." She wasn't sure what would have happened if Jack were still alive. He'd had a good job, and she doubted he'd have wanted to move down here. But now that she'd been alone four years, having her sister for a housemate and running the quirky inn seemed like a terrific idea—if they could make it pay.

She checked off each of the artworks and decorative items. "They let me sleep in the Scarlet O'Hara room once, and I loved every minute."

Kate came to stand beside her, the blue duster in her hand. "You know, I liked having my own apartment and being independent, but I liked coming back here even more. This place was such a wonderful gift from Mom and Dad. I'm just sorry we had to lose them to get it."

"Yeah." Jillian walked to the bathroom doorway and turned on the light. She made a quick visual inspection of the spotless fixtures and the supplies. Check.

She and Kate had agonized over what to do with the hotel after their parents' car accident in March. In the end, both gave up their jobs and homes to move back here. They now lived together in the old carriage house behind the inn, which their father had remodeled as private living quarters.

Their brother, Rick, was an equal heir and partner, but he wanted to keep his fulltime job as a police officer. He and his family lived about three miles away. He'd told his sisters he would be a silent partner and help out whenever he could. So far, so good.

“Do you miss teaching?” Kate asked.

“Yes.” Jillian considered that for a moment. “I miss my students. I don’t really miss the job. How about you? Do you miss the doctor’s office?”

“Not a bit.” Kate had manned the reception desk for a busy medical practice, with three physicians as her bosses. “Give me this place and the carriage house any day.”

Somewhere within the house, a door closed.

“I’ll get Copperfield next,” Jillian said. “Run down and make sure everything’s okay in the dining room.”

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“When Mr. Miller checked out, he said the wall holder for the hairdryer is loose,” Kate told her sister later, when Jillian spelled her at the front desk.

“Mr. Miller used the hair dryer? I wouldn’t have thought it with his short hair.”

“Go figure.”

“Okay,” Jillian said. “I’ll get up there with a screwdriver. We need to keep a toolbox with the basics up here instead of having to run down to the garage all the time.”

“Dad used to have one in the storage room, but I think Rick appropriated it,” Kate said.

“Wonderful.” Jillian rolled her eyes toward the high ceiling. “Next time he drops by, I’ll tell him we need it. But yeah, I’ll fix that before I start my bookwork.” She kept the financial records up to date for the inn. The sisters took turns at the lobby desk and divided other chores however it seemed most practical. “You know, I think we’re going to see a bit of profit this month, even after we pay Mindy and the night clerks.”

Kate grinned. “Terrific. Maybe next month we can start paying ourselves.”

“Yeah. We need to talk about doing some ads or something. We got a notice from the state tourism board yesterday about putting the inn on their website. I think Mom and Dad did that every year.”

Mr. Miller entered the lobby with luggage in tow, ready to check out, and Kate said. “Let’s discuss that later.”

The first of the cheerleaders arrived shortly after one o’clock. Kate was still at the front desk, but she called Jillian out from the office. Emma Glidden gave out a little squeal when she saw her former teacher.

“It’s so good to see you again, Mrs. Tunney.” She looked around with eager green eyes. “I love this place already.”

“Thanks, but I think you’re old enough to call me Jillian now.” She stepped forward and gave Emma a little hug. “It’s great to see you too. Thanks for thinking of us for your reunion.”

“Oh, I’m so excited about it. And everyone thought it was a fantastic idea. I sent them the link for your website, and they all loved it.” Emma sobered. “I know I’m early, but I couldn’t help myself.”

“You’re fine,” Jillian said. “This is my sister and co-owner, Kate Gage.”

“Hi,” Kate said. “Let me check you in, and Jillian can show you to your room.” They had designated the third-floor Scarlett O’Hara Room, one of their largest and most glamorous units, for Emma. After all, she had brought them this onslaught of business.

While Jillian continued to chat with Emma, Kate ran her credit card and programmed a key card for Scarlet O’Hara, Room 12.

“Here you go.” She handed the key to Emma. “Jillian will take you up in the elevator.”

“Oh, wow. An elevator, in this old house?” Emma turned wide-eyed to Jillian.

“Yes, our parents had it put in about fifteen years ago,” Jillian said. “It’s a huge help, especially for the third-floor rooms and heavy luggage.”

They wheeled Emma’s bags around the corner, still laughing and chattering. Kate smiled and sat down on the stool they kept handy for whoever manned the desk. Jillian had taught Emma her first year as a teacher. At twenty-two, she wasn’t all that much older than her high school students that year.

Emma had moved away after her freshman year, when she’d taken Jillian’s English class. She spent her last three years of high school in Augusta, at Cony High. It was there she became a cheerleader and got to know the other members of the squad. Kate reflected that if all eight former cheerleaders were as enthusiastic as Emma, they might be in for a raucous weekend.

Two more women walked in the front door, and Kate stood and smiled.

“Welcome to the Novel Inn. I’m Kate. May I help you?”

By the time she had checked in Alicia Boyken and Patrice Flynn, Jillian had returned and was ready to help them move their luggage to the Elizabeth Bennett and Galadriel Rooms, on the second level.

“You have Wi-Fi, right?” Patrice asked as they turned the corner.

“We sure do,” Jillian said heartily.

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Danielle Redding jammed on the brakes and squinted at the GPS screen on her phone. Where on earth was this thing taking

her? She ought to have been at the hotel by now. She pulled the phone from the cupholder and studied it for a moment.

“Better turn around. Just great!” She shook her head. “Shoulda made sure this car had a built-in GPS before I took it.” Her whole day had been like this, from the moment she’d opened the door and realized her car had been stolen.

With a sigh, she inched down the road in the heavy shade, looking for a place to turn around. A small bridge with concrete sides appeared ahead. Not a good place to try to maneuver. She thought she caught a whiff of sea air, which was maddening—to be able to smell the ocean but not see it. She had to be close. Emma had said the hotel was right on the shore.

Past the bridge, she found a small, grassy lane leading off into what looked like a hayfield. She turned the unfamiliar car around laboriously, trying to watch both ways before backing out onto the road again. How did she get in such an isolated place, anyway?

Relieved to be safely on the pavement once again and headed back toward the last turn she’d taken—the *wrong* turn, she was sure—she settled into the seat and looked forward.

Something smashed into the windshield, jarring the whole vehicle and shattering the glass. She slammed forward, and whiteness enveloped her.