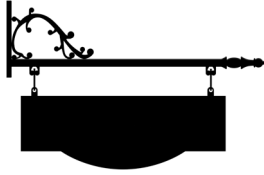


2



Seven of the cheerleaders arrived at the inn by four thirty, and a giddy catch-up session was under way in the first floor living room, where the large windows offered a breathtaking view of the bay. Kate had suggested they wait there for the last straggler—the former head cheerleader, Danielle Redding. The sisters agreed the living room was a better place for them to congregate than the second-floor game room, just outside quiet Mr. Philson’s door, or the library one flight above.

Jillian came out of the office, where she had paid Mindy her hourly wages for the week.

“Bye, Mindy,” Kate called to the maid, just as the women in the living room broke into a lively cheer for the Cony High Rams. “Man, they’re loud,” she told Jillian in a stage whisper.

“You said it. They sound like a bunch of sixteen-year-olds.”

“I guess that’s what they want this weekend,” Kate said with a shrug.

“Yeah, I get that feeling. It’s a real getaway, from their jobs, families ... everything.” Jillian peered through the dining room

toward where the women were lining up in a formation they had used on the sidelines at high school football games. “They asked me to make them a reservation for dinner, so I set them up at Sheldon’s Seafood.”

“Good choice. It’s close, and the food’s great.”

“Oh, by the way,” Jillian said in a confidential tone, “Heather Saxon complained about the Anne Shirley Room.”

Kate bristled. “Whatever for? That’s a charming room!”

“Yeah, but she wanted something more glamorous that didn’t have a children’s book theme.”

“Oh, good grief.” Kate rolled her eyes.

“It’s okay,” Jillian said. “Emma’s switching with her.”

“What? You gave the complainer Scarlett O’Hara?” That didn’t seem right.

“Emma offered. She was very gracious, and Heather jumped at it when she saw the room.”

“I’ll bet she did.” Kate shook her head. “That was your perk for Emma.”

“It’s all right. Really. Emma, it turns out, has a thing for Green Gables, and she read the whole series when she was a kid. She loves the Anne Shirley room.” Jillian walked over to the double front door and peered out. “No sign of the last one.”

“Well, I’m holding the Anna Karenina room for her.” The ground floor room would be easy to settle the latecomer into with her luggage. Kate looked at the clock. “It’s after five. What time’s the dinner reservation?”

“Six.” Jillian frowned as another robust cheer broke out. “Who’s sleeping right above Mr. Philson?”

Kate checked her roster. “Uh, that would be Bobbi Talbott, in Scout Finch.”

“Right. Maybe we should ask her to please keep it down. You know Mr. Philson likes peace and quiet.”

“Yeah, we should request that any midnight gab fests be

held toward the back of the house. I hope they'll respect the rule for quiet hours after ten o'clock."

Emma and Alicia Boyken, whose long, blond hair was intricately braided, came through the dining room toward them.

"We're a little concerned about Danielle," Emma said. "Alicia and I have both tried to call her and text her, but we haven't heard anything from her."

"She's probably just running late." Jillian gave them a brilliant smile. "Isn't she coming in from Massachusetts?"

"Yes, Boxborough," Emma said. "She moved down there a couple years after she got married. But still, she told us she'd be here before this."

Alicia pushed back a lock of hair. "Danielle was always resourceful. I'm surprised we haven't at least heard from her."

"Let's give her a little longer. Can we serve you ladies some iced tea while you wait for her?"

"That'd be great," Alicia replied.

A searing headache pounded Danielle's skull, and her cheeks stung. She put a hand to her temple and when she drew it away, she felt stickiness. Blood. It took her a minute to realize she was in the rental car.

With a ragged breath, she blinked and looked around. Everything looked odd. White powder. The steering wheel wasn't right. That was it, the airbag had deployed. She lifted her head and stared at the shattered windshield. What on earth had she run into? She could make out trees outside—maples, she thought, and a few pines. Movement in the rearview mirror caught her eye.

Someone pounded on her side window, and she jumped

away from it, sending a dart of pain through her head. A man was bending down and peering at her.

“Are you okay?” He yanked the door open. “You have your seatbelt on. Good. Can you unbuckle it?”

“What happened?” Danielle could barely hear herself, and her voice sounded strange.

“You hit a tree.”

She frowned and looked at the windshield. A tree did that? Why wasn’t the front of the car wrapped around it?

“Come on, let me help you.” He reached over her, groping for the seatbelt release.

“I—” She sighed and let him find it then haul her out of the compartment. Weariness settled on her, and when he pulled her to her feet she nearly collapsed.

“Easy, now.” He guided her a few shaky steps and opened the door on another vehicle. A pickup truck. White, like her rental car.

Danielle wasn’t sure she could climb up into the cab, but he gave her a solid boost and then buckled her in.

“My purse,” she said.

A moment later, he set her leather bag beside her right foot then went around the truck and vaulted into the driver’s seat. He started the engine and headed off down the road. She tried to turn her head and look back at the car, but it hurt to do that, so she faced forward and concentrated on breathing.

After a few minutes, he turned onto another road. They were still in the country. Maine. She was in Maine, she was sure of that.

She tried to focus on the driver. “Who are you?”

The man glanced her way. “How you doing now?”

“Not good. I—I guess I crashed.”

The fiftyish, brown-haired man threw her another quick look. “Yeah, you had an accident.”

She closed her eyes. “Something hit me. My car, I mean.” He didn’t respond, and she blinked at him. “What’s your name?”

“Uh, I’m Bob.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“I’m taking you to the hospital in Bucksport. You look pretty shook up, so I thought you needed to see a doctor.”

“Bucksport? No, I’m supposed to be in ... in ...” She frowned, and that hurt too. “Skirmish Cove, that’s it. Are we near there?”

“Well, yeah.” He pulled up at a stop sign and looked over at her. “There’s no hospital, though. It’s a little tiny town.”

“Take me to the hotel.”

“What hotel?”

“Uh ...” She leaned back against the headrest. “Am I bleeding?”

“A little, but I don’t think it’s bad. You hit your head, though. You ought to be looked at.”

“Just take me to the hotel. I’m supposed to be there.” Once she connected with the squad, they’d help her. Gingerly, she probed the sore spot on her temple. It didn’t seem to be actively bleeding, just tacky. A Band-aid would fix that. But her head ached, and she felt a little woozy. Probably her blood sugar. “I need something to eat,” she muttered.

“Huh?” He peered at her. “What did you say?”

“Oh, nothing, I just need something to eat. A candy bar—anything.”

He frowned. “Let’s get you to a doctor.”

They were driving past picturesque homes now, on a very rural road—little saltboxes and Cape Cods.

“Aren’t we in Skirmish Cove?”

“We were—well, we were near there. But I really think you need a doctor.”

She frowned at him. If he was that sure she needed medical attention, why hadn't he called an ambulance? A wave of panic hit her. Where was her purse? She patted around herself on the seat frantically.

"What?"

She pulled in a shallow breath. "Where's my—Oh, there it is." Her leather bag was cuddled up to her foot on the floor, right where he'd put it. She bent to retrieve it. "I need to call—" She paused, groping for the name. "Emma. I should call Emma."

He kept driving.

Danielle unzipped the bag and rummaged in it, methodically at first, then in a frenzy. Her breath came faster, and her pulse raced.

"It's gone."

"What?"

"My phone."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Look, I don't care about hospitals. Take me to Skirmish Cove. I'm supposed to meet someone at a hotel there."

He hesitated, his foot hovering on the brake pedal. "I don't know ..."

"Please! Look, you know I was in a wreck. The driver's not supposed to leave the scene, are they?"

"But you were hurt."

"Take me back!" Her head swam.

He eyed her uneasily. "Okay, lady. Calm down."

She tried to catch a deep breath as he found a driveway and turned the car around.

"Do you have a cell phone?" she asked once they were pointed back the way they'd come. The trees alongside the road swirled.

“No, I ...”

She rolled her eyes and winced.

“What’s the hotel’s name?”

She swallowed hard. “I’m trying to remember.”

“I don’t live in Skirmish Cove, but I think there’s a few. They get a lot of tourists this time of year.”

Danielle’s head hurt from her efforts at concentration. “Something Hotel. Or Motel. No, that’s not right. I didn’t make the reservation. My friend did. But it’s some storybook hotel, something like that.”

He shook his head. “Never heard of it. Look, I have a friend who lives a couple miles from here. Why don’t I take you to his house, and he can help you out. He’ll have a phone book and a computer. He can help you—”

“No.” She definitely felt unsafe, with the stranger blithely trying to talk her into going to yet another strange man’s house. “No, I need to find my friends right away.”

He came to another stop sign, and off to the left sat a gas station. She could get out and walk over there—the owner could probably help her. She swiveled her head slowly. To the right she could see several more businesses—a seafood place, a grocery store, and—

“There’s a motel down there.”

He looked where she pointed. “You think that’s the one you want?”

“I don’t know. Just take me there, okay? If it’s not the right one, I’ll figure it out.”

A minute later, he drove slowly into the motel’s parking lot. It didn’t look very inviting, though the neon sign said *Vacancy*. The red paint of the office building was peeling, and the line of one-story units looked bleak and definitely no-frills.

“You want me to go in with you?”

“No,” she said quickly. “This is fine. Thank you very much.”

“Oh, you’re welcome. I wish I could’ve done more.”

The look in his eyes as he said it made her shiver. She fumbled with the door handle and eased down onto the pavement. The pickup was higher than the vehicles she was used to. She staggered, nearly falling, but caught herself on the edge of the door.

“You sure you’re okay?”

Danielle pulled in a breath and blinked a couple of times until the world stopped spinning.

“Yeah. Thanks.” She remembered to grab her purse then shut the door and headed slowly for the office. When she reached the door, she turned and saw him still watching her. At once he put the truck in gear and drove to the exit, spraying a little gravel.

A white pickup, she told herself. What make? It was too late to tell as he pulled out and headed on down the road. She gave herself a mental kick, wishing she’d gotten more than his first name. A license plate number, for instance. Oh, well.

Her legs felt like rubber as she wrestled the door open and went inside. A heavysset young man rose from a stool behind the counter.

“Can I help you, ma’am?”

“I—yes. I—” A wave of dizziness hit her. Was it her blood sugar or the bang on the head?

“Are you okay?” he was staring at her head.

“Oh, yeah, just a little bump.”

“Do you want a room?”

She grabbed the edge of the counter. “I need to sit down.”

“Yes, ma’am. There’s a chair right over there. I can check you in and take you right to the room, if you need to rest.”

The searing pain in her head was nearly unbearable now. “Maybe that’s best.” She sidled over to a plastic chair and sank into it.

“Your name?”

“Danielle Redding.”

“Do you have a credit card?”

“Uh, yes.” She dug into her bag and pulled out her wallet. Trying to suppress a groan, she rose and walked stiffly to the counter. She opened the wallet and squinted at it. Which side were her credit cards on?

She realized the desk clerk was looking at her billfold, which held several hundred dollars in cash. She’d wanted to be prepared to spend a bit this weekend without the bother of credit card bills later.

“Uh, how about if I pay in cash?”

“Well, we’re supposed to take a credit card, just for security. Do you have one?”

“Yes.” She found them—a plastic sleeve with four cards—and eased out the one she used most.

After he’d run it through the scanner below the counter, he said, “Okay, Unit 14.”

“Do you have vending machines?” she asked.

“Yes, right over there.” He pointed to his right, and she followed his gaze. A small alcove held three upright machines.

“Thanks.”

He returned her Visa and gave her a room key card. Danielle walked slowly to the vending machines and scanned them. Food. She needed something.

She picked a chocolate bar and a can of Pepsi. Was there anything with protein? She spotted a pack of cheese crackers with peanut butter and selected it. They all fell into the machines’ trays, and she stuffed them into her roomy purse. Where could her phone be? Back in the wrecked rental car, no doubt, along with her suitcase and her glucose monitor.

She started to turn toward the desk again, to ask for help finding the other hotel’s name and address. Without her smart

phone, she didn't have Emma's number, or any of the cheering squad's. Her head pounded.

The clerk was watching her with an air of suspicion. He hadn't asked for her license plate number, or if she had luggage, for which she was glad. Best to get right to the room and get the glucose inside her. She'd grab a nap and then sort it out. She turned on wobbly legs toward the door.



The seven women stayed somewhat calm for an hour. Though they were subdued, Jillian felt a storm of emotion hovering, about to break. She was out of ideas when Emma approached, her brow furrowed. "Do you think we should go to the restaurant?"

"That's probably a good idea," Jillian said. "I'll call Sheldon's and tell them you're on your way. When Danielle gets here, we'll send her over."

Emma's brow cleared as she made the decision. "Okay, thanks. It's getting kind of tense in there, and I think everyone needs a distraction. But I admit, I'm worried about Danielle."

"When did you last hear from her?" Jillian asked.

"Alicia talked to her this morning. She said she was almost ready to leave Boxborough, and she'd be here in plenty of time. She was detouring to her sister's house in Portsmouth, but unless she stayed there several hours, I don't know why she's this late."

Jillian couldn't understand it either. Any competent driver leaving Boxborough, Massachusetts, before noon would have reached the destination by now. And if she'd been delayed, shouldn't Danielle have let her friends know?

Emma grimaced. "Alicia and I have both tried calling and

texting, but Danielle hasn't responded. That's not like her. I don't suppose there's anything you can do?"

"Well ..." Jillian glanced at Kate. "Our brother is a policeman. I could call him and ask if he's heard any accident reports or anything like that."

"Would you? I'd feel better." Emma's green eyes were practically pleading.

"Sure," Jillian said. "Why don't you all get your jackets and head out. You can walk to the restaurant easily. We'll give Rick a call."

Kate went with Emma to spread some calm and assure the women they would soon be reunited with Danielle. While they went to get their coats and purses, Jillian gave Rick a quick call and told him about their missing guest.

"Everyone's really worried about her. If you could just check on traffic reports, or whatever it is you do ..."

"Okay, I'll check reports for I95 and Route 3," her brother said.

As she thanked him and hung up, the cheerleaders entered the lobby with Kate, who gave them directions to the restaurant. They saw all seven out the door, and the inn seemed tranquil. Jillian went into the office and sat at her desk, and Kate came to the doorway.

"Did you get Rick?"

Jillian nodded. "He said he'll do some checking and let us know if he hears anything."

They didn't want to leave the front desk unattended in case Danielle arrived, so Kate fixed supper plates for them in the kitchen and carried them out to the lobby.

Jillian smiled ruefully when she saw the leftover spaghetti and garlic bread. "Thanks. We eat over here more than we do at our house."

"I don't mind." Kate pulled over a chair from beneath the

curved stairway and sat down with her plate. “I really thought she’d show by now.”

Their other three guests were all in for the night, and quiet had settled over the inn when the cheerleaders returned around ten o’clock. They seemed in good spirits, and Jillian guessed some of that came from a couple of cocktails apiece.

“Any word from Danielle?” were Emma’s first words as she came through the door.

“No. Sorry.” Kate looked past her as the front door opened again. “Rick.” She looked around, her gaze landing on her older sister.

Jillian’s heart sank. Rick wouldn’t have driven over if he had no news. She stepped forward and held up both hands.

“Ladies, this handsome gentleman in uniform is our brother, Rick Gage. I know you’re all anxious about Danielle, so let’s give him our attention. Rick, tell us what you know.”

Rick drew in a deep breath. His face was somber, and Jillian didn’t like that. He’d probably planned to talk to her and Kate privately, not face the cheering squad.

“I do have a little news,” he said, looking around at the anxious faces. “I don’t know yet whether it has anything to do with your friend or not, but a rental car was found abandoned on the outskirts of Skirmish Cove. The county sheriff’s office is handling it. I’m headed over there now, and I’ll call when I have anything one way or another. I don’t want to upset anyone, but it’s possible this car was rented to Danielle Redding.”