

The Plot Thickens



AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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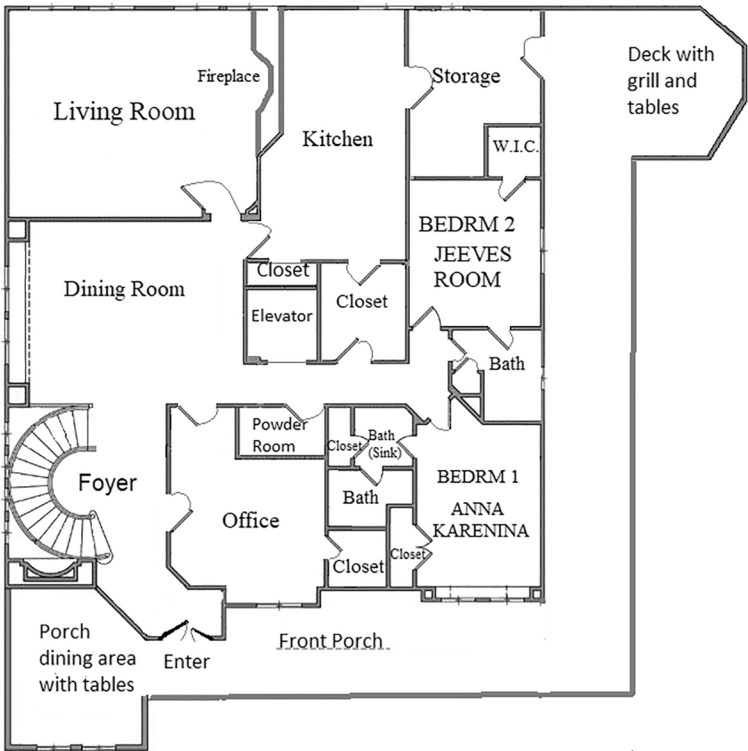
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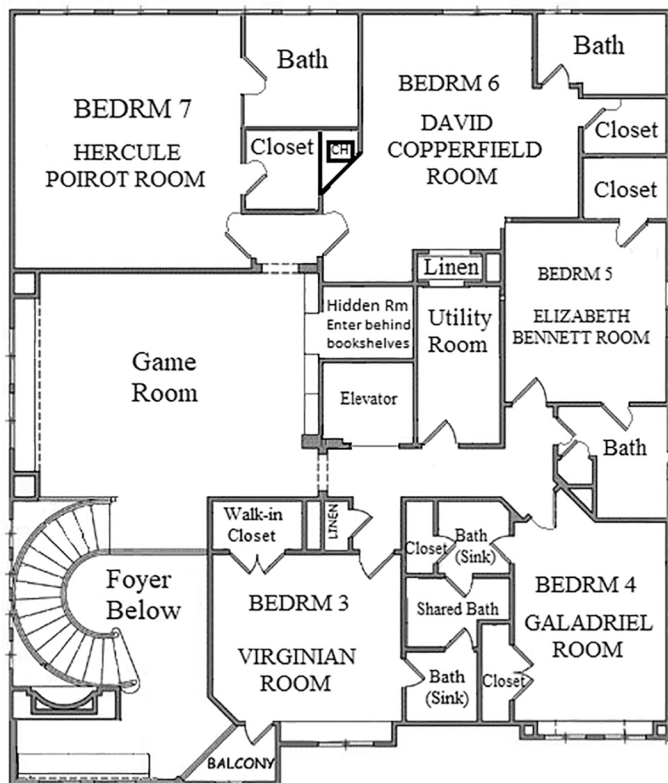
FIRST STORY - NOVEL INN

TO BLUFFS OVERLOOKING BEACH ↑

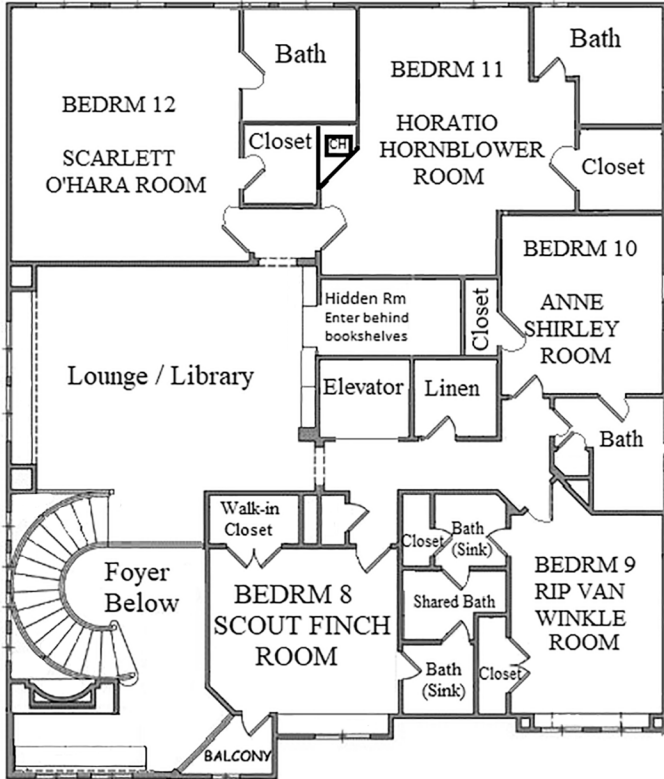


TO CARRIAGE HOUSE →

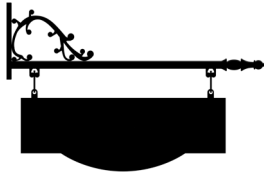
SECOND STORY - NOVEL INN



THIRD STORY STORY - NOVEL INN



1



Jillian Tunney left the Novel Inn under her sister’s capable supervision and walked briskly into the heart of Skirmish Cove. She loved the little town on the bay’s edge, where salt permeated the air and small businesses lined the sidewalks. Snow hadn’t fallen for nearly a week, and the sky formed a brilliant blue canopy. The air was warm enough to start shrinking the snowbanks left by the plows.

When she reached the snug little Book Rack, she pushed open the door and greeted the owner with a big smile.

“Good morning, Carl.”

“Jillian! How are things going at the inn? January slump?”

“No, actually. We’re nearly full right now.”

“Ah, the Winter Carnival?”

She nodded. “It’s only two days away. This weekend, we’re booked solid.”

Carl Roofner looked around his store, where only one customer browsed that morning, and arched an eyebrow. “It’s winter slow in here. I hope some of the carnival goers decide to go book shopping.”

“I’m sure they will.” Jillian pointed to the end cap. “I see you have all the local interest books displayed.”

“Yes, to showcase our Maine authors. Stan is coming in to help tomorrow and Saturday. We’re hoping for a blitz.”

“What about Eric?” Carl’s son worked part-time at the store as well as Stan Chappell. Jillian was sure Stan must be nearing retirement. He looked a decade older than Carl, though neither of them was young.

“Oh, Eric’s going to Clifton for a snowmobile rally.”

“What? On carnival weekend? Won’t there be snowmobile events here?”

“Not as many or as interesting, I guess.” Carl shrugged. “He doesn’t think we’ll get that much traffic in the bookstore this weekend. What can I do for you this morning?”

“I’m thinking of redecorating one of the rooms at the inn.”

His face lit with interest. “What’s the theme? No, let me guess. A Maine story, maybe? Something by Stephen King?”

Jillian blinked. “I hadn’t even considered that. I mean, how many people want to sleep in a room with horror décor?”

“True, true.”

“No, it’s an old classic. *Around the World in Eighty Days*. I thought a Phileas Fogg room would be fun.”

Carl nodded slowly. “I can see it. Some sort of elephant artwork, perhaps.” He eyed her keenly. “Not the most politically correct story for these times.”

“I know,” she said with a little grimace. “The British Empire and all that. Maybe I should reread it first—it’s been more than twenty years for me. I don’t think the movies they’ve made have been exactly accurate.”

“I’m certain they’re not. But, Jillian, you can order it online so easily. Why here?”

She smiled and leaned on the counter. “You know me, Carl.

I like to support the local businesses. Besides, I want an original copy.”

The older gentleman’s eyebrows rose.

“Oh, I don’t mean a first edition—I can’t afford that. But an old one, leatherbound, illustrated maybe.” Jillian shared her vision with a sweep of her hand. “We’d put it in a glass display and have pictures of book covers or movie posters on the walls. And curtains that smack of the Orient.”

“Sounds interesting.” Carl leaned toward his computer and clicked away on the keyboard. “Let’s see ...” He squinted at a distributor’s catalog listings. “Here we are. *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Hmm. There are about a million versions.”

Jillian waited patiently. As a small business owner, she sympathized with the older man. Carl was widowed and in his sixties. Keeping the shop open couldn’t be easy, especially in the slow winter. But she admired his tenacity.

“I see an 1880 version, published in London. That’s the oldest one offered in English. Now, if you want it in French ...” Carl turned the monitor so she could see the screen.

“That’s beautiful.” She peered over his shoulder at the computer’s screen.

“Illustrated.”

“Yes.” She blinked at the price. She could just hear her younger sister Kate’s response when she learned Jillian had spent over four hundred dollars for an antique book.

He clicked a few keys. “And this sheet music from the Michael Todd film’s theme would make an excellent wall decoration. You could have it framed.”

Jillian nodded. At twelve dollars and fifty cents, the sheet music was a bargain. “I’ll take the sheet music. Will you do a little more research for me when you have time and see if you can find another copy of the book that old for just a little bit

less?” She formed a half-inch measure with her thumb and index finger.

“Sure.” Carl brushed his graying hair back off his forehead and worked on his keyboard some more.

“And why don’t you get me an inexpensive paperback copy too. I don’t think I’d want to handle the antique one very much, especially if I decide to spend that much.”

“I’m pretty sure we’ve got it in the classics section.” Carl didn’t look up from his work. “I know we have a children’s adaptation.”

Jillian almost discarded the idea of purchasing a children’s version of the book, but it might be good to have on hand for families who stayed at the inn. Two women came through the door, greeted Carl, and headed for the discount table.

“I’ll go take a look.” Jillian walked farther into the store, taking in the colorful book covers face out on the shelves. So many enticing images.

Reluctantly, she moved past the mystery section and made her way to the classics. Stan was working at the end of the aisle, gently taking nature guides and books on astronomy from a carton and arranging them on a rack under a sign reading “Science and Nature.”

“Hi, Stan.”

“Hello, Jillian. Looking for something special?”

“Thought I’d revisit *Around the World in Eighty Days*. It’s been ...”

“More than eighty days, eh?” Still spry, Stan moved quickly to her side. “You’re almost there. Here we go.” He stooped and took a copy off a bottom shelf.

“Perfect. And now for a children’s version.”

As usual, Stan knew exactly where to find the title she requested. She left the Book Rack ten minutes later with a warm feeling of friendship. Both the paperback of Jules Verne’s

novel and a colorful picture book nestled in her bag. Those, with the sheet music Carl had ordered, had set her back almost forty dollars—plus tax—and she had yet to convince Kate that she wanted to redecorate one of the rooms. Surely the exotic locations and action in the story would sway her sister.

“You really want to redo a whole guest room?” They’d discussed the possibility before, but Kate was still surprised Jillian decided to move forward without consulting her first.

“I think it’s time.” Jillian turned a row of bacon slices on the griddle. “Think about it. Nobody reads *The Virginian* anymore.”

Kate scowled. “They remember the TV show.”

“Only people my age and older. Anyway, I put in an order for an illustrated, leatherbound edition. Carl Roofner at the Book Rack is ordering it for me.”

“Why?” Kate asked. “You could just order it online.”

“I know, but we like to support the local businesses.”

“True.”

Jillian smiled. “We can display it in the room. It’s an 1880 edition, and he found one for a pretty good price.”

“What else do you plan to use for decorations? A balloon?”

“That wasn’t in the book.”

Kate loaded a tray with a can of coffee, filters, and metal containers of silverware. “It wasn’t?”

“Nope. Only the movie and TV mini-series versions. Verne did write a book called *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, though, so I guess the screenwriters figured it was okay.”

“They always change stuff.” Kate hefted the tray and went into the inn’s dining room to set up for the breakfast crowd. She wasn’t completely against the idea, but usually they made

these decisions together, as joint owners of the inn. She checked the small refrigerator in the dining room. No almond milk. They had a couple of vegan guests, so she needed to put a fresh carton out.

She was still mulling Jillian's decision to spend almost two hundred dollars on an old book. Even though she insisted Carl had found a bargain, Kate wasn't on board with the idea.

"Morning, Ms. Gage!"

"Oh, hi," Kate said with a smile as two of their guests entered the dining room. "Call me Kate. We're just about to bring out the hot dishes."

When she returned to the kitchen, Jillian had three egg cartons open on the counter and was cracking eggs like a shell-hating robot. Three dozen seemed excessive, but Kate remembered the Novel Inn was full this weekend for the Winter Carnival, so it might not be too much. And if their brother dropped by, he'd help clean up the leftovers.

Skirmish Cove was determined to earn a spot with vacationers as more than a picturesque summertime venue. Outdoor activities were set up for adventurers—snowmobile tours, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing. A small pond near the library had been turned into an ice skating rink, and a hill behind the town hall was designated for sledding and tobogganing. Contests throughout the carnival included snowman making and skating relays. Restaurants and gift shops were in high gear, and so was the inn.

Kate grabbed the almond milk and several containers of Greek yogurt. "Can you believe the snowmobilers in David Copperfield are up already? They're starting on coffee and muffins, but I told them bacon and eggs would be right out."

Jillian looked at the clock hanging over the dishwasher. "Breakfast doesn't officially start for another ten minutes."

"Yeah, I think they want to hit the trails early." Kate went

back to the refrigerator. “Do we have more individual butter servings?”

“In the second freezer.”

“I think I’ll miss having a western-themed room.” Kate glanced at her sister, half hoping she’d immediately give up her plans for change. “Maybe we should redo Anna Karenina instead. Nobody reads Russian novels anymore.”

“Says you.” Jillian carefully poured her mixture for scrambled eggs into the pan. “Besides, we’d have to give it a feminine theme. What woman would we use?”

“Annie Oakley?”

“She was a real person.”

“Right. Let me think about it.” Kate headed for the storage room behind the inn’s kitchen, where they had two upright freezers. She found the butter easily. Back in the kitchen, Jillian loaded a pan with crisp bacon while the eggs cooked.

“How about Cinderella?” Kate asked.

“Well ... I guess that’s a possibility, but it’s not a novel, and we’re the Novel Inn.” Before Kate could accuse her of being too picky, Jillian said, “Here, the bacon’s ready.”

Kate lifted the pan and carried it out to the dining room, where she put it into a slot on the serving counter.

“Good morning, folks. Eggs will be right out.”

The couple already seated greeted her cheerfully, and another duo came in the door.

“Hello,” Kate said cheerfully. “You’re just in time. Here comes my sister with the scrambled eggs.”

The Novel Inn had become a way of life for her and Jillian. Along with their brother Rick, they’d inherited it from their parents the previous spring. It had taken them a few months to master some aspects of the innkeeping business, but they’d made huge strides. They’d spent a lot of time in the fall

figuring out how to draw in wintertime guests at a literary-themed inn on the Maine coast.

Finally, their efforts were paying off. Reservations were coming in weeks and even months in advance. The house was full most weekends, and they had a respectable number of rooms filled during the week.

“You know,” Kate said as she returned to the kitchen, “I was serious about the western theme. A lot of people like it, especially people with kids.” She scrutinized Jillian’s face. “No? I guess you’re set on Phileas Fogg.”

“Kind of.”

“How about Nancy Drew?”

Jillian frowned. “I’m going to do more bacon for the late risers. What about oatmeal?”

“We’ve got the instant kind out there.”

“I know, but it’s winter. People want hot stuff.”

“There’s the waffle maker, and bacon and eggs.”

“I’ll do some link sausage, too.”

Kate let out a big sigh. “You sound like Mom. Better too much food than not enough.”

“You know it’s true. We’ve got about twenty more people who aren’t even in the dining room yet.”

Jillian might be exaggerating, but not by much. Their twelve rooms had housed twenty-two guests overnight. The largest rooms, Hercule Poirot and Scarlett O’Hara, held families, while the others had couples or singletons. And more than half of those would be here another night.

“Relax, Jill. They have the toaster, and there are muffins, bagels, Danish pastries, and several varieties of whole-grain bread.”

“Okay, you’re right. But can you get me two more pounds of bacon from the fridge?”

The carnival was in full swing Saturday, and the inn emptied by nine in the morning. They didn't serve lunch or dinner unless by special request, and Jillian and Kate expected most of the guests to stay out all day.

After a leisurely brunch together, Kate ventured out to enjoy the carnival attractions. Jillian sat in the office, happily analyzing the profits for the month. The phone rang, and she answered it almost on auto-pilot.

"Jillian? It's Carl Roofner. Your special order book is in."

"Already? That was fast! You just ordered it Thursday."

"It sure was. You can come get it anytime."

"Well, Kate's not here, so I can't leave right now. I'll probably come over this afternoon."

Knowing the book was waiting for her at the Book Rack distracted Jillian. She wrote checks for the two night desk clerks and the part-time maid and put away her ledgers. When Kate got back, bubbling with reports on the carnival, Jillian was eager to go out and take it in for herself.

"You've got to see the snowmen in front of the library." Kate unwound the knitted scarf from her neck and pulled off her gloves. "The contest doesn't close until four, and they'll do the judging and hand out prizes then."

"When's the skating relay?"

"That was this morning."

"Who won?" Jillian was a little disappointed she hadn't been on hand to watch.

"A team of high school boys. Jeremy Tilton was on it."

"Sandra's son? Wow, I'm so happy for him!" The teenager was a major *Lord of the Rings* fan and had visited on a slack day last summer to view their decorations in the Galadriel Room.

"What was the prize?"

“They all got trophies and gift cards for pizza and ice cream.”

Jillian shivered. “Ice cream in January?”

“Hey, that’s what was donated. I saw Sandra. She says hi.” Sandra Tilton, a volunteer firefighter, was a friend of Jillian’s.

“Great. Well, as soon as I get a bite to eat, I’m heading for the Book Rack. My copy of *Around the World in Eighty Days* arrived already. I may go by the library after and watch the snowman judging.”

Kate peeled off her parka. “Take your time. I doubt any of our guests will come back for at least another hour. Some of them will pop in before they go out for supper, but it should be a quiet evening.”

They ate sandwiches for lunch in the inn’s kitchen. Jillian wasn’t very hungry, and she knew treats would be on sale at booths throughout the carnival area and downtown. She put on her winter jacket and matching hat and gloves. In the doorway, she paused. “If anyone calls wanting to make a reservation, check the list carefully. We don’t have many vacancies over the next couple of weeks.”

“Got it.” Kate was already settling in at the front desk with her iPad.

Since it wasn’t too cold, Jillian decided not to drive. No doubt traffic would be heavy near the library, and a block near the skating pond was barricaded to keep out vehicles during the weekend events. She didn’t want to add to the congestion, so a brisk walk was in order.

When she came near the library, a few snowflakes were falling. According to the TV weatherman in Bangor, that wouldn’t last long or accumulate, but it added a lovely touch to the festivities.

The sidewalk near the snowman contest on the library’s lawn was packed with spectators. Jillian wended her way

between the onlookers and found a spot where she could see without standing in a foot of snow. At least a dozen of the entries were finished, and five teams were still working on their masterpieces. The competitors were allowed to use extra props for facial features, as well as hats, scarves, and up to two more items.

Jillian got a good laugh out of the firefighter snowman, who had a snow Dalmatian sitting patiently beside him. Another entry was composed of a carefully sculpted Statue of Liberty, but the team was having a hard time keeping the upraised arm with its candleholder torch from collapsing.

After watching the action for ten minutes and greeting several acquaintances and two of the inn's guests, she walked on to the bookstore. She hoped Carl had seen a lot of customers today, but pedestrians were sparse in this section of the downtown.

She pushed open the door expecting a vibrant greeting from Carl. Instead, the whole store was silent. Stepping inside, she let the door swing shut behind her and peered toward the counter. No one. The cash register and the stool at the computer were both empty. She scanned the room but didn't see any graying heads above the rows of bookshelves. Carl must be out back.

She stepped toward a rack of inspirational romance and stopped.

Scuffed, brown oxfords stuck out beyond an end cap full of Gerry Boyle novels.

Heart pounding, Jillian stepped forward. Between the racks of merchandise, the pair of feet remained motionless. She pulled in a shaky breath and inched closer.

Stan Chappell lay sprawled on the floor, his head turned to one side. His eyes stared vacantly at a row of Maine travel books.