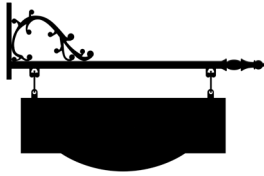


3



Kate took the elevator to the third floor, a bundle of fresh towels and sheets in her arms. Jillian had already stripped the bed and emptied the trash in the Horatio Hornblower room and was now cleaning the bathroom.

“Everything okay in here?” Kate asked as she restocked the towels.

Jillian stood and backed away from the shower with a can of disinfectant cleaner in her hand. “Yeah. Just a sec, and I’ll help you make the bed.”

Kate went back into the bedroom and paused for a moment by the walnut binnacle Zeb had built. It held an old ship’s compass they’d discovered in one of the inn’s small, windowless chambers they called secret rooms. He’d done a beautiful job. She ran her fingers over the smooth wood that edged the glass in the top of the case.

“Let’s do this,” Jillian said, flinging back the duvet. They stripped off the sheets and pillowcases and replaced them almost as quickly and neatly as Mindy would have.

“Go ahead down to the desk,” Kate told her. “I’ll dust and vacuum the lounge.”

“It’ll probably be okay for another day,” Jillian said. “Mindy just did it Friday.”

Kate shrugged. “I don’t mind.” She’d finished her baking for the day, and she was keeping away from the second floor, where Luke’s room was. Since he’d finished fastening the shutters over all the upstairs windows, she didn’t think he’d venture up here to the third level again.

“Suit yourself,” Jillian said. “We don’t need to do anything to Scout Finch or Rip Van Winkle.” Those were the two rooms with plumbing problems in the connecting bathroom.

Kate frowned. “This storm could delay the plumber.”

“I know. And some people are already putting the brakes on their vacations. I doubt we’ll need the rooms for a few more days.”

“I don’t like Mindy’s power being knocked out. We could lose ours anytime.”

“I know. If it wasn’t so nasty out, I’d run to the store for extra supplies.”

“We can get by for a day or two with what we have, but not much more than that.” Kate scooped up the dirty linens.

“Want me to take those down?” Jillian asked.

“Would you?” Kate was glad she didn’t have to take the dirty things down—the elevator opened right opposite the door to the Phileas Fogg Room, where Luke was staying, and the utility room was off the same hallway.

Jillian bundled everything in her arms, and Kate tucked in a stray hand towel.

“I might go over to check on Zeb and take him some soup and a muffin.”

“The wind is awful,” Kate said.

“Don’t worry. I’ll drive.”

“Well, let me know when you’re ready, and I’ll go down to the office.” She could shut the hall door there. If Luke came into the lobby, she supposed she’d have to face him. She clenched her teeth and picked up her cleaning caddy.

Just getting out to her Taurus was a struggle. Jillian carefully put the box containing Zeb’s treats on the passenger floor. Chicken-vegetable soup, breadsticks, and a half dozen oatmeal cookies. That would at least get him through lunch. When she edged the car out onto the road, no other traffic was in sight, but a big branch from a white pine lay on the shoulder.

Zeb’s driveway was only a tenth of a mile past the inn. Smaller limbs littered her short drive. Once in his yard, she picked up a plastic planter that must have been thrown off his porch.

She knocked, and with her ear to the door, she heard his feeble reply. She swung the door open. He should keep it locked, but then, he probably didn’t want to have to get up to let in any callers.

“Zeb? You okay?” She quickly scanned his snug living room, but he wasn’t there.

“In here.” She set down her box of treats and the planter and followed his voice to his bedroom—the captain’s cabin at the back of the house, overlooking the bay. She’d never been in there before. Finding Zeb sitting up in his bed, she stopped short in the doorway. “Hi. Sorry to bother you. I brought soup and cookies.”

“Bless you.” Zeb punched his pillow without much force. “I just didn’t feel up to going on deck today.”

She smiled. “It’s not a crime to stay in your berth one day, Zeb.”

His scowl said otherwise.

Beyond the window, the whitecaps swelled on the bay, colliding and merging as they surged toward shore. The wind whistled around the eaves. His little house didn't feel nearly as solid and secure as the inn.

"Have you got storm shutters?" she asked.

"Just for these back windows. But ..." He settled back on his pillows and pulled the quilt over his legs.

"I can send someone over to put them up for you." Who could she send? It would be a chore. But she'd fret about Zeb lying helpless in a bed so close to a large, uncovered window. "Are you sure you're okay here alone?"

"I'll get by." He let out a little moan. "Can you turn the heat up a notch?"

"Actually, it's quite warm in here." She stepped to the bedside and laid a hand on his forehead. "I think you have a fever, Zeb."

"Wouldn't surprise me." He pulled the quilt up higher.

"Do you have a thermometer?"

"Medicine cabinet."

She hurried to the small bathroom and foraged until she found it. Two minutes later, she squinted for the reading. A hundred and one.

Jillian did some quick calculations. She wouldn't sleep well tonight. She'd be worried about him over here alone. He wouldn't like it, but ...

"I'm taking you to the inn."

"Wha—?"

"Come on, I mean it. You can't stay here alone." Large drops of water pelted against the window.

"Look, it's raining already," she said. "If phone lines go out, I won't be able to call you. Have you got a duffel bag? Tell me what to pack."

“I—my seabag’s in the closet, but—”

“No buts. We’ve got a nice, comfy room right near the office.”

“Hornblower?” A gleam lit his watery eyes.

“No, that’s on the top floor.”

“Oh.”

“Come on, sit up and I’ll help you get your shoes on.” She decided not to tell him the room she had in mind was Anna Karenina. Zeb would probably prefer a room representing a masculine character. “When you’re feeling better, I’ll take you up to see Hornblower. I promise.”

She dashed back to the bathroom and grabbed his toothbrush and two prescription bottles, then went back to his room and pulled a few clothes out of the dresser.

“The windows.” His voice was so low she barely heard him.

His room had two windows on the back wall. The house was quite close to the cliff, and she saw what she hadn’t noticed before. Against the wall below each frame hung a hinged board panel.

“Your shutters are inside,” she said.

Zeb nodded. “Just these two. I had Lee fix ’em, so I wouldn’t have to climb a ladder. It won’t protect the glass, but it’ll keep the rain out if the window breaks.”

Jillian brought in the chicken soup and ordered him to eat while she worked. She cleared the floor beneath the windows, dragging aside a small table and a few pairs of shoes. Then she hoisted each shutter. Small deadbolts were attached to the top and side edges, and she soon had them secure.

“Any others?”

He shook his head. “The rest of the storm windows go outside, and they’re put away in the cellar. Leave them.”

She strode to the bedside. “All right, then. Let’s get going.”

Helping him stand was an effort, but they managed. She

turned off his bedside lamp and guided him to the doorway. As they passed through the living room, she hoped he wouldn't make a plea to bring along his telescope. It was a large one on a tripod, and she wasn't sure she could get it safely out to the car on her own.

He didn't mention it, and somehow she got him bundled up and into the car, along with the hastily packed canvas seabag. He'd eaten the soup she brought and one of the cookies while she raised the shutters, and she left the rest of the food.

She started the car. "Is there anything else, Zeb, before we go?"

"You locked the door."

"Yes, and I got your toothbrush and clothes. Have we got everything you'll need for the night?"

"Aye."

The rain deluged the car, but with the wipers going top speed, she managed to get them back to the inn and pulled up with Zeb's door broadside to the front steps.

"You sit tight while I get someone to help us," she told him. Not waiting for an answer, she hopped out and slammed the door harder than she'd meant to, with the wind's help. All her strength was needed to get around the car and push her way to the front door. Without the railing, she doubted she'd have made it.

Luke Brantley was coming down the stairs as she tumbled inside. He ran down the last few steps into the lobby.

"Jillian! Are you all right?"

"Yes, but I've got our neighbor in my car out front, and I've got to get him inside. He's sick, and I didn't want to leave him alone. Can you help me?"

"Sure. What's his name?"

"Zeb Wilding."

She hated to confront the storm again, but Luke plunged

outside without a coat. Rain pummeled the porch roof and gushed from the downspouts at the corners. Luke ignored the storm and flung Zeb's door open, standing in the downpour.

"Mr. Wilding, let's get you inside." He took the old man's arm and half pulled him from the car and up onto the porch.

"Get him into my office," Jillian said. "I'll get his things."

"Are you—"

She ran down the steps and, with difficulty, opened the back door and pulled the seabag to her. When she got inside, she couldn't close the front door, and wind howled in, choking off her breath.

"What's going on?" Kate yelled from the dining room doorway.

"Help me!"

Both women pushed, and together they shoved the door into place. Jillian locked it and stood panting.

Kate was gazing toward the open office door behind the front desk.

"Luke helped me get Zeb in," Jillian said between puffs of air. "He's got a temp, and I didn't want to leave him over there by himself."

"Where will he sleep?"

"Anna Karenina, so he's nearby."

Kate picked up the seabag. "I'll code a key card."

"Make it two—one for me and one for Zeb."

"Right."

Knowing Kate wouldn't want to come face to face with Luke, Jillian took Zeb's bag from her. "I'll get this. Luke and I can take it from here."

In less than a minute, Kate handed her two cards.

"Thanks," Jillian said.

"Hey," said Luke from the office doorway.

Kate shot Jillian a keen glance and ducked across the hall into the dining room.

Jillian went around the counter with the seabag slung over her shoulder. “I’ve got keys for the room down the hall on the right. Let’s get him dry and into bed, if you don’t mind.”

“No problem.”

Jillian stepped into the office with him. Zeb was sitting in her desk chair, looking a bit bedraggled from his few seconds out in the rain. She smiled as she opened the office’s second door, into the hallway.

“There, we’ve got a nice room for you, Zeb. It’s just a short walk down the hall.”

“No stairs?”

“Not even one.”

She and Luke each took an arm and guided him out of the office, past the elevator on one side and a powder room on the other, to the last door on the right. Zeb eyed the plaque that read ANNA KARENINA, surrounded by chamomile flowers, but he didn’t protest. She opened the door and flipped the light switch.

Zeb glanced around the room, decorated with scenes from St. Petersburg and a print of a couple riding in a *troika*, a sleigh pulled by three horses abreast. A display shelf unit held enameled boxes with traditional Russian motifs, a wooden set of brightly painted, nesting dolls, copies of *Anna Karenina*, and other volumes by Tolstoy.

“Let me help you with your jacket and shoes, Zeb,” Jillian said.

“I can help him.” Luke took the old man’s hat and set it on the dresser. “You’d better put your car in the garage if you can.”

Jillian dreaded facing the rain again, but he was right. Leaving her vehicle in the parking lot could result in damage on a day like this.

“Thanks. I’ll be back in a few minutes with some hot tea, Zeb.”

“Thank you,” he croaked out as Luke eased his wet jacket off over his shoulders.

Jillian dashed down the hall. Kate was crossing toward the office.

“Hey. Everything okay?” Kate asked.

“Luke’s helping Zeb get his wet things off in Anna Karenina.”

Kate eyed the car keys Jillian held. “Oh. Okay. Where are you headed now?”

“I’m going to take my car down to the garage. Is your Jeep in there?”

“Yeah, it’s all buttoned down tight.”

The carriage house didn’t have storm shutters, even though it was closer to the bay.

“I’m going to grab a few things from the house and bring them up,” Jillian said. “I’ll stay in the Jeeves Room tonight, so I can be near Zeb. I think we should both stay here. Do you want me to pick up anything for you?”

Kate glanced uneasily toward the covered windows. The raging wind and the rain drumming on the porch roof hammered in the logic of both sleeping at the inn.

“It’s probably a good idea. Don called, and I told him not to even think of trying to get here tonight. So, yeah, I could use pj’s and my toiletry bag. Maybe a sweatshirt and a change of clothes for tomorrow, if it’s not too much.”

“It’s not. I’ll see you in fifteen or twenty minutes.”

Jillian put on a hooded jacket and braved the elements again. She sent up a prayer of thanks for their garage and the automatic opener. Unfortunately, the garage was detached from the little house. After parking her car inside, she took a big breath and stepped out. The overhead door rolled down

behind her as she sprinted the few yards to the front of the carriage house.

Years ago, when the inn had been a private home, the carriage house had held their horse-drawn vehicles. At some point, the smaller building had been remodeled into a snug cottage. The Gage siblings' parents had lived there happily for several years after they bought the inn. Now Kate and Jillian shared the cozy space.

The sun hadn't peeked out all morning, but the storm brought true darkness, and it wasn't even noon yet. Jillian hurried to stash a few clothes into a vinyl bag for herself and then for Kate. Plenty of shampoo, soap, and toothpaste was stored at the inn for guests, so she didn't bother with those, but chose other personal items.

Soberly, she tied her hood close and pulled on knit gloves. She'd thought she wouldn't need those again this spring. At last, she shouldered the two bags and was ready to make the run up to the inn.

With the wind hitting her sideways, she raced up the driveway and cut off for the familiar path to the side porch. She burst into the storage room panting and locked the door behind her. She found Kate in the kitchen, piling candles and batteries on the counter.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Jillian gasped, thrusting Kate's damp overnight bag into her arms. "It's really rough out there, though. Sorry that's wet."

"It's okay." Kate grabbed a dish towel and wiped the outside of her bag. "I drew some jugs of water, just in case."

Jillian's heart sank. "So, Rick didn't set up the generator?"

"He brought it up to the side porch, but no. I guess we could ..."

"Let's just wait and see if we need it."

“Okay. What do I do now—pick a room, any room? You said you wanted Jeeves.”

“Yeah. I guess you can sleep anywhere you want, as long as it’s not occupied or plumbing challenged.”

“I’ve always wanted to sleep in Horatio Hornblower. That couple left this morning.”

“Now’s your chance.”

“Even though it’s one of the biggest rooms?”

“Why not? I doubt we’ll get any more guests for tonight in *this*.” Jillian accentuated her statement with a wave toward the door. “If we do get a guest, you can change the bed as punishment.”

Kate laughed. “Thanks. I’ll sit on the desk while you go put your things away.”

As Jillian lugged her bag down the hallway, the door to Anna Karenina opened, and Luke came out. He smiled when he saw her.

“I think Mr. Wilding’s all set. What a character.”

“Oh, yeah. Sometimes I think we should dedicate a Zeb Wilding Room, but—oh, wait! He’s real.”

Luke chuckled. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“Not right now, but thanks, Luke. I’ll call on you later if we need to start the generator. And thanks for understanding about—you know.”

He nodded and turned away. Jillian lingered in the hall until she saw with relief that he was taking the elevator. No need for him to pass Kate in the lobby.