

THE RED HERRINGS AT KILLINGTON INN

By Shawn Reilly Simmons

Judy Plath's joy was renewed every morning when she woke in the main quarters of the Killington Inn, the bed and breakfast she and her husband Jerry ran. The inn was situated at the foot of Killington Peak and snowbirds and skiing enthusiasts traveled from all over to stay in their quaint rooms, and traverse the mountain ranges that surrounded the area. Judy enjoyed watching their guests cut paths down the mountain from the warmth and safety of the inn's dining room every morning as she laid out scones and fresh-squeezed orange juice on the banquette. If anyone had asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, little Judy would never have said innkeeper, but just like most things that come to be in a person's life, she'd landed in the exact right place at exactly the right time.

The man who had built the Killington Inn over one hundred and fifty years earlier had been wise enough to position the building so that it faced the tallest nearby mountain. Judy admired people who made the right choice, especially when they had multiple options to consider.

As she set down some scones and jam on a nearby table for one of her guests, Meryl caught sight of her husband out on the slope from the corner of her eye, his puffy red jacket bright against the snow.

"You're welcome," Judy murmured with a warm smile to her guest and

then took a few steps toward the window. Jerry pointed his skis this way and that, gliding easily over the snow as he taught his first lesson of the day. A group of three young women trailed behind him, their movements varying degrees of awkwardness as they reached the bottom of the bunny slope. Judy poured herself some coffee from the carafe near the window, not taking her eyes off the group. One of the women faltered as she slid to a stop and fell into Jerry, her long blonde ponytail shimmering in the morning sun. Brent reached out his strong arm to steady her, saving her from falling into the snow on her backside. She gripped him tightly and Jerry laughed, his grin stretching beneath his snow goggles, his smile wide and indulgent.

Judy took a sip from her coffee mug, and the too hot liquid scorched her tongue.

A small tour bus turned into the inn's parking lot and Judy's expression softened as she watched her new guests step out onto the frosty pavement. As the group of six made their way toward the front door, Meryl glanced once more at Jerry and his ski class. They were heading toward the lift for another run down the mountain, his hand lightly touching the jacket of the blonde, near the base of her spine, steadying and urging her forward.

"Welcome to Killington Inn," Judy said brightly as the tour group entered the lobby. She sized them up as they began to shed coats, hats, and gloves and made the standard comments about the chill in the air, and the warmth from the fireplace inside the inn.

"We're so glad to finally be here," one of the women said. "We've come a long way."

Judy slipped behind the wooden reception desk and tapped on a tablet that was discretely tucked away from view. She liked to keep the inn looking as rustic as possible, but there was no beating technology when it came to guest management and processing credit card payments. An old fashioned ledger would have been more historically accurate, but not nearly as efficient.

"And you're the Baxter party?" Judy asked.

The woman nodded, her round cheeks rosy from the cold. "The

reservation is in my name. Sienna Baxter.”

“And you’ve come all the way from Maryland. How was your trip?” Judy asked, like she had hundreds of times before.

“Long,” one of the men said with a bark of laughter. “Worth it though. This is definitely the right place.” He craned his neck and gazed at the wooden beams running beneath the vaulted ceiling of the lobby. “The pictures don’t do it justice.”

“Has someone you know stayed with us before?” Judy asked.

The group all shook their heads and the short woman with the red curly hair in the back chimed in. “This place has been on our list for over a year now.”

“That’s so nice to hear,” Judy said. “We’re glad you’ve arrived. I see we have three rooms ready for you. Does that sound right?” Judy knew it was exactly right, but she’d learned letting the guests think they had some control over their visit made them feel better about staying in an unfamiliar place.

“That’s right,” Sienna Baxter said. The others behind her nodded as she continued. “Two to a room. Three rooms total, all facing the back courtyard.”

“Yes,” Judy said. “I remember that now. We often get requests for rooms facing the mountain.” She nodded at the front door behind them. “But not too many requests to face the rear.”

“Then it shouldn’t be a problem, right?” Sienna said. “We’d really prefer the rear view.”

“Not a problem at all.” Judy’s eyebrows scrunched together as she squinted at her screen, trying to remember a time when a group of six hadn’t wanted a view of the ski slopes. “Perfect then,” she said, tapping a few more times as Sienna dug for her wallet in a fanny pack that was hung around her pudgy middle. A small pin shaped like a fish shimmered on the lapel of her jacket. “Will you need any additional lift passes?” Judy asked with a smile. “We provide one per day per guest for the resort right here. They come with your reservation. If you’d want to venture out and ski at another resort, we can reserve those for you too and add it to your daily

room rate.”

Sienna shook her head and smiled. “We’re not here to ski.”

Judy looked up from her tablet. “Nature hiking, then?”

Sienna glanced at the group behind her. Most of them were shaking their heads. “Not this trip. Definitely not in two feet of snow.”

“You’re too late for foliage, I’m afraid,” Judy said, probing. “Ah! The maple syrup festival.”

“I’m diabetic,” one of the men said.

Judy bit her bottom lip as Sienna handed over her credit card. “What a nice pin,” she said, glancing again at the fish on Sienna’s jacket and then at the rest of the group. “I see you all have them.”

“Yes,” Sienna said, touching the pin lightly with her finger. The fish had a silver head and a reddish hue to the engraved scales down its body. “We’re members of the Red Herring Society.”

“Oh, right. The Red Hats,” Judy said, relieved she’d figured something out about this group. “I’ve heard of them.” She handed Sienna back her card.

One of the men chuckled as Sienna shook her head. “No, no red hats here. We’re from the Western Maryland chapter of the Red Herrings. We investigate true crimes, specializing in unsolved murders.”

Judy touched a finger to her lip and stepped back from the desk, bumping the wall behind her. “What are you talking about?”

“Murder,” one of the men said, his voice bouncing off the wood paneling. A couple dressed in ski suits edged past the group, eying them curiously as they made their way out the front door.

“I’m sorry,” Judy said, recovering. “There must be some mistake. The Killington Inn has the finest reputation in all of Vermont. We don’t deal in any sordid business here. Definitely not murder. No not at the Killington.”

One of the women pulled a yellowing newspaper from her bag and held it up for Judy to see. “There’s been two suspicious disappearances here. Both women are assumed to be dead. Both most likely murdered. Both remain unsolved.”

Judy’s face fell as she read the headline in the woman’s hand. *Dozens*

Dead in Killington Blizzard. “Oh, yes, those were hard times in this area, over a hundred and fifty years ago. Jasper Killington built this inn. My husband is his sixth great grandson. But surely you don’t think...murder?”

“We do. And we can solve it,” Sienna said as her friend tucked the newspaper away again. “Modern technology and internet sleuths are cracking cases all over the country. And we have leads on the other... curious disappearance that happened here more recently.”

Judy started shaking her head before Sienna Baxter stopped talking. “No, now...I know what you’re thinking, but you can’t just come in here and disrupt our family...”

“We’re here for the Maple Syrup Festival,” the woman who hadn’t spoken yet said, cutting her off. The adjacent dining room had become unusually quiet, and Judy feared she’d make things worse by encouraging the conversation.

Judy stared at the group, who remained silent for a full minute. She was the first to speak. “Please, let me show you to your rooms.” Judy knew from years of experience that the customer was always right. At least you had to make them feel that they were.

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Judy showed them to three rooms along the back of the inn, all facing the snow-covered courtyard, as requested.

“We provide a continental breakfast every morning, for those who want to hit the slopes early, as well as a hot breakfast for our guests who prefer that option. My son—”

“Your stepson?” Sienna asked, the single word slicing like a blade.

“Yes,” Judy faltered. “Blake. How did you...?”

Sienna smiled and stepped through the doorway into her room. The woman with the newspaper had already begun unpacking her bag, strewing papers and other debris from a small suitcase across the bedspread. “Part of what we do. We don’t ever arrive at a scene without conducting our background investigations.”

“Sorry, are you with the police?” Judy said, straightening her shoulders. The wool sweater she’d put on that morning was suddenly too warm.

“No, we are civilians,” Sienna said. “But the Red Herrings have closed over a dozen cases across the country so far. The Vermont chapter passed on this case, and we decided to pursue it. We want to get a win up on the board.”

“Right,” Judy said. “Well, enjoy your stay.”

“I’m sure we will,” Sienna said, closing the door behind her.

* * *

“Blake, dear,” Judy said, stepping into the inn’s kitchen. The room had been redone since the inn had been built, but far enough back where it could stand to be updated again. “I wanted to chat about the special menu tonight.”

Judy’s stepson stood behind a steel counter in a chef coat, his dark bangs sweeping down to cover his eyes. He wiped a chef knife slowly with a terry cloth towel.

“The murder club?” Blake asked. “Yes, Judy, I’m working on that now.”

Judy recoiled. “You knew about them? And you know I prefer you call me S-Mom. Or Mom. Or Mummy. Not Judy.”

Blake shrugged and lifted his lip in a slight sneer. “Okay, S...mom.” He hissed the S and then smiled. “Whatever you prefer, of course. And yes, I knew about them coming. They phoned ahead with some special requests.”

Judy cheeks reddened. “I didn’t know anything about that.”

“Surprising,” Blake said, swiping his knife blade on the towel again. “Not much gets by you.”

Judy sighed. “Let’s not argue. I know I’m not your mom. We’ve gone over that a thousand times.” She crossed her thin arms over her waist and took a few steps toward him. Blake let out a sigh and nodded, not raising his eyes to meet hers.

“What’s on the menu then?” Judy asked.

“It’s a bit on the nose. We’ll start with pickled herring deviled eggs, then

a pasta Fra Diavolo, Wine-Drowned Chicken for the main course, and we'll end with Death by Chocolate for dessert. Oh, and a Forbidden Fruit tart, for those watching their sugar intake."

Judy tightened her arms across her waist. "My darling boy, did anyone ever tell you, you have a flair for the dramatic?"

Blake polished his knife once more and looked up at her. "Yes. My mother did, right before she disappeared into the night."

* * *

As Judy cleared away the breakfast plates, she thought about how sweet Blake had been as a child. Back then he'd come to her when he needed anything, to tend a bruise or make a sandwich, or cuddle after bath time as they read his favorite book. When he looked at her his eyes were wide and searching, studying her younger face with wonder. When Judy had accepted the position of au pair that first summer of college, her very first job as a young adult, she had no idea that she'd never end up leaving.

By the time Blake became a teenager three years later, Judy had moved from her own room next to his into his father's quarters. Blake's looks grew darker and more suspicious in the following years, and the closeness she once shared with him eroded from day to day. Blake told Judy he hated her one afternoon when he found her boxing up his mother's clothes to move into the attic. Judy's heart broke as she stood in front of the closet, one of Emma's well-worn sweaters limp in her hands.

Blake would sit near the back door of the kitchen and wait for his mother to return, like he had when she'd run out to the store when he was little. Emma Killington had gone out one night and never returned, no matter how hard her son had wished for her to come back. He'd taken his hurt and anger and pointed them directly at Judy, which she understood. She had so much love for him, she hoped once he'd given up hope and accepted Emma wasn't coming home, he'd come back around to loving her again, too.

Jerry said he and Emma were perfectly happy, and he had no idea why

she'd gone off and abandoned him and their son.

When Blake decided he wanted to be a chef, Judy urged Jerry, now her husband, to send him to the Culinary Institute in New York where he could train with the best in the business. After a couple of tough years in Manhattan working as a high end, line chef, Blake had returned to the inn, homesick and still missing his mother.

Judy had planted Emma's favorite flowers in a memory garden during the years Blake was away in New York. It was just behind the inn in the courtyard, and she envisioned it as a place for Blake to sit and feel close to his mother. Blake had raged at her the first time he'd seen it, as if Judy was trying to put an end to the possibility of Emma returning one day to claim her family, or implying she was gone forever and needed a special memory spot. But eventually Judy had seen him out there, sitting and staring at the flowers in the summer. He never thanked her for it out loud, but she hoped what she had created for him was helping him to heal and get over his loss.

"Excuse me," Sienna Baxter said, interrupting Judy's thoughts. She'd been standing at the window, watching Jerry mingle with his ski class. They were leaning against their skis, propped up in the snow. Jerry smiling down at the blonde.

Judy knew that smile well. The first time Jerry had kissed her, she was folding Blake's sheets, still warm from the dryer. Blake had had an accident the night before, something that had been happening off and on since Emma had disappeared that night. She'd been gone for two months, which seemed like forever but also not long at all. Judy was taken off guard by the whole thing and had never considered Jerry as a potential suitor.

Eventually she gave in to his advances, and began slipping into his bed most nights, always careful to be back in her own before Blake woke up in the morning. She and Jerry had tried to do things the right way, in an attempt to cause the least damage to Blake. Judy was convinced if they all just loved each other enough, everything would work out. She also wished Blake would just forget about Emma, like his father had. Jerry never talked about his first wife, and by the time they had started their relationship,

he'd boxed up all of the photos of Emma too.

"Oh," Judy said, jumping a little, as if she were the one caught doing something she shouldn't. "Sorry. Can I help with anything?"

"Are we able to take any of the books from the library upstairs to our rooms?" the woman asked, her fish pin glinting in the sunlight.

"Yes," Judy said. "Wait, no. We don't really want the history books to leave the library. Some go back very far in my husband's family. You understand."

"Of course," Sienna said with a grimace. "We'll set up in there then."

"Set up?" Judy asked, her voice trailing off. Sienna had already turned to go and was marching through the dining room to the study at the far end of the inn.

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"Jacob Killington," Sienna said with a grin. Her thick finger lightly touched the pages of the large book she'd set on the table near the upright piano. "Murderer."

Judy entered the room with a tea service and set it on the low table near the windows. "I don't think he's—"

"Well," Sienna said, looking up at her. "It doesn't say that, of course, but we know he most likely is. And we're here to prove it. Right, Henny?"

The shorter member of the group with the red hair nodded enthusiastically.

Judy tugged lightly on her scratchy turtleneck.

The rest of the Red Herrings had gathered in the study, and were perusing the bookshelves, studying papers on the large card table, or making notes. Judy bit the inside of her cheek, then said, "Tea, anyone? I have cocoa too. And brandy for anyone needing to fight off a chill. Our chef is preparing some light fare for you to enjoy while you...work."

A few nods around the room set Judy in motion as she began to prepare the hot drinks. While being a topnotch innkeeper was always her main goal, she had an ulterior motive of wanting to eavesdrop on the murder

club as well. She couldn't imagine how they were so certain Jerry's fifth great grandfather was a killer of some sort. If he were, whatever had happened took place so many years ago there couldn't be much in the way of proof.

As Judy poured the tea, she glanced out the window. Jerry's red coat was zipping down the mountain again. The blonde was right behind him, copying his movements and picking up speed to join him. Maybe she'd been pretending to not know how to ski, Judy thought. She sloshed the hot water and burned her hand, causing her to drop the teacup onto the tray. The fragile china broke in half and she looked down at the two pieces, the word Kill staring up at her from one of the pieces.

"It's here," one of the men called out. "The house ledger, in the back of this book. I'm looking at 1885, the year in question."

"What have you found, Tom?" Sienna said, turning around from the bookshelf.

"She's not here," Tom said. "Under other household." He pointed to a faintly written ledger on the back pages of the History of the Killington Inn they kept on the top shelf in the library.

Judy turned around. "Who isn't listed?" she asked. "What are you talking about? The whole family is there, for every year all the way to this one. We have copies of records. It's an important part of our history."

"Your history?" Sienna said. "You're a new member of the family, are you not? No blood relations."

Judy's cheeks burned. "I fail to see your point." She really wanted to tell them all to get out, to stop prying in her happy home and business, but the exemplary innkeeper in her fought down that urge. She didn't need to open Yelp in the morning and read how she'd tossed out a group of six guests, no matter how intrusive they were being.

Blake entered the library carrying a tray of finger sandwiches and biscuits. Judy waved him over and pointed to the credenza where she'd been pouring the tea. Taking another glance out the window, she saw that Jerry and the young woman had removed their skis and were heading for the inn. Getting a better look at the girl's face as she approached, her

stomach twisted once more before she turned back around. She looked enough like Judy to be her college aged daughter.

“Blake is a classically trained chef,” Judy said, her voice quivering slightly. “He studied and did his apprenticeship in New York.”

“At Le Bernardin,” Henny said, looking up from her newspaper clippings. “We know.”

“They’ve...studied us,” Judy said to Blake. “They’re looking in to some—”

“Murders,” Sienna said, grabbing a cucumber sandwich from the tray.

“Events,” Judy said. “That have happened here at the inn. They’re not with the police or anything. They’re just internet people.”

“Civilian sleuths,” Tom corrected her.

“Are you here about my mother?” Blake asked. His expression was so hopeful Judy’s heart broke all over again. She wondered for a moment if he’d react the same way if she were to go missing. At this point she’d mothered him for more years than Emma, but he still couldn’t let her go, let her be a part of his past.

“No, dear,” Judy said, cutting off an about to speak Sienna Baxter. “Not your mother. Your many generations ago great grandmother. I’m sure this is a bit of nothing, a fun get-together among friends who enjoy reading old newspapers.”

The Red Herrings stopped what they were doing and stared at Judy. She cleared her throat but held her ground, smiling politely at everyone in the room.

Tom was the first one to move, slowly pulling a sheet of paper from a file folder on the table. “We have proof. Of Henrietta’s murder.”

“Who is Henrietta?” Judy asked. “Jacob’s wife was called Sarah. See, I told you.” She shook her head at Blake.

“Henrietta was Jacob Killington’s first wife,” Sienna said.

Judy scoffed. “There is no Henrietta in our family. There’s no record of her name anywhere. You’ve made some kind of mistake...you have the wrong family.”

“You know for sure, Tom?” Sienna asked, stepping closer to the table.

“The names have been changed,” Tom said with a nod. “The records

here,” he pointed to the Killington Inn history book, “have been altered to reflect what you think of as the Killington family. But the census done that year does not match. Sarah Burr is listed as a household member. A servant.”

“Blake, can you go make some more sandwiches? I don’t think this will be enough.” Judy tried to usher Blake from the room, but he waved her off.

“What are you talking about?” Blake asked, his voice sharp.

“We’ve solved the case of your missing fifth great grandfather’s first wife and son. You are descended from Jacob’s second wife, who originally was one of the servants of the household. She had six children with Jacob and raised Henrietta’s baby as her own.”

Blake paled and he seemed to stagger for a second. “Are you saying the man who built the place we’re standing in was a killer? What proof do you have?”

Judy felt the air around her chill for a second, then become overly warm again. A log popped in the fireplace and just as quickly she felt stiflingly hot again. A conversation from another part of the inn floated toward them and she remembered she had to switch the towels from the washer to the dryer downstairs before they began to mildew.

“There was a number of blizzards the winter before Jacob and Sarah were married,” Tom said. “Many people in this area didn’t survive, and neighbors were cut off from each other for most of the winter. There were less than a hundred people living within one hundred miles of here anyway. Jacob Killington’s actual first wife, Henrietta, and her two-year old son also didn’t survive that winter, but not because of sickness or the cold. Henrietta’s infant daughter did survive, and on her death bed ninety years later, she told her granddaughter...”

“My grandmother,” Henny chirped, her red curls springing out in all directions. “She told me the story her mother had told her, that she’d never spoken about before.”

“I think I need a brandy,” Judy murmured, but didn’t make a move.

“Sarah Burr was a maid here at the inn,” Henny continued. “She and Jacob fell in love and then killed Henrietta and Jacob Junior.”

“Why wasn’t this ever talked about in the family?” Blake said, throwing an accusatory glance at Judy.

“These people are making this up,” Judy said pleadingly. “I’ve never heard of a Henrietta, or any of these people. Sarah and Jacob built this inn.”

“Henrietta had gone mad after the birth of her second child,” Henny said, as if Judy hadn’t spoken. “According to my grandmother’s diary she’d wake in the night screaming for her baby, but then reject the child and claim it wasn’t her own. Jacob and Sarah had taken up with each other by then, and one night, they were at their wits’ end. They smothered Henrietta during one of her hysterical fits. Little Jacob woke up, and they were afraid the boy would remember and eventually expose them, so they murdered him too. They’re both buried on the grounds, out beneath the courtyard, according to my grandmother.”

Blake put a hand to his stomach and doubled over. Judy sat down in the nearest chair, afraid her legs wouldn’t hold her any longer.

“How are we just hearing about this now?” Blake said, pulling himself up.

Silence was the only response.

“Maybe you’re wrong,” Judy said. “Maybe Henrietta just died. Maybe she had complications from childbirth and that’s what made her...the way she was. Fever, infection.”

Sienna nodded slowly. “Henny’s grandmother was told about the murders.”

“Hearsay,” Judy said, standing up from her chair. “Maybe the woman liked to tell scary stories before bedtime.”

“Are we cousins?” Blake asked.

“Distant ones,” Henny said. “I’d have to look at the family tree to figure it all out.”

Blake took a deep breath, and the color came back into his cheeks. “Thank you all for sharing this with us. I feel like I know my family a little better now.”

Some guests had moved into the dining room next to the study and Judy wondered if Blake had started the lunch prep yet.

"I don't want to think badly of the man, considering all he's done for us," Blake said. "But it's hard to get my head around the fact that I'm related to a murderer. And a man who seduces a servant at that, to help him commit murder...the thought of that makes me sick."

Jerry Killington stuck his head in the room, his expression twisted into a frown.

"Blake!" he shouted. "What are you saying? Judy would never help me commit murder."

"Dad," Blake said. "What are you talking about?"

"You're in here talking about a murdered wife, with these strangers? And calling Judy a servant? I really think we need to talk. Your mother... she was unstable. You mustn't blame Judy, or me, for that matter for the heartbreak she brought down on us. It's not our fault she decided to leave. It's time to let all of that go."

Tom slowly reached into his satchel again and pulled out a stack of papers that were bound together with clips and rubber bands. "Actually," he said quietly. "Emma Killington hasn't gone very far at all."

* * *

Judy and Blake watched Jerry as he was led away by two uniformed police officers and sat in the back of their patrol car. Judy felt like she was watching a movie, that somehow this wasn't happening to her and Blake, and that she could turn it off at any time, put a gentle hand over his eyes.

Blake hadn't said a word since Tom and the rest of the Red Herrings laid out the evidence they had found regarding Emma's disappearance. Jerry had planned what he'd called a romantic getaway for the two of them, and said he'd meet her at a remote cabin, where she was actually abducted by a drifter Jerry had hired. The killer died of cancer shortly after, but not before confessing his crimes to a family member, who kept it to himself.

"I'm sorry, dear boy," Judy said. "I hope you know how sorry I am for everything that has happened."

Blake looked at her, his eyes rimmed red. "I believe you. I always knew

she wouldn't just go off and leave me." He stepped closer and put his arm around her awkwardly as they watched the police car pull away.

"Solved. A twofer," Sienna said, as the Red Herrings made their way into the dining room. "Just goes to show, nothing stays a secret forever."

Judy gave her a weak smile, and fought the sick feeling growing in her stomach.

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