

Backstory



AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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Published by Scrivenings Press LLC
15 Lucky Lane
Morrilton, Arkansas 72110
<https://ScriveningsPress.com>

Printed in the United States of America

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Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-297-6

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-298-3

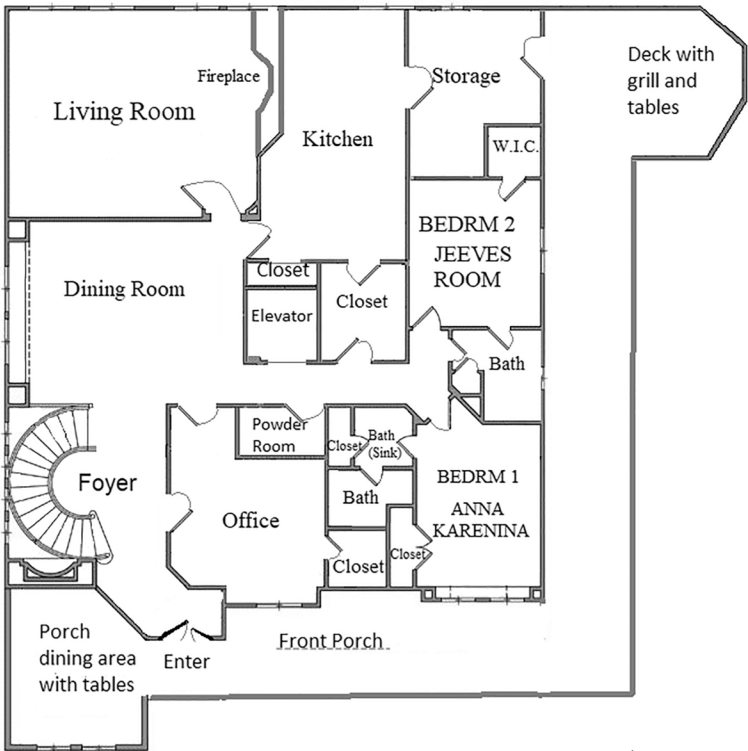
Editors: Elena Hill and Linda Fulkerson

Cover by www.bookmarketinggraphics.com.

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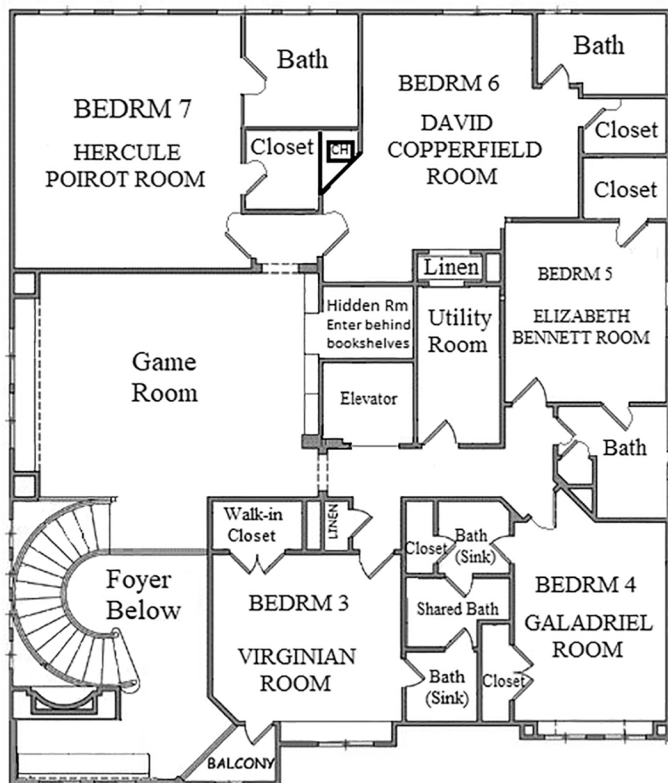
FIRST STORY - NOVEL INN

TO BLUFFS OVERLOOKING BEACH ↑

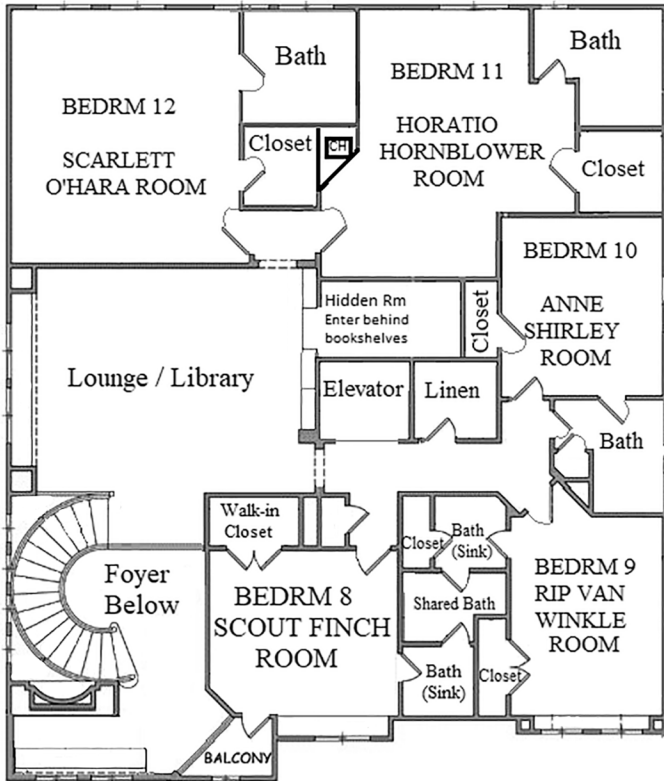


TO CARRIAGE HOUSE →

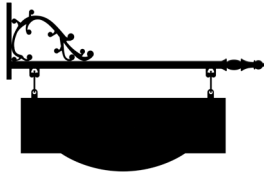
SECOND STORY - NOVEL INN



THIRD STORY STORY - NOVEL INN



1



“**Y**ou got some drain cleaner?” Rick Gage looked up at his sister Jillian from where he was hunched over the side of the bathtub.

“Yes, but I’ve tried that. Twice.”

Rick sighed and glared at the inch of water in the bottom of the tub. “What kind was it?”

“Heavy duty.” Jillian could see the skepticism on his face. “Hold on. I’ll go get it.”

“Might as well get me a plunger while you’re at it.”

Jillian dashed out through the Rip Van Winkle bedroom and across the hall to the third-floor linen closet. She and her sister kept a plunger on each story, in case they or the maids needed it in a hurry. Minor plumbing problems weren’t common at the Novel Inn, but once in a while, they cropped up.

She ran back to the bathroom that was shared between two guest rooms. Each side had its own vanity section with a sink and toilet, but the middle section with the tub-shower was shared, with a door on each side. They usually tried to put

families, or at least acquaintances traveling together, in Rip Van Winkle and Scout Finch. Two guest rooms on the floor below had the same arrangement, but the rest had private baths.

“Here.” She shoved the plunger into her brother’s hands. “I’ve got to run downstairs to get the cleaner. Be right back.”

Before he could speak, she was out the door again. The utility room on the second floor was larger than the closet she’d just visited, and it held a washer and dryer as well as cleaning supplies and tools. She ran down the stairs because that was quicker than using the elevator. By the time she got to the utility room and unlocked the door, she was panting.

When she came out with the bottle of drain cleaner in her hands, her sister Kate stood on the stair landing. Jillian made sure the door was locked behind her and walked swiftly to where her sister waited.

“Is that you running around up here?” Kate asked softly.

Jillian nodded. “Getting this for Rick.” She held up the bottle.

“Oh. Does he think he can fix it?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“I sure hope he can.”

Jillian blew her bangs off her forehead. “Me too. But don’t reserve those two rooms for anyone until we’re sure.”

“Got it.” Below, the desk phone rang. Kate turned and hurried lightly down the curving stairs.

Jillian hauled in a deep breath and climbed to the third story. She was glad none of the guests passed her as she walked briskly by the lounge and down the hall.

Rick was where she’d left him. His sleeves were rolled up, and he was vigorously attacking the tub drain with the plunger.

“This is what I used.” She set the bottle of cleaner on the edge of the tub.

He glanced at it and grunted. “And none of the other drains are stopped up?”

“No, just this one. We checked the rooms below, and they seem to be fine.”

Rick scrunched up his face and renewed his efforts. After a moment, he stopped and leaned on the side of the tub, staring at the drain.

“I thought it was going to move. Let’s see ...” He fumbled with the knob that would turn the water on.

“Wait!” Even as Jillian spoke, water gushed out of the showerhead and soaked Rick’s head and shoulders. They both jumped back.

“You coulda warned me!” Rick fumbled for the towel rack.

“I didn’t notice it until you turned on the water. Apparently, somebody left the lever up to make it come out of the shower, not the faucet.”

Rick muttered as he rubbed a towel over his sopping hair and blotted his wet shirt.

Jillian winced. “So, what do you think?”

“I think you need a plumber.”

“But the storm’s coming. I don’t know if we can get someone here before that.”

“Well, it’s beyond me.”

“But—”

“I’m sorry. I know it will cost money and all that, but I can’t fix this. Now, I need to go home and sleep. I’m on day shift tomorrow.” Rick dropped the damp towel on the tiled floor. He grabbed his jacket from the second towel rack and headed out.

“Let me know what happens,” he called over his shoulder.

“Sure,” Jillian said bitterly. She stooped for the towel and

used it to mop up water that had spilled out onto the floor. The bathmat was wet, too, and she scooped it up to take downstairs.

When she reached the lobby, their night clerk, Don Reece, sat behind the desk. Kate leaned against it, talking to him.

“So, Rick just left,” Kate said. “He didn’t look happy.”

“He was sopping wet,” Don said. “What happened?”

“He couldn’t fix the tub. We’ll have to call a plumber.”

Kate frowned. “It’s too late tonight.”

“I know.” Jillian sighed. “I’ve got to put these in the laundry room. Can you make me a note to make the call first thing in the morning, so I don’t forget?”

“Sure.” Kate reached for a memo pad and pen.

“I hope you can get someone before Hurricane Cloris gets here,” Don said.

Jillian clenched her teeth.

“Do you want to go up and look at it?” Kate asked with a note of hope in her voice.

Don raised both hands. “Not me. I’m not a plumber. Rick’s a handy guy. If he can’t fix it, I’m sure I can’t either.”



“That hurricane will be here tonight,” Kate said the next morning. She grimaced as she turned her back on the radio and pulled three packages of sliced bacon from the refrigerator.

“Right,” Jillian said absently as she chopped onions and peppers for the individual omelets. “We’ll have to put up the storm shutters. Maybe Rick can get over here and help.”

Kate eyed her doubtfully. “After last night? He’s not going to want to come back today. At least we only have ten guests this morning.” She plunked the bacon on the counter and cut open the first package.

Jillian laughed. “*Only* ten guests. Never thought I’d hear you say that.”

“I know. It is kind of weird. Last year at this time, we hesitated to reopen the inn, scared to death nobody would come here. And look at us now.”

“Nearly full to capacity most of the winter, which is supposed to be the slow season in coastal Maine.” Jillian poured egg mixture onto the griddle to begin the first omelet for the inn’s guests.

“You mean the dead zone,” Kate muttered, immediately feeling a little guilty since they’d been touched by death that winter as well as by success.

Jillian glanced at the clock. “Is the coffee ready? I know at least three people are checking out this morning, and some might want to just grab coffee and go.”

“I made sure the hot drinks and cups are all set, and the pastries and muffins. It’s too bad we have to cook everything for so few people.”

Jillian shook her tongs at Kate. “Hey, we get great marks for our breakfast spread, and I don’t want to stop now. I’d cook eggs and bacon if we only had one guest.”

Kate frowned but got out the sausage links and started warming a pan for them. While both sisters were good at preparing the breakfast buffet items every morning, Jillian was the omelet expert, no denying that.

A shadow flickered over the glass in the swinging doors between the kitchen and the inn’s dining room.

“Oh, there’s somebody.” Kate hurried out to greet the early rising guests and assure them that hot dishes would be out momentarily.

When she returned to the kitchen, she said, “Mr. Blake’s starting with coffee and a bagel, but he would like an omelet.”

“Coming right up.” Jillian reached for the shredded cheese.

The radio announcer's crisp voice detailed the forecast for Hurricane Cloris, the early tropical storm making its way up the Atlantic coast. "I have a feeling some people will want to leave early to get ahead of that storm."

Kate frowned. "Do you think everyone will leave because of the hurricane?"

"I hope not. At least three rooms are booked for the whole week, and it's only Tuesday. I guess I wouldn't blame them, though. It's not much fun around here when it's pouring rain and the wind is howling at fifty miles an hour." They worked in silence for a couple of minutes, then Jillian handed her a tray. "Here are four omelets. Take them out, along with the bacon. I'll do a few more."

"I guess we'll be eating leftover breakfast for lunch again if the guests don't eat them all." Kate took the tray and pushed through the dining room door, surprised to see half a dozen guests now slowly choosing their meals. It seemed Jillian was right. Their breakfast buffet was both necessary and popular.

"Heading out early, Mr. Blake?" she said to a man filling a cup with orange juice.

"Yeah, it sounds like the driving could be tricky later."

"Well, here's your omelet." Kate fitted the warming tray in place and smiled at him. "Don't forget to take a travel cup of hot coffee with you."

Within an hour, four guests had checked out and left the inn. Later risers straggled in from the elevator or the curved stairway, assuring the sisters they were staying on for at least another night. Kate carried a tray of dirty dishes into the kitchen right behind Jillian, who had just refilled the coffee and hot water urns.

"It's only eight o'clock, and I've checked out four people," Kate moaned.

"It's okay. It might be better to have fewer people here

when the storm hits.” Jillian peered out the kitchen window. “It’s already overcast, and the trees are blowing like crazy.”

Kate went to stand beside her and gazed out toward the whitecaps dotting the bay. “It’s not supposed to hit until tonight.” The few trees she could see from this vantage point weren’t leafed out yet, but their late April buds waved frantically in the blustery air. “Isn’t it early in the season for a hurricane?”

“Yes, a little. I guess the main storm is still down the coast, but we’re getting the fringe, that’s for sure.” Jillian’s face tightened, and she turned away to start loading the dishwasher.

The radio’s newscaster moved on to a report of a jewelry store robbery in Bangor. “... and the clerk did not survive his wounds—”

Kate snapped the broadcast off. “Why don’t they just say he died?”

“I think that’s the latest euphemism,” Jillian said. “At least for news people.”

“More proof our language is deteriorating,” Kate muttered. Her sister was a former English teacher. The fact that English was fluid and grew from the bottom up was a topic she could expound on for hours.

This time, Jillian didn’t answer. The door flew open, and their brother plowed into the kitchen in his full police officer’s uniform.

“Morning, ladies.”

They greeted him, and Kate said, “Have you eaten?”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t say no to coffee, and maybe a Danish.”

“You know where we keep them,” Kate replied.

“And maybe a couple slices of bacon.” Rick arched his eyebrows at Jillian.

“Go ahead,” she said, pouring another omelet. “There’s plenty today.”

“Great. Thanks.”

He ducked back into the dining room.

“Did you check the butter and cream cheese?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” Kate said. “Nobody’s eating cereal, so the milk is fine too.”

“Comfort food today.” Jillian hesitated with the pitcher of egg mixture in her hand. “Okay. I’ve got six more omelets here. I guess I won’t make any more. We’ll probably end up eating a couple of them ourselves as it is.”

“Let’s go sit down with Rick.” Kate untied her apron.

“Okay. I’m surprised he came back here so early.”

“Me too,” Kate said. “He doesn’t seem to be upset about last night.”

Jillian pushed the plate of fresh omelets into her hands. “Can you take this in? I’m going to see if Zeb’s got his flags up.”

“In this weather?” Kate said, but she took the plate. Zeb Wilding, their nearest neighbor, was a special friend of Jillian. The retired naval officer used the flagstaff beside his front porch to send messages sailor-style or simply to assure them he was all right.

Only three guests were in the dining room when Kate entered—vacationers Charles and Marie Simon, and Roger Cowper, a salesman who was making the inn his base for a few days while he visited businesses in the surrounding area. Kate transferred the omelets to the buffet table, poured herself a cup of coffee, and joined Rick.

“So, yeah, it’s going to hit hard around supertime, I think,” Rick said. He took a bite of his pastry and picked up his coffee mug.

Jillian slid into the chair across from him.

“Did you call the plumber?” Rick asked.

“Yeah, just a few minutes ago.” Jillian’s gaze followed a guest making her way along the buffet counter.

“Great omelet, sis,” Rick said. “Even better than Mom’s, if it’s not a crime to say that.”

“If it were a crime, you couldn’t take it back,” Jillian pointed out. “You have witnesses.” She winked at Kate.

Kate flashed her a quick smile. “I was just asking if he could help us get the shutters up.”

“I’ll try,” Rick said. “I’ve got to check in at the station this morning, and I may be on the front desk a while. I know the sergeant wants us all available to help people with storm prepping, and later to help anyone with trouble. If he doesn’t stick me on the desk, I might be able to give you some time while I’m on patrol.”

“That would be a big help,” Jillian said. “It’s the first time we’ve felt those shutters were needed since we took over, and they’re awkward. But we’d understand if you can’t help us.”

“Tell you what ...” Rick took a big gulp of coffee. “If I can’t come, I’ll send Dave or Geordie.”

His sisters nodded. They knew Skirmish Cove’s small police contingent well, and any of the patrol officers would be welcome at the inn, lending a hand with the heavy work. The inn had once been the home of a well-to-do sailing family, and the storm shutters were a bulky holdover from the era before triple-glazed windows.

“We’d probably be okay without them, but the weatherman was saying scary things about flying debris.” Kate sipped her coffee and noticed Jillian hadn’t fixed any for herself. “Is Zeb okay?” she asked.

Jillian’s lips twisted. “His flags aren’t flying, as you predicted. But I admit, I’m a little concerned. Is it just because of the weather, or is he ill? I mean, it’s eight thirty now ... He’s usually up before this. Maybe I should run over.”

“You want me to do a wellness check when I leave here?” Rick asked.

“Do you mind?”

“No, I’ve got my SUV. I’ll drive over. That’ll be better than you running across the bridge. It’s really windy out there already.”

“Thanks.”

“Aren’t you late reporting to work?” Kate asked, glancing at her phone’s screen.

“They expect we’ll have to work late tonight, so the chief told some of us to come in later.”

The Simons had risen and were placing their dirty dishes on the counter by the trashcan. Jillian stood. “Guess it’s time to finish loading the dishwasher.”

“Yeah, you don’t know if you’ll have power to run it later,” Rick said.

“Don’t say that!” Kate glared at him.

Her brother shrugged. “I’m just sayin’—be prepared.”

“Thanks, Boy Scout. Maybe we should get the generator set up when you come to do the shutters.” Jillian gave him a wry smile and started to turn away.

“Hey, wait a sec, Jill. I, uh, wanted to tell you both something.”

Jillian sat back down, and Kate leaned in, curious. Rick usually spoke his mind, but he sounded a little cryptic now.

“What?” Kate prompted.

“Uh, well, I might as well just say it. Diana’s pregnant.”

Kate leaned back, staring at him. Rick and Diana’s youngest, Joel, was twelve years old, and Ashley was fifteen. Had they planned on more children? Or was this a real surprise?

Jillian grinned widely. “Wow! Fantastic! Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Rick said, smiling sheepishly.

“I’ll call Diana later,” Jillian said.

“Yeah, do that.”

“Is she happy about it?” Kate asked.

Jillian tossed her a glare as a warning to be quiet, but Rick nodded affably.

“Yeah, we’re both pleased. Didn’t expect it, really, but hey, the more the merrier.”

“Right.” Kate sipped her coffee.

Rick shoved back his chair. “Well, I’d better get moving. I’ll stop at Zeb’s, and someone will be over later to help with your shutters.”

He grabbed a take-out cup, filled it with coffee, and left. Kate looked around the room. “So, has everyone eaten now?”

“Uh, Don checked someone in last night. I don’t think—”

Jillian broke off, and Kate swiveled her head to see what she was staring at. The man in the lobby doorway glanced toward the coffee station, but then his gaze flicked to them, and his eyes locked on Kate’s. His huge brown eyes.

The last person Kate expected—or wanted—to see.

Luke Brantley.