



Those Who Forget History
Using Backstory to Enhance Your Novel
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A Few Examples of Prologue

Here are a few examples of prologues from my own books. As you'll see, they focus on one major character, they set the scene for the story to come, and they each contain an incident in that character's backstory that will have a major effect on the story.

The first excerpt is from my novel, *In Sunshine or in Shadow* (Highland Press, 2006).

Ballycashel, Ireland, 1850

Siobhán Desmond stood before the heavy wooden door, shivering as the cold, wet autumn wind knifed through her threadbare cloak. Squaring her shoulders, she raised her hand and lifted the dragon-headed brass knocker.

You've no choice, she reminded herself. *You must do this. You must.*

The door creaked open, the mournful sound loud as a banshee's wail.

"Yes?"

Biting her lip to still its trembling, Siobhán gazed up at the tall, broad man with the craggy face and wintry blue eyes. A chill raced down her spine as she forced herself not to flinch from that cold, superior gaze.

Lord Percival Glenleigh.

The one man she hated above all others.

"Are you one of my tenants?"

He didn't know her. She, her mother and father and their grandparents before them, had all been his family's tenants, yet not a spark of recognition flared in his icy gaze.

"Aye, Your Honor. My name's Siobhán Desmond, sir."

"Desmond? I don't recall the name. But no matter. One cannot keep track of all one's tenants. Well, get on with it then, Shi...vaun. What is it you want?"

Siobhán swallowed against the surge of hatred boiling in her throat. *Remember Ashleen*. She would do anything even beg scraps from this repulsive man if it meant her daughter would survive.

"I-I'm after lookin' for work, sir," she murmured, her head lowered, her voice barely audible. "'Tis desperate I am. The money's run out, and 'tis all I can do to keep body and soul together. I've knowledge of cooking and cleaning, and I make lovely lace. I did go to the servants' entrance first, but no one was there. Please, sir, I'll do anything—"

Oh, *God*, how she hated the note of pleading that crept into her voice. *Oh, Michael—Ashleen... Forgive me...*

"Come in, then. What did you say your name is? Shi...vaun?"

Siobhán nodded as Glenleigh ushered her into the drawing room. It felt blessedly warm inside, the fire blazing cheerily, the thick carpets soothing her bare, blistered feet. She longed to throw herself onto one of those deep-cushioned brocade sofas and sleep. It would be soft, she knew, and she could pull one of those heavy throws over her shoulders and be warm again...

If Glenleigh would hire her, she could bring these things home...

"So it's work you're seeking, is it?"

"Y-yes, sir. I'll do anything, Your Honor. I can cook and clean and do mending. Just give me a chance..."

He was staring at her, she realized, gooseflesh springing onto her arms and crawling up the back of her neck like a thousand poisonous spiders. A small smile played around his thick lips as his gaze traveled from her face to the pitifully undernourished body barely concealed beneath her worn woolen cloak.

'Tis the very green of yer eyes, darlin', Michael had once told her, his own blue eyes sparkling with love. *But sure, those eyes put Erin's green fields to shame, so they do*. She forced her mind from past to present as she heard Glenleigh's arrogant voice. "Are you clean, madam?"

"I...clean?" For a moment, Siobhán could not understand his words, then all her Irish pride rose up in her. "Aye, 'tis clean I am, Yer Honor. We've not much more than a sliver of soap at home, but..." Her words trailed off as the real meaning of his words hit her.

This evil old man actually thought...wanted—

With his words, all the pain and anguish she and her family had suffered washed over her as if it were yesterday. The hunger. The little ones dying. The evictions.

And now this man actually thought she would sell herself? To *him*? And for what? A moldy crust of bread? A bag of meal? A banquet served at the enemy's table?

No! her mind screamed. She wouldn't—couldn't lower herself to that. No matter what, she would find some other way to keep them all alive.

Wildly, she shook her head, her long, freshly-washed curls bouncing about her shoulders. Yet even as she did, he reached for her, his soft, white gentleman's hands tugging at her cloak.

"Here, now, don't be shy, my dear. If you cooperate, I'm sure I can find some food for you—the servants can't possibly eat everything they prepare. If you'll just come in for a moment—"

"Take your filthy English hands off me!" Was that voice really hers? Furiously, she struggled to free herself. "I'll not be yer whore, Your Honor. I'd not be seellin' meself so cheaply, no if you promised me a banquet in Heaven itself."

"Why, you little Irish bitch!" His fingers biting into her shoulders, he lowered his mouth to hers. Hatred surged in her heart as she twisted in his grasp, frantic to free herself. He rammed his tongue into her mouth and she shuddered with revulsion. A low moan of despair tore from her throat.

Then, just as suddenly as his assault had begun, Lord Percival Glenleigh's hands went slack and a harsh sound gushed from his lips. His eyes bulging, he clutched wildly at his chest. He opened his mouth to speak, but only a strangled gurgle emerged.

Siobhán watched impassively as the mountainous man fell to his knees on the lush Aubusson carpet. She stared in silence at the hand he held out in supplication.

"Please—water," he croaked. "There—on the table—water, damn you!"

Impassively, Siobhán looked from Glenleigh to the sparkling array of decanters and glasses set on an elegant cherry wood table. They were crystal from Waterford, she knew, the best that money could buy.

Money that could have bought food to feed her starving people.

It would be easy, she thought. So easy to fill one of them, to hand it to His Honor. Memories flooded over her—her mother and sisters looking to her for the food that wasn't there, two beloved bodies swinging from the Hanging Tree, her baby sister dying in her arm,

What had Glenleigh ever done for her?

As the master of Ballycashel House fell prostrate on the floor, his struggles stilled, a high, wordless cry rose to Siobhán's lips. It was a cry of rage, of anguish, a mourning cry wrung from the very depths of her tormented soul.

She spun on her bare heels and ran into the dark, salt-sprayed night.



The second excerpt is from my novel, *Deceptive Hearts* (Highland Press, 2013).

The Atlantic Ocean, Black '47

The ship *Sally Malone* bucked and groaned and almost upended him. Shane MacDermott halted in his tracks for the fraction of a second it took to steady himself before he scurried down the crowded passageway.

“Easy there, laddie.” The gap-toothed old man reached out a bony hand to steady him. “These rough seas’ll knock ye off yer feet, sure as the devil.”

Intent on his mission, Shane nodded a brief thanks and hurried on, carefully picking his way through the narrow, crowded aisle, one skeletal arm cupped protectively around the dipperful of warm, brackish water.

“All this rolling and tossing does make walking terrible difficult,” another woman, one of the strange community that had sprung up in this miserable, stinking hole, commiserated.

Shane barely noticed, and didn’t speak. He had to bring the water for Da. Had to help ma dribble the few drops through his parched lips, praying they might just break the terrible fever that held his father in its deathly grip.

His mother looked up at his approach, a smile lighting her haggard face. Shane looked at her closely and shook his head in sadness. She was that thin a gust of wind could blow her off the ship and away back to the Cove of Cork.

“Ah, my Shane, ‘tis a fine lad ye are.” Ma’s blue, blue eyes, the only bit of color in her pale face, glowed with love as she took the dipper from his trembling hands.

He reckoned they’d been on this dreadful ship for five torturous weeks. Shane collapsed on the narrow wooden bunk, too weary to notice the miasma of vomit, urine and unwashed bodies. His younger brother and baby sister stared vacantly at him.

He gazed into their gaunt faces. They’d left Ireland for a better life in America, but a sudden terrible fear swept over him. Would any of them live to see it?

“Shane.” His mother’s voice penetrated his terror. “Shane, yer da’s askin’ for ye.”

Shane jumped up and hurried to the bunk where his father lay, his burly blacksmith’s frame shrunken, perspiration dotting his waxen forehead.

“Shane.” Da reached out blindly. “Shane, me lad.”

“I’m here, Da.” Struggling to keep his voice steady, Shane clasped his father’s hand as tightly as he could. “I’m here.”

“You’re a good lad, Shane,” his father rasped around his swollen tongue.

“Always...helped...me...”

Tears threatened to blind Shane, but he blinked them back furiously and swiped a grimy hand across his nose. He *wouldn’t* let Da see him cry!

He opened his mouth to speak, but all that emerged was a squeak. Da didn't hear, for he was struggling to speak again.

“Look after them, son,” he begged. His voice, once a hearty boom, was no more than a papery whisper as he struggled against the demon fever. But his dark eyes blazed with passion, searing Shane's soul. “Look after...yer ma. Look after...the family. Help them...when ye get...to...Amerikay. Keep...them...safe.”

“I will, Da,” Shane vowed furiously around the strangling lump in his throat. “I promise I'll look out for ma and the little ones.”

“Love...ye, lad. Ye're...me heart's...pride...”

The tears he could hold back no longer coursed down Shane's face as he watched his father's eyes close for the last time.

And Shane MacDermott vowed he'd never—never—let anything harm another person he loved.