

## **The Sea Horse Trade** by Sasscer Hill

*This author believes that properly staging each scene of a novel is vital, and the first scene the most critical of all. Imagine you are watching the opening of a play. The stage is dim, a wind is blowing, a female figure walks alone on a deserted street, she appears worried—you know immediately this is not a comedy, probably not a cozy. THE SEA HORSE TRADE is a novel about human trafficking, and though it is not without humor, I wanted to set the mood and the stage in the first paragraph:*

I heard the SUV before I saw it. The deep thump of subwoofers rumbled in the deserted street as I headed away from the sea, moving west on the sidewalk. Pausing, I glanced back. A block away, the vehicle cruised slowly toward me, chrome and glossy black beneath the bright streetlights. At four a.m., it was the only car on Hallandale Beach Boulevard.

*With those first five sentences, you know it's night, the protagonist is alone, that except for her and the SUV, the street appears deserted. You know the location is by the sea at a beach town, and that it's the lonely hour of four a.m. You hear the subwoofers, and you see the glossy black paint reflecting in the streetlights. But I also hope the reader wonders, "Why is she out on the street by herself at four a.m.? Is she in danger?"*

*In the second and third paragraphs the reader sees the protagonist quicken her pace as if frightened, learns the time of year, that the protagonist is involved with the racetrack, and worried about something more than the approaching SUV:*

I quickened my pace, stepping around a pile of crushed beer cans and dirty party streamers, probably left over from New Year's Eve. Overhead, the palm trees shimmered, their stiff fronds rattling in the humid breeze that blew along the boulevard from the Atlantic Ocean.

I didn't need to be at Gulfstream Park racetrack this early, but sleep had evaded me, nervous energy driving me into these predawn hours. Again, I glanced behind me.

The pounding music grew louder as the black SUV loomed closer, its chrome grill gleaming like shark's teeth.

*In the fourth paragraph, the expression "bus-stop shelter" was purposely used as the word "shelter" indicates a need for safety from possible harm. The reader sees the protagonist's instinct kick in, showing she is intuitive, and quick on her feet:*

Ahead, an abandoned shopping cart lay against a small bus-stop shelter. Instinct drove me to step behind the shelter's solid rear wall, and from there, I peered around the edge, my senses heightened. Inside the vehicle the music seemed to crescendo into a scream as the glistening metal drew even with the bus stop.

*The next few paragraphs portray a terrible event, which I hope hooks the reader by making them ask "What will happen next?"*

The rear door jerked open. A girl, her dark hair streaming, pushed herself away from the door frame, flinging herself into space. Her feet hit the pavement, she lost her balance, and went down. Tumbling across the concrete, she landed on her side near the curb. She was almost naked, dressed in a tiny sequined outfit.

The vehicle's transmission slammed into reverse as the girl struggled to get to her feet. She cried out as one leg gave way and she fell back to the pavement. The SUV stopped, and I waited for someone to get out, to *help* her. The passenger window lowered, and loud Spanish rap poured into the street. I glimpsed a stubbled face behind dark-glasses.

"You stupid bitch," his Latino accented voice yelled over the music. "You break your leg? What good are you now?"

The girl tried to crawl away and I almost rushed to her, but a glint of metal shone from the car's window. *A gun.*

"No!" I screamed. "God, no!"

Two hot flames. Gunfire shattered my ears. The girl screamed, jerked twice. A geyser sprang from her chest, spilling blood over little strips of sparkling cloth. The SUV sped away.

Frantically, I searched the boulevard for help. We were on our own.

*Hopefully, the above paragraphs invoke that sense of horror you feel when a helpless girl is in the hands of horrid men. When you are faced with a terrible situation and you are on your own. Hopefully the reader asks, "Why? Will these terrible men come back? What will the protagonist do?"*

*The next two paragraphs were written to show the reader that the heroine, Nikki Latrelle, is a woman of courage and resourcefulness, who is willing to risk danger to help the helpless. If my writing lets the reader see these things, I believe they will continue on with the story:*

I ran into the street and squatted next to the girl. I thrust a hand out to steady myself, my palm skidding on her blood. Ripping off my hoodie, I wadded it and tried to compress her chest wound. A second hole darkened the skin above her collar bone.

The girl's eyes were open, fixed on me as her heart pumped a well of blood beneath my hand.

"They're gone." My voice cracked. *Did they hear me scream? God, don't let them come back.*

Carefully, I removed my cell phone from my blood-soaked hoodie. "I'm getting an ambulance." I thumbed 911. "You're gonna be fine," I nodded like I believed it, my left hand pushing harder against the makeshift compress.

*In the next three paragraphs we learn the protagonist's name and the fate of the girl.*

She coughed horribly. Blood dribbled from her mouth. "No," I whispered. *Don't die.*

"A girl's been shot," I said, when the 911 dispatcher came on the line. "Hallandale Beach Boulevard at –" I looked around wildly. "There's something called a Publix, next to a Walgreens. What? Nikki Latrelle, my name is Nikki Latrelle."

Beneath me, the girl shuddered. Her eyes became fixed and unseeing.

*In the last three paragraphs of page two we see the protagonist's reaction to losing the girl she's tried to save, a girl that is barely more than a child. And in the very last sentence, the novel's title, THE SEA HORSE TRADE, comes into play.*

I slumped to the pavement, the girl's blood soaking into my jeans. I stared at her. Beneath the blood, the tops of her small breasts were pushed up by a tight glittering bra. Lower down, a G-string hid almost nothing. God, she was still a *child*.

I could hear the dispatcher's voice calling me from the phone. I set it on the curb, turned back to the girl.

Then I saw the dark turquoise sea horse on the flawless skin of her forearm.

*As a race horse breeder and owner, I spent time in Hallandale Beach going to the races at Gulfstream Park. I started this book while in Florida, and one morning I left my hotel and walked on Hallandale Beach Boulevard at 4:00 a.m. It was scary to be out there alone on that deserted street. When I wrote this opening scene, I could only pray it would speak to the reader with the urgency I felt as I wrote it.*

*The SEA HORSE TRADE was published by Wildside Press in 2013 and in its niche as a "Horse racing mystery," it remained number one on Amazon for the rest of 2013, all of 2014, and much of the current year, as well.*



**Sasscer Hill**, a former Maryland racehorse breeder, trainer, and rider, uses the sport of kings as a backdrop for her mysteries. Her “vivid descriptive” prose about greed, evil, heart, and courage propelled her novels to multiple award nominations including an Agatha, a Macavity, and the Dr. Tony Ryan Best in Racing Literature Award. Hill earned a BA in English Literature from Franklin and Marshall College and now lives with her husband in Aiken, SC.

<http://SasscerHill.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/SasscerHill/>

<https://www.amazon.com/author/sasscerhill/> Twitter: @SasscerHill