

Damned If You Don't: The First Two Pages
by
Anita Page

Damned If You Don't (Glenmere Press) is a dark traditional mystery set in the Catskills. The book features Hannah Fox, a community activist raised in the sixties on picket lines and peace marches, who battles an eminent domain scam that threatens a friend's land and ends in murder.

Like Hannah, I moved from New York City to a small Catskill Mountain town that bears some resemblance to the fictional Laurel Pond. Also, like Hannah, I had a close group of politically active women friends who took on town hall and various other institutions when the occasion demanded. Those memories drove my decision to write a book that would give me a chance to revisit that time and place.

The choices I made as a writer in the first two pages, as well as in the book as a whole, reflect my preferences as a reader. For me, the draw is always character. Put me in the character's head, preferably in close third person, and I'm good for the duration. Place runs a close second: the smells, the sounds, and the weather. As for plot, I want the writer to pose questions that will keep me turning pages, but I don't want to feel manipulated. Suspense, yes; terror, no.

I begin *Damned If You Don't* with a sensual memory that establishes the close third person POV and reveals significant details about Hannah's past—her rootless childhood and the political and social milieu in which she was raised.

The room had the smell of an old house in summer, the sweet dry scent of wood beams behind plaster walls. Which house was she thinking of? Oregon, maybe, the summer she was seven. Chasing fireflies across a scruffy yard while the grownups sang Dylan and Woody Guthrie and smoked dope on the back porch.

Next paragraph, we're in the present, where the reader surmises that this is Hannah's first time volunteering at a domestic abuse hotline. I don't state that directly, but the clues are there: The house in which she's working is identified as SafeHarbor; she's a bit anxious as she waits for a call, rehearsing the script she's already memorized. Was it a conscious decision not to be explicit? Looking back, it's hard to say. However, I do think it makes sense not to tell the reader what she already knows or can work out for herself.

The windows were open, the evening air dissipating the heat that had built up all day. Nothing to do now but wait for a call. Hannah read through the script again though she had it memorized. SafeHarbor. This is Hannah Fox. How can I help you? They'd stressed that during training. Say your name. Make it easy for the caller to ask for help.

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Next, we meet two other women who work at SafeHarbor. At this point, I had a decision to make that I've struggled with in other writing. It's important to me that the world in which my characters live is racially and ethnically diverse. Ethnicity is easy to indicate with the help of last names. Introducing racial diversity is more challenging. If I don't say Mr. A. is a white guy, then it seems inappropriate to say Mr. B. is black. I'm always interested in how other writers handle this issue. You'll see the choice that I made below:

Andrea Dubois, a thin redhead in a black tank top, was working on her laptop at the next desk. Another volunteer, Rose, was on the phone at a desk across the room. In her fifties, Hannah guessed. A striking woman in a loose coral shirt, a hint of the West Indies in the lilt of her voice as she invited the caller to make an appointment.

Last, the phone call, which establishes the rural setting, an important element in the story, and takes us to the end of the first two pages. My goal here is to create tension by making clear that the stakes are high: the caller is pregnant and has been badly beaten. I build suspense by presenting obstacles to her getting help: her garbled speech makes it difficult to pinpoint her location; her cell cuts out; we learn that she ducked into the woods because she was afraid that a passing car was her husband coming after her. Last, the gunshot, which raises the question of her survival, one that drives much of the action of the book. Credit here to Lee Child. When at a writers' conference someone asked him how to create suspense, he said: Ask a question and then don't answer it.

The phone rang, and Hannah glanced at Andrea who shot a finger at her. This was it, her first call. At Andrea's nod, they each picked up a receiver. "Like riding a bike with training wheels," Andrea had promised. "You may wobble, but you won't fall."

"SafeHarbor," was all she got out before the woman at the other end began crying, her words garbled. Forget the script. Hannah, scribbling the number of the incoming call on the recording sheet, asked, "Are you hurt? Can you tell me what happened?"

The woman was trying, but she was difficult to understand. She sounded like she'd had six shots of Novocain. Or been punched in the mouth. Pregnant, Hannah finally made out. Then, dog's chain. He'd hit her with the chain.

Andrea was cueing Hannah, covering the mouthpiece of her phone. "Get the location!"

"Tell me where you are so we can get you help," Hannah said.

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Something Road, the woman said. One garbled syllable. "Say that again," Hannah said, and the woman repeated it. One syllable starting with B. "Ball Road?" Hannah asked, and let out a breath when the woman said, "Yes." Yesh.

"Where on Ball?" Andrea demanded, and Hannah nodded, the question already out of her mouth. "Can you tell us where on Ball? What's the nearest cross road?" Nothing. "Is there a house nearby? Something we can look for?" Nothing.

"Shit." Hannah ran a hand through her hair, the phone still to her ear. "Her cell must have died. Now what?"

"You want me to call 9-1-1?" Rose was at her desk.

"Let's see if she gets the signal back so we can pinpoint her location," Andrea said. "It's almost three miles from one end of Ball to the other."

"Hold on. I think..." Hannah grabbed her pencil. "Hey, there you are." She nodded at Andrea. "I understand. It could have been your husband. Good thinking, moving into the woods when you heard the car."

Hannah wrote down what the woman was saying, repeating it aloud for Rose. A barn, a farmhouse way back from the road, then woods on the left. The woman sounded a bit calmer, easier to understand. Woods, a farmhouse, a barn. How many farmhouses were along that three-mile stretch?

"We're calling the police this minute," Hannah said. "Duck back in the woods if you need to, but keep a lookout for the police car. You'll see the flashing lights. Okay?"

Yes. The woman understood.

"Do you want me to stay on the phone with you until the police come?"

"No," the woman said, "it keeps cutting out."

"Name," Andrea prompted.

Of course. Jesus. "I never got your name," Hannah said.

"Mary—" the woman said, and then screamed. Then a gunshot so loud it sounded as if it were in the room.

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An addendum here: We learn to write by reading other writers. If we're lucky, we may have opportunities to listen to and work with other writers, but the reading and re-reading are primary. I once heard a very well-known author say that she never reads because she doesn't want to be distracted by other writers' voices. For me the opposite is true. I welcome those voices because without them I don't know that I would have found my own.

BIO:



Anita Page's debut crime novel, *Damned If You Don't* (Glenmere Press), is widely available online. She is the editor of *Family Matters: Murder New York Style*, an anthology of twenty short crime stories by members of the New York/Tri-State chapter of Sisters in Crime. Her short stories have been appeared in webzines and anthologies including *Mysterical-e*, *Beat to a Pulp*, *The Back Alley*, *Family Matters*, *Fresh Slices*, *Deadly Debut*, and *The Prosecution Rests*. Her story "Twas the Night" won a Derringer Award in 2010. She blogs at www.anitapagewriter.blogspot.com and www.womenofmystery.net.