

## A Conversation with a Protagonist About the First Two Pages

By KM Rockwood

Many of the characters in my stories are very real to me. They have minds of their own. I often talk to them, especially when I hit a problem. They answer me.

Jesse Damon, the protagonist in my Jesse Damon Crime Novel series, appeared fully formed in my mind and, in his unassuming but persistent way, suggested that his was a story that needed to be told, and I was the one who needed to tell it.

Okay, Jesse. But you're not exactly a conventional character, and I bet there aren't too many mystery readers out there who can envision working the overnight shift as a laborer in a steel fabrication plant. Not to mention that you're hardly a sympathetic character. *I* know you're well intentioned and trying hard to do what's right, but let's face it. You're on parole for a murder conviction, even though you didn't kill anybody yourself. As a kid, you were involved with your brothers in a felony where someone died. It may sound harsh, but you're guilty. You reached adulthood in prison, which isn't a great place to grow up. In many ways, you're still the naïve sixteen-year-old who agreed to accompany your brothers on an ill-fated drug buy. A prison-hardened sixteen-year-old, maybe, but definitely lacking the maturity to make intelligent decisions. Or take care of yourself in the real world. In fact, you're so used to having so little control over what happens to you that you often don't even realize you have decisions to make, intelligent or otherwise.

And you expect me to somehow write a novel that people might be interested in reading? How would I even begin to do that?

We'll have to start in the middle of things, with a conflict. Maybe some dialog, so we can get an idea of the people we're dealing with. And since we have to be somewhere, we might as well start in the factory where you got a job under a program that gives companies a tax incentive for hiring paroled convicts. Here we go:

“Hey, buddy. New guy. I'm talking to you.”

Pretending not to hear over the din of the plant floor, I put my lunchbox on the crude lunch table by the vending machines and hung my jacket on a hook on the wall. I walked over to the time clock and punched my timecard. My shift,

midnight to eight, would start in a few minutes. The other workers on the same shift milled around, waiting for their assignments.

Keeping my back against the wall, I leaned into a corner next to the time clock, my hard hat tilted away from my face. Closing my eyes went against every instinct I had, but I willed myself to do it. I'd take any chance to avoid a confrontation that might jeopardize this job. Getting hired as a machine operator at Quality Steel Fabrications was a big break for me.

We've established a few things here. This story is going to be in first person point of view. That's pretty limiting. No one will ever see or hear or know anything Jesse doesn't. I'm pretty strict about that—if it's going to be first person, it feels like cheating to me to let it slip. I know some authors manage to weave in and out of first person and make it work for the reader, but I don't think I could. There are readers who don't like first person, and already they aren't going to read on.

We've also given a few details about the setting. It's just before midnight in an industrial setting. Our characters are blue collar workers. Jesse is a new employee. Somebody, who doesn't sound friendly, is trying to engage him. Jesse, worried that this will lead to problems, is trying to ignore him.

“You. Hear me?” Somebody poked me in the shoulder. Hard.

I opened my eyes. Mitch the forklift driver. Not the most rational of people.”I'm listening,” I said.

“I asked you why you been staring at my wife.” Mitch scratched a scab on his scrawny elbow beneath the rolled up sleeve of his flannel shirt. A drop of blood trickled down his arm. He didn't seem to notice.

No idea what he was talking about. “Your wife? When?”

“Just now.”

I glanced around. The factory floor vibrated with the pulse of dozens of machines. The air smelled of oil and hot steel. “Your wife's *here?*”

The conflict accelerates. We get an image of Mitch. He doesn't worry about correct grammar. He's the forklift driver, so he's going to be moving freely around the plant. He's scrawny. Not rational, maybe even paranoid. Scabs on his arms. Meth addict? Looks like it, but Jesse can't be sure. We get a bit more about the setting. When I close my eyes, I can see the whole scene. But even if I could describe it in detail, nobody would want to read it. I pick out a few of the salient aspects.

"No, jerk. When she dropped me off."

I shook my head. "I didn't notice."

"Hell you didn't. You was *staring* when she kissed me goodbye." Mitch shifted his weight restlessly from one foot to the other.

"Woman in a nightgown kissing somebody when the gates opened? Hard to miss. Didn't know it was you. Or your wife."

"You think she's good looking?"

I shrugged. This could lead to nothing good. "I guess."

"You just keep your eyes to yourself, buddy."

"Will do."

Conflict continues. Jesse's still more interested in keeping things low key and staying out of trouble than defending himself against Mitch's irrational ranting. The gates had to be opened for the workers—there's some security features. People won't be wandering in and out.

"Or I'll make sure you're sorry. Mitch reached over and grabbed the leg of my blue jeans. He jerked it up a few inches.

I tensed, but I didn't move.

"Thought so," he said, grim satisfaction on his gaunt face as he stared at the black plastic box strapped on my ankle above the short work boot. "What are you? Some kind of sex offender?"

I hadn't spent more than half my life in prison without learning that when a bully persists in picking on someone, he can't be ignored. He wasn't going to just go away no matter how much I wanted him to.

I narrowed my eyes and stared straight into his. They were bloodshot and bleary.

“What's it to you?” I demanded.

We find out a few things about Jesse here. He's wearing an ankle monitor, so he's probably on house arrest. He's spent a lot of time in prison. He's so accustomed to submitting to being physically handled by prison staff that he doesn't have a normal reaction to someone invading his personal space by grabbing his pants leg. And it doesn't particularly bother him to have someone imply that he's a sex offender, even though he's not.

But he's ready to stand up for himself if he absolutely has to. That prison yard stare goes a long way toward stopping Mitch in his tracks.

In these first two pages, we've gotten a fair amount done. We've presented disreputable characters who may have little respect for rules. There may be drugs involved. There may be sex involved. We have a bare-bones description of an industrial site. Our protagonist is more concerned with keeping his job and staying out of trouble than he is with what people think about him. He's a convicted murderer—he already has a pretty good idea what people do think of him. But if trouble is unavoidable, he'll meet it head on. And we have a growing, if somewhat irrational, conflict.

So the question now is, have we created a character that people care about, despite his background? Have we established a setting that even people who have never spent eight hours operating steel fabricating machinery can relate to? And does the growing conflict interest people enough to encourage them to find out what happens next? In other words, have our first two pages created a situation that will make readers want to go on to page three?

*KM Rockwood draws on a varied background for stories, such as working as a laborer in steel fabrication and fiberglass manufacture, and supervising an inmate work crew in a large state prison. These positions, as well as work as a special education teacher in alternative education and a GED instructor in correctional facilities, provide material for numerous short stories and novels, including the Jesse Damon Crime Novel series.*