

Red Flags: The First Two Pages

The opening lines of my books tend to come to me well in advance of writing the rest of the story. That was certainly the case for my newest Kate Reilly Mystery, *Red Flags*. About four months before sitting down to actually engage on the novel—as I was trying to let things like the plot, the villain, the victim, and the supporting cast cook in my head—I heard the first line in my head. It brought with it the identity of the victim, long before I knew exactly *why* he'd been killed. And I should note that I originally wrote it as “I looked down at my cousin’s face and tried to care he was dead,” which got fixed up (and anonymized) in the editing process.

At that point, all I knew is that one of Kate’s hateful cousins was dead, but I hadn’t yet settled on Billy or Holden. That choice came later as I worked out which death would make the most delicious family drama. (Billy’s, by a landslide.)

When I settled down to write the rest of the chapter (and book), my biggest challenge was the dreaded information-dump. I’m sure it’s true for most writers: we want to set the scene, forgetting that the better idea is plunging the reader into the action. By the fourth book in the series, I’ve gotten over the idea that I need to tell everyone who Kate is, what she looks like, and why she’s at a racetrack—or even that she’s at one—right away. But since I set every one of her adventures in a different city, track, and race, I’m still tempted to info-dump all of the location information right away.

I had to remind myself that the page preceding Chapter One would contain a track map and the words “Grand Prix of Long Beach, Long Beach, California.” Out went all of the location details...except for the tiniest tidbits here and there, such as “the Long Beach police detective” and “the Grand Prix of Long Beach Media Day.” A mention of “my ten-day trip to California” allows me make it clear Kate’s not from the area and drop the detail of a specific timeline. But what’s interesting about re-reading these pages now in their finished form is that those were very deliberate additions. I wrote the scene in the full flood of creativity without those establishing details. Later, with a cooler and more strategic mind, I returned to surgically insert them.

Overall, I wanted to do two things in these opening pages. First, of course, I wanted to make the reader curious enough to read on. I hoped to plant the seeds of enough conflict, questions, and yes, mystery, to keep people turning the pages.

Second, and related to the first, was I wanted to convey Kate’s conflicted feelings about seeing her cousin dead. Frankly, in this situation, she’s a classic case of “sorry/not sorry.” In theory, she’s sorry Billy’s dead. In practice, she’s not at all sad she won’t ever have to deal with him again. That leads to feeling guilty for being glad someone—anyone—was dead. Plus worried the cops would think that attitude was suspicious. On the heels of those emotions comes relief that she won’t have to get involved in finding out who killed Billy. “Just don’t make me solve this one,” she thinks, as she leaves the scene.

Of course, we all know exactly what happens next...

CHAPTER ONE

I stared down at the man's face and tried to care that he was dead. I tried to ignore the bloody dent in his head and focused instead on his relaxed features, which lacked the cunning and malice they'd worn in life.

"Do you recognize this man, Ms. Reilly?" I blinked as the Long Beach police detective prompted me for the second time.

"Billy Reilly-Stinson. William." I paused. "He's my cousin."

"My condolences for your loss."

"I didn't know him at all." I looked at the cop. "I only met him two years ago, and he made it clear he didn't want me in the family." I glanced at Billy again, seeing the clumpy, oatmeal-like substance in the blood on his shoulder. My stomach lurched. *Brain matter*. I turned away and breathed deeply.

The detective gestured across the parking garage toward the stairs I'd descended with him five minutes prior. I'd been a few hundred yards away in the temporary paddock for the Grand Prix of Long Beach Media Day, when he'd called asking for my help with something. His request seemed benign at the time.

He walked me around the corner of a half-wall so I couldn't see Billy's body, which settled my stomach, but not my emotions. This was my third body in as many years, and I didn't like seeing anyone dead. I felt sorry for Billy and his family—my father's family—even if I had a hard time convincing myself I'd miss Billy. Then I felt ashamed I hadn't liked him and worried about my proximity to death. Again.

The detective pulled a notepad and pen out of his sportcoat pocket. "What can you tell me about the deceased?"

"You said you're Detective Barnes...you're with homicide?"

He raised an eyebrow. "That's correct. Mr. Reilly-Stinson didn't do that to himself. We're looking for another party."

I really didn't expect my ten-day trip to California to start with murder. I studied Barnes: stocky, bowlegged, of mixed Asian and Caucasian heritage. His face was comfortably lined, and his eyes shone with intelligence. I hoped he was smart and fair. I'd gone down the suspect road before, and I wasn't in the mood.

"Ms. Reilly? What do you know about him?"

"It's Kate." I stuck my hands in the back pockets of my jeans. "We were acquainted. We had no reason to communicate or be friends. Neither of us wanted to. We rarely saw each other." I considered. "I haven't run into him in more than a year. And I've never seen him alone. He's usually with his cousin, Holden Sherain."

"Is Mr. Sherain here?"

"Not that I've noticed." I bit my tongue on the fact I'd caught sight of Billy that morning and deliberately avoided him.

"Can you tell me your whereabouts today?"

(To finish the chapter, read the [online excerpt](#).)



Tammy Kaehler discovered the racing world via a stint in corporate marketing, and she was hooked by the contrast between its top-dollar, high-drama competition and friendly, family atmosphere. Mystery fans and racing insiders alike have praised her award-winning Kate Reilly Racing Mystery Series (*Dead Man's Switch*, *Braking Points*, and *Avoidable Contact*), and Tammy takes readers back behind the wheel in her fourth entry, *Red Flags*. She works as a freelance writer in the Los Angeles area, where she lives with her husband and many cars. www.tammykaehler.com