

# *Grabbers and Hookers*

*By Linda Thorne*

My debut novel, *Just Another Termination*, was released by Black Opal Books on August 29, 2015 as the first in a series of mysteries that tell the story of Judy Kenagy, the first human resources manager to turn sleuth or, at least, the first to admit it.

I knew I needed grabbers and hookers to reel readers in, and keep them going throughout the book, but I also knew how easy it was to lose them in the first two pages. I needed to identify the protagonist. At minimum, provide a hint to her motivation. Add a few fascinating characters, set the tone, establish timeframe and setting. So what did I do? Here's the start of my book.

*October 2004:*

*When the plant manager told me Alma Guerra hadn't shown up for work, I should've walked away from my quarter-century long career in human resources right then. But the thought didn't enter my mind. Why would it? I couldn't recall a single incident of a no-call-no-show amounting to much more than some trifling issue. Sure, you get those who've quit without notice, but they're always the ones you're glad to see go.*

In the first sentence, the attention grabber comes when the reader is told that an employee named Alma Guerra did not show up for work, and the words that follow strongly suggest this will become one huge deal.

Timeframe is established with October 2004 typed before the first paragraph begins. Early on, readers want to know the protagonist's sex, age, and occupation. Physical details can wait. We have a general idea what the character's age is with the remark about twenty-five years in human resources, which also reveals the main character's occupation. It's obvious the setting is a manufacturing plant because it's the plant manager who tells the protagonist the employee has not shown up. The sex is not yet mentioned, but a lot of information is crammed into this very first sentence. The rest of the paragraph supports the grabber sentence while giving us a taste of what the tone will be.

*Not more than an hour after his announcement, Andy Holman waltzed back into my office with a new issue. "Judy, we've got to term Lester Robichaux."*

Aha! With the mention of her name in the second paragraph we now have the protagonist's sex.

The word "waltzed" is used as a subtle hint. Later in the book, readers will learn the plant manager, Andy Holman, is gay, so I began using words and terms from the start to allude to this. When readers either guess Andy's sexual orientation or learn flat out, they should recall some of the clues and realize they've been prepped for this moment from the beginning.

I've added another hooker when Lester Robichaux is introduced along and with his upcoming termination. The reader finds out more in the next segment:

*“What now?” I asked. In Lester’s mere six-weeks of employment, he’d already damaged two machines, putting them out of operation for weeks.*

*“He dropped a motor on the plant floor. It’s done for, and so is he.”*

*I rolled my eyes and sighed. “I’ll prepare the discharge papers and meet you in your office.”*

The reason for the discharge is given along with more information about Robichaux. The termination is coming up soon, so hopefully the reader will want to stick around.

We also get a feel here for how Judy and the plant manager interact at work.

*I’d gotten as far as opening the blank termination form and typing in Lester’s name when Millie Landry rapped on my doorframe. “I’m worried about Alma. I’ve been calling her all morning.”*

*Having a bout of hot flashes, I didn’t want to deal with it so I waved her off. “Maybe she overslept, or had car trouble.”*

*But I knew Millie couldn’t be pacified. She was Alma’s supervisor, and a motherly one at that. No doubt she had visions of Alma getting in a car accident, or a random fire at her house.*

*Millie cited a list of possible calamities before dropping dramatically into one of my straight-back chairs. “Alma was due in at seven. Judy, I’m telling you something’s wrong.” Her Southern Mississippi drawl cut across my desk without losing a note. “For land sakes, the girl’s worked here ten years with no attendance issues.”*

In the section above, I introduce one of the plant supervisors, Millie Landry. We hear her accent and are told it’s a Southern Mississippi drawl, which places the setting. The character of Millie serves a number of purposes in the book. One is to keep Judy up to date on people and happenings in the workplace. She has her finger on the pulse of each and every employee and doesn’t hesitate to share the information when needed to move the plot along.

Millie is also an informant of current and past Mississippi Gulf Coast traditions and rumors.

The “hot flashes” remark puts the character even closer to her true age of 49. I’m showing this without outright telling the reader her age.

*I gulped. “Ten years?”*

*“Yes. If you knew her, you’d be in a panic, too.”*

*I’d only worked for this packaging manufacturer for less than two months and hadn’t met most of the two hundred plus employees yet.*

*Millie scooted closer, her dark hair, chocked-full of gray, hardly moving. “I’m going to drive over.”*

*I held up a hand to keep her in her seat. “Let’s pass it by Andy first.” I leaned toward the*

*phone, hit the speaker button, and tapped in Andy's extension. When he answered, I said, "Millie's here, upset about Alma, and—"*

*"You mean she still hasn't shown? Alma's never late."*

*"I want to check in on her," Millie piped in.*

*"Hold off," he said. "Judy, look through Alma's file. Try her emergency contacts first. Millie, we'll get back to you, but we've got another issue at the moment."*

*On the personal information form Alma had completed upon being hired, she'd listed her parents. At the time, they'd lived here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, but she'd noted a change, showing their address was now in Texas, along with a new out-of-state phone number. I flipped through the rest of her file, looking for local contacts, then went back to completing Lester's termination form.*

My intention is to add suspense when Judy gulps and repeats Millie's remark about the employee's decade of employment. Again, more anticipation added when Millie tells Judy why she should be in a panic too.

We're reminded where the book is set and I've established that Judy is a fairly new employee with her company.

The reader is interested in finding out who the employee is who did not show up for work. Judy gives the reader information when she goes through the employee's personnel file, a logical step for any human resources manager with a missing employee. Millie provides a little more information too, like she did in the previous section.

I've mentioned several of the tasks assigned to Millie. They are all important, but any other character could chip in and provide Judy with the same information and Millie would no longer be needed. What makes Millie Landry so important to my story is that I created her to help me overcome the limitations authors run into when writing in first person. Everything the reader sees is through the eyes of Judy Kenagy who cannot be in two places at one time or see or hear through walls. There are times when Judy and the reader need to know what's happened somewhere else in other scenes. I came up with another character, a minor one, who is an administrative assistant for the chief of police. This minor character is a gossip and also best friends with Millie Landry. The best friend entrusts Millie with a lot of secrets, descriptions, and information about what's happening inside the local police department. Millie then shares the information with Judy, trusting her totally. Let's go on.

*With the papers in hand, I pushed the door leading out to the plant open. Rows of machines stretched out before me. Their warning lights flashed, reflecting off the rusting, thirty-foot ceiling, while an array of noises roared in my ears.*

*Millie stood near a cluster of box-folding machines, holding a clipboard, a stocky, uniformed woman beside her. "Millie!" I called over all the grinding and clacking. She glanced up then transferred the clipboard to the woman and serpented around the machines.*

*I led her to a slightly quieter spot. "Her parents are her only contacts, but they're out of state. I'll get back to you after Andy and I handle this other matter."*

*Millie bit down on her lower lip. "I don't like this. I don't know of anyone who could look in*

*on her ‘cept me or one of her co-workers.’*

Here I describe the inside of the plant without dumping information. The last sentence, where Millie bites down on her lip, is another hooker, a jab at suspense, reminding the reader this missing person is likely to be one enormous problem.

*I had to admit I didn’t like it either. The memory of another young woman surfaced for the first time since I took this job, intensifying my feelings of unease. I’d hoped to shake the tragic memory by changing jobs, yet here she was with me once more. I shuddered and rubbed my brow.*

What’s this, a tragic memory of another young woman? What happened? Is this part of what drives Judy? The tension is building.

So, in the first two pages, the reader should have a general idea of who my protagonist is and have a feel for the setting. We know she’s a fairly new employee, so there’s a lot she doesn’t know about the employees and her employer. What will she uncover? Some of the other characters are introduced. Are there enough grabbers and hookers to hold readers? They’ll probably stay through the end of the first chapter. They’ll want to see Lester Robichaux terminated and since Alma Guerra is found shortly afterward, they’ll want to stay for that. At this point, all I had left to do was to keep my readers hooked until the end, another three hundred pages or so.



Linda Thorne began pursuing her true passion, writing, in 2005. Since then, she has published numerous short stories in the genres of mystery, thriller, and romance. Her debut novel, *Just Another Termination*, is the first in a planned series of mysteries that tell the story of Judy Kenagy, the first career human resources manager to turn sleuth. *Just Another Termination* was released by Black Opal Books August of 2015. She is currently writing the second book in her series, *A Promotion to Die For*.

Like her lead character, Thorne is a career human resources manager. She has worked in the HR profession in Arizona, Colorado, Mississippi, California, and now, Tennessee where she lives in a suburb of Nashville with her husband and two border collies.