

When the Past Haunts You:
The Beginning

by L.C. Hayden

In my book *When the Past Haunts You*, retired Dallas homicide detective Harry Bronson is forced to face his painful past when his estranged sister begs him to rescue her.

Since the book is part of the Harry Bronson Mystery Series, I was hoping that the readers would know that Bronson does not have a sister. But now here, clear out of the blue, not only a sister appears, but she wants her Big Bro to help.

With this type of setup, I immediately encountered some dilemmas when deciding how to open the story. I needed to establish the fact that Bronson does indeed have a sister. But if so, why the big mystery? Why hadn't he mentioned her before?

At the same time, I wanted the readers to know that Lorraine is in so much trouble that circumstances forced her to break all those years of silence.

Then there's the back story. What happened so long ago that led to this? Surely, the readers will demand to know.

I played with these three ideas and tried to figure out how I could incorporate them into the opening. I decided it would be best to look at each idea individually. First, I considered the back story which in itself is quite interesting. But it's just that—a back story. One of the purposes of the opening pages is to set the tone and let the reader know what the story is about. As I said before, the back story is interesting, but it's not what the book is about. Therefore, I chose to give the readers the information at the time they needed it, a bit here and a bit there.

That left me with two other choices: establishing the fact that Lorraine exists and letting the reader know she's in a lot of trouble. Another purpose to the opening pages is to introduce the characters, to reveal the conflict, and to establish the setting.

Keeping this in mind, I realized that I would have to introduce Lorraine and then introduce the problem she is having. But how do I introduce her? At her home in Pennsylvania? Put her in some kind of a danger so that the reader knows what's going on?

Not a bad idea. There would be conflict, an essential element of the opening pages. I'd be showing the readers the problems she has instead of telling them about them. I would be involving the readers which is something else the opening pages should do.

Yet, something wasn't quite right. Back to the drawing board.

I considered my last option: establishing the fact that Lorraine exists. I would be doing that if I started out the novel with Lorraine's problems. I would in fact be introducing the characters—that's when it hit me. This is a Harry Bronson Mystery Series, not a Lorraine Bronson Series. I needed to begin with Bronson. How did Bronson feel about his sister showing up after all of this time?

The emphasis here is on the word *feel*. Anytime you can make the readers feel something, you're one step ahead. Opening pages definitely need to make the reader feel something. If I show Bronson's feelings, the readers will sympathize with him and will urge him to help his sister, no matter what the past holds. But how do I do that?

Readers of the Bronson series know that Harry and Carol have a very loving relationship. Here's the perfect place to show that relationship and to introduce not just Bronson but also his

wife, Carol, and his sister, Lorraine to the readers. Thus, with these things in mind, here are the opening lines to *When the Past Haunts You*:

Carol Bronson sat ramrod straight on the sofa waiting for her husband. Soon as he opened the front door to their motor home, she stood, her eyes, tiny slits on her face.

Under normal circumstances, at this point, Carol would place her left hand on her hip, wiggle her extended right hand index finger, and scold him. But not today.

That, more than anything, forced a gasp to escape from Harry Bronson's mouth. He took a small step forward. "Carol, sweetheart, what . . ."

"Have we ever kept any secrets from each other?"

A frown formed on Bronson's forehead. "No, of course—"

"Think before you answer."

When he worked for the Dallas Police Department, before he'd been forced to retire, he worked cases that placed him in mortal danger. He'd tell Carol not to worry, all was well. A small, white lie he knew she didn't swallow.

Since then, almost two years later, he hadn't kept anything from her. Unless . . . He reached in his pocket and felt the cell. Still there.

"I'm waiting," Carol said. "Is there anything you want to tell me?"

Bronson crossed his arms. "No."

"Then I'll start. Your sister called."

Carol spoke in a calm voice, but as far as Bronson was concerned, she might as well have shouted. He took a deep breath. "I don't have a sister." He swept past Carol, heading toward the bedroom. That was the main problem about traveling in a motor home. No space for privacy.

"Harry Bronson, you get back here."

Bronson stopped but didn't turn around.

"We've been married thirty-one years and in all that time, you never mentioned a sister."

Bronson felt her arms wrap around him. He wanted to turn around, face her, tell her the ugly truth, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

"Why didn't you tell me about her?" She rested her forehead on the middle of his broad back.

Bronson squirmed, forcing Carol to release him. He turned to face her. "Last thing she told me was that she wanted nothin' to do with me or Mom or Dad. She made that decision, she should stick to it." He headed toward the door leading outside. "Now, if you excuse me, I'd like some time alone." He gently opened the door and let himself out.

In those first few opening paragraphs, I hope I established the problem (conflict) and introduced some of the characters. Also, I hope I hooked the readers by creating a mystery about what happened between Lorraine and Bronson. To insure this, I ended the opening pages with a cliff hanger—a device intended to force the reader to keep reading. After all, that is another thing the opening pages are supposed to do: entice the reader to keep reading.

With that in mind, here's how I ended my opening pages:

Bronson sat at the edge of the bed, his hand playing with the cell, his mind bombarded by the memories he hoped he had forgotten.

Lorraine.

Only fourteen and already a drunk.

Lorraine.

High on pot and Lord knows what else.

Dad, with his weak heart, begging her to stop. Lorraine threw her head back, laughed, and blew smoke toward Dad's face.

Bronson stood and headed for the living room area. He bit his tongue—a habit he had developed when he didn't want to curse—and found his sister's number on the missed calls function. He pressed the call key.

Lorraine immediately picked up. "Oh God, Big Bro, you called. I need you."

"What do you want?"

A pause. "After all these years, those are your first words to me?"

"What do you want?" Bronson repeated. He tried to force the anger and the bitterness out, but like thick syrup, his resentment smothered his intentions.

"I want you to come."

"I can't."

"Please. I got involved in—" Another pause. "Please, I'm afraid. They're going to kill me. Please come."

"Tell me what's wrong."

"I can't."

"Then I can't help you."

"You've got to. I'll tell you when you get here. I don't want to say anything over the phone. I'm afraid it's bugged. You need to come."

"Where are you?"

"Whittle City, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh."

Clear on the other side of the United States. "Not sure I can get over there."

"Please."

"I'm in South Dakota."

"South Dakota? What are you doing there? Thought you were a detective for the Dallas Police Department."

How the hell did she know that? Worse, how had she gotten hold of his and Carol's cell numbers? "I'm retired. Carol, my wife—but I guess you know that since you talked to her. Anyway, we got a motor home."

"Retired?"

Did Bronson recognize a note of regret in his sister's voice? "Yes, retired."

"But you can still . . . You've got contacts, right?"

"What do you want?"

"I want you to come. Please. I don't have anyone else to turn to."

"You should have thought about that before you killed Dad and Mom." He hung up.

With those words, I hoped I hooked the readers and make them want to read the rest. I'm assuming it worked as reviewers have constantly given it a four or five star rating. The book hit the Kindle Bestseller List and was a finalist for Left Coast Crime's Watson Award for Best Characters.

I'd love to hear from you. Did the beginning work for you? Contact me!



Hayden refuses to be outdone by Bronson, her series character. He geocached, so Hayden geocached. Most of the caches in *Why Casey Had to Die* are actual geocaching sites—and just like Bronson, Hayden and her husband own a motor home and travel all over. She promotes her books; Bronson solves the mysteries. For another series she's writing, her character took up scuba diving—so did Hayden.

Hayden further encounters more adventures during her “working” cruises she does for cruise lines as Author-in-Residence. Her latest jobs include a Princess Cruise where she and her husband went on a Grand Mediterranean Cruise. A couple of months later, Celebrity sent them on a Panama Canal cruise.

Hayden's Bronson series include *Why Casey Had to Die*, followed by *When Death Intervenes*, then *When the Past Haunts You*. She is currently writing the next book in the series, *What Lies Beyond the Fence*.

Her other series include the Aimee Brent Mysteries and a standalone, *Secrets of the Tunnels*. She also pens inspirational and children's books, and other genres.

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