

Going Deeper in the Opening Scene
by C. T. Collier

Have you ever performed a ritual to let go of something you once valued but have lost? The impulse to use a ceremony or ritual to mark a transition, such as “letting go,” is universal, and it’s part of the hook that draws the reader into my current mystery, *Planted*.

When I submitted the first few pages of *Planted* to my critique group, I was confident of my opening—new homeowners dig up a gun in the backyard garden and the ensuing chaos leads to the investigation of a long-hidden murder. However, my helpful critics pointed out that a gun, even tightly wrapped in a thick layer of plastic, could not remain underground for a period of years and still function. Dirt and other matter would insinuate themselves through the covering and into the works of the revolver.

I wasn’t ready to abandon the idea, so I posed the age-old question every author asks at some point, “How can I make this work?” Instead of nit-picking the logistics, I dug deeper with the character who planted the gun in the first place. No spoiler here: I’m not saying he is or isn’t the murderer! Digging deeper led to the question: Why didn’t he dispose of the weapon by, say, tossing it in a lake halfway across the country?

In a conversation with my character, he revealed the layers of grieving that led him to bury the gun in an unusual manner, by planting it under a miniature tree in a rose garden. When he wrapped it symbolically in multiple layers he was burying a part of himself, a relationship, and a way of life he could not carry forward. With this insight, I could make my opening scene work. How does the discovery look in the final version?

Planted now opens with the gardener’s teenage son, Richie, finding not a mass of tattered plastic, but a rusty oversize lunchbox that he thinks must be a time capsule. In the excerpt below, Richie has already pried open “his” lunchbox before Lyssa Pennington, the homeowner and protagonist, can stop him. Worse, her friend Bree has persuaded her to reveal the contents for all of them to see:

With the three of them crowding around her, she cut into the tattered plastic and tossed it away, revealing an inner wrapping of red-checkered oilcloth that might have been a scrap of picnic tablecloth. Her heart raced as she unwrapped the oilcloth. Inside, another layer, a navy-and-white bandanna, protected a lumpy leather pouch about eight inches long and five inches across. Both were splotchy with dirt that had worked through the plastic and the oilcloth during the time underground.

As she fingered the pouch’s drawstring, her heart thudded.

She loosened the drawstring half an inch, but a sense of impending doom stopped her. This wasn't her usual panic attack. In fact, she hadn't one in months. *Enough.*

She handed Bree the cloth with the pouch nestled inside before sidestepping away from the group. "If it's something really awful, just end it, please."

"You mean like a dead mouse?" Bree flipped the leather sack from one hand to the other.

Richie snorted, and his father elbowed him with a grin.

Lyssa wrapped her arms around her middle and tapped her foot.

Bree explored the outside of the pouch with her fingers. "It feels hard, like metal." She fully loosened the drawstring and peered inside. "Holy cannoli."

"What?" Lyssa asked.

"What is it?" Dick said.

"What'd they bury?" Richie's eager voice asked.

Bree drew out a handgun, gripping the wood handle with her thumb and two fingers.

"Oh my gosh." Lyssa's head and heart pounded. "Put it back. We're done with this." She started toward Bree, but Dick shifted on his feet and tightened the circle, blocking her access.

"Revolver," Dick said. "It's in good shape for something that's been buried as long as that tree's been there."

"Buried is right," Bree said with a short laugh. "It was wrapped in—what?—three layers like a mummy inside that metal box."

By going deeper into the thinking of a critical character, rather than throwing out a troublesome idea, my opening scene ultimately posed a question central to the ensuing murder investigation: why was the weapon buried the way it was?



Raised in Seneca Falls, NY, the birthplace of women's rights, C. T. Collier left the Finger Lakes area for college and jobs, but she always wanted to return. Today she lives in a beautiful small city on one of the prettiest of the Finger Lakes. Most days you'll find her writing in her tiny office looking out on a woods populated with fox, deer, wild turkeys, and songbirds.

With degrees in Information Science and Educational Technology, her career as software developer, tech-savvy professor, and college administrator afforded endless opportunities to study intrigue in High Tech and in Higher Education. Add to that her longtime love of mysteries, and it's no wonder she writes academic mysteries that draw from the traditions of Agatha Christie and other masters of the genre. Her setting, Tompkins Falls, is a blend of several Finger Lakes

towns, including her hometown. Entirely fictional, Tompkins College is no college and every college.

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