

## Sometimes You Have to Cheat

by Nancy Jarvis

Two pages isn't much space to fill readers in when they start reading a later-in-the-series book cold without having read the preceding books. That was the problem I had with book six in the Regan McHenry Real Estate Mysteries series. Regan, the protagonist, and her husband, Tom, have to be introduced, their relationship needs to be made clear, they have to be made sympathetic, and that's just for starters. It's also necessary to set the stage, build tension, and introduce the overriding dissonant theme in of the book.

So how did I handle the problem? I cheated by asking the title for help. There's nothing neighborly about murder, and the title, *A Neighborly Killing*, suggests things that don't fit together as expected. The discordance readers encounter because characters aren't necessarily who they seem to be and events aren't what they seem to be at all begins before the reader cracks the book or fires up their e-reader.

Regan was one more flutter of eyelashes away from sleep. When she startled awake, her eyes wide open, she didn't trust what she had heard. She thought she might have imagined the sound in the split second before sleep came.

The first chapter is all sleight-of-hand beginning with Regan's questioning of her first sensation. Tom can't see clearly what's happening just outside their bedroom because their mostly glass house is in the midst of a rain-filled cloud. Regan's sensation of sight is quickly brought under a cloud as well.

Tom, lying in bed next to her, flinched slightly with the second report.

"What was that?" she asked, rolling in his direction and putting her hand lightly against his back.

"A gunshot. A rifle shot." His voice was barely louder than a whisper, but it held no hint of sleepy haze.

She pushed an elbow under her and propped herself up so she could see over his shoulder to the outside. After promising El Niño rains in January, the skies had dried and temperatures hit record highs, leaving California still in a drought on this leap year last night of February. A rainfall Miracle March looked possible, though, and their house, at sixteen-hundred feet elevation on the windward side of the Santa Cruz Mountains, was under promising clouds, teasing that they might produce rain. She couldn't see anything clearly in the diffused light of their mist-filled cloud cover except the bricks of their patio which glistened with moisture.

Setting the stage for place and circumstances is begun immediately so the reader knows where they are, time of year, and a bit of what has happened before the story begins. Regan and Tom try to normalize what is an unusual and disconcerting situation before the story takes a leap past their efforts.

"Do you think it's pig hunters?"

It had been several years since Bonny Doon had an outbreak of wild pigs. That episode was ended by experienced pig hunters who asked only for the meat they killed in exchange for ridding the countryside of the destructive beasts.

"Not on a night like this and not so near houses. The pig hunters gave notice a few days before they started hunting, too, so no one would be concerned when they heard shots, and they only hunted right after nightfall and right before

dawn. Besides, I haven't heard anyone complain about pigs lately. Have you?"

"No, I haven't ..."

Two more shots rang out in rapid succession, the second shot sounding before the echo of the first ceased.

Tom sat bolt-upright in bed. "Those blasts were close, I bet not more than thirty yards away." He swung his long legs to the floor. "Whoever is shooting, they're moving in our direction and getting awfully close."

Tom and Regan can hear gunshots, but the character of the shots changes as they get closer, reinforcing the notion that sound is unclear and puzzling. At the same time, the urgency of their situation is increased and tension is added as the gunfire moves closer to them.

Regan usually loved the glass wall on the back side of their house which provided wonderful views over Monterey Bay and the Pacific Ocean. Tonight that feature made her feel exposed and vulnerable. As the gunshots came closer, she would have happily traded the view for substantial bullet-stopping walls.

The contradiction of what makes a home is emphasized and fright and tension are heightened with the introduction of vulnerability as the light, view, and airiness of their home, all normally assets, transform into threats.

Tom was out of bed, robe-less, and searching for his rubber-soled slippers. As soon as he found them and wiggled his feet into them, he reached for the putter he had stowed between his night stand and the window. He gripped it tightly in one hand as he stood at the bedside sliding door, open a couple of inches for fresh air, and peered into the night.

Regan's tone was apprehensive. "You're not going to ..."

"I can make out a light," he said in a soft voice. "It's blurred and small; could be from a flashlight. It's close, coming from the hillside below our patio and moving toward us."

Regan thought she could see a faintly brightening patch beyond the patio's edge, too.

"I want you away from the windows." Tom barked a command at her in a husky whisper, "Go! Open the garage door and get in your car. Be ready to leave."

"No. Not unless you come with me."

The couple's relationship is briefly introduced. They clearly care for one another because neither will seek safety unless they do so together.

The light outside stopped moving. There was another shot, but it sounded different from the previous shots. It lacked the power and resonant sound of rifle fire and was just a pop. The hillside light moved downhill a few feet and stopped. As they waited for what would come next, Regan forgot to breathe. She strained to hear any sounds through the narrow door opening. Was she imagining it or were there voices outside? Tom cocked his head. She wasn't imagining; he

heard something, too. The voices grew loud enough to fill the night. Words reached Regan and Tom's ears, but they were shouted and full of emotion ... and impossible to understand.

By the end of the first two pages the reader has many questions that need to be addressed. Regan and Tom want to understand what's happening, and so does the reader who has established a small bond with them and is concerned for their safety. With the help of the title, pages one and two have done their job, and the reader wants to move on to page three and the rest of the book.



Nancy came to writing by way of a checkered past. After earning a BA in behavioral science from San Jose State University, she worked in the advertising department of the San Jose Mercury News. A move to Santa Cruz meant a new job as a librarian and later a stint as the business manager for Shakespeare/Santa Cruz at UCSC. Her final career before starting to write was as a Realtor, the job that inspired her character, Regan McHenry.

Nancy's philosophy is that you should try something radically different every few years. Writing is her latest adventure. She invites you to take a peek into the real estate world through the stories that form the backdrop of her Regan McHenry Real Estate Mysteries series. The murders are made up, but the real estate details and ideas come from her work

experiences.

To keep her writing fresh, Nancy took a timeout from Regan's adventures to write *Mags and the AARP Gang* and to edit a cookbook, *Cozy Food: 128 Cozy Mystery Writers Share Their Favorite Recipes*. Beginning in 2017 she intends to host other writers in her home where they can work on their books and share creative energy in a retreat setting.

Amazon author page: <http://tinyurl.com/nkjcg2d>.