

FIRST PAGES, PAULA MITCHELL, PI
SECRET EXPOSURE
by Jan Christensen

Often PI novels start with the beautiful woman hiring the hardened PI for one reason or another. And often she turns out to be as much of a problem for the poor guy as the case itself.

For this, my tenth novel, I decided to be more deliberate about the beginning from the beginning. But I did follow the tradition of having a difficult client, although he's a guy, not a femme fatale.

Of course, the female PI has to be tough, too, and the clients are often either liars or evading the truth, keeping back secrets.

For the three books so far in the Paula Mitchell series, I've had her meet her clients outside her office. For example, from *Secret Exposure*:

I came in behind the stranger as he brandished a gun in his right hand. He shouted, "Where is she? Where's Marisa?"

The receptionist rose slowly from her desk, openmouthed. I jerked the guy's arm down and backward and put him into a choke hold. He dropped the gun and gagged. I spun him around and gave him a shove. He fell on his ass and looked up at me in astonishment. A good thing he was only a couple of inches taller than I am, and that my reflexes have always been excellent.

I'm sure you noticed how I fit a bit of description in there and set the office scene.

Before the police arrive, I have some time to get in a few more details, such as main character names and a plot point or two:

The woman at the desk already had the phone to her ear, talking to the police. Jack opened his office door and stuck his head out. "Paula, what's going on out here?"

A young woman, maybe thirty, short, with a pixyish face and Cupid's-bow mouth stood behind him. She whispered, "Simon? What are you doing?"

I grabbed the gun from the floor and pointed it at Simon. "Good question. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Simon scooted backward on his butt until his back hit the wall. He raised his trembling hands. "She's a no-good liar. I never, ever abused our son. Tell the truth, Marisa. I could never hurt Henry." Tears streamed down his face. I didn't remember ever seeing anyone so miserable.

Then it was time to ratchet up the tension:

Someone shouted in the hallway, "Police! Freeze!" Anders and Peterson came in, weapons pointed. Right at me. My heart did a little jig in my chest, and I carefully placed Simon's gun on the floor. They slowly lowered their guns when they saw me.

Being your typical writer, I wanted to make a change in the last paragraph. Can you guess what it was? Next to last sentence. Too late now, darn it.

Then I lowered the tension again, giving a bit more background for the story:

That's how my day started. Just another typical summer morning for a private investigator in Springton, Rhode Island. Right. After the police took our statements and hauled Simon away, Jack offered me a brandy. I declined. I had work to do. "Give me the subpoena, and I'll get it served." I glanced at Marisa who had sunk down into a visitor's chair looking pale and wan. "You okay?" I asked her.

"I guess so. I've never seen Simon so crazy. He's always controlled. I don't know what's happened to him."

"You asked for a divorce," Jack reminded her. "I'm guessing he doesn't want one."

"He should have thought of that before abusing our son."

Well yeah, I thought. Decided to get the hell out of Dodge. Unmarried myself, messy divorces made me uneasy, even though I sometimes had to get some unsavory evidence about one spouse or the other.

"Well, it's been fun. I'm going to go serve this subpoena. Hope the guy doesn't have a gun."

"It's a woman," Jack said, grinning at me.

"Great." I picked up my huge purse, my battle bag, and left them to it.

The woman gave me no trouble except for the cussing when she realized what had I handed her.

Next, Paula finally arrives at her office, and gets the big surprise at the end of the first short chapter:

I drove back to my office and said hello to Brian, our gorgeous twenty-six-year-old receptionist. Tall, blond, blue-eyed. If he didn't work for Geri and me, I'd hit on him.

"Geri busy?"

"Yes, but you can go in." He squinted at me. "You look a little, what? Frazzled?"

"Yeah, that's what happens when you have to wrestle a gun away from a crazed man first thing on a Monday morning."

"What?"

I told him what had happened. I'd never seem him so amazed before. "Okay. You have a right to look frazzled."

I laughed, knocked softly on Geri's door and entered.

Her blue eyes watched me walk in and sit down in a visitor's chair. "What's wrong?"

"Damn. I didn't realize my face gave so much away."

"It must have been really bad. I've hardly ever seen you like this before. Someone point a gun at you?" She tapped her pen on the desk.

I laughed. "Almost. A guy named Simon Langford stomped in front of me into Jack's office waving one around."

Geri's eyes got huge. "Who? Simon Langford? He just hired me to represent him in his divorce."

"Figures," I muttered.

And that ended the chapter. I didn't deliberately set out to write the beginning this way. The only decision I made before starting, besides knowing there would be a new case for Paula, was that I wanted something with a bit of action. After I decided what that action would be—man waving a gun around—and where it would happen, the rest just flowed out of me. I imagine you can tell, I'm not a plotter.

I have to admit this was a fun chapter to write. I hope that when I'm having fun, the reader will, too. This is my primary goal with my writing.



BIO: Jan Christensen grew up in New Jersey and now resides in Texas. Her published novels include *Sara's Search*, *Revelations*, *Breakout*, *Organized to Death*, *Buried Under Clutter*, *Cluttered Attic Secrets*, *Perfect Victim*, *A Broken Life*, and *Secret Exposure*. She's had over seventy short stories appear in various publications, among them a collection, *The Artie Crimes* from Untreed Reads. She's past president of the Short Mystery Fiction Society, a member of Mystery Writers of American, and Sisters in Crime. Learn more on her website: www.janchristensen.com

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