

The First Two Pages of *Skin of Tattoos*

by Christina Hoag

The opening of a book has to accomplish many objectives, the chief one being to hook the reader so she reads on, and that makes it tough to write. I end up writing my openings a zillion times and tweaking words endlessly. In *Skin of Tattoos*, a literary thriller, set in the gang underworld of Los Angeles, I decided I had to introduce the reader to my protagonist Mags's world first because it's a subculture most are not going to be familiar with. I also am partial to openings that seem like, well, openings. I like to start with a paragraph that has a little majesty to it because it heralds the start of a grand adventure I will take you on and that deserves a tiny bit of pomp. From there on, I ease the reader into this world and the story of Mags.

Night in L.A. can be heavy as a medieval cloak or it can sparkle and crackle. It can burn you with its current, protect you or betray you. It can be like a *jaina* with a wet pout and curves that clap into your cupped hands. Tonight L.A. was just heavy; swimming in sweet syrup heavy.

Right away we know we're in L.A. and it's night, which of course is when gangs are most active. I also established the literary voice with similes and metaphors. The Spanish slang word "jaina" for woman and mentions of her curvy attributes also gives a sense of who's talking: a young Latino male. I also wanted to hint at the undertow of conflict in the story to come: the night protects or betrays, it sparkles or it burns, it's sweet but cloying. It gives a sense that our narrator is going to face a duality, that things in his world have two faces, that he is going to have choices.

I stood on the sidewalk and breathed in a lungful of darkness. For the first time in twenty-six months and thirteen days, I was free to go to the corner store and buy a Snickers. At least that was my excuse for slipping out my first night home, in case anyone asked. But they didn't. Moms and my sisters went to bed, my brother Frank wouldn't be

home til the next day and Pops was working his night job. I bolted.

Now we get more of a sense of who the protagonist is. We infer that he's been in prison. He's got a sweet tooth, a little character detail that drives home his youth, and lives with his family. But he's getting away from them on his first day home, so maybe they're not the most important people in his life. They also don't ask where he's going, so maybe he's not that important to them.

The quietness rang in my ears like I'd been punched upside the head. I had to listen to find noise. It was there. A siren whooped, a car door slammed, but they were faded, comfortable noises like a pair of old jeans. Noise wasn't up close like in lockup with all its yelling, buzzing, clanging—the constant rumble of hundreds of angry *vatos*. And it was dark. No lights blaring into every little crack of privacy all the time.

He's comparing his freedom to what he's just been through. We see he has to adjust to his new life. How is he going to adjust?

I threw the hoodie up over my head and walked past the store flashing the Tecate neon sign behind a barred window, feeling the moon watching me. I was going to see Blueboy. A parole violation for sure. He was on the D.A.'s gang affiliate list and so was I. I was home and free, but not home free. Not by a long shot. But I had to see Blue. We went way back, to before we were both jumped in to the Cyco Lokos. That was a lifetime and a half ago. Just seven years. But they were gang years, which kind of count like dog years. We were thirteen.

Now we get more details on him, he's a hoodie-wearing gang member, and a sense of the tension that's coming into play and the challenges and choices he faces. He's already violating parole—danger!--but he's willing to risk this because of his relationship with his homie Blueboy. We get a drip of essential backstory in here about the gang and Blueboy. It's always tough to know how much backstory to get in upfront and to slip it in a way that's unnoticed.

Blueboy lived in the armpit of the 110 and 10 freeways. If he was home, he'd be slouched on the couch watching TV with the lights off, like we always did when his moms was working nights at the hospital.

He was going to be surprised when he saw me. I didn't get word to my homeboys about

my release date. I missed the hell out of them, but I wasn't getting back in the life again. I couldn't do more time. That's all *la vida loca* was going to get me. Or killed. Same difference.

It felt rich just to push one foot ahead of the other and to go wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted. I stuck my arms straight out and walked like that for a while, looking into windows. People watching TV, eating. Women carrying babies, wearing curlers. *Tetas*.

Now we get an inkling of one tough choice the protagonist is going to face. He doesn't want to get back into gang life. He equates going back to prison to death, but he wants to be around his homies, which we've learned is a parole violation if he gets caught. He misses his homeboys. He's nostalgic about Blueboy. The pull is there. How's he going to deal with that?

We also get a hint of the downtrodden urban landscape these characters inhabit. Living in an "armpit" of freeways doesn't sound so hot. We see that the narrator is observant and hyper-aware of his surroundings, which hints that he's smart.

I pushed open Blueboy's gate. The pitbulls next door barked as I ambled down the driveway to the illegal garage conversion where he lived with his moms and sister. Blue flickers from the TV flashed through the missing slats of the window blinds. He was home. For the first time since eight o'clock that morning, when the State of California spit me out to a bus stop, my bones didn't creak.

I drum-rolled my knuckles on the door. The blinds rustled and then the door burst open.

"Mags! What the fuck, fool?" He hugged me. I hugged him back. Hard. "Why you didn't tell me you were coming home? I thought I was seeing things."

"Just got home today." Big smiles splashed on our faces.

He stood back to let me in. "Damn, you got buff, homes. You been working out?"

"That's all I did inside, work out and go to school. You know how it is."

"Yeah, I feel you."

Blueboy looked the same. Tall and bony with vanilla ice cream skin and the bluest eyes I've ever seen. Eyes like the desert sky. Everybody thought he was white, which pissed him off. He was as Salvadoran as I was.

Blueboy is thrilled to have Mags home so this is an important relationship. We also get more of a feel for where these characters living circumstances: an illegal garage conversion and

missing blind slats. Blueboy's and Mags' parents work nights. They're working-class poor. The narrator's name is revealed, Mags, and we find out he's from El Salvador. The reference to Blueboy's fair complexion again shows that everything is not what it seems. There's a superficial layer of appearance and the truth underneath. We finally hear their voices and get a real feel for how these characters interact.

If I've done my job well, the reader will now have a sense of the world and the challenges that await Mags in his journey and will read on.



Christina Hoag is the author of *Skin of Tattoos*, a literary thriller set in L.A.'s gang underworld (Martin Brown Publishers, 2016) and *Girl on the Brink*, a romantic thriller for young adults (Fire and Ice YA/Melange Books, 2016), which was named Suspense Magazine's Best of 2016 YA. She is a former reporter for the Associated Press and Miami Herald and worked as a correspondent in Latin America writing for major media outlets including Time, Business Week, Financial Times, the Houston Chronicle and The New York Times. She is the co-author of *Peace in the Hood: Working with Gang Members to End the Violence*, a groundbreaking book on gang intervention (Turner Publishing, 2014). She lives in Los Angeles.

For more information, see www.christinahoag.com.