

The First Two Pages: *Designed For Haunting*

By Sybil Johnson (Henery Press)

Designed For Haunting is a cozy mystery set in the world of tole/decorative painting. It's the fourth book in my Aurora Anderson series so by now a number of things have been established about the setting and the recurring characters. But I still want a first-time reader of my series to be able to pick up any book and enjoy it so there is, necessarily, some basic information that is passed on from book to book. Such details appear where it feels most natural, usually in the first few chapters.

Rory is an amateur sleuth so she's not actively looking for mysteries to solve. Instead, they tend to come to her. The story starts when something happens she feels compelled to investigate:

Two weeks before Halloween, Rory Anderson received an email from Beyond The Grave.

Since this book is set around Halloween, I wanted the first line to have a spooky quality. I also wanted to immediately orient the reader as to the time of year and who the main character is (Rory Anderson). This introduces the event that starts the whole story off—a mysterious email. I'm also hoping that people will wonder why Beyond The Grave is capitalized, giving them an incentive to read on.

Chills ran down her spine as she stared at the words on the computer screen.

“I think I have a stalker,” the message read. “If you’re reading this I’m either missing or dead. My life may depend on what you do. Please find out what happened to me. You’re the only one I can trust.” Below the startling words were Zelena Alvarez’s social media and email accounts with their corresponding passwords.

Here I give Rory’s initial reaction to the message, which I think is fairly typical of most people’s. I also give the reader some idea that she’s some place where she’s staring at a computer screen. Then there’s the actual contents of the message along with who arranged for it to be sent (Zelena Alvarez).

Rory pushed her chair away from her desk and closed her eyes, taking several deep breaths to slow down her racing heart. Once the analytical side of her brain kicked in, she rolled the chair back to its place in front of her computer and stared at the screen once again. As she reread the unexpected message, looking for clues to its authenticity, a brown Abyssinian cat jumped up on her lap and butted her head against the sleeve of Rory’s gray hoodie. She absently stroked the cat’s fur. “What do you think, Sekhmet? You’ve met Zelena. Do you think she sent this?”

This section gives the reader some idea about the kind of person Rory is as well as showing a bit more about where she is—at her desk in front of her computer screen, a typical place for her to be. She’s pretty analytical and a bit skeptical of strange emails so she’s the kind of person who would question if the message is real.

And then there’s Sekhmet, her cat. I admit that I get rather annoyed when someone I don’t know hears I write cozy mysteries and immediately asks if my

books have a cat in them. Yes, cozies often have animals in them, but they're not required and their presence is not a defining element of the sub-genre. There! I've gotten that off my chest. Now I can move on. I feel cozies often have pets in them because they're about ordinary people dealing with extraordinary events and ordinary people often have pets.

Honestly, this scene didn't really come to life for me until I introduced Sekhmet. Rory adopted her in the previous book so I wanted to make sure readers of the series knew Rory still had her and was taking care of her. Pets are also great sounding boards and provide a way for Rory to have a conversation about what's going on when she's the only one in the scene.

Sekhmet meowed, then curled up on Rory's lap and closed her eyes. Rory stroked the cat's fur a few more times before picking up her cell phone and dialing Zelena's number. When the call went to voicemail, she left a short message, then sat back in her chair and stared out the window in front of her desk at the street beyond. A delivery van drove down Seagull Lane past her single-story stucco house, stopping at a two-story Mediterranean three doors down. The driver hopped out, package in hand, and headed up a walkway lined with foam tombstones. Ghosts hanging from a tree in the yard across the street swayed in the ocean breeze.

Here, Rory's doing what I'd do in this situation—try to get hold of the person this message is purportedly from. The fact that Rory's got Zelena's number shows that she's a friend or at least someone she wants to talk to fairly often.

I'm not overly fond of long descriptions, but the reader needs to know more about the environment Rory is in. It could be anywhere at this point, although

probably a house or apartment since the cat's also there. So I've put in some action for her to see outside her window. Now we know the name of her street as well as she's in a single story house. The description of the ghosts and tombstones she sees reinforces to the reader this is taking place around Halloween, and the mention of the ocean breeze indicates she's near the ocean.

As she watched the cluster of white sheets move back and forth, she thought back to the last time she'd seen her friend. Zelena had seemed fine at the decorative painting chapter meeting a few days before, but Rory had been so busy discussing the group's upcoming charity event and the changes everyone wanted her to make to the chapter's website, she might not have noticed a problem.

Here I also introduce how she knows Zelena and mention the decorative painting chapter as well as the event they're planning, both of which will be featured heavily throughout the story. In this series, there's always something to do with tole/decorative painting in each book so I want to mention it fairly early on. The part about her updating the website lets the reader know that she's at least knowledgeable about computers. In this case, she's a freelance programmer, but all anyone needs to know right now is that she's tech-savvy.

Rory swiveled her chair back and forth. Sekhmet opened one eye and stared at her in disapproval. When the movement didn't stop, the cat jumped off her lap and, tail held high, walked across the great room that spanned the front of the house, into the area set aside for the living room, and curled up on the sofa.

I give the reader a little more of a picture about the house that she's in. It has a large room that spans the front of the house, half of which is her work area and half her living room.

Pushing a strand of her shoulder length brown hair away from her eyes, Rory picked up her cell phone once again and dialed the number for her best friend and fellow painter, Elizabeth Dexter.

"Hi, Rory," Liz said in a cheerful voice. "Hold on a sec."

Rory could just make out voices speaking Japanese in the background.

"Sorry about that. What's up?" Liz said when she came back on the line.

"Are you with a client? Do you have time to talk?"

The click click of heels on a wood floor followed by the soft thud of a door closing came over the phone line. "I'm showing a house to cousins of my mother's." Liz lowered her voice. "Between you and me, they're driving me bonkers. I'm running out of places to show them in Vista Beach. They want to be close to LAX and my mom. I've suggested neighboring cities, but they insist on buying something here in town."

Now we know a tiny bit more about what my main character looks like.

Rory is probably one of the least described characters in my books, something I just realized as I'm writing this. I'm not really fond of descriptions of people, preferring to have the reader create their own picture in their minds, but I do like to give out bits and pieces so the reader has something to base their picture on.

Here I introduce her best friend and sidekick, Elizabeth Dexter. When I first started writing, I read a lot of books on writing mysteries. In one, the author noted that characters should be introduced either somewhere they'd typically be or doing something they'd typically be doing. Liz is a real estate agent so we see her

showing a house. From their conversation, the reader finds out they live in Vista Beach, which is fairly close to LAX so we know we're in Los Angeles County.

So the first two pages introduce Rory and her best friend who will do the majority of the sleuthing as well as the situation that starts the story off. Hopefully, it's all interesting enough and raises enough questions that the reader wants to continue reading *Designed For Haunting*.

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Sybil Johnson wields pen and paintbrush from her home in Southern California where she writes the Aurora Anderson Mystery Series. Her short fiction has appeared in *Mysterious-E*, *Spinetingler Magazine*, *King's River Life Magazine*, *Crimson Dagger* and *Silver Moon Magazine*. Visit her at www.authorsybiljohnson.com or on the blog Type M For Murder (www.typem4murder.blogspot.com) where she posts every other Wednesday.