

The First Two Pages: *Skin Game: A Sin City Investigation*
by J.D. Allen (Midnight Ink)

There's a meme out there that says "Whiskey... because no good story started with a salad." I extrapolate that to my writing as "Action... because no good story starts with backstory."

For me, the first two pages of a novel are chock full of jobs. *Skin Game* is the second book in the Sin City Investigations series. As such, I needed the opening to do several things. First, I like to start a story, whether long-form or short, in the middle of a character *doing* something. In this case, my P.I. Jim Bean is working surveillance and is undercover in an unusual way. Second, I needed to let new readers know who he is (or isn't as the case may be) without beating returning readers over the head with endless description and backstory. Putting Bean in an uncomfortable scenario lets new and returning readers see his reaction to that dirty job and immediately gets across the idea who Bean is and what his goals are. Money. Easy money. And easy clients. Third, this first page sets the scene by telling us we're in Vegas, it's hot, and the neighborhood Bean is working in is not so desirable. It gets lots of work done on one page!

Days like this one made being a PI suck. Jim Bean dragged a dirty sleeve across his brow as he bent over and dipped a tattered brush into a paint bucket for the three millionth time. He peered through a jagged hole in the wooden privacy fence surrounding the

target's dilapidated house as he straightened. This guy had been a rotten pain in his ass for days. More like a pain in his sore back. He stretched. Vertebrae popped in complaint. Bribing the body shop owner to let him paint the dumpster had been a stroke of pure genius. What he hadn't thought through was the actual work of painting the stinking thing in the sweltering Vegas heat. As if it was his goal in life to paint the perfect dumpster, he coated it in navy blue, then forest green, and now it was about to be finished out in a very nice Boy Scout beige. The ruse had served well as cover but was killing his left wrist and lower back. It was better than the alternative, which had been to hang around this alley sitting on his ass in a car. Too obvious. Besides alerting the target to his presence, the act of spying on someone's back yard in this neighborhood might not have been so good for Jim's long-term health. People got dead around here fairly often. He didn't want to be added to any police statistics this week. Given that his wrist felt like it had been used to paint the outside of the MGM hotel instead of a six-foot-by-four-foot dumpster, he really hoped that Edmond Carver made a mistake soon. Thus far, Jim had evidence that this outstanding citizen was most certainly dealing drugs, had a taste for ugly prostitutes, and ordered lots of cheap pizza. Information Jim might be able to sell to a prosecutor at some point in the span of Edmond's burgeoning criminal career. However, none of that was the evidence Jim was currently being paid to gather. Standing out there sweating was getting old, but it was a job he had to do. He needed to replenish some cash flow. "It's all about the money," Jim muttered as he slathered on a little more paint. Let the cops take Edmond down for pushing. All he needed was to catch the creep holding something heavy or shooting hoops with one of the other losers on the block—anything that might prove he hadn't slipped a disc tripping behind a blackjack table. Bye-bye workmen's comp claim.

The second page drops a wrench into the status quo of Bean's investigation.

Something unexpected. Conflict.

A car pulled past his position and parked not far from the dumpster. Interesting. No need to run through the list of cars he'd mentally cataloged over the last couple of days. No way this

screaming yellow compact was on that list. In this kind of neighborhood, he saw cheap auction rejects or pimped-up land yachts. This brand-new compact did not belong to one of the local residents. A well-made woman unfolded herself out of the small door, tripping on her heels and grumbling as she did. She was checking a slip of paper as she stretched to retrieve something from the passenger seat. Jim couldn't help noticing the nice curve to her ass, but more interesting was why a chick dressed like she belonged in a fancy office was making her way to the gate of Edmond Carver's house. He missed getting a good look at her face as she stepped out and turned. Probably shouldn't have been watching her ass so closely. Rookie mistake. Jim Bean was no damn rookie. His intuition twitched, making his stomach tighten. He checked his back. No one. Edmond stuck his crooked nose out the door. She managed to talk him out onto the concrete porch. Then, like a mother scolding an unruly child, she kept advancing on him, causing him to back his way along a rusted porch rail. He looked like he was about to run from her. They moved out of the line of sight afforded by the busted fence. If Jim wanted to see more, he'd have to be a little more obvious. Dammit. Maybe this Edmond character wasn't as dumb as he looked and had hired himself a lawyer. Jim checked his back again, the alley to the east. He was still alone. No one paid attention to a guy in dirty painter's overalls and cap. He stepped over so he could get a glimpse of the pair. He edged closer and pressed his ear to the wood fence. The new position gave him a fresh nose full of stink. He could only see her back. She was really working it, using her body, inching right up in Edmond's face. The drug dealer kept backing away and shaking his head.

His hands were up, showing her his palms. "I ain't done nothing, lady."

Jim finally was able to make out Edmond's argument as his back hit the wall at the end of the cracking concrete porch.

"You'll have to look somewheres else."

The vocabulary on this one. Jim huffed and tucked his paintbrush into the little bucket he'd been using. There was only so much this guy was going to take from the woman before he pushed back, and that might be Jim's best opportunity to get his money shot. Can't beat up an attorney, or whatever she was, if you have a slipped disc. He turned on the video camera disguised in an empty can of paint sitting on the far corner of the dumpster as she moved in even closer.

She poked his chest. “Where is she?”
“Lady, I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”
“You know. You were the last one to talk to her.”

So now we have a small insurance claim investigation that has turned much more sinister. Will this guy hurt the woman? What will Bean do in that case? Who is she? And who is missing or dead? It’s not very long before we find out who this woman is and that she’s been part of Jim’s life in the past, maybe page four.

Maybe I could have brought that information sooner. In a short story, that would absolutely be the case. In the long form of a novel, I wanted to take a little more time to draw out the suspense. Draw the reader into the mystery. The idea being that by page two, the reader wants to keep turning pages to find out who the woman is and how she impacts Bean and his target. The last line implying someone is dead or missing should do just that. I’m leading them to a big revelation at the end of the chapter.

All Whiskey. No Salad.

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J.D Allen’s Sin City Investigations series launched with *19 Souls* last year and followed up with *Skin Game* in February. She has short stories in the Anthony Award-winning anthology *Murder under the Oaks* as well as in *Carolina Crimes*. She’s a past chair of the Bouchercon National Board, a member of Mystery Writers of America and PI Writers of America, and president of her local Sisters in Crime chapter. She’s an Ohio State University alum with a degree in forensic anthropology and a creative writing minor.