

The First Two Pages: “No Honor Among Thieves” by Heidi Hunter
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edited by Barb Goffman (Wildside Press)

When I heard about the *Crime Travel* anthology, my first thought was that my story should be an adventure, because time travel would be an adventure.

I wanted to begin the story with a hook that would entice the reader to join in the upcoming exploits: “It was the sledgehammer in his left hand that told me it was not going to be our usual Saturday night.”

This unexpected opening sentence was one of the first things that popped into my mind before I had a clear idea of what the plot was going to be, but it helped me build the rest of my story. Why does he need the sledgehammer? What is he going to do?

The protagonist gets dragged into the plot in a subsequent paragraph: “He grabbed the crowbar leaning next to the door and handed it to me.”

I felt this opening foreshadowed that something out of the ordinary, even illegal, was about to happen. Why else would you need a sledgehammer and a crowbar on a Saturday night?

I next created a sense of urgency. Why does it have to be done that night?

“We have to do it now, Joanna. The house will be torn down on Friday, and if we don’t find it, it may be lost forever.”

This statement also hints at the mission. What may be lost forever?

I had in mind an Indiana Jones' type of adventure, where our protagonist Joanna and her friend Tony embark on a quest to locate a valuable artifact that's been missing for many years. I wanted to use an actual lost object as it would be fun to speculate what happened to that item. So, I researched missing artifacts and identified the perfect object for their treasure hunt.

Everyone in town knew the legend of the stolen Florentine Diamond... Bertrand Sr., a well-known art collector—or art thief, depending on whom you talked to—came into possession of the Florentine Diamond, a 137-carat yellow diamond stolen from Austria after World War I. Senior, as he was known, held a dinner party in 1935 during which he was going to unveil the diamond, but he and all his party guests were gunned down. There were plenty of suspects—art thieves, the Mafia, crooked business associates—but the murders went unsolved and the diamond disappeared.

This paragraph not only introduces the object of the impending search but also the mystery elements. Who committed the murders? What happened to the diamond?

When detailing the backstory of the diamond and its alleged owner, I alternated description with discussion between Joanna and Tony. My initial draft of this story had paragraphs of exposition rather than the dialogue, which I thought the reader would find boring. Plus, through this conversation, I was able to demonstrate Joanna's reluctance to join in Tony's scheme.

“Surely if it was here, someone would have found it already.” I rushed to keep up with Tony. “The house has been empty for a year, since Reginald the third died. And he probably found it when he was living here.”

“It’s still there. It has to be,” Tony insisted. “I’ve researched the diamond. There were a few possible sightings over the years, but they were all fakes.”

“Then it was sold to a private collector, who has it stored in some climate-controlled room for his own viewing pleasure.”

“It has to be hidden in the walls. It’s the only place I haven’t looked.” Tony was sweating in desperation and not listening to me.

This exchange starts to set the stakes as well. Tony is anxious to find the diamond. This outing isn’t just something fun to do on a Saturday night. He needs it. Why?

I establish that in the next paragraph by describing a town on the brink populated by desperate residents willing to make a buck by any means possible.

Tony needed the money from selling the diamond. Everybody did. After Reginald Jr. died, his family-owned manufacturing plant in town deteriorated until his son, Reginald III, shuttered it. It was the death knell for many people. Unable to find work, they created their own jobs, many illegal... Every once in a while, someone was caught in the house, but the treasure hunters had become more frequent since it was announced the house and several nearby would be torn down to build an assisted-living center.

Here, the reader should start to sense this outing may be dangerous to Joanna and Tony. What threats might they encounter in the house?

During the editing process, I was asked about the choice to have Joanna and Tony walk to the house instead of driving. Besides giving Joanna and Tony the time to talk over the foolhardiness of the plan, I felt it was consistent with two concepts I had already established. First, they likely didn’t have the funds to own a

car, hence the treasure hunt. Second, what they were about to do was criminal, so they wouldn't want a car parked on a deserted street drawing unwanted attention.

In the rest of page two, I describe the setting by focusing on the condition of the house where the rest of the action will take place.

All items not nailed down had been sold at an estate sale months ago, including the light fixtures. Looters had pulled wiring from the walls and stripped it for its copper. As we passed through the solarium to the main hall, we dodged holes in the walls and floors, which I suspected were created by other treasure hunters also using sledgehammers. Even with our flashlights, it was treacherous to maneuver without breaking an ankle.

This will contrast with the opulence Joanna later encounters during her time travel, but there are hints of the luxury that once was.

The wood floors were original, oak. Too bad they were irreparably damaged... a mahogany staircase with intricate carvings graced the main hall, some of the bannister posts missing, as if someone thought they were hollow and the diamond was hidden inside... the ornately carved mantel over the fireplace that had been ripped down and lay in pieces.

Page two ends just as the hunt is about to begin. Will the diamond be found? Will we learn who committed the murders? Hopefully, the first two pages set up an adventure the reader wants to tag along on!

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After a decade of investigating financial crimes, Heidi Hunter now follows her passion for writing mysteries and short stories. Her stories have appeared in anthologies and e-zines such as *Flash Bang Mysteries* and *Mysterical-E*. She's a member of Sisters In Crime and their Guppies Chapter and the Short Mystery Fiction Society. Heidi can be followed on her author blog, <https://hollyhyattauthor.wordpress.com/>.