

**The First Two Pages: *I Know Where You Sleep*
by Alan Orloff (Down & Out Books)**

An Essay by Alan Orloff

I Know Where You Sleep is my first PI novel, and it has a special place in my heart because my first real foray into crime fiction was courtesy of Robert B. Parker and his Spenser series. Sure, I'd read some Agatha Christie as a teenager, and I'd picked up the occasional mystery or high-stakes thriller, but Spenser was the first real crime fiction series that I latched onto and devoured like pancakes on a snowy Sunday morning. That is to say, ravenously.

So now, finally, nine published books into my career, I've got a PI novel coming out!

Typically, my goal is to catch the reader's attention from the get-go, and this novel was no exception. I decided to start with a brief piece of exposition that would divulge the immediate back story to PI Anderson West's potential new case, thus launching the reader right into the victim's predicament.

During this first two pages, neither the narrator ("me") or the victim ("she") is identified, and the narrator is simply recounting what "she" had told him/her.

She told me the calls started about six weeks ago.

The first two came ten minutes apart. No answer, no heavy breathing, just a couple of wrong numbers. Then three the next night. Most likely, someone had gotten the number transposed, a misplaced digit, a too-big thumb struggling with tiny buttons. Or maybe it was some kind of robo-caller gone rogue.

Two days without a call and she figured things had gotten straightened out. Then four calls in the span of an hour, then five the next day, then five more two days later.

She'd tried to talk to the caller, tell him he had the wrong number, but there was no response. Not a grunt or snicker or hiccup. Nothing.

Her fears were confirmed. This was no careless dialer.

Throughout, I wanted to convey a growing sense of dread, without letting a lot of emotion get in the way. *Just the facts, ma'am*. In fact, as I wrote this, I kept hearing the voice of Joe Friday from the old *Dragnet* TV show. To accomplish this, I tried to keep the sentences simple. Direct. Choppy. Some incomplete.

She blocked the number, but it didn't work. He called from another phone, so she blocked that number, too. But he switched phones again. It was like playing Whack-A-Mole.

She changed her phone number, once, twice, but the caller tracked her down. Now the calls came eight, ten in a day. She turned her phone off. When she turned it back on, she was greeted with message after message of dead air.

The victim's predicament becomes increasingly dire. But there's no dialogue. No internal monologue. In fact, at this point, you don't have a clue about either the narrator or the victim. To further echo the dread, I used the phrase "dead air."

The caller ID always read *Unknown Caller*. She pleaded with the phone company, but there was only so much they could do. And it wasn't enough.

She tried whistles, screaming, even a friend's airhorn. Still the calls came.

In the following paragraphs, I used three snippets of threatening dialogue from the stalker. *I know where you work. I know where you play. I know where you pray.* All are intended to ramp up the terror the victim feels. She's not safe anywhere and she realizes it. And, if readers remember the title (*I Know Where You Sleep*), they'll know that the most terrifying threat of all is yet to come.

After three weeks, she got a call at the restaurant where she worked as a hostess. "*I know where you work.*" A coarse whisper.

She went to the cops. They talked with her, tried to reassure her, suggested she change up her routine. Told her to be careful. With luck, it'll pass, they said.

No luck; the calls didn't pass. After four weeks, she was summoned to her gym's check-in desk for a call. She knew who it was, without even answering. But she did anyway. "*I know where you play.*"

She bought a gun.

Five weeks after the very first call, her phone rang while she was at church. Unknown caller. She knew better, but the pull was too great and she answered it. The same voice, the same harsh, indistinguishable rasp. The same voice that chilled her to the core. "*I know where you pray.*"

At this point, we still don't know who the characters are. So I wanted to end the passage with the introduction of the protagonist, Anderson West.

That's when she came to see me, Anderson West, owner of West Investigations.

After this expository section, I began with the stereotypical (not cliché, think homage) opening to a PI novel, where the client is in the PI's office asking the investigator to take on the case. You'll notice that I did omit the "dame" with the "gams that reached the floor." But otherwise...

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Alan Orloff's thriller *Pray for the Innocent* won the 2019 ITW Thriller Award for Best E-Book Original. His debut mystery, *Diamonds for the Dead*, was an Agatha Award finalist; his story, "Dying in Dokesville," won a 2019 Derringer Award ("Happy Birthday" was a 2018 finalist); and "Rule Number One" was selected for *The Best American Mystery Stories 2018*. *I Know Where You Sleep* comes out on February 10 from Down & Out Books. Alan loves cake and arugula, but not together. Never together. www.alanorloff.com.