

The First Two Pages: *Beached*

By Micki Browning

My intent in the first two pages of *Beached* is fourfold: raise questions, build intrigue, ground the setting, and introduce two of the series' characters with enough detail to bring them to life for new readers and add fresh details for return readers. You see, *Beached* is the second book in the Mer Cavallo Mystery series, and as such, I have two different audiences to please: those hoping to continue their relationship with characters they care about, and those who pick up this book unaware that these characters have engaged in prior adventures together. Regardless, my job is to provide a gripping story to everyone.

Before we get too far along, I have a confession. When a phrase resonates with me I don't always stop to analyze why. Such was the case with my opening sentence. It was only during the writing of this essay that I delved into the particulars of why it worked for me—and how much I'd crammed into thirty words.

Meredith Cavallo had questioned her decision to stay in the Florida Keys plenty of times over the past few months, but never while standing on the deck of the *LunaSea*.

This single line immediately introduces the protagonist with her full name and alerts the reader that the story is set in the Florida Keys—at the moment, on a boat.

We also learn an important aspect about Mer. The sea brings her a peace of mind that is elusive elsewhere.

Two days remained until Thanksgiving and she had a lot of blessings to count. She had only to look around her. The waves above French Reef sparkled in the late morning sun, a welcome contrast to the squall that had passed through last night. She drew a big breath of salty air. No. This was home.

At least for now.

These two paragraphs elaborate on the setting, introduce the time of year (specifically Thanksgiving) and reinforce the opening question. Why *did* she harbor reservations about staying in a place that many people consider paradise?

The mention of the recent squall not only introduces a bit of unease into the paragraph, but also hints at how the inciting incident mentioned later could have occurred. In addition, the passage marks the first mention of a theme that develops as the story progresses; is home a place or an amorphous emotion?

Next month, charter boats would be full of divers on their winter holiday, but today a family of four made up the entirety of the *LunaSea's* manifest. That left plenty of elbow room on a vessel large enough to accommodate twenty-six divers.

Mer scanned the water out of habit. They had the dive site to themselves and the divers had splashed ten minutes earlier. The reef was shallow. They had at least another half hour to explore.

In the above passage, I sprinkle in details that on first read might be considered extraneous, but that set the stage for later conflict. There are four divers

in the water and since this is a commercial charter boat, their safety is Mer's responsibility—a responsibility she takes very seriously.

Captain Leroy Penninichols poked his head out of the engine hold. An ever-present plastic straw peeked beyond his silver-streaked beard.

"Maggie wants to know what she can make for Thanksgiving." A slight drawl tempered his baritone voice.

Mer gathered the tools at the edge of the hold. "Not a thing. I've got it covered."

"She said you'd say something like that." He pulled himself out of the hold and onto the deck. Sweat dampened his T-shirt and he wiped his hands with a rag. "I'm supposed to insist."

"Really. I got it." The toolbox was its usual jumble and Mer sorted the equipment into specific compartments. "Recipes are just like experiments."

"How many of these have you done?" he asked.

"Experiments? Lots."

"I meant Thanksgiving dinners."

"Before this one?" Mer asked. "None."

Leroy folded the rag and placed it on the camera table that rose from the rear of the deck. "Oh, goodie. I'll tell Maggie to make pies...and maybe the turkey."

In this exchange we meet a new character, Leroy, and I establish that while his relationship with Mer is close, they are not romantically linked. Leroy is Mer's captain, mentor, and friend. She cares enough for Leroy and Maggie to invite them to join her for Thanksgiving dinner—a traditionally family-oriented event.

Their banter provides clues to Mer's ability to pull off hosting her first Thanksgiving feast. Her likening recipes to experiments is a nod to her role as a scientist, and her need to tidy the toolbox illustrates her penchant for organization

and her attention to detail. Finally, I sow a bit of physicality into the tags that mark their banter.

He dropped the lid of the hatch. It slammed with a metallic bang and she flinched.

“Sorry.” He indicated her leg. “That still bother you?”

She found herself rubbing her thigh and forced herself to stop. The wound had healed. “What bothers me is your skepticism regarding my ability to construct a pie.”

“You don’t even look like you know how to eat one.”

“Well, if your waistline is any indication, you have enough experience for the both of us.”

He patted his belly. “The proper terminology is baked, not constructed. Do you even have a cookbook?”

“That’s what the Internet’s for.”

“Great. We’ll bring the dressing, too.”

“It’s stuffing. It goes in, not on.” The last wrench properly sorted, she shut the toolbox and snapped the latches. “Seems pretty self-explanatory.”

She slid the heavy box under one of the aluminum benches that ran the length of the deck on both sides of the vessel.

“How about we all just go out to dinner?”

Mer flinches when Leroy drops the hatch. This action acknowledges a significant event that occurred in *Adrift* without digressing from the current story. (New readers will have their curiosity appeased several pages later.) My word choice is deliberate. *Wound* carries a darker nuance than *injury*. But I’ll admit this might be a holdover from my law enforcement days when officers typically defined wounds as intentionally inflicted by another while injuries were unintentionally sustained through accident or calamity.

In the excerpt above, Mer deflects Leroy’s concern, but she can’t erase the

fact that he noticed a lingering repercussion of the event. She hides behind humor while reiterating her ability to pull off the meal. Will she? She's smart. But is she naive? Anyone who has hosted a meal steeped in tradition surely has an opinion about that.

Mer shielded her eyes against the November sun. Still no bubbles, but a dark shape in the water caught her attention. She stepped onto the bench to gain a better vantage and pointed off the starboard side. "Any idea what that is? I can't make out it out."

The end of my first two pages coincides with the close of Mer's normal life and the beginning of the inciting incident. Her Pandora-level curiosity leads to the discovery of a bale of drugs, which Leroy dubs a square grouper. What is cached with the drugs is the hook of the novel that I hope encourages readers to continue turning pages.

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An FBI National Academy graduate, Micki Browning worked in municipal law enforcement for more than two decades, retiring as a division commander. Her debut mystery, *Adrift*, won the 2015 Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence and the Royal Palm Literary Award. *Beached*, the second Mer Cavallo Mystery, launches January 10, 2018.

Micki also writes short stories and non-fiction. Her work has appeared in dive magazines, anthologies, mystery magazines and textbooks. She resides in Southern Florida with her partner in crime and a vast array of scuba equipment she uses for "research."

Learn more at <https://mickibrowning.com>.