

The First Two Pages: “Taking Care”

By Deborah Lacy

From *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine* (May/June 2018)

When I started writing “Taking Care,” I wanted to build an opening to showcase a real-life phenomenon that had been spreading among many of my former work colleagues faster than a virus in a hot tub— people in their 40s and 50s reuniting with their high school and college loves in long-distance romances after a messy divorce.

I needed to set the scene of demonstrating how lost my character Lucy Ann felt, so I created a trio of the worst possible circumstances I could for her. I purposely made the circumstances hit her in the most personal way possible, betrayals that left her decimated emotionally.

The past year had been the worst of Lucy Ann’s entire life. Her husband of fourteen years had left her, for a man. Her best friend embezzled two hundred thousand dollars from their catering company and took off for Mexico. And worst of all her older brother Chet, the person she loved more than anyone else, died of a staph infection he got swimming in the lake next to the house where they grew up.

Grief-stricken, embarrassed and depressed all at the same time, Lucy Ann had never felt more alone.

Her husband doesn’t just leave her, which is tough but happens to a lot of people, he left her for a man, raising a whole host of additional questions and reasons to blame herself for her inadequacy and judgment. She also loses her best

friend and her financial stability in one sentence. And then her beloved brother dies, literally doing something they had done as kids day in and day out. The examples are jarring and have high stakes for this character to help draw the reader into the story, wanting to learn more about how and if Lucy Ann will survive this.

Next I wanted to establish the theme of the story, which is also in the title, “Taking Care.” I purposely used the words “Taking Care” because they can be interpreted several ways to open up the story. This is especially important in writing a mystery so that you can land the all-important surprise ending.

A man had always taken care of her. First it was her father, and then it was Chet, then her husband. Minutes before Chet died he told her she was going to have to start taking care of herself. She knew he was right, but she didn’t know how. She felt so lost and unsure.

What did Chet mean by telling Lucy Ann that she needed to take care of herself? This is the central dramatic question in the story. The secondary question here is: Is Lucy Ann even capable of taking care of herself? This is reinforced by the next few paragraphs of the story.

More than a few people suggested she go to counseling to deal with the load, but Lucy Ann had her own way of coping. She’d come home from catering jobs, smelling of garlic, and sit in the dark drinking large quantities of leftover wine until she was tired enough to go to bed.

Sometimes she’d watch reality TV shows and wish she had the guts to go on an adventure. The shows gave her lots of ideas. She could live on an island. Take singing lessons. Or maybe she’d become a fabulous dancer. She would imagine herself wearing a dress covered in feathers dancing the tango with George Clooney and promise

herself to sign up for a dance class. Maybe she'd even meet a guy she liked.

But after a tough day at work, it was so much easier to pull off her apron, pour that glass of leftover wine and watch other people live.

This got me to the point where I hoped the reader would empathize with Lucy Ann enough to keep reading, and now I could introduce my central plot, when she's contacted by her high school sweetheart.

So when the letter arrived in the mail from Matthew Rodgers, Lucy Ann's high school sweetheart, she was both excited and relieved. She didn't have to troll online dating sites e-mailing men who'd rather date someone younger.

She knew Matthew. She knew his family, his likes, his dislikes, and besides, he already liked her.

Again, I know the reader is expecting a mystery, so even though I haven't "dropped" a body yet, they know the potential is there. My goal to this point is to create enough emotional interest in Lucy Ann to continue to read. Let me know in the comments if I accomplished my goal from your perspective.

A big thank you to Art Taylor for inviting me here today. This is my first story published in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* and I was thrilled to be invited.

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Deborah Lacy has had other stories published in *Mystery Weekly Magazine*, the Anthony-award winning Bouchercon anthology *Blood on the Bayou*, and *Dark Corners*. She has a story she co-wrote with Pat Hernas in the Darkhouse Books anthology, *Shh...Murder*. She also writes for MacMillan publishing's Criminal Element blog, and runs the Mystery Playground blog, where every Friday they match a book with the perfect drink.