

The First Two Pages: *Borrowed Time*

By Tracy Clark (Kensington)

A PI's life isn't glamorous, not by a long shot. I spend half my time sitting in a cold car watching people do the dumbest things and the other half typing up reports about it. But that's when business isn't slow. When it is, like now, I, Cass Raines, PI, contract myself out for steady pay. Today, I was riding out the latest dry spell working for the law firm of Golden, Sprague and Bendelson, trying to hand off a summons to a Chicago blues man named Big Percy Prescott who'd somehow forgotten on his rise to the middle that he'd left behind a long-suffering ex-wife and three little Prescotts in desperate need of child support. Big Percy, apparently not just any man's fool, knew the suits were after him and was making himself not only scarce but downright invisible.

Others before me had tried to ruin Prescott's lucky streak, none had succeeded. Now it was my turn. The work didn't exactly thrill me, but it kept my office lights on. It was Tuesday, just after eight p.m., my first night looking for Big Percy. I started my car and let it run a bit while I thought things through. I'd dressed for business in jeans, a light sweater and Nikes, and in anticipation of a long night, I'd brought along snacks--a banana, granola, and a chocolate doughnut for dessert. All set, I pulled away from the curb in front of my apartment and got to it. "Now if I were a kid-dumping bluesman where would I be?"

I didn't know jack about blues guitarists. I didn't get blues. Real life was hard enough. I wasn't about to pay good money to listen to somebody sing about their misery. But if Big Percy was like any other musician, he was likely ramping up for a late-night set somewhere. I had a list of clubs to check, but before I did that, it wouldn't hurt to take a pass at his last known address. Big Percy's ex-wife reported that she hadn't been able to get a nickel out of him in over a year, and now couldn't find him at the place he'd been staying. I flipped his file open on the passenger seat, committed the address to memory, then headed there; on the move and on the case for Golden, Sprague and Bendelson.

I woke up Big Percy's landlady, Mrs. Ocela Pinkney, by leaning on the bell. The old lady grouched some at first at the lateness

of the hour, but then calmed down enough to tell me Big Percy had moved out more than a month ago. I got her to show me his apartment and, sure enough, the place was empty, not a stick of furniture in it. Prescott left her high and dry, Pinkney said, without so much as a lah-dee-dah, and she passed along a few choice words she wanted me to convey to him when I finally tracked him down.

Back in the car, I hit every legit blues club and hole in the wall masquerading as a legit blues club. Chicago had to have a million of them. Nobody I asked would admit to having seen Big Percy. Half of them were likely lying, but there wasn't a thing I could do about it. I'd have to keep looking and hope for a break.

It was well after midnight when I pulled up in front of the Purple Tip on North Halsted, the eighth club on my long list to check. I'd eaten the chocolate doughnut, leaving the banana and granola for later. I was just about to get out of the car and go inside, when I saw a freshly washed turquoise Caddie matching the description of Prescott's car ease up the street. I caught the plate and matched it to the info in the law firm's file. It was Prescott's, all right. Though, frankly, how many folks would choose to roll around town in a gaudy turquoise Cadillac with whitewall tires, unless, of course, they were an old-school pimp caught in a Huggy Bear time loop?

The scene goes on from there, but these are the opening two pages of my new Cass Raines PI novel, *Borrowed Time*.

Let's break 'em down.

Cass is an ex-homicide cop turned PI. Chicago's her beat. The series is told in first person, intentionally. I wanted the immediacy. I wanted the reader to connect more intimately with Cass as protagonist, to peer over her shoulder and know that they had a confident guide through the story, one who would lead them from scene to scene, book to book, with a clear voice and steady steps. I wanted

the reader to trust Cass, identify with her, and sign on to follow where she led. I figured the best way to do that was to let Cass be Cass.

But for *Borrowed Time*, I didn't come to that realization until my next to last rewrite. Up until then, the book started off with a killin'. From the opening sentence, I put the reader firmly on the shoulders of the poor unfortunate soul fighting desperately for his life. They were right there as soon-to-be-dead guy struggled to survive, fighting against odds stacked firmly against him (and I should know, I did the stacking). Readers have their noses pressed to the glass when dead guy breathes his last agonizing breath. It was heartwrenching, taut, deliciously intense, if I do say so myself. I didn't get to Cass Raines, protagonist, until chapter two. Maybe a bit too late?

This original start felt right to me, all the way up to the point when my editor pointed out why it didn't feel right to him. I sputtered a little. I may have pouted. But when I reread the opening from his perspective, dang it if I didn't see it. Then I just felt stupid. So that sweet opener went. It's still one of my favorite murder scenes I've written, though, and I whimpered just a tad when I cut it from the book. But I didn't trash it. I'm not an idiot. I saved it, put it aside. I may be able to use it in another book. It really was a thing of beauty, you guys, full of pathos. I almost needed a tissue to wipe my eyes. And I knew what was coming!

So, with that near-perfect murder scene gone (but not forgotten), I had to come up with another way to start *Borrowed Time*. I went back and thought about where Cass was as the second story begins, her frame of mind. In book one, *Broken Places*, she suffered great losses—the loss of her police career, the loss of her surrogate father... Heck, she was shot and nearly died on a dirty rooftop. I really put her through it.

Book two picks up two months after the first book ends. Cass is still grieving, still coming to terms with those monumental losses, and now on top of that, she's scrambling for clients and needs to bring in steady income. So how do I present all of that in an engaging way, in a way that would entice readers to commit to at least the first two pages and, fingers crossed, keep reading?

I decided to swap the darkness of the original scene for a lighter touch, a more human touch. I would start funny.

Cass's struggle is real, and I start piling it on right out of the gate. She has no paying clients. She's got bills to pay. She's missing Pop. What's she going to do? What *can* she do? Something easy, I thought. Something that wouldn't require that much of an intellectual investment on her part. Remember, she's coming off the hardships of book one. She's a bit defeated, still a little raw. And the funny opening is charged with revealing my main character, introducing readers to their story guide. So easy. Something Cass doesn't have to think too much about.

Enter Big Percy Prescott.

Big Percy came to me while I was driving. Two cars in front of me was the loudest, ugliest Cadillac I'd ever seen in my life, so I did what any curious writer in need of a hook would do, I did that speed-up-to-see-who's-driving thing so I could see who was behind the wheel. And, lo and behold, inside that godawful gaudy car was Big Percy Prescott. Of course, that wasn't his real name, and chances are good he wasn't a kid-dumping jazz guitarist. That stuff came to me later (I think I was in the grocery store buying apples), but I had Cass's scene partner. Half the battle.

So, Cass encounters Big Percy in the first two pages. There's a little lighthearted sparring, a little song and dance. We see Cass in action, get a taste of her personality. She's snarky, a bit of a wiseass, but efficient, competent, whip smart. By the end of the encounter, Big Percy and his bodyguard are left standing on the street, their mouths agape, and Cass is back in her car, job done, on to the next thing. The next thing being the meat and potatoes of the story.

And as it turns out, the opening, having shifted from dark to light, eases the reader into *Borrowed Time* more gently, explains Cass a little more succinctly, and plants both protagonist and storyline on a firmer foundation.

I think the new opening works. I hope readers are drawn in, that they identify with Cass and trust her to guide them. I hope they like her as much as I do.

But I'm seriously going to keep that original opening. I am not kidding you it was fantastic. It was full of drama, had tons of atmosphere; it really set a mood. There was a rainstorm and the choppy waters of Lake Michigan, which I described in minute detail. I really went to town. And I actually felt for the dead guy. I was on the edge of my seat, hoping he made it, and I was writing the darn thing!

Oh, well, like I said. Next time.

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Tracy Clark writes the Cass Raines PI series, which is set in Chicago. Her series debut, *Broken Places*, made *Library Journal*'s list of the Best Crime Fiction of 2018 and was short listed in the mystery category on the American Library Association's 2019 Reading List. *CrimeReads* also named Cass Raines Best New PI of 2018. The novel also received a starred review from *Publishers Weekly* and a rave from *Kirkus Review*, was selected as a TOP PICK by *Romantic Times*, was nominated for a Lefty Award for Best Debut Novel for 2018, and is now a finalist for the 2019 Anthony Award for Best First Novel. Book two in the series, *Borrowed Time*, released in May 2019.