

The First Two Pages of “The Vermeer Conspiracy” by V. M. Burns  
From *Midnight Hour: A Chilling Anthology of Crime Fiction from 20 Authors of Color*,  
edited by Abby L. Vandiver (Crooked Lane Books)

An Essay by Abby L. Vandiver

When Abby Vandiver first approached me about writing a short story for inclusion in an anthology with other crime writers of color, I said NO. I was in the middle of edits and convinced that I couldn't write short stories. It takes me a long time to get to the point, which isn't acceptable in a full-length novel and completely unacceptable in short fiction. The next time Abby asked, she sounded anxious. Two of the original authors had bailed out and she really wanted 20 stories to complete the anthology. I had a little time now that edits were done, and I knew writing a complete story in five thousand words or less would be a challenge. As a writer, I think it's important to push myself, so I agreed to give it a try.

Most of the other authors submitting to the anthology wrote darker crime fiction. I write cozy mysteries. Cozies are lighter than most traditional mysteries and have an amateur sleuth, no bad language, no sex, and no violence. Two things were important for me to convey in the first two pages: *voice* and *character*.

First, I wanted my voice to come through. I wanted readers to get a sense of the lighter, more humorous tone early in the story. But light doesn't have to equate to slapstick humor. Just because cozy readers aren't looking for the tough-as-nails-no-nonsense sleuth that they see in noir, doesn't mean the cozy sleuth needs to be a

flat, uninteresting, cliché. I wanted to write a character who had both the lighter humor of a cozy, combined with the lone-wolf, moral ambiguous, fatalism of a Sam Spade or Phillip Marlowe. That's a lot to hope for, especially in less than five thousand words. But I was challenging myself, so that was my goal. It was important to me that I strike the right balance early in the story.

The second thing that I wanted to achieve in my first two pages was a sense of my sleuth's character. Character is a key component in cozy mysteries. The basic structure or plot of cozies is simple. There's a crime, an investigation, and a resolution. A lot happens in between each of those, but that's the process and readers know it. In fact, they expect it. So, what keeps cozy readers coming back for more? In my opinion, it's rich, multidimensional characters. Readers want to spend time in St. Mary Meade with Miss Marple, in London with Hercule Poirot, or in New York City with Nero Wolfe. Cozy readers enjoy the sleuth's quirks and their eccentricities, so I knew I needed to give my character both. Would Hercule Poirot be as interesting without his moustache and little grey cells? Nero Wolfe is a genius, but would he be as appealing without his orchids, love of gourmet food, and fear of leaving his brownstone? Sherlock Holmes may be a genius, but he has no social skills. Yet, readers want to spend time with these characters (check out the huge number of books in each series). I wanted a sleuth that readers would want to spend time with, too.

My sleuth, Jasper Bland, is an art restorer and an art detective, with a secret. From the first two pages, the reader can tell a lot about him by his response to being in the helicopter, but also from the way he responds to being on a luxurious yacht. It's not an environment that he's accustomed to. But there's something more going on with him. He's anxious. His hands are sweating, and his heart is racing. Why? What happened to him? Those are the questions that I hoped the reader would want answered and would (I hoped) keep reading in order to find out.

### **The First Two Pages of *The Vermeer Conspiracy***

The helicopter touched down onto the back of a yacht that, from the air, looked about the size of a bathtub. Up close and personal, it was massive, as far as watercraft go, but I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed that my breakfast would remain inside my body rather than threatening to join the great outdoors as it had been for the last couple of hours.

The pilot landed in the middle of a circular target. I pried my hand from its grip on the dashboard. From the headset, I heard the pilot's garbled voice mention something, but the blood was rushing in my ears, and I had no idea what he said. I removed my headset and gave a thumbs up, which I hoped said, *thank you*. Before the blades stopped moving, someone opened my door and helped me out.

It took a moment for my legs to transform from jelly back to their solid form, but the prospect of getting away from the blades of death motivated me. I moved as quickly as my legs would carry me while bent over toward the ground.

My escort ushered me inside the yacht's cabin, where I finally felt safe to stand upright. I straightened my back and hoped my young guide hadn't heard the creaking as I stood.

Whether he heard or not, he didn't let on. He led me through a large living room with stunning views into an office that was larger than my apartment. One wall was lined with floor to ceiling

mahogany bookshelves. The bookshelves curved around a half wall and framed a massive screen. There was a glass conference table with seats for ten in front of the screen. A sofa covered in leather-like butter and a comfortable chair created a spacious lounge and conversation area. In the center of the room was a circular mahogany desk which, if the number of monitors, electronic devices, and gadgets was any indication, was where NASA would be launching the next space shuttle. A wall of windows looked out onto the ocean. There was a bar in one corner of the room and every convenience known to man, made the room both functional and inviting.

“Please make yourself comfortable. Mr. Merriweather will be with you shortly.” My guide smiled before he turned and left.

Alone, I looked around the grand space. If it weren't for the view out the window, I could have been in any grand office atop a skyscraper as opposed to on a luxury yacht floating in the middle of the ocean. I couldn't believe I was here. Years of hard work were finally about to pay off.

My palms sweat, and my heart raced. I strolled around the thick, lush, carpeted room. It was inevitable that my mind drifted back in time to the moment that forever changed my life.

I remember I glanced at my watch a few minutes before midnight. I had just turned twenty-one and was still wet behind the ears. *God, it's hard to believe I was ever that young and naïve.*

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V.M. (Valerie) Burns was born and raised in northwestern Indiana. She currently resides on the Tennessee/Georgia border with her two poodles, Kenzie and Chloe. Valerie is a member of Mystery Writers of America, Dog Writers of America, Crime Writers of Color, International Thriller Writers, and Sisters in Crime. Valerie is also a mentor in the Writing Popular Fiction MFA program at Seton Hill University in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Valerie's debut novel, *The Plot Is Murder*, was nominated for an Agatha award for Best Debut Novel. Her RJ Franklin Mystery series was a Next Generation Indie Book finalist, and her short story, “The Vermeer Conspiracy,” is a 2022 Edgar finalist. Valerie writes the Mystery Bookshop Mystery series and Dog Club Mystery series, and in August 2022, her newest series, Baker Street Mysteries, will be released. Readers can visit her website at [ymburns.com](http://ymburns.com).