

**The First Two Pages of *The Goddess of Shipwrecked Sailors*  
by Skye Alexander (Level Best Books)**

An Essay by Skye Alexander

Usually, the first thing I decide on when I start a novel—even before the plot—is the location. The place where a story occurs provides a backdrop for the action and creates ambiance. It also grounds the tale in a time/space framework with a history, culture, and physical features that dictate what can or cannot happen there. My Lizzie Crane Mystery Series takes place during the Roaring Twenties, and I set the books in some of the oldest and most colorful cities in America. *The Goddess of Shipwrecked Sailors*, the third in my series, begins in December 1925 in Salem, Massachusetts, where clipper ships brought vast wealth from the Orient during the mid-1800s.

After driving for seven hours, the four musicians arrived at Matthew Gardner’s home on the most fashionable street in Salem, Massachusetts, a three-hundred-year-old town known for its seafaring history, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and hanging women suspected of witchcraft.... Candles burned in the windows of the Gardners’ handsome three-story Georgian mansion. An electrified Moravian star illuminated the front portico.... Despite temperatures in the low-teens, a group of carolers, bundled up against the cold, strolled from house to house, celebrating the holiday with joyful songs.

My characters, a jazz band called The Troubadours from New York City, are hired by wealthy people to perform music and theatrical acts at weddings, birthday celebrations, holiday parties, and other special events that last a few days or weeks.

Because a book's characters drive the story, I try to introduce all the major ones right away, often in a group scene—in this case, an open house given by the heir to a shipping fortune who's hired The Troubadours to entertain his guests during the Christmas holidays. My challenge is to provide just enough info about each character to give a picture to my readers without overwhelming them.

Before the carolers finished the second verse of “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” a short, middle-aged man with a full head of wavy graying hair pushed past his butler. He stood in the open doorway of the mansion and joined in the singing.

*He's a first-rate baritone,* Lizzie noted with surprise. Inspired by the revelers' high spirits, she added her professional soprano to the chorus of voices.

Taking a cue from the great Agatha Christie who wrote during the 1920s, I sequester my characters in a confined area, sometimes the estate of their hosts or a town they can't leave (for various reasons). Limiting the characters' range of motion and the short period of time it takes for the tale to unfold, helps me get to the point *pronto*, and ramps up the story's tension. But it also presents challenges for me and for my characters. I've only got a span of about a week to tell the story, so I have to cram a lot of info and action into that brief period. And because my characters are in close, constant contact with the villain(s)—and they don't know who's got it in for them—they're always looking over their shoulders, suspecting danger in everyone and every situation.

Crime writers are familiar with the axiom “drop the body fast.” Our readers don’t want to wade through a lot of backstory or development to get to the action. Therefore, I try to kill the victim (or present the crime) in the first chapter and draw readers into the adventure ASAP.

As her host accompanied his butler into the mansion’s entry hall where a uniformed policeman waited, Lizzie followed at a discreet distance. She ducked behind a lacquered Oriental screen and eavesdropped on the conversation between Gardner and the officer, who seemed to be suffering from a winter cold.

The policeman blew his nose and said in a nasal voice, “I apologize for bothering you, sir, but a man has just been found dead near the harbor. He had a note addressed to you in his pocket.”

“I’m sorry to hear of his passing, at Christmastime no less,” Gardner said, his jovial mood plummeting. “Who is the man? Do you know how he died?”

“We don’t know much yet, sir. No identification on him. But the note said ‘The lady is not so easily won.’ It wasn’t signed. Does it mean anything to you?”

Of course, Prohibition plays a role in my stories, as it did in *The Great Gatsby* and other novels of the time. The law presents a unique challenge for the characters and serves as a nonhuman antagonist they must deal with.

“By the way,” Lizzie told her friends, “it turns out I have a second cousin living in Salem. I never knew about him until I visited my mother on Christmas day to let her know we were performing here. His name’s Jacob Watkins. Owns a pub around here someplace.”

Sidney smiled and blew smoke rings at the ceiling. “A pub...that could be a useful connection.”

Soon Lizzie becomes a pawn in a deadly game between her cousin and her employer over a mysterious lady with a dangerous past. Along the way, she—and

readers—learn about Salem’s glory days during the clipper ship era, secret tunnels used to smuggle contraband beneath the city, the origins of jigsaw and crossword puzzles, and the Chinese goddess Quan Yin who protects sailors.

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Skye Alexander is the author of nearly 50 fiction and nonfiction books. Her stories have appeared in anthologies internationally, and her work has been translated into fifteen languages. Her first novel *Hidden Agenda* won the Kiss of Death Award—and she hopes this one will too. In 2003, she cofounded Level Best Books with fellow crime writers Kate Flora and Susan Oleksiw. The first novel in Skye’s Lizzie Crane mystery series, *Never Try to Catch a Falling Knife*, was published in 2021; the second, *What the Walls Know*, came out in 2022; the third, *The Goddess of Shipwrecked Sailors*, has just been released. She lives in Texas with her black Manx cat Zoe.