

The First Two Pages: “Chill” by Ashley-Ruth Bernier

From *Malice, Matrimony, and Murder*:

25 Wedding Cozy Mystery & Crime Fiction Stories (Marla Bradeen)

An Essay by Ashley-Ruth Bernier

I’m *that* author.

Yes, I know, this is a direct parallelism of the opening sentence of my short story, “Chill”, which appears in *Malice, Matrimony, and Murder*, a wedding themed cozy anthology. Ordinarily, I’d construct a new opening line for a different piece, one with weight and meaning and a draw of its own. But in this case, a knockoff made sense. In digging into the first two pages of “Chill,” I realized I really am “that author”—that is, one who doesn’t drop a body on the first page or even within the first five; who feels that the beginning of a story often has other important work to do. I’m that author who believes in layers, and the beginning of a story is all about building a strong one.

So if I’m not dropping a crime in the first two pages of my story, what *am* I dropping? My goal is to get four other things down on the page: tone, place, voice, and “trouble.” I try my best to build these into the first layer of every story I write, but with my stories about St. Thomian food journalist Naomi Sinclair, I try to include the beginnings of a fifth element, too: theme. As I like to say about this

series, Naomi's tales focus on Virgin Islands cuisine and culinary traditions, but stories about food are ultimately stories about *people* . . . and with these stories, I try to make sure there's plenty of both.

Let's take a look at how I attempted this with "Chill." In these first few paragraphs, I try to get several big ideas across to the reader: the tone of the story, which I hope is light and sunny; and Naomi's voice, which is conversational and descriptive. I hope that some of what Nay says shows the reader that she's calm and steady, and that she's good at solving problems—all great traits for an amateur sleuth.

I'm *that* bridesmaid.

Not the Maid of Honor, who needs the mental strength and physical endurance to manage bouquets and bustles. Not the style savior, who can reverse hairstyle malfunctions and blot out any stain from white silk. Nah. I'm the fixer. The problem-solver. My job is to keep a smile on the bride's face no matter what, whether it's an ex showing up at the ceremony or a cousin going for round 7 at the bar. Or a no-show bridesmaid, four days before the wedding. We're forty-five minutes into a Bridesmaids Day that includes drinks in plush lounge chairs and a catamaran waiting for us just past the buoys in the sparkling aquamarine waves of St. Thomas' most beautiful beach, and still—there's a bridal meltdown looming, right there in the words falling from Rina Douglas's mouth and the flash flood building in her eyes.

"The photographer charges by the hour, and he can't start until *she's* here," Ri tells me at the charcuterie table set up on the sand between our lounge chairs. She's not wailing, not yet—but I hear the beginnings of it building in her voice. "How the pictures gon' look with an empty lounge chair and an unclaimed swag bag? With only

four of us instead of five? My pictures need to be *symmetrical* and *perfect*, and they won't look right without her. Naomi, I jus'—I can't have lopsided pictures!"

Maybe you noticed that I tried to include some hints about *place* here, too. I'm originally from St. Thomas, and all of my stories featuring Naomi—okay, all of my stories, with or without her—take place there. I mention that they're on St. Thomas' "most beautiful beach" (Magens Bay, which is named later), but perhaps you may have noticed that Rina's speech is punctuated with a little bit of dialect. That speaks to setting, too. Although there have been a few debates about including dialect on the page, I'm a firm believer in authentically portraying the way people from my island speak. I've purposely dialed it back a lot in this story, but it's apparent in the next paragraph, too:

I fill Ri's glass of passionfruit mimosa a little higher than I'd originally intended. "Hey. Eboni's probably jus' running late, okay? Just—breathe, Ri. You don't want tear tracks in your photos."

"Late? No, gyul. Not at all. I saw Eboni drive through the beach gates half an hour ago," Rina says. "She's up at her ice cream hut instead of here with us. She promised she wouldn't work today. She *promised*, but . . ." There's a gulp of the mimosa, and I raise the pitcher, ready to top her off again. "I know she wants to make me look bad. Entitled. Like a spoiled Bridezilla, while she's down there scraping pennies together."

"Or maybe it's not about you at all, love," I try.

"You're right," Rina realizes. "Mussbe she tryin' to make *herself* look good. Like, better than everyone else. With her 'unshakable work ethic,' or whatever."

These paragraphs bring out something else, too: the “trouble” I hinted at earlier. Even if there’s no body or crime within those first few pages, there should be a hint at some kind of tension. I’ve tried to place the building blocks of it here. Naomi’s caught in the middle of yet another fight between her Bridezilla buddy Rina and Rina’s work-addicted sister Eboni, who’s skipped out on a planned Bridesmaids Day to work at her beachside ice cream hut. It seems like a small problem, but it’s one that’s relatable . . . perhaps enough to make a reader roll their eyes and commiserate. For this reason, I often stick Naomi with irritating company at the beginning of her stories—I believe many of us read these characters and instantly think of someone in our own lives who feels very familiar.

I’m about to respond to that, but then I remember—bridal happiness, no matter what. “Right. Sure. Of course.” I reach for her free hand. “Ri. Look, I know weddings are stressful and all, but this day is supposed to be for you to relax and enjoy. Maybe if you took a moment to—”

“Can you talk to her for me, Nay?” She’s gripping the glass stem with the same force she’s using on my fingers. “I’d do it myself, but conversations with her always end with at least one of us crying—and like you said, my makeup’s already done. Please, can you tell her to close up shop and get her behind down here?”

“With those exact words?”

At least this gets a grin. “See? You get it. Talking to people is your whole job.”

“I interview chefs, Rina.”

“That’s talking to them, right? This is why it has to be you,” she says. I begin to say something about her spending the bulk of her days talking, too—persuading people to buy million-dollar villas, no less—

but she barrels right over my words. “And I hate to ask you to do this when you’re not working, when you back *home* for a few days to unwind.”

In the previous section, I establish Naomi’s primary job, and the skill set that makes her a good candidate for talking to Eboni—and a good candidate for solving a mystery. I also try to make it clear that Nay isn’t a tourist visiting the island. Writing about native Virgin Islanders at the forefront of our own adventures, excelling in our fields, being the main characters in our own stories—well, that’s all I ever wanted to do.

“Rina, I’m back home for a few days . . . for you. To be the best bridesmaid I can be. To help you be the best bride you can be. If talking to your sister is something I can do so that you enjoy today a bit more...”

“Oh, Nay. Thank you. It is. I can always count on you,” she says, blinking back the flood and widening the grin. She sets her glass next to the charcuterie board and hugs me. I’ve just convinced myself she’s settled down when she speaks again. “I see my photographer checkin’ he watch, though,” she murmurs into my hair. “Think you could try talkin’ to her, like, right now?”

This last section fully pulls Naomi into the conflict between the sisters, and ultimately sends her down the beach to speak to Eboni at her ice cream hut . . . which, as it turns out, is the scene of a crime. But before all of that happens, I hope I’ve laid down the building blocks of the theme in this story, which also relates to the title. “Chill” is about ice cream, particularly ice cream with the flavors of

Caribbean fruits (soursop, guava, mango, and more), but it's also about finding the time to relax, about stepping away from the work-till-you-drop ethic that Eboni personifies; about making it a point to unwind and breathe and . . . yes, *chill*. It's my goal in these first few pages to contrast the relaxing vibes of the sunny beach, the shaded sand, the charcuterie and the catamaran with Rina's frenzied state and a hint at sisterly drama. It's my ultimate goal, by the last words of the story, to reconcile all of it.

Tone, voice, place, "trouble", and theme: perhaps understated a bit in this cozier and shorter Naomi Sinclair story, but there nonetheless. With those elements firmly in place, I can comfortably send Naomi down the beach to do what she does best—contemplate the intricacies of Caribbean cuisine, stumble into crimes, and solve problems in her own unique way. Thank you for reading, and I hope you'll find time of your own to *chill* . . . perhaps with a good book, maybe a cozy wedding-themed anthology?

The First Two Pages of "Chill"

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Ashley-Ruth M. Bernier’s short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Black Cat Weekly*, *Stone’s Throw*, *Smoking Pen Press*, *The Best American Mystery and Suspense 2023*, and *The Caribbean Writer*. Originally from St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, she is an emerging writer of contemporary Caribbean mysteries. Ashley-Ruth is the winner of the North Carolina Writers Network’s 2022 Jacobs/Jones Award for Black writers, a 2023 Derringer nominee (novelette category, Short Mystery Fiction Society), and 2023 Killer Nashville Claymore finalist (Best Short Story Collection). She is an active

member of Sisters in Crime, Crime Writers of Color, the Short Mystery Fiction Society, Mystery Writers of America, and the North Carolina Writers Network. Ashley-Ruth currently lives with her husband and four children in North Carolina, where she teaches first grade and finds very few things more valuable than uninterrupted writing time.