

**The First Two Pages: “Bad Influence” by Mark Stevens**  
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An Essay by Mark Stevens

I had “who, me?” moment when Robert Lopresti approached me at Bouchercon 2023 in San Diego. He asked if I would consider writing a short story for a volume he was planning to edit for Down and Out Books. Yes, I’ve had a few short stories published here and there (one in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and one in Akashic Books’ *Denver Noir*, among a few others) but, *moi?*

Lopresti assured me that he had the correct suspect. Er, *writer*. He told me the theme for the anthology would be stories related to environmental villainy. So I signed up. Who would miss the chance to work with Lopresti, author of 80-plus short stories and three-time winner of the Derringer Award?

In fact, Lopresti was a huge help in how “Bad Influence” came together. He had some key insights that were critical to the story’s shape and arc. He came up with the title, too, and worked with me through several iterations of the story.

My idea was pretty simple: I wanted to build a story around the social media influencers who exploit the great outdoors for their commercial benefit. I saw a story of vengeance. Beyond that, being a complete seat-of-the-pants writer, I had no idea where the story would go.

But let’s take a look at the first 13 paragraphs of “Bad Influence.”

If I had planned this out, I might feel like I could explain my careful construction like an architect anticipating every need of the future occupants a home. But I think, even as a retroactive exercise, I can explain what I was thinking.

**Paragraph #1:**

Danger Dog posted again. For the 19th time that day, he added to his commentary. His *content*.

**What I was thinking:** One thing I keep in mind when working with a blank page is the idea that readers *love* to be disoriented. That's part of the fun of reading, putting the puzzle pieces together. So a catchy nickname and a quick reference to his fixation—social media.

**Paragraph #2:**

Danger Dog was easy to track. He first posted about his latest quest from the comfort of his starter castle in Aspen, inviting his followers to join him. He didn't mean physically *follow* him. All they had to do was watch his posts. And be entertained.

**What I was thinking:** It's not directly implied, but quickly we have our point of view. A narrator is watching Danger Dog. And I thought the two words "starter castle," with the suggestion of grandiosity, would add attitude. Is it based on envy?

Or something else? There's no need to answer that question. Leave the reader hanging.

**Paragraph #3:**

“I'm going to take you as close to a roaring wildfire as you've ever been,” he said. He held up two drones one in each hand. “There's smoke in Chicago and soot falling in Nova Scotia from this sucker and we're going right to the belly of the beast. Destination Missoula and then north. We leave tomorrow.”

**What I was thinking:** Motion. Action. The story points to a destination. And sets the time. *Tomorrow*. It's the end of the beginning. Now we have a true beginning.

**Paragraph #4:**

Danger Dog's “we” included his 450,000 followers. Dozens of sponsors propped up his lavish lifestyle, led by a sports gambling website and a Bitcoin company. He wore a thick dark beard. The beard and its maintenance were a subplot in his feed. He once joked, flicking crumbs out of his facial bush in a bathroom mirror, that his beard deserved its own Instagram account.

**What I was thinking:** Provide a sense of scale and an idea of Danger Dog's popularity, without going into too much detail. Any influencer who thinks their facial hair should have its own social media account is certainly living a cocky life.

### **Paragraph #5:**

“You're going to feel the heat. Might even melt a bit of plastic off the drones if I'm not careful.” Danger Dog sat on his expansive deck with the million-dollar view down the Roaring Fork valley. His name was Earl Boggins. He launched all his so-called “adventures” from the same spot.

**What I was thinking:** First, a sense of the peril ahead and Danger Dog’s promises to his followers—a visceral thrill. Second, a sense of routine. This is just another trip to Danger Dog.

### **Paragraph #6:**

The next post was a time lapse video of all his gear being packed in the classic quote “Yakety Sax” music. “Aspen to Denver, Denver to Missoula tomorrow,” he said as he climbed into bed, giving me the head start I needed.

**What I was thinking:** More mystery. We don’t know where our narrator lives. We don’t need to know that detail, only that he’s in a position to beat Danger Dog to Missoula. The old adage *less is more* works here. I’ve learned that if the story (or novel) keeps moving along that the reader will go for the ride, if some details are held in a state of, well, suspense.

### **Paragraph #7:**

Danger Dog had promoted one rental car company for years so he was easy to spot. Even social media stars had to use the shuttle. Of course, he was the only one filming every precious step of the way.

And in Missoula the off-airport rental car companies didn't have that much business.

**What I was thinking:** I kind of like this paragraph because it moves the story to Missoula without underlining anything. “Of course, he was the only one filming...” Suddenly, we’re in direct sight of Danger Dog. And we see a bit of our main character’s talents as an amateur detective. But the paragraph doesn’t come right and tell the reader everything. The deduction by our narrator is merely suggested.

**Paragraph #8 (follows a section break to imply a gap in time):**

I kept my distance from Danger Dog at first but closed the gap as the air grew opaque and chewy. My eyes stung. I pulled the bandana over my mouth and nose. Visibility dropped. Oncoming headlights screamed out of the gloom.

**What I was thinking:** More motion. And bring in the senses. But, note how much is implied without needing to spell out everything. We know our narrator has a car, too. And that he’s capable of tailing Danger Dog. The paragraph also gives us an idea that the fire is having its promised impact.

**Paragraph #9:**

Three hours north of Missoula, Danger Dog pulled into an old lodge that looked ready for some horror writer’s next novel. My GPS

said Noxon. I waited 30 minutes for him to get settled then went in and asked for a room.

**What I was thinking:** Location, yes, but also more smart tailing. We get a sense that the narrator has thought this through and doesn't want to be caught off-guard. We don't yet know why he dislikes Danger Dog so much but making our narrator smarter than our villain gives us a reason to root for him.

**Paragraph #10:**

I didn't think Danger Dog had any reason to be suspicious, but my biggest fear was that he might leave early. So my room went largely unused. By 3:00 a.m., I was waiting in my rental car.

**What I was thinking:** That I wanted readers to think our narrator has the upper hand. And that the narrator is sacrificing sleep for his mission, which suggests a bit of determination.

**Paragraph #11:**

I had no trouble staying awake. All I had to do was think about one particular beautiful young woman. If that wasn't enough fuel, I thought about that young woman's mother. And if that wasn't enough, I thought about the video that was still out there, still racking up views.

**What I was thinking:** That it was time to give the readers a glimpse of motive, a sense of the drive behind the narrators' efforts. And the paragraph gives us three sources of ignition—a young woman, her mother, and a video that appears to be a

source of embarrassment. Again, more questions than answers. But now readers know that sleep isn't an issue. At least, by comparison!

**Paragraph #12:**

Together a black hole of heartbreak.

**What I was thinking:** To give readers a sense of the narrator's internal emptiness.

**Paragraph #13:**

A trifecta of pain.

**What I was thinking:** That three doses of hurt are more troublesome than one and that underscoring the agony, at this point, will drive it home for the reader. And make the reader want to keep going. Why is this guy feeling so aggrieved?

**Final thought:**

Of course, having written paragraph #13, I still didn't know where this was story was heading. But I had the starter ingredients beginning to drive events. I had a point of view and accompanying attitude. I had events in motion. And I had the seeds of our narrator's motivation.

And, finally, I had dangled a series of questions that I hoped would keep the reader eager to keep turning the pages. Those same questions were driving me to keep writing. Of course, I wanted to know the answers, too.

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Mark Stevens is the author of *The Fireballer* (2023, Lake Union) and The Allison Coil Mystery Series, including *Trapline*, which won the Colorado Book Award for Best Mystery. In 2025, Thomas & Mercer will publish *No Lie Lasts Forever*, the first in a series of new thrillers. Stevens is previous past president of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of Mystery Writers of America. He reviews books on his [blog](#) and you can visit him at his [website](#).