The First Two Pages: "High Hit Area" by Margot Douaihy
From *Crime Ink: An Anthology of Crime Fiction Inspired by Queer Icons*,
edited by John Copenhaver and Salem West (Bywater Books)

An Essay by Margot Douaihy

When I sat down to write the opening lines of "High Hit Area," I was hunting for something that felt true about deception. Not just the kind that gets you arrested, but the kind that gets you through an ordinary Tuesday. Here's what I landed on:

What is a trap but a trick? A pretty trick that keeps you stuck.

I wanted to open with a question that wasn't really a question. A riddle that would reverberate throughout the story, from the psychological snares binding the queer characters to each other and to a very cold Maine town.

The non-question initiates (invites?) the reader into the hazing of this noir. Instead of a causal line from point A to point B, we slide right into Sam's restless, spinning mind. The delphic riddle is also a portent, dare, a quirk of character. The close-third person POV lets us live inside Sam's obsessive interiority and see what she sees. I repeated "trick" to create a chant-like cadence and echo some of the thought-loops she's stuck in. The musicality of "pretty trick" adds a strange bit of seduction to evoke noir's contradictory allure as well as its resistance to an easy definition. "Noir is elusive," Christopher Breu argues in *Noir Affect*; it's a genre

defined as much by mood, an unsettling affect, and rupture as by convention. I wanted to play with that inherent slipperiness on page one.

But I also needed grounding. So, we watch Sam watching a hard snow "assassinate" her town at 2 a.m., the Arak in her glass "rolling silky and alive." The verb "assassinate" does heavy lifting. It's violent, deliberate, and precise, and it foreshadows a murder plot while making winter feel criminal.

Next comes the memory of Sam's Lebanese Jeddo (grandfather). The materiality of memory breaks the temporal plane of the now with an auditory return—the elder's voice saying "magic." An idea that Sam immediately rejects.

> Chemistry, not magic. How easily her Jeddo was fooled. How easily people would swallow a lie to tell a better story.

This moment defines Sam's character as skeptical. The magical thinking almost makes her wince. It also sets up an irony because she's about to become complicit in an elaborate lie. I wanted that line to collapse binaries the story proceeds to explore: truth/fiction, pleasure/pain, science/mysticism. It's a small moment right at the jump but a narrative prophecy.

> Then the fox screams in the garage.

I shifted from the abstract to the concrete to add friction and urgency. The fox is a ruse, a plot point, and a symbol. It's wild, trapped, probably dangerous. All the characters are. I structured the opening beats around these nested traps—the baited trap in the garage; the emotional cages of the season, geography, family

obligation, and severe longing for Sam's ex, Lucy. Lucy, of course, gets caught too. All the characters are ensnared in their own ways. The trap of metal and bait. Desire and history. A silent bomb about to detonate in Sam's dark garage waiting near the unlit lamp (the inspiration for this noir).

Liminal Spaces

Sam's Lebanese heritage adds another layer of dislocation. Her grandfather's voice—"Look, habibi, see how it changes"—is a channel of cultural memory, intimacy, and control. But Sam exists between worlds, between duty and alienation in a place "cold as the coast she called home." No one says her last name right. No one knows where Lebanon is.

Like the characters, the setting becomes what Maud Casey calls the "land of 'un'"—uncertainty, unknowability, unrest. Narrative cartography shaped more by questions than answers.

Crime Behind the Crime

Sam's arrhythmic inner monologue—"Ensnared. The thought arrived in Sam's head again. Or maybe it was always there"—refuses reliable narration and complicates the mystery at the syntax level. I deployed elliptical gaps and fragments to mirror content and form. There are hidden crimes beneath the most visible one, so I levered the line level to craft red herrings and disorientation.

That destabilization is what I admire about noir. We can't quite trust anyone; even the MC's interiority is in question. The narrator's arch aside—"How easily people would swallow a lie to tell a better story"—also casts doubt on Sam's motives and sets a nuanced tone. Who's being fooled? Who's lying? Who is being lied to? Who *wants* to be?

The diction toggles between registers, from tender (*habibi*) to clinical ("Chemistry, not magic") to predatory ("assassinate"). I wanted that slippage to honor noir's ambiguity too. Why settle into a single tone? Narratorial intrusions like "such a clichéd haunting" create distance and intimacy. We're inside Sam's head but maybe observing her too. But not judging. The story hints at BDSM dynamics, sure, but that's surface. The real kink is emotional. Sam's careful planning, her risks, her willingness to do bad things, her addiction to Lucy's intensity and threshold for pain. The queer women of "High Hit Area" are all caught in something that looks like love and operates like pathology. Maybe it's neither. Or both. The ambient tension runs under every scene and gives the lake ice its fine cracks and fissures that soon turn deadly.

Missing Shade

Hume's thought experiment haunts the story: "It's a color that exists only in the mind's eye, something you can only see if you believe it's there." I've been thinking about that a lot lately. How much of love is like that (un)real shade. How

much of what we call intimacy might be a shared hallucination. And if so, is that such a bad thing? Does the reader need an answer? Hope not, because I didn't write one. I wanted Sam and Lucy's relationship to exist in that impossible hue. Something too wild to ever be caught but so powerful it bends energies toward it. Something that keeps these characters circling each other for nine years, through blizzards and heartbreak and the particular cruelty of hope.

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Margot Douaihy, PhD, is the author of the award-winning, bestselling Sister Holiday Mystery series, in addition to the poetry collections *Bandit/Queen: The Runaway Story of Belle Starr, Scranton Lace*, and *Girls Like You*. Her debut mystery, *Scorched Grace*, won the Pinckley Prize for Crime Fiction and was named one of the Best Crime Novels of the Year by *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and others. *Blessed Water* was also named a *New York Times* Best Crime Novel of the Year (2024) and won the Publishing Triangle Award for LGBTQ Fiction. The third mystery in the series, *Divine Ruin*. will publish January 2026. Margot is an assistant professor with the Popular Fiction MFA at Emerson College in Boston.