

Analyzing the First Page of *A Gift for Murder*

by Karen McCullough

Here is the first page of the print edition of my mystery novel, *A Gift for Murder*:

*** Excerpt ***

If I'd known how bad Wednesday would get, I would've—what? Stayed in bed? Not likely. The show must go on and all that. But I would've at least asked for another shot of espresso during my morning stop at Starbucks. Maybe two.

My work day went from peaceful beginning to chaos within half an hour. This wasn't just another day at the office. The start of the annual Washington, D.C. Gifts and Decorations Show, our biggest show of the year at the Commerce & Market Show Center, was always the worst day of the year for the staff who organized it.

By nine-thirty, blizzards of paper covered my desk, my cell phone hadn't quit buzzing, and the land-line phone rang continuously. The computer constantly chimed the arrival of new email messages. A strange man stopped at the office door and stood there watching me.

The triple-shot latte was already struggling to keep my sanity in place.

I recognized the number on the cell phone display and reached for it first.

“Heather?” Janelle, the Show Center's director and my boss, sounded disturbed. Unflappable Janelle sounding disturbed was worse than most people shouting or having hysterics.

“Problem?” I asked, trying not to stare at the stranger, who lingered near the doorway. A quick glance said he was worth a look.

Until Janelle said, “Find Mark and tell him aisles three to five don't have power. He's not answering his pager. Then call Truffant Shipping and ask them to fax copies of the manifests for their deliveries to Brent-Cooper. A couple of their boxes are missing. Once you've done that, can you get down here? Lots of ruffled feathers over the power. Oh, and Grantwood & Bethel is missing one of their key people. They think he may be lost somewhere in the city. And Sue Savotsky of Trimstates doesn't like her location—the carpet's not clean, and the people across the way are playing loud music.”

**** End Passage ***

A Gift for Murder was published in hardcover by Five Star/Cengage and later reprinted by Harlequin Worldwide Mysteries in mass market paperback. After rights reverted to me, I released it in ebook form with a new cover. It got a nice review from *Publisher's Weekly* and a mention in *Library Journal*.

I recently wrote a blog post in which I talked about trying to make every piece of a story I write carry more than its own weight. That means each word, each sentence, each paragraph has to do more than just one thing. So I consider each bit I write carefully to be sure I'm getting maximum mileage from my words.

The first paragraph of *A Gift for Murder* was the very last paragraph I wrote, and even then I reworked it several times. On my first draft, I'd started the book with a slightly different version of the second paragraph, which wasn't bad but seemed a bit flat. I wanted to kick off the story in a way that would introduce the reader to the first person narrator immediately and would also suggest that a fast-paced, exciting romp was coming up. So I let Heather tell the reader how she feels about that first day, in retrospect. The fact that the only thing she would've changed—ordering stronger coffee—gives the reader an impression of a woman who is tough, resilient, smart, and has a sense of humor. At the same time it signals that Heather's day is going to go downhill fast and far.

I like to think that first paragraph serves as an effective hook because it rouses curiosity about just how bad her day is going to get and what bad things are going to happen. It's a mystery novel with the word "murder" in the title, so the readers know that a murder is going to occur, but they don't know who or how or what sort of complications that's going to present.

The next few paragraphs have a number of objectives. Aside from setting the scene at the Market Center, and showing us what Heather's job is, they also introduce the two most important secondary characters, show the behind-the-scenes chaos of setting up a trade show, and—though the reader doesn't know it yet—set the stage for the central mystery of the story. It's not really a spoiler to tell you that the key person missing from Grantwood & Bethel is *not* wandering around the city, lost.

I hoped that these first few paragraphs would raise a number of questions in the readers' minds so that they'd want to continue reading to get answers. The second paragraph shows Heather in the midst of chaos at her desk when a stranger shows up who draws her attention. Who is the stranger and why is she intrigued by him?

Then she takes a call from her boss, and the usually unflappable Janelle sounds harried as she recites a list of problems. Obviously this isn't all business as usual for the show. They've had a power outage; merchandise has gone astray; and an executive is also

missing. Some of those things Heather can fix, and we will later see her doing so. But one of them, the missing person, is a much bigger problem.

I hope the reader will want to find out just how much bigger and what Heather will do about it.



Karen McCullough is the author of a dozen published novels and novellas in the mystery, romantic suspense, and fantasy genres as well. She has won numerous awards, including an Eppie Award for fantasy, and has also been a four-time Eppie finalist, and a finalist in the Daphne, Prism, Dream Realm, Rising Star, Lories, Scarlett Letter, and Vixen Awards contests. Her short fiction has appeared in several anthologies and numerous small press publications across many genres. She has three children, seven grandchildren (plus another on the way) and lives in Greensboro, NC, with her husband of many years.

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A Gift for Murder Blurb:

The Home and Decorative Accessories Show makes for a long week for the Market Center staff, and particularly for Heather McNeil. As assistant to the director of Washington, D.C.'s, Market and Commerce center, she's point person for complaining exhibitors, missing shipments and miscellaneous disasters. It's a job she takes in stride—until murder crashes the event.

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