

The First Two Pages: “Duty, Honor, Hammett”

By Stacy Woodson

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Originally, I wrote “Duty, Honor, Hammett” for an anthology where geography had to play a central role in the mystery. These guidelines shaped my approach to the story and how I wrote the first two pages.

I chose Arlington National Cemetery because I was fascinated by the location’s history, and I wanted to create a mystery that showed a different side of the cemetery—something beyond what most visitors see. I picked a protagonist who was responsible for guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, an aspiring sentinel, who would see the cemetery through fresh eyes. I thought this choice would also keep the location a centerpiece in the story.

In the first two pages, my goals were to introduce the setting and my protagonist (Specialist Jimmy Reilly), establish stakes (to keep readers interested), hint at the mystery, create tension, and establish a “drumbeat” for the ending. I thought Tomb Guard Quarters was a good place to start:

In Arlington Cemetery, under the steps of the Memorial Amphitheater, the clock in Tomb Guard Quarters chimed.
“Bells. Bells.” Tuck, my trainer, echoed the time warning.

Here, the setting is in the forefront, an intentional decision because of the anthology requirement. Also, Tomb Guard Quarters and the activities that occur aren't well-known details about the cemetery. I hoped this insight would be interesting to the reader. I included the chiming clock because I wanted to create tension and a sense of foreboding. The clock is also a real detail.

Next, I introduce Jimmy, his trainer (Tuck), and the intense preparation that occurs before the changing of the guard. I also wanted to add more tension, so I tried to show both Jimmy and Tuck's anxiety during the uniform inspection process:

But I remained at attention—chin up, chest out, shoulders back—while he inspected my uniform. My brass shone. My medals were exact. And my shoes sparkled like a Mop & Glo ad.

Tuck still made another pass, his success tied to mine. This time, he attacked my jacket with a lint roller. The tape crinkled back and forth as he wheeled it across my shoulders.

“Looking good, Jimmy.” He finally gave his approval, even though he still hovered like a parent on the first day of preschool.

Then, I wanted to establish stakes, to give the reader a reason to want to go on this journey with Jimmy. I talked about his pending performance test:

I loosened my shoulders and tried to relax, but all I could think about was the performance test that loomed ahead.

My standard is perfection.

Line six of the Sentinel's Creed echoed in my head, a reminder of what I needed to achieve. My uniform. My movements. Everything I did was cataloged and graded. With a ninety-percent attrition rate, few Tomb guards rose to the level of sentinel.

The sentinel badge is one of the least awarded badges in the military (a fact). And although the detail is mildly interesting, I knew the promise of a badge wasn't enough. The stakes needed to be higher. Jimmy needed a personal reason, ideally something universal that would resonate with readers. So, I focused on family:

*If I made one mistake, one misstep...
My family's sentinel legacy ended with me.*

But this still wasn't enough. I wanted to take it a step further, to make this journey matter even more and also provide a hint of the mystery to come. I added Jimmy's dead brother, Hank—another soldier and former sentinel. As Jimmy gets ready, he sees Hank:

I glanced back in the mirror. My brother, in his army combat uniform, sat behind me.

Just like you

Just like Dad.

Today, I walk the mat.

I turned to face him, but the chair was empty. My shoulders sagged.

Throughout the pages, I wanted to create tension in the build-up to Jimmy's performance test. I tried to use sensory details, internal monologue, and actions to achieve this goal. Earlier, I mentioned the clock in Tomb Guard Quarters and Jimmy and Tuck's anxiety. But I also wanted the reader to feel Jimmy's anxiety, not just witness it. I included a line about his coat:

Instead, my chest tightened, and the coat belted against me suddenly felt like a straitjacket.

Finally, I wanted a drumbeat—a line that would echo throughout the piece and something I could use to at the end of the story to help tie it up in a clean way. I chose: *my standard is perfection*. I also thought the line added tension because nothing is ever perfect, and it creates an expectation Jimmy would make a mistake.

I hope these elements in the first two pages of “Duty, Honor, Hammett” keep readers turning the pages. I am grateful to Janet Hutchings for believing in this story and sharing it with *EQMM* readers.

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