

The First Two Pages: *Hang Time*

By S.W. Lauden

The first two pages of my third Greg Salem novel, *Hang Time*, were probably the toughest I've ever had to write.

Describing disturbing events is part of the job as a crime and mystery author, but there's something particularly heartbreaking in writing about suicide. Even in a fictional universe, it's a tragedy for everybody involved.

So here are the first two pages of *Hang Time*. I'll talk more about them below.

October 1998—11:00 p.m.

Tim threw the rope over the exposed ceiling beam. He'd been practicing the move in his mind all day, but it still took a few tries. A sense of relief washed over him as he looped it over again, pulling the loose end down the other side to form a noose. His mind was surprisingly sharp considering the farewell shot of heroin coursing through his veins.

He'd learned about tying knots from his father, at their cabin in the mountains. The family spent whole summers up there when he and his younger brother, Greg, were still kids. Just three men hunting, fishing, and living off the land. Tears filled his eyes as he thought about how much simpler life had been then. Before they discovered punk rock, drugs, and disappointment in their teenage years. Tim wondered if his father or brother would recognize the knot when they found his body.

Tim took a step back to have a last look around the record store. A familiar yellow glow came through the windows from the streetlights out front. The towering racks and bursting bins always looked like an industrial landscape to him, silhouetted as they were in the crowded space. Only he knew exactly where every rare single and limited edition remastered CD was tucked away.

This was the business he'd built with his own two hands, dropping out of high school to devote himself to music. He'd worked endless hours every day since, toiling alone in the tiny backroom office—teaching himself how to read foreign catalogs, understand basic accounting, and occasionally make payroll. It was a labor of love that reaped its meager rewards in the frantic smiles of his devoted teenage customers; the same kids who used to come see his band, Bad Citizen Corporation, play at the local all-ages venues.

That was before the band he loved ruined his life. There had been plenty of evidence that things were changing. It was there in pointless power struggles at the rehearsal studio, where he and Greg fought over things as trivial as set lists. Or in the tour van when they'd come to blows over which fast-food restaurant to drive through, or which song to listen to on the stereo.

And it was there at their childhood home where they could no longer visit their father at the same time. Tim could see how it hurt the old man, but there was nothing he or anybody else could do about it. He understood now how he'd retreated into ritualistic self-destruction that required something as blunt as a needle for relief. He'd chosen to shut himself down instead of facing the pain of his band—his life—falling apart. Greg, on the other hand, embraced anger; clutching tight to his ego as he waded fists-first into fight after pointless fight.

There simply wasn't enough oxygen to contain them together in their father's house, the band, or, as Tim very recently realized, the entire world. Tim saw it all much more clearly now, framed through the noose swinging in front of his face. The finality of it all brought a sort of clarity to his mind, a sad certainty that every one of those signs lined the one-way street leading him here. There was a terrible inevitability to it, a tired junkie cliché that almost made him laugh.

He climbed up onto the counter, slipping the noose around his neck. The rope felt itchy against his skin, a brief reminder of the petty annoyances he was saying goodbye to forever. He slid the knot down until it was tight, inching his Converse to the edge. It was no longer a question of if, but when.

Tim barely finished whispering "Goodbye" before leaping out into the permanent darkness. He listened to the rope creak against the ceiling beam overhead, mind already disconnected from his arched back and jerking legs. It came as a shock when, in his final moments, he still had more questions than answers. One in particular was louder than all the rest—will Greg ever understand why I had to do this for him?

At its core, this entire series is about an aging musician's midlife crisis. Greg Salem is an infamous SoCal punk rock singer who becomes a police officer in his late 20s and a P.I. in his early 40s. Through it all, he maintains his youthful disdain for authority, penchant for violence, and a chip on his shoulder from the death of his older brother, Tim. The local police ruled Tim's death a suicide twenty years ago, but Greg always suspected murder.

The relationship between the two brothers is set against the backdrop of SoCal's legendary hardcore punk scene. Influenced by bands like Black Flag and The Circle Jerks, Tim and Greg start a band of their own called Bad Citizen Corporation. Tim is the introverted artist while Greg is the hell-raising extrovert. Their short-lived music career burns hot and bright for only a few years before everything falls apart.

Self-destruction is a very real component of the "live fast, die young" attitude embraced by certain rock musicians, but I tried hard not to romanticize Tim's suicide. Simply put, he is a desperate drug addict in need of help that he unfortunately never gets. Sadly, his death has a lasting negative effect on those who loved him—especially Greg, who copes with addiction and emotional issues of his own throughout the series.

Suicide is not an easy way to start a novel, but in this case it was necessary to bring resolution to a three-book story arc. I like to think that the rest of *Hang*

Time isn't quite as dark as the opening, mostly thanks to all of the sex, drugs, and rock and roll that form the foundation of this trilogy. But I'll let you decide for yourself.

If I'm going to leave you with anything, it's this: the suicide described in *Hang Time* is fictional, but for some of us suicidal thoughts are not. If you or somebody you know needs help or just wants to talk, the National Suicide Prevention Hotline is a great place to start. Call 800-273-TALK (8255).

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S.W. Lauden is the author of the Greg Salem punk rock P.I. series, including *Bad Citizen Corporation*, *Grizzly Season*, and *Hang Time*. His short fiction has been published by *Out of the Gutter*, *Criminal Element*, *Dark Corners*, *Dead Guns Magazine*, *Akashic Books*, *WeirdBook*, *Spelk Fiction*, *Shotgun Honey* and *Crimespree Magazine*. He's also had short stories in the anthologies *Unloaded: Crime Writers Writing Without Guns*, *Fast Women and Neon Lights: Eighties-Inspired Neon Noir*, and *Waiting to Be Forgotten: Stories of Crime and Heartbreak Inspired by The Replacements*. He is also the co-host of the *Writer Types* podcast.