

## **The First Two Pages of “RFP/RIP” by Britt Alan**

From: *Chesapeake Crimes: Invitation to Murder*

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### An Essay by Britt Alan

I have a secret. My secret is almost embarrassing, sacrilegious even, given the subject and forum to which I’ve been asked to contribute: *Invitation to Murder* reintroduced me to short stories. (Shhh! Please don’t tell.)

I don’t think I’d read, much less written, a short story since high school—more decades past than anyone needs concern themselves. But having heard Josh Pachter speak on some of his short story accomplishments (*Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*—I had no idea!) I realized there was an entire alternate universe of writers thriving in the realm of the succinct. *Cutting your novel from 150,000 words to 110,000? Ha—child’s play. Try weaving a compelling mystery in 8,000 words.* What I had previously never considered, especially after having published my debut thriller, *Tiananmen Ascending*, now seemed impossible, not to mention vaguely unsettling. Still, the idea of writing a compelling crime or mystery short story that might be selected and published by my new, vastly more experienced friends in Sisters In Crime challenged me, the literary equivalent of... could I free hand climb El Capitan?

I had finally finished my then-current proposal project, and I realized that the submission for the Chesapeake Crimes anthology I’d heard so much about—

that I'd ignored due to the frantic pace of my proposal—was almost due. A good news/bad news/worse news scenario:

- **Good news:** Proposal du jour submitted. Next proposal project just starting. A little bit of malleable time available in my schedule.
- **Bad news:** I had challenged myself to submit for the anthology—and, *damn it*, myself had accepted! I already knew every loophole I might cite to escape my commitment. Struggle was futile.
- **Worse news:** The clock was ticking, accelerating, as the height of my personal El Capitan increased inversely propositional to the time remaining. The lack of any idea for or start to a story was icing on the cake of my fledgling short story career.

My current avocation that pays the bills is as a government contractor, a proposal manager and technical writer for hire. Thinking about that concluded project, I realized that an RFP was actually an invitation from the government to submit a proposal. It followed that if a murder occurred over the course of that RFP response, I had the potential for a compelling story, that no one had ever considered. And so it began:

The FedBizOps notice hits my inbox with a digital thud, ruining my weekend and trumpeting the opportunity I've been anticipating, dreading, for weeks. Request for Proposal—RFP.

Invitation to propose a technical solution to the Fed in response to an urgent need. Invitation to spend the next thirty days in federal proposal hell. Yay! You say toe-may-toe, I say toe-mah-toe.

Whatever. Angela is gonna kill me.

Dead.

Again.

As I mouse over to open the FBO email, I note the time: 3:21 p.m.—Friday afternoon of a holiday weekend, of course—and realize that not only is she going to kill me, but we'll be charged for the cabin rental at the lake, even if no one shows up. No cancelations within seventy-two hours of check-in. Such is life when you work for yourself, I guess—but it still won't dampen my wife's wrath.

Sometimes, life has a way of recalibrating you, despite your most heroic efforts to resist. You plan, you work—you give it your best—then some higher-power decides: *No*, not gonna happen that way.

I realize I won't make my flight home that evening. Maybe she and the kids will go on the quick weekend away we'd planned anyway. Maybe I'll be lucky and she won't hold this against me.

Who am I kidding? I've never been lucky.

In the first passage, I needed to convey the importance of the solicitation notice and the proposal effort that would follow, in order to welcome the audience into a world I believed was different than a typical mystery setting. Time was ticking 24/7, and each character's respective management of it was no longer a factor in their control; establishing that was important to the rhythm of the story and also served to draw the reader into the dedication of the characters to the task.

For example, my protagonist, Ethan (as we learn later) is willing to—needs to—sacrifice substantial personal equities (e.g., personal time, investment, and commitments made to wife and family) for the foreseeable future to achieve his goals and to successfully meet his professional obligations speaks to the risk involved in this seemingly innocuous introductory passage.

On the latest project I had worked with some interesting folks; there might be something there to get the synapses firing. Continuing on:

I'm a specialist, of sorts.

My client is Excelaton, a hotshot cybersecurity powerhouse. They're the company the government turns to when its most-classified digital secrets are compromised, exploited like so much innocent virtue on the dark web by nation-state adversaries. Excelaton has no business pursuing this particular opportunity, though—wrong technical swim lane, no competitive advantage, no substantial past performance, no innovative approach—a belief I've shared with their leadership countless times. It is the brutal, but accurate, truth, and I've hoped the client will shut down the pursuit and release me from this Sisyphus nightmare.

No such luck. Leadership had assured me that landing this contract would mark the rise of Excelaton 2.0 and would re-energize its revenues.

We are submitting a bid, or we'll die trying.

I glance around the proposal war room—our conference room home for the proposal's duration—surveying the motley crew of method-actor consultants I've been saddled with: five morose, occasionally mildly unreceptive faces stare back at me.

The only beacons of hope come from LuLu and Liz, who have worked with me before, Liz as my proposal coordinator. The three of us work well together—our approach and work ethic really sync; even when when LuLu is stoned, she gets the job done. Liz is a straight arrow and attractive despite the decade plus she has on me, but LuLu likes her wacky brownies a little too much.

*Medicinal. Uh-huh.*

Whatever, do the work well, and I don't judge. And they both do, without fail.

Corporately, we learn that this effort that Ethan is leading is literally make or break for his client, Excelaton, and that he already has doubts about the suitability for and capability of Excelaton to successfully bid for and perform the work the government is seeking. This passage introduces the main cast of the story; all the

action centers on the confines of this character group. We discover Ethan's relationship with these characters; he has only a superficial understanding of and familiarity with most of these folks—which may come back to haunt him—with the exception of LuLu and Liz, with whom he has worked before and whom he considers friends. These two characters are contrasted by the “unknowns” with whom he is paired and whose motives he ultimately has cause to question. Equally important, however, is that both his friends seem to have predilections that cause our protagonist to pause but not to question their dedication to the success of the effort. Their shared past is LuLu's and Liz's proof of skill and commitment.

In understanding our characters reaction to the news of the solicitation and the beginning of the actual proposal response, we peek inside the mood of the characters and also begin to understand the pace and tone of the story. I also strived to provide the reader a play-by-play perspective by writing in present tense, in order to have them invested faster in the storyline, since this was a short story. In the passages above and below, we also learn supporting details that substantiate our protagonist's doubt as to the viability of the pursuit, foreshadowing the murder we've been invited to witness.

“Shit.”

“Motherfucking government.”

“Goddamn govies.”

Muttered curses bounce around the room, off the whiteboard walls and seem to home in on me at the end of the large conference table.

We've already spent several weeks cooped up in the war room, brainstorming and crafting a technical solution to the National Nuclear Security Administration's pressing problem that it wants proposals to address. Our work has been based on the government's draft RFP, in which the feds said what they're probably going to be looking for when the final—official—RFP comes out. With the arrival of that final RFP, it is now Day Zero—(D<sub>0</sub>) or (D<sub>initial</sub>) as scientists like to say. We are on the clock, with every second ticking toward D<sub>30</sub>—our submission deadline date, thirty days from now.

We'll be working long days until the deadline, with brief breaks when absolutely necessary. No weekends. No vacations. No sick days. We'll eat while we work. Sleep, shower, and change clothes when we have to. We'll remind our families we're alive via Skype. Hopefully, this work ethic, coupled with the work we did pre-final release, will produce a winning bid.

I raise an eyebrow and dip my chin in a subtle nod to Liz, whose job is basically being a fixer—helping us navigate the Excelaton corporate maze and making sure that the proposal we produce holds true to Excelaton's corporate mission and guidelines. And doesn't give away the Excelaton secret sauce, either.

I took a risk here. A friend of mine, a well-known author, had lunch with me while I was still writing *Tiananmen Ascending*. I asked him to read several passages of dialogue during a tense sequence, and he gave me some great advice: *de-fuck-ify* the story. In other words, there are levels of harsh language, and there are appropriate times for each level, and I should avoid using harsh language inappropriately and/or gratuitously. My risk in the above passage was that while I have generally held true to that advice in my writing—I think it is sound—I felt strongly that for the reader the language was meaningful to the understanding of this foreign environment. I believed especially for a short story with a largely

completely unfamiliar setting, I needed to establish concretely, rapidly, and concisely that the dialogue rang true, tensions were high, and tempers were short.

In the above passage, we also learn the real-time duration of the project—30 days—which quantifies the pressure these folks are dealing with as they embark on their effort: “on the clock” and under the gun. As we see below, our protagonist, Ethan begins the actual mechanics of organizing his team, relying on the two characters he knows best, LuLu and Liz. Their actions to create the opportunity for the antagonist to strike and introduce the first conflict and the mystery that results, leading up to the final conflict of the story.

She responds by passing out long, thin pieces of paper and pencils to each team member as I rise to address the team. I glance at my watch, an Omega my father had given me: 3:30. He’d been a proposal manager too. Career bad luck must be hereditary.

“Some of you have worked with me before on prior opportunities. You just keep quiet and fill out your slips,” I say. “For everyone else, we’ve been hard at this for a couple of weeks, but the shit just got real. We’ve got Final, and, like it or not, we’re starting now in earnest. This is Day Zero, and we’ll sleep on Day Thirty, post submission.”

I pause, gauging my audience. Everyone has glanced at the slips they’ve received, and while there are some lingering expressions of surprise, they’re all busily putting tick marks in little boxes.

“I understand we all had plans this weekend, but we all also knew this day would come, and it’s what we’ve signed up for. The federal government is a cruel mistress. I’d love to sugarcoat it, but I can’t and I won’t try. You can enjoy the Memorial Day weekend next year. Now, we’re working seven days a week. We’ve got a huge lift ahead of us to put lipstick on this pig. But . . .” I pause as Liz collects the paper slips, then begins pounding away on her computer. I nod in approval as I continue my briefing-cum-pep talk. “That is exactly

what we will do, because our client *needs* this win, and we *will* do whatever it takes to deliver that winning proposal. Any questions?”

“Any good news, Ethan?” LuLu asks. I can always count on my friend to serve up a softball for the benefit of the audience.

I chuckle. “Okay. It’s time to formally kick off this proposal effort, folks. Liz?”

“On it,” she says, and slips out the war room door.

Proposals are frequently developed in what we call war rooms, where everyone on the proposal is co-located in a dedicated room for the duration (usually a conference space we take over) to collaborate to create and submit a compliant, compelling government proposal. When I was brainstorming the story, and as I considered the idea of murder in the war room, I realized it was not so far-fetched. In this niche industry, most of us have wanted to... adjust the breathing status of one (or multiple) of our bosses, colleagues, or clients at one time or another—occasionally all of them at the same time!

While a war room may not have been the most common setting for a murder mystery, with the above passage we understand that the stakes are high and that our characters will go to unimaginable lengths to succeed. Everyone is driven... but some are more driven than others.

Thank you, enjoy the story and all the great stories in *Chesapeake Crimes*!

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Britt Alan is the author of The Dragon Proxies thriller series. His debut, *Tiananmen Ascending*, was hailed by *Kirkus Reviews* as “highly recommended for readers who enjoy cerebral, absorbing narratives about contemporary politics and the devastating potential of global terror.” Alan has twenty-six years’ experience in military Science and Technology, technical and persuasive writing, international



relations, and communications. His interest in global politics started when, at age eight, he wrote the Islamic Republic of Iran to protest the Iran hostage crisis. The response sent to him by the Islamic Republic's charge d'affaires introduced him to propaganda and years later inspired *Tiananmen Ascending*. Alan lives in Washington, DC, and is writing his next novel of international intrigue, aggression and deception. [www.BrittAlan.com](http://www.BrittAlan.com).