

**The First Two Pages: *Straight Up: A Murder on the Rocks Mystery*
by Cathi Stoler (Level Best Books)**

An essay by Cathi Stoler

As any author knows, writing a continuing mystery series can be challenging. Not only do you want to have the characters you've already created continue be who they are—with all their quirks, opinions, and personality traits intact—but it's also important to show how they've evolved and changed, and how they're facing life since the last time readers met them. And, of course, you have to keep the new mystery intriguing, as well.

This was very much on my mind when I began to write *Straight Up*, the third book in my Murder On The Rocks Mystery series. How could I accomplish what I set out to do? What would keep the novel moving forward and ratchet up the suspense level?

After several false starts, I decide to introduce a new character to place in opposition to my main protagonist, Jude Dillane, owner of The Corner Lounge on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

We meet this character, Dolores Castel, in the novel's prologue as she is traveling from Los Angeles to New York City under mysterious circumstances. We immediately see that she is rich and privileged, someone used to enjoying the

best an upscale life can provide. How she's obtained everything this lifestyle entails is central to her personality and to what will happen in the story.

Having money makes everything better. The thought flowed through Dolores Castel's mind as she eased back into the supple leather seat and let it envelop her in its cocoon-like comfort. The first-class cabin on the top deck of the 747 aircraft was as good as it gets when it came to flying commercial. At the moment, booking on a private jet was out of the question.

Although, this was roomy, quiet, and luxurious enough. Dolores had always understood the value of traveling well and accepted the twenty-five-hundred-dollar one-way fare as part of doing business.

She smiled to herself in anticipation of the journey ahead and what it might bring.

A small, satisfied sigh escaped her lips as the young flight attendant assigned to the cabin approached holding a silver tray filled with beverages in crystal glasses.

Throughout the prologue, we hear Dolores's thoughts. They hint as to why she's leaving California, her plans for the future, and her relationship with her assistant, Diego.

"Would you like a glass of Champagne or orange juice before takeoff?" the woman asked in sweet, honeyed tones.

Dolores reached for a glass from the tray and nodded her thanks. She glanced over her shoulder toward the left side of the plane where Diego was seated one row behind and opposite her. He noticed her looking and moved his hand from the Champagne he'd been reaching for to the orange juice instead. He offered the flight attendant an open, inviting smile. s "Maybe some Champagne later, with lunch." _ She beamed back then moved on to the next passenger, passenger, her eyes tracking behind, fixed on Diego.

Dolores knew she needed to watch him carefully. He was just a little too handsome for his own good with deep chocolate brown eyes women found hard to resist and chiseled movie star features. She

hoped his good looks and easy, laid-back California style would serve him, and her, well in New York.

He didn't always obey her rules, rules that were instituted for a purpose. Such as no flirting with women like the pretty, young flight attendant, which could derail his focus from the plan she'd formed.

To begin, I wanted readers to wonder about her objection to living on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where a woman with her status obviously belongs.

Is she hiding something?

In the meantime, she had plans to firm up for New York. The first, and most important, was to secure an apartment for Diego and herself. She had thought about renting something on the Upper East Side but quickly put that aside. Things never changed in that part of town. People were ensconced there for generations and someone might recognize her from when she'd been a resident in her younger days. That hadn't ended well and she couldn't take the chance.

What exactly are her plans? When she arrives in New York, how will her presence impact the novel's other characters?

These questions and how they play out are central to the story. Though presented from her point-of-view, I decided to make Dolores's motivations very mysterious and keep them that way as they unfold slowly throughout the novel.

I saw Dolores as a true opportunist and wrote her that way. When she accepts the offer of a ride into the city from a fellow passenger, she plays him to perfection.

Stan's chauffeured town car was waiting outside the terminal when they exited. He was on his way home to Greenwich but had insisted on giving her a ride to her hotel, the Monclare, an elegant private establishment on Mercer Street.

Stan had taken the seat next to her in the back of the limousine. Now he exited and opened the passenger door, hovering as she stepped out. “Dolores. I hope we’ll see each other again very soon.” He handed her his card.

“I’d like that very, very much,” she replied, taping his arm with her hand and casting a seductive look his way. The doorman took their luggage into the lobby and

Dolores smiled and waved as the car pulled away into traffic.

Greenwich meant a house, most likely a wife and children. That was not part of the plan. She tossed his card into the waste bin inside the front door. Once Stan’s car was out of sight, she asked the doorman to call her a taxi. “We won’t be staying after all.” She smiled sweetly.

My goal was to have the prologue lay the foundation for her actions that follow and how they affect the story. I hope my readers will accept this new, enigmatic character and feel I succeeded in adding a surprising new element to the mystery.

#

Cathi Stoler is an Amazon best-selling author. Her *Murder On The Rocks Series* features The Corner Lounge owner, Jude Dillane, and includes *Bar None*, *Last Call*, and *Straight Up*, published by Level Best Books. She's also written the suspense novels *Nick of Time* and *Out of Time* and the Laurel and Helen New York Mysteries. She is a three-time finalist and winner of the Derringer Award for Best Short Story. Cathi is a member of Sisters in Crime New York/Tri-State, Mystery Writers of America, and International Thriller Writers. She lives in New York City with her husband Paul. You can reach her at www.cathistoler.com.

