

**I Stayed Up Until  
4:00 AM  
Creating and Maintaining  
**SUSPENSE****

Robin Perini  
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# Introduction

# Suspense Through Words

- ❖ *“Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.” –Anton Chekhov*
- ❖ *“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.” – Mark Twain*

# Take what you want and leave the rest!!!

❖ There are no rules; there are tools and guidelines

❖ *What a writer ... "wants is a set of rules on what to do and what not to do in writing fiction...."when one begins to be persuaded that certain things must never be done in fiction and certain other things must always be done, one has entered the first stage of aesthetic arthritis, the disease that ends in pedantic rigidity and the atrophy of intuition."* — John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*



# How to Create Suspense

# Suspense - Definition

- ❖ Keeps the reader turning the pages until 4 AM
  - ❖ Builds apprehension and anticipation in the minds of your readers
  - ❖ Think: Worry equals suspense
  - ❖ Always have an unanswered question in the reader's mind (What happens next?)
- ❖ Suspense builds as danger approaches and we care!

# 4 Factors Create Suspense

- ❖ Reader Empathy → Character
- ❖ Reader Concern → Character, Conflict, Plot, Emotion, Hook
- ❖ Impending danger (emotional or physical) → Character, Plot, Hook, Emotion
- ❖ Escalating Tension → Plot, Surprises, Character Choices, Scene and Sequel, Turning Points, Hook, Word Choices



# Keep Them Reading!

- ❖ If you don't hook your readers, they won't get into the story.
- ❖ If you don't drive the story forward by making readers worry about your main character, they won't have a *reason* to keep reading.
- ❖ The basic narrative fuel is always the **slow unveiling of the final answer**. (Lee Child) – if you want to build suspense, postpone it
  - ❖ Suspense happens in the moments between the promise of something dreadful and its arrival.



# Story Elements that Create Suspense

# Five Ways to Create Suspense

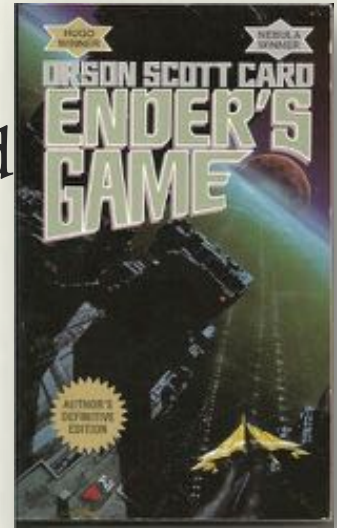
- ❖ Hook the Reader
- ❖ Put character in physical or emotional jeopardy
- ❖ Surprise the reader
- ❖ Drive the Story Forward
- ❖ Escalate the Tension

# Hook the Reader

- ❖ Beginning Hooks (chapters and scenes)
  - ❖ Openings are critical
- ❖ Ending Hooks (first page, third page, scene, chapter, book):
  - ❖ Threat of Danger (Emotional or Physical)
  - ❖ Shock Factor
  - ❖ Ending Question
  - ❖ Ending Prediction
- ❖ Let's look at some hooks!

# Dialogue Only

Ender's Game by Orson Scott Card



"I've watched through his eyes, I've listened through his ears, and I tell you he's the one. Or at least as close as we're going to get."

"That's what you said about the brother."

"The brother tested out impossible. For other reasons. Nothing to do with his ability."

"Same with the sister. And there are doubts about him. He's too malleable. Too willing to submerge himself in someone else's will."

"Not if the other person is his enemy."

"So what do we do? Surround him with enemies all the time?"

"If we have to."

"I thought you said you liked the kid."

"If the buggers get him, they'll make me look like his favorite uncle."

"All right. We're saving the world, after all. Take him."

TYPE of Hook – Threat of Danger, Shock Factor

# First person

Silent in the grave by Deanna Raybourn

*London 1886*

*Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out.—John Webster, The Duchess of Malfi*

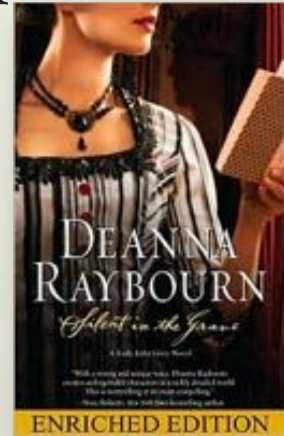
To say that I met Nicholas Brisbane over my husband's dead body is not entirely accurate. Edward, it should be noted, was still twitching upon the floor.

I stared at him, not quite taking in the fact that he had just collapsed at my feet. He lay, curled like a question mark, his evening suit ink-black against the white marble of the floor. He was writhing, his fingers knotted.

I leaned as close to him as my corset would permit.

"Edward, we have guests. Do get up. If this is some sort of silly prank—"

"He is not jesting, my lady. He is convulsing."



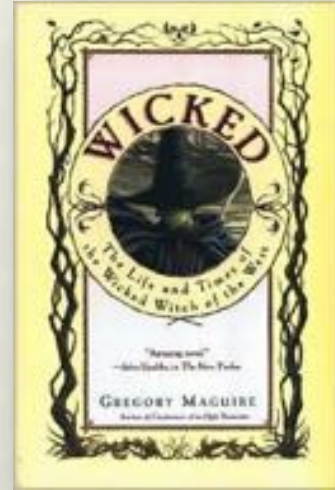
TYPE of Hook – Shock Factor

# Omnicient

## Wicked: The life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the west by Gregory Maguire

### *On the Yellow Brick Road*

A mile above Oz, the Witch balanced on the wind's forward edge, as if she were a green fleck of the land itself, flung up and sent wheeling away by the turbulent air. White and purple summer thunderheads mounded around her. Below, the Yellow Brick Road looped back on itself, like a relaxed noose. Though winter storms and the crowbars of agitators had torn up the road, still it led, relentlessly, to the Emerald City. The Witch could see the companions trudging along, maneuvering around the buckled sections, skirting trenches, skipping when the way was clear. They seemed oblivious of their fate. But it was not up to the Witch to enlighten them.



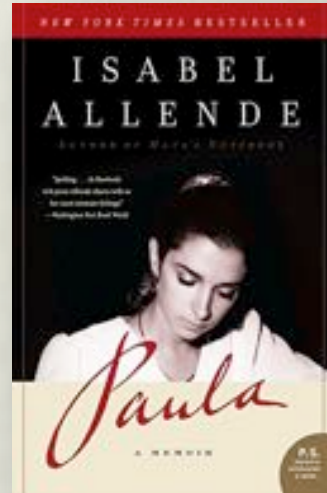
Type of Hook – Ending Prediction



# First Person

## Paula: A Memoir by Isabel Allende (2014)

My soul is choking in sand. Sadness is a sterile desert. I don't know how to pray. I cannot string together two thoughts, much less immerse myself in creating a new book. I plunge into these pages in an irrational attempt to overcome my terror. I think that perhaps if I give form to this devastation I shall be able to help you, and myself, and that the meticulous exercise of writing can be a salvation. Eleven years ago I wrote a letter to my grandfather to say goodbye to him in death. On this January 8, 1992, I am writing to you, Paula, to bring you back to life.



Type of Hook – Ending Prediction



# Third Person

## Game of Fear by Robin Perini (2014)



“You’ve figured it out already, haven’t you, Zach?”

The excrement-flinging fan was winding up now.

“Spell it out for me. I’m feeling a little slow.”

Whitney paled, then raised her chin. “Somehow I doubt that.” She clicked her seat belt into place. “I’m your half sister,” she said, her tone professional. “And before you ask, I’ll tell you everything I know. Your parents separated for a short while. Your father got drunk, took my mother to bed one time, and I’m the result. Now that that little turd has been dropped into the punch bowl, we have more important things to worry about. Can we talk about Winslow?”

Type of Hook – Shock Factor, Ending Question

# Is this a hook?

It was a cold and rainy day.  
Lyssa Cafferty walked  
down the street going  
home for the evening.

# Secret Obsession (August 2014)

**S**pecificity  
**P**ower Words  
**I**magery  
**C**ompelling  
Dialogue  
**E**nd Hooks  
**D**eep POV

The **sting** of frozen rain **pricked** Lyssa Cafferty's cheeks, **another attack couldn't prevent.** She hurried from the **L station toward her small Chicago apartment.** **If only she could pull her hood over her head, duck down and avoid** the **piercing needles of ice on her face** but then she'd lose her peripheral vision.

She couldn't afford to allow comfort to trump safety.

Not now. Not ever.

# Openings and Application of SPICED

- ❖ Set the tone of your story
- ❖ Set reader expectations
- ❖ Hook them in!
- ❖ Now...apply SPICED!



# Create Characters Readers Care About

- ❖ Put them in jeopardy (physical and/or emotional)
  - ❖ Make it personal (not just a world in danger, Grandma lives there)
  - ❖ Isolate the character so choices are limited
- ❖ GMC
  - ❖ Goal: How much a character cares about his goal is in direct proportion too how much the reader will care (Laura DeVries)
  - ❖ Motivation – why he wants it and what makes it important
  - ❖ Conflict – what's stopping him from getting it and what are the stakes (what terrible consequences will result if he doesn't get it?)
- ❖ Character Arc
- ❖ Surprise the Reader



# Writing so Readers Care: Use S-P-I-C-E-D

- ❖ **S**pecificity (including senses)
- ❖ **P**owerful Verbs, etc.
- ❖ **I**mage-making and picture-forming words
- ❖ **C**ompelling Dialogue (Inner/Spoken)
- ❖ **E**nding Hooks (And Openings) aka Surprises!
- ❖ **D**eep Point of View



# Showing Character with Deep Point of View – An Example from Game of Fear (August 2014)



Finally reaching the landing, Deb slipped her key into the lock. **Ashley better have a good reason for being here and not at her Air Force Academy dorm where she belonged.**

Deb shoved the door open. Her sister jumped up from the beige corduroy couch **like a gun had exploded in her ear.** The textbook vaulted from her hand landing five feet away.

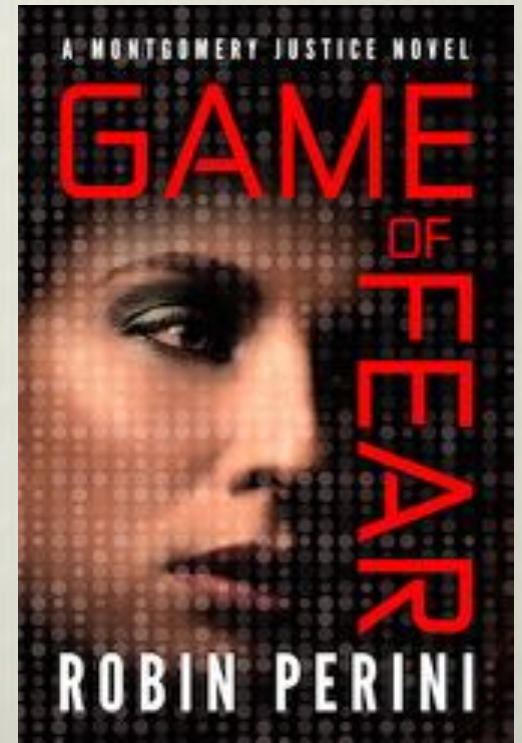


# What do you know about Deb?



# GAME OF FEAR

- ❖ SPICED in a single scene from Game of Fear – Montlake Romance, August 2014
- ❖ Brilliant kids from all over the country are disappearing after mastering the video game, *Point of Entry*—but no one knows why. Until now.
- ❖ Deb Lansing - Heroine



# Care about the Character

SPICED – Image-making and Picture-forming words

The whirr of the **circling Bell 212 helicopter** rotors echoed through the cockpit. New Mexico's **Wheeler Peak, barely visible in the dusk**, loomed just east, **its thirteen-thousand-foot summit laden with snow**. Deborah Lansing leaned forward, the **seat belt straps pulling at her shoulders**.

Far, far to the west, the **sun was just a sliver** in the sky.

“It’s almost dark, Deb. We have to land,” Gene Russo, her local Search and Rescue contact, insisted.

Why do we care? Search and rescue, in jeopardy

# Characters Must Have GMC

## ❖ GMC

- ❖ Goal: How much a character cares about his goal is in direct proportion too how much the reader will care (Laura DeVries)
- ❖ Motivation – why he wants it and what makes it important
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# Care about the Character: GMC

## SPICED - C Compelling Dialogue (Inner/Spoken)

Deb squinted against the setting sun; her eyes burned with fatigue. They'd been at it for hours, but she couldn't give up. Not yet.

"All the other choppers have landed, Deb. **This is too dangerous.** Besides, **do you really think your spotlight's going to find a snow-covered bus** on the side of the mountain with all these trees?"

"Five more minutes. That's all I'm asking."

A metallic glint pierced through a thick carpet of snow-packed spruce.

"There! I saw something." Deb's adrenaline raced as she shoved the steering bar to the right and down, using the foot pedals to maintain control.

"Holy crap, Lansing. What are you doing?" Gene shouted, holding on to his seat harness. **"You trying to get us killed?"**

# Surprise the Reader

- ❖ Character Surprises – character vs. characterization
  - ❖ Who your character appears to be, isn't who he is.
  - ❖ Emotional responses
- ❖ Plot Surprises
  - ❖ Set up expectations and keep your promises in unexpected ways
    - ❖ List of 20
  - ❖ Shift the character's reality
  - ❖ Push the readers' emotional buttons
    - ❖ Actions don't drive the story; actions drive emotion; emotions drive the story (Laura Baker)



# Character Surprise

## SPICED – Deep Point of View (Character)

He [Russo] didn't understand. The bird knew exactly what Deb wanted, and **she didn't leave people behind to die. Not after Afghanistan. She had enough ghosts on her conscience.** She tilted the chopper forward and came around again, sidling near the road toward Taos Ski Valley where the church bus had been headed before it had vanished.



# Plot Surprises

## SPICED – P Powerful Verbs, etc.

She **dipped** the chopper, **scouring** the terrain with the spotlight. A metallic flash **pierced** her gaze once again. “Gene, did you see that? Just south?”

The gray-faced spotter **shook** his head. “No, I’m too busy trying not to **puke** all over your windows.” He **swallowed** deeply and adjusted his microphone. “Could you **fly** this thing steady for a while?”

# Drive the Story Forward

- ❖ Actions don't drive the story.  
Actions drive emotions.  
**Emotions** drive the story!

## Motivated Drama



# Drive the Story Forward

- ❖ Scene and Sequel
  - ❖ Definition of Scene: GOAL – CONFLICT – DISASTER
  - ❖ Definition of Sequel: EMOTION – QUANDARY – DECISION – ACTION
  - ❖ Arc of the Scene
- ❖ Let the reader in on a secret so they worry about what's coming
  - ❖ Anticipation of difficulties to come
- ❖ Each time you remove an obstacle, uncover one more.
  - ❖ This works best if a character's choice causes the dilemma

# Drive the Story Forward

## SPICED – S Specificity (including senses)

Gene groaned. “Deb, I know you’re used to Denver terrain, but you can’t treat the **Sangre de Cristo Mountains** this way. These **gullies and drafts can buffet a chopper**, especially in some of the gorges. Your lift will disappear, and you’ll fly into the mountain.”

A peak rose toward them, and Deb **pulled up on the collective control stick**. The Bell followed her lead easily, but the sun was gone now. The near-total darkness made flying treacherous. The moon was the only thing making the deadly terrain remotely visible outside the spotlight’s range.

“At least **there aren’t Stingers or RPGs shooting** at us,” she said.

# Drive the Story Forward

SPICED - Ending Hooks (And Openings) aka Surprises!

The chopper touched down, and Deb jumped to the snow-packed ground, ignoring the cold around her. For now, she had people to save. As Deb and Gene yanked out the sled to transport the wounded, two men ran toward her, one whose forehead was caked with dried blood.

“Please, we need help. Some of the kids are hurt bad. They need a hospital.”

Deb scanned the inside of the chopper. How many could she fit and safely make it back? If she left equipment behind, she could carry someone extra. Her boss would be furious she'd taken the risk, but she'd worry about her job later.

# What do you know about Deb and the Story?





# RECAP

- ❖ Scene and Sequel
  - ❖ Definition of Scene: GOAL – CONFLICT – DISASTER
  - ❖ Definition of Sequel: EMOTION – QUANDARY – DECISION – ACTION
  - ❖ Arc of the Scene
- ❖ Let the reader in on a secret so they worry about what's coming
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  - ❖ This works best if a character's choice causes the dilemma



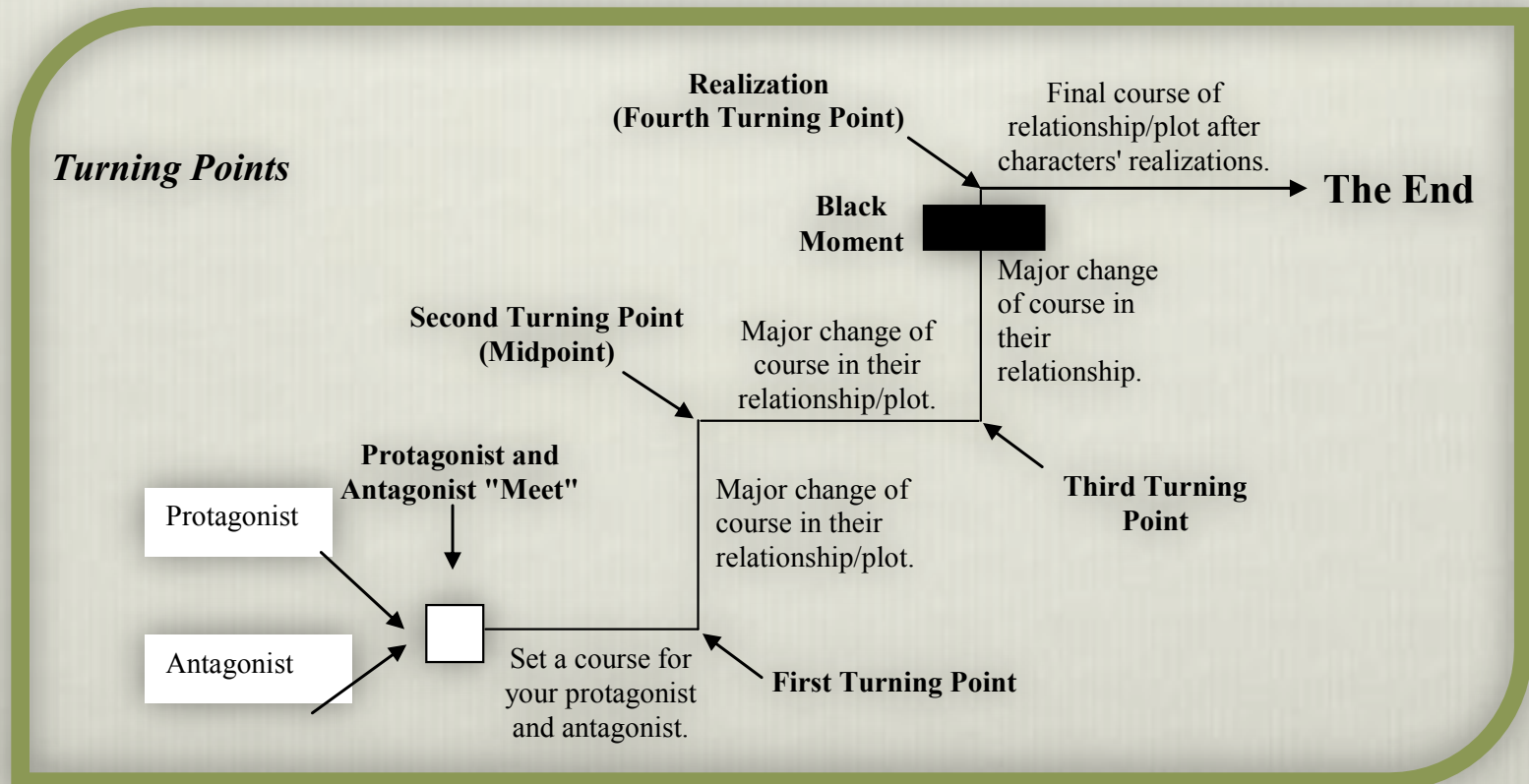
# Craft Tip: Watch Out

- ❖ 's/he felt,'
- ❖ 's/he thought,'
- ❖ 's/he saw,'
- ❖ 's/he wondered,'
- ❖ 's/he realized...



# Turning Points

- ❖ Significant and surprising scene or series of scenes which change the direction of your plot or subplot **FOR THE CHARACTER** and the reader.
- ❖ Turning points illustrate deep character, theme, braiding of internal/external conflict, layering through conflict, action, emotion and surprise



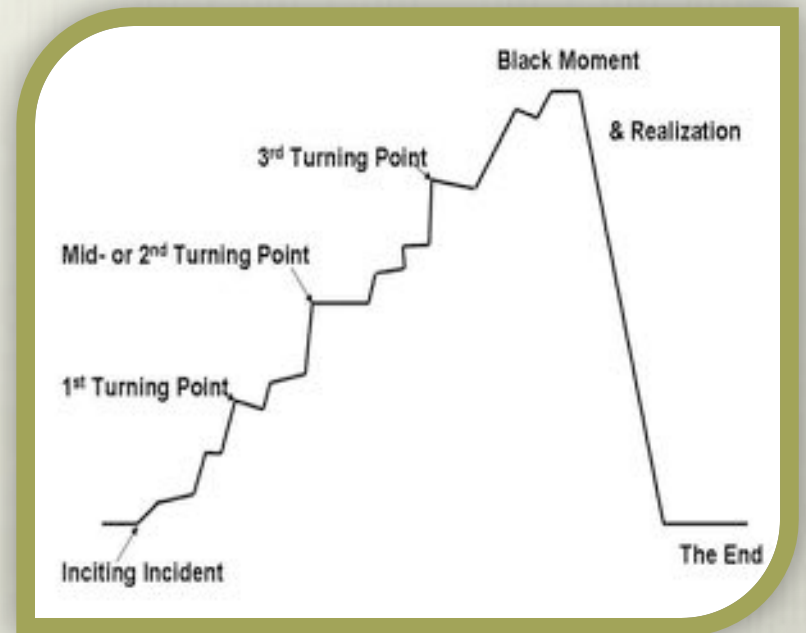
# Sample TP and Reversal Scenes

## Identify Heart Clenching Moments (Elizabeth Sims)

- ❖ Love at first sight (Marius Pontmercy meets Cosette)
- ❖ A huge moral lapse (Judas takes the money)
- ❖ Murder (Miles Archer's sets Sam Spade in motion)
- ❖ Death by other means (Injun Joe starves to death in the cave)
- ❖ A refusal of grace (Mayella Ewell sticks to her story in spite of taking the courtroom oath)
- ❖ Nature gone wild (shark dines on first recreational swimmer)
- ❖ Someone standing up to corruption (Shane picks up his gun again)
- ❖ A change of heart, for good or ill (Michael Corleone offers to kill Sollozzo and Captain McCluskey)
- ❖ An act of depraved violence (Bill Sykes cudgels Nancy)
- ❖ Betrayal (Sandy puts a stop to her mentor Jean Brodie)
- ❖ Forgiveness (Melanie insists Scarlett join her in the receiving line)
- ❖ A revelation (Pip's secret benefactor is none other than ... !)

# Turning Points are about Character as much as plot

- ❖ Escalate the internal and external stakes as you go from turning point to turning point.
- ❖ A good rule of thumb: 1 MAJOR turning point every 25,000 words
- ❖ Could a kiss be a turning point? Why?



# General Structure

## Story Board

For a 20-Chapter Book with Four Turning Points

1 Story's Inciting Incident	2	3	4	5 First Turning Point
6	7	8	9	10 Mid or Second Turning Point
11	12	13	14	15 Third Turning Point
16	17	18 Black Moment	19 Realization	20

Fourth Turning Point

# Arcs

- ❖ **Polarity of Arcs**
- ❖ **Character, Scene, Chapter, Turning Points, Book**
- ❖ **Scene and Sequel**
  - ❖ Definition of Scene: GOAL – CONFLICT - DISASTER
  - ❖ Definition of Sequel: EMOTION – QUANDARY – DECISION – ACTION
  - ❖ Identify the Scene's Arc



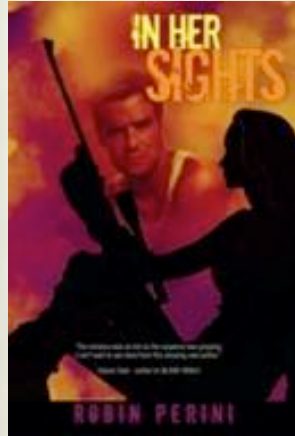


# Conclusion

- ❖ **Trust your instincts**
- ❖ **Find Your Own Process and Don't Edit Out the Passion**
  - ❖ **Let your Voice Shine Through.**
  - ❖ **It's YOUR story, but always ask WHY?!**
  - ❖ **Ray Bradbury says, "There is only one type of story in the world-- YOUR story."**



# Q&A and Drawing



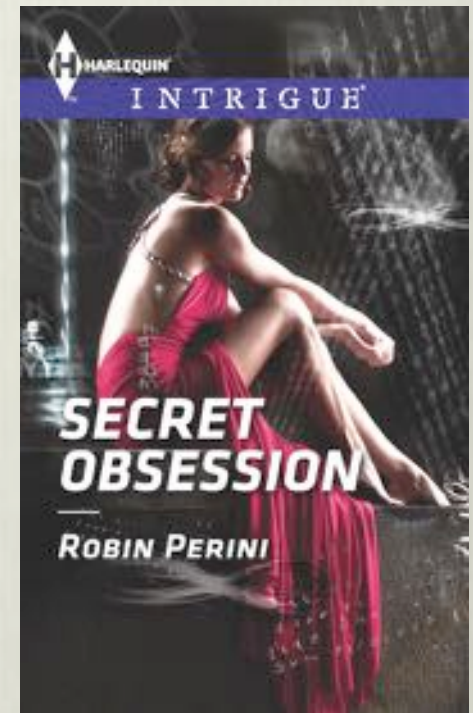
[www.robinperini.com](http://www.robinperini.com)



# Backups

# SPICED - SECRET OBSESSION

- ❖ SPICED in a single scene from Secret Obsession – Harlequin Intrigue, August 2014
- ❖ Desperate to keep a precious secret, the only woman to survive an uncatchable serial killer, must count on her murdered fiancé's best friend—a brilliant and deadly ex-Marine—to save her from the killer's vicious obsession.



# SPICED – Image-making and Picture-forming words

The diner was **dingy, grimy and dirty**. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the chair down before carefully sitting in the booth.

Alessandra had run, but he would have her. Soon.

He **shifted** in his seat. **His feet clung to the sticky floor** and he grimaced. Carefully **using two fingers, he opened the menu** then couldn't bear to hold the **germ-infested** plastic in his hands. He **rubbed the table with two napkins** to protect his skin from touching the filth.



# SPICED - C Compelling Dialogue (Inner/Spoken)

“Are you going to order or keep cleaning?” A young woman with streaked blue hair and a tattoo on her neck stared down at him, chomping her gum.

He focused on the table, gripping his trousers. **She was rude, but she was probably rude to everyone.** He should ignore the urge. He had more important work to do.

“Come on, buddy. **Either order or get out. I ain’t got all day.**”

He pasted a smile on his face, but inside, his head throbbed, pounding at his temples. “**Coffee. Three sugars. Cream. Not creamer, cream. The kind that comes from cows.**”

“**Freak,**” she muttered [...]



# SPICED – Powerful Verbs, etc.

The waitress practically dropped the cup on the table. Coffee **sloshed** over the edge. She didn't even bother to wipe it down. She **sashayed** away to another booth where a smiling young man winked at her.

They **ignored** him. They always **ignored** him.

She wouldn't **ignore** him for long.

**Abandoning** the coffee, he stood and walked out the door. He took a half dozen steps and waited, an alley situated **strategically** behind him.

The girl ran out of the coffee shop. "You can't leave without paying!" she **shouted**.

"And you need to learn some manners."

# SPICED – Specificity (including senses)

“I don’t think so, girl.” With a smile, he slipped a knife from his pocket. “You’re very rude,” he whispered, **pressing the blade against her side**. “You must be taught a lesson.” With a quiet move he slit her shirt on the side and flicked the sharp knife through a layer of skin.

She opened her mouth, but before she could scream he covered her lips with his hand. He **pressed her against the brick wall**. “I won’t be ignored,” he said softly. “Or dismissed.” He drew the knife around **her torso, positioned** the blade between her ribs and shoved it in.

She tried to scream, tried to bite him. “Don’t bother,” he said softly. “You’re bleeding inside. You’ll be dead soon.”

# SPICED – Deep Point of View (Character)

“With practiced ease he slid his knife through her dress, baring her chest. He didn’t look on her tattooed curves with desire. Just disgust.

He dragged his blade across the tainted pale skin of her belly, then stopped. She wasn’t worthy of him or his attention. Marred with drawings and piercings.

Alessandra Cummings had none of those. Alessandra Cummings was perfect.

She’d run from him, though.

“What a disappointment. He’d forgiven her the slight twice before, but this time she would have to prove herself worthy of him.

# SPICED - Ending Hooks (And Openings) aka Surprises!

He stared down at the woman's body, then at his hands, bloody and uncovered. He tugged out a vial from his pocket and **sprinkled the body with the concentrated accelerant he'd created.**

The strike of a match and her body was engulfed in flames. He tugged his coat's cashmere collar around his neck and slipped down the alley before rounding the corner.

Behind him someone shouted.

**Sirens screamed, but he didn't care.**

**Archimedes had a seduction to plan.**