

A Novel Idea

By: Nathan Morris

UNDERWHELMING CREATIVE IDEAS and a demand for books to sell were what pushed Hartley Salk to create a fictitious version of the serial murders happening around him. Characters were given different names, the town was rebranded, and fodder was thrown in for characters who were people he had never met: that is all he did to change his story from what was happening around him.

Hartley Salk was an acclaimed author, once, but time had worn on him, his body, and his proficiency. After a whopping twenty books all came out critically successful, he was due for another, but another wasn't on his mind. There wasn't even an idea. His creativity was gone; his last few books had teetered on the edge of mediocre, but thankfully enough the critics had been euphoric about his original masterpieces and managed to overlook tired tropes and plot points running rampant through his newer work. What he needed was something new, something other than science fiction stories and grim romance novels, and he decided to plagiarize life for that.

A murder mystery was nothing like what he had written before. Blood on his pages, screams echoing between the spine of the book . . . it was exactly what he needed to make his work flare again, and he got the idea after the first grisly murder took place in the quiet town he was retreating in.

Somewhere inside he knew it was wrong while he read over the news report glowing off of his laptop screen. It was afternoon, the day after another murder just down the road, with this one being a Samantha Wilcox. None of the victims had any relation that Hartley could figure out, which made the mystery in his novel all the more compelling, and this death would especially be so as Samantha was found stuffed into her home's water heater. He added his own part with his character's jaw being snapped open and both hands being shoved down into her neck, sinister enough for shock value. Other deaths, which he chuckled to think he had made up since other murder reports weren't as revealing (it had been a slip up that the water heater detail was

released), included a hundred pencils being stabbed through the arms and legs of the victim, the final one piercing his eyes, nose, ears, and mouth, as well as a woman who had all of the circulation in her body cut off by tightly bound rubber bands at every joint, and an older woman who was found strung against the ceiling with her back sliced open and a rabid dog left in the room.

Hartley couldn't attribute all of the death details to himself; in fact, most of them had come from his writing apprentice, Daisy Ruiz, who had surprisingly been on board with the idea of writing about the death around them. In her mind, they were fictionalizing what was happening around them, they were making it less grotesque in a way and possibly making it seem like a story with an end, that the killer would be unmasked and put in jail. She had joined him shortly after he moved to town, which happened to be perfect timing for him since the murders started a few weeks after that, and she had sought him out to ask in person if he could teach her how to be a better writer. Hartley couldn't refuse; he loved attention and fans.

After he finished reading about the murder and picturing how he would write it, Hartley glanced in the dirty mirror across the room and studied his dark, morbid features. For several days he hadn't slept in order to stay on top of things; it seemed like he was on a writing streak he didn't want to lose. He next looked at the clock and saw it was 3:50. Daisy was just getting out of high school and would be coming soon to talk about writing. At first he wasn't sure about her pitching in to the story, as she had initially proposed herself as someone who was horrid at coming up with original ideas, something she wanted help with. Hartley couldn't tell her he himself was out of creative ideas, but the way she came up with deaths impressed him.

The one thing that worried him about what he was doing was the idea that when he moved back to the big city and released the novel, people from the town and those who kept up with the story would recognize similarities and he would be criticized for that. It was surely a risk, but his story bore enough

of its own signature, and instinctively he would write his own ending as thus far it seemed as though the cops weren't on any good trails to find the killer. Hartley wasn't worried about coming up with something original or entertaining enough for the ending, though. He had Daisy to help him.

When the young girl came bounding through the door, having a key of her own to get into the house since sometimes he wouldn't be there when she got there and he trusted her to not mess anything up until he got back, he expected to have to explain the news to her; however, Daisy seemed fully aware of it already.

"Did you hear about it!?" she exclaimed with that natural delight she had when opportunities for story inspiration came to her. Hartley was still getting use to her thick accent, and even though he didn't full well understand what she had said, he just laid back and let her continue. "Found in a water heater? That's crazy! I mean, it's all so awful, we had a moment of silence of school. I'd seen her a few times at the Food Lion I work at, so it was kinda weird to hear that she had died...I honestly hope that killer is caught soon, or at least quits town. Also, sorry I'm late, I was talking to Darren for a bit before leaving."

"Yeah," he agreed, going back to his page. Darren was Daisy's best friend. She had talked about him several times and several times had arrived late because she had been talking to him. "Hey, come here, read this, Daisy. Tell me what you think, I didn't wanna go any further because I wanted to have the cop's reaction to the way she dies."

"You worked without me!?" she mockingly cried, bouncing to his side to read over his shoulder. Her eyes plastered the screen with her vision while she speed read. All the while, Hartley couldn't decipher what was behind her serious face plate until she said her opinion out loud. "I think it could be better." She spoke bluntly but smiled apologetically to make up for it. "I actually came up with something too!"

"What's that?" Hartley asked anxiously, finding it a trend that her ideas were usually always better than his.

"So, I like where you were heading, disfigurement is always a shock factor when it comes to serial murders. But look at the things the killer has done so far, that level of of gore isn't something he or she would do themselves. Ripping the jaw open and slamming her hands inside is too sadistic for them I think. But what if, okay, what had happened was that before being shoved into the water heater, like, she couldn't fit, so he broke all her bones and when he figured that she still couldn't fit, he forcibly tore out her femurs and pushed her legs up behind her head? Huh? Huh? Gore with a purpose!"

"This is why you're my apprentice," Hartley chuckled, moving in to rewrite the scene, although just as he was about to, Daisy's fingers flexed out across the keyboard.

"May I?" she asked politely, looking as though she would die if she didn't get to. When Hartley nodded, she squeaked with joy and took his seat as he jumped out of it, then he watched as Daisy arched her body and destroyed the keyboard with her typing speed. It was something Hartley was jealous of, since he himself took time to write, and while she was fast, she was also good. Her writing style and level of detail was similar to his, which he assumed was because he mentored her.

"Don't go too far, last time you did that it was good stuff but if you write too much of this then it might be your story instead of mine," Hartley remarked, moving off to make himself some more coffee.

"I'm just writing this scene, don't worry, Mr. Salk," she replied casually, the clicking of the keys rebounding off every millisecond. "I feel like the story is almost done anyways, we've had good build up, I feel like if we drag it on too long it might get boring, and I'm starting to run out of ideas for deaths."

"You might be right, and if I release it around the same time the murders end, people might see similarities easier."

"And at the same time, knowing the killer or how it ends might influence your ending and make it similar, making it even more similar!"

“I guess we should end it soon,” Hartley nodded to the air. “How many pages we have?”

“213.”

“Long enough for a thriller.”

“Include ending length though,” Daisy started. “At least 20 to 30 pages if well written and suspenseful enough. And are we having falling resolution or is it a shock ending? The story seems to rely on shock in the way we’ve constructed it, so it’d make sense to have a shock ending instead of giving resolution. Are we killing off the main character? Which character are we going to have be the killer? The second main character, I feel like that fits since the other character has been kinda sidelined the whole time and I feel like that might make it less satisfying.”

“You’re right,” Hartley agreed.

The two of them bickered away for the rest of the afternoon until Daisy trotted off back to her house, zooming away down the street on her bike. Hartley watched her go, and wondered about going further in the story while she was gone. He had already done so before, and it was his book anyway. In any case, the book had reached its finale, and if the finale wasn’t his own idea, then why put his name as the author?

Hartley sat down at his desk and brought the document back up, seeing that Daisy had left notes on it for her thoughts on how to reach the scene of the climax which evidently would take place at the main character’s house. The set up was put in broad strokes, the sidelined character killed off essentially by being fodder, something Hartley agreed with and Daisy had given him a beautifully crafted death that she had went and typed herself. Found in the woods, legs broken, and the neck snapped back with a thick log rammed down his throat and into his chest. Hartley guessed she was leaving the ending to him, a note at the bottom was typed: “Here’s to an ending I know I’ll be happy with! Thanks for all you’ve taught me, make this story your best! Best wishes, Daisy :)”.

He chuckled, knowing full well he could never type fast enough to finish that night, but he would at

least get to the end of her set up. So he leaned back in the seat, stretching out with a groan, and set his fingers to work crafting what would lead into the end of the story.

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It was four in the morning when his computer gave him the news notification. Another victim found, Hartley was quick to open and look at it. Another one so soon, it chilled him, and at the same time he wondered what the circumstances were and if he had missed an opportunity. Daisy probably wouldn’t mind too terribly if it turned out to be something great and he used it instead of her idea. This thought crossed his mind as Hartley went into the report with an open mind and eager, yet somber, expectations. The boy had been found by a casual jogger who thrived on early morning workouts, so the details weren’t hidden by the police. Then his heart stopped.

There was a banging at the door, three loud knocks that rattled his senses in what had been silence in the dark. With shivers crawling all over his body, his eyes wide with realization and shock, Hartley rose to his feet and steadily moved towards his door in the next room over. Every step seemed to fall into nothing, and the world seemed immense around him, like everything like swirling and expanding. Then he reached the door and took the handle firmly, clenching his fingers tightly on the warm, curved piece of metal before turning it and pulling the weighty wooden door open.

In the dark of the night, looking small, frail, and grieving was Daisy holding herself while wearing a shoddy rain jacket and a pair of sweatpants. It was obvious she hadn’t dressed before coming over.

“Darren’s dead,” she sniffed, her eyes stained a gross red from crying. Her lip was still quivering, snot dripping from her nose. “They...they found him in the forest...he’s dead...I didn’t want to be at home.”

Hartley only stood and looked at her, the girl he had spent the last few weeks with, bonding with, treating her like a guest in his home, a friend, and a minute earlier he would've welcomed her in with comforting arms; however...

"I wanted to come here, the story..it makes this all seem not real, I don't want this to seem real..." she sniffled loudly, looking as though she would break down in tears again.

"It's you..." Hartley muttered hollowly, taking a step back.

"Mr. Salk?" she asked quietly, lips still quivering, her hands tucked firmly under each other and out of sight as she shivered.

"I saw the description of what happened to him..." Hartley said, inching backwards further as Daisy took her first step into the house. "And it, it's just like how you described the death you wrote for me to write...you're the killer..."

"..You saw the news..." she said somberly, her expression shifting on a dime from sadness to regret to extreme guilt.

"Every death you wrote for the story," Hartley started, his heart pounding in his throat. "You didn't blindly come up with those deaths...those were the real deaths that you caused..."

"You weren't supposed to find out," she said softly, still appearing distraught as she steadily moved further into the house after him as he backed away. "Not yet."

"Why?" he asked plainly. "Why'd you kill all those people?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Hartley backed into his desk chair, the plastic roller seat bumping away from his rump loudly as the wheels spun against the ground. Being in his work room diverted his attention to his computer and the novel.

"Why help me write about it all? You helped me write it, everything you put in, every death, every character detail, were things you knew because you're the killer...why?"

"Because..." Daisy began, seemingly searching her head for words she had previously memorized but lost in the moment. Frustration flushed across her for a moment, but washed away and the guilt came back. "It's your book, Hartley, you're the author. And when everyone sees it, they'll think you're the killer writing about your own story...and I can go free."

"No, I'll tell, I'll tell them it was you," Hartley announced carefully. "I'll delete it!" he snapped and whipped around to the small laptop on the desk; however, just as he was about to work his fingers across the keyboard and delete the lengthy nonfiction account, he heard the click of a revolver and turned to see Daisy with a heavy pistol in her gloved hands. She looked despairing.

"I'm sorry," she whimpered, beginning to cry again. "I knew what I planned to do from the beginning...but...but-" she said, her words breaking as she tried to talk. Hartley could see her hands shaking terribly. "I didn't think I'd like you so much, that you'd actually become a real friend."

"I am your friend, Daisy," Hartley said stiffly, making sure to keep still in wake of the weapon pointed at him from just a few feet away. His heart was pounding even harder now. "What did you plan?" he inquired, keen on keeping her talking.

"Help you write your book, and make it exactly like what you were trying to avoid similarities with. Then everyone would see, and you would be accused of the murders, and I would just be the young girl you tried to victimize," she explained morosely, sniffing loudly. "How far did you get in the story? How far in what I left you to write?"

"All of it," Hartley said to her. "I got to the end of your planning, I wrote everything you left for me, but Daisy, it's okay, you don't have to do this. Your plan was great, brilliant, and...I need more like that. The police don't have any evidence or leads to point to you, just the story, so we can scrap it, get

rid of it completely and just go on with our lives. I'll keep your secret," he said wholeheartedly, ready to do anything to save his life, and hers. As he spoke he realized that he really did care about her, and she really was a friend to him. "Put the gun down, and we can start a new story, and no one else has to die." Hartley gave her the warmest smile he could muster, hoping to see some flicker of agreement in Daisy's watery eyes, then moved as carefully as he could to try and resolve the scene with a hug; the most cliché climax conclusion he could think of.

Daisy cried out as she pulled the trigger on the gun, her aim not failing her and the bullet drilling between Hartley's eyes. Her mentor and friend toppled over on the ground clumsily, falling with a thud, and after a second of silent shock Daisy regained her thoughts and worked fast. She put the gun in his hand, bolted to the computer, and wrote. Her nimble fingers transversed the keyboard at record speed like they always did and she finished the story, she finished the story writing as Hartley who confessed to the murders and killed himself so they could never catch him, leaving his final novel, leaving a shocking conclusion to his career from someone so desperate for an original story he would kill for it. As Daisy had it, the killer had finished a satisfying story before ending his life, while she was just a young girl accidentally caught in the middle of everything.