

Leigh's comments on **Sarah's Journey**, by Jennie

Hi, Jennie – Thanks for sharing Sarah's Journey with me.

Your prologue is intriguing, and the location is wonderful – Greece is an underused setting, and it offers great promise for a romantic background. In both of the scenes you've shared in your first chapter, Sarah's situation has the potential to be gripping – both the nightmarish feeling of knowing you're being chased but nobody will believe you, and the almost under-cover escape from a boss/job/ex are things the reader can understand and empathize with.

Unfortunately, in neither case have you been able to take advantage of the potential and achieve the dramatic and emotional power that the scene could have. Reading this is sort of like reading shorthand, or perhaps it's more like reading your notes for the scene, rather than the scene itself. We get snippets, but not enough feelings or images or evidence to feel that we're there and taking part in the action.

That effect may be deliberate in the prologue – and as a rule, prologues should be intriguing and suspenseful, which often means using a somewhat telegraphic style – but here we get so little information and so little emotion that it's more an intellectual puzzle than a gripping read. Instead of being breathless with concern for Sarah (because either she's in danger or she's paranoid), the reader is trying to figure out what you are trying to say. She's trying to get a grip on the story and the character. While that terse style may work in literary fiction, in romance it generally doesn't – especially if it's the emotions which are missing. Why does Sarah feel that she's in danger? Why is she so immediately reassured when the street is suddenly empty? (Couldn't the bad guy have deliberately stepped out of sight? Why is she sure she's safe just because she can't see him any longer?) When she rushes into the store, why does she feel secure with the stranger behind the counter? She's never been there before; she's never seen him; she hasn't been directed to him – why would she trust him, especially when he's dismissed her feelings without even listening to her? When he says he knows where to take her, why does she believe that he will actually take her back to her friends? Why does she trust him?

Despite the promise offered by the Greek setting, there's really nothing here to show that she's in Greece. Except for the Greek sign and the man calling her Kyria, she might as well be in Los Angeles or Tampa. Where's the atmosphere?

We don't need lots of description, and in fact a lot of description would get in the way of the action. But a few telling details would make us feel that we're right there. What does Rhodes smell like? Sound like? Feel like? How is it different from Sarah's home? How was it different two hours ago, or before she felt she was being followed?

POV in romance is generally third person, selective; that means what the reader sees is what the character sees, so when Sarah "hadn't time to notice the brass plaque on the old stone wall" then we've veered into an omniscient narrator, or we have the author commenting, and this leaves the reader distant from the heroine and makes it even harder to be personally involved in her danger.

The prologue left me thinking of Sarah as a young woman – not terribly experienced or well-traveled, possibly mistaken about being followed, perhaps naive in being so easily convinced she's out of danger. But then the story begins with her having daughters in college. How much time has elapsed between the two scenes? It's not necessary to instantly have an explanation or connection between prologue and first scene, but here the disconnect left me scratching my head in confusion. If the story is about Sarah escaping from her job and her ex-husband, why did we go to Rhodes for the prologue at all? The two scenes seem to be about different women who share only the same name.

I was also surprised, given the nature of the prologue, that when Sarah began thinking of when she was young and thought life would be smooth, she started reflecting on her co-worker rather than thinking of the trip to Greece and the friend who had accompanied her there. Again, I was left wondering why we had the prologue, since it doesn't seem to be connected to the main story.

In fact, I'm wondering why you chose to start telling the story where you did. Setting the prologue aside (for now), I'm specifically asking about the scenes in the office where Sarah works and what they add to the story. We see her emailing a resignation; we know she's chosen this way to escape from both boss and ex-husband; we see her office furniture. We don't see the going-away party or the co-workers, except for one – and we find out more about the co-worker than we do Sarah. If the main part of the story is what happens after she leaves this job, and the characters here (boss, ex-husband, co-workers) aren't of continuing importance in the story, then I'm not sure why I need to know all of these details, especially right at the beginning.

Your final scene, on the other hand, starts with a hint of intrigue – “The following Wednesday began like any other Wednesday” – and I’m wondering if that isn’t where the action of the story really starts, as this new job gets off the ground and Sarah finds out why this day isn’t going to be like any other Wednesday after all.

Sarah is an intriguing character with a lot of past – Greece, ex-husband, ex-job, friends, kids – which offers lots of opportunities for story development and showing the character in action. I’d like to see you reassess your reasons for starting the story with these particular scenes, and give thought to how – before long – you’ll show the reader the connection between the prologue and the main story.

Thank you for sharing your work with me.

Leigh Michaels