

The Advantage of an Iterative Writing Process for Novels and Short Stories

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Abstract

Many writers struggle with completing a novel when they follow the traditional process of working through plot, character and world building problems in prewriting activities followed by sitting and drafting the story in a linear process scene by scene and chapter by chapter. This thesis proposes an alternate iterative approach. Iterative drafting creates multiple smaller versions of the full story that build to a first draft. By moving several problem solving activities into the draft itself writers can find increased opportunity for quick analysis, low effort corrections and a more efficient drafting method.

This thesis lays out the description and support for an iterative process and then applies the theory to drafting a novel in the creative manuscript. The conclusion offers a brief reflection the how the process of iterative drafting aligned with the theory.

Keywords: creative writing, first draft, writing process

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1. Artist Statement

For centuries there has been one primary method for drafting narrative fiction. Granted, it was a necessity when writing by hand or using a typewriter. Edits to manually produced pages were painstaking and required potentially extensive work for the surrounding text to accommodate changes. Our technology has changed, enabling seamless edits that insert and delete text. This has allowed writers to be more flexible with their drafting methods, though the prescribed methods in academia have barely changed. My thesis proposes a strategic, iterative method to produce the first draft of novels and short stories. While drafting methods may only seem relevant to writers and those who teach writing, similar iterative methods can be applied to daily and professional tasks in order to create efficiency and potentially time saving processes in everyday life.

I published my first novel in 2014 after four years of writing what was originally supposed to be a short story. My initial goal was a simple exercise in plotting. I'd written scenes and developed characters for years, but I never quite knew how to structure a story around them or figure out the elusive *what happened* that would turn a moment with the characters into a story.

When I began drafting *Tattered Heart*, I sat down to write the beginning of the story, because I didn't know what else to do. I didn't read any books about how to write a novel or research any methods of writing. I figured all the *how* in the world wouldn't tell me *what* the story was. The only way to figure it out was to write my way into the story, a discovery process if ever there was one.

As I continued writing I developed something of a process, or perhaps I accepted my amorphous discovery process and repeated it intentionally. Eventually, I described it as taking the adage “write what you know” for a little spin. I’d write what I knew of a story, which for me usually entailed characters, a good bit of dialogue and a thin plot. By the time I reached the end of the story (there was definitely a beginning, middle, climax and end in that initial draft or what I referred to as the narrative outline) I knew more of the story than when I started. So, I went to the beginning and “wrote” it again revising some but mostly inserting new text. The second time around what I knew of the story often consisted of emotional logic and dialogue tags while I strengthened the plot. It generally took three to four versions of what I referred to as my layering process (since I put the story together one layer on top of another) before I had a manuscript that I mostly revised rather than continued to write. Admittedly, it wasn’t a great process which is why I was always looking to authors whose work I appreciated to learn what their process looked like and if there was anything I could learn from them. But this process served me through two novels and six interconnected short stories that, taken altogether, were novel length.

Then I entered the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) for Creative Writing program at Liberty University and encountered my first grading rubric which required a “first draft” to have fully developed characters, plot and setting (First Draft). It seemed ludicrous to me that anyone would sit down and be able to write all the elements of a story in one sitting or in a single draft. No wonder people got writer’s block! I quickly realized, however, this was not an isolated expectation. This idea of a fully formed first draft was the default view; the standard expectation of a first draft with few exceptions.

Even outside academia I saw the same full composition first draft mentality. Bestselling authors such as Brandon Sanderson and Maggie Stiefvater have lectures about crafting plot,

developing characters, reviewing their prose. When it comes to discussions of the writing process most of the attention is focused on discovery writing versus outlining. Discovery writers uncover the story as they move through their drafts. They often talk about throwing away thousands of words, sometimes entire chapters or entire drafts, when they determine the story has gone wrong. Outliners tend to throw away less work as they know where they're going when they start. And yet when it comes down to it, both discovery and outline writers sit and write their novels from beginning to end, one chapter at a time. It's a method that works and the method that is taught to most creative writing students. Many people think it's the only way to write. What else can we do but sit down and start at the beginning then write out the story, characters, dialogue, setting, plot and all, as we go?

As I've mentioned, this originated from a legacy of handwritten and typewriter produced stories that essentially required full compositions from beginning to end. Even though technology has changed in a way that allows for revision and less linear writing, our teaching methods are still based on this same old world model. But what if it's not the only method?

I struggled for some time between the expected full composition drafting methods and my approach which built the story up layer by layer. Readings for various classes affirmed the frustrations and waste of the traditional writing method as authors talked about an editing process that nearly always required trimming the narrative down. I recognized that my process alleviated many common pain points including discarded drafts and getting stuck. Writer's block makes perfect sense if you're writing a chapter and get stuck on any number of potential details. What if you don't know what the room looks like? Or what the atmosphere feels like for the characters? How does one focus on what happens next in the plot when you're also trying to sort out what the characters say in dialogue? But if you don't shackle yourself to all the details or needing to

write all the elements of a story at once you're free to: skip details you don't know, focus on plot and come back to dialogue, leave out the setting entirely and write the essential pieces of the scene in order to maintain writing momentum.

These options may create a messy first draft. It may even be a document that some writers and teachers classify as prewriting rather than an actual draft. But progression through a story to the end is one of the consistently important elements of a first draft. As writers we're struggling to take ideas and wrestle them into substance as words. Once the idea is bound up in words then we have something to work with as a sculptor works with clay. We adjust. We manipulate. We mold the story to more closely align with our original idea.

But first we have to get something of the story written and there are a few exceptions to the traditional drafting method. Leigh Bardugo (bestselling author of *Shadow and Bone*) talks about starting with a "zero draft" where she writes out the entire story on one page (Brabenec). She has said for the zero draft she is telling the story to herself. Lindsay Eager (author of *Hour of the Bees*) offers a course on her website for "fast drafting" which involves getting the story down as quickly as possible, skipping over any gaps or putting in placeholders as necessary to avoid writer's block.

The process I propose is more strategic and structured. It draws on my experiences as both Product Manager (designing and documenting software) and Project Manager (creating processes then working with teams to complete projects using standardized and predictable methods). Creating a new mobile app or computer program, much like drafting a novel, can be an overwhelming project. The business of software development required organization and formal processes for success. Agile methodology, developed in 2001 (IBM), provides structure for a fluid and flexible endeavor that can be applied to drafting novels.

Admittedly, software development and creative writing might seem unrelated. Software development is technical in nature, analytical, and leverages the left-brain characteristics of detail-oriented facts and cold logic. Creative writing is, well, creative. It uses imagination, emotion and visualization captured in language. How can these two seemingly divergent endeavors both use a similar methodology?

Whether logical or creative, any large project can benefit from processes that start small and build upon previous versions to create a complete end product. Using what I know of agile methodology (I became a certified ScrumMaster in 2015) I focus on the different story elements to create different iterations of a story. The various courses I took at Liberty University as part of my MFA program enriched my theory by teaching me how to create structure around my process. Several courses also informed how an iterative process can be formulated as a curriculum to share with other writers.

This iterative drafting method is based on a key tenant of agile methodology: minimum viable product. MVP is the absolute least design and development required for a product to function. I can't help but be reminded of the moment in *Spaceballs* where Lone Starr (Bill Pullman) insists after crash landing that they "take only what you need to survive." That is the essence of MVP. In writing, MVP would be the plot since characters and setting don't constitute a story unless something happens. One might change the acronym slightly to stand for minimum viable plot. From there setting, character and prose are added to the manuscript each as their own iteration. The strategic sequences add details and context to deepen and enrich the manuscript and create a comprehensive draft.

At first glance an iterative process may seem like more work than traditional drafting. Logically, writing something four times would take more time and effort than writing it once.

Years of agile software development, however, have shown that this isn't the case. Small, strategic work increases speed to production and minimizes unnecessary or throw away work. In writing, drafting smaller pieces more quickly allows the writer to analyze the work and determine what's working and what isn't working faster. This has the potential for the author to decide if they want to continue with a particular story or not. It also enables them to correct course sooner in the process. These benefits, and more, have the potential for authors to produce more work in a shorter timeframe with potentially less effort.

My process for the thesis has been to closely examine traditional drafting methodology through research and observation in the MFA courses I've taken and lectures from other authors. I have also researched some of the alternative drafting methods available from authors through interviews or posted on their websites. I have found that authors don't often discuss the process of creating a first draft unless they're doing something other than the traditional method. I hope to expand the conversation around writing processes, adding my perspective and experience to the current body of work.

A significant part of my process has also been to validate the merits of an iterative writing process. It's easy enough to explain a particular way to write. It's another entirely for that methodology to be worth examining in a thesis. Identifying the value of the process to other writers is important context to offer. This can only be achieved by presenting unbiased comparisons of other methods along with their unique advantages. There is no one way to write that works for every writer. The more options we have available to us and the more diversity of tools and methods we can explore, the more potential we have to improve our craft.

My vision is that other writers would recognize an alternate approach to the writing process. I hope that the iterative drafting process offered in my thesis is not the last or only

iterative process identified by writers; that it is perhaps instead the first iteration of many. As we break out of the old world, traditional model perhaps we can find less linear, non-sequential ways of writing. Though, we will continue to require grading rubrics that require one specific process. But what if creative writing classes had multiple assignments and that each assignment required a different writing methodology so that students could explore different avenues for their writing?

As a Christian scholar, I recognize that we are what J.R.R. Tolkien referred to as “sub-creators” (145) made in the image of a creator God. Where God spoke His creation into being we fumble and grasp to take the vision in our minds and in our hearts and give it substance in words. Robin McKinley said they’re just words, simple and predictable things, until they’re crumbling “to mortar dust and broken eggshells in your hands.”

We need processes to create because we are merely sub-creators. In this season of my scholarship, these processes of creative writing are fascinating. What sort of tricks do we play with our minds and our hands to make what we end up saying align more closely with what we meant to say? Because it is what we mean to say that matters.

I admire the work of some of the great Christian, fiction writers. C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Madeleine L’Engle. They each created worlds that revealed to humanity some part of who God is and what it means to live in a world where He is recognized as God. Madeline L’Engle encouraged peace and harmony, looking to and reflecting the creator in her stories (16). Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* presented an alignment with God as the default when one opposes evil (207). Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia* showed a world view of life with God through characters that displayed and valued honor, bravery and kindness so that we might aspire to such qualities ourselves. Pastor Levi Lusko observes that Jesus taught in parables which “are

earthly stories to convey heavenly truths.” That is the sort of Christian writer that I want to be. I want my work to reflect a world full of heavenly truths, the sort of world that God would have us inhabit, even if we are bound to a fallen world.

While an iterative process doesn’t impact the content of the work produced, it can make the process less frustrating. And if the writer is less consumed by the process of getting words down, they can then focus on what they’re trying to say rather than muddle through the process.

2. Critical Paper

2.1 Introduction

Creative writing is inherently an iterative process. There is the first draft, and then authors revise, create a second draft, revise again. There are versions of the story where this character almost died until the author changed their mind and versions of the story with characters that readers never meet because they don't make it through to the final draft. Therefore, the concept of a thesis focused on an iterative process for creative writing may seem unnecessary; elucidating on the obvious; irrelevant in light of an activity already fraught with versions. But what if we shift our perspective, rather than iterating *from* a first draft, we iterate *to* that first draft. In this context, iterative drafting offers a more efficient process with the potential for authors to create higher quality work in a shorter period of time.

Like any big project “there is no hiding the fact that writing well is a complex, difficult, and time-consuming process” (Elbow 3). But what happens when the daunting task of sitting down to create that first composition is broken into strategic pieces? Examining project management in other areas such as building construction and software development suggests that we can be more effective in writing by focusing on one element of story and then another. We can write faster when we place decision points at deliberate intervals. For some writers, hammering out a full composition will remain their most efficient method to a first draft. For other writers, the process of iteration alleviates stress points making it easier to compose a draft. For those who teach writing, an iterative process increases the variety of tools they can provide to students. And for those who neither write or teach, understanding the concept presented here

of breaking down large projects into small, functional and repeatable steps may cast light on ways to improve everyday personal and professional tasks.

For writers of centuries past there was little choice but to draft a full composition from beginning to end. Even if paper and ink weren't scarce, the trouble of inserting or changing even a few words resulted in the need to rewrite entire pages so that the surrounding text could accommodate the change. With the advent of typewriters, pages could more quickly be filled with words and retyped to adapt to revisions. But entire pages still needed to be retyped to rearrange themselves around revisions. Today's digital technology enables writers to edit in the midst of typing, to easily insert and change words, to delete and rearrange text with a simple copy and paste. As a result, compositions no longer need to be crafted wholly from beginning to end.

There is some reluctance to both study and teach the process of drafting. Graeme Harper attributes this reluctance to the "romance of the creative, where...we have not approached the creative critically, for fear of interrupting it" (*Future* 605). This is supported by psychological analysis of creative writing where "the common view [is] that creativity consists of extraordinary thinking occurring suddenly, via bursts of inspiration coming from the unconscious" (Forgeard 326).

The implication of this view of writing is that it "suggests that creative individuals are able to spontaneously produce high-quality material" (Forgeard 326). Most experienced writers would counter this view, acknowledging that high-quality material is occasionally spontaneous but more often forged from planning, analysis and revision. The fusion of these ideas, that creativity is spontaneous and unknowable, and quality is elevated by activities around the writing process, has created a modern school of thought focused on prewriting activities (to fuel and

direct spontaneous drafting) and editing techniques (to enhance what has been created). As a result, there is a great deal of literature focused on prewriting: outlining, plot structure, character arc, discovery writing versus outlining and more. Lorraine López confirms a prewriting approach assuring writers that “once decisions regarding setting, characterization, and perspective have been made, writers often set about drafting the work” (20).

One can also find investigation into and prescriptive methods for all levels of revision from high level story editing to copy editing for proper grammar and spelling. But when it comes to the writing stage the spontaneous process myth persists. Stories “are either born fully formed or not. The process is basically opaque, and simply not visible for analysis” (Gilbert and Macleroy 256). This is exemplified in *Write Right!* which details “The Write Right Story Writing Progression,” an eleven-point process where step eleven is: “Write The Story. Focus on detail, energy, emotion, word choice, and character feeling and information as you write” (61).

Authors on the other hand can’t escape investigating their process because readers are curious. Popular authors in particular often offer process texts in the form of interviews, podcasts or blog posts. Leigh Bardugo echoes the idea of a spontaneous process when discussing how she wrote her first bestselling novel, *Shadow and Bone*, “I thought you had the idea and the story flowed out of you” (“Epic Journey”). By and large, from Brandon Sanderson (bestselling author of *Mistborn*) to Maggie Stiefvater (bestselling author of *The Raven Boys*) and Amie Kaufman (bestselling co-author of *Illuminae*), whatever planning and strategies they discuss inevitably end with sitting down to write the story one chapter at a time. Bardugo reveals that “I tried to write a bunch of books. I would get an idea and I would race into writing. I was so excited. Momentum would usually carry me through 50 pages or so and then I would hit a serious bump or I would lose steam” (“Tasks Writing a Novel”). Is it only determination and self-discipline that can carry

a writer through to a complete manuscript? Or can an iterative process support the work when momentum fails?

The iterative process put forth in this thesis is based on Agile methodology which originated in 2001 when seventeen software engineers came together to form a more efficient process for software development. The existing process, known as waterfall project management, could not adapt quickly enough within the technology world. Waterfall methodology requires that “goals and outcome [are] established from the beginning” (Forbes). As a result, the entire project must be conceived, outlined, given a timeframe and budget at the outset. The work of planning a project can sometimes take a year or more to identify and account for every contingency before work begins.

Waterfall methodology is “also known as the linear sequential lifecycle model” (IBM). To draw a comparison to the process of drafting a novel or short story, the writing is linear (in a straight line from beginning to end) and it is sequential (each chapter requires that the previous chapters be completed first). It isn’t difficult to establish that a waterfall process is the default expectation for writing first drafts of novels and short stories.

Authors often talk in interviews about sitting down to write one chapter at a time. Amie Kaufman talks about trying to find time to write “bit by bit, I’d eke out one chapter after another” (“No time”). National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) is founded on the idea of writing 50,000 words of a full novel in one month. Kaufman used NaNoWriMo to write her first novel and describes how “you throw sanity to the wind, and just wear your pjs and drink too much caffeine and go, go, go until you’ve written fifty thousand words” (“Draft Finished”). While the waterfall drafting method works for many authors, others may find the process overwhelming and as inefficient as the engineers found waterfall development. At the rate

technology changed the entire project could be irrelevant by the time code development work was slated to begin. They needed something faster and more adaptable.

Agile methodology takes a project and breaks it down into functional pieces. “Instead of drafting lengthy project requirements at the onset, an agile team breaks out the product into specific features, and they tackle each one” which is combined “with other functional code from previous iterations” (IBM). The first specific feature is known as the minimum viable product (MVP) which is the absolute smallest, simplest version that allows the product to fully exist and function in the real world. Think of a car, its functional job is to get passengers from here to there. MVP of a car requires wheels, a frame for passengers to sit on, and basic mechanisms to control the car’s motion.

The MVP is released so that future versions are influenced by real world use and user feedback rather than designer speculation about what users will want or how they might use it. Software engineers then build up on that MVP: adding new functionality, making improvements, simplifying user interaction, etc. In the example of a car, the designer may think the most important next feature would be safety bags or better acceleration. But in reality, users want cushioned seats and a windshield.

In the decades that agile methodology has been used in software development, certain benefits of the process have become evident. Releasing MVP versions of a product enables the product to more quickly be available for users. The logic is that a small quick version of something is better than nothing at all. Smaller versions mean less time and money wasted if the product fails. Small versions also require a smaller codebase, which allows for faster and more efficient adaptations to keep the product viable. Forbes observes that “there is a lot of flexibility to change project direction and experiment with new directions.”

2.2 Iterative Process Description

Creative writing is not software development, however, and we are not releasing small versions of a text to readers. How can an iterative methodology apply to creating a first draft and what advantages does it offer? The comparison of waterfall projects with traditional drafting is fairly straight forward. Both focus on the whole project and attempt to create something fully formed out of the gate. Where agile methodology breaks a project into functional elements, drafts can be broken down into the basic story elements (plot, characters, dialogue, setting and worldbuilding, and finally prose). The iterative method I propose approaches each story element as individual iterations.

In “Architecture of a Story” Lorraine López cautions that “successful stories result when writers incorporate setting, sensory details, characterization, plot, dialogue, consistent perspective, and effective prose rhythm from the first draft” (14). She reasons that “just as no builder would contemplate erecting an entire house using nothing but a handsaw or just a hammer, no writer should be limited to only one or two elements of fiction” (14). A builder does, however, lay the foundation first, add the frame followed by the roof, interior walls and so on. Large projects of all kinds benefit from being broken down into smaller segments which are approached individually and incorporated strategically into the whole. Iterative methodology approaches drafts in the same manner, not limiting writers to a single tool but focusing on each element strategically to create a cohesive whole.

While characters and setting may be interesting to a reader, they don’t comprise a story unless something happens. Plot, therefore, is the first iteration and provides a functional, though not fully formed, version of the story. The writing is mostly general description and is similar to

a process Maggie Stiefvater suggests: “Write what happens in the chapter. I mean just a narrative description. No style. Just words. . . . And that way you can go back through and later populate it with actual prose now that you no longer have to untangle the actual order of events” (“Prose”). In an iterative process the writer thinks beyond a chapter and writes the entire story from beginning to end similar to the way a painter creates a sketch before working with oils. Throw out the old adage of ‘show, don’t tell’ and tell the story to imaginary readers and to yourself.

This MVP, minimum viable plot if you will, is not intended to create a rigid adherence to only writing plot at the exclusion of all else. The goal of a plot iteration is to externalize the actions and events of the story in the easiest, fastest manner possible, “it’s a draft that has not lingered on any one plot problem or snarly piece of prose” (Eager). If certain elements of worldbuilding are integral to the plot logic, they would be included. If a bit of dialogue is easy for the author to compose and helps them identify how the story continues to move forward, then it serves the plot rather than distracting from it. The key is to mostly stay focused on plot in order to create a small frame of the story and to move forward without getting stuck. This allows the story to be externalized using a pen as “a machine to think with” since “writers thoughts can be improved when externalized onto paper or some other medium” (Freiman 49).

The advantage of an MVP is that the writer doesn’t need to know everything before composing the plot iteration. Processes focused on writing activities around the drafting process (planning and editing) identify it as a problem if “students don’t include detail because they haven’t created the detail to include, because they began writing the story before they could vividly imagine, in multisensory detail, the story and each character” (Haven 7). The solution, common throughout a variety of creative writing methods, is to sort out the details and imagery before the writer begins. Kendall Haven identified seven problems that “derail students creative

writing efforts” and insists that “the first five of these fundamental problems must be solved before students begin to write” (8).

With an iterative approach lack of detail is not a problem. In fact, lack of detail is an advantage since the MVP is not the place for multisensory detail. That comes later and allows for discovery to infuse the iterative process. No matter how extensive the planning or how simple the drafting “a novel will develop as it is written, for new connections will be made, and new insights will occur to the writer” (“Form and the Fantastic”). A minimum viable plot requires fewer writing activities before starting the draft, allowing the writer to understand the story by writing it. MVP is best supported with a grasp of the story arc and basic plot structure, fundamental understanding of the characters within the plot, perhaps an outline, and does not require anything else.

Once the author has a solid MVP then the next iterations are more fluid and may change with each project. At this stage the story will move from the general description to “specific descriptions of characters, traits, actions, reactions, emotions, things, places” (Haven 73). Many teachers encourage authors to “be specific in your writing” (Haven 73) and iterations keep the specifics strategic.

The second iteration may focus on characters and emotional logic. This version may dive into scenes with dialogue and physical action. It might add character descriptions as well as expound on motivations so that the character movements within the story align with the plot.

Or a second iteration may focus on setting and worldbuilding, enriching the connection of the reader to the space of the story. This may offer context on how the world of the story influences the plot. It may provide details on the rules of magic or technology so that the course of the plot is more easily connected to the realities of the world.

Or an author may step outside linear drafting altogether and dive into separate scenes with important foreshadowing. Working on these scenes individually might ensure the foreshadowing is present but hidden within the context of the scene. Focusing on these scenes also allows quick, small analysis to confirm they serve the story as needed and requires small effort correction if needed.

Since each of the basic story elements are necessary, they are added to the narrative, each as a new iteration, in whatever order works best for the author. This order may change project to project, or the author may find they develop a particular sequence that works well for them time and again. The final iteration, often, is prose. Many authors find it easier to determine how they want to say something once they are secure in what they want to say. Leaving prose to the end of the process leverages the advantages of isolating the decision points around specific words in a way that doesn't distract from the momentum of other story elements.

2.3 Iterative Process Benefits

A minimum viable plot iteration may seem foreign for writers accustomed to the traditional method, but Peter Elbow reminds us that “there is no good reason why you must try to produce something in your first cycle of writing that resembles the form of what you want to end up with” (47). The important thing is to externalize the story, translate it from idea to written words. This allows for analysis, revision and adaptation. Even outside of creative circles it has been established that writing ideas and concepts out helps us track what we know and what we don’t know (Strong 43). Once the story has been externalized then the author can see the form it has taken, what’s working and what isn’t, and what it still needs. Waterfall methodology requires that the entire manuscript be externalized in a linear method before it can be reviewed and analyzed. Iterative methodology externalizes specific and strategic elements of the novel for analysis and enables authors to pivot early, quickly and without significant loss of words.

One of the primary efficiencies of an iterative method is the ability to fail fast, which is a common adage in software development. The idea is that failure is a part of creation. The goal is to limit failures to small products so failure can be recognized more quickly, walked away from more easily while incurring less loss or corrected rapidly with less effort. The same is true when working with a first draft.

Todd Lubart tested the impact of evaluating creative works early in the process, late or cyclically (twice through the process). The results of Lubart’s experiment “showed that students who evaluated their work early produced more creative stories” than the students in the other control groups (Forgeard 327). Plot iterations allow for early evaluation of a fully functional small product. This enables faster evaluation than reading a 50,000 word draft. Plot holes, which

are inconsistencies and errors in story logic, can be recognized more easily in a small frame without distraction by characterization or setting. Failures, if the plot arc or climax aren't working, can be corrected with less effort in a small draft. Even if it requires eliminating entire scenes, the loss of words is less in an iteration than with a waterfall version of the scenes. And if the author simply decides the story is not working and walks away from it, less time and effort put into only writing the plot means the author has failed fast and can move onto the next project.

Beyond handling failure in an efficient manner, authors can pivot in big ways more efficiently with iterations. In the same way that small ships turn more easily than large ships, stories can be given a different climax or entirely new trajectory with less effort. Peter Elbow observes that “what prevents most people from being really critical of their own writing is the fear of having to throw away everything” (10). Iterations allow authors to be critical and make big moves without fearing significant loss of words.

Iterations also provide a better use of the author's time and energy for the work they keep. Sol Stein teaches that “your first objective in a general revision is to tighten the manuscript. I know of only one novelist who writes tight first drafts that need expanding in revision. The others need cutting, lots of it. It is perfectly normal to overwrite in first drafts” (211). The problem with a draft everything, then cut words approach is that time is wasted on both sides. First there is the wasted effort of writing all the words that end up cut. Then there is the effort of finding and cutting the words the author worked to write.

The logic of an iterative approach is that writers start with the base level essentials. Then in reviewing the minimum viable plot writers identify what more is needed to give the story depth and bring the world to life. Lindsay Eager describes a similar process, “I want to get the shape of the book, a rendering, an idea of where the lights and shadows fall, the rough parts, the

parts where I need to pay attention to detail.” With each iteration the author builds the next level of details and specific fundamentals in. Approaching the work iteratively steers the writer to only add the essentials each time reducing the waste of unnecessary words.

In addition to a more efficient process, writers have the opportunity to improve their skill level and the quality of the finished product through iterations. When a writer is approaching a text with a waterfall mentality, scene by scene, chapter by chapter, it is easy to see how characterization might get lost in trying to execute plot, or plot get muddled from a focus on worldbuilding. Any element might falter when the author is tackling plot, action, characterization, setting and pacing within a chapter all at once. Lopez supports this by observing that beginning writers can neglect sensory detail “in the rush to develop plot, or else they neglect plot altogether while under the spell of their own lyrical language” (14).

But if the same writer is working on a character iteration, then they are likely to create more specific and fully formed characters because they are focused only on characterization and making it work well. Without the distraction of other story elements or trying to do all the things all at once, each element of the story can reasonably be expected to improve through individual attention.

One limitation to iterative drafting is that it requires an ability to focus on stories in a fragmented fashion. Many writers are accustomed to producing fully developed, or mostly developed, text. Approaching a story only one element at a time may be counterproductive to their process. Graeme Harper notes that writing is a process of “harnessing how you think, feel and act” (*Companion 2*). For some writers it may be difficult to fracture what they feel and how they think into strategic pieces, then harness each piece to build a cohesive whole. Some writers

who expect their thinking cannot be fractured in such a way may find an iterative approach productive with training and practice.

Iterations also offer writers the chance to cultivate their skills with a particular story element without the need to draft a waterfall manuscript, similar to the advantages of writing short stories. Brandon Sanderson teaches that the more you write, the more you will instinctively do the easy stuff so that you can focus then on higher level writing problems (BYU Lecture). Small iterations allow authors to write more, faster. A 10,000 to 20,000 word plot iteration takes less time to write than a waterfall 50,000 to 70,000 word draft. A 5,000 to 10,000 word character iteration takes less time than the waterfall draft. By breaking story elements into iterations, authors have the opportunity to focus on one element, perhaps again and again if they'd like.

Authors who wrestle with plot can write multiple plot iterations they never take any farther. Or they can come back after the fifth or sixth plot iteration to an earlier story, make improvements from the experience they've gained in later stories, and then iterate that early story through character and setting to a fully formed draft. Other authors who fly through plot but struggle with dialogue can similarly draft out multiple plot iterations. Then build dialogue again and again on each until they're more comfortable with the process. "Through practice, the author will foster in his or herself a skill both conscious and subconscious, one that recognizes what belongs in a particular novel and that which does not" ("Form and the Fantastic"). Iterations create the opportunity for frequent and repeated practice with full stories and yet smaller products than a 50,000 word manuscript. Segmenting the work strategically may allow the overall composition to be created faster, allowing writers to produce more stories in less time.

In some cases, however, approaching the story in a segmented method may limit the creative process. Some stories emerge fully formed which perpetuates the myth that all stories

are created in such a fashion. In one famous example, C.S. Lewis wrote *Pilgrim's Regress* in only two weeks (Latta). Such flashes of creative expression would be hampered by attempting to methodically implement an iterative process. When a story is not crafted so fluidly it is instead "a series of decisions" ("Mood"). These decision points can delay or exaggerate the time to produce a draft since they force the writer to pause during the process of externalizing the story.

Maggie Stiefvater describes that "at a certain point in that manuscript... sometimes 3,000 words from the end, you've made all of those decisions, and all that remains is for you execute them.... All the words come pouring in there" ("Mood"). Isolating decisions points into different iterations allows for that pouring of words to occur earlier and perhaps more often. For instance, a writer adept at plot can externalize their MVP without stopping to wonder what a character might or might not say in a situation or wrestling over how to reveal an aspect of the character in the midst of the action. The same writer can then in the character iteration focus on those character decisions without the distraction of the action or struggling with prose.

For many writers, decisions can stall them to the point of writer's block which prevents them from moving forward with the remainder of the story. When authors tackle a story with a waterfall mentality it's easy to imagine how they might become overwhelmed facing all the decisions that need to be made about plot, character motivation, setting details, and prose at once. Some writers will insert placeholders to move past decisions they aren't ready to make. Other writers will remain stuck until they make the decision and allow themselves to move forward. Agile writing confines decisions points strategically so an author doesn't falter on a plot point while working on a setting iteration or get stuck on a character decision while drafting a plot iteration.

The advantage of writing fast and writing small products through iterations can be applied to the classroom as well. The pedagogy of iterative drafting has two dimensions. First, the teaching *of* iterative drafting by instructing writers on how to draft a story using an iterative process. Second, teaching *using* iterative drafting as a method to teach various storytelling elements and skills.

Teaching the process of iterative drafting to writers would align well with Willy Maley's PIP method to teach creative writing: "Prescription, Imitation, and Practice" (86). Prescription would take the form of lectures that explain the iterative drafting method along with expected benefits. Imitation could be a variety of classroom activities that showcase different iterations. Through guided activities students would have the opportunity discuss the process, write their own attempts, ask questions and receive immediate feedback. Students would also be able to reflect in journal entries on each step of the iterative process and provide feedback of what works for them and difficulties they experience. Practice would involve drafting a story where the different iterations build toward a portfolio as "the evidence trail of writerly action" (Harper qtd. in Vanderslice 608). While Prescription and Imitation would be important in the initial stages, procedural memory, "slowly accumulated knowledge deeply internalised" would be created through Practice (Leahy 17).

Teaching using iterative drafting methodology offers several advantages. One hindrance of many creative writing courses is the limited timeframe which is often not enough to draft a full 50,000 word composition, let alone analyze and revise such a large product. One traditional solution might be to focus on a limited word count each week, in which case the course would teach scene writing skills, word choice, perhaps some characterization and worldbuilding. Such

an option would struggle to teach plot structure in a way that allows teachers to give feedback based on a full view of the story.

An iterative approach could generate a minimum viable plot that gives the teacher a full view of the story to provide coaching on pacing, plot arc and structure. Teaching using iterative drafting would also create targeted development of multiple skills by focusing on the various iterations. Traditional writing workshops may include lectures or study of various skills, where an iterative method would enable each skill to be put into practice. Another focus for a course might be to instruct the writer to choose one scene and fully develop it through multiple iterations in order to work on scene structure and dialogue. While the timeframe of the class still may not allow for a full 50,000 word composition by the end of the course iterative small products embody “a move away from creative writing as product and toward creative writing as process” (Vanderslice 604).

While this thesis offers one version of an iterative drafting process, the idea is a burgeoning concept for some writers. Lindsay Eager (author of *Hour of the Bees*) teaches a “fast drafting” method. Eager writes a messy waterfall draft, with placeholders and as much of the story as comes easily to the writer, skipping over any decision points that would stall the drafting process (“Fast Drafting”). The goal, similar to a plot only iteration, is to get the story externalized as quickly as possible. This enables Eager to then work in a nonlinear fashion by jumping around to fill in placeholder scenes, improve existing text or rearrange the story as it becomes more solid and well defined.

Leigh Bardugo has talked in several interviews about her “zero draft” which is a one-page version of the story from beginning to end. From the zero draft which is “more like a very

elaborate outline” she fills in what she knows of the story “so, that then becomes a workable first draft” (“Writing Process”).

All three of these iterative methods take advantage of the power of externalization which enables analysis (Monk 106). Analysis creates the opportunity for adaptation. And that is the essence of the writing and revising process. The writing process, in particular, can be “a daunting, even terrifying experience” for many writers (Lopez 13). To brave that daunting experience even seasoned writers conjure all sorts of tricks, adhere to writing rituals, prescribe prewriting activities, and develop new theories simply to dive into the unknown and craft a story.

Ted Dekker defines story as “a series of events involving worthy characters who change as a result of those events” (Creative Way). For some writers it can be difficult to manage worthy characters and transformative events simultaneously in the attempt to craft their abstract ideas into the substance of language. Some writers find that a waterfall method works best for them. Others externalize the essentials of what they need to express in order to move forward with more complete versions.

While no method will alleviate the need to simply sit and write a story, iterative drafting can make a large, often overwhelming process, manageable by strategically breaking down the story elements first to lay out the events, then to weave the characters in and focus the work on how the events change the characters. This creates an efficient, repeatable process that can improve the quality of a story and allow writers to produce stories more quickly. In the end, we all aim for a finished story with great characters and a clear beginning middle and end. When it comes to how we get there, “there are no rules, no absolutes, just alternatives” (Murray 6).

The following creative manuscript showcases the iterative method proposed first through a minimum viable plot iteration which encompasses the full story. Dialogue and description iterations follow, each of which reveal the story in greater detail and yet shorter scope.

3. Creative Manuscript

3.1 Plot iteration

Bob hated nights like this as he stood outside his best friend's birthday party. The flight from New York to LA earlier in the day involved too much sitting; too much stillness. He hadn't burned off enough energy. Now he stood here stuck again. He shouldn't have to be on a list to see Tom. Bob was tempted to walk past the girl at the check in table, but he wasn't the sort of guy who plowed his way through life. Instead, he turned away and texted Tom's assistant.

Alice panicked when she got Bob's text. She knew she'd made a big mistake and expected Tom to fire her for it. Alice raced through the party looking for the event planner and her somewhat mentor, Sarah, to figure out what to do. Sarah took it in stride, heading to the entrance to let Bob in.

When Sarah saw Tom's best friend she stopped in her tracks for a split second. She'd worked in the entertainment industry for a few years and normally someone that good looking ended up on camera. She led him past the check in table and into the party. They flirted a little because both Sarah and Bob were ready to relax and have fun for their own reasons.

When he brushed his fingers over her hand Bob noticed that she felt hot, almost feverish. Sarah pulled back from him; brushed off the moment. She hadn't realized that her blood was turning to lava until he touched her. It frustrated her because she wanted to enjoy the party, not run home to burn safely.

As she tried to think of a graceful exit Tom found them and introduced Bob to his girlfriend, and Sarah's sister, Lisa. Tom made a silly toast that Bob saved him from. Then Sarah pulled Lisa aside and told her that she had to leave. She took Lisa's hand and her sister realized

Sarah was burning. It surprised Lisa surprised because it was too soon. But there wasn't anything they could do about it, so Lisa said she'd cover for Sarah's absence. Secretly, though, in a place she barley admitted to herself, she was grateful her sister left so Lisa could have the attention to herself.

* * *

Sarah woke up in the ashes, the weight of defeat tearing through her brand new heart. The fire always won, making it useless to fight. She burned every time, reduced to a pile of ash until the sun rose and she emerged whole again in the new day. It didn't matter that her body had regenerated, every muscle and organ brand new, she needed more. She drove to church to let the time of worship renew her soul.

* * *

King's Road coffee was packed on a late Sunday morning. Tom's celebrity, famous enough to be recognized by not famous enough to be mobbed, didn't matter. He and Lisa still had to wait for a table. The other patrons tried not stare at him, but Lisa caught the sly glances, the subtle yearning to connect with him in even the most passing way. Tom didn't notice though. The turbulence within him had stirred up and so he focused on Lisa, the way her almost unnatural calm steadied something inside him.

When they'd been seated, ordered and were enjoying the delectable coffee only King's Road served they talk about the party the night before. Tom compliments Sarah on throwing a great party. Lisa points out that Sarah basically planned the party for him as a favor. He understands why her rates are so high and why she plans parties for some of the biggest producers in town.

They talk about him leaving soon to go back to Vancouver and continue working on his latest movie. Lisa suggests she might come visit him there. Tom reminds her that movie sets are boring when you're not working, and sometimes even when you are. He'll text her like they normally do, and he'll be back next weekend. Then he takes her hand, holding onto the sense of being settles she give him while he can.

* * *

Lisa came home to find Sarah on the couch, her sister's arm covering her eyes as if trying to hide from the world, or from herself. They talked about how the fire came too soon and what might have set it off. Sarah's interested focused on how long she could hold it at bay rather than what set it off. She normally burned every six weeks and so she thought it would be long enough for her to plan Brian and Samantha's birthday party. Since they were her biggest clients, and their birthday was their biggest party each year, she wanted to be able to focus.

Lisa admonished her she needed to do more than keep the fire at bay. If Lisa had the fire, she'd find a way to use it. She let a hint of her jealousy of Sarah and the fire slip into her words, but Sarah doesn't notice. Sarah challenged her that there is no way to use it. She points out if she hadn't left the party last night, she'd have burned the whole place down and probably hurt someone. Maybe even killed them.

Lisa said she still thinks there must be some purpose in it. Why else would Sarah be given such power. A little she resents Sarah for having the fire and hating it when she'd give anything for power like that. Sarah replied that Lisa only thinks that because she's never burned.

Sarah counters that there's no purpose in being a force of destruction. But this is an old fight they've had before. Sarah reminds Lisa that they're meeting at a specific restaurant for

lunch the next day to check out the menu. Sarah thinks they might be a good catering option for Brian and Samantha's party.

* * *

Monday morning Bob called his assistant in New York from his LA office. They'd worked together a few years so had a casual but still professional relationship. She asked about Tom's party and then went through some of his responsibilities for the day. She mentioned that Mark called. Bob told her that Mark is in Australia and with the time difference he can't return the call.

Bob flipped through scripts on his desk as she talked about problems with one of his client's new shows that the actor's manager couldn't figure out how to solve. Bob barely had to pay attention to give her a solution. He told her if they don't send the contract by the end of the day, he'll call them. His assistant remarked that if Bob called, they'd send it over in five minutes because everyone likes him.

Bob shifted the conversation to Papel Aeronautics which had his full attention. His assistant confirmed the director and writer that own the production company were meeting him for lunch. She suggested a restaurant, but something in him didn't feel right about that. He suggested the same restaurant Sarah and Lisa were testing. Bob asked if his assistant wanted to come to LA. She responded that she thought he hadn't planned to be there that long. He told her that he's staying longer than expected. She decided that she likes being in New York without him, even if it means longer days. Bob laughed and said that's fine. But if they start filming, he might need her in his time zone.

His assistant reminded him that he needs to meet with one of his clients, Hunter, while he's in town. Bob is bored again and suggested she schedule a lunch later in the week with Hunter.

* * *

Lisa drove over the hill into Beverly Hills on a beautiful Monday morning. The perfect song played on the radio, and she drove on a back road with no traffic, enjoying the day.

When she got to the hotel Mack, a colleague and occasional competitor, greeted her. They both managed hotels but they had different goals. Mack wanted to attract high end and famous clientele. Lisa managed a boutique hotel owned by a studio where out of town actors and crew stay. She didn't have to try to attract the sort of clientele Mack wanted. Mack asked why she pushed herself like the other hotel that had to attract clients. He reminded her that she had nothing to prove.

Lisa thought briefly of Sarah and the fire and how cold it felt in the shadow of the sun. But she laughed off Mack's question and said actors may come to her hotel, but she had to work to keep up with their demands for an exceptional experience. Mack admitted the more his hotel met or exceeded the amenities Lisa had the better he could lure in her clients when they weren't working for that studio.

She came to see him because he has a new rooftop area. An actor staying at her hotel is giving her a hard time because he wants an area like it. But Lisa and Mack both know really, he wants the studio to pay for him to stay at Mack's hotel because it's closer to where his girlfriend lives. Still, Lisa enjoyed the excuse to come see Mack and check out what he's doing. They talk shop and trade entertainment industry gossip. Mack suggested that Sarah might want to plan a

party on his rooftop. He knew Sarah would be looking for venues for Brian and Samantha's party soon. She told Mack she'd mention his new space to Sarah.

Mack invited Lisa to have lunch with him, but she is going to meet Sarah.

* * *

At lunch Bob met with the directing and writing team that started Papel Aeronautics. They've made a few successful movies, but they've never had the capital to make more than one movie at a time. Bob wants to join their production company as a producing partner. At first, they wonder how a business manager is going to transition to producing, even if he does have clientele like Hunter who is a well known television actor. But Bob assured them that his job may be to handle their money but reading scripts and talking shop is part of maintaining his relationship with his clients.

The writer and director resist in the beginning. The director basically came for the free lunch. But as Bob talks, they can't help but become interested. Bob's ideas are decent and of course they like the idea of making more money. Mostly, though something about the idea of working with Bob sounds right. They think this guy can pull off what he's suggesting, even though it's ambitious and unorthodox.

When Sarah and Lisa arrived, they noticed Bob. Lisa playfully chided Sarah for drawing Bob to the same restaurant. Sarah denied it, but then acknowledged she probably did though not on purpose. It terrified her a little, the magic that drew him to her without her meaning to; the idea that he'd want to get close to her. He'd already felt the heat in her skin at Tom's party.

Bob looked up and noticed her, as if her presence drew his attention, would have drawn it across an entire stadium. She went to talk to Bob for a moment. The writer and director can't

help but be a little stunned by her, but Bob made it clear they don't have a chance. He invited Sarah to join them, but she declines.

Even as she walked away Sarah decided not to fight Bob's fascination with her. She'd to let it play out for a while. She felt sure she could let him close and keep him at a distance as she'd done before. The fire might draw people to her, but it couldn't make her put her heart on the line.

While she waited for her sister, Lisa got a text from Tom that made her smile.

Hey beautiful.

Bored already?

What are you going to do about it?

Lisa knew the fire drew people to her sister like moths to the flame. So, when Tom's text came at that moment, when it felt like everyone saw and adored her sister, it lightened Lisa's heart. She looked up at Sarah and Bob. She could see the writer and director plotting ways to include Sarah in their business. Lisa wondered what she'd do if she had the power to attract people the way the fire attracted people to Sarah.

* * *

After lunch Sarah drove to Brian and Samantha's office to suggest some party themes for them. They're a brother and sister producing team that Sarah worked for a few years ago as their assistant. After doing all the unexpected and sometimes odd tasks of an executive assistant Sarah realized she enjoyed planning the wrap parties and cast dinners the most. She accepted that she'd loved creating experiences even as a teenager and so she transitioned into event planning.

The receptionist greeted Sarah when she arrived then notified Brian and Samantha's assistant. She offered Sarah coffee and water, and Sarah asked for a bottle of water. The assistant

came out to walk Sarah back to the office and they chatted just a bit. This assistant had been with Brian and Samantha about six months, so she and Sarah had talked before.

Brian and Samantha greeted Sarah with quick hugs and Sarah noticed that they were even more excited than usual. They sat on the couches in their office and start talking themes, which ones will and won't require costumes. Sarah's expertise is in creating experiences more than simply events. Brian and Samantha decided on a theme that requires a dress code rather than costumes. When Sarah started discussing details Brian and Samantha interrupted her.

They'd decided they want to expand beyond movies into reality television. They want to do a series about planning elaborate events and they want Sarah to be their star. They think she's fantastic and beautiful and brilliant and they're sure audiences will flock to watch Sarah work. Not only that, but they also want to use their birthday as the pilot.

Sarah balked. They often hinted at wanting to cast her in various things when she worked for them, but she declined in a way that mostly kept her off the radar. The idea of being on camera, of being seen by that many people terrified her. It didn't matter that they wouldn't be watching her burn, secrets are a part of the fabric of who she is as much as the fire. She told them she didn't want to be on a show.

They said that before she can decline, she needs to meet the director. Brian tells their assistant to bring in the director. Delilah came in excited to meet Sarah. Somehow her presence makes the whole thing a little more real and Sarah felt herself panicking. The fire stirred in her, but Sarah pushed back, trying to suppress it.

The director talked excitedly about her ideas for following Sarah around with a camera crew, setting up interview times for Sarah to talk through her process. Sarah interrupted her.

“No.”

Brian, Samantha and Delilah were all surprised. Sarah stood up and walked away from the couches for a bit before turning around to face Brian and Samantha. She told them she'll plan they're party, but she won't be a part of a show and she won't be on camera.

Samantha said that if Sarah wanted the party she had to be on camera. They are going to film the planning. Sarah nodded and said she understood. She'd send them an invoice and they could keep her idea for the theme and have someone else plan it. She wished them luck and then she left.

* * *

As a baby Sarah burned once a year on the winter solstice. Her family had a stone crib passed down through the generations for fire babies.

As a toddler she could occasionally work herself into a tantrum that would wake the fire. Most often it would smolder and fade away again. A few times a year it ran hot enough in her blood for her to burn.

She lost control at thirteen when everything in her body changed, came to life, went haywire. She had to pay attention to the heat, guard against the fire so that she only ever burned on the stone floor of their house. Never let anyone know she burned.

Now, as an adult she ran the fire out before it got too hot. Or she tried to. The music coursed through her, became her energy. It moved faster than the fire; pushing her on, pushing her beyond her ability to go.

The meeting with Brian and Samantha woke the fire too early. Now she had to fight it; had to run before John and Miranda's barbeque so that she didn't ignite. Because she couldn't take the chance that it would destroy someone other than her.

* * *

John and Miranda have a house in Los Feliz with a nice back yard. It's an older house, like so many in LA are, but they've made it feel comfortable and excellent for guests. Sarah and Miranda are talking when Bob and Tom arrive. Bob caught Miranda's eye and she teased Sarah about bringing another guy into their midst. Sarah replied she did no such thing. Chad and Travis came on their own when they worked on the television show with John and Miranda.

Bob noticed Sarah as soon as they arrived, but Tom led him over to the grill area and introduced him to John. Then Tom led Bob over to the cooler so they could get sparkling waters. Tom informed him that a few months ago Miranda got on a health kick, so their gatherings never have alcohol or sugar. But her protein cookies are surprisingly tasty.

When they move over to the seating area with a few short couches and several chairs Bob noticed that Sarah sat next to another guy, close but not quite touching. He took a chair not quite across from them. Tom sat on a short couch next to Lisa.

Introductions were made and Travis scoped out the new guy. Despite the impulse to move closer to Sarah he remained a discreet distance from her. This wasn't the first time a new guy had found their way into her life. The guys came and they went, and Travis was still there beside her when they were gone.

John told them the food was ready and everyone headed over to the grill area. Tom said grace and they loaded up their plates. Bob noticed how close Tom and Lisa were, how his friend acted differently with this girl. Tom stayed close to her as if her physical presence were a balm. He handed her condiments recognizing what she needed and what she liked. When they settled back on the couches and started eating Miranda asked about how Bob and Tom became friends. Which led to Chad explaining how he, Travis, John and Miranda worked on a short-lived television show together, became friends and have hung out ever since.

Travis connected that Bob works with Hunter, who is a friend of his. As the day progressed Travis found that as much as he'd rather not, he kind of liked Bob. He asked Sarah if they're going to be invited to Brian and Samantha's party since it's such a big event every year. She replied that if they were it wouldn't be through her. She handed her barely eaten burger to Travis to finish and explained about the reality show and that she'd have to fill the gap somehow of her biggest contracts of the year.

Bob went back to the grill area to try one Miranda's cookies while John cleaned up. He subtly asked John about the group dynamics. John caught on that Bob wanted to know about Sarah and her connection to Travis and Chad. He explained that there's nothing between them, that they're just good at being friends. Bob didn't know what he meant but before he could ask Sarah came back for a cookie also. John left to go sit by Miranda.

Sarah had barely eaten, and only picked at a cookie. Burning out the fire left her feeling hollow. Bob noticed that she's quieter, more subdued than she has been. He flirted with her a little to see how she'd respond. When she flirted back, he asked her out. He didn't know what she'd say and that made him nervous for the first time. She'd already said no to him twice before. But she smiled and said yes. Then he reached for a cookie when she did so he can touch her hand, test her skin which is cool despite the warm afternoon. He realized she's hiding something though he has no idea what.

* * *

After the barbeque Bob went with Tom to his house for a bit. They talked about Lisa and Sarah and Tom teased Bob about liking Sarah. Bob used the opportunity to ask about Sarah and find out what Tom knew about her.

Tom asked about Bob's interest in Papel Aeronautics. Bob talked about how he liked that Papel provided a unique opportunity to launch from what they'd already built. Tom made a comment about how this would be easy for Bob because things were always easy for him. He said Bob's parents must be glad he's falling in line by starting his own empire. Bob laughed and said his parents have businesses not empires. Tom laughed and said his parents had a business and money and they weren't invited to the Governor's Ball every year. Bob admitted that, yeah, they were waiting for him to make his mark on the world but really, he felt bored and needed to get out of New York. Tom asked if Bob needed to get away from an ex-girlfriend. Bob countered and asked if Tom knew they'd broken up when he slept with her. Tom confirmed he definitely knew it then.

When Bob got up to head back to his hotel Tom told him he should stay at his house. Tom reminded Bob that he's in Vancouver for another few weeks and his house is closer to the beach to go surfing than the hotel. Bob agreed and said he'd bring his stuff over the next day.

* * *

Bob took Sarah surfing on a Thursday morning. She teased him that it was a terrible time of year to go surfing. He agreed, it was also the worst time of day. But it meant a mostly empty beach and if they happen to get lunch afterward it would make sense. She laughed and then paddled out to wait for a wave.

Bob followed her and they talked for a bit sitting in the ocean. She asked how he became a business manager and he asked how she got into event planning. She explained about working for Brian and Samantha. She admitted that it's hard not to be doing their party, not just because of the money. She can plan two or three smaller events at a time, but she blocked out her

schedule for their birthday. Now she didn't know what to do with herself. Surfing is exactly what she needed, she said as she paddled out to a wave.

Bob caught a wave also and then they paddle back out. She teased him again about the surf conditions. He countered that she should be a little impressed he knew she surfs. Sarah asked how he managed in New York when he couldn't surf. Her question brought to the surface how stagnant he felt there. He makes a comment about how she'd probably be warm enough without her wetsuit. Any other girl would have melted his smile, at the glimmer in his eyes. Sarah's heart didn't skip a beat. She felt the push against her secret like a low wave and she let it push her way from him, further from any reminder of her skin the night of Tom's party. She offered a blithe answer then swam away to catch another wave.

Bob sat stunned for a moment, surprised she pushed away from him so easily. He faltered and then he grinned at the challenge as he followed on a wave behind her, and they swim back out. As they flirted, she found herself a little afraid that she liked him. But then she reminded herself men never stay long enough to be in danger. When they surfed back in, they stayed on the beach.

Bob invited her to lunch. She balanced temptation and fear. She declined by telling him she found lunch a pedestrian option. But she said he should come to Travis's soiree Friday night. Bob suddenly found himself grateful for his trip to New York. He wanted to spend more time with Sarah, but he absolutely didn't want to do it at Travis's place. When he told her he'd be in New York she faltered for a heartbeat. The idea of him leaving should reassure her. Everything would be safer with distance and yet it bothered her. He clarified that he needed to take care of a few things, but he'd be back Monday. He told her the next time he took her out he'd give her something impossible.

* * *

Remind me again why I'm doing this.

Because it's what you wanted.

I don't remember that.

Because a Gary Ross movie
will make your career.

Tell me it won't be a career of
this inanity.

You love this character. You're
going to have fun. They'll get
you in a wire rig or running through
the street and you'll remember.

Next time I'm taking a movie
that shoots in LA so I can see
you every day.

I work.

We'll figure that part out.

As Lisa put down her phone the actor walked into her office upset about the room service. He wanted the chef he had on his last movie. Lisa said if he wanted to hire the guy then he's welcome to use their kitchen. But she knew the actor didn't want to pay for it, he just wanted to make trouble.

When the actor asked about the rooftop area Lisa said she's not going to renovate a portion of the hotel when the actor's movie is done filming in two weeks. She remembered that the actor has a role in Tom's movie and asked when he's going to join them in Vancouver. The actor bristled. He mumbled that he's already been up there for stunt training and then exited her office.

Lisa noticed his odd exit and then got an idea. She called Sarah. Lisa asked how the date went and Sarah smiled and said it went fine. Lisa suggested that Sarah plan the wrap party for Tom's movie since her schedule is open. Sarah hesitated as she drove home from surfing. The money wouldn't be great. But Lisa pointed out that it was better than nothing. Sarah agreed and Lisa said she'd ask Tom about it at the soiree.

* * *

Travis had a soiree on a Friday night about once a month, mostly so he had an excuse to use the word soiree. They hung out in the pool area of Travis's complex where there's a pool, hot tub and grill surrounded by trees to create the feel of a private garden. Occasionally the music, or the friends, got a little loud but the neighbors let it go because they liked Travis.

When Lisa arrived John and Miranda are already there along with Chad and Travis. Chad's mood brightened the evening because he booked the lead role in a mini-series that's an adaptation of a book he loved. While the guys fussed over the grill Sarah arrived with a lot of sushi. She reminded them that the grill has been out of gas for weeks.

Travis picked her up in a big spinning hug. When he put her down, he commented that she felt warm today. She stepped back but he smiled, that soft and warm smile that said no matter what he'd be there for her, be whatever she needed. He told Chad Sarah needed to cool off in the pool as he winked at her and walked away.

Tom arrived last. His movie wrapped early, and he caught the first flight from Vancouver to LA. He couldn't get away fast enough, couldn't get to Lisa fast enough. He stood outside for a moment, letting the music wash over him, reset him. When he walked through the trees Lisa came to him and they have a moment before they join the others.

Miranda asked Sarah about Bob's absence. Sarah replied that he flew to New York for the weekend.

"But he'll be back, right? Of course, he'll be back." Miranda told Sarah that she needed to be careful with Bob. She said that he's not like any of Sarah's other guys.

Sarah told Miranda that Jason called and asked her to dinner. Miranda referred to Jason as the one that got away. But Sarah thought about how he didn't get away. He made it easy for her to be with him without asking anything from her; exactly what she wanted, what she needed. She didn't have to be vulnerable which made him a safe sort of love that wasn't really love because neither one would let the other get close. No matter what they wanted from each other, they both knew it wasn't enough.

Then Tom threw Lisa into the pool fully clothed. Miranda and Sarah quickly stripped down to their swimsuits before the other guys can do the same to them. Lisa ducked Tom in retribution, and he let her. They flirt for a moment, and she suggested that he introduce Sarah to Gary so she can plan the wrap party for his movie. Tom hesitated but Lisa reminded him Sarah did him a favor for his party, he can do her a favor. Tom agreed partly so that she'd stop reminding him of work.

When it gets cooler, they all head to the hot tub. Sarah got drowsy as it got late, and everyone teased her about not being a night owl. Travis slowed down the music and everyone groaned because now she'd definitely fall asleep. Tom got a lounge chair for her and pulled it over beside the hot tub so she could lay down and still be connected to the conversation.

Sarah woke up in the middle of the night next to Travis. Everyone lay sprawled on lounge chairs around the pool. She almost laughed thinking how the fire made her a heated

blanket for him. Lisa couldn't be more wrong about the fire having purpose. She thought about Travis and Bob and Jason. The fire would destroy them all if she let any of them too close. But she could tell that Bob is different, like Miranda said. If she wasn't careful, he'd get too close. So, even if she wished Bob lay beside her, she snuggled into Travis; why she'd go to dinner with Jason; why she hoped Bob found a way to save himself from her.

* * *

The next morning Sarah woke up before the others. She loved mornings and wanted her friends to feel that the world is as magical as it felt to her. She left to get coffee and donuts. Miranda woke up to the scent of coffee just after Sarah returned. They joked about how Miranda was also a morning person but only Sarah got teased for it.

Sarah turned on her morning playlist and the others started to rouse. Travis commented that he had a fabulous night sleep next to Sarah. Chad asked if she ran hot. Travis said hotter than the Hawaiian sunshine and told Chad to dance with her. Because if he didn't force himself to see her with another man, he might lose himself to her again. He might still be a little lost. Miranda told John he needed to dance with her. Tom told them to quiet down and pulled Lisa closer.

After they danced Miranda got coffee and chastised Sarah for bringing donuts because they're just sugar and carbs.

"Breakfast burritos get cold, Miranda. Open a protein donut shop."

"I will."

* * *

Bob called Mark at 7pm New York time, 9am in Sydney. Mark had been in Australia for nearly a month working on a project. Bob wasn't entirely certain what it entailed, but he didn't need to know. The movie deal kept him too busy.

Mark asked about the Papel Aeronautics deal and Bob assured him it went well. Bob said that a studio executive had started to show interest in the company, but he didn't think it would derail their investment plans. Mark seemed confident Bob would win over the writer and director. They sent him to make the deal in the first place for a reason.

* * *

Sarah felt a little guilty about going to dinner with Jason, but it didn't last long. They had never really been together, like most of the men in her life, but they fit well. When they ordered Sarah kept the waitress's attention, so she didn't notice that Jason never took his eyes off Sarah. He'd become just famous enough that everyone wanted something from him, which made Sarah safe and comfortable. She knew him before the fame and didn't care about.

They talked about their past, a little, filling in the silence. His boredom and loneliness carried a faint tinge of wistfulness. He hinted at what they could have been together. But she pushed back that they were exactly what both of them wanted. He noticed something different about her this time, something he couldn't quite name but knew that he'd lost.

When Jason asked her to go dancing with him, she laughed.

* * *

Sarah knew a boy in college who was an artist. She was his favorite canvas. She'd sit on the couch, and he'd sit on the floor in front of her and draw on her leg while they watched a movie. Flowers, symbols, vines unfurling on her skin under his touch.

He'd sit beside her on the couch and draw on her arm while they studied. Pens, markers, whatever he found handy. "You should get a tattoo," he said to her once. She didn't answer. It wouldn't last.

When they were bolder, she lay face down on the floor and he'd draw butterflies and murals on her back.

One night he brought paints. She lay down on the floor for him to paint her back. The cool, wet paint glided over her skin in sensational ways. She couldn't sort out the picture he painted. She simply reveled in the feel of it. Until the paint started to dry too fast from the heat under her skin. She said she didn't feel well, and he left.

Then she curled up on the stone floor her father had installed and waited for the fire to take her.

She burned again the next night.

On the third day she ended things with the artist and closed her heart off. It was safer that way.

* * *

Bob drove back from the airport to Tom's. Fast. Too fast and not fast enough. It took ages to slow down when he got off a plane. Like once his body had tasted velocity it had to keep moving. He reveled in the movement that released the energy rampaging through him.

* * *

Sarah woke up in the ashes angry at herself and at Jason and mostly at the fire that tormented her.

As she got coffee Lisa emerged from her bedroom. Lisa asked about dinner, but Sarah didn't want to talk about it. She asked Lisa if she remembered before the fire changed, before it responded to Jason.

Lisa shared a memory of a time when they were about ten and Sarah burned. The whole family watched the small, fun part of their lives without fear or turmoil in the fire. Lisa suggested that maybe the fire didn't change, maybe Sarah did.

* * *

I've been awake since 4am.

ouch. did you go to sleep at all?

Early. 9:30

grandpa

grandpa lover.

;) why the early start?

First day of the fight scene.

Are you wired up?

Not that kind of fight. Lots of punches and kicks. Travis would enjoy it.

Sarah would enjoy it.

I can fight her this weekend if she wants.

I remember, by the way.

* * *

Sarah left her car with the valet when she got to Gary's office. The receptionist offered her coffee or water while she waited. Sarah didn't want either. She knew of Gary, one of the biggest producers in town, through the industry. But she'd never met him. His office took up an entire floor at the top of a building he owned.

Sarah didn't wait long before one of his assistants came to lead her back to his office. Gary was a genial man, fit and lean even in his fifties. But Sarah knew his geniality masked a decisive, powerful man.

He asked about her work with Brian and Samantha. He asked about her connection to Tom. He looked at her like he wanted a connection of his own.

Sarah struggled to pull every ounce of magnetism and allure from the fire and bury it deep within herself. She gave him simple responses, without acknowledging the subtext in any way. When he made a joke that he should cast her in his next movie Sarah thought briefly of summoning the fire; of burning any thought like that out of him.

His power got him a lot. But he wasn't forceful. He offered Sarah two jobs. A small wrap for the Canadian crew in Vancouver. He'd been wanting to do something for them but since he didn't have an event planner on staff or at the production company, he hadn't figured it out yet. Then she would manage the wrap party in LA for the cast and crew.

* * *

Sarah was sixteen when Tyler gave her a shot of something, vodka maybe, she thought. She wouldn't have known the difference because it was the first alcohol she'd ever had. She didn't bother to ask. They were at a party in an old barn on the outskirts of town.

Sarah laughed with a group of friends as Tyler handed shots around. It burned the back of her throat and the fire surged to life. She barely noticed and even if she had she wouldn't have worried. She smoldered for days before she burned.

They danced and laughed for hours. Sarah's friends said it felt hot in the barn. She didn't hear them over the music. The fire burned hotter, and she danced relentlessly.

Brad said another shot would cool everyone off.

It burned like kerosene down through her. And the fire responded in kind.

Sarah staggered off the dance floor, looking for Lisa. The fire surged through her veins. She couldn't see her sister in the darkness and flashing lights. There wasn't enough time.

She found a dark, quiet corner and collapsed, curling in on herself. She hoped she lay on dirt and not hay.

The next morning Sarah woke in the askses of the barn as the sun crested over the hills. The fire she started hadn't spread much beyond the barn. There was no one around. No one to see her tears fall before she rose from the ashes. No one to realize she hadn't left the party last night. And she hadn't died in the fire. She made her way over into the forest on tender feet and sunk behind a tree to hide. She had no way to get home. She couldn't even walk home without creating a stir. A girl wandering into town naked after the fire the night before. She could only imagine the questions her friends would ask.

It didn't take long before she heard a car drive up. Sarah peered around the tree, hoping her parents came to look for her. To her relief her mother got out of the car. She wrapped Sarah in one of her father's large coats and then wrapped Sarah in a hug.

Lisa said it'd been an inferno. The barn burned so hot and fast everyone barely got out. She wanted to stay and wait for Sarah, but everyone pulled her away. Sarah asked Lisa if she was a villain. She'd thought it once before and tried to forget. Lisa told her sister that all the books they were forced to read in English class said that someone's choices made them the villain or the hero.

They had to pretend everything was normal. Sarah had left early because she didn't feel well. They had no idea what started the fire. They listened to the gossip and speculation along with everyone else and hid behind their smiles.

Sarah never drank again.

* * *

There are 7,000 extras on set today.

Really?

I may be exaggerating slightly.
Its. It's crazy.

Do you have your choreographed
dance routine worked out?

What? This isn't a prom scene.

Are you in a tux?

...no. In my defense I left the
party with valuable intel.

Want me to send you a video of
the extras running in panic?

Are they running from the
aliens?

This isn't an alien movie. Did you
even read the script?

The assistant director called Tom to set while he still laughed at her text. Tom drew a deep breath and steeled himself to go back out into the mayhem. He could harness the energy from the turbulence within him, use it to fuel his performance. He did it all the time; it made him a dynamic actor.

He wondered briefly when Lisa brought calm to him if it would hinder his ability to perform. But, as much as he craved her and the sense of peace she gave him, he kept her in his weekends so he wouldn't have to find out.

* * *

The most exclusive restaurant in town was thirty minutes south of LA. The phone number was unpublished. It didn't have a name—just an address, 1661 New Orleans St. Every day people walked by without any idea the most elite studio executives and actors dined in secret opulence on the other side of a nondescript door. As far as impossible dates went, it was a good start.

Bob and Sarah talked about first dates. They avoided talking about falling in love because it was too soon even though it drifted right there on the surface.

The waitress couldn't stop staring at Bob as they ordered, ignoring Sarah. Sarah thought about the difference from Jason who dodged attention. Bob surfed it with the same expertise he surfed the waves.

Sarah asked about New York, and he admitted he was glad to be back in LA. For the first time he found New York stifling. He recognized the boredom and restlessness he'd fallen into before coming to LA. The Papel Aeronautics deal offered him a chance for a new challenge. But he realized he found Sarah much more interesting than a business deal.

He reached across the table to touch her hand in a flirty move, but too close to the night of Tom's party. She pulled her hand away, held onto her smile. He realized she held this secret too close and too tight. He knew it was something and it was going to be a problem. Before he could ask anything, more Delilah came to their table.

Sarah couldn't believe Delilah got into this restaurant. But Delilah had a friend who waited tables there. She had a few friends that she'd asked to keep an eye out for Sarah because she wanted to talk to her. Delilah asked Sarah to rethink doing the show with Brian and Samantha. Sarah can't imagine how Delilah thought she'd convince her when Brian and

Samantha couldn't. Delilah said not even Brian and Samantha realize how incredible this could be.

Recognizing Sarah's discomfort Bob stood up; stood between Delilah and Sarah. She noticed him for the first time and her demeanor changed, like a dog on the hunt distracted by a bear. He asked Delilah to leave while motioning to the maître d'. Delilah backed off nodding. She didn't resist when a few waitstaff led her away, still awed and intimidated by Bob. Bob didn't move until she vanished behind the kitchen door.

Then he turned back to Sarah and could see that she remained shaken. He took her hand to reassure her.

She felt off balance. She yanked her hand out of his and accused him of testing her to see if she's hot again.

He counters that he simply wanted to comfort her.

She took a ragged breath and apologized. She appreciated that he helped her.

He commented that it worked out nicely that they'd finished eating because the evening had been ruined as he motioned to their waiter for the check.

She attempted a weak smile and said it doesn't have to be. They shouldn't let Delilah spoil anything. She reached her hand across the table from him in an offering. The maître d' arrived with the check and Bob looked between the small folder with the bill and her hand. He chose her, taking her hand and lacing his fingers between hers. They stood and he told the maître d' to put it on his tab.

* * *

The exit to the restaurant wasn't out the front door. A private door at the end of a hallway that led to a private lobby. Two ways led into the lobby other than the private hallway, an

elevator from the rooftop of a hotel behind the restaurant and an entrance from a parking garage. As Sarah and Bob walked out into the parking garage, he commented that next time they should take a helicopter. She replied that then he wouldn't be able to drive.

They were barely halfway to their car when gunmen accosted them. One man stood in front of them and two more behind. Sarah knew Bob would protect her as much as he could, but she wasn't sure how much that was. Suddenly, irrationally, she wished for the fire; that she could somehow wield the power of it like Lisa always told her she should. Because maybe, impossibly, it could save them.

She didn't realize that she'd stepped between Bob and the man with the gun. That she'd decided to summon the fire without recognizing the moment of choice. Bob grabbed her arm and tried to pull her behind him, but she took a step closer to the gunman. She willed the fire to life within her.

The gunman moved closer, trying to intimidate her. He grabbed her arm but before Bob can punch him, he dropped his hand, shaking it as though burned. He took a step back, a shift in power. Her eyes glowed like sun flares.

The two other men saw her hands flex as the fire surged into her fingers; leapt from her hands a few inches into the air. Not enough to reach them but enough to terrify them.

But Bob didn't notice. He couldn't take his eyes off the man in front of them with the gun, couldn't stop thinking of a way to put himself between that man and Sarah without startling him, without giving him a reason to shoot.

The leader signaled the men behind them, and they all ran.

But it was too late. Sarah had called too much of the fire and it smoldered within her. She felt herself falling but never felt the ground. She was hollow, the fire had consumed her insides, leaving her body just a shell.

She looked up and noticed a man hovering closely over her. He seemed worried.

Did she know him? Some bit of familiarity tried to make itself known but there was so little of her mind left to work with.

Was he shouting her name? Didn't he know she couldn't answer? She had no lungs, or throat with which to form a voice, nor nerves left to feel the pain of this emptiness.

And then blessedly, the darkness took her.

* * *

Sarah woke up in the ashes, disoriented. She didn't know how she'd gotten there, didn't know what had happened which she found odd because she always knew when she before she burned. Then memories came flooding into her mind. "Aw, hell," she muttered as she rose from the ashes and pulled her robe on.

Lisa sat on the couch with her coffee. She asked Sarah what happened. Sarah explained that she and Bob were mugged as she went into the kitchen to get her own coffee. She asked what happened after she passed out.

Lisa told her that Bob brought her home. He didn't ask any questions. He left Sarah on the couch and Lisa moved her into the stone floor in her room. Sarah smoldered for hours until she crumbled into ash instead of burning.

Sarah admitted she summoned the fire to chase the men off. She blamed Lisa for always telling her there's something she should be able to do with the fire.

Lisa turned her own words against her, suggesting that watching Sarah turn to ash probably wouldn't do the trick. Sarah replied that apparently it did, the men ran away. Lisa suggested that maybe the fire wasn't meant to destroy people but help them. Sarah changed the subject and asked when Lisa is going over to Tom's. She said he got in late so they're meeting for lunch.

* * *

Bob waited until Monday morning to call Sarah. He hadn't stopped thinking of her all weekend. Lisa hadn't seemed concerned when he dropped Sarah off. He'd thought through a dozen reasons why Sarah passing out wouldn't be something to worry about, but he didn't like any of them.

He felt terrified she wouldn't answer; terrified she would answer and tell him it was over before anything really began. When Sarah answered they barely acknowledged the incident, other than their date had failed epically. Even though he wanted her to trust him Bob decided not to push her. She suggested that they try a do over. Instead of going to work he should tour venues for Gary's party with her. He agreed as relief washed through him and said he'd pick her up.

They went to Mack's hotel first. Sarah wanted to check out his new rooftop and Lisa wouldn't tell her much about it. Sarah and Mack joked about hotels and ballrooms. Mack liked Bob and joked with him as easily as Sarah, as if they'd known each other for ages. He tried to guess Bob's favorite foods to bring them samples.

Then they went to a 'new' hotel. It had been purchased six months ago and completely remodeled. The event space offered a large open room with alcoves along the walls. When the concierge left to get menu samples for them Bob suggested they test out the dance space.

They talk as they danced, growing closer. She asked him to tell her something, something know one else knows. “A secret for a secret?” he asked her. Then he told her a story about his mother forcing dancing lessons on him. It led to a quiet, soft kiss. Then he told her to take her turn.

She said she had planned dozens of events. She started at thirteen or fourteen. But this with this job, for the first time, she worried she’d fail. She hadn’t worked in Vancouver before and didn’t have any contacts. And she kept second guessing herself with the LA party; questioned if she’d pick the right place, if she’d capture the right feel. He asked how it should feel. She said, “this” and kissed him again.

He asked if a Gary Ross party was really supposed to feel like this. She laughed and said no. He took a beat and assured her she could tell him anything.

A heavy moment of silence settled on them. They both knew she still kept something from him.

She wanted to trust him but, in that moment, when everything about him drew her in, the fire flared and she stepped back quickly, afraid it would burn him. She simply nodded and the concierge returned with food. He smiled and said he needed to eat, not the truth since they’d sampled plenty of options at Mack’s. She smiled at the distraction and asked the concierge questions about the dishes.

* * *

Sarah ran for days. After Bob dropped her off from their make up date the fire had been churning within her. She ran and ran but it was never enough. Every night she still burned. As if the fire had gotten a taste of him and craved his life. She refused to let it destroy him.

* * *

I've been acting opposite
a tennis ball all day. I'm
going out of my mind.

I thought you were supposed to be
making out with the hot actress
who plays your girlfriend.

That was last week. I tried to
get them to fly you up here
as her body double.

So you could make out
with me instead.

Obviously. But you work.

Bummer. Is the
tennis ball a good kisser?

I don't have to kiss the
tennis ball.

oh, I thought you were cheating
on the girlfriend with the troll.

This isn't a troll movie.

Dinosaur?

Lisa set her phone down as Sarah came in from another run. Sarah put her phone on the table by the door without noticing the black marks where her fingertips touched the wood. Sarah asked about Tom and Lisa replied that he seemed worn down.

Sarah went to take a shower, but Lisa never heard the water turn on. She knocked on the door, but Sarah didn't respond. Lisa slowly pushed the door open and found Sarah standing stunned, staring at the towel rack. Lisa looked over and saw a black handprint on the top towel.

Lisa freaked out but Sarah didn't respond. Only when she reached for Sarah did her sister react, pulling herself away from Lisa for fear she'd burn her. She screamed at Lisa demanding to know the purpose in this.

Lisa said she has to figure out things with Bob, but Sarah denied Bob is affecting the fire. Things were good between them; it wouldn't do this to her. Lisa insisted that something is changing her.

Sarah suggested that maybe it isn't Bob, that maybe it was the natural course of the fire. Their great-aunt died young. Lisa said their great-aunt died was ten years older than Sarah is now when she died. Sarah said maybe this is the first step in it consuming her to the point that she isn't revived.

* * *

Sarah had planned two parties at the same time before, but not when she burned this much. She'd never burned like this. And she'd never worked in Vancouver before which meant she had to find new vendors, pick a venue without scouting it first, trust the recommendations for caterers she got from her contacts in LA. It would have been almost too much if she burned every other month, back when the fire was manageable, before she met Bob. Now, burning every few days, slow burning and singeing things in the middle of the day, she felt completely worn down and overwhelmed.

It didn't matter that the fire renewed her each time. She wasn't physically tired. She felt mentally and emotionally depleted and the fire couldn't heal that. She barely saw Bob. He stayed busy negotiating the deal with Papel Aeronautics and prepping for the movie they'd agreed to make. When he called, they'd talk and the stress that bore down on her shoulders and her mind would lighten. She could breathe again, almost. And then she'd run for hours so if he wanted to get dinner, she wouldn't burn him. When she ran her muscles burned in a human way from the lactic acid build up rather than the fire. It wasn't enough anymore. The fire couldn't be satiated no matter how hard or how far she ran.

Sarah found a luxury boutique hotel in Vancouver that could fit the cast and crew up there. The adjacent restaurant had a well renowned chef who deigned to do a buffet rather than plated dinner for a Gary Ross party. It didn't hurt that she suggested if all went well, he'd be her go-to for other parties and catering. And yet her minor successes amplified the pressure rather than relieving it. Because she knew once it was done, when things were in place and the party was ready, she and Bob would have time together. She knew the look in his eyes when he wanted to ask her about the heat; when she kissed him instead of answering; and she knew when this was done that wouldn't work any longer.

* * *

You want a new dress?

Yes.

Why do I need a new dress?

Premiere Tuesday night.

One of the girls in hair has a friend in LA that's a designer. I mentioned the premiere, she asked if you'd wear a dress. You have a fitting tomorrow at Riley's Sparkle or something.

Riley's Sparkle Emporium on Sunset. I can't wait to see the dress.

That's not a real place, is it?

No.

I'll get the real name for you. I told her you were super sweet.

Super sweet?

Clearly I'm going out of my mind.

What else did you tell her
about me?

Pretty much what I tell everyone else.
I can't seem to stop talking about you.

* * *

Sarah answered the phone without thinking. She had been fielding enough calls to manage the two parties that she'd briefly thought of hiring an assistant. She didn't bother any more to see who was calling, when she knew it was always something she had to deal with. She didn't expect this call to be Brian's assistant.

Brian and Samantha wanted to meet with her. Sarah thought about putting them off, claiming she was too busy. But the producing pair had been good to her over the years, and she could make time for lunch.

She didn't expect when she arrived at their office that they'd ask her to plan their birthday party. It was only three weeks away, not nearly enough time for an event of the scale they preferred. Before she had a chance to ask about the reality show Delilah entered the conference room with take out from the Mexican place around the corner. Of course, that hadn't changed.

Brian and Samantha acted like Sarah had already agreed to come back, talking about filming meetings as they unpacked the food. Sarah felt the heat building in her and took a deep breath. Delilah cajoled her, talking about how great it would be for her event business, how much the public would love to watch her work and learn what went into planning grand events. Sarah felt trapped, and worse than that she felt betrayed.

Sarah reminded them she didn't want to do the show. They didn't listen, waving away her concerns as they passed around the bag of tortilla chips. Of course, she'd have a great time. They'd bring in a wardrobe designer and she could keep whatever outfits she wanted.

Sarah wonder what they'd think if the outfits started melting off her as the heat built under her skin. She had to get out of there. Sarah stood up stunning everyone into silence. She told them she'd made herself clear, she wouldn't do a show. She hadn't changed her mind and she didn't know what they thought would be any different with the show still on the table. She walked out before they had a chance to ignore her again.

* * *

Bob wasn't expecting the text from Sarah. Lunch was the busiest time for both of them during the day. But her small simple text shook through him.

help. Please. Tom's?

Bob immediately texted her back that he'd be there in thirty minutes.

When Bob answered the door Sarah didn't look like she was injured. She looked beautiful, and sad. She stepped forward into his arms and sighed.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded against his chest but didn't move.

Bob pivoted them gently so he could close the door and they stood there, him holding her, until she finally drew a deep breath and stepped back a bit. He asked what happened as he led her over to the couch and they sat. She explained that Brian and Samantha shanghai'd her about planning their party with the director there. It made her angry and it felt like a betrayal of them working so well together over the years. But it made her realize that Bob wanted her to trust him... and she hesitated because for the first time she acknowledged out loud that there was a secret between them. But even with that between them he felt safe. He made her feel safe. And

she wasn't sure what she could give him yet, but she asked him to be patient with her. He took her hand in silent assurance that they'd work it out.

Then Bob got a text from the director. He'd missed their lunch with the studio executive who had increased the first look offer to the production company. Bob's frustration and her keeping him at a distance amplified the frustration that the studio put more money on the table than he wanted to deal with, and it might make him change his plans. There was a moment where he almost explained why to Sarah but then he gave her a slightly sideways answer. She knew she couldn't push him without offering something of herself in return, so they sat on the couch side by side, close and a million miles away at the same time. Until Bob suggested they both needed to go surfing. She said it was a terrible time of day. He said that hadn't stopped them before.

* * *

They didn't know Sarah was a phoenix the day she was born. It was a few days later when Sarah's grandmother came to meet her. It only took one touch, and the old woman knew. Her parents were horror stricken. They knew the Sarah's grandmother lost her sister to the fire when she was thirty-four. Even though she was still a baby they still feared losing her one day to the fire.

Her grandmother said that it meant she had potential and purpose. The old woman held the baby, comforted by the heat.

Her parents are appalled but her grandmother says that it means she has potential and purpose

* * *

Bob took her to a movie set for their next real date when they both had less pressure from work. She commented that it wasn't impossible, but he assured her it would be worth it.

The set was Bob's client Hunter's television show. Travis was also on set doing a guest star appearance for three episodes. The scene they were filming was a luau and they'd brought in fire dancers. Bob thought Sarah would enjoy the spectacle and might want them for a future event. He had no way of knowing the way the fire would speak to Sarah. For a second the fire entranced her, and she almost believed Lisa that it could be a good thing, even if she didn't understand how. But then the display called to the fire in her blood, and she had to get out before she burned.

Sarah walked off set before the director yelled cut. Bob followed her, unsure what had upset her. He tried to comfort her, to hold onto her and keep her from running but she won't let him. They explode in the back lot, when he told her she can't keep running from him. She was tempted to stay, to step into the haven he offered her. Then she remembered singed towels and singed wood and she imagined leaving burnt handprints on his skin and she shook her head and walked away.

* * *

Tom and Lisa arrived at the movie premiere to screaming fans. He took a few minutes to greet them and take pictures while Lisa watched.

Jason arrived and paused to talk to Lisa for a minute. He was grateful the crowd focused on Tom so Jason could slip past them. Lisa understood. Most days she hated the shadows but then there were times she enjoyed that she could escape the onslaught in a way Sarah never could. Jason doesn't quite ask about Sarah and Lisa doesn't quite reassure him. Jason gives Lisa an opaque warning about Tom then continued on into the theater.

Tom came back and he and Lisa went past the photo pool and into the theater. He wanted to skip the movie, but she wanted to watch it and convinced him to stay.

* * *

The sun hung low and warm over the Pacific Ocean when they all arrived at the beach to play volleyball. Miranda teased Bob for being too good looking not to be an actor. Tom saved him by inviting everyone to the wrap party in LA for his movie. Sarah assured him she could get everyone on the list.

John hassled Lisa for seeing the movie earlier than any of the rest of them. She shrugged and smiled at Tom, saying she enjoyed it enough that she'd gladly see it again.

Travis noticed that Sarah is getting hot, but he thought it was just sun heat. Bob distracted him by serving the ball and getting them back into the game.

When Bob drove Sarah home, she asked why he never became an actor. He directed back to her, commenting that she never became an actress. He said they both have their secrets. She acknowledged that her secret is not something they can get past, and he agreed but doesn't push her.

When Bob dropped her off, Sarah was surprised to find Lisa at home. Lisa said that Tom flew to Vancouver because he had an early call tomorrow. Sarah told her about Bob and that she kept pulling away from him and it wasn't working but she didn't know how to walk away. She acknowledged that Lisa and Miranda were right, he's different.

They got in a fight and Sarah burned Lisa. Sarah apologizes but can't go near her sister for fear of burning her again. She retreats to her room and decides to pull away from everyone, including Bob.

* * *

Tom called Lisa in the middle of the night. He was upset about the bad day of filming they had and nothing she said consoled him. He ended the call in a way that left her with a disquieted feeling.

The next morning Lisa tried to talk to Sarah about it, but Sarah wouldn't come out of her room. She said she was packing to go to Vancouver for the cast and crew party, but Lisa knew she was scared to be around her sister.

* * *

Mark arrived at LAX on the 11:00 AM flight from Australia. Bob picked him up to take him directly to a meeting with Papel Aeronautics. Bob suggested that with the time difference Mark must be jetlagged and Mark agreed but said he worked better raw from fatigue.

As they talk, Mark figured out that Bob was distracted. Bob tried not to let on that Sarah pulled his attention from the deal, even more now after the awkward morning they'd had. Bob dropped Sarah off when he picked Mark up and she'd be away in Vancouver for a few days. She'd sat beside him in the car, and as far away as she could. He suspected she would have called a car if he hadn't insisted, he had to go to the airport anyway. And even then, she'd been reluctant in a way he didn't understand. She refused to touch him; refused to kiss him goodbye.

It made him realize that maybe he cared more about fixing things with her than fixing the deal. Mark had flown in to shut down the first look offer once and for all. Mark reminded him that he had a purpose at Papel Aeronautics; that they were watching him, counting on him to fulfill that purpose. He assured Mark that his distraction wouldn't jeopardize the deal.

* * *

Bob went to the movie Saturday morning because Miranda invited him. Because he didn't want to sit around Tom's house alone with both Sarah and Tom still in Vancouver. When he got there, he realized he was early. And then Travis arrived early too.

They acknowledge that Miranda set them up to talk. Bob felt disquieted after the way Sarah left for Vancouver. He asked Travis how it ended between them. Travis said that it almost never was. It was a long weekend and a beautiful illusion, but it was never real. He said she wanted something he couldn't give her. Or something she wouldn't let him give her. Travis encouraged Bob that maybe he could. Travis told him not to let her walk away.

* * *

Lisa drove to Tom's house when she knew Bob was at the movies with everyone. Alice worked out of the house when Tom worked in Vancouver, and she stayed in LA.

Lisa told Alice that she's been texting Tom for the past few days, since he called. But he hasn't texted back.

Alice dodged the question; said he's been busy as they wrap up filming. Lisa didn't buy it. He texted. He called. He didn't disappear when he got busy. While they were talking Tom texted Alice and Lisa caught her in the lie. She told Alice that the actor had been trouble and wanted to get away from her. She said she wondered why that was and walked out.

* * *

Sarah called Lisa, the sound of music pulsing in the background. Tom invited Jason to the party. She was already burning without any safe place in the hotel. Lisa is distracted from her conversation with Alice. She almost asked Sarah about Tom. But she realized Sarah's panic was too much already. Lisa reminded her that she used to burn in the bathtub when they traveled as kids. She told Sarah to leave the party just like she left Tom's birthday party. Sarah said that Lisa

isn't there to cover for her. Lisa said that there are no VIPs, and no one would notice. Sarah reminded her that Jason would notice. Lisa said he'd notice her burning too. Sarah needed to get out before everything got out of control.

* * *

Bob picked Sarah up from the airport even though she said she could get a car. He took her home and walked her into her house. Lisa wasn't home, she'd gone to see Tom.

Bob said that he wants to love Sarah, but she won't let him. He pushed at the edges of her secret, and she almost told him but then she stops herself. He asked if this is it, this is how they become good at being friends. He asked if she'll go back to Travis when she's done with him or give Chad a shot. She said they're not the ones he should worry about. She almost said Jason's name, barely stopped herself from admitting he's the one who made her burn.

But he saw it in that moment. The edges of her secret, where to push and how hard. He'd tried and tried to get her to open up to him and he saw that she still couldn't bring herself to trust him.

This time Bob walked away.

And Sarah cried in his wake. The moment the door closed she knew how much he mattered to her. She knew if she let herself love him then the fire would destroy him, so they were better off this way. But still she wept.

* * *

Tom was glad to see Lisa at first, but it didn't last long. She confronted him about cheating on her and he admitted it. She asked why she wasn't good enough for him and suggested that maybe he was more interested in Sarah like everyone else. He was appalled. He only wanted Lisa. She said then there's something broken in him because he destroyed them.

When she went home, she and Sarah cried together.

* * *

Sarah was 10 when death came for her grandmother. The woman had been ill for so long and everyone thought she'd lost her mind because she kept telling stories of people on fire and her sister when they were children. But the family knew; knew she was only remembering; knew the fire occasionally consumed those around it. And so now, when her mind had become feeble with age the fire was all she could see.

Sarah's parents thought it would be good for the girls to say goodbye. And perhaps, they wondered, since Sarah carried the fire, if it might help somehow.

They spoke for some time, the little girl listening to stories filled with heat that drove you mad. She asked Sarah. She looked in Sarah's eyes and knew without touching her skin that it would burn her.

And somehow, Sarah believed she could help. Her grandmother longed to see her sister again, spoke of her so often. And Sarah thought if she just touched her, perhaps the heat would remind her, perhaps it would comfort her enough to quiet her.

So, Sarah reached out hesitantly and laid her fingers against her grandmother's cheek; let her palm rest against her chin. Her wispy skin threatened to crumble under the heat like paper. But it didn't seem to hurt. The old woman reached up and one hand clasped Sarah's arm, while the other wrapped her fingers on the back of her hand so her whole hand cupped her face. And she stared into Sarah's eyes with wonder and determination.

A girl so young could not know the old woman drew the fire out of her; did not realize it would recognize something familiar in the old woman, something so like her sister; and so, respond to the call. She did not know they sat, looking into one another's eyes far too long for

any human to withstand the heat radiating from her. And so, she did not pull away, unknowingly she granted the dying woman's last wish and let the fire take her, reuniting her forever with the sister she loved.

* * *

The next morning over coffee the sisters talked about how Tom had a better back yard than they did. Lisa said Tom's whole house was surrounded by walls unlike the open spaces they grew up in. Lisa wished they were at the family house in Hawaii.

Then Lisa told Sarah that she needed to tell Bob the truth.

Sarah challenged her that family rule number one is don't ever tell anyone. It wasn't safe to tell him.

Lisa countered that for generations the phoenix women got married and had children. They had to tell someone at some point.

Sarah agreed as if it's a revelation, though it shouldn't be. But she still couldn't. She couldn't let the fire destroy anyone else she loves. Lisa countered that she had to risk being destroyed herself and not fear so much destroying someone else. Sarah said she didn't know what she was talking about. Lisa doesn't believe the fire is given to her to destroy people but to help them. Sarah wanted to believe her, but she didn't know how. She decided to go to the house in Hawaii to clear her head. She asked Lisa to come with her.

Lisa said she had to work. And more than that she knew she had to learn to live in these days without Tom again. Running would just make it harder.

But once Sarah left Lisa locked up the house and went to the hotel for a few days.

* * *

It took two days for Bob to call Lisa and ask where Sarah was. He went to the house, but it was locked up. Lisa told him Sarah left town and that their parents have a place in Hawaii. He asked if her dad is the world famous marine biologist. Lisa admitted that he was. Bob said the fundraiser for his organization was always the highlight of his parent's year. He asked if Sarah started event planning for their father. Lisa confirmed that she did.

He asked where the house was and she said that it was supposed to be a family secret, their hideaway from the world. He didn't have to ask again, though because she knew Sarah needed him. She texted him the address.

* * *

Sarah was out surfing when Bob found her. It was a terrible time of day to surf which is why they're the only ones out on the water. It was also better in Hawaii than LA. She finally brought herself to ask him if he wanted to know the truth even if it destroyed him.

He didn't think it would. But he said even if it did, he wanted to know.

"I can't tell you this secret." She drew a breath, resisting the terror racing through her heart. "But I can show you. If you trust me."

"Of course, I trust you."

The eat dinner on the porch as the sun sets and then she took him into her room. He asked why there's a stone slab against the wall and she said he'd find out. She sat on the floor and told him to sit in the armchair. When she was little her parents would take turns sitting in the chair watching over her in the night. She told him not to be afraid, that she'd be okay, and she'd come back to him.

They sit in silence for a bit and then she began to crumple before his eyes, as if her bones were vanishing. Flames danced along her skin and then flare like a mini-supernova.

He realized she was a phoenix and the magnitude of it almost overwhelmed him. He paces the room, his thoughts going sixty, eighty, a hundred miles an hour, trying to decide what to do.

* * *

The next morning when the sun crested the horizon, he watched her emerge from the ashes. He gave her the robe draped at the end of her bed and said he'd going to go make breakfast while she got ready. He didn't ask her any questions. He just wrapped his arm around her waist and held her close.

She asked why he left her with Lisa after the attack without asking questions. He told her he already knew she had a secret, so Lisa seemed like the best idea. When he got her home and Lisa didn't insist on going to a hospital, he figured she knew what she was doing.

* * *

They go back to LA and Sarah worked to finalize the LA wrap party. Tom kept busy filming, so Bob hardly saw him. When he did see his friend, he didn't look good.

Lisa was still distraught, crying in the shower, but trying to appear to Sarah as if she was okay.

* * *

The night of the party everything went great until Tom showed up with a gun.

Brian and Samantha's director somehow got into the party. When Delilah found Sarah, Sarah didn't even give her a chance to talk. She told the director she won't ever do the reality show. She wanted nothing to do with her. The director said she doesn't care about Brian and Samantha's stupid show. But Sarah will work with her, one way or another. The director said she knew what Sarah is and then walks away.

Sarah was shaken and went to find Lisa. She found her sister with Bob and their friends and Tom shouting at her that she ruined him, that he hadn't slept in days, that he barely ate. He told her to fix him.

She said she didn't know how and looked to Sarah, wondering if the phoenix could help him.

Her denial made him angrier. The gun went off and everyone screamed and scattered. The DJ stopped playing music and knocked the light controls in her desperation to run. The lights went wild, but Sarah saw Bob lying on the ground. She knelt down and realized he'd been shot in the chest, just above his heart. She leaned over him weeping and her tears fall on the wound. It began to draw closed, and he drew a deep breath. But an excruciating pain gripped her chest as the wound opened slowly, tearing her muscles and tissues apart, breaking the skin open and rupturing her veins. When he'd healed his gun shot is in her.

Bob sat up and grabbed her shoulders, frantic to help her. She fought the scream that wanted to burst from her, and she summoned the fire. Before he knew what happened a flame flashed along with the wild lights leaving Sarah nothing more than a pile of ash beside him.

Chad saw Bob sitting on the ground and asked where Sarah was. Bob told him to go get Lisa. Chad was confused but Bob insisted.

When Lisa got there, he took her hand and put it on the ground beside him, so that she could touch the ashes and understand what happened without him having to say anything aloud, without her having to see in the still flashing lights. Lisa called her mom and asked if they can move Sarah. Her mom said they can. Lisa went to get her purse and Bob's jacket to hide the hole and blood on his shirt.

The police arrived to arrest Tom and question people. Bob answered questions and then when it was Lisa's turn, she gave him her purse so he could go to their house. The police asked her about dating Tom, and she said she didn't know he had a gun. That she wasn't sure he even tried to shoot it or if it went off accidentally. Finally, they let her go as the sun came up.

* * *

The girls' mother told them the story whenever they asked. She'd tell them that generations ago magic drifted in the air. She'd tell them of a young girl growing up in Scotland who was cold all the time. Every night she would sit in front of the family's fire trying to get warm. And each night she moved a little closer to the fire, trying to draw its heat into her bones. Until one night her father came into the room. And he screamed because his little girl sat in the fire. He saw her smiling as the flames danced around her, as if she'd finally found peace in the warmth of the fire. The father fell to his knees and wept bitter tears all night long as the girl's body seared and charred and finally fell to ash.

When the sun broke into the room the next morning her father found the strength to lift his head and look at the cursed hearth. He was instantly speechless because his little girl lay there in the ashes, healed and whole and new again.

She went back to the fire days later when the heat faded from her body. Her father was no longer afraid, nor did he grieve for her because he had witnessed her being burned before. When she grew too big for the hearth, he'd build a fire for her outside. She would sit in the fire, absorbing the heat and the flame into her. In time she and the fire became friends. The flames would caress her skin without her being burned. She was the first phoenix.

Their mother would tell them that her blood runs in their veins and gave them the fire.

"But only every other generation," Lisa said. The sadness in her voice said *but only one of us*.

"We all have the fire in our blood my darling. Sarah just has more fire than blood."

* * *

Sarah woke up in the ashes disoriented. Slowly the memories from the night before came back as she showered and got dressed.

Sarah found Bob cooking breakfast. She smiled that he was there in the aftermath. She touched his chest to make sure he was okay, and he assured her he was fine. He was more than fine.

3.2 Dialogue iteration

"You're not on the list."

"Check again. Halden, with an H."

"It's not there," said the girl behind the check in table. "I've checked twice."

"Are you sure there isn't a separate VIP list?"

"This is the only list I've got. I'm sorry."

"You've got to be kidding me." Bob turned away from her. "This is ridiculous."

Alice panicked when she got Bob's text. She knew she'd made a big mistake, the sort of small mistake that got people fired in the entertainment industry. Alice raced through the party looking for the event planner and her somewhat mentor, Sarah, to figure out what to do. When she reached the bar in the back corner, she found Sarah talking to the bartender.

"Bob isn't on the list!" Alice blurted out as she ran up to Sarah. "He's standing at the door, and they won't let him in!"

Sarah turned to the young girl with a calm Alice could only wish for. "You do know you can get anyone into this party, Alice. Why are you running here to tell me instead of telling them to let him in?" Sarah headed through the crowd toward the door as she talked. "And why isn't he on the list?"

"I thought he'd be in New York. I mean, Megan told me when she left that he always comes to LA for Tom's birthday, but I forgot with everything going on with the movie and the party and I am so gonna get fired."

"You're not getting fired. Go lose yourself in the dance floor until I get a drink in him."

As Sarah dismissed the young assistant she wished, for just a moment, that Tom had hired someone with a little more experience so she wouldn't have to fix this.

Sarah stepped out into the night and immediately recognized the agitated guy hovering just past the table. When Sarah saw Tom's best friend she stopped in her tracks for a split second. She'd worked in the entertainment industry for a few years and normally someone that good looking ended up on camera.

She walked up to him with a smile. "Hi, Bob. I'm Sarah. Sorry about the hassle. We thought you were in New York."

She led him past the check in table and into the party.

"Alice forgot I come to town for his birthday."

"Alice just got out of college and has a few things to learn." Sarah led him toward the bar in the back of the club.

"Is she pretty?"

"Not that pretty." Sarah understood the implication in his question and found herself impressed by his perception. "Tom met her when she interned for Gary."

"From big shot producer to actor? What does she want?"

"She doesn't know yet. I think Tom stepped up and hired her before Gary could."

"Not that pretty?"

"Pretty enough," she conceded.

Bob smiled. As much as he'd hated waiting at the door, he decided to let it go, enjoy himself, let the music lure him onto the dance floor and maybe entice the beautiful girl beside him to come along. "Tom's a good guy no matter how hard he tries to pretend otherwise."

"I hope so."

"How about I buy you a drink?" Bob leaned forward and turned to look at her again.

"That's an easy offer when the drinks are free." Sarah couldn't help herself from flirting a little.

"I work with what I've got." He quirked an eyebrow and she nodded. Bob turned toward the bartender, "Sorachi Ace and..." he looked back to Sarah.

"Cranberry and tonic."

"That's hardly worth the offer to buy a free drink. Not even a glass of champagne?"

"I don't like to drink when I'm working."

"Working? Alice is the assistant, and a caterer doesn't let people into the party. Which would make you...?"

"The event planner." Sarah accepted her drink from the bartender with a polite smile.

"You seem to know Tom pretty well for being the event planner."

"It helps that he's dating my sister."

Bob couldn't help grinning. "Good. The way you walk around this party like you own it I was half afraid he was dating you." He slid his hand over and brushed his thumb across her fingers. "I guess it's my lucky night after all." His smile faded, though, as he wrapped her hand in his. "Are you okay?" He looked down with concern at their hands.

"Why?"

He brought his other hand over and brushed it across her forearm. "You're burning up."

Her smile dimmed for a moment but then she recovered, almost before he could notice. She hadn't realized that her blood was turning to lava until he touched her. It frustrated her

because she wanted to enjoy the party, not run home to burn safely. "I'm fine. It's just warm in here." She slipped her hand out from his. "Did you fly in today?"

"No, I've been in town for a week. I've been working with a production company to build up their financing. It's really not that interesting."

"It might be."

"Over coffee, maybe." He laughed. "On a night like this, there are so many more interesting things."

"Like what?"

"Like how you found the most obstinate girl in LA to work the door."

Sarah laughed. "Before the party I got Tom to take a picture with her on my phone. If she lets anyone in that's not on the list, she doesn't get it."

"That's pretty high currency to be playing with."

Before she could ask anything, else Tom came over with a huge smile, his arms outstretched. "Hiding at the bar with a beautiful girl." He clapped Bob on the back then turned to see her. "Oh, hi Sarah."

"Tom."

"Have I told you yet tonight that you've done a fabulous job with this party?"

"No, but thank you," Sarah answered with a smile.

"Where's my girlfriend? Lisa, baby, come meet Bob."

Lisa came over and quietly smiled at Bob as Tom draped his arm across her shoulder.

"Hi." Lisa reached out to shake Bob's hand.

"Nice to meet you."

"Bob, my friend, since the most beautiful woman here adores me completely, you may enjoy the company of the second most beautiful. No offense Sarah."

"None taken. Actually, if I could steal the most beautiful woman from you for a moment..." Sarah stepped away from the bar but Tom held up his drink to stop her.

"First, a toast! To family. No, wait... To friends that are closer than family and family that is actually family... On my birthday it's perfect that everyone I love is here, loving each other..."

Bob cut him off by lifting his glass. "To you, man. Happy birthday."

"Happy birthday!" they all echoed as their glasses clinked.

"Now, I need my sister for just a second." Sarah walked away from the group just far enough that they couldn't be overheard with the music reverberating around them.

"What's up?"

"I have to leave. You need to cover for me with Tom."

"What's wrong?"

Sarah didn't answer, she just took Lisa's hand. Sarah's hand felt hot and feverish, and Lisa knew.

"I thought it was just last week." Lisa pulled her hand back before Sarah burned her.

"It was! I don't know where this came from. But I have to go. Everyone important is already here and everything is going okay..."

"Yeah, I'll make sure it's fine. Where's Alice?"

"I banished her to the dance floor. But I'm sure she's watching her phone if you need her."

"Okay. Love you."

"Love you too."

After a minute Lisa returned to Tom and Bob secretly, though, in a place she barely admitted to herself, she felt grateful her sister left so Lisa could have the attention to herself. She ignored the question in Bob's eyes. Tom didn't even notice Sarah's disappearance. They enjoyed the party Sarah had conjured, dancing and laughing for the rest of the night.

* * *

Sarah woke up in the ashes, the weight of defeat tearing through her brand new heart. The fire always won, making it useless to fight. She burned every time, reduced to a pile of ash until the sun rose and she emerged whole again in the new day. It didn't matter that her body had regenerated, every muscle and organ brand new, she needed more. She drove to church to let the time of worship renew her soul.

* * *

King's Road Cafe was packed on a late Sunday morning. Tom's celebrity, famous enough to be recognized by not famous enough to be mobbed, didn't matter. He and Lisa still had to wait for a table. The other patrons tried not stare at him, but Lisa caught the sly glances, the subtle yearning to connect with him in even the most passing way. Tom didn't notice though. The turbulence within him had stirred up and so he focused on Lisa, the way her almost unnatural calm steadied something inside him.

Once they were finally seated, had ordered and had started drinking the delectable coffee only King's Road served they began to feel more like themselves.

"What time do you fly out today?" Lisa

"4:30."

"That's not bad. Two and a half hour flight to Vancouver. You'll get to eat dinner there."

"Yeah. Call's not until 7:00 tomorrow morning, though." He didn't want to think about Vancouver; didn't want to think about leaving her. "I'd rather stay longer."

"It'd be fun to come with you for a week."

"You'd be bored. Being on set is tedious if you're not working. And I work all the time."

"I know. But it could be a vacation for me. I could relax and go shopping. Aren't there a lot of great restaurants there?"

"There are. But if you want a vacation, I'd rather we go somewhere more interesting."

"More coffee?" Their waitress interrupted the moment.

Tom pulled back and offered a softer smile to the waitress—his charming movie star smile that never quite filled his eyes. "Please. An espresso and she had a caramel latte."

The waitress glowed under the slightest his attentions and turned away.

Lisa smiled in the remnants of the broken spell. "I remember feeling like that when you smiled at me."

"I don't fluster you with my smile anymore?"

"I know you too well to be charmed by that smile. You've got better smiles that I prefer." She spoke the truth, but also, she said what he need to hear.

They ate in silence until the waitress brought their coffees.

"That was quite a party Sarah threw last night."

"I told you she's the best."

"I know but she's your sister; you're supposed to say that. I didn't know you were actually right. I should have guessed from what she charges."

"She gave you a discount. Imagine what she would charge Gary."

"Does she give Brian and Samantha a discount too?"

Lisa smiled, thinking of the brother and sister producing team that gave Sarah her start as an event planner in the entertainment industry. "On her fee. Mostly so they can feel magnanimous with their bonus."

"Where did she go, by the way? I remember her hanging out with Bob. But I don't remember seeing her the rest of the night. Did she go home with him?" He took her hand, holding onto the sense of being settles she give him while he can.

"No. Don't you remember when you and Bob got on the dance floor?"

"We did not. I was drunk but I would remember that."

"You need another coffee then because you absolutely did. The two of you even did a synchronized dance from high school."

"Now I know you're lying." Derek leaned around the table and kissed her because he liked it when she lied.

* * *

Lisa walked in the door and saw Sarah sprawled on the couch with her arm flung over her eyes as if trying to hide from the world, or from herself.

"It's okay, Lisa. You don't have to worry." Sarah didn't move as she spoke.

"You're not worried?"

Sarah sighed and brought her arm down from her face so she could look up at her sister.

"It happens."

"It happens when he's in town—"

"When he's in the room."

"Whatever. He wasn't there last night, and something set you on fire."

"Stop it. It sucks but it also means I get to reset the clock."

Lisa closed her mouth, thought about stopping; thought about respecting Sarah's denial. But she couldn't let it go. "You don't ever want to think about what brings the fire on, only what makes it go away."

"Yes. I'll have six weeks to plan Brian and Samantha's birthday before I burn again. Maybe I can even hold it at bay for two months this time." Since they were her biggest clients, and their birthday was their biggest party each year, she wanted to be able to focus.

"But that's not any sort of control. That's hiding from it and hoping it goes away when you know it won't. The fire is in your blood."

"Why would I want to control it?" Sarah pushed up off the couch, pacing the modest living room. "I don't ever want to summon the fire. Can you imagine if I hadn't left the party last night?"

"I don't have to imagine."

"No, you don't. I'd have burned the whole place down and this time I'd probably hurt someone. Maybe even kill them. I hate the fire. and I hate what it does to me, and I hate feeling like this!"

"But it's your power! Why don't you want to find the strength of it?"

"You only say that because you don't have it!" Sarah snapped her mouth shut, wishing she could pull back her last words.

Lisa sat stone-faced looking at her.

"Look, Lisa, I'm sor—"

"No, you're right. If I had the fire... I would revel in the power. I would find some way to do something with it." She let a hint of her jealousy of Sarah and the fire slip into her words, but Sarah doesn't notice.

“What, what would you do? There’s no purpose in being a force of destruction.”

Lisa stood, tired of this fight. They'd had it too many times. "I don't understand you at all."

Sarah looked down. "That's because you've never been burned."

* * *

Monday morning Bob looked out the window of his office as he answered the call from his assistant. "Your timing is perfect."

"That's because you're a creature of habit. Did you enjoy the party?"

"One of Tom’s better birthdays. Until we hit the dance floor."

"Please tell me there are pictures."

Bob turns away from the window with a smile. "If there are and you ever saw them, I'd have to fire you."

"Back to work, then. Mark called and you also need to return Clay and Moira. Leslie's agent finally sent over the check for the last episode, and I had that deposited."

Bob flipped through scripts on his desk. "Do I have anything today other than lunch?"

"And Mark's call? No. But you do have to meet with Hunter at some point while you're out there."

"Mark is in Australia this week. He's asleep by now. Where am I meeting the Papel Aeronautics guys for lunch?" Though Bob his job bored him, he enjoyed the entertainment industry's effect use of lunch. More business happened, connections made, and opportunities were seized at lunch than from behind a desk.

"They said it's up to you. Mark said to call anyway. Do you want to go to Tuscan Sun since it's near the office?"

Something didn't feel right about Tuscan Sun. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he craved something else. "You know what sounds good? Baltaire."

"Okay. I'll make a reservation and let the Papel guys people know. One o'clock?"

"Yes. Do you want to come to LA?"

"For lunch?"

Bob laughed. "No, for a few weeks. I'm going to stay here longer than I expected and if the time difference is hard on you, you can work out here."

"And give up the hours I have in the morning to get work done until you wake up?"

"By get work done you mean watch your tv shows, don't you?"

"Well, it's important that at one of us keeps up with your clients' shows. I'm a season behind on Leslie's show and I'm pretty sure Gerald is about to come back from the dead. And I don't mind the late days because you're buying me dinner."

Bob laughed. "Schedule lunch with Hunter's people sometime this week. Or I'll stop by his set if he's working all week. And catch up on your shows over the next few weeks. If we start filming, I'll need you in the same time zone."

* * *

Lisa drove over the hill into Beverly Hills on a beautiful Monday morning. The perfect song is on the radio, and she drove on a back road with no traffic, enjoying the day.

She left her car with the valet and walked into the Mer Hotel as if she owned it.

Mack greeted her with a smile and a hug. "You really drove all the way here from the valley to steal my concierge?"

"I can steal your concierge with a phone call." She stepped back to grin up at him. "I came to see this fancy new floor Joe can't stop talking about."

"He'd rather stay here." Mack led her across the lobby toward the elevators.

"Of course, he would. His girlfriend lives around the corner. But the studio that owns my delightful boutique hotel isn't going to let him and so I get to listen to him use this new floor as his excuse. He thinks I'm actually going to build one too."

"Half the decent hotels in town remodel either to spite you or because they're desperate to keep up."

"It's like we live in Vegas."

"Please," Mack cringed. "You'll ruin the rest of my day thinking about it."

"Sorry. Are you going to show me this floor or what?"

"I'm going to do that and then I'm going to take you to lunch."

Lisa turned to him as they waited for the elevator. "I wish I could but I'm meeting my sister."

"Well damn. I'm going to have to come up with some new flashy toy so Joe will send you back to visit me."

"Oh, don't worry. I'm sure I'll have a reason for you to drag yourself to the valley long before Joe's back in town."

He took her up to the fifteenth floor which had been cut in half.

"It's like the perfect backyard but without a pool." Lisa walked onto the open air patio with three hot tubs on one side, a handful of cabanas scattered around and a bar with a grill behind the counter across from the hot tubs.

"We would have had to lose all the rooms below to accommodate a pool. With the hot tubs we only lost a few and moved some walls so now we have more suites there."

"How many rooms did you lose when you sliced the floor open?"

"More than the owners wanted to give me. But the additional suites help, and I convinced them an area like this would increase our prestige enough that the occupancy would improve."

Lisa moved behind the bar and leaned her elbows on the counter, smiling up at Mack.

"And it would give me something to live up to."

Mack laughed. "I'll never understand why you push yourself as if you're one of the rest of us. The studio brings the most elite actors to your door. You have nothing to prove."

Lisa thought briefly of Sarah and the fire and how cold it is in the shadow of the sun. But she laughed off Mack's question. "The actors may come to my hotel, but I have to give them an exceptional experience or the studio will find someone else who will."

"If they try it, you can always come work with me. Then I won't have to work so hard to get Sarah's attention. Brian and Samantha's birthday is coming up soon?"

"And you happen to have a brand new rooftop area. What interesting timing."

"Isn't it? It also gave me a reason to see you," Mack said with a wink.

"You're a charmer, Mack."

"And you're dating a movie star so you're immune to charm."

"Not entirely. And what do you care? You're not interested in dating me."

"You're my nemesis, doll. Charm keeps you off your guard."

* * *

"Why our production company?" John sat across the table from Bob. He and Max had formed Paper Aeronautics five years ago, John as the director and Max as the writer, as a way to get into their chosen fields.

Bob smiled at the question. “You’ve had some successes. Your dynamic works well as a writing and directing team. But your resources are limited. You can’t survive even one bad movie.”

Max laughed. “Well, we could survive a bad movie if it made enough money. But you're right. That's what keeps us sharp—keeps us making good movies.”

“But one movie at a time.” Bob countered. “What do you do, Max, while John's in prep? While he's filming? You don't secretly have a slate of scripts you work on to keep from being bored?”

Max shifted in his seat, looked down at his half-finished plate.

John, however, didn’t flinch. “By the time I finish editing he's practically got the next script written. I can't direct more than one movie at a time.”

“No, eventually we'll have to hire other directors. But that's the difference between a production company and a studio, isn't it? More movies on the slate, more crews to work with, more money.” Bob let that sink in as the waiter refilled their drinks. “You both get your pick of the projects you want to work on, and we hire the rest out. It won't be that different from how you're working today.”

“And what do you get?” John asked.

“I get to leverage a brand you've already built. I get an infrastructure that's a well-oiled machine instead of starting from scratch. And if we handle distribution ourselves, we all make more money.”

“And you think your experience as a business manager means you can handle producing, not just one movie at a time, but several?” John asked. “Just because you have clients like Hunter Kahlo doesn’t a producer make.”

“I handle their money, which makes me a good businessman. I read scripts because Hunter and my other clients want to talk shop. I know more about agents and directors and producers than you would expect.”

That didn't surprise Max. Something about the idea of working with Bob felt right. He could see John opening up to the possibilities as they spoke.

Bob looked up and noticed Sarah, as if her presence drew his attention, would have drawn it across an entire stadium.

Sarah and Lisa noticed Bob as soon as they walked into the restaurant. Sarah looked over at Lisa, who couldn't resist a mischievous grin. Sarah rolled her eyes at her sister. “I did not do that.” But they both knew she was lying. She'd met Bob once and already the fire burning under her skin had drawn him to her. “Fine. I didn't do it on purpose.” It terrified her a little, the magic that drew him to her without her meaning to, the idea that he'd want to get close to her. He'd already felt the heat in her skin at Tom's party.

Lisa shook her head and followed the hostess to their table while Sarah went over to him. Bob couldn't keep himself from standing at her appearance.

“I didn't expect to see you again so soon.”

Bob grinned. “You're the one on my side of town.”

Sarah smiled back. “I didn't mean to interrupt.”

John gawked at her, mesmerized. “No, interrupt all you want.”

Bob didn't quite sigh at the prospect of sharing her, but he knew it would be awkward if he didn't make introductions. “Sarah, this is John and Max.” He looked down at his companions with a cocky grin. “We're going to make a movie together.”

Sarah glanced at the other men, barely. “Lucky you.”

“Do you want to let them hang out with Lisa and get we get a table on the patio?”

Sarah smiled at his brash idea. “Lisa might never forgive me.”

“They’re nice guys. John will be especially nice when he tries to get Derek in his next movie.”

Sarah grinned and lightly touched his arm. “I’ll see you later.” Even as she walked away Sarah decided not to fight Bob’s fascination with her; to let it play out for a while. She felt sure she could let him close and keep him at a distance as she’d done before. The fire might draw people to her, but it couldn’t make her put her heart on the line.

Bob watched her walk away. He gradually sat back down.

Max looked at him with a smirk. “We’re going to make a movie together?”

“Aren’t we?”

John leaned back in his chair to consider the prospect. “Find us the right script.”

* * *

Hey beautiful.

Bored already?

What are you going to do about it?

Lisa knew the fire drew people to her sister like moths to the flame. So, when Tom’s text came at that moment, when it felt like everyone adored her sister, it lightened Lisa’s heart. She wondered what she’d do if she had the power to attract people the way the fire attracted people to Sarah.

* * *

After lunch Sarah drove to Brian and Samantha’s office to suggest some party themes for them. They’re a brother and sister producing team that Sarah worked for a few years ago as their assistant. After doing all the unexpected and sometimes odd tasks of an executive assistant Sarah

realized she enjoyed planning the wrap parties and cast dinners the most. She accepted that she'd loved creating experiences even as a teenager and transitioned into event planning.

The receptionist greeted Sarah when she arrived then notified Brian and Samantha's assistant. She offered Sarah coffee and water, and Sarah asked for a bottle of water. The assistant came out to walk Sarah back to the office and they chatted just a bit. This assistant had been with Brian and Samantha about six months, so she and Sarah had talked before.

Brian and Samantha greeted Sarah with quick hugs and Sarah noticed that they were even more excited than usual. They sat on the couches in their office.

"So, I heard you're in production on a Chinese inspired martial arts film," Sarah began.

"How did you hear that?" Brian asked.

"Sarah always hears top much. Why do you think she was such a good assistant? Go on." Samantha encouraged.

"I thought we could celebrate your Chinese birth year."

"Cool. Wait. Were we born in the year of the squirrel or something?" Brian asked.

"There is no year of the squirrel. Wait is there?"

"No, squirrels are not indigenous to China. You were born in the year of the horse."

"Yes! Rodeo party. Finally!" Samantha almost stood up in her enthusiasm.

"No. How many times do I have to say I'm allergic to horses."

"You're not allergic to horses."

"I could be. They're big and dirty and probably smelly."

"I wasn't thinking of a rodeo theme. The Chinese Horse is probably dusty," Sarah acknowledged to Brian. "But is also energetic and all about freedom."

"So, we can finally have a raucous party?" Brian asked.

Both Sarah and Samantha laughed because they always had a raucous party.

“Does everyone dress up in horse costumes?” Samantha asked.

“I thought we could play with color themes. The horse’s lucky colors are green and yellow. Bad luck colors are blue and white. So, we ban blue and white. Lots of music, oriental decorations. I’ll get into the symbolism some more for the decorations. We’ll have games this year because the horse is also athletic so the venue will have to have space.”

“Wait. Don’t get into the details yet.” Brian went over to his desk and typed a message to their assistant.

“We’ve decided we want to do more than produce movies. We want to get into reality television,” Samantha explained.

“There’s so much money in it. Low production costs and we have an idea we think could hit big.”

Samantha’s face lit with excitement. “We want to do a reality show about you.”

“No.” Sarah answered without even thinking.

Samantha ignored Sarah’s denial. “You’re fantastic. And you do the most amazing parties. We want to do a show centered on your event planning.”

“You were supposed to wait for me.” Brian came back to join his sister on the couch.

“You were ten feet away,” Samantha dismissed his complaint. “We thought our birthday would be the perfect pilot. And since you’ve tied the theme into the movie we’re prepping—”

“That you know nothing about,” Brian emphasized.

“—then it would be perfect cross-promotion!”

Sarah balked. They often hinted at wanting to cast her in various things when she worked for them, but she declined in a way that mostly kept her off the radar. The idea of being on

camera, of being seen by that many people terrified her. It didn't matter that they wouldn't be watching her burn, secrets are a part of the fabric of who she is as much as the fire.

Before she could decline again another woman joined us.

"Ah, Delilah. This is Sarah. We just pitched the idea to her." Samantha stood to greet her.

"Sarah, Delilah is going to be our director."

"It is so nice to meet you," Delilah emphasized every word as she shook Sarah's hand.

"We're going to have so much fun working together."

"No, we won't."

Delilah took a step back, surprised.

"I didn't mean it like that. But I'm not doing the show."

The room stilled with her denial. Brian and Samantha glanced at each other.

Delilah tried again. "If you're worried about the camera's following you, it won't be that bad. Lots of people are nervous at first but before long you won't even notice. And we'll have interviews where you can explain what you're doing. It's really more like you and I having a conversation. Everyone loves to talk about their work."

The fire stirred in her, but Sarah pushed back, trying to suppress it. "No." Sarah shook her head.

"I don't think you understand," Samantha began softly.

"We're going to film the planning of our party. We already have a contract with a network for the show. This is happening."

"That's great. I hope you guys are successful. I really do." Sarah stood. "But I don't want to do the show." Sarah felt frustration crawl under her skin that they decided all this before they

asked her. "You can keep the theme. Find someone else to work it." Sarah started to say something else. Good luck. Even if she meant it, it sounded snide. She nodded and left.

* * *

As a baby Sarah burned once a year on the winter solstice. Her family had a stone crib passed down through the generations for fire babies.

As a toddler she would occasionally work herself into a tantrum that would wake the fire. Most often it would smolder and fade away again. A few times a year it ran hot enough in her blood for her to burn.

She lost control at thirteen when everything in her body changed, came to life, went haywire. She had to pay attention to the heat, guard against the fire so that she only ever burned on the stone floor of their house. Never let anyone know she burned.

Now, as an adult she ran the fire out before it got too hot. Or she tried to. The music coursed through her, became her energy. It moved faster than the fire; pushing her on, pushing her beyond her ability to go.

The meeting with Brian and Samantha woke the fire too early. Now she had to fight it; had to run before John and Miranda's barbeque so that she didn't ignite. Because she couldn't take the chance that it would destroy someone other than her.

* * *

Miranda and John lived in a small house in a nice West Hollywood neighborhood with a nice back yard. It's an older house, like so many in LA are, but they've made it feel comfortable and excellent for guests.

"Hello!" Miranda exclaimed quietly, looking past Sarah.

"What?" Sarah turned to look over her shoulder and stopped dead in her tracks.

"Tom brought a friend."

"Oh," Sarah sighed. "Bob. That's his best friend Bob."

Their eyes met across the backyard and his slow smile made everything in her flip flop.

"Bob? Isn't he tall, blond and delicious."

"Miranda," Sarah turned back to her friend, chastising her half-heartedly.

"What? You were thinking it."

"I wasn't—"

"Uh huh." Miranda pointed at Sarah's expression and then her finger crisscrossed Sarah's face and up and around her body, taking in all of her. "You found another one."

"I didn't."

Miranda raised a scoffing eyebrow.

"Okay, maybe I did. Chad and Travis came on their own when they worked on your television show."

"Whatever. Go have some fun."

Sarah shook her head and went to sit in the circle of comfortable couches and chairs with Chad.

* * *

Bob couldn't suppress a grin when he spotted Sarah. As he and Tom made their way to the side of the house, not toward the grill, Tom stopped to shake hands with the grill master.

"John, good to see you."

John left small charcoal smudges on Tom's hand. "Ah, New York Bob. This is Travis," he pointed to the tall, well-built guy next to him by the grill.

“New York Bob?” He turned to Tom. “You have so many friends named Bob I need a nickname?”

“It was either that or Bob Number Three.”

She turned at the sound of her name and gave him a friendly wave, then returned to her mission. Travis left John alone at the grill and sat beside Sarah on the short couch.

Tom led Bob over to the side of the house to get a drink.

Grapefruit. Cranberry lime. Vanilla.

"Not quite what you expected?" Tom leaned against the wall next to the cooler as Bob surveyed its contents.

"You might have warned me." Bob selected a cranberry lime seltzer water and stood to look around the backyard.

"About six months ago Miranda decided that this is LA. Everyone's trying to be healthy. Why sabotage that while having a good time."

"So, no alcohol?"

"Or sugar." Tom took a sip of his seltzer and stood away from the wall. "Her protein chocolate chip cookies are surprisingly good." He walked over to Lisa and wrapped his arms around her.

“Chad—” Tom began as Bob sat in the chair across from Sarah and Travis, but Chad waved away the introduction.

“New York Bob, I heard. Nice to meet you.” Chad’s lean frame made him look a few years younger than everyone else. “Chad Tongia.”

Bob gave him a friendly nod. “I hope now that we’ve met it’ll be just Bob.”

Travis scoped out the new guy. Despite the impulse to move closer to Sarah he remained a discreet distance from her. This wasn't the first time a new guy had found their way into her life. The guys came and they went, and Travis was still there beside her when they're gone.

Miranda perched on the arm of Chad's chair. "Fair enough, just Bob. Tom talks about you plenty but hasn't told us how two met."

Tom shrugged. "We've known each other as long as I can remember."

Bob scoffed. "Second grade. I asked you to throw my ball to me."

Tom's face lit up with the memory. "I hit you in the face with it."

"On purpose."

Tom's indolent smile offered no apology. "You looked like a kid who needed to be hit in the face."

"You're lucky I didn't hit you in the face. A broken nose would've ruined that movie star façade you grew into."

Travis found that as much as he'd rather not, he kind of liked Bob.

John laughed. "True. And you never would have caught Lisa without your heartthrob good looks."

Tom groaned. "I did one teeny-bopper movie and every media outlet in the world labeled me a heartthrob."

Lisa smacked his chest. "Be nice to the teeny-boppers. They spend money to go to your movies, even the bad ones. And they love you enough to make you famous."

"Yeah, Heartthrob," Travis teased him.

"Watch it, Rockstar." Tom pointed at him. "If we're taking people down for their good looks, you're next on the chopping block."

Travis clamped his mouth shut.

"Oh please! Movie star, actor, actor," Miranda pointed at Tom, Travis and Chad. Then she looked at Bob. "I don't know what you are, but you're too good looking to be an accountant."

Bob laughed and took a drink of his seltzer.

Miranda stood and headed back toward the grill to join John. "The writers are going to be back here getting food ready for you beautiful people."

Lisa deflected the attention away from herself and Sarah. "Shut up, Miranda. You're gorgeous."

John smiled at Lisa's words.

"Enough of this." Chad sat forward. "Movie lines!"

Sara nodded. "And not the ones on the wall of every movie theater in America."

"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn about your rules." Tom smirked.

Lisa kissed his cheek. "Looks to me like you're on the wrong side of the river."

"How else am I going to explain the game to Bob?"

Bob leaned back in his chair. "Let's ride."

"Oh!"

"Careful." Sarah grinned at him. "Only the penitent man shall pass."

"Fortune favors the brave."

Everyone looked back at Miranda, bewildered. "Nope, that's a book."

John came over to her and kissed her forehead. "What an idiot."

Lisa smacked Tom in the chest with the back of her hand to get his attention.

"Foul!" He pointed at John.

"To call it, you have to name it." John smirked.

Tom snapped his fingers a few times, looking at Lisa for help. She tried to convey the message with her eyes, but it clearly didn't work.

Finally, it occurred to him. "Generic foul. Deliver it with the accent."

John cleared his throat and attempted his best British accent. "What an idiot."

Everyone laughed at his abysmal accent. "Nope," Tom declared. "You're out."

"Major boring shit." Travis took a sip of his drink to emphasize his disinterest.

"Language!"

"You swear?" Sarah set Travis up for one of their favorite lines.

"Every damn day."

The game continued until Sarah fell out and then Bob let a song lyric slip in to drop out of the game. Lisa, Travis and Chad would have kept going, but John called for a game pause when the food was ready.

Tom snatched a chip as they stood in line.

Travis pointed to him. "He says grace."

They formed a loose circle and Tom asked for God's blessing on the food, their friendships and their time together.

When he finished, Bob stepped up beside him. "That was unexpected. When was the last time you volunteered to pray?"

Tom shrugged. "You didn't know the first bite rule. I couldn't take the chance when the last time you prayed out loud it was a disaster."

"I was nine."

"You were stumbling over yourself and asking God to bless every single person you knew. By name."

"I didn't want anyone to be offended."

"Most of them weren't there."

Bob shrugged with a grin. "They'd know."

As the guys swarmed the table to make their burgers, Sarah took a half step toward the grill. The heat called to the fire in her blood, even after she'd run it out earlier in the day.

John stood beside Lisa and glanced over at Tom. "I can't imagine flying into town for, what, 36 hours? He must be in love, Lisa."

Lisa spooned grilled squash and tomatoes onto her plate. "We've only been together three months, John. It's too early for that." She went over to the food table next to Tom.

Bob noticed how close Tom and Lisa were, how his friend acted differently with this girl. Tom stayed close to her as if her physical presence were a balm. He handed her condiments recognizing what she needed and what she liked.

"Tom said you worked on a TV show together." Bob walked back to the circle of couches.

"Twenty-two gloriously low-rated episodes." Chad ate a fry as he settled back into his chair. "It will forever be the best and worst thing I've ever done."

Travis shook his head as he sat down beside Sarah. "The worst thing you ever did was that Ranger show they cancelled in the middle of filming episode four. They didn't even bother to let you wrap."

"I met Lexi on that show."

"Who you kept dating for almost two whole months after the show ended." John carefully laid pickles on each of his two burgers, still back at the tables near the grill.

Tom scooped guacamole onto his burger with a tortilla chip. "What happened with her?"

Chad paused for a moment, then a grin lit up his face. "I kissed her. And she broke her hand. Punching my face. Total misunderstanding."

A heartbeat passed then laughter erupted throughout the backyard. Travis leaned forward to give Chad a high five.

"Movie line?" Bob looked to Tom, but Tom looked bewildered.

Sarah glowed with laughter. "An expertly played movie line."

When their amusement died down, Travis asked Chad, "What's the real story?"

Chad dismissed the question by standing up to get a second burger. "I got distracted."

"That show had a fantastic score." Miranda settled briefly on the arm of the couch that Sarah and Travis shared. She managed two bites before a timer went off in the house and she left to get more food.

"I don't understand why everyone doesn't hire Alex Sabolecki," Sarah nearly sighed.

"Not everyone loves every single thing he composes the way you do." Travis looked down at her with a grin. "You could invite him to Brian and Samantha's party along with the rest of us."

Sarah stiffened slightly by beside him. "I won't have the chance."

Sarah handed her plate with its half-eaten burger over to Travis. Lisa watched Sarah but didn't say anything about her lack of appetite. When Sarah ran the fire out it always left her a little hollow. "They're hiring a different event planner."

Travis took his arm from the back of the couch to accept her plate without comment. "That's ridiculous. You're the best in town." He peeled the top bun off and removed the pickles, grimacing. "You want me to grab you a bottle of water while I go wipe all this ketchup off?"

"Please." Sarah sighed. "They're getting into reality television and want to film the party. I refused to be the start of their show and lost the party along with it."

"Who wants what?" Miranda half overheard them as she came from the kitchen with a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

"Sarah wants a water and a new party to plan. Travis wants a napkin to make the rest of her burger halfway palatable," Chad answered for them.

"There is nothing wrong with liking ketchup," Sarah defended herself.

Miranda set the plate of cookies on the table next to the grill, rubbing her hand over John's back as she passed. Then she came back to the circle and handed Sarah her water and Travis his napkin before she sat down in a chair.

Chad saw the question in Bob's eyes. "Don't get the wrong idea. Sarah eats. Far more than you'd expect for someone who looks that great. You should see her on set when they bring out catering."

"Chad!" Sarah's mostly feigned her indignation, and he knew it. They'd had too much fun over the two years they'd known each other trying out different restaurants.

"Anyway, she eats. And then some days... well, I guess we eat for her."

"If you catch her on the right night, it would make her a real cheap date," Tom cracked. Everyone groaned and Travis threw the ketchup soaked napkin at him.

"Don't listen to him," Sarah said to Bob, her face lighting up with a mischievous smile. "I'd order a steak and not touch it just to spite him."

Bob smiled back at her and nodded.

Tom stood up, leaving Lisa on the couch for just a moment, just long enough to wipe ketchup off his t-shirt.

Bob followed him, grabbing another drink from the cooler. "You seem good, man."

"Don't say it."

"I didn't say anything. Except that I hadn't realized."

"Well, now you know. Don't make it more complicated than it is."

Bob watched as Tom went back to the couch, took Lisa's hand and rested it on his leg. He watched the way she settled into Tom. There had been a lot of things throughout their lives he couldn't save Tom from. This one, he didn't know if he should.

Bob glanced over at Sarah next to Travis. They weren't quite touching, but they were clearly comfortable close to one another. Bob didn't know what to make of it. And he didn't like it.

"Tom." Lisa snuggled closer to him and batted her eyelashes up at him. "I want a cookie."

"They're awfully far away."

"I know. And this couch is so comfortable."

"It's more comfortable with me on it."

Lisa grinned at the truth of his observation, her eyes sparkling.

Tom finally tore himself away from her attention and looked over to Bob still back by the food, his grin turning mischievous. "I bet Bob will get us both cookies."

Bob sighed. He could argue but he wanted to try the cookies himself.

"Have you seen *Shadows in the Mist* yet? It's so good," Lisa turned her attention to Travis now that they'd settled the dessert plan.

"It was awful." Amusement lit Travis' dark eyes. The only thing that made a terrible movie better was highlighting all its flaws with someone fun.

"Only because you're a film snob."

"It's what makes me a good actor."

Bob took a tentative bite of one of Miranda's protein chocolate chip cookies. He nodded in satisfaction. Tom hadn't steered him wrong; they were surprisingly good. Bob moved to stand next to John, still outside the circle of everyone. "Does he agree with anyone on anything?" he asked, gesturing to Travis.

John glanced over his shoulder then went back to cleaning the grill. "Only other film snobs. I think he's so often cast in the tough guy role he feels that he has to prove he's a serious actor."

"I saw him in *Deception of the Sands* two years ago. He was decent."

"Were you surprised?"

"A little." Bob smiled as he finished his first cookie. He took a peanut butter one next for variety. "But my assistant watches television shows so I don't have to. Tom said your show was really good."

"All twenty-two episodes." John closed the grill and wiped his hands on a dishtowel Miranda had left for him. "We had a great time on that set even though we were hanging by a thread the whole season."

"Is that where you all met?"

"Yeah, it was the first show Miranda, and I wrote full time for. Travis and Chad were both on it. We used to hang out with a few of the other actors too, but you know how it is in LA."

"It's been a while, but yeah. I know what you mean."

John took one of the cookies Miranda made with melted dark chocolate. "You get busy and then you meet new people and things just shift."

"Unless you have a reason to stay." Bob turned his attention to Sarah on the couch next to Travis.

"You noticed that, huh?"

"Kind of hard to miss. What's the story there?"

"Miranda would kill me for telling you."

Bob turned back to John. "That ever stopped you before?"

John just laughed. "He's caught in her gravitational orbit, same as Chad."

"Chad?"

"You didn't catch that one, huh? He's subtle but even from back here I can tell you his eyes have barely left her. He has a whole different connection to her, but he's also always here. He'd follow that girl anywhere."

Bob looked over at Chad in the thick of the debate with Lisa and Travis. "But whatever it was, it's over? For both of them?"

"Miranda would know more what it was, but yeah, it's run its course for Travis. I don't think Chad ever had a chance, but he still adores her." John took a second cookie. "I mean, I've only known Sarah a few years, and I don't pretend to understand it all. But men can only hold onto her for so long. Then they can't quite get over it. Like something is changed by knowing her. Or some part of them is waiting."

"For what?"

"For her to come back, I guess. She wouldn't say that, though."

"What would she say?"

"That they're good at being friends."

A dozen questions raced through Bob's mind. But he didn't get a chance to ask any of them because Sarah had walked over to join them with a stack of the empty plates. John took them from her with a friendly smile and headed to the kitchen.

"Lisa sent me to salvage your failed cookie mission."

"I recommend the chocolate chip." Bob picked up one from the plate and offered it to her. "You should stay and eat it with me, so she learns a little patience."

Sarah lips almost tipped into a smile, taking the cookie from him and leaning against the table beside the grill. She broke off a small piece and ate it. "So, what else do you do, Bob Halden, besides work and hang out with actors?"

"Hey now. I also hang out with writers." He indicated John and Miranda who had settled, finally, in the circle with everyone else. Bob shook his head at the ongoing debate. "They do this a lot, I guess."

Sarah's smile grew broader. "Sometimes if Miranda gets bored, she'll set them off just for fun."

Bob nodded as he laid a napkin on the table. "I've been out of the city so long I forget how opinionated people get about movies."

"Even though all your clients are actors?"

"We talk business more than film theory. As long as I know enough about their projects, I'm fine." He selected a chocolate chip cookie and a peanut butter and put them on the napkin.

"You know more than just their projects, though, don't you," Sarah observed as Sarah's eyes beckoned him to reveal his secrets to her.

"I always know more," Bob answered with an intriguing smile of his own.

She laughed softly, looking down to break another piece off her cookie. "You're in town for three weeks, huh?"

"Probably. You want to go out Thursday? Late morning?" Bob looked into her eyes with his most charming smile. He didn't know what she'd say and that made him nervous for the first time. She'd already said no to him twice before. But he'd decided it didn't matter what other guys were lingering in her life. She fascinated him and intrigued him. He couldn't leave without asking her out, asking her for more time, more attention, just more...

She looked up at him with a teasing smile. "Don't you have to work on Thursdays?" She knew she wasn't ready for this, ready for him, ready to leave another one by the wayside. She also couldn't bring herself to walk away.

"Not if I really don't want to. Let's go surfing instead." He reached for a second peanut butter cookie, for good measure, and let his fingers brush against her hand. Her skin felt cool despite the warm afternoon, and he knew she hid something though he had no idea what.

3.3 Descriptive iteration: Character and Setting

"You're not on the list."

"Check again. Halden, with an H."

"It's not there." The slight girl behind the table's voice trembled slightly. "I've checked twice." But she looked down at the list, her eyes straining in the lights spilling over from Hollywood Boulevard a block away, searching again through all the names in case he was listed by his first name... or it was spelled wrong... or any other possibility she could think of to not have to be the one standing in front of this guy telling him no. Not when she wanted more than anything to tell him yes... Yes, he could go past the huge bouncer into the party. Yes, he could have her number or possibly her heart if he smiled at her one more time.

"Are you sure there isn't a separate VIP list?"

"This is the only list I've got. I'm sorry." It pained her to say it. The bones in her arms and her fingers ached as if she'd lifted a 100-pound weight one too many times.

"You've got to be kidding me." Bob turned away so that his frustration wouldn't lash out on the remarkably unyielding girl, and he pulled out his phone. The flight from New York to LA earlier in the day had kept him too still too long and he hadn't burned off enough energy. And he hated being stuck. "This is ridiculous."

Alice's phone lit up in the dim club with his text. She'd kept it in her hand all night waiting, wondering what disaster would need her attention. Her heart sank with the weight of this problem because this mistake had been hers and the reality of that thundered through her. She knew the second before she read the text what it would say and realized with sinking clarity how badly she'd messed up. *Just keep breathing*, she thought even though she felt completely

numb. *Focus on solving the problem.* But she couldn't think past finding Sarah who could solve the problem for her.

Alice raced through the club, skirting around the dance floor. She glanced at the small groups of people talking, looking in the darkness for Sarah. Alice didn't bother with the people sitting on the couches or clustered around the high tables because she knew Sarah wouldn't be relaxing. When she reached the bar in the back corner, she found Sarah talking to the bartender.

"Bob isn't on the list!" Alice blurted out as she ran up to Sarah. "He's standing at the door, and they won't let him in!"

Sarah turned to the young girl with a calm Alice could only wish for. "You do know you can get anyone into this party, Alice. Why are you running here to tell me instead of telling them to let him in?" Sarah walked through the crowd toward the door as she asked. "And why isn't he on the list?"

"I thought he'd be in New York. I mean, Megan told me when she left that he always comes to LA for Tom's birthday, but I forgot with everything going on with the movie and the party and I am so gonna get fired."

"You're not getting fired. Go lose yourself in the dance floor until I get a drink in him." As Sarah dismissed the young assistant she wished, for just a moment, that Tom had hired someone with a little more experience so she wouldn't have to fix this. Though if this ended up as the worst thing, she had to deal with it would be an easy night.

Sarah stepped out into the night and immediately recognized the agitated guy hovering just past the table. She hadn't expected Tom's best friend to look like a movie star, as if somehow there wouldn't be room for someone like this guy in Tom's orbit. Or that if he looked the part, he would have lived up to it. Bob's tall, well built silhouette almost glistened in the dim light. He

had the kind of blond hair and blue eyes that belonged on a movie poster or the hot surfer everyone wanted.

She walked up to him with the smile she'd developed through the years of pacifying actors and producers. "Hi, Bob. I'm Sarah. Sorry about the hassle. We thought you were in New York."

Bob's anger faltered when he saw Sarah. Her sparkling elegance only dimmed slightly with a comforting smile that assured him everything would be okay. He found it easier to be gruff once they stepped into the darkened club and the music distracted him from her. "Alice forgot I come to town for his birthday."

"Alice just got out of college and has a few things to learn." Music pulsed through the night shifting their heartbeats to a fast, loose rhythm that begged them to start dancing, but Sarah led him away from the dance floor toward the bar at the back of the club.

"Is she pretty?"

"Not that pretty." Sarah understood the implication in his question and found herself impressed by his perception. "Tom met her when she interned for Gary."

"From big shot producer to actor? What does she want?"

"She doesn't know yet. I think Tom stepped up and hired her before Gary could."

"Not that pretty?"

"Pretty enough," she conceded.

Bob smiled. As much as he'd hated waiting at the door, he decided to let it go, enjoy himself, let the music lure him onto the dance floor and maybe entice the beautiful girl beside him to come along. "Tom's a good guy no matter how hard he tries to pretend otherwise."

"I hope so."

"How about I buy you a drink?" Bob leaned his elbows on the bar and turned to look at her, smoothly shifting gears from irritated to charming. The warm yellow and orange lights of the club brought out the auburn in her brown hair swept up away from her shoulders.

"That's an easy offer when the drinks are free." Sarah couldn't help herself from flirting a little.

"I work with what I've got." He quirked an eyebrow, holding her brown eyes with the implicit question. When she nodded Bob turned toward the bartender, "Sorachi Ace and..." he looked back to Sarah.

"Cranberry and tonic."

"That's hardly worth the offer to buy a free drink. Not even a glass of champagne?"

"I don't like to drink when I'm working."

"Working? Alice is the assistant, and a caterer doesn't let people into the party. Which would make you...?"

"The event planner." Sarah accepted her drink from the bartender with a polite smile. He'd worked several parties for her before and she kept him at the back bar, so he didn't have to rush through mixing easy drinks for the crowd. Those who knew enough headed to the back where he could take his time making the more exotic drinks.

"You seem to know Tom pretty well for being the event planner." Bob took a sip of his beer, drawing slightly away from Sarah.

Sarah watched him pull away. He was a good friend to Tom. She offered him a coy smile, hoping to encourage him back. "It helps that he's dating my sister."

Bob couldn't help grinning. "Good. The way you walk around this party like you own it I was half afraid he was dating you." He slid his hand over and brushed his thumb across her

fingers. "I guess it's my lucky night after all." His smile faded, though, as he wrapped her hand in his. "Are you okay?" He looked down with concern at their hands.

"Why?"

He brought his other hand over and brushed it across her forearm. "You're burning up."

Her smile dimmed for a moment but then she recovered, almost before he could notice. "I'm fine. It's just warm in here." She slipped her hand out from his. She hadn't realized that her blood was turning to lava until he touched her. Frustrated flared within her because she wanted to enjoy the party, not run home to burn safely. "Did you fly in today?" Sarah took a sip of her drink. The ice had already melted enough to water it down.

"No, I've been in town for a week." He let her change the subject even though his curiosity remained. Her eyes invited him to explain, and he found himself glad whatever had passed between them hadn't been the end of their conversation. "I plan to work with a production company to build up their financing. It's really not that interesting."

"It might be." She shrugged, a playful sparkle in her eyes.

"Over coffee, maybe." He laughed. "On a night like this, there are so many more interesting things."

"Like what?" A small group joined them at the bar, and she leaned away from them, closer to Bob.

"Like how you found the most obstinate girl in LA to work the door."

Sarah laughed. "Before the party I got Tom to take a picture with her on my phone. If she lets anyone in that's not on the list, she doesn't get it."

"That's pretty high currency to be playing with."

Before she could ask anything else Tom came over with a huge smile, his arms outstretched. "Hiding at the bar with a beautiful girl." He clapped Bob on the back then turned to see her. "Oh, hi Sarah."

"Tom."

"Have I told you yet tonight that you've done a fabulous job with this party?"

"No, but thank you," Sarah answered with a smile. Tom was always gregarious when he got drunk.

"Where's my girlfriend? Lisa, baby, come meet Bob."

Lisa came over and quietly smiled at Bob as Tom draped his arm across her shoulder.

"Hi." Lisa reached out to shake Bob's hand.

"Nice to meet you."

"Bob, my friend, since the most beautiful woman here adores me completely, you may enjoy the company of the second most beautiful. No offense Sarah."

"None taken. Actually, if I could steal the most beautiful woman from you for a moment..." Sarah stepped away from the bar but Tom held up his drink to stop her.

"First, a toast! To family. No, wait... To friends that are closer than family and family that is actually family... On my birthday it's perfect that everyone I love is here, loving each other..."

Bob cut him off by lifting his glass. "To you, man. Happy birthday."

"Happy birthday!" they all echoed as their glasses clinked.

"Now, I need my sister for just a second." Sarah set down her glass and walked away from the group just far enough that they couldn't be overheard with the music reverberating around them.

"What's up?" Lisa didn't look at her sister, her gaze still back on Tom. His dark hair was less artfully disheveled than usual making him, somehow, even more handsome.

"I have to leave. You need to cover for me with Tom."

Lisa's smile fell away as she turned her attention to Sarah. "What's wrong?"

Sarah didn't answer, she just took Lisa's hand so she could feel the heat radiating under her skin.

"I thought it was just last week." Lisa pulled her hand back before Sarah burned her.

"It was! I don't know where this came from. But I have to go. Everyone important is already here and everything is going okay..."

"Yeah, I'll make sure it's fine. Where's Alice?"

"I banished her to the dance floor. But I'm sure she's watching her phone if you need her."

"Okay. Love you."

"Love you too."

After a minute Lisa returned to Tom and Bob. She ignored the question in Bob's eyes. Tom didn't even notice Sarah's disappearance. Secretly, though, in a place she barely admitted to herself, she felt grateful her sister left so Lisa could have the attention to herself.

* * *

Sarah kept her eyes close when she awoke. She'd been here too many times before and knew if she opened her eyes ash would drift into them. She slowly pushed herself up from the pile of ashes into a seated position, the stone floor hard under her tender skin and still faintly warm. Her head remained bowed with the weight of failure as she opened her eyes slowly. She drew small, steady breaths so that she wouldn't inhale cinders from the hair cascading around her face. Her hair would hold the deep glow of embers for several hours, redder this morning than it

had been the day before. Ash clung to the skin on her arms; clung to her hands so that she couldn't brush it off. She didn't even try anymore. Sarah stepped out of the large fireplace her father had built into the wall, large enough to fit a grown woman. She left a trail of ash footprints as she walked to her bed for her robe. Sunlight crested through the window as she swept the ash back into the stone floor of the fireplace. On the nights she burned she always awoke with the dawn, with the first touch of sunlight on her.

Then she got in the shower, washing away the ashes but not the burning pain of failure. She could never fight the fire no matter how hard she tried. She couldn't stop it from consuming her. But she hoped she could wash away the memory, or at the very least, not think about it long enough to pretend it didn't happen. She went about her day—dressing and eating breakfast and pretending that everything was normal.

Sarah drove up Mulholland soaking in the sunlight and the cool spring air. She arrived before most of the crowd, before the band assembled on the stage below where she sat alone in the balcony. Even as others arrived, everyone smiled and had no idea, could not imagine, that the night before she'd burned to ash and been reborn.

When they began singing, she finally felt like she could breathe. She needed the music, the beauty and the angst buried in it. She needed to sing loudly, drowned by the other voices and the instruments until the music became a part of her. The music reached inside this new body, purifying and making her whole. The fire restored her body, but she needed the music to renew her soul.

And then she left when the music ended before he started preaching.

4. Conclusion

Implementing the iterative drafting method through the creative manuscript revealed several things. It required focusing on the purpose of each iteration, which also required letting go of many typical expectations. This also fostered unexpected differences in analysis. From the plot iteration to the dialogue iteration there was an unexpected loss of words. Though each iteration did enable low effort improvement within its intended scope.

While working on the plot iteration especially, it was difficult to write a sentence like “Bob and Sarah talked about first dates” rather than diving into the dialogue of their conversation. Perhaps even more difficult was not cringing at such a generic sentence. It required frequent reminders that the purpose of this iteration was to map out the events of the story without regard for prose and context.

This also impacted the analysis of the plot iteration as many of the usual touchpoints were irrelevant. Grammar, of course, was important but character dynamics expectedly fell flat. The story had no passion, no excitement. The fantastic is an important element in this story and the absence of a sense of wonder was difficult. I had to let go of the need for it to be a good story and simply let it exist as a good beginning.

The dialogue iteration replaced “Bob and Sarah talked about first dates” with the conversation which resulted in an unexpected loss of words. One of the benefits proposed with an iterative process is a reduction in word loss between drafts (p. 23). While the assertion that an iterative process reduces overwriting and the resulting cutting of words holds true, it does introduce a different loss when general description is transformed into more vivid language. The words that were displaced were low effort to produce and few in number suggesting that the

word loss from an iterative methodology still offers a benefit over cutting words in a traditional editing approach.

Finally, the iterative process created an opportunity for improving the story in a focused manner. In particular, character motivations and reactions to one another were refined in the dialogue iteration. Areas that could support change were quickly identified with only the dialogue to review. The sparse text enabled quick adjustments with resounding impact. Additionally, the sparse text simplified the effort of focusing specifically on character interactions and their impact on the story.

Based on this experience, iterative drafting holds exciting prospects as an alternative drafting method with ample opportunity for further exploration.

5. Annotated Bibliography

Bardugo, Leigh. "Author Leigh Bardugo Shares Her Thoughts on the Tasks of Writing a Novel."

The Fandom, By Nat, The Geek Girl, 25 Nov 2013, <https://thefandom.net/author-leigh-bardugo-shares-her-thoughts-on-the-tasks-of-writing-a-novel/>. Accessed 20 May 2022.

Bardugo discusses her early attempts as a writer to complete a manuscript. Her stumbles were a result of attempting to write using the traditional drafting method. This provided a steppingstone into the value of an iterative drafting process.

Bardugo, Leigh. "Leigh Bardugo On Her Epic Journey From Shadow And Bone To Rule Of

Wolves." *Nerdist*, By Rosie Knight, 26 Mar 2021, <https://nerdist.com/article/leigh-bardugo-profile-grishaverse-writing-rule-of-wolves/>. Accessed 20 May 2022.

Bardugo discusses how her writing process evolved from her first novel to her seventh. Her discussion on the shift from the idea of a story emerging fully formed to methodical ways of drafting helped lay the foundation for an iterative process.

Bardugo, Leigh. "The Writing Process of a Best-Selling Author with Leigh Bardugo." *Being*

Boss Podcast, episode 280, <https://beingboss.club/podcast/the-writing-process-of-a-best-selling-author-with-leigh-bardugo>. Accessed 18 June 2022.

Bardugo provides details on her "zero draft" which is the first step in writing a manuscript. This provided a specific approach to writing and drafting to compare and

contrast with iterative drafting.

Dekker, Ted. "Deadly Mistake #4: Underestimating." *The Creative Way*,

<https://thecreativeway.com/4-dm-4>. Accessed 23 May 2022.

Dekker encourages writers through the inevitable experience of failure as a writer. His focus on story to lead writers through failure opened up the conversation around iterative drafting from a drafting method to a larger perspective on storytelling.

Eagar, Lindsay. "Fast Drafting: What, Why, & How." *Misfist & Daydreamers*, 13 March 2020,

<https://preview.mailerlite.com/s6z6c4/1376230154723923663/b4o8>. Accessed 07 May 2022.

Eagar goes through her experiences as a writer, starting but not completing multiple drafts until she found a method to get through a story from beginning to end. Eagar's method provides a specific drafting method to review alongside iterative drafting. Both methods have some shared benefits and differences which expanded the conversation on iterative drafting.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*, Oxford

University Press, Incorporated, 1998. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=241397>.

As a recognized authority on creative writing processes, Elbow directed the writing program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst from 1996 to 2000. In one of his seminal works, *Writing with Power*, Elbow situated iterative drafting in the context of the

larger process conversation. His multiple, practical methods to create a draft provided specific examples to compare and contrast with iterative methodology.

Forgeard, Marie, et al. "The Psychology of Creative Writing." *A Companion to Creative Writing*, edited by Graeme Harper John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

Forgeard's examination of creative writing establishes the common perception of traditional drafting. Her work then provides psychological support for the value of early examination of the work. This supports the value of an iterative drafting process.

Freiman, Marcelle. "The Art of Drafting and Revision: Extended Mind in Creative Writing." *New Writing*, 12.1 (2015): 48-66, 2015, DOI: 10.1080/14790726.2014.977797

Despite the title, Freiman does not provide a specific drafting or revision methodology. Instead, she examines the value in drafting which is externalization of ideas which leads to effective revision. This supported a key benefit of iterative drafting.

Gilbert, Francis and Vicky Macleroy. "Different ways of descending into the crypt: methodologies and methods for researching creative writing." *New Writing*, vol. 18, no.3, 2021, pp. 253-271, DOI: 10.1080/14790726.2020.1797822

Through Gilbert and Macleroy's focus is on research they examine the process of creative writing and various approaches to the craft. Their work takes a stance that studying the methods of creative writing is valuable. This establishes support for the examination of an iterative process.

Harper, Graeme. *The future for creative writing*. John Wiley & Sons, 2014.

Internationally recognized scholar Graeme Harper received the first doctorate in creative writing in Australia in 1993. Harper discusses both the process and teaching of creative writing. His examination of the reluctance to teach creative writing highlights the need to discuss and teach the process of creative writing. This opened the door to examine a specific process in iterative drafting.

Haven, Kendall. *Write Right!: Creative Writing Using Storytelling Techniques*, ABC-CLIO, 1999. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=497134>.

Haven outlines her drafting method which relies heavily on prewriting activities. This situated iterative drafting alongside another tactical drafting method for comparison and contrast.

Hoory, Leeron. “Agile vs. Waterfall: Which Project Management Methodology Is Best For You?” *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/agile-vs-waterfall-methodology/>. Accessed 07 May 2022.

Hoory reviews both waterfall and agile methodologies. The emphasis on the benefits of agile methods provided a framework to examine comparable benefits in iterative drafting.

Kaufman, Amie. “How to Get that Draft Finished.” *Amie Kaufman On Writing*, season 2, ep. 9, <http://amiekaufman.com/podcast/season-2/episode-9-how-to-get-that-draft-finished/>. Accessed 20 May 2022.

Internationally bestselling author, Amie Kaufman has degrees in history, literature, law and conflict resolution and is pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing. Kaufman shares an amusing description of traditional drafting along with other practical steps to create a completed manuscript. Kaufman infuses National Novel Writing Month into the drafting conversation. This provided a counterpoint for iterative drafting to the widespread approach of traditional drafting.

Kaufman, Amie. "Writing When You Have No Time." *Amie Kaufman On Writing*, season 3, ep. 3, <http://amiekaufman.com/podcast/season-3/episode-3-writing-when-you-have-no-time/>. Accessed 20 May 2022.

Kaufman provides specific steps to draft a manuscript within a small timeframe.

Kaufman's emphasis on the traditional drafting method throughout each of the steps helped situate iterative drafting as a new methodology.

Kavlakoglu, Eda. "Agile vs. Waterfall." *IBM*, <https://www.ibm.com/cloud/blog/agile-vs-waterfall>. Accessed 07 May 2022.

Kavlakoglu offers a succinct review of both traditional and agile methodology. Her contrast of the two methods provided an approach to align software processes with writing processes.

López, Lorraine. "The Architecture of Story." *A Companion to Creative Writing*, edited by Graeme Harper John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

In her essay, Lopez covers several tactical aspects of writing. Her positions on the value

of traditional method positions iterative methods as a counterpoint to broaden the conversation.

Monk, Jonathan. "Revealing the iceberg: Creative writing, process & deliberate practice."

English in Education, 50.2 (2016): 95-115, DOI: 10.1111/eie.12091.

Monk shares results from a case study using an iceberg illustration as part of students' creative writing process. Monk then details his methodology and the goal of teaching planning and revision as a skill rather than talent. His para-writing activities emphasize the importance of externalization, highlighting an important benefit of iterative drafting.

Murray, Donald. "Teach writing as a process not product." *The leaflet* 71.3 (1972): 11-14.

Murray offers simple, specific observations on the process of writing. His emphasis on the importance of process on teaching, rather than trying to teach creative writing by examining finished works, situated iterative drafting within both the practice and teaching of creative writing.

Sanderson, Brandon. "Form and the Fantastic." *BrandonSanderson.com*,

<https://www.brandonsanderson.com/form-and-the-fantastic/>. Accessed 22 May 2022.

Brandon Sanderson is an international bestselling author of over 40 novels and adjunct professor at Brigham Young University. In an essay on his first published novel, Sanderson discusses the element of discovery within the writing process regardless of how planned or how much prewriting activities are involved. This drew attention to the

need to discuss that factor of discovery within an iterative drafting method.

Sanderson, Brandon. "World Building." *2013 Brigham Young University Lecture series*,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEcyutljQIM>. Accessed 22 May 2022.

Similar to Strong's discussion on writing fluency, Sanderson provides practical observations of how the practice of writing improves a writer's technique. His observations uncovered a particular angle in which iterative drafting can benefit writers by creating repeated iterations around a specific writing element.

Stein, Sol. *Stein on Writing*. St. Martin's Press, 1995.

Stein provides practical advice on a variety of writing elements, though little on drafting. His observations and commentary on editing highlighted how an iterative process creates more efficient word count management.

Stiefvater, Maggie. "Mood." *Writing with Maggie Stiefvater*,

<https://www.etsy.com/listing/806360184/writing-with-maggie-stiefvater-8-hour>.
Accessed 24 May 2022.

Stiefvater examines establishing the mood of the story as the first step in her writing workflow. She emphasizes writing as a series of decisions. This crystallized the benefit of segmenting decisions into different iterations.

Stiefvater, Maggie. "Prose." *Writing with Maggie Stiefvater*,

<https://www.etsy.com/listing/806360184/writing-with-maggie-stiefvater-8-hour>.

Accessed 14 May 2022.

Stiefvater discusses the importance of prose and how a story is told. She identifies the gap between first drafting and intentional prose and offers potential methods to start externalizing a story as preliminary drafts. These include saying it out loud before writing it (as if one is transcribing their own words), starting with narrative description, and blocking how it will look on a page (using placeholders like commas to see the shape before words and be applied to it).

Strong, William. *Coaching writing in content areas: Write-for-insight strategies, grades 6-12*, 2nd ed., Allyn & Bacon, 2012.

While slightly askew of the creative writing conversation, Strong's focus on writing across disciplines makes a strong case for the value of the practice of writing to improve writing fluency. He also provides excellent supporting references on the topic.

Understanding the importance of writing fluency emphasized the value of an iterative method.

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