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Exploring Fiction Writer's Approaches to Plot Outlining During the Planning Stage  
of the Writing Process

A Thesis Submitted

by

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## Abstract

This thesis is about one person's discovery and growth as a writer of creative fiction that spans decades. It specifically explores and analyzes how professional authors approach plot outlining during the planning stages of the writing process. Some professional authors prepare plot outlines prior to writing their first draft, while others do not. Over the course of the author's writing life, experimenting with both methods has been instructive to the development of a personal approach to plot outlining. The Artist statement provides background on the author. Next, the Critical Paper examines and analyzes plot outlining and plot structure. Plot structure and plot types are detailed, followed by a comparative analysis of the plot structure of the novels of three contemporary authors. Finally, the Creative Manuscript demonstrates the author's attempt at effective story structure in the opening chapters of a novel-length work, *A Dex Wing Mess*.

*Dedication*

*For my parents. You first inspired and cultivated my love for reading and writing stories.*

## Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the thoughtful advice and constant support of my thesis chair, Dr. Karen Dodson, and my reader, Professor Ruth Ronk. Secondly, I would like to thank my classmates and instructors for their helpful feedback and suggestions throughout the program. Finally, I am grateful to my family and my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for everlasting love and encouragement throughout this journey.



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## Section One: Artist Statement

### Introduction

I have had an active imagination since childhood. I entertained myself a lot since my two siblings were eight years older. I grew to love books early on, and upon entering adulthood, Science Fiction and Mystery were the two genres I read most often. Due to the influence of my father's career in law enforcement and my desire to emulate him, I gravitated toward the Mystery genre. The protagonist of my creative thesis, Dexter Wing, was born in my police cruiser on a graveyard shift as a rookie police officer. Upon acceptance into Liberty University's MFA in Creative Writing Program, I found new inspiration for my love of creative writing which I had abandoned since the early 2000s. Dexter Wing, a character who has been with me all this time, was fully developed in WRIT 610, Writing Fiction. Through writing study and practice in this program, I was able to envision my debut book. While I desire to traditionally publish an entertaining novel, it is also my desire as a Christian writer *A Dex Wing Mess* has a positive moral impact and may facilitate personal evangelism.

My creative thesis, featuring my protagonist, is the first chapters of my debut Mystery/Crime Fiction novel tentatively titled *A Dex Wing Mess*. This creative thesis would not have been possible had I not learned the conventional study and practice of the craft of creative writing. The first time in my writing life I learned of the distinction between the writer's critical voice and creative voice was during my study in this program. It was not just craft elements I was given the opportunity to explore. For example, I drafted a fiction book proposal for my novel while studying in ENGL 602, Methods and Materials of Research. The research and creation of my fiction book proposal taught me about matters agents and publishers weigh, like market placement and vision, when deciding whether to represent or publish works.

I considered training for pastoral ministry at this phase in my life. Several years before completing my undergraduate education, my personal relationship with God deepened. I majored in Biblical Studies and minored in Christian Worldview, intending to continue study in seminary. The Bible is the foremost literary context for my creative writing. *A Dex Wing Mess* is a Christian Mystery/Crime Fiction novel because, as a Christian, I possess a Christian Worldview.

## Journey-Background

### *Childhood and Adolescence*

I have had a vivid imagination for as long as I can remember. My two siblings were eight years older than I, so I spent a lot of time playing by myself. But, as my family recounts, I was not always alone. In my mind I had created playmates with whom to socialize and pass time. For instance, I am told I entertained myself with one particular playmate during my early years. On one occasion when my aunt was babysitting me, I terrified her with repeated requests to let “Jokey” in the basement door. My imaginary friend had gotten locked out of the house. Once my mother explained who Jokey was to my aunt, things returned to normal. Though I was too young to remember Jokey, I do recall my entire childhood filled with the encouragement to be inventive.

My parents instilled in me a love for reading as a child. My parents provided me with all the classic children’s books, which I read repeatedly. I remember *The Shepherd Boy and the Wolf*, from one of Aesop’s Fables (36-37). In the tale a shepherd boy entertains himself by crying for help when none is needed. He says a hungry wolf stalks his flock when there is no wolf. In the story’s climax a wolf does threaten the flock, but no one believes the boy when he “cries wolf” and his flock is killed. The moral is “liars are not believed even when they speak the truth”

(37). In addition to entertainment, this story, and many others, left indelible moral impressions while also stimulating my imagination and love for storytelling.

In my adolescence, I started writing my own stories in two genres: (1) soap operas and (2) comic books. The soap operas and comic books owing to my two older sisters and neighborhood friends. I wrote my own version of scripted soap opera episodes with my own invented characters and plotlines, and my friends and I crafted comic book panels with our own created superheroes and villains. In addition to writing my own stories, as I entered adulthood, I began reading more fiction as well.

### *Young Adulthood and Adulthood*

Entering adulthood, I found myself reading fiction from two genres: (1) Science Fiction and (2) Mystery. I believe my love of comic books fueled my affinity for science fiction stories. And with respect to the mystery genre, my interest was piqued by my father. He was a career law enforcement officer, a profession which I idolized and mirrored in my own occupational aspiration. For instance, the mystery genre, and crime fiction within this genre, has been of particular reading interest for me. Some of the authors whose work I began reading at this time were Janet Evanovich, Lawrence Sanders, Elmore Leonard, and Walter Mosley. Two authors outside of this genre who also captivated me at this time were Stephen King and Dean Koontz. I began attempts to craft my own stories in the science fiction and mystery genres during this time as well. It was also during this time in the early 1990s when Dexter Wing was created.

### *The Protagonist's Background*

Dexter Wing, the protagonist of my creative work for my thesis, came to life in my mind

in the morning hours of a graveyard shift as a rookie police officer. When the shift was slow, like some graveyards, I would write. I have a canvas bag full of yellow legal pads upon which I have started many story ideas, but they are unfinished. Though I have written a few short stories over the years, and logged several submission rejections, I had never been able to fully develop my story ideas. By the early 2000s, I abandoned my secret writing compulsion altogether. The responsibilities of family and career extinguished any burning desire to write with the abandon I did as a young man. It wasn't until I began studying for my MFA in Creative Writing at Liberty University that I began to realize what hindered my development as a fiction writer.

I have come to realize my development as a fiction writer was hindered by two flaws in my thinking as it relates to the practice of creative writing. The first of my errors was over-generalization of writing methods after consideration of too few examples. The second of my errors was failing to consider alternative writing methods. In my case with outlining plot, I considered one popular writer's method and considered no alternatives. Not outlining plot at the start of my fiction writing project did not work for me, but my ignorance in study of craft left me deficient in the basic methods of outlining in the planning stages of a fiction writing project.

## Adjustments-The Process

### *My Creative Voice*

After my hiatus from creative writing since the early 2000s, my acceptance into Liberty University's MFA program rekindled my passion for the craft. It was at this time I first conceptualized the four writing stages of planning, research, writing, and revision, and implemented them in my fiction writing. Like many writers, I had some idea of my creative voice, but no conception of a critical voice with regard to writing fiction. After all, writing

creative fiction is magic, right? It was not until I entered formal training in the craft of creative writing at Liberty University that I learned about the whole writer—the creative voice and the critical voice.

The reader's palate is soothed by the 'taste' created by the unique tone and style of the writer's prose. Tone can be distinguished by comparison and contrast: (1) formal or informal, (2) optimistic or pessimistic, (3) humorous or serious, etc. And a writer's style may be characterized as driven by detailed narrative, vivid description, reflective, persuasive, etc. Zinnser explains "taste is a quality so intangible that it can't even be defined...but we know it when we meet it" (233).

In Liberty's program, I believe I have discovered and begun to cultivate both my creative and critical writing voices. The instruction, reading, lecture, and exercises we completed began to delineate the difference. Stein explains "the author's 'voice' is an amalgam of the many factors that distinguish a writer from all other writers" (Stein 307). Moreover, Smith notes the critical voice is not the creative voice, but it spends "time and energy outlining and working...making sure [everything] is perfect before ever writing word one" (Smith 6). Smith asserts while the critical voice accesses the "front part of our brains [that] takes in all the information...the creative part has a large filter and only takes in the knowledge it wants and uses" (6).

I characterize the writer's creative voice as the unique way a writer uses language that makes a few lines of their prose as recognizable as a bar of Miles Davis's playing the trumpet. Like the jazz musician's improvised lines, the creative voice writes freely without constraint—it "free writes." While I am an outliner, I utilize the outline as a prompt and free write every session. When free writing, I do not concern myself with "order or wording," nor do I "stop and

edit” myself (Bell 230). I leave that for my critical voice. While I have benefited from decades of life experience to develop my creative voice, I am certain a missing component from my process has been a deficient critical voice.

### *My Critical Voice*

Work on my novel in this program, *A Dex Wing Mess*, was the first time in my writing life I was aware of the suggested delineation between the writer’s critical voice and the creative voice, or subconscious and conscious mind. I was under the impression the writer, like other artists, mainly used their subconscious mind or creative voice. According to Birch, Our conscious mind can only focus on one task at a time, while the subconscious can work on an indefinite list...art can only be created with the creative voice (Birch). With my work throughout this program on *A Dex Wing Mess*, I feel I have filled the gaps of my writing process with the discovery and cultivation of my critical voice to complement my creative voice.

The writer’s critical voice plans outlines, considers creative research, and bookmarks revisions. Comparatively the creative voice ignores the intrusion of the critical voice and is as close to spoken thought in the writer’s mind as possible (Krueger 105). As an Outline Person, the planning stage of the writing process includes work on character development and plot structure. In Writing Fiction (WRIT 610), Professor Christian introduced a detailed character biography exercise to facilitate thorough character development. It is here I felt my protagonist, Dex Wing, fully developed. Weiland explains “the character drives the plot, and the plot molds the character’s arc...they cannot work independently” (Weiland 16). Synthesizing this crucial information brought my conception of *A Dex Wing Mess* back to life. Moreover, creative research is a necessary stage of the writing process wherein the critical voice is used. Although I

have some personal life experience to draw from for this creative work, creative research is an on-going activity throughout the stages of the writing process. The revelation of facts learned through creative research lends authenticity and inspires the story of *A Dex Wing Mess* more than I could without the facts learned through investigation (Gerard 5).

Revision is a stage of the writing process where I feel I use my critical voice, which has improved my writing. I knew nothing about self-editing and revision prior to studying in Liberty's MFA program. And the privilege of workshopping both prose fiction and screenplays in this program was a priceless benefit, enabling me to produce a better draft. Stein notes "the biggest difference between a writer and a would-be-writer is their attitude toward revising" (Stein 277). After months of daily writing, self-editing, and revision, I anticipate this stage of the writing process as well. Professional authors must be adept at self-editing and revision of their work so their best draft goes to a professional freelance editor, literary agent, or publisher's editing team. I have learned effective self-editing and revision is required to produce the best "polished" draft for the next editing stage(s) in the process toward publication. Jenkins asserts "if you pay an editor, what is the publisher buying? Your work or someone else's? Learn to edit yourself" (Jenkins). I have come to look forward to self-editing and revision as much as any other stage of my writing process.

#### Genesis-Literary Context

My creative thesis consists of chapters from my first Mystery/Crime Fiction novel tentatively titled *A Dex Wing Mess*. The publishing industry understands the Mystery genre to encompass the subgenres of Crime Fiction, Suspense, and Thriller (Child, Lee, et. al. 4-6). The external literary context for *A Dex Wing Mess* lies in contemporary novels from both the Thriller



and Crime Fiction market subgenres of the broader Mystery genre I have reviewed. One example is *Abandoned in Death* by J. D. Robb, a story about a homicide detective who must untangle a twisted family history while the life of a hostage is in jeopardy (Publisher's Weekly-Mystery). Another is *The Locked Door* by Frieda Mcfadden, where the protagonist has to clear her name after she has been accused of a crime she did not commit (Amazon-Mystery, Thriller, and Suspense). Then there is *One-Shot Harry* by Gary Phillips, in which an African American forensic photographer seeks justice for a friend set in 1963 Los Angeles amid the turmoil and struggle of civil rights (Amazon; Milliot, Jim; Publishers Weekly). Novels like these set the external literary context for *A Dex Wing Mess*.

The internal literary context: a composite of the backstory, characterization, and setting for *A Dex Wing Mess* is comprised from personal life experience and the specific works of Mystery/Crime Fiction and Thriller author's whose writing has influenced me over many years. Both my father and I were career police officers. Our experiences as residents and public servants in urban environments; along with experiences witnessed and related by relatives, friends, and colleagues; serve as part of the internal literary context for *A Dex Wing Mess*. Moreover, a few of the authors I feel have influenced me and informed my internal literary context include those mentioned; Janet Evanovich, Lawrence Sanders, Elmore Leonard, Walter Mosley, Stephen King, and Dean Koontz. These authors first captivated my imagination and turned my creative interest from writing in the genre of Science Fiction to Mystery.

Perspective- My Vision and Its Significance

*Audience*

In ENGL 602, Methods and Materials of Research, I researched and prepared a fiction

book proposal for *A Dex Wing Mess*. In the process, I learned about some of the issues agents and publishers consider including the vision for my novel, my credentials, and potential market placement. One important issue is the identification of the potential readers of *A Dex Wing Mess*.

My research suggests my primary reading audience consists of females over the age of fifty-five, and avid readers of urban fiction from varied demographics will likely comprise my secondary audience (Sisters in Crime). Every novelist desires to publish bestselling fiction, and in the process benefit the reading audience. It is my goal that my characters' experiences through story resonates with readers and communicates positive themes. While I endeavor to share my voice, influenced by living and working in urban environments as an African American male, I feel convicted to do so without the inclusion of gratuitous sex, violence, profanity, and to propose the reality of humankind's need for redemption through the Lord Jesus Christ.

### *Christian Fiction*

I feel *A Dex Wing Mess* is a Christian Mystery/Crime Fiction Novel. The primary literary context for my creative work comes from the truth in the Bible—the foundation of the Christian Worldview. The Holy Bible is the final authority for every Believer. As a Christian novelist, I seek to have a religious and moral impact like that of P.D. James, considered a Christian writer with a Christian “angle of vision” though she, like other confessed Christian authors, refused “to write for a religious audience alone, but serious readers of all sorts and conditions, seeking to engage them with the largest human questions and the deepest theological truths” (Wood 583). Christian Fiction, stories that positively depict the Christian Worldview through characters, plot, or both, are blended with other genres, such as romance, mystery, and adventure.

### *Personal Evangelism*

I considered training for pastoral ministry at this phase in my life. Several years before completing my undergraduate education, my personal relationship with God deepened. I majored in Biblical Studies and minored in Christian Worldview, intending to continue study in seminary. During my research on seminary programs at Liberty University, I learned about the MFA in Creative Writing program. I prayerfully considered my direction and am happy with my decision to pursue my writing career in this season as long as the Lord allows. It is my desire *A Dex Wing Mess*, and novels to follow, may serve as means to personal evangelism through their positive messages.

### Conclusion

I want *A Dex Wing Mess*, and all my other creative work, to entertain readers in addition to having a religious and moral impact. As a Christian writer, my creative work's chief literary context comes from the authoritative text for Believers—the Bible. My protagonist, Dex Wing, has real world problems resolved through the lens of his Christian Worldview. My goal is for *A Dex Wing Mess*, and all my other work, to convey a positive message while entralling readers.

Liberty's MFA in Creative Writing program provided study in craft, a supportive community, challenging coursework, and instilled in me the confidence to call myself a writer. In ENGL 602, Methods and Materials of Research, I chose to research and complete a fiction book proposal for the basis of my creative thesis, *A Dex Wing Mess*. Literary agents and publishers analyze points like market placement and vision when weighing whether to represent or publish works, which I learned during the research and creation of my fiction book proposal. In the program I also made effective modifications to my writing process. The delineation

between the writer's subconscious and conscious mind, or creative and critical voice, was first discerned in this program and beneficial to my writing process. I was under the false impression professional writers chiefly used their creative voice, or subconscious mind. Through Liberty's MFA in Creative Writing program, I was blessed to reawaken a dream and make it a reality.

My imagination was vivid as long as I can remember due to a lot of solo playtime around the house. My siblings were eight years older than I, so we were in different developmental stages. By adulthood I read the genres of Science Fiction and Mystery. It was not long before I tried to create my own stories. When I was a new police officer on a tour of midnights, I created Dexter Wing as I wrote longhand into a yellow legal pad. It was not until my acceptance into Liberty University's MFA in Creative Writing Program that my fervor for creative writing was renewed after a long hiatus. The culmination of my development as a creative writer to this point is expressed in the first chapters of *A Dex Wing Mess* submitted as my creative manuscript for my thesis which begins the next chapter of my professional life.

## Section Two: Critical Paper

### Introduction

Traditional Creative Writing instruction in many settings teaches there are distinct stages to the writing process that encompass: (1) planning, (2) research, (3) writing, (4) and revision (Sampson, et. al). New writers first learn the essential ordering that results from planning, then the discovery and confirmation of details from research (Monk 95; Gerard 5). Next, writers start their story in earnest, endeavoring to evoke emotion in their audience (Stein 7). Lastly, they rewrite what does not work, and improve what does work, through revision (77). Professional fiction writers utilize varying methods and sequences in their approach once they have become familiar with the stages of the writing process, but they invariably subject their work to all four stages of the writing process to produce a polished draft.

Plot outlining is a part of the planning stage of the writing process. Plot includes what happens to characters in situations that challenge and motivate them in the story (*Revision and Self Editing* 50). Characters steer plot and plot forms the character's arcs in both character driven and event driven stories (Weiland 16). New fiction writers improve plot construction through a thorough study of plot structure and how it applies to their story (*Plot and Structure* 7). Professional fiction writers prefer to outline what happens to their characters before they begin their first draft (Outline Writers or Plotters), some at a point during their writing project, and others not at all (No Outline Writers or Pantsers).

In Aristotle's *Poetics*, he argued that stories had a beginning, a middle, and an end which came to be known as the Three-Act Story Structure (Finkelburg 60; Trottier 5). Moreover, the Hero's Journey is an ancient mythical storytelling structure akin to the Three-Act Story Structure with a distinct beginning, middle, and end. The beginning of the story comprises approximately

25%, the middle 50%, and the end another 25% (Trottier 5). Regardless of the plot type, Mystery or Quest, the basic structure in narrative storytelling has remained the same for thousands of years (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*; Van Nortwick X).

A qualitative comparison of the concept of the Three-Act Structure was applied to novels from three different genres. Moreover, the three novelists varied in their approach to plot outlining during the planning stage of writing. One novelist is a proponent of plot outlining while two others are not. The results of plot structure analysis comparison of the three novels suggests that, although each novelist had different approaches to the mode and sequence of plot outlining, each novel possessed traditional plot structure when compared to the Three-Act Structure paradigm.

### The Writing Process

Educator, lecturer, memoirist, poet, and writer Patricia Hampl notes,

When I am the reader, not the writer, I too fall into the lovely illusion that the words before me, which read so inevitably, must have been written exactly as they appear. . . but here I sit before a yellow legal pad, and the long page of the preceding two paragraphs is a jumble of crossed-out lines, false starts, confused order. A mess. (Hampl)

There are distinct stages to the writing process: (1) planning, (2) research, (3) writing, (4) and revision (Sampson, et. al). Professional writers use all stages of the writing process to create a polished draft of their work. Monk suggests that the planning, drafting, and revision stages remain “submerged” in relation to the “‘visible’ end product” (Monk 95). But each stage is

crucial to the writing process. Professional writers use different methods and sequences in the writing process, yet evidence suggests they all invariably subject their work to all stages to produce a polished draft.

### *Planning*

The Planning Stage of the fiction writer's project includes the creation of characters, plot development, setting choice, and determining point of view. Consideration of each story element is necessary, at least in part, at the start of the writing project. Planning is essentially ordering and developing ideas, which writers of all disciplines engage in for the duration of a writing project (Monk 95). Bell notes, however, that fiction writers "can avoid major problems by some focused thinking about your story before you write" (*Plot and Structure* 152).

Writers in different genres of fiction may plan differently throughout their writing project. For example, science-fiction writers engage in extensive world-building exercises before writing while a literary writer may "do less planning and more reconceptualizing at the start of a project" (Syrewicz 215-216). Regardless of the degree of planning at the outset, each element of story visualized during the planning stage is crucial to evaluate throughout the fiction writer's project.

### *Research*

Creative research, "a creative act" in itself, is the unearthing of the details of phenomenon converted into "artistic purpose and the method of finding out those facts" (Gerard 5). Beyond the axion "write what you know," research is inevitable because no one has exhaustive knowledge and research is a crucial component to the completion of any writing project (*On*

*Writing* 233). And even writers who do not like research should find a way to accomplish the task. For example, Bestselling Mystery author Lawrence Sanders would employ a New York firm to conduct research for his books when needed (McLain). Fiction writers who possess comprehensive knowledge on a particular topic would benefit from some level of confirmatory research but should remember research “is a *specialized* kind of back story” that should contribute to story, not dominate it (*On Writing* 229-230). Through creative research the facts a writer knows little about are discovered and purposed, which lend greater authenticity and increased creativity to their writing project (Gerard 5).

### *Writing*

The essential difference between the fiction writer and the nonfiction writer is purpose. The nonfiction writer imparts information, while the fiction writer triggers emotion (Stein 7). And the fiction writer elicits emotion in the reader through the use of their “repository of sensation and image” through which they readily “translate sensation into an appropriate emotion” for readers to experience—terror, joy, pain, embarrassment (Davis 148). Freiman explains that “in the creative use of language in writing, the writer deals with the vivid inner, shifting and imaging, perhaps film-like or dream-like, perceptions of memory and imagination” (53). Stein argues that even the nonfiction writer can benefit from recognition and practice of the fiction writer’s objective while not deviating from facts (9).

Research suggests that professional writers are not so rigidly locked into individual stages of the writing process, but they fluently write as they engage each of the four stages: (1) planning, (2) research, (3) writing, and (4) revision (Syrewicz 215). By continuously recording and cataloging ideas, fiction writers maintain a range of creative story possibilities (Freiman 56).



For instance, journaling and free writing is an effective way to record and catalog reconceptualization of story. The writer's subconscious mind is more active in the writing process than they realize (Zinnser 78). And the subconscious mind, or creative voice, remains active throughout all four stages of the writing process.

### *Revision*

Revision is the writer's task "of excising words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters that do not work and improving those that do" (Stein 77). Revision is a key writerly habit, and a writer who does not revise is an indication of an amateur (Monk 98; Stein 77). Writing educators and industry professionals agree both planning and revision are critical to the writing process (Graham and Sandmel 398; Stein 77). Revision, or rewriting, "is the essence of writing well" (Zinnser 83). Revision allows writers to say what they initially meant to say as well as they could in their first draft (83).

Developing the skill to eliminate all the parts from the whole that do not contribute to the novel is the task of all professional fiction writers. Revising makes a writer better, identifies the writer as a professional, and builds confidence (*Revision and Self Editing* 186). King says that revision for him "has always been two drafts and a polish," but he admits that in practice "rewriting varies greatly from writer to writer" (*On Writing* 209). Though approaches may vary, all professional writers should be well acquainted with revision.

### Plot Outlining in the Planning Stage

In defining plot, Walter Mosley says "Story is what happened...plot is the order in which it's revealed to the reader." (Child 162). Every story starts with characters, then something

happens to the characters. Plot consists of the things that happen to characters recorded in incidents that challenge and motivate them in a story (*Revision and Self Editing* 50).

Plot and characters are dependent on each other because characters steer the plot, and plot shapes the character's arc (Weiland 16). Fiction writers either outline what happens to their characters before they begin their first draft (Outline Writers or Plotters), at some point during their writing project, or not at all (No Outline Writers or Pantsers). Whatever a fiction writer decides with respect to plot outlining, the effort to understand plotting conventions will serve them well and make them a better novelist (*Plot and Structure* 7).

#### *Outline Writers (Plotters)*

Outline Writers, or Plotters, approach the four stages of writing in the conventional way, or the way creative writing is formally taught in many settings (Sampson, et. al). They begin with the planning stage of the writing process, which includes a plot outline. American Mystery and Crime Writer Jeffrey Deaver says he is “an ardent outliner, spending six to eight months planning a novel (or a week or so in the case of a short story)” and “the outline is finished before I write a single word of prose” (Child 154).

Traditional pedagogy for academic writing instruction, to include Creative Writing, tends to favor the linear, sequential approach to the stages of writing (Graham and Sandmel 396). Plot outlining is an integral part of the planning stage for fiction writers. Authors like Robert Crais, an American writer of Detective Fiction, outline because they want to know “as much as [they] can about the story and the scene [they are] going to write before [they] get going” (*Plot and Structure* 154). Some writers prefer to follow a traditional approach to the stages of writing and outline first, which adheres to the traditional sequence— (1) planning, (2) research, (3) writing,

and (4) revision.

### *No Outline Writers (Pantsers)*

No Outline Writers, also called Pantsers because they write by the seat of their pants, are non-traditional in their approach. In contrast to Plotters, Pantsers start with a character, and an idea, and begin with story. But evidence, by way of well-crafted stories, suggests that none are strangers to plot outlines. There are successful fiction writers who discourage plot outlining because, as Ray Bradbury explains it, “plot is no more than the footprints left in the snow after your characters have run by on their way to incredible destinations” (*Plot and Structure* 152-153). Stephen King says,

You may wonder where plot is in all this. The answer—my answer, anyway—is nowhere. I won’t try to convince you that I’ve never plotted any more than I’d try to convince you that I’ve never told a lie, but I do both as infrequently as possible. I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our lives are largely plotless...second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren’t compatible. (*On Writing* 159)

Pantsers feel that charting a story path by constructing a plot outline hamstrings the story, and plot outlining before you begin results in a story that “is apt to feel artificial and labored (*On Writing* 160).

### *“Middle Ground” For Plotters and Pantsers*

Research and experience suggest there is fertile “middle ground” between the writing

preferences of Plotters and Pantsers. The distinction of the professional writer is their recursive approach to all four stages of the writing process (Sampson, et. al; Syrewicz 214). The stages of the writing process are “performed in parts” wherein the writer plans, researches, writes, revises, then overlaps and repeats those same tasks again (214). This repetitive approach continues incrementally throughout the super-imposed stages of the writer’s project. So, the professional writer uses what she needs at the time to suit the progression of her story.

It appears that professed Plotters fly by the seat of their pants from time to time, and professed Pantsers plot when needed. The plotting habits of both Plotters and Pantsers appear to thrive in the “middle ground” at times because all professional writers are familiar with the conventional method of plot outlining. For instance, there are good indications Bestselling Mystery Novelist Lawrence Sanders, a professional editor before selling over twenty-five million books, was both a Plotter, a Pantser, and thrived in the “middle ground” during his career. Sanders says he “went the traditional way with the first 15 books, using a blocked-in outline” then “later I figured the hell with it, I’ll wing it...I’m pleased with the last five novels...I didn’t know myself what the characters would look like” (Kerr). There is no particular right way to write any particular book. So, Plotting, Pantsing, or taking the “Middle Ground” are all viable options, and professional writers likely use each of them depending on the story (Smith 8-10).

## Plot Structure

### *Three-Act Story Structure*

Left unfinished over two thousand years ago, Aristotle’s *Poetics* is one of the few general texts ever written on stories (Booker 5-7). Finkelburg notes that Aristotle’s *Poetics* “is one of the most influential documents in the history of Western tradition” and its influence on literary

theory and practice endures (60). In *Poetics* Aristotle wrote that stories have three main parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. This story structure has come to be known as the Three-Act Story Structure. The basic proportions of this story structure are as follows: the beginning comprises about 25% of the story, the middle is approximately 50%, and the end is about 25% (Trottier 5). Some writers prefer to envision plot structure by other terms and divisions, but each of them reduces to a beginning, middle, and ending proportionate to the Three-Act Structure (6).

Stories need structure to give them form and shape (Trottier 5). In the beginning of the story the reader's attention is captured, the premise introduced, and the situation for conflict established. (6). In the middle of the story the stakes are raised as matters get more complicated, building to an inescapable crisis for the main character(s) (6). And in the end, the story concludes and the main character(s) resolve the conflict (6).

But all stories since the dawn of humanity share an inherent mythical quality which resonates with readers, because ancient myths utilize three-act storytelling. Clayton explains that "Aristotle is not directly concerned with the relation between myth and narrative, but he does offer a set of influential ideas about the nature and structure of a well-crafted story" (Clayton 209). The Hero's Journey is an enduring storytelling structure akin to the Three-Act Story Structure, because the Hero's Journey also has a distinct beginning, middle, and end which parallels the Three-Act Story Structure.

### *The Hero's Journey: The Oldest Recorded Story*

In order to describe, relate with, and understand the world around them, cultures throughout human history have told stories. One example is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the oldest recorded story in the world that scholars maintain was first composed orally and sung by court

singers of heroic tales (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*).

At the start of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh terrorized the people of Uruk. The goddess Ninhursag heard the people's pleas for relief, and she created Enkidu. The two fought to a draw and became friends.

Next, the two sought out the fire-breathing guard of the Pine Forest, Humbaba, killed him and became famous. They returned to Uruk, and the goddess of sexual desire and war, Ishtar, where Gilgamesh refused her advances. In her anger, Ishtar released the Bull of Heaven on the citizens of Uruk, but Gilgamesh and Enkidu slayed the bull. However, Enkidu died after a troubling dream and illness. Gilgamesh mourned his friend's death and fled to the countryside.

Gilgamesh wandered the countryside reflecting on Enkidu's death and his own mortality. He decided to find the only immortal person, Utnapishtim, to become immortal himself. He enquired of Utnapishtim, who told Gilgamesh about a plant that will grant him youth. Gilgamesh managed to find the plant, but a snake stole it from him. The ferryman, Ur-shanabi, took Gilgamesh back to Uruk where the two admire Uruk for its splendor. Gilgamesh concluded that he will certainly die, but immortality can be gained through the memory of one's good deeds and their legacy. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and other ancient epics like the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad*, "present the heroic journey" laden with thematic messages for interpretation (Van Nortwick X).

### *The Heroic Journey in Three Acts*

Generally speaking, as the Hero's Journey begins in Act One, the Hero lives amid ordinary surroundings in her Ordinary World (Trottier 60; *Plot and Structure* 26). Then she receives a call to adventure, also known as the catalyst, but at first is reluctant to heed the call. Ultimately, she accepts the call to adventure and leaves her Ordinary World.

In Act Two, the Hero steps squarely into the Extraordinary World of adventure (60; 26). She is given an amulet or aid by an older person, a Mentor, as she embarks on the journey. It is here that she faces an increasing number of tests and trials. The tests and trails often start with the Antagonist's Helpers, then after the Midpoint the Antagonist himself. The end of Act Two places the Hero in the worst circumstances and low point of the story, though a talisman or relic of some type may be introduced to aid in battle.

At the beginning of Act Three, the Hero finds herself in the most serious crisis by far, and failure looks certain (60; 26). Death, either literal or symbolic, seems likely. The Antagonist is hot on the heels of the Hero and her Helpers, leading to a showdown between the Hero and the Antagonist. The Hero then defeats the Antagonist, seizes the treasure, and returns to her ordinary world where whatever treasure she has recaptured blesses the people. Finally, the Hero often faces symbolic or literal resurrection or receives some type of distinct honor.

Mythical stories have been told throughout human history because they aid cultures in understanding the world around them. Whatever the genre, the Hero's Journey may be incorporated into any story (Trottier 59). Trottier notes, "beyond genre is plot and myth" (59). Genre provides an overall perspective that plot explores throughout a story (Phillips). And, in considering plot, there are only a handful of plot types that correlate to established genre categories.

### Plot Types

There is no definite consensus on the exact number of plot types or patterns, but Bell, Booker, and others discuss variations of the following basic plot patterns: (1) Overcoming the Monster, (2) Rags to Riches, (3) the Quest, (4) Voyage and Return, (5) Comedy/Love, (6)

Tragedy/Power, (7) Rebirth, (8) Revenge, (9) Adventure, (10) Chase, (11) One-Against, (12) One-Apart, (13), Rebellion Against “The One,” (9) Mystery, and (15) Allegory (*Plot and Structure 180-193*; Booker 5-7).

Moreover, the basic plot types may be further subdivided into more variations. Fresh plot ideas evolve when the writer combines patterns, or types, with these variations to create a fresh plot (*Plot and Structure 180*). For instance, Overcoming the Monster can have a number of variations including: (1) Western (town threatened by outlaws), (2) Melodrama (hero threatened by scheming villain), (3) Thrillers (world threatened by madman), (4) War Stories (world threatened by Nazis, etc.), (5) Science Fiction (world threatened by aliens or a man-made threat/monster, and (6) Sympathetic Monster (e.g. King Kong, Godzilla) (Booker 32-41 ). Regardless of the plot type or genre, a story “is all about the protagonist’s thwarted goal” (Weiland 25). And whatever plot pattern and variation a writer pursues, it is beneficial to consider different patterns “if only to understand what they’re trying to do” (*Plot and Structure 180*).

## Plot Structure Analysis

### *Novels Analyzed*

The Three-Act Structure was used to analyze the plot structure of three selected works of fiction in this critical paper. Two author’s novels were analyzed who are confessed Pantsers, and one who admits taking the Middle Ground—he was a Plotter who also wrote successfully as a Pantser. His book analyzed in this paper, *McNally’s Secret*, was reportedly one of his last in which he prepared a Plot Outline (Kerr).

The first book analyzed, *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, is a Literary/Epistolary novel



told from the perspective of Reverend John Ames, a Midwestern preacher who is dying from a heart problem. Through his correspondence with his young son in the 1950s, he shares his struggles and insight on the themes of compassion, forgiveness, family, mortality, and love through various trials. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 2005, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. When asked if she plots her novels, Robinson replied,

I really don't. There was a frame, of course, for *Home*, because it had to be symbiotic with *Gilead*. Aside from that, no. I feel strongly that action is generated out of character. And I don't give anything a higher priority than character. The one consistent thing among my novels is that there's a character who stays in my mind. It's a character with complexity that I want to know better. (Fay)

The second book analyzed, *Misery* by Stephen King, is a Thriller/Psychological Horror story about a famous author rescued from a car accident by one of his fans. He soon learns that the care this fan administers is simply the beginning of his traumatic ordeal as her captive. As mentioned above, Stephen King has always been a vocal Pantser. Of Plot Outlining, he also says he does not plan but goes where the book leads him (*Bangor Daily News*). While he acknowledges that everyone works differently, plot has no place in his writing process (On Writing 159).

The Third book analyzed, *McNally's Secret* by Lawrence Sanders, is a Mystery/Thriller/Suspense novel told from the first-person perspective of Private Investigator Archibald "Archy" McNally. He takes on a burglary case involving the theft of a valuable stamp collection from a wealthy Palm Beach woman, and a murder is shortly linked to the theft. As previously mentioned above, Sanders states that he outlined his first fifteen books, and "winged it" with the remaining novels (Kerr). *McNally's Secret* is book number fourteen in his book list

(Lawrence Sanders).

### *Method of Analysis*

A qualitative comparison of the concept of the Three-Act Structure was applied to the three mentioned novels. A close reading was conducted of each novel, evaluating plot at critical points in the Three-Act Structure model. The resultant observations are recorded in the following table (see table 2.1):

Table 2.1: Analysis of the Plot of Three Works of Fiction to the Three-Act Structure

<b>Three Act Structure Plot Analysis</b>			
	<b><i>Gilead</i> (Pantser); 215 pp. (digital version)</b>	<b><i>Misery</i> (Pantser); 338 pp. (paperback)</b>	<b><i>McNally's Secret</i> (Plotter-Middle Ground); 341 pp. (paperback)</b>
<b>Act One-Setup</b>	Reverend John Ames	Annie rescues Novelist	Archy conducts
<b>Catalyst/Inciting Incident</b>	(Protagonist), in ill health from heart problems, begins writing to his 7-year-old son in the 1950s; he expects to die before his son matures (pp. 4-9)	Paul from a serious car accident; Annie discovers Paul is writing a new series; doesn't like it; she finishes last <i>Misery</i> Novel; learns Misery died (p. 34)	"Discreet Inquiries" at his father's law firm; looks into the theft of valuable stamp collection from Lady Cynthia Horowitz (pp. 9-11)

<b>Act Two-1st Plot Point</b>	John introduces Robert Boughton, fellow pastor, and best friend; the Boughton's (Jack) play prominently in the rest of the story (pp.37-39)	Commissioned by Annie to write <i>Misery's Return</i> ; sends her for paper; she almost catches him out of his room/prison (pp. 61-69)	Archy's investigation begins at the mansion of Lady Horowitz where he inspects the scene of the crime and questions family and servants (p. 55).
<b>Pinch (Antagonist Flexes)</b>	John Ames "Jack" Boughton; Robert's son and John's namesake, returns to Gilead (p. 91)	Paul suffers writer's block (pp. 121-122)	Local stamp dealer Bela Rubik is murdered after he contacted Archy and said he had important information relevant to the theft (pp. 99-113)
<b>Midpoint-2nd Plot Point</b>	Ames (Protagonist) does not trust Jack Boughton and does not approve of his relationship with his wife, Lila; warns his son about Jack (pp. 123-125)	Paul makes writing progress and continues to plot his escape while he promises to finish <i>Misery's Return</i> for unstable Annie (pp. 162-163)	Archy learns Lady Horowitz has no solid alibi for Rubik's murder; other suspects (daughter, friend of chauffeur) emerge (pp. 130-156)

<p><b>Pinch (Antagonist Flexes; Crisis Foreshadowing)</b></p>	<p>John (Protagonist) recounts how Jack, years earlier, abandoned a young woman and the child he fathered out of wedlock; the child got sick and died a few years later; John (protagonist) shares his unforgiveness for Jack with his son; he thinks he's a bad man (p. 154)</p>	<p>Annie tells Paul she discovered he tried to get out of his room (pp. 209-216)</p>	<p>Lady Horowitz's housekeeper reveals affair between the Chauffeur and one of Horowitz's houseguests, Angus Wolfson; a young woman tried to sell counterfeit copies of the stolen stamps nearby (pp. 183-190)</p>
<p><b>Act Three-3rd Plot Point (Crisis)</b></p>	<p>John (Protagonist) struggles with his contempt for Jack and the need to forgive him; he thinks Jack plans to court his wife (Lila) once he dies; the two encounter each</p>	<p>Paul struggles to finish novel; cop shows up; Annie kills cop (pp. 260-262)</p>	<p>Archy goes to see Lady Horowitz; asks her if she ever inspected her stamps for authenticity; she is offended and dismisses him; that evening Archy and his parents attend a party at</p>

	<p>other in person; he admits he had never “warmed” up to his best friend’s son (p. 187)</p>		<p>Horowitz’s estate; he goes to a wooded part of the estate for a cigarette and spies Wolfson and the chauffeur (Kenneth) smooching; later Angus Wolfson is discovered dead (pp. 220-226).</p>
<b>Showdown/Realization</b>	<p>John (Protagonist) reaches out to Jack; learns Jack has a common-law wife and son; it is an interracial marriage and her family objects; John advises Jack, blesses, and accepts him; Jack leaves Gilead and never tells his own father the truth (p. 215)</p>	<p>Paul tells Annie that he killed Misery; Sets book on fire; after vicious fight kills Annie (pp. 312-320)</p>	<p>Archy learns Wolfson had cancer and committed suicide; he learns Wolfson was summoned to have her stamps appraised in Boston; Wolfson had told her stamps were forgeries; the young blond trying to sell the forgeries was the chauffeur’s girlfriend</p>

			(Sylvia); Wolfson was in on the stamp theft with chauffeur and girlfriend; Wolfson killed the stamp dealer (Rubik) and committed suicide fearing he'd be caught; Sylvia and the chauffeur are arrested (pp. 255-303)
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### *Summary of Findings*

The comparison of two novels written by Pantser, *Misery* and *Gilead*, versus a Plotter, *McNally's Secret*, reveals that all conform to the Three-Act Structure paradigm. Each novel has a beginning where the protagonist is presented with a problem to react to, a middle where they spend the greater part of their time attempting to solve the problem, and an ending where the problem is resolved (*Plot and Structure* 23). Moreover, each novel appears to model the pinch points and beats of the Magnificent 7 Plot Points, in addition to the three plot points delineating each act (Trottier 22).

Both Pantser, Robinson and King, were character driven in the creation of their analyzed work, while Plotter Sander's preparation of a plot outline suggests his novel was plot driven. The results of this analysis suggest that character and plot are inextricably linked, and "cannot work

independently” because “character drives the plot, and the plot molds the character’s arc” (Weiland 16). Fully developed, humanized characters with structured arcs tend to result in structured plots because “major plot points all revolve around the characters actions and reactions” (Weiland 16).

Moreover, the recursive approach of the professional writer to the four stages of the writing process guarantees multiple revisions, including attention to a structural/developmental edit (Sampson, et. al; Syrewicz 214). Smith refers to it as “cycling,” where the writing process is “performed in parts” wherein the parts of the writing process overlap and repeat themselves to suit the needs of the professional writer at the time (Smith 38-41; Syrewicz 214). Therefore, due consideration of conventional plot structure by Plotters, Pantsers, and those who take the Middle Ground before the final draft prepared for publication, despite variation in the mode and sequence of plot outlining, inhabits their writing processes.

## Conclusion

There are distinct stages to the writing process: (1) planning, (2) research, (3) writing, (4) and revision (Sampson, et. al). Plotting, or Plot Outlining, is a part of the Planning Stage of the writing process. Conventional writing instruction teaches the stages in sequential order as listed above. Professional fiction writers, however, use different methods and sequences in the writing process, but they invariably subject their work to all stages to produce a polished draft.

Things that happen to fictional characters in a story and the incidents that challenge and motivate them are plot (*Revision and Self Editing* 50). Fiction writers may outline what happens to their characters before starting their first draft (Outline Writers or Plotters), at some point during their writing project, or not at all (No Outline Writers or Pantsers). A thorough

understanding of conventional plot structure will serve the fiction writer well and make them better, no matter which approach to plot outlining they find suits them best (*Plot and Structure* 7).

Creative Writing instruction teaches that all stories need structure to give them form and shape (Trottier 5). The Three-Act Story Structure and the Hero's Journey are the enduring paradigm for story construction. The Hero's Journey has a distinct beginning, middle, and end which parallels the Three-Act Story Structure. In *Poetics*, Aristotle wrote that stories have three main parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end, and this structure's influence on literary theory continues (Finkelburg 60). Though writers prefer to envision plot structure by other terms and divisions, each of them reduces to a beginning, middle, and ending proportionate to the Three-Act Structure (Trottier 6).

Approaches to the stages of the writing process vary by mode and sequence among professional fiction writers, and it is important for new writers to be aware that there is more than one way to organize the effective planning, research, writing, and revision of works in progress. To explore the result of professional fiction writer's varied approaches, a qualitative comparison of the concept of the Three-Act Structure was applied to three novels from different genres. The novels were subjected to close reading to explore whether there were significant differences in the pacing and overall structure of major plot events in each novel. The results suggest that all professional fiction writers possess knowledge of conventional plot structure, whether they are a Plotter, Pantser, or take the Middle Ground.



### Section Three: *A Dex Wing Mess*

#### Chapter 1

Dex Wing, Operations Manager for the Revelation Baptist Church Mission, sipped from a half pint of whiskey as the clatter of a ruckus prompted him to glance out the office window. The sight made his limbs stiffen and shunned his brain's instruction to move.

"Don't hit my baby!" The words caught in his throat. *I'll never get there in time to prevent it*, he thought.

A green blob smoked and spit as it kissed the curb, bounced, and jerked. But terror abated as the car stopped short of his Harley Davidson Road King Classic. He rode it daily until he repaired his truck. Otherwise, it was garage kept and ridden on weekends.

The thing he loved more than the touring motorcycle was Eva, his wife. He peeked heavenward and exhaled. *On the day I park out front*.

The blob, a green jalopy, sputtered off. The last shudder spit a thick smoke plume in front of the Revelation Baptist Church Mission. It adjoined to the small store-front church on its left. Members opened it not long after the church's founding forty years ago.

A young man drove the car, a young woman rode beside him, and three little brown heads bobbed up and down in the back seat. They shared a hollow gaze like they drove for hours though they'd traveled a few miles.

Pastor Greg Jackson stood beyond the weathered building's awning. He and Dex were childhood friends. The two were as close as brothers. *And we often fought like siblings, didn't we? But we always made up. You've always been my voice of reason*.

Greg waved as he walked over to greet the family. *Where'd you come from?* Greg pulled his jacket down. It rode up his belly when he zipped it. And that was welcome on this cool

afternoon when mulch, twigs, and fallen leaves blew against curbs and buildings.

He looked at a photograph of Greg and him pinned to his bulletin board. *Greg, you're always happy to be in the right place at the right time.* Dex's mother took it when they both finished seminary in 1993, after members founded the church.

Dex sank into his chair. *After that guy almost hit my bike, I'm not in the mood. Now I need a cigarette.* He stared at the wallpaper image in his smartphone while he kept an eye on Greg. The picture was of his late wife, Evangeline. Family and friends called her Eva. He glared at the photograph like he possessed the power to will her from the grave.

He had not been able to accept the fact she died. He also could not shake the conviction of responsibility for what happened. Today was a day when his heart weighed him like a sack of bricks. His entire life collapsed around him.

"Miss you Eva," he said.

He barely finished the words when one of the mission volunteers, Lindy, peeked in his doorway. "You say something to me?" She held a clipboard and tucked a free hand in her pale pink apron.

He secreted the bottle into his desk drawer. "Nope. I was thinking out loud." He swiveled in a squeaky, gray government chair to face her. "What do you need?"

"Any clients this afternoon?" Lindy asked. "We're cleaning a bit. It gets so dusty 'round here."

Dex squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "No. Last appointment was at eleven." He pointed out the window, opposite the door of his unkempt office, at Greg and the visitors. "But let's see what's going on out there."

"Looks like some folks showed up without an appointment." Lindy put a hand on her hip

and smirked, which accentuated the dimple on her pudgy right cheek. “We are a charity ain’t that right?”

Dex smiled. “We are. And we couldn’t do it without you.” She was one of the faithful bunch. That’s what he and Greg called the tireless souls who gave their time. “Let’s go see what Pastor Jackson wants to do.” He popped a peppermint into his mouth. It crunched as he bit into it and began chewing.

As they made the left out of his office and approached the side door, the male driver yelled. They quickened the pace.

“Y’all full of it.” The young man’s chest flared, and he bawled his fists.

Greg didn’t back down, but he did back up. “Now, come one. You need to calm down. There’s a process— “

“Like I said. Y’all full of it.” His speech slurred. The young man pounded a hand on the hood of the car his wife and kids still sat in. He took a step toward Greg with clenched fists.

Dex propelled himself into the confusion. The youthful behemoth began an advance as if he was ready to pummel Greg, but he hesitated when as reinforcements arrived. The young man unclenched his fists and halted as Dex advanced.

Dex slowed his gait. “Pastor Jackson, is there a problem?”

“It’s all right. Chris is anxious to find a hot meal and bed for his family.” Greg glimpsed at Dex. “I was explaining to Chris we have a room for his wife and children at the women’s shelter, but the family shelter is full. We don’t house single males. So....”

Chris cursed under his breath. “So, what you want me to do? Sleep in my car again?”

*If my family were good to go, I think I would.*

Chris, a decade younger and fifty pounds heavier than Dex, darted his bloodshot eyes back and forth. Although a large man, he moved effortlessly. Dex noticed when he threw the tantrum and attacked his car.

The stench of stale beer emanated from Chris. *But I could still take him.* The ex-cop in him thought he could take anyone. Dex moved a step closer. The two, the same height, locked eyes.

“Let’s get your wife and kids registered and placed,” Dex said, “then we’ll figure something out for you.” He nodded at Chris, then pointed to the mission. “Let’s walk.”

Dex turned and started toward the building. then glanced at Chris as he willed him to follow. Chris folded his arms and turned to view his wife and children. His wife managed a reassuring smile. Chris followed.

Dex sighed in relief. *Assertiveness in conflict resolution. I still got it.*

As the two headed toward the side entrance, Greg said, “Well Praise God.”

*My sentiment exactly.*

The two men rounded the corner of the mission. The first floor consisted of a reception area, offices, storage, and a food pantry. Dex held the door and ushered the young man inside, past several open boxes of dented canned goods near the entrance. The second floor housed two classrooms and storage for the church’s second-hand store a block away. “Chris, right?”

“Chris Fleming.” He stopped and fumbled with his clothing inside the door.

“First right Chris,” Dex said. “I’m Dex Wing. I manage this place. My office.” He followed the young man into his office.

“That’s your bike out front?” Chris pointed to Dex’s scratched half-helmet which sat atop

the desk and inspected the collage of photographs on his bulletin board.

“You mean the motorcycle you almost totaled with your car? Yeah.”

Chris stood there and swayed while he examined the photographs. “Sorry.”

“Not as sorry as I would have been had you hit my bike.” Dex slid onto his chair and pulled a folder from the top drawer. “Chris, I want to—”

“—82nd Airborne,” Chris said. He studied a photograph of a soldier in uniform. He grinned wide and unzipped his jacket, removed his right arm, and raised the sleeve to reveal a tattoo. “Me too.” On his right bicep was the Army 82nd Airborne insignia.

Chris’s chest expanded in pride. He stood and extended his right hand to Chris. “Thank you for your service, Chris. King of Battle. All the way. As my dad would say.”

Chris met Dex’s handshake. “Hooah.”

Dex passed one-hundred dollars to Chris he had palmed before he extended his hand. He saw the young man’s eyes widen as he realized there was more to the handshake than he first gathered.

“You know that’s what my sister does,” Dex said.

Chris tilted his head. “Jump out of perfectly good airplanes?”

Dex chuckled. “She owns a tattoo parlor in downtown. Sheila’s Exotic Ink.”

“Good to know.” Chris pulled down his shirt collar to reveal other tattoos. “It’s been a few years. Time to touch a few of these up.”

“Keep her in mind.”

The young man examined the bills. “Are you for real?”

“You want to sleep in your car again?” Dex grinned, as Chris choked back a tear. “Pay it forward. Get yourself a room. There’s a motel down the block.”

Chris nodded as he stuffed the wad of bills in his jeans pocket. “Yeah, we passed it on the way here.” He wiped his eye with the other hand. “I’m gonna find a job and pay you back as soon as I can.”

“By tomorrow, I’ll work something out and get you, your wife, and kids together. See Lindy if I’m not here. And come back sober, all right? We have a zero-tolerance policy Chris.”

*I’m a hypocrite.* Dex motioned Chris to take a seat by the door. “Pull up a chair. 82nd Airborne? Not me. My father was.”

Dex focused on the bulletin board’s collage of memories. *Yeah, Dad, there’s a strong resemblance.* He and his father looked so much alike in their youth; it was easy to mistake them.

“Oh.” Chris pointed back to a second photograph on the board. It was a profile of Dex in police uniform. He posed in front of an American Flag. “But you’re the cop there, right?”

“Was.” Dex straightened, opened the folder, and retrieved an emergency shelter application. The word “was” caught in his throat. *Still strange to say.* His entire life was law enforcement, until Eva. He thought it a shame his career complicated their marriage so much. *Sheila was right about that. I just wish she’d stop comparing me to Dad.*

“What are you doing here?” Chris pointed to a group photograph with Dex in police battle dress utilities and a tactical vest. He held an assault rifle. “What happened?”

“Big bust. Drug seizure. 1996.” Dex glanced over to make sure he saw the same photograph Chris did.

Chris studied the photograph of Dex posed alongside fellow police officers, who all wore tactical gear and posed with a pile of drugs, guns, and bundled cash. “You look young and fit enough to still be out there bustin’ heads. What happened?”

“What happened?” Dex leaned back and crossed his arms. *I would give anything to know*

*what happened.* He inspected a picture of Eva on the weathered bulletin board opposite the desk and the corners of his mouth dropped with his head. “Life.”

## Chapter 2

Violette’s boyfriend called her while she prepared for her day. Her pulse rate quickened, and she nearly dropped her Lego pencil holder. She arranged her collection of knick-knacks and put her newest find front and center. One day Candles. The next day coffee mugs. The day after doilies because her mother loves them. Violette didn’t care for doilies, but she was obsessed with Roscoe McKinnon’s classic flip-top wick lighter.

He showed her the skull etched lighter, with its silver-finished case when they first met. “That belonged to my Dad,” he said. Ever since she would take Roscoe’s lighter, and Roscoe would collect it back. Then, the juvenile lover’s game she perpetuated began again. *Keeping something of yours keeps you close*, she thought.

“I got something real important to talk to you about,” he said when he called. His voice sounded like he dipped a big toe in an ice-cold tub. *Strange. I hope you’re thinking of proposing, and not breaking up.* She checked her dyed hair in the mirror. *Maybe you’re ready to discuss a serious relationship and quit the gang life with the Durango Boys for good.*

In her cubicle at Sheila’s Exotic Ink, a tattoo parlor on a retail corridor northwest in the city, Violette then placed tattoo needles in the autoclave beneath her mirror. She fanned the air to dissipate the overpowering smell of the disinfectant. The sterile scent often invoked the experience of the nightmarish procedure which caused her infertility.

If she had it to do again, Violette would have postponed her senior year to have the baby. Her mother was furious with her decision. “I want to have a lot of babies with you,” he said. She

didn't muster the nerve to tell him she was barren. *He wants kids. What man doesn't?*

*I hope he arrives soon.* "Sheila, I'm taking my lunch break. My next appointment is supposed to be here around twelve," Violette said. She checked the time, and for new text messages.

Sheila leaned out of her cubicle with tattoo needle and an ink-splotted towel draped over one shoulder. "Okay, baby. I'm just straightening up a little."

Sheila was rough around the edges, but soft on the inside. She waved a sheet of thermal paper above her head. "I have the 'Michelle' stencil when you need it. When are people gonna stop tattooing their lover's name on their flesh?"

Violette leaned against the wall outside her cubicle. "Let me guess. Probably...never. The things people do for love, right?"

"I'm waiting for you to put your man's name on your skin." Sheila let loose her infectious laugh as the parlor phone rang.

Violette blushed as she rushed to answer it.

"I got it," Sheila said, as she removed the parlor's cordless from her smock pocket. "Lock the front door while you're on break, babe." She raised her voice over the waiting area's television. "Sheila's Exotic Ink, can I help you?" She disappeared back into her workspace.

Violette took leftover Chinese take-out and set the container on the dinette table in the center of the small room. She backed the metal wire out of the carton and placed it in the microwave.

The rear door shook and startled Violette. Roscoe pressed his face against the screen.

"Sheila wants everyone to use the front door," she said.



Roscoe rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue. It nearly touched the dusty screen.

Violette winced. “Ewww...remind me not to kiss you.”

“You can’t keep your hands off me.” Roscoe stooped at the door.

*You know the routine. Sheila will shoot you with your own gun if you bring it in here.*

He adjusted his waistband, then pulled the door open and entered. “You really should lock this door though. You don’t want people like me walkin’ in.” He laughed.

Sheila’s older brother, Dex advised them to lock the rear door and use it sparingly. He told them how the alley entrance was dangerous—nooks for criminals to hide.

*You don’t worry because you know all the nooks. But it’s all over. You’re here to tell me you’re done with your life of crime.*

“What’d you do to your hair?” Roscoe asked. He reached behind his ear and produced a cigarette. “My lighter. I wonder where it could be?” He grinned and stroked her short brown hair. “You made it darker?”

*You’d notice.*

Violette nodded as she reached into her pocket and retrieved his skull lighter. She tried to light his cigarette. It produced a spark, but the old lighter’s flame didn’t catch.

“Hey, that’s mine.” Roscoe grabbed the lighter before she tried to light it again. He produced a second lighter, a cheap Bic disposable. He held it in his other hand and lit his cigarette. He took a drag.

“Give it back, Roscoe.” The corners of Violette’s mouth turned down, she sniffled. “I’m mad at you, Mr. McKinnon.”

Several silent seconds passed, then she grinned. *You can see right through me.*

His shoulders bounced in laughter as he headed toward the door with a mouth full of

smoke. "I like your hair. It's...so...brown." He leaned out the back door to expel the fumes as he fished in his pocket for something.

*He's fidgeting an awful lot.*

He stepped out again and took one long drag, then stooped to put out the cigarette. He flicked it into the alley, then re-entered and rubbed his shaved head.

"Litterbug." Violette turned on the microwave.

"Chinese?" Roscoe's forehead wrinkled as he closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Yuck."

"Hush. You don't know what's good. You eat pizza and drink beer all the time."

"That's how Miraldo rewards his crew. He's Italian," He said in a thick Italian accent. He stepped behind Violette and embraced her in front of the microwave stand. He slipped the skull lighter into the stand's drawer.

"Hurry and get out. Rubin Miraldo Sr. is a monster." Violette reached and fished in his sweatshirt pocket for the skull lighter. *I saw where you put it.* She pressed her body against his while she retrieved the lighter from the drawer. She dropped it in her cargo pants pocket. *Gotcha.* The microwave beeped, and she removed her lunch. *Something's off here Roscoe. What are you worried about?*

Roscoe glanced at her, then down to the checkered-tile floor. "I'm in trouble. Miraldo wants me dead. Something important to him is missing, and he thinks I stole it. He'll do anything to get it back."

Violette's breath caught in her chest, then she swallowed unchewed fried rice. Sheila stood outside the break room. *How long has she been standing there? Did you have anything to*

*do with it? You're scared.* She held her words and stared at Roscoe with raised eyebrows, her head askew. Her mother used to tell her she looked like a confused puppy.

“I need to disappear for a minute. Until...” Roscoe’s voice changed in pitch, like it did when he was nervous.

Electronic chimes signaled entry at the front door. Several people entered.

Sheila rushed into the break room past the two. She pulled at the paneled wallboard next to the mini-fridge and microwave stand. “Durango Boys. It’s gotta be them. Pulled up right after you came in.” Behind it was an empty void recessed in the wall. “The water heater used to be here. Now you. Get in. Hurry.”

Roscoe climbed into the cramped space.

Sheila pushed the paneling back in place. “Be quiet. Silence your phone.”

Sheila turned to Violette; her eyes wide as a deep, booming voice called out. “Anyone here?”

“Yeah,” Sheila said, “Be right there.” She pointed to the breakroom table and Violette’s food. “Eat your lunch. Act normal.”

Violette sat down and pawed at her food. The thought of eating now revolted her. She listened as Sheila told the men Roscoe wasn’t there.

A muffled voice spoke a few indistinguishable words, then cubicle curtains slid along their tracks. *They’re searching.* Alien footfalls started, stopped, then started again. They got louder. Violette glimpsed at the nook where Roscoe hid, then out into the parlor beyond the break room doorway. *Sheila, I hope you’re okay.*

They inched closer to the break room. Then one of the men bounded into the room like a boxer. He carried a large, black handgun.

Violette straightened, and they stared at each other for several seconds. The man appeared to be her age, and he also had acne. He held the gun at his side. His eyes danced around the small room. They rested on the rear entry agape with its flimsy screen door. The thug's gun overran her thoughts.

“Your boyfriend went out that way?” He smiled and revealed a wide gap in his teeth.

Violette thought it was an insincere smile. Harmful. Violette nodded as he walked to the door. “He left.”

He peered into the alley as the two other members of the crew ushered Sheila into the break room. One was Hispanic with a shiny forehead, and the other African American. The African American ducked under the doorframe to enter the room. They were all armed.

Sheila raised her hands and sighed. “He’s gone, guys. He bounced before you got here.”

“What’s this about?” Violette asked. She struggled to speak above a whisper.

The thug with the acne faced her. “He knows what it is.” He turned to his other two crew members. “This door was open; you check the rest of the place?”

The other two nodded.

“Let’s go.”

The tall, African American thug left the sweet, piney scent of his aftershave as he passed. Violette’s breath caught in her throat. *I’m going to throw up now.* The three disappeared into the alley, as the screen door slapped its frame and bounced several times.

Sheila remained at the door for several seconds. She then turned and walked to Roscoe’s hiding spot and pulled the paneled wallboard loose.

“Should we call the cops?” Violette asked.

“No.” Sheila and Roscoe both said in unison.

“What do they want?” Violette asked. A huge tear tumbled down her cheek. “I thought you were done with this nonsense?”

“Yeah Roscoe. What about that?” Sheila fit the paneled wallboard back in place.

Roscoe walked to Violette, whose eyes filled with tears. Sheila swelled with tears and her asthma began to bother her.

Sheila looked at Violette. “You close up.” She turned to Roscoe. “I saw the truck they came in. I’ll make sure they’re gone, pull around back, then we’re leaving.”

“Going where?” Roscoe’s eyes narrowed and he bit his lip. “I need to get—”

“—Out of here. They’ll be back. My brother is in Southern Maryland. He can help.”

“What does he know about the Durango Boys?” Roscoe asked.

“Enough. He grew up around them...and he investigated them. They have history.” Sheila rushed out of the break room.

Roscoe grumbled.

Violette stared at Roscoe. *How did you get into this mess? What are we going to do?*

### Chapter 3

The trio swayed back and forth as Sheila's small truck raced through city traffic.

Violette cringed as they approached a red signal, but it turned green just in time. *What would we have done without Sheila?* she thought.

Sheila squealed tires through a couple of turns, then slowed to blend in traffic.

Violette clung to Roscoe like a toddler who lamented her first day of preschool as they slumped in the back of the SUV. *What have you got yourself into?* Her eyes outlined the contour

of Roscoe's face. He sat and stared straight ahead.

She squeezed his hand. "I'm listening."

"I Need to get lost...figure this out." Roscoe pounded his leg. His olive skin developed an orange hue. *You're mad.* Violette squeezed her eyes shut and hoped this was a bad dream. She wasn't naive enough to think Roscoe didn't do shady stuff. He dealt his dirt far away. He never brought any trouble to her. *Is this part of his plan to get out of the life his father introduced him to?*

Roscoe put an arm around her and kissed her forehead. "We disappear. Together. We—"

Sheila raised her hand. "--That it? Disappear? Where? Do you have a plan? Miraldo wants you dead. Said it yourself. That's why we're headed to my brother."

"What kind of plan a washed-up cop turned security guard have?"

"What do you got? You run to your girlfriend? Bring the heat to her?"

Violette opened her eyes and Roscoe mouthed, "Sorry."

*Sorry. You're sorry.* Violette didn't return his stare. The worst part of all was this bewilderment.

Roscoe peered out the rear window. "We got company."

The black SUV was close. The Durango Boy with acne sat in the front passenger seat. An armed man had never threatened her and she would not soon forget his face. His ominous smile spoke obscenities in its garishness.

The large African American man gripped the steering wheel of the pursuing vehicle like a stock car driver who vied for pole position in qualifiers. They accelerated to within inches.

"Oh no," Violette said.

"I see them," Sheila said. "Going to widen the gap." Sheila pulled a hard left and cut off

oncoming traffic. “Roscoe, you got your gun?”

“No. I stashed it where I normally do—outside your back door.”

Everyone anticipated the turn and leaned into it to avoid the push of inertia. Her risky stunt put valuable distance between vehicles.

The SUV continued to follow as angry motorists’ horns blared. The thug blew his own horn and bullied his way through traffic in the intersection. Sheila’s maneuver created distance, but their pursuers gained steady ground due to the artificial bottleneck.

The trio traveled a block before the large SUV cleared the congestion. Its much larger engine allowed it to bridge the gap. It would be on top of them again soon.

Roscoe leaned forward and braced himself as he hugged Sheila’s seat back. Violette held onto his arm as they traveled fast through city streets.

“I know this area. We need to go over—couple a blocks.” Roscoe’s again spoke in higher pitch. *Sheila can’t tell, but Roscoe’s scared.* “Slow down a little bit. Turn right at the next block. Not many cops around.” His voice deepened again as he settled back. “Uptown Crew territory. It’s off limits to Durango Boys.”

Sheila glanced at him in her mirror. “Still a beef between the Durango Boys and the Uptown Crew?” She eased off the throttle.

“Never ended. Just stay out each other’s way. Miraldo’s orders.”

Violette checked for the thugs. The running lights of a vehicle a block away could be them.

They turned onto the next street lined with modest row houses and almost hit a large red sedan, Violette’s cell phone tumbled and slid beneath the front seat. She let go of Roscoe’s arm

and leaned forward to fish for the phone, but the car's movement jolted her upright when Sheila jerked the wheel to avoid the other driver.

Sheila composed herself until she looked in the rear-view mirror. Sheila pointed behind them. "They found us. They ain't backing off."

Violette returned Sheila's worried glance.

Roscoe leaned forward. "They will when we get to—turn here." They rode another block. "Heart of Uptown territory here. Their boss Big Mike's stomping ground. They won't stay around here long."

"Don't tell me--Uptown has twenty-four-hour guard or something?" Sheila asked.

Roscoe flashed a timid grin. "Not really—just don't want no mistakes. Business is good. Steady...but we don't push as hard as we used to. Miraldo's orders. Better when there's no smoke on the streets." Roscoe pointed to the right. "Slow...turn here."

Sheila aimed for the narrow space between row houses. She glared at Roscoe in her mirror. "You sure know a lot about Uptown Crew turf for a Durango Boy."

Roscoe rolled his eyes.

As they neared the end of the alleyway Sheila prepared to turn onto the street when the black SUV pulled up and blocked their exit.

The large African American thug got out of the driver's seat and stood next to the vehicle. He held a handgun by his side. "Roscoe, let's go." The large man's voice thundered.

Beads of sweat dripped from Roscoe's brow. His chest heaved as he breathed to quell his anxiety. She struggled as hard to prevent her own hyperventilation. Violette's knuckles whitened she squeezed his arm so hard.

"C'mon now," the African American thug said. "Let's take this off the street, and back in



our house.” He motioned to the two thugs in the vehicle. The pimple-faced thug opened his door, and the third Durango Boy exited the vehicle. The African American thug turned to the third Durango Boy and said whispered something. He climbed into the driver’s seat of the SUV.

Roscoe opened his door and slinked out of the small SUV. The stench of rotted garbage and urine in the alley assaulted Violette’s senses, as she relented and let him go.

“Gonna run for it. Get lost.” Roscoe walked away and crouched to avoid detection.

The African American thug peered over his shoulder at his pimple-faced partner. The pimple-faced man rounded the front of the vehicle. Violette cringed at the sight of the handgun—the same one which threatened her inside the tattoo parlor.

Both started down the alleyway toward them.

Sheila stared, wide-eyed. “Violette--”

“There he is,” the African American thug said. “End of the alley.”

Then everyone froze at the sudden blast of a police air horn.

On the street beyond their SUV sat a Metropolitan Police car. The thugs hid their weapons in their waistbands. Sheila eased the car into reverse. They started to retreat down the alley the way they came. Violette turned to look for Roscoe. He was at the alley apron.

The police officer pointed at the SUV. She raised her loudspeaker microphone. “You’re double-parked.”

The two Durango Boys outside the vehicle turned to face the police cruiser, and Sheila picked up the pace. Her car nearly hit Roscoe as he and the vehicle converged on the apron at the end of the short, narrow alley.

“Watch out,” Roscoe said. He scrambled back in the car next to Violette. “Go.” Roscoe

lost his grip on the door handle, and it swung open as they turned onto the street.

Violette clung to Roscoe. “The door!”

Roscoe leaned out and Violette hung onto his other arm. He pulled the door shut.

Two turns and the trio emerged back on the central route to the highway headed south out of the city. Sheila rubbed her brow. “Why did you bring them to my shop? You knew they were following you. What did you take? Money? Or was it drugs?”

“No.”

“No what?”

The trio stopped at a red light. All of them searched for their pursuers.

“It’s not like that. No money...no drugs.”

“Then you must be screwing Miraldo’s mistress then?”

The two glared at each other in the rear-view mirror. Violette leaned forward. “Sheila—”

“--I’m sorry, but we need to know.” She smiled at Violette. “I am sorry.” Sheila searched the front of the vehicle. “My phone--Violette, call Dex. I’ll give you the number.”

“Mine slid under the seat.” Violette bumped her head on the seat back as she contorted herself to retrieve it. She stretched all she could while she probed for it. But the phone slid too far forward. “I can’t reach it, Sheila.”

“Alright. I think we’re okay.”

The trio made their escape. It was dangerous to remain in the city. Roscoe harbored fear, but Violette was also mad with him. *How many were hunting them? Why? What did they know? What is Roscoe not saying? What did he do?*

They continued north on Georgia Avenue. Then down the inner loop of Interstate 495 headed to South County.

## Chapter 4

As the mission Operations Manager Dex would check on everything daily. There was never much, but always enough. And things left unattended turned into headaches fast. *Better to discover small problems than allow big ones to find you*, he thought.

Dex was a complicated man, like his father. His mother said, “Your father treats strangers better than us. It’s a shame he doesn’t give as much time and attention to his own.” *Eva said that to me, and it broke my heart*. After they helped Chris and his family, he took a moment before he made rounds to see if anything needed his consideration.

He closed the office door and opened his top left desk drawer. He stared at the half pint of whiskey. *Almost empty*. He took a nip and closed it. *Screw my life*. He slumped his head on the desk with a thud which reeled his hazy memory.

He usually welcomed his alcohol-induced memories of Eva. But not this one. The night when several hours, and a confession later, he called her to apologize for running behind again. He told her he needed to finish an interview, then he’d be right home. *I was the commander of investigations. I didn't have to question suspects into the early morning hours. Not anymore. But it's in my blood*.

Eva didn’t answer his calls. She was lead prosecutor on her current case and put in long days herself. *She dove headlong into her own career because I was too far gone chasing my own professional accolades*. He rushed home. He pulled in their driveway. *Hey, your car’s not here*.

His cell phone vibrated.

Deputy Chief Ransom told him of Eva’s murder. The Deputy Chief’s cracked falsetto strained. “I’m so sorry, Dex. It was a random robbery.”

Dex’s broad shoulders heaved in grief.

The Deputy Chief's voice made his ears ring. *It's too much.*

The day the department psychiatrist told him, "Take some time, all the time you need," he came to the painful realization time was one of his worst enemies.

*I'm the reason you were working so late, Eva. If I'd have come home, you would have followed. I should have stayed instead of retiring. You would have wanted me to stick it out, Eva. Especially after all our ambitions have cost us. A demotion or a transfer was on the horizon. It wouldn't have been easy to stay. You were gone, and everything changed.*

Later, he accepted an offer to serve subpoenas for extra cash to cover the mortgage because his meager pension check wasn't enough. The tedium of the task became a bore to someone used to excitement. Or like his old buddy Charlie Banks used to call excitement—mess. *The funny thing is you get used to mess after a while. Even my own.*

A private investigator's license made subpoena service easier, but that lost to alcohol. Booze didn't take the pain away; it sent it to the next room. It wasn't long before the P. I. thing fell off. *Didn't stay and tough that out either.*

How embarrassed he was to lose the home he and Eva bought.

He sniffled.

The memories whirled through his head like beach umbrellas which tumbled in a windstorm. *Flashes of pain and regret muted in my whiskey induced haze.*

His alcohol problem crept up. An extra beer, then extra shots. Then he drank alone because he couldn't sleep which led to the bump of alcohol to take the edge off. He kept something nearby all the time to stay even. *Like now.*

The problem is he didn't just forget the pain of Eva's loss, he lost his identity. He forgot the people who cared. He forgot to care. *Screw my life.*

Dex wiped his face and hands with wet naps. Lindy made sure they, and peppermints, were on hand. *God bless you, Lindy.*

Several minutes passed, and Greg wrapped on Dex's office door. He sat up and made sure he hid his whiskey in the desk drawer. He straightened his wrinkled clothing and popped a peppermint, and bit into it. *I'm all right.* He mindlessly tapped a pen on his motorcycle helmet and chewed.

"It's open."

Greg opened the door and stared a second. He swayed to the rhythm of his nervous habit and snapped his fingers.

"Get you another pen and you'd have a killer single-stroke drum roll my man."

Dex quieted the pen, when Lindy also appeared. He stood and rounded his desk toward the two to prevent them from smelling alcohol.

"Your sister pulled up in a hurry. She's not alone," Lindy said. "There's a girl and a guy with her."

"Girl and a guy?" Dex asked.

"The short Spanish girl—the one that works for her...and a rough-looking Spanish guy. They'd been sitting there a couple minutes, but they just got out of the car."

Dex looked at Greg, and the pastor returned the same concerned glance.

"Thought Sheila and you weren't speaking?" Greg asked.

*My sister's as stubborn as I am. She's still mad so this is no regular social call.* "We aren't."

## Chapter 5

Dex rose and started for the parking lot. *Sounds like trouble*, he thought. He didn't talk to his sister much these days. It wasn't because they didn't love each other, but sometimes their opinions differed. *I might as well talk to them outside so no one hears anything embarrassing.*

Greg and Lindy's footsteps echoed an irregular rhythm as they followed. Dex wanted them to wait inside. Greg and Lindy were family. Their support was welcome since Eva's death. He couldn't bring himself to request they turn back. *Not them.*

Dex met the trio, Sheila, Violette, and Roscoe, at the side door. *What a motley crew.*

"What's going on?" Dex stared at Sheila. "What's up? Hey Violette." The autumn breeze blew and raised the hair on his forearms. It reminded him it's jacket weather.

"Been trying to call you," Sheila said. She wore a haggard grin. The situation was serious indeed for her to display such a coping mechanism.

Dex looked at Roscoe, who assumed a rigid stance. "I don't think I know you."

"You don't." Roscoe didn't blink but averted his gaze.

The veins in Roscoe's tattooed neck enlarged . *A Durango Boy. Sheila notices. I recognize him from surveillance we did when I was on the force investigating Rubin Miraldo Sr. And the Durango Boys ink.*

"Okay," Sheila said, "What is this?" She rushed Roscoe and placed her forearm in his chest. "I'm trying to help your dumb butt— "

Roscoe huffed and squeezed his chin. It produced a contorted smile. He took the same hand and raised his middle finger. His muscles stiffened as he emphasized the gesture. The veins on the right side of his neck pulsed and accentuated his skull tattoo. He directed the obscenity at no one in particular. At least it didn't appear that way.

*They all look frustrated.*

“No,” Violette said. She went to Roscoe and grabbed him. Her eyes were as big as saucers as they filled with tears.

“Now, e—everyone—,” Greg said. The trio brought tension to the outreach mission. There was hesitancy in his voice.

Lindy stood near Dex outside the huddle and wouldn't look up. He turned to face her and smiled. “You can go,” he mouthed as his eyes darted skyward then down the hall past his office.

Lindy has been a sweet soul not accustomed to confusion. She reminded Dex of Eva, but they didn't share the same temperament. “Thank you,” she mouthed back, then walked inside. His Eva was argumentative, but Lindy possessed an agreeable nature. If he excused her, she'd appreciate the action.

“Let's take this inside,” Dex said. “This smells serious.”

Dex and Roscoe again locked eyes like two hungry mutts over one meal. He had no doubt Roscoe was dedicated to being a Durango Boy. He embodied a genuine thug. He had spent enough time around gangbangers. *I've investigated and lived with your kind.* He didn't fear Roscoe, and knew he felt the same.

Greg then squeezed his round frame past Dex and stopped between the two men. “Hey Violette, why don't you and your friend ... Roscoe ... go with me to the pantry for a cold drink. Give Dex and his sister a minute to talk.”

Dex rubbed his exposed arms and shook his head as he disappeared into the building. He nearly tripped over the boxes of dented canned goods stacked near the door. He turned to confirm his sister followed him inside to discuss their abrupt arrival. She turned her nose up like

she smelled something. He and Sheila entered his office. *We both need a drink to calm our nerves.*

He showed her several missed calls to his cell phone. “You get a new phone? You say you called, but this is the only call I received—the unknown one here.”

“It was Violette. Forgot mine...left it at the shop.”

“What’s going on?”

Sheila was near his door. The breath of her raspy voice whistled when she exhaled. She tried to keep her distance so her labored breathing wouldn’t be so obvious. He’d always been her protector even though they fought often throughout their lives. He frequently said, “I fight with my sister, but no one else can.” She glanced at his collage of memories on his bulletin board, then her brother.

Dex didn’t return her gaze. He scratched his eyebrow. He loved his sister, but lately they couldn’t stand each other’s guts. Their dispute wasn’t centered on any particular thing. *The clash of two hard heads. She thinks she knows everything, and I’m certain I know everything.* He waited for her to respond. *She won’t. I need to calm down before this goes nowhere fast.*

Dex looked at her and folded his arms. He leaned them on his desk blotter. “Let me guess. Durango Boy in trouble? On the run? With his girlfriend? And her boss?” He shook his head and sighed.

Sheila remained silent.

“Is he? On the run, I mean. Is he a snitch? Stole money? Drugs? Please tell me you know something?” He started to stand.

Sheila halted her brother with raised hands. She pushed his office door closed. “He’s pissed them off. Stole something important from Miraldo himself. They followed him to the



parlor.” She sat in the chair opposite his desk. “I got scared because I’ve never seen Roscoe so nervous. He said Miraldo wants him dead...his voice cracked. Then, they came in so fast—I just acted.” Sheila leaned closer. “If it wasn’t for the storage spot you talked me into keeping after you moved the water heater—”

“—You hid him in there? Why did you get involved? Why didn’t you let him run with those thugs on his tail? They think you and Violette know something now.”

“No choice.” Sheila stood and sighed. “Something bad was about to happen.”

Dex raised an eyebrow. “So, they left empty handed. Then you bring this mess here?”

“We had to get out of there. We had nowhere else to go. When we left in my car, they followed us. They blocked us in an alley uptown, then this cop warned them for double parking. Gave us a chance to put some distance—”

“—Distance? They were following you? You still came here? How do you know—”

Sheila’s teeth clenched and her lips narrowed. “—We weren’t followed.”

“You sure, Sheila?” He waited for a response. He glanced out his window. “Are you absolutely sure?”

Sheila’s breathing became shallow. She’s suffered from asthma since childhood.

“Where’s your inhaler?”

“I’ll be okay. Talk to him, Dex. See if he’ll open up. You know the Durango Boys. Or should I say we know them.” Sheila shook her head.

*Always dredging up the past.* He slid his chair back and leaned forward. He rested his forearms on his knees. “Tell him to kick rocks. You know why? You screwed up when they saw you leave with that clown. They’re not just searching for Roscoe, now. They’re looking for you. If he doesn’t want to talk about what went down, ditch him. Then, call the cops.”

“And tell the cops what? They could be investigating Roscoe. They probably are...he’s been in the streets. So, he goes seeking help from them and gets himself arrested? I believe jail’s the last place I’d want to be if I were him.”

*She’s right. Jail is not safe. The Durango Boys have reach.* He stood. “Sure you weren’t followed here?”

“We lost them uptown with the double-parking thing and all. Didn’t know what else to do, so I came here.”

“Well, I tell you what...drive him back to the city and drop him off.”

“Now?”

“Durango Boys come to your parlor looking for him, they follow you, then they lose you. I say take him back uptown and lose him there. He knows his way around. So, what if you’re seen. It’s a plus if they get word you ditched him. Better if somebody witnesses it.”

“You’re not going to help?”

“I’m telling you what to do.”

Sheila sat back down by the door, taking short sips of air. “Talk to him. Just you two. Talk some sense into him.”

“Screw him.” He went to her. “Where’s your inhaler?”

“Left in a hurry.”

He took her hand. “Come on.”

Dex walked into the hallway and still held his sister’s hand. He avoided stumbling over the non-perishables stacked near his door once again. He paused outside his office door and turned to her. “Tell me something...how’d Violette get mixed up with that piece of work

anyhow?”

Sheila rolled her eyes. “She’s a grown woman, Dex.”

“Okay, but—”

“—Could have said the same thing about Dad for Ma? Or my high school sweetheart?

How about you and Eva, huh?” She released her brother’s hand and crossed her arms.

*You’re right.* He leaned against the wall. “We’re not doing this now.”

“We’re never doing it. You’re just like Dad.”

“We’ll get into this later.”

“Okay, which means you’ll dodge like always.”

He stepped to her and grabbed her hands. “Seriously.”

“Yeah right...Dad’s idea of talking is saying ‘we’ll talk about this later.’”

He sighed. “Really, we will.”

Sheila smirked and wrinkled her nose. “You’re still drinking.”

She labored to inhale. “You’re wrong,” he said.

“I smell it, Dex.” She let go of his hands. “Are you drunk right now? You’ve always hid it well...got that trait from Dad too, didn’t you? Hiding stuff—and here Eva thought she was marrying a saint. You were one of the biggest sinners.”

Dex shook his head and continued toward the pantry. *We’re going nowhere fast. One day soon I’ll have to tell you the whole rotten story Little Sis.*

The pantry was a converted room in the old two-story retail building. In the center were tables and folding chairs where Greg sat opposite Violette and Roscoe. It served the community with donated food. Struggling families and the homeless depended on the charity of their

neighbors.

Roscoe put one arm around Violette, and she held his other arm like a novice swimmer grips the side of a pool. Let go, and she drowns. She appeared asleep, but then Dex saw her blink an eye.

Sheila's breathing improved.

Metal shelves lined three walls, stuffed with non-perishable food items. Two loud deep freezers lined the fourth wall. Greg stood and faced Dex and Sheila. "I'll be next door in my office." He hugged Sheila and took her hands. "Praying for you." Then, he turned to Dex.

Dex nodded as he placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "We'll talk."

Greg smiled and waved as he left.

Dex grabbed two sodas from the refrigerator nestled between the deep freezers. He turned to Roscoe and tossed one at him. Roscoe sat straightened and caught it.

"Let's take a walk," Dex said. "Have a smoke."

Dex pointed to the door and headed toward it. *I need to get Roscoe alone.* Then perhaps he would talk. *Let's try more of that assertiveness in resolving conflict.* He stopped to look at Roscoe. *Signal the outcome I want and relay it without anger or frustration.* Roscoe got up warily and followed him to the rear parking lot. *First Chris—now him. I'm two for two today.*

Outside, Dex lit a cigarette. He smoked menthols because his father smoked menthols. He used to steal singles from his father's pack as a teenager. That's where the habit began. He offered one to Roscoe. Although he'd never met the man, he figured he smoked. At least in times like this—the negotiation. It was the diplomatic thing to do, even if you didn't inhale. He learned parties settled some disputes during a smoke break, though often it resolved nothing. The problem is many found themselves addicted to nicotine on account of being diplomatic. He

became addicted long before he cared about diplomacy.

“Got my own,” Roscoe said. He retrieved a cigarette from his sweatshirt pocket.

“Recognize me?” Dex exhaled a thin plume of smoke and opened his soda.

“I seen you around.”

“When I was undercover, you mean?”

“That’s what it was? Oh.”

Dex flicked his ashes and took another drag. “You and Miraldo’s son, Rubin Jr., were tight?”

“I knew him.” Roscoe opened his soda and took a slurp.

*You two were inseparable.* “You with him the night he got killed?”

Roscoe lifted his sweatshirt to reveal a long scar on his abdomen. “Almost got me too.”

Dex had worked an unrelated homicide the night rivals murdered Ruben Miraldo Jr. and injured Roscoe near the southwest waterfront in the city. Gunmen fired on their parked vehicle in what Roscoe described as a robbery, although authorities knew otherwise.

It didn’t appear to Dex that Roscoe carried a weapon. He raised an eyebrow. “You not armed?”

“Stashed it behind the tattoo parlor. Sheila—”

“—I gotcha.” *My sister hates guns.*

“You’re still here, though.” Dex moved closer. “So, you tell Violette you love her?”

“What kin—”

“—Why involve them? You’ve been in these streets long enough to know better.”

“Didn’t mean it. I went to tell her I should disappear—”

“—What’s really going on. What did you take from Miraldo?”

Roscoe took an exaggerated drag of his cigarette.

“I think you screwed up. Now you’re scrambling. Do you watch college football?”

Roscoe nodded as he gulped his soda.

Dex took a step back and stood like a football quarterback poised to throw a reception. He pinched his cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He squinted the eye closest to its perch because of the fumes. “Know the triple option?”

Roscoe flicked his ashes. “Yeah, it’s like a double option.”

“Right. Except there’s one extra player the Q-B can toss to.”

Roscoe took a last drag, then stamped on his cigarette.

“Most in the life think about the double option. Not many ways out. Death ... or life in prison. But you had clout. I was there. You and Miraldo Sr.’s son were tight. So, you wanted to bail...you called an audible.” Dex dropped his cigarette and stepped on it. “You gambled a third option. I think you stole enough cash to disappear, or you’re an informant.”

Roscoe’s chest inflated and his nostrils flared. “I ain’t no snitch!”

“Then you’re a thief?” Dex smiled. He missed it—investigations. He long ago admitted his proficiency.

Roscoe shook his head in irate opposition as if the more he shook it the tighter his lips would seal. Dex, like most criminal investigators, trained in reading micro-expressions and body language to detect deception. Detecting deception in this fashion was a lot like wearing a condom to prevent unwanted pregnancy—it works, but not every time.

*I pushed him, but he isn’t ready to budge. What’s he scared of? Dex stooped to retrieve both men’s butts. He’s keeping something to himself, and I’d rather he takes his chances on his own than put Violette and my sister in jeopardy with him.*

“Either way, you need to disappear.” Dex looked at Roscoe. “Anything happens to Violette or my sister, I’ll kill you myself.”

## Chapter 6

Dex walked in the pantry and set his drink down on a folding card table converted to its use. He raised his arms and looked at Violette. “Your boyfriend is a selfish idiot. He’s going to get you all killed.”

“Where is he?” Sheila asked. She sat next to Violette in the center of the room.

Dex pointed to the rear parking lot. Violette buried her head in her hands. Dex sat opposite the two women.

Violette raised her head. “We’ve been talking. He’s trying to get out of the life, you know. We want a new start. Him and me. Start a family. The Durango Boys don’t agree. That’s all.” She wiped her red eyes.

“That’s not all. Doesn’t make sense,” Dex said. “There’s more to this than a soldier who wants a discharge. The Durango Boys, all the gangs, have been laying low. Better for business. It appears they were willing to disturb the peace in Roscoe’s case.”

“What’d he say?” Sheila asked.

“Not much. There’s a lot doesn’t make sense,” Dex said. “If Roscoe wanted out, and they wanted to make sure he didn’t spill gang secrets, Miraldo could have him dealt with quietly. But why make all this noise? It seems something unexpected happened. Unusual. Roscoe stole from him. One of his top soldiers.” Dex pursed his lips and tightened his gaze at Sheila. “It’s like...never mind.”

“Roscoe has a secret? Could you imagine.” Sheila chuckled and turned to Violette. “Men

have secrets, let me tell you. All men. Including yours. They get it from their fathers.”

Violette tilted her head.

*I don't think Violette appreciated the insinuation, Sheila.* Dex rose and slid his chair toward the women. It scraped on the cracked tile floor. Violette raised both arms to shield her face, and Sheila's eyes widened. He grabbed the chair to stop its momentum. He smiled at Violette. *I don't appreciate it either.* “Keep your personal feelings out of this, sis. Now is not the time to go down memory lane about our problems.”

“You mean your problems. You need to fix your temper.” Sheila rolled her eyes at Dex.

Dex exhaled in silence. *You need to fix your mouth.*

“I'm right. Count to ten,” Sheila said.

*She's right.* Since he lost Eva, his feelings were like loose marbles and he wore oven mitts trying to collect them.

“Alright. Thoughts? What do we do?” Sheila asked.

Dex folded his arms, and lines formed in his forehead. *I need tact here but I sure don't want to. How dare my sister bring this mess to me here.* “What do you do? Did I stutter the first time? Dangerous situation. Take his ass back uptown. Leave him. If he's smart, he'll create distance—get lost.”

Violette perked up. “Do?”

“First thing is man up and get eyes off you two. Let his boys know he's alone, but it's not going to be enough. They'll still watch you two. I was undercover in the gang. It's how Miraldo operates.”

“You think he stole from them? What if they kill him, and still don't find it? Where does that leave us?” Sheila asked.



Violette winced. Dex grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut as if he could erase her terrible thoughts. Sheila embraced Violette.

Dex walked back to the two and stirred a re-purposed shopping bag he caught as it fell from the table. “Did he give you anything Violette?”

Violette tilted her head and stared into space. Her eyes moved back and forth, and her lips mouthed silent words. “No.”

Violette’s brow wrinkled as she squeezed her eyes shut.

“Did he tell you anything out the ordinary before today?” Dex asked.

“No. Nothing.”

Sheila began to wheeze again. “I bet your little car chase uptown changed things. Now, Miraldo and his Durango Boys want Roscoe for what they think he has, and you two for what they think you know.” Dex turned and walked toward the door. *Now I need a drink.*

Roscoe appeared and the two men stood mute in the doorway opposite each other as a nearby deep freezer’s compressor droned. Dex pushed Roscoe and he fell into one of them against the wall. Roscoe rebounded and hurled himself at Dex. The two men embraced in a wrestler’s clench, tumbled across the pantry floor, and toppled chairs and a table. The two fought free and scrambled to their feet gasping as Sheila and Violette put themselves between them. Neither man tried to hurt the other.

Sheila struggled to breathe. “You need your inhaler.”

Violette grabbed Roscoe’s arm and pulled him into the room. Dex remained near the door, and when Sheila looked at him, he put his head down.

“Typical.” Sheila rolled her eyes as Greg and Lindy rushed into the room.

Dex walked down the hall, entered his office, and slammed his door behind him.

*I'm too pissed to sit still.*

There was movement in the hall. Greg's reassuring voice hummed a tune as footfalls passed and exited the side door. *I shouldn't have lost my cool.* Dex walked outside to smoke a cigarette as Greg locked the church sanctuary next door. The two watched Sheila, Violette, and Roscoe drive away. The trio made a left at the corner.

Greg stood with his hands in his pants pockets, his belly hid beneath his belt. His girth he owed to his wife Wanda's cooking. "They got trouble?"

"You said it right. They got trouble." Dex inhaled from his cigarette.

Greg backed a step away as Dex exhaled. He adjusted his collar. "You remember when we were in seminary and the guy from Georgia needed to get home fast?" He shoved a hand back in his pocket. "He had no money. No car. We were all scraping to get by and finish school."

Dex squinted. "Orlando Hayes. His mother was dying. Cancer."

Greg pointed at Dex's cigarette and smirked.

The corners of Dex's mouth turned down. "We made it to Georgia before she took her last breath."

Greg smiled. "Oh, you complained alright. Your Ford Mustang? The sleek, red monster? You went on about it and how 'Orlando's fixin' to pay for my ride'."

Dex laughed. "Those old dirt roads down there chipped my paint."

"That's not the only time though."

Dex raised an eyebrow. "Only time?"

"You handled other's trouble."

Dex nodded.

“Orlando pastors the largest church in his county,” Greg said.

“A whole twenty members strong.”

The two chuckled. Dex flicked ashes. “Do you two still talk?”

“Once in a while. Years and miles don’t separate brothers in Christ, though. He asks about you. He asks whether you’ve abandoned playing cops and robbers to preach the Word. I told him I’ve become convinced law enforcement was your calling.”

Dex nodded.

“You know something,” Greg said, “He has four girls to my three. We couldn’t steal a boy from the maternity ward if we had a lookout.”

“That reminds me,” Greg said. He bumbled toward the sanctuary door again. “Walk with me, Dex.”

Both men laughed.

Dex stood next to Greg and he fumbled in his jacket pocket for the door key. *The young man this morning—Chris—carried himself well despite his size.* Though shorter than Chris, the two men possibly weighed the same. *Too much.*

While Greg was not a fighter, Dex thought he could take anybody. Chris appeared to be years younger than him and Greg. *Probably had a dozen extra butt-whippings to his credit too.* He was getting old for his bravado though. His poor knees and back reminded him every morning.

Dex followed Greg into the foyer, and the two men turned right short of the sanctuary. The church always smelled old and stale. Down a short, wood-paneled hallway were a restroom and two offices. The one on the left served as a meeting room, and the other room housed Greg’s

space. He unlocked the flimsy wooden door, and Dex followed him inside the building.

Decorators adorned Greg's space in the same wood grain that paneled the vestibule and sanctuary. He stuffed his bookshelves with Biblical texts—concordances, commentaries, atlases, devotionals—both assigned to him as a seminarian and collected as a pastor. He pulled a three-ring binder from the shelf behind him and set it on his desk. “I kept thinking about this, so I thought I'd share it with you.” It was a scrapbook of old flyers, church programs, and photographs. He opened it and produced a picture, which Dex hadn't seen in years. The two men stood on the steps of a church with Bible in one hand and gold-fringed certificates in the other. To the right of Dex, a tall, light complected man and two women posed.

“Remember this day?” Greg asked.

“Yeah, sure do...the day your church—Revelation Baptist Church—was founded.” Dex ran his finger across the print, stopping at each face. “The original board of trustees.”

To the left of Greg, a short, bald man with a fluffy white beard grinned.

Dex pointed at the man in the frame. “Santa Claus. And just as jolly.”

“Santa—Deacon Standifer—always thought you'd join my pastoral staff.”

Dex was silent. When Greg brought this up, he often rode it out without a comment. Or he'd change the subject. “Is this why you brought me in here? To look at old photos?”

“No, I wanted to show you something.” Greg put the picture down and flipped a couple pages through the scrapbook. He stopped on one from seminary of Dex in the pulpit, clutching a Bible, preaching a sermon. He slid the old snapshot out of its page protector and held it between his thumb and index finger. “Maybe it's time.”

“Time? To jump behind the pulpit and act like I'm not the one who needs to be on my knees in front of it?” Dex raised his eyebrows and tilted his head.

Greg smirked. “Alright—alright. We’re all corrupted images of God. But I am glad to hear you say it.”

“Say it?”

“We’re all selfish...but capable of immense compassion. We’re all sinners, yet so valuable to God. We need his cleansing, and his redemption.” Greg placed the photo back into its sleeve. “No response?”

“I have some cleaning up to do first, Greg.”

“Now, you know that’s not how it works. God has never left your side...He’s seen it all. You need time with Him—like you used to. At the rate you’re going my friend, you’ll not last long.”

Dex was still silent.

“It’s not your fault.”

“What’s not my fault? You mean Sheila and them—”

“—No Eva. Bad things happen...even to good people. And it doesn’t mean we stop caring and trying to keep our loved ones safe. This is the fallen world in which we live.”

“Okay, this is not the time—”

“—I understand...I’m ready when you are.” Greg pointed at his dusty desktop computer on his desk. “Hey, I could show you my inbox...full of prayer requests.” Greg put the binder back on his shelf, turned, and ushered Dex toward his office door. The two walked out of the sanctuary.

They were silent for several moments and listened to the awning buffeted by a breeze.

Dex was the first to speak. "I'm sorry I lost my cool in there with Roscoe."

Greg smiled and nodded at Dex.

"Why'd you think about Orlando?" Dex asked.

"Trouble. Like when someone needs only what you can provide."

Dex raised a brow again. "But this ain't nowhere near the same situation."

"Well, it's something Orlando said back then concerning you." Greg looked at Dex.

"Don't remember, do you?"

Dex said nothing.

"Orlando said, 'Dexter Wing was my bridge over troubled water.'" Greg smiled. "It's a big part of the reason I keep you around, though you drink and smoke as if we run a dive bar instead of a church mission. You fix things, Dex. But you need to realize you can't fix everything all the time...and it's okay. It doesn't mean you stop trying...you don't give up hope."

Dex huffed.

"You're in a new season of your life. Other than you being my best friend and all, I see you not for who you are right now, but for everything God called you to be." Greg adjusted his jacket collar. "Sheila called a truce to seek her big brother's help. Why'd you two stop speaking?"

Dex stamped out his cigarette. "My father. She's still mad at him because he left our mother. She blames me for the problems Eva and I had. They were close. I guess I remind her of him. That's the gist of it anyway."

Greg stepped closer and placed his right hand on Dex's shoulder.

"Sheila is your sister. She and her friends got trouble...means you got trouble. Go to

them. Talk it out. See what you can do. You'll never forgive yourself if something happened to them and you stood idly by Dex."

Dex said nothing.

"You're awfully quiet."

"I'm thinking, Greg."

"Well, it's a start." Greg released his grip on Dex's shoulder. "I have to go pick up my girls." He turned to Dex. "Take care of your girls—your sister and her friend. Helping troubled people...it's your calling."

Greg left the mission before Dex. He left his office, unsure of his next move. The thing loved as much as whiskey these days was his motorcycle. *I need to clear my head.*

He started his Harley, and the low growl of the engine gave him respite from the current situation. When he got on his bike, it transported him to another place. Even if he didn't ride far, it helped him cope with the gut punches of life.

He tightened the chinstrap on his half-helmet and put his bike into gear. As he neared the intersection where Sheila took a left, he made a right and rode for miles. The current reality didn't matter, as the bike's engine droned in the cool evening air.

## Chapter 7

Dex awoke a few hours later to his blaring television set. He was sprawled on the living room sofa. An empty take-out container and beer bottles littered the area. The television alone illuminated the room. He lay on his stomach staring at the television. The images and words were an unintelligible blur of light and sound which made his head throb.

Dex listened for several seconds while his eyes brought television images into focus. He stirred as a local news reporter spoke about a shooting incident in the northwest section of the city which occurred a brief time earlier. The location alarmed him. He strained to hear the reporter. Somebody fired gunshots at Sheila's tattoo parlor.

"...Not known if someone at Sheila's Exotic Ink was the target. Investigators believe the tattoo parlor was unoccupied at the time...." the reporter said. Dex grabbed what he thought was his cell phone but turned out to be the television remote. "Police are attempting to notify the owner and collect additional information—"

He muted the television and searched for the cell phone. *Is my sister okay?* He searched under the sofa, between the cushions, and behind it next to the wall. Dex fought to control the images of the trio in grave danger troubling his mind. He tried to slow the images down because they made his head throb more than usual.

Dex's effort to find his cell phone was preempted by nature's call. He stumbled into the bathroom and turned on the shower. He relieved himself as he thought of scenarios for the shots fired earlier.

*It doesn't have to involve them at all. It is uptown in the Nation's Capital. Bad stuff happens.*

The hot shower did its job and helped him gain a clearer head. He toweled off and exited the bathroom. *Where is my cell phone?*

The phone chirped and vibrated. He retrieved it from the floor in his bedroom hidden halfway under the bed. It was a text from Greg, "You guys okay?"

Dex wrapped the towel around his waist and tucked the corner to secure it. He began a return text, then thought it better to call.



*I dropped the ball on this one.* He allowed anger with the situation Sheila involved him in to alter his emotions.

Truth is, he didn't know if they were okay. He'd been passed out on the couch. And it made him sick. *What's happening to me?* There were no missed calls, so he scrolled through his call log. No call or text from Sheila, or the caller he learned was Violette.

He tried the unknown number. It went straight to a general, computerized voicemail greeting. He added Violette to his contacts, surprised at his preoccupation with such a mundane task in the midst of chaos.

*All of a sudden I feel sober.* He navigated back to Greg's text and pressed the call button.

"Hey Dex? You guys okay?"

"Greg, I need to use your car."

"I'm out with Wanda and the boys. Take the van at the mission. Do you have a key for it?"

"Thanks," Dex said. "I have a spare for the van in my office. I could use the extra space anyhow."

"How's everything? How are they doing?"

"I'm going uptown to find them. That's why I need your car...the van."

"So, you haven't seen them since—"

"—No, Greg. I messed up."

"More like you're messed up," Greg said. "I'm sorry brother. What can I do?"

"I'll let you know. Once I find them, I'll bring them back here until I figure something out."

"Any ideas?"

“Figure they went back to Exotic Ink for Sheila’s inhaler and her cell phone.”

“And Durango Boys were waiting.”

“Yeah. Foolish. They could have died there.”

“The Lord looks out for babies and fools. You think they’re okay?”

“I hope so brother. I hope the gunplay was unrelated and they got out of there clean.”

“You called them yet?”

“No one answered.”

“The cops?”

“No, Violette’s cell phone.”

“You should call the police, Dex.”

“Let me find them first and show up for them like I should have earlier. If you don’t hear from me by morning, call the police.”

“We shouldn’t wait.” Greg’s voice sounded distant. Dex thought he’d moved the phone away from his face, but knew he was mistaken when Greg cleared his throat into the receiver.

“You’re not a cop anymore,” Greg said. “What would you do if you ran into those Durango guys?”

“Boys.”

“Huh?” Greg’s voice deepened.

“Boys—Durango Boys, Greg.” Dex opened the top drawer of his dresser and pulled out some undergarments and some tube socks.

“Well, I don’t care what they call themselves—”

“—Sorry...my attempt at humor. Bad timing.” Dex uncinched the towel and let it drop to the floor. He stopped to pick it up and almost bumped his head on the bureau in the small space.

“I don’t know how you dealt with this kind of stuff,” Greg said. “But you have been away from that side of your life for a while...add to it your drinking...are you up for this right now?”

*Scary. He knows me well.* Dex rolled the towel and put it into the open hamper next to his bedroom door. “It’s not a good idea to run into law enforcement until we have to. They could be involved.” *I’d be willing to bet they are. Miraldo’s always had some of us in his pocket. That’s what scares me.* Dex pulled down a pair of boxer shorts then sat on the bed’s edge. He leaned toward the dresser and grabbed his unscented aerosol deodorant.

“You believe Roscoe?” Greg asked.

“He’s all we got for now. Plus, I’m considering what he’s not saying...more than what he’s saying.”

“Well, he’s not saying much is he. What if he’s lying?”

“All criminals lie, Greg.” Dex sprayed under each arm setting the can back atop his dresser.

“No but—”

“—You mean what if he’s lying to us intentionally?” Dex grabbed his aftershave from atop the dresser.

“Yeah, like a set up.”

“I’ve entertained the thought.” Dex thought twice about applying aftershave. *Many a man’s fragrance has betrayed his presence.* He set the unused bottle back on the dresser. *Miraldo would love to get back at me for the hurt my undercover investigation put on his organization.*

Greg insisted he pray before they disconnected. He was a dedicated man of faith. Dex didn't resist, and silently assented to Greg's demand. *I do feel better.*

"Call me when know something," Greg said. He hung up the phone.

Dex planned to find the trio as soon as possible. *I'll get with Greg in the morning.* If he did locate them sooner rather than later, he didn't want to startle Wanda and the boys by ringing the house in the middle of the night.

His headache subsided thanks to the hot shower. The outrageous circumstances also contributed to accelerated sobriety .

Dex placed his cell phone back on the dresser and opened the top drawer. In it he lifted some clothing, revealing a black semi-automatic handgun.

He removed his nine-millimeter from the drawer. He took it out of its black leather pancake holster and inspected it. He blew dust, which accumulated on the gun oil, and moved clothing to reveal a small cleaning kit. He wiped the gun down and grabbed a few extra rounds of ammunition. *Just in case.* He already loaded the gun and its extra magazine.

He checked his cell phone again for any messages, trying both Sheila and Violette. There was no answer.

*Should I enlist help now?* The urgency of the situation and his hangover made thinking a chore. *I need to do something. I want to know they're okay.*

Outside the apartment, Dex straddled his motorcycle and took a drag of a cigarette. He tossed it and started the bike. He soon lit another cigarette with trembling hands. He sat there as engine's drone soothed him. He removed his gun from the pancake holster on his hip and ejected the full magazine. He cycled the slide simultaneously and the round in the chamber popped out.

He caught it and reinserted it. He let the slide ride home with a satisfying click. After reinserting the magazine, he re-holstered. He took a drag of the cigarette and his mind replayed what Greg said to him.

*Sheila is my sister. She and her friends got trouble. Means we got trouble.* Dex rode out of the parking lot on his motorcycle into the night.

## Chapter 8

The same evening Ruben Miraldo paced the grimy concrete floor of the cavernous vacant building and adjusted his shirt cuffs. “Tell me what happened there.”

The three stood before Miraldo and Nick, his new chief enforcer and adviser. They inspected the nervous men in the dimly lit space who fidgeted like timid children at a spelling bee.

Miraldo didn't look directly at each of his underlings. Their young faces reminded him of his son, but he was put off by their clothing choices. Ruben Jr. had held an affinity for his father's professional attire. These men dressed like common street thugs and drew unneeded attention. *I detest baggie jeans and over-sized hoodies. Who goes to work wearing gaudy jewelry?* Miraldo thought. *You resemble those Uptown Crew clowns. Nick, I should have let you handle this as soon as I discovered it.*

Miraldo spun on a heel of his Italian loafers and paused to address Nick. “Can you tell them what we discussed on the way here.”

Nick beheld his diminutive boss and met his gaze, then turned to his soldiers. “Well, first we're going to hear you guys.” He cupped his chin and stared at one of the uneasy young men. “Goyo?”

Goyo, the pimple-faced leader, wrung his hands and sighed as a bead of sweat dripped from his brow.

Miraldo sighed. “Goyo, come out with it son. Why haven’t you located Roscoe Mckinnon? Why is he not standing here?”

“We saw him leaving his apartment, right? So, we followed him...he got some breakfast.”

“Why didn’t you grab him then?” Nick said.

Miraldo raised his hand. “Let him finish. Goyo, go on. Then?”

“We didn’t take him because—”

“—Don’t get distracted now.” Miraldo glared at Nick. “Stay with your report on your surveillance. He finishes breakfast, and I want you to pick up from there. Nick’s not going to interrupt you anymore.” Miraldo pursed his lips. “Right Nick?”

Nick said nothing as he and Miraldo stared at each other. Nick bowed as a servant might do in obeisance. Miraldo smirked. *Cute. Everyone’s a little salty I see. Noted.* He folded his arms and rocked on his heels. He removed his tailored suit jacket and handed it to Nick, who draped it over his arm.

Miraldo’s eyes scanned the room and settled on the heavy metal lock and chain wrapped around the push bar of the door they entered. “So, he finishes his sausage and eggs, and...” He walked to the door.

“Then he left and headed to the subway. I told Urbano to follow him.”

Miraldo unwrapped the chain from the door’s push bar. He turned to Goyo, then Urbano. “Okay, so Urbano followed him onto the train? Where did he go next, Urbano?”

“We r-r-rode the Blue Line to L’Enfant P-Plaza. Then he tr-tr-transferred to the Gr-Green

Line. Got off on U Street.” Urbano’s sweaty forehead glistened.

Miraldo hung the open metal lock on the push bar and walked back to the gathering in the center of the room. He held the steel chain and stopped in front of the African American in the group, Cedrick. Miraldo peered up at him. “Wow, son. Are you still growing?”

Cedrick managed a weak grin and swallowed hard. “I—”

Miraldo scrunched his nose and fanned the musty air. “—Lay off the after-shave, will you? I wonder if they smelled you first.” Miraldo turned and walked to Goyo.

Nick chuckled. The men wore plastic smiles. Miraldo stood in front of Goyo and broke the uneasy silence. “Then?”

“Urbano called us,” Goyo said, “Ced and me. We followed Roscoe to the tattoo shop.”

Miraldo was silent and held the chain in both hands. It scraped the stained concrete floor as it swung. “So, you and Ced drove to the tattoo shop to meet Urbano.” Miraldo turned and smiled at Urbano. “Nice job, son.” He regarded Goyo, the two men the same height. “Then, you resolved to watch the place. To see where Roscoe would go next?”

“We went in lookin’ for him and he was gone,” Goyo said. “We went and searched around, then saw the chicks and him leaving and followed ‘em...we lost ‘em, so we went back to the tattoo parlor right after and kept checking. Then, a couple hours later, Urbano saw the truck parked back there. So, we stopped to go in and look for Roscoe.’

“Yep. The Black chick, the owner or whatever, must’ve seen us ‘because she peeked out the window right at us. Then when we came in the front they ran out the back...and Ced saw ‘em driving through the alley...but the door—the deadbolt...they locked it and took the key from the inside...and Ced had to force it—”

“—So, Cedrick defeated the lock, but they had the jump on you so you lost it and shot at

them?” Nick asked. “You parked in front? Why would you do something so dumb?” Nick shook his head. “How about they saw you because you parked too close to the target. Who else saw you dimwits? Amateurs.”

“But these are our amateurs,” Miraldo said. He looked at Nick, who he recently tasked with overseeing the gang’s operations. “Right?”

Nick returned the stare but the men didn’t lock eyes long.

“Zeal,” Miraldo said. “They were enthusiastic. Determined to accomplish the objective. Albeit they were careless—undisciplined.”

Miraldo focused on Goyo. “We take care of our own....” The chain links jangled. “...One way or the other.” He pulled the chain apart with both hands and silenced it. “Continue. Then you searched for the thumb drive? What about the police? They didn’t come to investigate?”

“They checked around...found a couple of bullet holes in the front of the tattoo parlor. I don’t know if they got any shell casings. But they didn’t find nothin’ else. We closed the front door, and you have to jiggle the back door to tell it’s busted. Then they left.” He watched Miraldo. “We went back and tossed the place.” Goyo dropped his head. “We didn’t find no thumb drive, Mr. Miraldo.”

“Any,” Miraldo said. He moved toward Goyo.

“Huh?” Goyo asked.

“Any...we didn’t find any thumb drive.”

Miraldo, holding the chain in a single hand, placed his other arm around Goyo and embraced him. The two men’s heads were inches apart. “So, you have no idea where they are? And you didn’t find my thumb drive either?” Miraldo scowled as he took in the aroma of Goyo’s panic.



Cedrick stepped forward and raised both hands—palms out—as if in surrender. “Boss, they ran out the front when we came in the back and...” His big barrel chest heaved with each word as he blinked back tears.

Miraldo was fond of Cedrick, often called Ced. He worked for him longer than Goyo or Urbano. Had he taken the other path in life, he’d be a decorated cop or combat hero for sure. He wasn’t a leader though, and Miraldo’s son Ruben Jr. learned this and intimidated it to his father.

Miraldo studied Ced’s square jaw. His bottom lip quivered like paper fluttering in front of an oscillating fan. The paper would buzz in the torrent of the fan like a hummingbird’s wings. *Big man, big heart.* Several years ago his son, frustrated but amused by Cedrick, said, “He stood in line twice when God was handing out heart, heck, maybe even three times.”

“That’s why he missed out on brains?” Miraldo Sr. asked.

“Nope. When they were passing out brains, he thought they said trains.”

“Trains?”

“Yep. He asked for a slow one.” How they’d laughed. *Maybe Goyo was following Ced when God handed out attributes.* Pigeon’s wings fluttered in the rafters of the warehouse, stirring Miraldo in the quiet. He’d been staring at Ced for several seconds, and everyone’s gaze was now expectantly fixed on him. *I miss you, son.*

The awkward embrace continued.

Reflecting on the pain of his loss often aroused misplaced anger. But under these circumstances he found his displeasure—and their discomfort—appropriate. *And satisfying.*

“Enough Ced,” Nick said. “You were made. They ran because they saw you and, however it went down you botched it and now we have to locate Roscoe again because of it.”

Miraldo and Goyo's foreheads now touched, and the young man's fear was palpable. He'd experienced terror many times. The sweat glands produce a pungent, sulfurous smell.

*Justice before mercy young man.*

Miraldo punched Goyo several times in the abdomen, and when he doubled over wrapped the chain around his neck and pulled.

Urbano froze as Cedrick pleaded again. "Boss...."

Miraldo released his grip. He applied enough pressure for the desired effect. Goyo dropped like discarded garbage pitched down a trash chute. He attempted to gulp the moldy air as he clutched his abdomen.

Miraldo focused on Cedrick and addressed him and Urbano. "Go help him. Get that thing off his neck before he passes out."

Urbano and Cedrick rushed to Goyo. Cedrick knelt on the dingy floor next to Goyo while he and Urbano loosened the chain so he could breathe.

Goyo labored to exhale and winced as Cedrick and Urbano sat him upright. Cedrick looked at Nick and Miraldo and shook his head. His action caught Miraldo's attention as Nick helped him into his custom suit jacket.

"Ced, you're mad," Miraldo said. "You've been in my employ long enough to understand mistakes have consequences. Consider this strike one fellas. But I must admit, I get so pissed sometimes I forget the count so...don't upset me again."

Miraldo tugged on his cuffs to adjust his shirt. "You can probably tell, gentlemen, it's important we find Roscoe. I want my thumb drive. So, now Nick's in charge of this task." His large confidant was handsome on the outside and savage on the inside. He smiled. "Nick?"

“Here’s what’s happening,” Nick said, “You’re going to clean Goyo up, get your heads right, and go back to the tattoo parlor. Search it again, then sit on it. If Roscoe went back, he must have been looking for something he stashed, right? I’ll meet you there. Got it?”

“Oh, and bring me Goyo’s sidearm,” Miraldo said. “Find him a replacement—his may be useful.”

The three men nodded as Miraldo and Nick turned and headed to the door.

Nick held the warped metal door for Miraldo as he looked over his shoulder. Cedrick and Urbano helped Goyo to his feet.

Nick followed Miraldo along a rusty chain-link fence to his luxury sedan. He shuffled ahead and opened the rear passenger door. He followed his boss into the car.

“Thoughts?” Ruben Miraldo asked. “But, I’m sure you’d consider the same play.”

“I follow you. You aim to give the law a reason to turn up the heat on Roscoe.”

“Goyo’s blunder can facilitate that. A page right out of you and your colleagues’ book, right?”

“Got it. You should’ve broke something...his arm.” Nick leaned forward to address the driver, “Take me back to my car first, then Mr. Miraldo to his office.” The solemn man nodded, and his flat driver’s cap revealed gray-streaked blonde hair.

“Goyo’s a good soldier. I wanted to get their attention.” Miraldo said.

“Expendable.”

“You’re a monster,” Miraldo laughed. His driver, Henri, glanced at him in the rear-view mirror and flashed a thin smile.

“You’re the one choking him with a rusty chain,” Nick said.

“Motivation. I improvise, what can I say. No worse than what you spooks do and—”

Nick’s posture stiffened. “—and it’s time we took point.”

“Take it easy. This will be handled correctly.”

“It will now that I’m in charge, Ruben. Besides, there’s no reason this has to unfold like it did the last time our ‘friends’ got nervous...especially if you step aside while I do what needs to be done.” Nick winked.

Miraldo bristled. “That’s what worries me. Things getting out of hand....” He turned to the window and cleared his throat. “People get nervous. I miss my boy.”

“You do. Roscoe was always solid, but something happened to him.”

“Yeah. Always loyal to my son. I’ll give him that.”

“He risked his life to protect Ruben Jr. the night he died.”

A city bus roared past as Henri turned out of the industrial area. “Somebody got to him.” Its wheels dispersed debris stirred by its locomotion and spat it into the air.

“I don’t get it,” Nick said. “What made him take it? He’d have to know how much trouble it’d cause.”

“Simplest answer? He was turned—recruited.”

“Who? How’d he find it? I’m sure it wasn’t in the open.”

“You’re right.”

“Snooping. Is he a cop? Undercover? Like Dex Wing? An operative?”

“No, not a cop. My son vouched for him. An informant? Maybe. Question is, who turned him?” Miraldo scratched his temple. “How’d they find it? And when?”

“Dex Wing?” Nick asked.

“He’s retired. Washed up, miserable drunk last I heard. But he was still on the force

snooping around here at the time. Possible. I'm thinking it could be one of our local officials we felt out for their cooperation."

"Felt out?" Nick laughed. "Cute way to put it. You mean extortion."

Henri eyed Miraldo from the rear view and smiled. *Yes, my friend, we have the goods on this region*, Miraldo thought.

"Well, if Dex Wing knew where the thumb drive was...regardless of whether he gleaned what information it held, why didn't he take it when he infiltrated back then? If he has any involvement...which I doubt...I'm sure he would have considered it leverage."

"I tend to agree. If Dex Wing plays any role, and any clue what's on the thumb drive, he knows this...." Miraldo patted Nick's leg. "...Some things are better left alone."

"Seems you'll never be free of him. Some way he always creeps back in the mix."

"Speaking of which, I believe his sister's going to contact him. So, get eyes on him. Let him lead us to them."

"In the works as we speak...actually, it's been in the works."

Miraldo smiled. "Good."

## Chapter 9

Dex had swapped his Harley for the church van and headed toward Sheila's Exotic Ink. *Good*, he thought. There's less foot and vehicle traffic. People are usually out for bad reasons at this hour. *And they see things*. The next best thing to finding the trio was locating an eyewitness to the melee earlier.

His head still ached. He mulled over scenarios. *Sheila needed her inhaler and wanted to get her cell phone. Roscoe didn't protest so he could look for whatever it was he*

*stole...something small enough to conceal.*

Dex checked the time and it was almost midnight. *It's wise to be careful.* Neither cop nor criminal welcomed unexpected visitors unannounced at odd hours.

He passed Sheila's tattoo parlor. Nothing seemed suspicious. The summer months brewed trouble, but in the cooler seasons there was often a lull in activity. *Still better to keep one eye open.*

Dex parked a block from the tattoo parlor. *No need to stand out. I can assess the area. I wonder if Roscoe stashed whatever he stole there? If Miraldo has surveillance here, that would be the reason.*

Dex crossed the street onto the same block as his sister's tattoo parlor. The magenta hue from the neon business sign reflected off nearby parked cars. He shoved his hands into the deep pockets of his worn pea coat and located his flashlight, but something was missing.

His small satchel with his lock picking tools was in the coat pocket, but his keys weren't. He kept a spare to the tattoo parlor, since he'd helped his sister secure the lease. He searched all his pockets. He had put his wallet, keys, cigarettes, and cell phone atop one of the van's rear wheels. He left the key. Then he saw something he missed on his drive by.

Light flickered in a vehicle parked a few doors from the tattoo parlor. Then the spark became the orange glow of a cigarette. He stood still for several seconds.

Once sure no one saw him, he returned to the van. Sweat formed on his brow. *Amateur move on my part. But why are these clowns sitting out in the open?* He took the key to the tattoo parlor from his keyring and placed it back on the tire. *Amateur move on your part.* He hoped it was because they hadn't found the trio. Whatever Roscoe stole was either on him or stashed in

there. Miraldo ordered these guys to find it.

He stood near the van and contemplated whether he should go back to the parlor. Ambient sound pierced his head like needles jabbed into a pincushion. He considered it a victory to persevere despite lack of concentration from his hangover. *Should I risk a run-in with these guys right now?*

He retrieved his cell phone. He got in the passenger seat and made sure he turned it off. He covered it with his open coat to shield its backlight.

There were two missed calls and a text message from Violette. He fumbled with his phone: “We’re safe. Call me. Sheila.” A single tear let loose and trickled down his face.

His fingers trembled as he pressed the call button. “Thank you, Lord.”

“Hey,” Sheila said.

Dex exhaled the breath trapped in his lungs at the sound of his sister’s raspy voice.

*We should put our nonsense feud behind us.* “I’m glad you’re okay. Were you at the shop? What happened there?”

“Yeah, got my inhaler but not my phone.”

*Why are you whispering?* “Something wrong?”

“It’s Roscoe—he’s resting now...but he got shot.”

“Shot? Where?”

“His side—near his hip—but it looks like it went straight through.”

“How’s he feeling? Has he lost consciousness? Much pain?”

“You can tell it hurts. But it’s better—he’s asleep now. Violette is too. We’re all exhausted.”

“Keep an eye on him. Could be worse than it seems—or he feels right now. Let’s hope it’s a flesh wound.”

“He’s snoring right now. We were leaving when they rushed in the front door, I must’ve left it open. They had been searching—tearing up my place. It’s a mess. We got out of there. That double keyed deadbolt you put on that door bought us some time. We heard shots as we got to my car. Roscoe didn’t realize he got hit until we drove off.”

“What were they driving? Same guys from earlier?”

“Yeah. Big Tahoe or something...”

“I think they’re still here. Guess is they couldn’t find whatever he stole. They want to make sure you don’t double back—”

“—it’s a thumb drive, Dex.”

“Thumb drive?”

“Roscoe took it from Miraldo’s office.”

“That could be anywhere in there. Did you—”

“—He doesn’t have it. But he was in the break room, so that’s the place he could have hid it.”

“He didn’t make it back there when you went back?”

“Didn’t have time. As soon as we went in, I went to my cubicle for my inhaler. Violette and him were with me. Before I could grab my phone, they heard us. We didn’t get any farther. We ran to my car...you think it’s still in there?”

“Maybe the storage spot he hid in. You put the wallboard back? It’s still hidden...right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Where are you?”



“A motel uptown. I’ll text you the address.”

“Wait there. Don’t leave the room. Watch him close. If he gets worse, call an ambulance. I’m going to try and search the storage space for the thumb drive, then I want to sit on these guys outside your shop for a while.”

“Why?”

“Maybe I recognize one. Maybe follow them to gather any useful info. You guys are all right there for now as long as Roscoe can manage until morning. Then we’ll see about getting him checked medical attention. How’s Violette?”

“A mess. But she’s sleeping now.”

*This whole situation is a mess.* “Get some rest. I’ll come by in the morning unless anything changes.”

“What are we going to do?”

He sat silent several seconds. “I’m good at messes. If I’m not making one, I’m cleaning one. Right?”

Dex placed his cell phone back and walked toward the tattoo parlor. Roscoe may have stumbled on something like a thumb drive. Miraldo was a businessman and a criminal. He kept detailed records. Anything with decent margins—drugs, prostitution, and gambling—he explored. *It could finish the job I started when I infiltrated them.*

Dex crossed the street onto Sheila’s block. He again saw the magenta hue of the neon sign. The SUV sat beyond the cars illuminated by the advertisement. He concealed himself by a huge oak tree whose mammoth roots protruded through both earth and the concrete sidewalk.

Dex stayed motionless half a block away but didn’t pause long. Tinted windows obscured

the Durango Boys. *It's not a good idea to risk discovery for a plate number.* He'd studied enough local registration plates to discern they were District of Columbia plates though. It wasn't long ago he was undercover in Miraldo's organization.

The fruitful investigation exposed some who profited from participation in illegal activity. *Crime doesn't occur in a vacuum.* People from all walks of life were involved, and he was in a position to know. There were upstanding businesspeople, local politicians, judges, lawyers, and Police Officers among them. *If that kind of stuff were on the thumb drive it would explain why Miraldo's top two lieutenants went to prison, but he wasn't convicted of any crime. And why the information I got when I was inside failed to take them out for good. People covering their sins. It also means he'll kill anyone to maintain leverage. Roscoe swept them into this mess. And I'm not sure they're aware how much danger is involved.*

Sheila told Dex she parked a couple of blocks from the motel. She added they paid with her parlor's petty cash. *Smart thinking, considering the circumstances.* He walked back to the corner where he entered the block and headed to the alley behind the tattoo parlor. Her block consisted of a dry cleaner's, hair salon, a local mini-market, and a vacant lot.

As Dex rounded the fenced yard of the row house near the alley entrance, a rusty porch swing creaked. He spied a wiry figure who sat there alone in the dim porch light. He continued and waved to the man. Dex paused. "Nippy out tonight."

The old man wore a sleeveless white tee shirt and a dark knit cap, and perhaps the wiry figure clothed himself for the season from the waist down. He didn't flinch and stared at Dex. A wry smile formed on his weathered face. "It ain't cold yet. Wait 'till January." The man stood and peered down at Dex.

“Careful taking shortcuts.” The man pointed down the alley. “Not safe ‘round here no more, especially at night.”

Dex smiled. “Appreciate the concern. Checking on my sister’s place. There was some shooting today.”

The old man scratched his ear. “They always shooting ‘round here.”

Dex stuffed his hands in his pockets and continued down the alley. *I’ll look for Sheila’s cell phone. She told me the Durango Boys heard them enter the shop. No one thoroughly searched. They barely got inside when the Durango Boys rushed them from the break room. At least she got her inhaler.*

Dex walked to the door, and it appeared intact. The break room was too dark to spy through either the door or the window next to it. The police wouldn’t have noticed the damaged door by a visual inspection. *They were probably too busy looking for the obvious—shell casings, bullet holes, and bodies—so they could clear and head on to the next call.*

He stood between the screen door and the wooden entrance. He listened for movement. *I’m glad they’re okay.* He pushed on the wooden door. On the second try, the door opened slightly. A couple of well-placed boots successfully dislodged the old door from the frame. *I’ll meet them in the morning, then take them to a safer place.* The well-placed kicks rendered both the standard key set, and the double keyed deadbolt inoperable. *Maybe even get someone to assess Roscoe’s wound.* He’d have to search by memory because he couldn’t risk using any light. *I need to take care and leave the door intact...may have to come back.* A faint noise behind him made the hairs on his neck tingle. He turned and a flashlight beam blinded him.

“You ain’t got no light?” a male voice asked. He lowered his flashlight.

Dex didn't get the beam in his eyes. He blinked a few times and scanned the alley. A knit cap was perched on the head of the wiry framed old man up the block.

"Could you turn it off?" Dex asked. *We'd better get out of here. Can't risk if those clowns out front saw his flashlight.*

The man wore an old Army jacket and blue jeans. "So, this your sister's place. The tattoo shop?"

Dex pulled the broken door closed. It appeared to be latched. "Yes, it is."

When he turned in the tight space, he kicked plastic crates stacked by the door. They toppled, and Dex saw the unmistakable glint of a firearm. The nickel plated, semi-automatic handgun had been placed there. *That's Roscoe's gun. I won't want to alarm this old man. He might be armed, and jumpy.* Dex placed the crates over the weapon once more. *It'll be alright there for a while.*

He walked past the old man, headed back the way he came. "I'm done here. I'll walk you back home."

"You don't want to leave that way."

Dex looked at the man.

"Let's go around the next block. I own a vacant building other end of this alley." The man peeped in both directions down the dimly lit alley. "Somebody's following you."

"Following me?"

The old man shuffled away. "They saw me talking to you though, and they left."

As the two neared the alley's end, the man cut left to the rear of a two-story apartment building and produced a key. "Something told me to come check on you." He fumbled with the lock on the door. "Y'all in some kind of trouble? Your sister and you?"

“No, I’m checking on her place....” Dex followed the man into a narrow hallway into the first floor. “Because of that commotion earlier.”

The old man navigated the darkness and turned on a light. The bulb’s wattage was excessive. “Here you come ‘round right past my door, heading’ for trouble without a plan?” He stood in the doorway of a small utility closet and squinted, one hand over his brow. “Why you come out here in the dark with no light? The wife always says God works in mysterious ways. Wasn’t for me—”

Dex pulled his flashlight from his pocket, unsure if the man could see it. “—I have a flashlight too.”

“Then use it. Foolishness.”

“The Lord watches out for babies and fools,” Dex said. *I must’ve just heard that.*

“Well, you ain’t no baby.” The man chuckled and turned the light off again, as bright light filled the crevices and small window of the door leading to the alley.

A vehicle had entered. Dex went to the door. The black SUV stop at Sheila’s tattoo parlor. He motioned the man to look. “See if you can make out anything about whoever gets out of this truck.”

Two figures exited the passenger side and met the third. “Is this who you saw following me?” It was too dark to identify anyone. “Recognize the truck?”

The old man sighed. “No, not them.”

“Not them? You’ve seen that truck before?”

“Been around the last couple of days. But not them.” The man smirked. “Those guys right there are gangsters. The guy followed you was a police.”

“A cop? How you figure?”

The old man folded his arms. “He was White. And there’s two reasons a White man is walking ‘round here this time of morning. He’s a junkie or a police.” The man threw his hands up. “And he wasn’t no junkie.”

The two watched the figures get back into the SUV and drive down the alley.

“What’s your name?” Dex asked. “I’m Dex Wing.”

“Elmer—Hughes.” He walked to his utility closet and turned off the light as he turned on his flashlight. “I’ll let you out the front.”

“Thank you for this, Elmer.”

The two men stopped at the front door. They shook hands.

“Look, I’m a private investigator,” Dex said. “I don’t have a card, but can I write down a way to contact me? In case you remember something ...or see something else you figure I might be interested in?”

Elmer frowned. “You can leave it, but I ain’t makin’ no promises.” He walked back to his utility closet. “Something told me to check on you, God working in mysterious ways and all.” He mussed the shelves for several seconds. “But I stay out of people’s business. I keep to myself.” He returned with a pencil and a torn corner from a Chinese Restaurant menu.

Dex scribbled his cell phone number on the ripped slip of paper. “I might have a few questions to ask you later.”

“I believe I done told you all I’m fixin’ to tell you.”

“I understand Mr. Hughes.”

“Elmer,” he smiled. “Private investigator? If I had to guess, I take you for the man.”

“I used to be a cop.” Dex grinned as the two stepped out onto the sidewalk. “I’m going to take the long way.”

Elmer nodded. “Now, that sounds like somthin’ a police would do.” He chuckled.

“Alright.”

Dex turned back to him. “So, you thought you saw a cop following a cop?”

“Now, that’s a dumb question—I might be wrong about the police thing, but I know I saw two fools.” Elmer laughed. “Babies got more sense than you two.”

Dex smiled, as he recalled Greg said it to him. *Yes, the Lord watches out for babies and fools. I sure need some looking out for us now.*

As Dex walked the dark streets back to the van, he pondered the secrets the thumb drive held. People other than the Durango Boys could be interested in what Roscoe took. *Was the man Elmer saw following me a Durango Boy after all? Could be since the crew went on a vehicle patrol minutes later, preventing me from searching the break room. I must locate and find out what’s on the thumb drive.*

He crossed an intersection two blocks beyond his parking spot. *Are they still driving around?* His eyes dashed left and right and he was convinced the lengthy route to the van would reveal anyone who followed. *Are they looking for me? Did they hear me, or see Elmer’s flashlight? I need to check the hidden storage space in the break room.*

The thumb drive was the leverage needed to bargain with Miraldo. Though it was after his undercover assignment within his criminal organization terminated, Ruben Jr.’s murder was rumored to be connected to compromised information. *Or so the story goes. He’s bitter about the loss of his son...I’m bitter about the loss of my Eva.*

Dex made his fourth left turn, encircling the perimeter of the area for any movement, then crept toward the van. *Who was the other guy following me? Elmer was certain the man following me was not with the Durango Boys watching the tattoo parlor.* Anyone who's grown up in a crime riddled neighborhood with constant police presence became adept at recognizing plainclothes cops. He turned and looked several seconds before he approached the van. *Elmer thinks he was a cop.*

Dex was intrigued, and noted what Elmer said. "He's a junkie or a police—and he wasn't no junkie."

He crossed the intersection that would place him on the street he parked on. He would pass Elmer's house again, this time headed in the other direction and opposite side of the street.

Dex would often return to reinterview victims and witnesses. *The man who was following me might return to question Elmer and provide clues to his identity.* Elmer may remember something. It wasn't uncommon to later recall additional details about an incident. *I'll be back to talk Mr. Elmer Hughes.*

## Chapter 10

Dex arrived back at the van. *If I can get out of here clean, I could use a meal and a nap.* He drove aimlessly for a while to determine if someone followed; varying speed, right turns in succession, sudden stops. Then wait, and repeat. *These guys have already engaged in gun play, and I want to avoid leading them right to the trio.* Miraldo seemed intent to obtain his thumb drive, even if it meant disturbing the recent peace in the streets.

Traffic was light. *Do not go to the motel now. Can't risk carelessness.* He fought the urge to rush, in case his surveillance countermeasures were rusty. *Since Roscoe is stable, I have the*



*time.*

Dex stopped at a 24-hour gas station near the mission, and bought two chili cheese dogs, chips, and a soda. His empty stomach rejoiced and the processed food never tasted so delightful.

As he wiped the last crumbs from his stubble, he called Violette's cell phone.

Sheila answered on his second try. "Hello?"

"Sorry to wake you. Checking in. How's everything?"

"Everyone's still sleeping," she said.

"Any unusual activity outside the room?"

"No."

"And you guys haven't left the room?"

"Nope."

*She's irritated.* "Okay, don't leave—"

"Dex—"

"Okay—okay. I'll be there as soon as I can. Definitely by check out."

Dex ended the call and refueled the van. His trip consumed a quarter tank. Minutes later his cell phone rang, and he retrieved it from the van's center console. Greg's name and number illuminated the screen.

"Morning. How'd it go? Did you find them?" Greg asked.

*Should I tell him?* "They're fine...." Dex sighed. "They shot Roscoe—but he's okay.

Look, I'm at the mission. I could use the van again...." *Okay, I told him. Here it comes. It'll take it a moment to register...*

"Sure. I'm taking the boys to school, then I'll be right—what did you say?"

...*there it is*. Dex turned the ignition key and the van sputtered to life. “It’s under control. One of Miraldo’s thugs shot Roscoe yesterday outside the tattoo parlor. It’s a flesh wound...he’s resting.”

“Under control? My Lord. Well, he needs a doctor—”

“—I’m going there soon. I’ll get him checked out, but we have to be careful.”

“What do you mean?” Greg asked.

“I think the police might be involved.”

“Cops?”

Dex eased the van into sparse traffic. “And if Roscoe appears in an emergency room with a gunshot wound, medical staff will report the injury to the police. And if there are crooked authorities present in bed with Miraldo, it could be a bad move.” Dex stopped before he pulled onto the road. “This is about a stolen thumb drive, Greg. That’s what he took.”

“A thumb drive?”

“Yeah, and who knows what’s on it. I figure it’s dirt on a lot of people related to Miraldo and his Durango Boys.”

“Miraldo’s blackmailing cops?”

“At least...and if he is they’d kill to get their drive. You think we should go to the police, but for right now....”

“I get it. I don’t like it, but I get it. So, what’s next?” Greg asked.

“I didn’t get a chance to look for the thumb drive...I got out of there when a man who lives in the neighborhood warned me someone was following me. He told me it was a White man...a cop.”

“Cop? What do you think?”

Dex checked his rear-view mirror. He scanned the lanes ahead and behind. “I don’t know. It was dark. He’s old. But he’s sure it wasn’t Miraldo’s Durango Boys.”

“Interesting.”

“Yeah, and I need to get back in the tattoo parlor and check one spot where I believe the thumb drive could be.”

“Maybe those thugs found it?” Greg asked.

“For all our sakes, let’s hope not. The drive may be the only leverage we have. Negotiate with Miraldo for its return in exchange for him backing off. But first we need to figure out what’s on it. I’m afraid possession of the thing could put us in more danger.”

“You said we. Well, praise God. Seems you’re in all the way. Your sister and her friends could use your help.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“I’ll be in as soon as I drop off the boys.”

“Alright,” Dex said, “We’ll talk then, if I’m still here.”

“If not, may the Lord be with you all.”

Dex pulled into the church mission’s rear parking lot an hour before daybreak. He planned to take a nap. Roscoe needed medical attention. The bullet missed vital organs and there were no broken bones. Sheila and Violette treated his wound, but infection without antibiotics remained a possibility.

He scrolled through his phone. He found the entry he wanted, then checked the time. *No one would be at the Very Well Urgent Clinic yet.* He put his phone away. He’d have to get Roscoe some medical care under an assumed name or seek discreet help from an associate who

owed him a favor—Dr. Colleen Bowler.

He exited the van. Several years ago, Dr. Bowler came to the attention of law enforcement when a disgruntled employee decided to blackmail her. She had a drug problem. He solved her extortion problem and let her addiction problem ride. *Sometimes there are greater matters.* She was grateful he enabled her to save her career. *Now she can show me some gratitude.*

He fished out his cigarettes. There were two left. *Surprised I haven't smoked in hours.* He chain-smoked when anxious. Greg told him alcohol and tobacco on church grounds made it feel like a dive bar instead of a mission. *He's right. I need to do better.* He stood near the building and lit a cigarette. He turned his collar up and shoved his other hand in his pocket, defiant of the chill. *Were those squealing car brakes?* He held silent. Nothing else. *Must have been my imagination.*

Elmer's revelation alarmed him. *Someone watched me. Another player in this? And I didn't make him? I'm more embarrassed than disturbed...with the experience I possess.* Frost glazed foliage, and he quickened his pace in the crisp morning air.

Several boxes of donations were on the loading dock. *I should move them inside.* He walked to the dock as he finished his cigarette. *Elmer's revelation makes me nervous.* He walked up the worn stairs and used his key on the door. The dock's clutter of rusty shopping carts packed with sundry items cramped him in the space. People left molded, moth-eaten clothing, ancient electronics, and a variety of soiled items rehabilitation wouldn't fix. He pulled the door open and sidestepped to retrieve the first box when a large figure bounded the stairs into the narrow space.

He glimpsed a shadow. The figure cornered him, and it ignited his fight or flight response. He drew his Beretta and spun to confront his visitor. He assumed a defensive stance and two-handed shooter's grip.

Chris raised both hands and dropped to a knee. "Whoa, it's me! It's Chris Fleming!"

Dex lowered his weapon. "You can't surprise people."

Chris's eyes widened. "I thought you were gonna shoot me and—"

Dex slid his gun back into its pancake holster. "—What are you doing here?"

Chris swept his hand across his stubbled jawline. "I was getting the kids' breakfast before school. I passed the van when it turned in here." He rubbed his red eyes. "After I picked up the food, I thought I'd check to see if it was you 'cause...I wanted to thank you. Lindy? She placed us all together in temporary housing...until I get on my feet."

"It was me all right, and you're welcome. But, how about saying something when you pop in, and not scaring the hell out of me."

The two men moved the donations indoors so volunteers could sort them.

"I owe you an apology for drawing my weapon on you," Dex said, "I'm sorry."

"Thanks, Mr. Wing."

"Call me Dex. Everybody else does."

Chris nodded. Dex locked the door, and the two descended the loading dock stairs and walked into the parking lot. Dawn's pink hue crested the horizon.

"You're not a cop anymore, right?" Chris asked.

"Retired, but I still have a permit to carry." Dex fished in his pocket for his last cigarette. "I have a private investigator's license."

"Well, I'm looking for a job. Could you use some help? An apprentice? Chris perked up.

A P. I. in training?”

Dex lit his cigarette. “I need to renew my license.”

“Man, I’d love to be a P.I. I bet you do all kinds of cool stuff, don’t you?”

Dex grinned. “You were 82nd Airborne. You know the phrase ‘hurry up and wait’ right?”

Chris laughed. “Yep. Too familiar.”

“It also applies to law enforcement...and P. I. work.” Dex put out his cigarette. He walked toward the side door near his office. “Come inside a second.”

Chris followed, and the two entered the building.

“The life of Private Investigators is not all car chases, disguises, and close calls,” Dex said. “It’s information retrieval—archives, public records, databases—hours of surveillance for seconds of video or one photograph—pretty boring stuff.”

Dex turned on the office light and sat at his desk.

Chris lingered in the doorway. “I need a job, and if you need an apprentice, I’m interested. I can be useful. Don’t think I forgot about the money you lent me.”

Dex opened his center desk drawer where he kept a crayon box stuffed with petty cash. “I’ll keep it in mind. But if you remember, it wasn’t a loan. I told you to pay it forward.” He removed a stack of the cash and let the cardboard lid drop closed. “It’s only been a day or so, but how’s the job search going?”

“I filled out a couple of applications so far, but no calls yet.”

Dex peeled a few bills—four Tens and ten Ones—and put the rest away. “Hang in there. But, in the meantime....” He reached across his desk toward Chris with the cash. “...A little something.”

Chris hesitated. “I-I don’t know what to say. Thanks.”

Dex closed his desk drawer. “You could use a little extra cash.” He stood. “You handle yourself well, the way you surprised me and all. I bet if you’d have gotten closer to me, I’d have been in trouble.”

Chris shrugged his shoulders. “It’s what we did...over there.”

“Iraq? Afghanistan?”

“Afghanistan.” Chris bit his lip and glanced out of the window. “Urban warfare is brutal.”

Dex said nothing.

“You don’t handle yourself bad for an old—older man,” Chris said.

“Thanks for correcting that...slip up.” Dex chuckled. “You from here?”

“My wife is. Me...North Carolina. We moved here a month ago. I was looking for work.”

“It’s been hard, huh?”

Chris folded his arms. “I guess my military training doesn’t cut it. I’m not even qualified to stock shelves or run a fast-food drive-thru.”

“So, I guess your specialized experience—counterinsurgency, door breeches, house-to-house skirmishes—not needed in the civilian world. You ever thought about contracting—you know—with private security firms?”

Chris raised an eyebrow. “I’m impressed Mr. Wing.”

Dex smirked. “My father is Mr. Wing, Chris. Call me Dex.”

Chris nodded and smiled. “Dex it is.”

“So, ever consider the private security gigs?” Dex asked. “Did you ever look into that.

I've heard it pays well."

"I thought about it, but my wife won't have it. I've spent enough time away. No more deployments...even though it does pay decent money."

The side exit door opened, revealed a flash of natural light, then shut. Both men remained silent as footfalls closed the distance to the office door. Lindy paused in the doorway and threw up a hand. "Hey." She smiled and revealed her dimples. She held a large paper cup with her other hand. "I'm so sorry y'all." She looked at Dex. "I wish you'd have let me know you'd be here early 'cuz I would have brought you coffee...other than this big 'un of mine."

"No worries, Lindy," Dex said. "I took care of the donations on the loading dock. Did you see?"

She nodded. "I did." She waved again as she turned and continued down the hallway. "Thanks."

"No problem," Dex said.

Chris stared at the empty doorway.

"You said your wife has relatives here, right? You couldn't stay with them...until you get on your feet?"

"Shayla doesn't get along with her family—her Mom's the only one left...they're too much alike."

"Like my sister and I, I'll bet. Your Shayla and my Sheila."

Chris chuckled.

"With all this you have a lot on you," Dex said. "Is that how the booze got out of hand?"

"It's not out of hand—"



“—It takes one to know one, son.” *I also tell myself daily young man.* “Sure? Not many recreational drinkers partake this early, like you did the other day. Again—today, your eyes are red. You haven’t shaved.” *I want a drink right now.* Dex grabbed his shoulder and looked him in the eye. “Chris, I didn’t mean to upset you, but I’m keeping it real, man.”

The two walked into the hallway.

“I appreciate you stopping. I’ll—we’ll—all be praying you get back on your feet.” *Did I say that? It’s good to say it...and mean it.*

Chris walked to the exit, then turned. “You sure there’s not anything I can do here? I mean, I ought to do something...you helping me with the cash and all.”

“We’ll see. But right now, I have to pee. Then, I need a quick nap.”

Chris headed toward the side door. “Yeah, I’m going to hit some stores today and fill out applications.”

Dex stopped short of the bathroom. “I tell you what. Stop back here at lunchtime, and Lindy will have something for you to do. Should take a couple of hours...for the next few days at least, if it’ll make you feel better. Keep you busy. Deal?”

“You bet.” Chris pumped a fist in the air and jogged out the door.

Minutes later Dex exited the bathroom as the side entry swung open and Greg’s round frame filled the doorway. A discarded gum wrapper blew into the opening, and he followed. He entered holding an armful of flimsy shopping bags. Good Samaritans had filled them with non-perishable donations.

Dex pointed at the other non-perishables stacked on the pallet near his office. “Set it right

there.” *Greg, always the tireless soul.*

Greg put the bag on the pallet and pulled his jacket down over his belly. “I see you’ve joined the faithful bunch this morning but seems you’ve hardly the time right now with everything that’s going on.”

The walls thumped in the pantry down the hall as Lindy moved and stacked items.

“How’s Roscoe?” Greg asked.

The smell of brewed coffee wafted into Dex’s nostrils. “I spoke to Sheila a few minutes ago. He was still asleep.” His stomach danced to the tune of chili, cheese, chips, soda, and mystery-hot-dog-meat.

“You sure it’s a flesh wound?”

“More convinced now. The greatest danger could be infection.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Greg shuffled toward Dex. A shoe squeaked on the scuffed floor. “You mentioned it could be dangerous to walk into an emergency room.”

Dex crumpled the course paper towel with which he dried his hands. “I have something in mind.”

“Something in mind?”

He dropped it in the nearby wastebasket. “I mean, I know someone—they owe me a favor.”

“Are they trained—”

Dex frowned.

“—a real doctor, Greg.” He dropped his head as Greg sighed. “Sorry,” Dex said. “I’m—”

“—You going to be all right? Really? Can you deal with this right now?” Greg asked.

“No choice.”

“You plan to get them out of the city, right? Where are you guys going to go?”

“I’m still working on it. Probably a rural motel.”

“I was thinking of this property we—the church owns—out on Route 5 in the country.

It’s a vacant farmhouse on a couple of acres.”

“Secluded. It’s an option...where is it?”

“I’ll text you the address. It’s on GPS. Now, there’s no running water or electric...and there’s a tree down on a faded-yellow real estate sign near the gate. That’ll help you know you’re in the right spot. Gets pretty dark out there.”

“Thanks. You don’t have to do this.” *Greg is a loyal friend to put himself out there for me—us—without hesitation.* “If we visit the farmhouse, we’ll make do.”

“Let me get the keys. They’re in my office.” Greg paused. “Oh—the driveway has a cattle gate. I’m sure I left it unlocked, but you could squeeze around it...there’s a gap in the fence.”

“Then I guess it’s doing a lot of good.”

“Well, if you don’t hug the gate, you’ll end up in a drainage ditch— there’s a storm culvert under the driveway.”

*The farmhouse might not be a bad place to go.*

Greg left. He then went to the pantry. *I need a cup of Lindy’s coffee.* His stomach churned as he asked her to give Chris some busy work when he comes. *I hope she didn’t hear that.* He poured himself a cup and got out of there before his belly groaned. *I’ll need to visit the bathroom again.*

Greg returned several minutes later as Dex exited the bathroom a second time.

“Chili Dogs,” Dex said. He patted his stomach and sipped his coffee.

Greg shook his head and grinned. “I saw Chris leaving.”

“Yeah, he popped in and surprised me.”

“I guess you heard we placed him and his family in temporary housing,” Greg said.

“Yeah, he told me. You might see him around a few days. I spoke with Lindy about finding him some things to do until he finds work. I’ll cover his wage.”

“God bless you, Dex. You’re a good man.” Greg nodded and smiled.

*Then how come I don’t feel like a good man?*

“How was he this morning?” Greg asked.

“How do you mean?”

“Had Chris been drinking again?”

“Don’t think so. I don’t get the impression the kid’s an alcoholic.”

“Kid?” Greg laughed. “You’re making me feel old.”

“Do you get the impression you are?”

“Old? I sure feel old, Greg.” Dex tilted his head.

Greg gave Dex the keys to the farmhouse. “Remember, there’s a tree down,” Greg said.

“Yeah, and the faded-yellow sign.”

Greg nodded, then stretched out both hands to grab Dex’s hands. “Let’s have a word of prayer for God’s wisdom and protection.”

Dex grabbed his dear friend’s hands and bowed his head. *We sure need it They’re tucked away right now. But once we start moving....*

## Chapter 11

Everything within Dex dissuaded him, but he couldn't help stopping at a familiar spot. He exited the highway, which fed one of the main arteries into the city. *I'm not a drunk*, he thought. *Chris is not a drunk. We're fond of drinking.* Dex craved the numb, glazed feeling alcohol brought him. Under the influence bad memories were obscured—somehow irretrievable. *Good for me.*

He thought of Eva constantly, but his total ineptitude thus far with the trio has preempted regular broadcasting. The pain of her loss haunted his sober self. He'd have to admit his heart wasn't in this mess Sheila laid at his feet. *Who am I fooling? I'm no longer cut out for this investigative stuff. I'll buy a half pint...in case.*

Digby's Liquors sat in an aged strip mall. As he drove past, the short radio antennae on the trunk lid of the blue sedan in the fire lane caught his attention. *Whose unmarked police car?*

Digby's business outperformed the others: a Chinese restaurant, car rental office, cellular phone service, and dry cleaners. Dex eased the church van into a spot near the gym. The largest businesses on the faded asphalt lot were an athletic gym and discount department store situated on either end. Customers streamed into the decades old retail center off the interstate during their commute.

*Charlie must be moonlighting at Digby's this morning.*

Dex sat in the van for a couple of minutes and debated whether he should go to another liquor store on the way. Things were serious, and he needed a clear head. The first time in a while it rattled him that he craved a drink. He sat there and gripped the steering wheel. He held his lids together tight, as if they could somehow strain his troubled thoughts like ringing out a wet washrag. A car door's thud nearby roused him.

*I'm here now—might as well get what I came for...then, I need to get moving.*

Dex hopped out of the van and shut the door. A male voice bellowed. “Boo.” The utterance made Dex recoil as he turned toward it. It was Charlie Banks. “You bastard,” Dex said. “If you were any closer, I would have belted you.”

Their height matched, but Charlie was beefier. His shoulders bounced in laughter as he assumed a boxer’s stance and swatted air. Were it not for his belly; Charlie would look super fit. For a middle-aged cop. *Now middle age is catching up with him...and me.*

“Always the jokester, Sarge,” Dex said.

“Why’d you park all the way over here?” Charlie asked. “You can’t fool an old investigator, ya know. I’ll spot you.”

“Can’t huh?”

“No sir. Head on a swivel.” Charlie adjusted his gun belt under his middle-aged mid-riff. Charlie wore his uniform. The department required it when officers worked off-duty security gigs.

He pointed at the gym as they walked. “Going for a work-out?” He playfully elbowed Dex in the ribs. “I get it. You parked in front to flirt with the ladies.”

“Didn’t want the van right in front of the liquor store. I needed to pick up a bottle of wine—new neighbor.” *Awkward.*

“Classy.” Charlie feigned a dignified voice. “You’re buying wine. Jacket required?”

Dex chuckled. “Casual dinner date, Sarge.”

“Date? Knew it.” Charlie poked Dex in his side. “Well, you always were a ladies’ man. When we were both in patrol out of the academy, the squad thought you were arrogant...but I

knew you were confidant. And you lived up to the hype...with the gals and the job. Hell, you're still the youngest officer to become a major crimes detective in the department's history."

Charlie frowned. "But man, you're losing your poker face. Dinner date?"

Charlie was no slouch as an investigator either. He'd taught Dex a lot. Some of it he'd rather forget, but it all started when they found cash in a gambling stash house raid, and Charlie convinced Dex to keep some for two reasons. "For one," Charlie said, "I'm sure keeping some." *Tragic I didn't realize sooner that cops such as Charlie were the unfortunate exception, and not the rule, in law enforcement.* "And two," he said, "It puts all sides on notice, ya know, that you're down for their cause—both the scum and badges figure you'll play for pay."

The stain on a crooked cop's reputation is like the stench of decomposition on attire after a death investigation. Once it settles in, you can't do much to hide it. The uniform is unwearable, now reeking of the departed.

"So just dinner, or a date?" Charlie asked.

"Charlie, really. Dinner—that's all." *I should quit while I'm ahead. All this for a half-pint? I need to get going, but maybe I should bounce this mess with the trio off Charlie? If he's still connected, he could be useful—I just don't want to get him involved.*

"Gonna leave the date—I mean dinner—thing alone. Real gents don't kiss and tell anyway." Charlie laughed and brushed a dirty-blonde lock from his forehead. "You should have parked in the hot spot." It's what Charlie called the fire lane, or any spot he claimed as his own—the hot spot. He pointed. He referred to the fire lane where he parked his unmarked car. Off-duty officers parked in conspicuous places to alert all they were there—no surprises.

Both men stopped at the edge of the common parking lot to wait for a passing car, then crossed the feeder lane to the storefronts.

“Not in the church van,” Dex said.

Charlie ribbed Dex. The shared memory hit them as they uttered: “Bishop Ira Brooks—the crook.” Both men laughed.

He slapped Dex on the back. “The night you were moonlighting here—the weird guy was tryin’ to read your palm—and I pull behind Bishop Brook’s church van in my hot spot—”

Dex looked at Charlie. “You mean parked in the fire lane when you implore a man of the cloth not to break the law...so you could have the spot?”

The two men walked across the feeder lane and Charlie’s shoulders began to bounce in laughter before he spoke. “—Then the Bishop gets out of his van to plead his case and leaves his door open as the C Bus is rolling to her stop...”

“Yeah, sheared the van’s driver’s door off when it rolled past.”

“Almost missed it,” Charlie said. “But that’s not the worst of it. Remember who was with him. His choir director. Stopping to get a drink—on the way to the Super 8...for a date.”

Both men laughed.

“It’s why I don’t go to church,” Charlie said. “Hypocrites.”

“Not all of ‘em Sarge.”

“What, not you?” Charlie huffed as Dex jokingly elbowed him in the ribs. “The preacher turned cop...turned P.I. You’re a lot of things. Hell, we’re a lot of things. We have stuff to hide. But we ain’t no hypocrites.”

The two arrived in front of Digby’s, and Charlie perked up. “Speaking of hiding, I have a new trick to show ya. It’s been a while, huh?”

“Ages,” Dex said. He rolled his eyes and grinned.



Charlie opened his passenger door and leaned into his car, searching the glove box and center console. Papers flew. "Go on in. Right behind you. Kim loves this one."

*Word travels fast in the department. He hasn't heard about Sheila's tattoo parlor?*

Ha-Joon Kim owned Digby's Liquors. He greeted Dex with his melodious voice as soon as he entered the store. "Officer Dex. Nice to see you."

Dex waved to Kim, and two patrons stood idle near the front counter. He hummed as he passed beverage coolers which lined the wall. The two patrons could have passed for brothers. They didn't loiter, but

gazed at the lottery monitors above the sales counter. *They were probably brothers. One towered over the other. They weren't the same complexion, but their posture gave them away. The two slouched to the left, with their right foot askew. Reminds me of Sheila and me. I'm much taller and thin, and she's short and...plumper. Different, yet the same.*

As Dex rounded the aisle, he passed whiteboards on easels, which advertised special price deals. Kim's ultra-neat handwriting on the easels matched his demeanor. Though he married into the business, he had already expanded. He owned Digby's, the laundry, and the dry cleaners.

Dex bopped to the bass line of a rhythm and blues song playing through the store speakers. The smell of incense and tobacco assaulted the nostrils at checkout, where Kim always kept a lit cigarette perched on the counter's edge while he helped customers. The incense always burned. Kim does it to mask the cigarette smell. An ordinance prohibited smoking in many businesses, and there were few exceptions. No official bothered to cite Digby's. *It is a liquor store, right?*

The entry door chime sang again as Dex dug his wallet from his pants pocket at the counter. Bottles clinked and a crisp paper bag snapped as Kim bagged Dex's items without hesitation nor aid—a half-pint of whiskey and two packs of menthol cigarettes. Like any good proprietor, Kim remembered his customer's regular purchases and had their items ready when they approached the counter. He and his bride received the store from his father-in-law two years out of high school, and twenty years later the two built a mini empire. *Great customer service. I hope so great this time Charlie didn't eye my whiskey...I don't care to hear his mouth with the, "I told you so...every cop becomes a lush—it's part of the retirement plan."*

Dex set his debit card on the counter and grabbed his bag as Charlie planted his heft next to him. He adjusted his gun belt again and placed both hands on the counter. His left hand rested on a small rectangular object which captured Kim's attention. *Must be what he searched for.*

Kim's eyes widened as he pointed to Charlie. "This guy. He amazes me." He waved his arms. "He's been wowing us for years, and it never gets old."

Charlie blushed and dropped his head like a schoolboy caught ogling his gorgeous young teacher. He enjoyed the attention he got.

"Okay, sarge," Dex said. "Show me the latest, and then I have to go."

"You're retired, son." Charlie winked at Dex. "You don't have anywhere to be at any particular time. Right?"

"Now, allow me to dazzle you."

"This...is a magic coin box," Charlie said. He held the box in his left hand. It was the size of a large, vintage wooden matchbox.

"Kim, may I borrow a quarter?" Charlie opened the coin box, sliding it like a wooden

matchbox. Instead of a rectangular hollow space there was a circular cutout large enough for the twenty-five-cent piece.

Charlie accepted a quarter from Kim and inserted it into the coin cutout.

Kim looked at Dex. "Have you seen this one?" Kim nodded his head. "It's a good one."

Charlie slid the box shut and, with a few spins of the box and flourishes of his free hand, he set it on the counter. The two lottery patrons moved closer so they could see his impromptu performance. He made sure his audience saw the coin remained as he slid it shut.

The taller lottery patron nudge the smaller as they whispered to each other. He smiled at them.

Charlie set the box down on the counter and took an exaggerated step back. "And like that..." He stepped to the counter and slid the box open. "...gone." He tilted the box so everyone could observe it was now empty.

"See," Kim said. "Told you—pretty neat huh?"

The spectators applauded Charlie, and he performed an obligatory bow. "Viola."

Kim turned to light another cigarette and the two patrons eased back to their positions at the game monitors.

"Retired to play P.I. and drink yourself to death?" Charlie asked. He glanced at the bag Dex held. "What's on your mind? I start drinking early when I'm thinking hard myself."

*I'm not going there now. Not with you.* "I'm wondering how you disappeared the quarter." *No, I'm not. I have to go. But should I bring the trouble with the trio up to him?* "Show me how it works?"

Charlie cared little about the magician's code to guard their methods. Charlie snapped up the box and shook it. The coin rattled.

Dex chuckled. “You mean it was there the whole time?”

Charlie smirked. He opened the box and raised the insert with the coin slot at eye level. “See the pin? It holds the coin.” He pushed the insert in its sleeve again and removed it. The coin vanished again. He shook the box, and the coin clinked.

“Secret compartment,” Dex said. “Like the drug runners used in their cars—made a few shady body shop owners wealthy installing them for a while.”

Charlie laughed. “Yep...for a while. A secret compartment’s just a compartment when you know it’s there.”

Charlie’s magic coin box—like the secret compartment in the break room at the tattoo parlor I need to check for the thumb drive before those Durango Boys figure out it’s there.

Charlie pointed at the bag Dex held. “Now, you going to fill me in?” He put his right palm on the butt of his gun and plucked his badge with the other hand.

*Here goes.*

Dex looked at Charlie. “Let’s walk, Sarge. I want to pick your brain.”

The two men headed toward Dex’s borrowed church van. “Revelation Baptist Church” in large blue letters adorned each side.

A rear tire bulged which made the one-ton van lean a bit to the right.

“The rear passenger tire’s a little light,” Dex said. *Should I tell him anything? Not too much.*

“Is this what you wanted to run by me?” Charlie jogged the last few feet and kicked the low tire. He turned. “It’s low all right.” Charlie chuckled. “I tell you what you ought to do...put some air in at a service station.” Charlie swiped his palms together. “That one’s free. Next.” He

bit his lip and ran a pudgy hand through his hair.

Dex smirked as he walked to the passenger door, opened it, and set his bag on the floorboard. He picked a pack of menthols from the bag and opened it. "I'm talking about my sister's place...the shooting. When were you going to say something, Sarge? What are you hearing?"

"Hearing? A shooting?"

*Homicide gets a citywide rundown of crimes involving weapons each day—he'd have recognized the location.* "Let me ask you this," Dex said. "Did you work yesterday at all? Or watch the evening news?"

"No, I didn't. I was off...took the boat out, then stayed on the shore 'till I came this morning to moonlight here at Digby's. I needed a break after the double homicide we worked all weekend. What happened?"

*His evening must've started like my own.* "There were shots fired outside Sheila's Exotic Ink. They didn't hurt anyone." *First lie.*

"Good. But gunfire ain't unusual there. I'm glad they're okay, but why are you asking? Is there something I should know, Sam Spade? Something you learned while you were serving a subpoena? Or, maybe when you were tree boxing a cheating husband?" Charlie laughed.

Dex smirked, then smiled. *Other cops get his inappropriate and morbid sense of humor—all first responders develop it.* "Turns out it may have something to do with a guy Sheila's friend is dating—girl named Violette. She works at the tattoo parlor."

Charlie folded his arms. "I'm not making the connection, ya know."

"Her guy is a Durango Boy on the outs with the gang."

"Okay. And?"

“And this guy—her boyfriend...he was right under Miraldo?”

“One of his lieutenant’s, huh? The ole’ inner circle. Well, looks as if you’ve been sniffing around. You say he was right next to the man...like...past tense?”

“Yep.”

“So, you’re saying this guy...this ex-lieutenant of Miraldo...he’s the reason Durango Boys were shooting outside Sheila’s?”

Dex nodded. He lit his cigarette.

“So, let me guess. Sheila and his girlfriend, Victoria—”

Dex raised a hand. “—Violette.”

Charlie shook his head and cleared his throat. “Sorry, Violette...somehow they reached out to you—the old, crack investigator who nearly brought Miraldo and his Durango Boys to their knees not long ago? Wink, wink.”

*He’s good. Seems we’re both fishing from opposite ends of the pond.* Dex nodded. “You still collecting his contributions to the department for the privilege of running his criminal enterprise?”

“He’s been cleaning up his organization for a while now, ya know. He’s known in circles as a pure venture capitalist. Has his foot in a lot of stuff—the service industry, laundry, vending, restaurants, lawn care, car washes, check cashing.”

Dex puffed his cigarette. “Cash businesses. Good for washing dirty money.”

“He’s preparing to be a player in the gambling and casino venues once the local legislature legalizes it.”

“You think they’ll legalize gaming in more jurisdictions?” Dex asked.

“Oh, it’s coming. I bet in the next five years there’ll be bright casino lights on the shores

of the Potomac River.”

“If Miraldo is able to get a stake in legalized gambling, he’ll be set to launder on an epic scale.” Dex inhaled from his cigarette. Charlie barely noticed. *All the times I’ve tried to quit, I wish I could be so resolute about giving up this nasty addiction.* He found it strange smoking around Charlie since he’d quit several years ago. It took a heart attack and emergency surgery. For several years afterward, he wouldn’t empty the ashtray in his police cruiser. It was stuffed with cigarette butts. They were a reminder. He managed to stop smoking without divine intervention it seems. *What will it take for me, Lord?* “Miraldo already has a lot of the law-abiding players in his pocket.”

“He could outsource it, for crying out loud. Advertise on the dark web, Launderers ‘R Us.”

Both men laughed.

Dex walked to the driver’s side of the van. “Gotta get going.”

“Wait a minute. So, you can confirm the Durango Boys were involved?” Charlie asked. “Miraldo’s Durango Boys and Mikey’s Uptown Crew have a pretty solid agreement. No static, no gun play, no problems.”

“Yeah, they’ve been in touch.”

Charlie followed Dex to the driver’s door. ““Ole boy must’ve made off with something pretty important for Durango Boys to stir trouble in Uptown territory. Especially since he’s been trying hard to avoid this type of attention.”

“Oh, it’s pretty important all right.” *Time to plant the seed. All detectives have Big Nose Syndrome. The scent on the trail of a clue gets you excited doesn’t it, Charlie?* If Charlie could sniff out any information, the possibility would compel him to pursue it. “I have it. Or, should I

say, I've located it."

"Have what?" Charlie's entire countenance glowed like a child descending the stairs on Christmas morning.

"I have the item 'ole boy, as you call him, made off with." *Another lie. But this one has a purpose...an investigative purpose.*

Charlie scratched his temple. "Really? Cash? Drugs? Intellectual property? Like names, dates, and amounts? Badge numbers?"

Dex wagged a finger at Charlie as he climbed into the driver's seat.

"Well, it explains why you're buying whiskey in the morning. You're in possession of the proverbial Hot Potato."

*If only you were right. I'm buying whiskey because I'm lush, and the Hot Potato is still up for grabs.*

Dex rolled down the window. *Were you on your boat last night, Sarge? Were you the cop Elmer saw following me last night?*

"Where is it?" Charlie asked.

The opportunist in Charlie wanted to carry sole knowledge of this development to Miraldo himself. *If he could.* They were friends, but everybody has a past and nothing is black and white...there's shades of gray. *You taught me that, Sarge.* "It's safe."

"What is it...exactly? Ledger? Recording?"

He held his cigarette near the open window. "I couldn't tell you—exactly. But it's information...I haven't seen it. Haven't had the chance."

"The kid didn't tell you?"



“Either he didn’t look...or he don’t know what he’s laid eyes on. Either way, Miraldo’s secrets are safe for now.” Smoke wafted out of the open window.

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “So, that’s why Durango Boy’s flashing guns and shooting must be serious.” He rubbed his face. “Look, I know you’ve never seen eye to eye with Miraldo...given your history...but I can maybe reach out...ya know, if he figures you have what he wants, I believe I might convince him to call off his dogs. You might have to give up the kid though.”

*It’s a risky play, because if they’ve found the thumb drive themselves....* “You still a designated collector of Miraldo and Mikey’s contributions?”

Charlie rested his forearm on the driver’s door post. “Yeah. It’s the cost of their business, ya know. We hit their pockets; they try to extort us. Ensures all sides plays ball.”

Dex smirked. “Right. It’s the way it’s been.”

“But, Miraldo has always paid less because he’s smart. He’s collected his coupons.”

“Yeah, he’s got dirt on everyone,” Dex said. “It seems.” *And I almost had my hands on it when I was inside his organization...could have broke his strangle-hold on this city then...*

The two men fell silent. Dex puffed his cigarette. *That’s what keeps all sides in bed with the likes of Miraldo a lot longer than they planned.* Fumes drifted into Charlie’s face.

“Miraldo? He’s smarter than most in any room though,” Charlie said. “He’s always understood information—not money—is the real currency.”

“True.”

“You realize the past two summers they’ve been pretty tame—Miraldo and Mikey’s crews. There’s been a diminishing supply of drugs, weapons...know what I mean...on purpose—Miraldo’s getting out of the drug game.”

“And I’m sure Mikey’s happy to pick up the slack.”

Charlie fanned the air in front of his face. “If Miraldo will turn Mickey on to all his connections.”

Dex put his cigarette to his lips. He paused before he inhaled. *I shouldn't smoke in the church van, and it's rude to irritate a non-smoker...even if it's Charlie Banks.*

Charlie's cell phone chirped. He unclipped it from his belt and squinted at the screen. “Gimme a minute,” he said. “One of my guys.” He typed a text message with a furrowed brow.

Though Charlie didn't complain, Dex opened the van's ashtray and put the cigarette out. *I'll need to clean it. What am I thinking?* The orange embers faded. He imagined the ashtray—his ashtray—full of cigarette butts, but like Charlie he had quit the nasty habit for good. *Hopefully not after a heart attack. What made Charlie able to quit with little effort? Mortality—death knocked on his door. Sheila always nags Dex saying, “what'll take for you to quit...lung cancer?”*

“So, yeah. I'll pass the message to Miraldo for ya,” Charlie said.

Dex started the engine. “Thanks, Sarge. I'm trying to judge whether he's up for a swap—he gets what belongs to him and he forgets any of this ever happened.”

“I wish you luck,” Charlie said. He wrapped knuckles on the door post. “We'll see, won't we?”

Dex learned as an investigator there are three sides to every story—my side, your side, and the truth. Circumstances sometimes cast the world in shades of gray, and law and justice are no different.

“I'll contact you when I have something.” Charlie turned and walked away.

While some things are black or white, right or wrong, there are a lot of gray areas. *Or are there? Do the ends always justify the means? Justice at all costs? I'm not so sure anymore. Is my*

*guilty conscious indicting me?*

“Yep, we’ll see.” *Talk about mission impossible.* Dex turned out of the strip mall and headed deeper into the city.

## Annotated Bibliography

Aesop. *The Aesop for Children*, Lerner Publishing Group, 2014. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, 36-37, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5441751>.

A collection of tales, credited to a slave in Greece (7th to 6th Centuries, B.C.) named Aesop, have come to be known as Aesop's Fables. The fables all teach a moral lesson containing some component of political, religious, or social themes. Initially related to adults, over time and proliferation through various cultures the stories were adapted for children. *The Shepherd Boy and The Wolf* is one of Aesop's Fables cited as an example of early influences, which stimulated creative imagination and taught moral lessons.

Amazon.

"Amazon Best Sellers." *Amazon.com*, 2022, [https://www.amazon.com/best-sellers-books-Amazon/zgbs/books/ref=zg\\_bs\\_unv\\_books\\_1\\_18\\_1](https://www.amazon.com/best-sellers-books-Amazon/zgbs/books/ref=zg_bs_unv_books_1_18_1).

*Amazon Best Sellers* is a webpage on Amazon.com that lists a ranking of current popular books. The list is based on book sales at Amazon.com, and it is updated frequently. This resource was used to compare novels recently published which provided literary context for the creative manuscript.

Bangor Daily News. "Stephen King talks about his writing process during an interview with the Bangor Daily News" [YouTube Video]. *Bangor Daily News*, publisher, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhwLqRQ8unM&t=54s>.

In this resource, popular novelist Stephen King discusses his writing process. The footage was uploaded to the outlet's YouTube channel. In the interview, King shares his personal approach to the planning stage of the writing process. He explains that he does not

prepare plot outlines, which is referred to in the critical paper to demonstrate the approach of No Outline Writers, or Pantsers.

Bell, James Scott. *Plot & Structure*. Writer's Digest Books, 2004.

This book explains plot and plot structure in the development of works of fiction. Bell shares his techniques and ideas, including charts and diagrams, to discuss various approaches to plotting fiction narratives for any genre. Moreover, the text provides suggestions for fixing common problems encountered with plotting. This text is instructive in the critical paper and the creative manuscript.

—. *Revision and Self Editing for Publication*. Second edition, Writer's Digest Books, 2012.

This book discusses various methods of self-editing and revising works of fiction. Bell explains his techniques, with illustrations, and exercises, with numerous references and examples. Moreover, Bell includes self-editing and revision exercises for practice. This text is instructive in the critical paper and the creative manuscript.

Birch, August. "Critical Voice Versus Creative Voice—Avoid the Typical Novelist's Struggle."

The Book Mechanic, *Medium.com*, 21 Jan. 2019, <https://medium.com/the-book-mechanic/critical-voice-versus-creative-voice-avoid-the-typical-novelists-struggle-5a5872ca557>.

In this article, Birch explains his impression of the writer's critical voice versus her creative voice and argues that she needs both her critical voice (conscious mind) and creative voice (subconscious mind) during her writing process. Birch references Smith's *Writing Into the Dark*, an exploration of writing a first draft without an outline. He compares Smith's position with conventional plot outlining during the planning stage of the writing process. This article is helpful in support of the suggestion that the writer's

critical voice (conscious mind) and creative voice (subconscious) mind are equally useful and should work in a complimentary fashion.

Booker, Christopher. *The Seven Basic Plots Why We Tell Stories*. Continuum, 2004.

In his book, Booker identifies and analyzes what he asserts are seven basic plots seen in storytelling throughout human history. He evaluates seven basic plots in classic works of fiction to illustrate his assertions. Moreover, Booker explains how the seven basic plot points evolve into several variations, and that many stories synthesize elements taken from more than one of the basic plots. This resource is instructive in research of the Three-Act Structure and identification of plot types in classic and contemporary works.

Child, Lee, and Laurie R. King, editors. *How to Write a Mystery: A Handbook From Mystery Writers of America*. Scribner, 2021.

This book is a resource about writing in the Mystery Genre, written by successful mystery writers. The contributors share their insight on the study, practice, and the business of writing fiction with an emphasis on the Mystery Genre. This book is helpful with a working definition of the Mystery Genre as understood by the industry, and additional impressions of the definition and approach to plotting fiction.

Clayton, Sue. "Mythic Structure in Screenwriting." *New Writing*, 4:3, 2007, 208-223, DOI: 10.2167/new571.0.

In her article Clayton examines critical literature of writing and mythology and explains how she has worked with mythological themes in her own work. With the analysis of two case histories, she suggests that she illustrates that filmmaking is not simply transposing of classic stories, that mythic material is renewed by its use in different contexts, and that the notion of "Classical Structure" in storytelling limits possibilities in some instances.

The critical paper benefits from Clayton's insight into the history of the Three-Act Story Structure.

Davis, Charles T. "From Experience to Eloquence: Richard Wright's *Black Boy* as Art." *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by William L. Andrews, Prentice Hall, 1993, 138-150.

In his critical essay Davis argues that while Richard Wright is best known for his work *Native Son*, his autobiography *Black Boy* provides the best display of his art as a writer. The essay discusses how some critics considered *Black Boy* a work of fiction rather than autobiography, due in part to Wright's effective use of vivid sensory imagery which evokes emotion. This quality of Wright's, suggested by Davis, is a skill all writers of fiction should cultivate, as discussed in this thesis' critical paper.

Fay, Sarah. "Marilynne Robinson, The Art of Fiction No. 198." *The Paris Review*, Issue 186, Fall (2008), <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5863/the-art-of-fiction-no-198-marilynne-robinson>.

This article transcribes an interview of novelist Marilynne Robinson in the fall of 2008. Robinson responds to questions related to her approach to writing craft in the completion of several of her popular novels, and in the interview reveals that she does not plot her novels. Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* is one of the novels analyzed in the critical paper of the thesis, based on the fact that Robinson is a confessed No Outline Person (Pantsner).

Finkelburg, Margalit. "Aristotle and Episodic Tragedy." *Greece & Rome*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2006, 60-72., doi:10.1017/S0017383506000039.

In her article, Finkelburg argues that Aristotle's style of episodic tragedy comes very close to the basic tenets of contemporary literary theory, also called "alternative poetics."

The critical paper of this thesis relies on Finkelburg's assertions to argue the significance of Aristotle's Poetics to Western literary tradition generally and the Three-Act Story Structure specifically.

Freiman, Marcelle. "The Art of Drafting and Revision: Extended Mind in Creative Writing." *New Writing* (2015), 12:1, 48-66, DOI: 10.1080/14790726.2014.977797.

Frieman's article evaluates intersections between the writer, language, and the materiality of writing through considering the generative processes, or the drafting and revisions of writing. She seeks to explain why drafting and revision are essential roles in the creative writing process, and without them textual creative work could not occur.

Frieman's assertions about the writer's memory and imagination playing important roles in both the drafting and revision processes were used to support the critical paper's thesis.

Gerard, Philip. *The Art of Creative Research*. The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

*The Art of Creative Research* is a field guide which covers planning, trade tools, research sources, and research methods. The book has suggestions for effective creative research utilizing scholarly, non-scholarly, traditional, and non-traditional sources. This resource was instructive in all phases of thesis preparation and remains a helpful reference.

Graham, Steve, and Karin Sandmel. "The Process Writing Approach: A Meta-analysis." *The Journal of Educational Research*, 104:6, 396-407, DOI: 10.1080/00220671.2010.488703.

This article explores the process approach to writing education, wherein students are traditionally taught to plan, draft, and revise their creative work. The authors analyzed 29 studies conducted with primary and secondary school students and determined the process approach did not result in statistically significant improvement in the quality of



students writing nor enhance their motivation to write. This article supported the critical paper's suggestion that the process approach is synonymous with traditional creative writing pedagogy.

Hampl, Patricia. "Memory and Imagination." *Anatomy of Memory: An Anthology*, edited by J. McConkey, Oxford University Press, 201-211.

McConkey, general editor, compiled essays ranging from scientific to humanistic on the nature of memory and the roles it plays in our lives. Hampl is an educator, lecturer, memoirist, poet, and writer is a contributor. Hampl's citation supports the critical paper's suggestion that the new fiction writer may want to prepare a plot outline during the planning stage of their writing process until they are thoroughly familiar with plot structure.

Jenkins, Jerry B. "How to Write a Book: 13 Steps From a Bestselling Author" [YouTube Video]. *Jerry B. Jenkins*, publisher, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHKKtxliYaY>.

In his YouTube video, bestselling author Jenkins outlines his thirteen steps to completion of a novel. He covers how to develop ideas, meet deadlines, create credible plot conflict, write draft, revisions, and other practical advice. Jenkin's citation in the artist statement supports the suggestion that new writers must learn to self-edit and revise their own work to produce a polished draft.

Kerr, James. "The Wages of Sin Pride, Covetousness, Lust and Anger Haven't Been Deadly to Lawrence Sanders. Instead, They've Made Him One of Florida's Wealthiest Novelists." *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, 25 Aug. 1985, <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/fl-xpm-1985-08-25-8502040851-story.html>.

In this article, Sanders shares his thoughts on his success, his move to Florida from New York City, and his writerly habits. Sanders gives insight into some of his planning and research methods. Sander's novel, *McNally's Secret*, is one of three novels analyzed for comparative analysis in the critical paper.

King, Stephen. *On writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Pocket Books, 2000.

In his memoir, King provides some details about his development as a writer from childhood to adulthood. He also offers some advice on the craft of writing from his perspective and is cited in the critical paper. His novel, *Misery*, is one of three novels analyzed for comparative analysis in the critical paper.

--. *Misery*. Signet, 1987.

King's *Misery* is a Thriller/Psychological Horror story about a famous author who is rescued from a car accident by his number one fan. He soon learns that the care his number one fan administers is only the beginning of his ordeal as her captive. *Misery* is one of three novels used for comparative analysis in the critical paper.

Krueger, Anton. "Whose Voice is it Anyway? Implications of Free Writing, Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa." *Online Journal* (Homepage; 2015), 27:2, 103-110, DOI: 10.1080/1013929X.2015.1086195.

Kreuger's article examines different interpretations of "voice" by exploring the use of free writing exercises as a means of nurturing the emergence of physical voice in creative writing classes before analyzing some of the diachronic and synchronic implications of the trope. This article supported the artist statement's explanation of the delineation between the creative writer's critical and creative voice.

“Lawrence Sanders Books In Order.” *Bookseriesinorder.com*, accessed 9 April 2023,  
<https://www.bookseriesinorder.com/lawrence-sanders/>.

This webpage maintains a searchable database of book series by their publication date. The database is searchable by author, character, and top lists. This resource was helpful in researching Sander’s publication history and verifying his plot outlining approach utilized in writing the book used in comparative analysis in the critical paper.

McLain, Sybil. “Book; NEWLN: Bestselling author says politics equals woman power.” *UPI Archives*, 22 July 1985,  
<https://www.upi.com/Archives/1985/07/22/BookNEWLNBestselling-author-says-politics-equals-woman-power/5080490852800/>.

In this article, Sanders shares insight into one of his research methods while discussing his characters and the political implications of popular fiction. His method supports the conclusion asserted with respect to creative research in the critical paper.

Milliot, Jim. “Print Books Had a Huge Sales Year in 2021.” *Publishers Weekly*, 6 Jan. 2022,  
<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/financial-reporting/article/88225-print-book-sales-rose-8-9-in-2021.html>.

Publishers Weekly is a weekly trade news magazine featuring book publishing and book sales targeting publishers, librarians, literary agents, and writers. The outlet maintains a website in addition to its print publication which includes business news, reviews, bestseller lists, and commentaries. This outlet was helpful in identifying comparable titles demonstrating the literary context for the creative manuscript.

Monk, Jonathan. "Revealing the Iceberg: Creative Writing, Process & Deliberate Practice."

*English in education*. 50.2 (2016): 95–115.

Monk's case study examines how attitudes to student creative writing may be influenced by placing significance on the creative process and engaging students in creative writing. Monk describes the iceberg metaphor, placing enhanced focus on the 'submerged' planning, drafting, and revision beside the 'visible' end product. Student responses evidence the significance of planning to order and develop their ideas employing the extended mind hypothesis. Monk concludes that, while further research would be worthwhile, students encouraged to treat creative writing as a process developed a growth mindset with potential benefits well beyond the English classroom. This article supports the critical paper's identification of the stages of the writing process all new writers should study and practice formally, informally, or casually as they develop their craft.

Phillips, Melanie Anne. "What are Character, Plot, Theme, and Genre?" Story Structure.

*Dramaticapedia*, 7 June 2014, <http://dramaticapedia.com/2014/06/07/what-are-characters-plot-theme-and-genre/>.

In his article Phillips defines character, plot, theme, and genre. He then explains the structural conventions of each story element, and how they work together to create a story of its own unique identity. This article supports the critical paper's assertion that plot structure is inextricably linked to characters, and present in all effective storytelling.

Publishers Weekly. *Bestsellers*. Publishers Weekly, 2022,

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/nielsen/index.html>.

Publishers Weekly is a weekly trade news magazine featuring book publishing and book sales targeting publishers, librarians, literary agents, and writers. The outlet maintains a

website in addition to its print publication which includes business news, reviews, bestseller lists, and commentaries. This outlet was helpful in identifying comparable titles demonstrating the literary context for the creative manuscript.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Gilead*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc, 2016.

Robinson's *Gilead* is a Literary/Epistolary novel narrated from the perspective of Midwestern preacher, Reverend John Ames. He is dying from complications of a heart problem and through writing to his young son he shares his struggles and gives insight on themes of compassion, forgiveness, family, mortality, and love through various trials.

*Gilead* is one of the three novels used for comparative analysis in the critical paper.

Sampson, Michael R., et al. "Rethinking the Writing Process: What Best-Selling and Award-

Winning Authors Have to Say." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy: a Journal from the International Reading Association*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2016, pp. 265–74,

<https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.557>.

In their article, the authors explore what best-selling and award-winning authors do to create quality writing. They examine the writing practices that professional authors engage in while they write, and their results revealed that professional authors all have unique writerly habits. The authors conclusions in this article with respect to the stages of the writing process, how creative writing is formally taught, and how professional authors develop their own writerly habits support the critical paper's assertions.

Sanders, Lawrence. *McNally's Secret*. Berkley Books, 1992.

Sander's *McNally's Secret* is a Mystery/Thriller/Suspense novel. Private Investigator Archibald "Archy" McNally takes on a burglary case involving the theft of a valuable stamp collection from a wealthy Palm Beach woman, and a murder is shortly linked to

the theft. McNally's *Secret* is one of the three novels used for comparative analysis in the critical paper.

Sisters in Crime. *2021 Business of Book Survey Report*. Sistersincrime.org, Dec. 2021, <https://www.sistersincrime.org/page/2021BoBS>.

Sisters in Crime is a crime writing association founded in 1986 to promote advancement, recognition, and professional development of women crime writers. Their Crime Monitoring Project enlists a network of volunteers to track book reviews in newspapers and trade publications, and conduct book surveys in addition to the monitoring project to compile data directly from its members about their experiences as readers and writers of crime fiction. The results of their 2021 survey support the suggestion of the primary audience for the genre of the creative manuscript.

Smith, Dean Wesley. *Writing Into The Dark*. WMG Publishing, 2015.

Smith's book discusses techniques and strategies for writing a novel with no plot outline or character sketch, but exploration of a story he terms "writing into the dark." He explains his perspective on the writer's critical voice versus creative voice, advocates that writing in the dark fosters enhanced story creativity but concludes that there is a place for proper planning. Hence, in his opinion, there is no "one right way" to approach the writing process. This book supported the artist statement's explanation of the delineation between the creative writer's critical and creative voice. Moreover, Smith's acknowledgment that there is no "one right way" to approach the writing process supports the critical paper's suggested approach to the writing process.

Stein, Sol. *Stein on Writing*. St. Martins Griffin, 1995.

In his book, Stein offers writers of fiction and nonfiction advice to improve their writing with detailed suggestions in the areas of characterization, dialogue, pacing, flashbacks, self-editing, and revision. This resource was instructive and supportive of all sections of the thesis.

Syrewicz, C. Connor. "How do expert (creative) writers write? A literature review and a call for research." *New Writing*, 19:2, 196-224, DOI: 10.1080/14790726.2021.2005631.

Syrewicz evaluates literature from diverse fields in order to posit some claims about writing expertise. His literature review reveals many recommendations for inclusion in creative writing pedagogies, but of particular interest to the thesis was that writing education should be focused on teaching students to perform textual production processes more like expert writers. This recommendation supports the thesis argument that professional writers are recursive and overlap writing stages in their writerly habits.

"The Epic of Gilgamesh: ca. 1900-250 B.C.E." *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Volume A, Third Edition, edited by Martin Puchner (General Editor), W.W. Norton & Company, 95-151.

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the earliest written pieces of world literature, and the greatest work of ancient Mesopotamia that relates the adventures of King Gilgamesh, its main protagonist. Among its many themes is the travel adventure and homecoming. The story explores many of the fundamental questions of humanity. Regarded by many scholars and historians as the oldest recorded story in the world, the narrative structure conforms to the Three-Act Structure and Hero's Journey, which support the critical paper's use of the classic plot structure to conduct the comparative analysis.

Trottier, David. *The Screenwriter's Bible: A Complete Guide to Writing, Formatting, and Selling Your Script*. 7th Edition Expanded & Updated. Silman-James Press, 2019.

The Screenwriter's Bible is an instructional guide to writing, formatting, and selling a screenplay. The text is divided into five sections which include exercises, illustrations, sample forms, sample scenes, sample treatments, techniques, tips, and worksheets. This text supports the critical paper's explanation and assessment of mythic storytelling and the Three Act-Story Structure present in fiction on stage, in print, or on film.

Van Nortwick, Thomas. *Somewhere I Have Never Traveled: the Hero's Journey*. Oxford University Press, 1996, X, 8-38).

Van Nortwick examines three ancient Western epics, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Iliad, and the Aeneid, and explores how the literary structure of the Hero's Journey facilitates focus on the evolution of the self and is a metaphor for the process of maturity. This text supports the critical paper's explanation and assessment of mythic storytelling and the Three Act-Story Structure present in fiction on stage, in print, or on film.

Weiland, K. M. *Creating Character Arcs: The Masterful Authors Guide to Uniting Story Structure, Plot, and Character Development*. Pen For A Sword, 2016.

In the book, Weiland explains her method for creating character arcs in works of fiction. She discusses the link between character arcs and plot structure, the link between character and theme, and details the three basic character arcs: (1) the Positive Change Arc, (2) the Flat Arc, and (3) the Negative Change Arc. This resource was instructive and supportive of all sections of the thesis.



Wood, Ralph C. "A Case for P.D. James as a Christian Novelist." *Theology Today* (Ephrata, Pa.), vol. 59, no. 4, 2003, 583-595.

Wood argues that James, a significant novelist in her own right, should also be rightly acknowledged as an important Christian writer because her stories have deep moral and religious themes from a Christian worldview. He points out that James did not write for her Christian audience alone but wrote for readers of all worldviews as she sought to explore fundamental human questions and deep theological truths in her stories. This article supports the student's current vision and approach to writing Christian Fiction as discussed in the artist statement.

Zinnser, William. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. Harper Perennial, 2006.

In *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, Zinnser provides advice to writers on how to write nonfiction about people, places, science, technology, business, sports, the arts, or personal narrative. While aimed at nonfiction writers, this book is equally beneficial for writers of fiction. This resource was instructive and supportive of all sections of the thesis.