

Write the Novel: Adding Muscle to the Story
2014 July 01

This is a sample of how a scene might change from draft zero, the unfinished manuscript, to draft one, the first complete rewrite. The scene is repeated three times: the draft zero version; critique comments added to the draft zero version; and a rewrite based on the comments.

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The set-up

Our heroine, Colleen Makepeace, attends her usual Tuesday morning staff meeting, but today is anything but usual.

Draft Zero (the unfinished manuscript) (448 words)

Colleen arrived ten minutes early for the weekly staff meeting. It was raining. Sheets of grey water covered the large conference room windows. She sensed something was wrong as soon as she stepped in the door. There was no coffee brewing; no bowls of mini-chocolate bars on the table.

Five of the six regulars filtered into the room at predictable intervals, except for Gary Neiman, her best friend and Chief of Security. Where was he? Everyone focused on one thing: there was no coffee.

Don, from Marketing said, “Amit, this had better not be one of your personality tests.”

The young Indian man held up both hands, “I am innocent, but now that you mention it, it is interesting to watch reactions.”

Colleen’s smart phone pinged that she had a new text message. Phones had to be shut off as soon as the meeting began, but there were still three minutes to go. She hastily checked her messages. There was a new message from Gary. *Keep quiet. Lay low.*

Colleen was startled to see Chief Financial Officer Desmond Taras enter the room. He never came to these meetings. Behind him trailed Tiffany Lawrence, administrative assistant to the CEO. She looked like she’d been crying. She took her usual place, just right of the head of the table. Gary was last in line. He closed the door firmly behind himself and stood with his feet planted apart and his hands behind his back, a military parade rest position that betrayed the years he’d spent in the Army.

Taras bunched his hands, leaned forward and put both hands on the table. “Last night between ten PM and midnight, our Chief Executive Officer, Gahan O’Connell disappeared. Kidnapping is suspected. As of this moment, the campus is on lockdown. The FBI is on its way to question everyone. They have also asked us to secure all cell phones and other electronic devices for

examination. Please turn your devices off and put them on the table.”

Colleen quickly pushed the delete button. Gary’s message disappeared. She turned the phone off and laid it on the table.

What in the world did Gary’s message mean? Keep quiet about what? How was she supposed to lay low, and why? She had a horrible thought. What if that message wasn’t meant for her. It was so easy, especially if the names were similar, to pick the wrong address in her address book and send a text to the wrong person. Had Gary meant to send this message to someone else?

Whatever else happened to day, she had to talk to Gary in private. With the FBI arriving on their doorstep, that wasn’t going to be easy.

Critique Added

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Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:09 AM

Comment: Can we have more description of the room?

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:10 AM

Comment: Filter words – they distance the reader from Colleen’s experience.

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:10 AM

Comment: Nice details.

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:11 AM

Comment: No one says anything except the two people who exchange the coffee quip. Why are so many non-speaking characters in this scene?

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:11 AM

Comment: We’ve already met Gary in previous chapters. We know he’s her best friend and Chief of Security.

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:11 AM

Comment: More details?

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:12 AM

Comment: This is very mysterious, and yet Colleen doesn’t react. What’s going on in her head?

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:12 AM

Comment: Telling, not showing

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:13 AM

Comment: We’ve never met him before. Sensory details?

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:13 AM

Comment: Is this a body language Colleen has never seen before, or rarely seen? What is her reaction?

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:14 AM

Comment: Whoa, big reveal, but no one reacts. You’re plowin’ ... [1]

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:14 AM

Comment: I thought this was a business. Isn’t a campus a school?

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Whatever else happened to day, she had to talk to Gary in private. With the FBI arriving on their doorstep, that wasn’t going to be easy.

First Complete Draft Rewrite (651 words)

Colleen arrived ten minutes early for the weekly staff meeting. Grey rain sheets covered the outside of the large conference room windows, obscuring the green quadrangle and the buildings on the other side of the campus. Campus. When had businesses taken on the affectation of styling themselves after universities?

The coffee pot on the polished stainless steel counter was off; it’s glass coffee pot turned upside down beside it. The oval rosewood table was bare. The teleconference screen was dark. Most important, there were no blown glass bowls of mini-chocolate bars on the table.

Don from Marketing arrived, followed closely by Amir, the head of Human Capital. Not Personnel, not even Human Resources, Human Capital. More affectation.

Don sat down, looked at the empty coffee pot; looked at her. “Well”

“Well, Don, just because I’m the only woman here, that doesn’t mean I make coffee.”

He got up and rooted in the cabinet, finally coming up with a filter and a coffee canister. “Amit, this had better not be one of your personality tests.”

The young Indian man held up both hands. His round, cherubic face broke into a smile. “I am totally innocent, but if we had enough people for an adequate sample, I would love to watch reactions.”

Colleen’s smart phone pinged that she had a new text message. It was from Gary. *Keep quiet. Lay low.*

Keep quiet about what? That she and Gary shared a pizza last night while they watched a movie? Just how was she supposed to lay low and why?

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:15 AM

Comment: Does she know that the message is still in memory, and is still a danger to both her and Gary?

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:15 AM

Comment: More filter words

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:16 AM

Comment: What is her reaction to this whole message thing?

Sharon Wildwind 14-7-1 10:16 AM

Comment: This implies she knows they are arriving at this moment. How does she know that?

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Desmond Taras entered. His shoes were shined; his Savile Row suit, immaculate; not a single silver hair out of place. But there was a minute dried shaving cream patch just below his left ear. First a mysterious message from Gary, then the Chief Financial Officer came to a meeting he never attended, and sporting a visible flaw to boot. Had she fallen into a rabbit hole on her way to work?

Tiffany Lawrence, O'Connell's administrative assistant, took her usual place, just right of the head of the table. Her eyes were red and puffy. Gary was last in line. He closed the door firmly and stood with his feet planted apart and his hands behind his back, a military parade rest position that betrayed the years he'd spent in the military.

She'd never seen Gary *do Army*. It was a part of his life he never talked about. Captain Neiman coming out of hiding was not a good sign. Colleen's mouth and throat were suddenly dry, and not just from lack of coffee.

Taras bunched his hands, leaned forward and put both hands on the table. "Last night between ten PM and midnight Gahan O'Connell disappeared."

Don paused with his coffee cup halfway to his mouth. Amit muttered something in a language Colleen didn't speak. What did he mean, disappeared? Like abducted by aliens? Disappeared off the face of the earth?

"Kidnapping is suspected. As of this moment, the campus is on lockdown. The FBI is on its way to question everyone. They have also instructed us to secure all cell phones and other electronic devices for examination. Please turn your devices off and put them on the table."

Colleen quickly pushed the delete button. Gary's message disappeared. Gone, but not really gone. Still lurking somewhere, like a latent virus. She turned her phone off and laid it on the table.

What if Gary's message hadn't been meant for her? It was so easy, especially if names were similar, to pick the wrong texting address. Had Gary meant to send that message to someone else?

Through the rain-soaked windows, she watched three identical black cars make their stately way around the curved driveway that led to the admin building's front door. She had to talk to Gary privately and soon. With the FBI arriving on their doorstep, that wasn't going to be easy.