

Author: Ward Rangler

Work: Fiction

Title: Sleeper Cell



Extended outline

Chapters 1 - 4

Chapter 1 – Shelter in the Storm

- Chas McKinney arrives with nothing except three shopping bags clutched in his hands. The bags are damp and stretched thin, one handle already fraying. Inside: a cracked phone, two shirts, and a half-eaten protein bar.
- The outer bands of a hurricane have begun to lash the area. Rain needles his scalp, and the wind smells faintly of salt and mildew.
- Chas discovers a gap in the fence surrounding the Palmtree resort and slips through. The chain-link is bent outward, as if someone else had forced their way in before.
- Approaching a doorway, Chas steps beneath the overhanging second story and scarcely hears the rattle over the pelting rain. Still, it's enough to immediately freeze him in place. A coiled rattlesnake continues the menacing rattle. It isn't especially large; possibly a three-footer, but it blocked the doorway. Chas slowly, smoothly backs into the rainstorm as the rattle continues.¹
- As the storm intensifies, Chas tries the adjacent building, repeatedly kicking at unyielding doors.
- He hurls a barbecue grill at a window. The grill falls back into the shrubbery, but the glass has shattered, and there's room to climb through the shards into the first-floor unit. In passing through the glass, a shard bites deep into his palm, and he feels the blood slick against his wrist.²

Chapter 2 – Unwelcoming Committee

¹ The rattlesnake threat is well-placed. Chas should be anything but comfortable in these opening scenes.

² If Chas shows a physical or emotional reaction to his injury, the reader can feel it as well.

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- Zito Ramirez, an indicted embezzler and formerly the VP of Food and Beverage at the timeshare resort, confronts Chas and aggressively tells him to leave.
- Chas notices that Zito's shirt is monogrammed but stained.
- Zito seems unwilling to provide shelter, even during the storm, Horace Smith arrives, looks around at the shattered glass and blood on the carpet, and asks what happened.
- Chas starts to stammer out a reply but is interrupted by Zito, who snarls that the vagrant was just leaving.
- Horace is smaller and younger than Zito, but when he holds up a hand, Zito falls silent. Horace asks Chas if he wants to leave.
- Chas says he just needs a roof over his head for as long as this storm lasts. He apologizes for the damage. Zito folds his arms across his chest, scowls, and turns his attention to Horace.
- Horace tells Zito that as soon as this storm passes, the police will be out on the streets. He lifts one of the shopping bags and turns his attention to Chas, telling him that if the police see him with this matched luggage, they will want to strike up a conversation.³
- Horace tells Zito that the first question the police will ask Chas is where he's been. That would guarantee a police visit to Palmtree. Zito looks alarmed.
- Horace tells Chas that he should stay here, noting his injury and harmless appearance.
- Zito leaves, mumbling a veiled warning not to be seen at the fence.⁴

Chapter 3 – Orientation with Horace

³ When Horace describes shopping bags as matched luggage, he reveals a dry sense of humor that can distinguish him from other characters.

⁴ Zito's warning, especially at the close of a chapter, can foreshadow and bring further tension to a future event.

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- Horace briefly leaves and then returns with bandages and disinfectant. He had been an EMT and so treats Chas's wound with practiced care. The antiseptic stings, but Horace's hands are steady.
- He remarks that maybe he should still be an EMT. The money at Adventure Worlds was better, so he changed careers.
- Chas remarks that Adventure Worlds wasn't paying Finance Interns much. Some were working for the experience only. When the semester and his college loan ended, the perm job never materialized.⁵
- Horace once pulled an entertainment exec from his mangled Ferrari, so that got him a "pretty solid" opportunity as a pyrotechnics manager. It had looked like a career until he had been "droned out."
- While giving Chas a property tour, Horace introduces him to Deidra Patel, another Adventure Worlds "castoff". She had been a college program culinary assistant and, much like Chas, had to leave Adventure Worlds when student loans were cancelled. When no longer enrolled in college, she lost her place in the college program.
- Deidre's preteen sister, Morgan, moved in with her into an off-property apartment after their parents divorced. After lease renewal and a substantial rent increase, the two young women had been evicted.
- Horace comments that another castoff, Floyd Lincoln, occasionally camped in a third-floor unit across the weedy sports court. He'd stay long enough to sober up.
- Deidra asks Morgan what Floyd did at Adventure Worlds. Morgan remarks that Floyd is not her best friend. He doesn't tell her everything.
- Deidra purses her lips as the conversation falls silent.⁶

⁵ This builds a foundation for friendship between these two characters. When Chas commiserates about career setbacks, he also reflects on their mutual employment at Adventure Worlds.

⁶ The silence is emotion-charged, giving it the potential to pique the reader's curiosity about Morgan and Floyd.

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- The group crosses the sport court, past the shell-shaped pool which now has no more than two feet of algae-thickened scum at the bottom. Sunlight at last breaks through the clouds.
- The group inspects the damage in the room where Chas had broken in. The carpet is soaked, the curtains torn. Horace declares that Chas can do better than this, so he opens a nearby room. Deidra and Morgan each take a shopping bag as Chas hefts the one most bulging with his belongings.
- Chas notices two cartoonish stickers still clinging to the mirror at a height that a child could reach. One is a killer whale, and the other is a dragon.⁷ These stickers are poignant—Chas imagining the child who placed them could add emotional resonance.]
- Chas thanks his three companions for their help and promises to move on within a few days. With enough temp work, he can earn a rent deposit. Horace assures Chas that he can work here with no rent or deposit. They all do. Zito can be ignored. They protect his secrets. He may have owned Palmtree, but Palmtree is bankrupt.⁸

⁷ The poignant detail of these stickers enhances the rental timeshare setting. That setting is further made vivid by its resemblance to a place well-known for theme parks, palm trees, killer whales, and dragons.

⁸ This chapter ends at a turning point that can be underscored. Even though there are no handshakes and no lease is signed, this is when Chas joins the Palmtree castoff community. He would be likely to express relief, gratitude, or both.

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Chapter 4 – Unpacking

- Morgan, the young teenager, makes a sly reference to it that triggers her big sister's rebuke. Deidra asks Horace to take Miss Mindreader over to the Marlin. They can start cooking while Deidra helps Chas unpack.⁹
- Deidra will show Chas to Marlin Bay where the group gathers for meals. Chas notices the way she tucks her hair behind her ear when she's thinking.
- Deidra and Chas shyly maintain distance as she helps him settle in. Chas notices her careful folding of his hardly-clean spare shirt, as if it mattered.

⁹ "Miss Mindreader" adds character definition to both Deidra and Morgan. It's a great nickname.