



Fiction Partial for Review

Opening scene: Chas finds shelter

Here was something you wouldn't see every day. The fiberglass gator from Captain Benny's cartwheeled along Tangelo Drive. It was raining, yes; a hurricane, in fact. Hurricanes have no concern for the homeless. They shove you along like they know you've already maxed your credit line thanks to parking fees, rollercoasters, and pizza.¹

The rain hit me in sideways sheets, and it stung like sand. Then, for a moment, I was thinking of sand. Not far from here, you could sleep on the beach and duck under the pier when it rained.² T-Drive offered no such opportunity. Plywood had been nailed over the windows of Sunshine Treasures. The neon sign above the Shell & Shamrock door blinked "Cold Beer," as if the place might accommodate customers along with an inch or two of flood water.

The wind was zero help with the shopping bags. I dropped all three and leaned against a chain-link fence. Behind it: the once-glamorous³ Palmtree Resort, now dressed in rainstorm grey and barbed wire. Clearly, no one was taking reservations.⁴

There might be fifty or sixty acres to explore, with hundreds of rent-free apartments. That hope boosted my energy enough to splosh-splosh around the perimeter, even as my sneakers and

1 This first paragraph introduces a Point Of View (POV) character who happens to be homeless, and we're with him in a well-defined place and storm.

2 When Chas thinks of sand, there's no emotion attached. He could remember a beach and a pier that provided shelter. A person could sleep there in any weather.

3 "Once-glamorous" isn't visual; it doesn't "show". Consider "once-colorful" or specify colors of your choice. Either description would be parallel to "rainstorm grey."

4 Chas's observations of the fence and barbed wire around an abandoned property are skillful introductions to a potential haven.

these bags grew heavier with every step.⁵

I'd occasionally lean into the fence. The fifth or sixth time I did that, I almost fell through a gap that opened just enough to squeeze through. Someone had judiciously cut several links at a location that was well-concealed by a palmetto thicket.

The branches seemed reluctant to let a six-foot swamp monster pass, but I broke free and stumbled onto an expanse of asphalt, bags still in hand. Building 2120 was Shangri-La and the Emerald City rolled into one, with a second-story overhang promising shelter from the worst of the rain.⁶

I splashed through the puddles. This was just like an afternoon a dozen years ago, minus the hurricane, and before mom yelled at me for ruining my shoes. Now I'd ruined another pair of sneakers, the only ones I had.

As soon as I reached concrete, I stamped some of the mud off, then looked up at the overhead and around at doors A, B, C, and D. The wind throbbed like a headache. That's when I heard the rattle.

Mr. Snake wasn't all that big; maybe three feet if it were uncoiled. But he wasn't, and he guarded door C like he had paid rent. That unit was his now. I'd back away and find another.⁷

The rain welcomed my return.

The next building offered no better hospitality than the last. I kicked at three separate

5 The vivid second sentence is a little long. To trim a few words, the sneakers don't have to get heavier if the bags are getting heavier.

6 Excellent! A fresh image like "Shangri-La and the Emerald City" is ideal when there's no dialogue and the POV character must *tell* the reader something.

7 The snake moment effectively blends tension, with a touch of humor. We experience danger while enjoying Chas's dry wit.

doors, each more stubborn than the previous. The storm had graduated from nuisance to full-blown tantrum, so now I was soaked, sore, and out of patience.

A barbecue grill sat abandoned near a patch of drowned shrubbery. I picked it up, muttered an apology to no one in particular, and hurled it toward the nearest window. The grill bounced off the siding and landed in a puddle, but a corner had connected with the glass, which shattered inward, leaving shards that I was wary of while stepping across the windowsill. A particularly malignant stalactite⁸ caught me in passing. That injury was slow to feel but immediate in the way it dribbled blood across the back of my right hand.

In the shadows of this unit's bathroom, I procured a washcloth to serve as temporary bandage. The room smelled of mildew. I didn't pause to leave a comment on the card that Attendant Lana had provided, next to the TV remote. I barely stopped the bleeding on my right hand when a visitor unlocked the door.

The man was brutally built and unsurprisingly wet. He had just burst in and scowled at me, so I mustered my most boyish apologetic grin.⁹

"Sorry about the glass."

"You need to leave. Now."

That would one day be confirmed as Zito Ramirez's standard greeting. He had been the VP of Food and Beverage at Palmtree Resort. Among items not listed on Zito resume, he had been indicted as an embezzler and now resided at his former workplace.

⁸ It's refreshing to see broken glass described as something other than shards or spears.

⁹ Having Chas "muster" a "boyish apologetic grin" is a skillful way to paint the character's appearance, emotions, and attitude.

“I’ll leave. But,” I said, and turned my hand so Zito see the injury. Then I pointed toward the shopping bags and crumpled clothing on the bed. “I just need a roof until hurricane whatever passes.”

Zito opened the door wide.

“This isn’t a shelter. It’s an ownership resort.”

“I understand.” I nudged the toe of one soggy sneaker against a shard of broken glass.

“And this is off-season.”

Zito seemed unappreciative of dry humor. I saw two fists.¹⁰

Before Zito could pull or shove me out of the room, another figure appeared in the doorway. This, I later learned, was Horace Smith. Horace had been a pyro guy at Adventure Worlds while I had a desk job there. Same company, different worlds altogether. Horace was short-to-medium height and built like he did more than put numbers in spreadsheets.

Horace took one look at the blood on the carpet and the shattered window and asked, “What happened here?”

I barely inhaled before Zito answered for me. “This vagrant was just leaving.”

Horace held his place in the doorway and seemed to be tasting something quite sour. Zito wasn’t eating candy, either.

Horace put a heavy hand on my shoulder. “Do you want to leave?”¹¹

I hesitated. “I just need somewhere dry until the storm passes. I didn’t mean to break

¹⁰ “I saw two fists” is evocative but slightly vague. It would be clearer to see him clench and unclench his fists.

¹¹ Horace’s quiet intervention is tonally perfect—he reveals confidence and authority without posturing. There’s a clean shift in power in this beat.

anything. I'm sorry."

Zito folded his arms, scowled, and shifted his weight like he was preparing a rebuttal.

Turning his back to Zito, Horace reached past me for one of the overstuffed shopping bags and held it up between the three of us. "The police are likely to notice this young man who perhaps needs a shave, and they'll see this is his matched luggage," he said, and set down the bag. "They will be curious, yes?"¹²

"So?"

"Question one will be where he has been, and question two, whom he has seen." Horace nodded toward Zito, "Do you understand?"

Zito relaxed his fists just long enough to step outside and slam the door behind himself.

¹² "Matched luggage" is a thought-provoking image to share with both Zito and the reader.