

Chapter 1

Otis stopped mid-sentence, turned away to face the air gushing past the open window. He took a deep breath, long and slow, as if drawing in the scent of the land beyond the highway; a connoisseur assessing a new variety. He stayed silent, ignored the twitching cell phone in his pocket, and the click as Abe Wade dropped the blinker lever. The car slowed, hit something. The curb. Bump, clunk, thump. Otis gripped the seat, grabbed the door, braced his knees, shielded his face. The rough ground shook the little sedan, jerked the headlights around. Their beams flashed only wild grass, buried bricks, broken concrete, and scattered trash. Wade sat with one hand rested on the steering wheel, the other fondling the gearshift. His bulk sank and rose with every roll.

“Mr. Wade?” Otis tried to keep the panic from his voice. “You don’t need to take a shortcut on my account, sir.”

“Shh,” he whispered, “we’re almost there.”

Through all the shuddering, Otis tried to pick out solid shapes in the darkness, get some clue about where they might be going, but the horizon blended perfectly with the night sky. They could be headed for a cliff.

Wade slowed, spun the wheel a few times, sending the headlights left then right, like he was shining a flashlight round a backyard. He spotted something, tapped the gas to shoot forward some more, braked, stopped and got out. Otis sat back for a second, un-clicked the safety belt, and let the band drag across his chest. He waited, looked around for signs of Wade. Saw nothing, then got out to follow.

The car was pitched with the grill tipped into the long grass. The beams, still on, woke a many-legged insect, forcing it to crawl to comfort elsewhere. The only other lights came from the streetlamps lining the road behind, and the city, still far in the distance. Wade’s lumbering figure shadowed the skyline as he kicked through the weeds of the disused lot.

Comment [NG1]: We don’t get to know Otis – the main character – until much later. This is a great opportunity here to tell the reader something more about him, especially introducing the idea of him being a story teller. And, since he’s already ‘stopped, mid-sentence’ you could have him continue with a story. You could, for example, bring forward the snake story that he tells later in this chapter..

That scene also perfectly illustrates the friction between these two characters and introduces Wade’s doubts about Otis’s abilities

Comment [NG2]: The reader can get confused with this character and the Mr Warden who comes later since both names are similar. Suggestion: change one of the names to something not beginning with W.

Comment [NG3]: Make it clear that Wade pulled the car from the road, show his aggressive nature. Suggestion:

Wade yanked the wheel

Comment [NG4]: This sentence is awkward to read, and does not quite convey the idea of a car hitting a curb

Comment [NG5]: Otis does many things in this single sentence. Suggest: split the Combine with previous and subsequent sentences to read, for example:

Otis gripped the seat, braced his knees as the car hit the curb. Thump. He shielded his face. Clunk. They bumped onto rough ground, that shook the little sedan, jerking its headlights around.

Comment [NG6]: Our hero sounds a little scared here. Assert the fact that he is actually a very strong character. Suggestion: Otis raised his voice over the rattle.

Comment [NG7]: Try to show more action here, Wade sounds too relaxed. Show us how he pulls that car around, the way we later see him treating those around him too.

Comment [NG8]: You could reinforce the idea that Wade is a big man by having the car rock as he gets out

Comment [NG9]: Show us how Otis felt at this moment, maybe the tension leaves his body. He could also look around, let the reader see the surroundings through his eyes.

Comment [NG10]: Wade seems to have disappeared very quickly for a man who ‘lumpers’

Comment [NG11]: Otis seems to find Wade quickly again, even though he’s now farther away.