

The First Two Pages of *THE FLAWED DANCE*

Laura Elvebak

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To capture the readers on the first page, my goal was to introduce Erin Matthews by showing her as a sympathetic, but flawed character. My biggest obstacle was how to tell her backstory, which provides the motive for her actions, without telling all in one chunk at the beginning.

I started Erin's story as she is beginning a new life in a world completely foreign to her after running from her past. She is alone, without money, and about to move in with a stranger. In the first two pages her character is partially revealed, as well as the characters and motives of the men who are aiding her escape. I also needed to show the era and place where her story is centered because the setting is as much of a character as the people.

This is the first two pages of the manuscript as I first submitted it. But there was a problem and it was rejected at first. I'll tell you why and how I fixed it at the end of this excerpt.

I trudged up the dark, narrow stairs of the converted row house, following Jesse to the second floor. The smell of grease and stale cigarettes seeped from the walls. I hesitated, one foot on the next step. "I'll be the only white woman living in this building, won't I?"

Jesse looked over his shoulder. "You wanna turn around and go back?"

If only I could. But I didn't come all this way to change my mind at the last minute.

I stared straight ahead. "No."

Jesse's thick upper lip curled. "Didn't think so."

The door at the landing came into view. I clenched my hands to keep from shaking and reached for something to say to calm my nerves. "The radio said there've been riots in the city

since Doctor King was killed.” Not that I was worried. Street fighting no more affected me than the war in Vietnam. I was more scared of Johnny. Dead or alive.

“This is the west side,” Jesse said, now sounding annoyed. “No trouble here.”

I didn’t know west from east. I’d never been to Philadelphia. What if there were riots? Maybe I should be worried, should have paid more attention to the news. No trouble for him, but what about me? I decided to keep my mouth shut until after I faced the stranger on the other side of the door—Jesse’s brother and my new roommate.

Jesse rapped hard on hollow wood.

A stocky man, wearing a faded flannel shirt and tan trousers with suspenders, opened the door. The man looked old enough to be Jesse’s father. His smile reached his eyes. Maybe he was the one with the nice gene.

“This be her. Erin.” Jesse mumbled the words. With a furtive glance in my direction, he said, “This be Carl, my brother I tol’ you ’bout.”

Carl chuckled softly, dispelling the bad air between Jesse and me. “I suspect she guessed that already. It’s a pleasure meeting you, Erin.”

His voice had a musical, sing-song quality. Cocoa skin crinkled around warm dark eyes. Tight gray curls framed a pleasant face, but I suspected the map of wrinkles remembered a road traveled over many miles of ruts and potholes. I wondered if my own face reflected my journey. I pushed away the thought and gave him my best smile, wanting to make a decent impression, no matter what Jesse might have said about me.

Carl gave me a quick study. I tensed, thinking he could see right through my shell to the runny yolk inside. I thought he looked trustworthy, but my ability to judge men had not proved reliable.

Okay, the problem was not the scene as written. The questions put to me by editors had to do with motive. Why did she put herself in that situation? Motive and insight into her character could only be told with backstory. Or so I thought. How did Erin get to this place and why? If I wrote everything that happened to her before she escaped to Philadelphia, it would be twice the novel’s length. It wasn’t necessary, but some hint of what drove Erin had to be revealed.

I solved this problem by putting this one paragraph at the beginning of the manuscript and it sold the book. You be the judge.

The instant I landed the blow on Johnny’s head, I knew he would live with me forever. I knew I wouldn’t escape no matter how fast or how far I ran. He lived with me as I crossed borders to a new life, one filled with unfamiliar sights and smells. I was the same person as yesterday, yet different. I was free, but shackled with my past. What other choice did I have, but to go forward?

Was Erin a murderer? Does she get punished or does she find redemption? The first two pages asks these questions. I hope it compels the reader to read on for the answers.

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Laura Elvebak earned five star reviews for her Niki Alexander mysteries, LESS DEAD and LOST WITNESS, available in print, e-book, and audio formats. The third book in the series, A MATTER OF REVENGE, will be released in September 2016. Laura is a founding member and past president of The Final Twist Writers and her short stories are included in four of their anthologies, A DEATH IN TEXAS, A BOX OF TEXAS CHOCOLATES, DEADLY DIVERSIONS, and TWISTED TALES OF TEXAS LANDMARKS. Laura is also a member of Sisters-In-Crime, International Thriller Writers, and Mystery Writers of America and serves as Treasurer and Sleuth Sayer editor for the

Southwest Chapter of MWA. In addition, Laura has had two screenplays optioned; co-wrote, directed and acted in a play, and co-wrote a short film for the 48-Hour Film Project.

For more about Laura Elvebak visit her website at <http://lauraelvebak.com>