

**The First Two Pages of “The Brotherhood of Tricks and Treats”
by Francelia Belton**

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An Essay by Francelia Belton

There are many things to consider when opening any story, but the most important elements are the character, his problem, and the setting. You need to establish all three without slowing the story while hooking the reader enough to keep them turning the pages. Not an easy feat, especially in a short story where every word counts. I've found, as a reader, in a novel, the author has a grace period of a few pages, maybe even the whole chapter, to capture me. In a short story, it must be done in a line, maybe a paragraph or two, but you'd better not take more than a page.

I follow the formula of putting a character in a setting with a problem to start all my stories. And for “The Brotherhood of Tricks and Treats,” I already had a setting in mind. I knew I wanted to revisit historical Five Points, Denver, Colorado, which is a world I've set other stories in. But I couldn't go too far back because the recipe I was using, Salted Caramel Popcorn Cocoa Krispie Treats, had Cocoa Krispies in it and those were not introduced into the market until 1958. So, I decide to give it a few of years and chose 1961.

The recipe was important because *Festive Mayhem 2* was a culinary holiday anthology with a cozy mystery or crime element, and I chose Halloween. And because I needed a culinary aspect other than just the recipe, I decided to make my protagonist, Vincent, a wannabe baker, whose older brothers didn't think much of him or his professional aspirations. I gave him the additional problem of wanting to desperately fit in with his older brothers, no matter the cost.

But first, I had to establish the family dynamics. I needed to show my protagonist in his element, the power play between the siblings, and a hint of what was about to happen. The reader knows in the very first paragraph that this is no ordinary family. When my protagonist states that he thinks of himself as forthright and trusting but should have been suspicious of his brothers asking him to tag along with them, he nudges the reader to be suspicious too. If Vincent has those attributes, then we knew that his brothers don't.

In the end, I established my character in a setting with a problem. Is it enough to keep the reader reading? I can only hope.

THE FIRST TWO PAGES OF “THE BROTHERHOOD OF TRICKS AND TREATS”

Vincent liked to think of himself as a forthright and trusting fellow. But he probably should have been suspicious when his brothers asked him to come with them to the Silver Sax's Halloween costume party later that evening.

They had never invited him to go with them anywhere before.

It was around 3:00 that chilly October afternoon in 1961. He remembered it clearly because he'd escorted his mom to Union Station that morning, and didn't have time to make his special Halloween treats for the neighborhood kids until later in the day. He was measuring the caramel sauce when the back kitchen door opened.

Roger and Silas strode into the tiny kitchen, as though it was an everyday occurrence. Which it wasn't, because neither of them ever came around their mom's house unless it was Thanksgiving or Christmas. They somehow must have known their mother was out of town.

Silas brought his longtime girlfriend, Connie, and she gave Vincent a quick smile before taking a seat at the table. Her gaze lingered on the bag of marshmallows, nuts, and bowl of popcorn before picking up a copy of *Good Housekeeping* magazine.

Silas headed straight to the pale blue Frigidaire and opened the door. Bottles and jars clinked and clattered as he rummaged through the shelves. "What is there to drink around here?"

Roger replied, "Nothing you're looking for." He leaned against the counter sink, watching Vincent to see what he would do.

Vincent didn't know what to do. His mom didn't tell him that Roger and Silas weren't allowed over. It was just expected they wouldn't see them for a few weeks.

Silas sighed and grabbed the bottle of milk. He unscrewed the top and started drinking from it. Vincent took an involuntary step forward, aghast. He had been a little boy the last time he had witnessed Silas try that stunt. Their mom popped Silas up the side of his head saying, "Boy, how many times have I told you to use a glass?" Watching Silas drink the milk now, without a care in the world, confirmed what Vincent suspected. Roger and Silas knew their mother wasn't home.

She'd gone to Texas for a few weeks to care for her ailing sister. Before she boarded the train, she had said to Vincent, "You be a good boy and stay out of trouble."

He ducked his head and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Geez, Mom! I'm not a kid anymore."

She chuckled. "Okay, then, *young man*, stay out of trouble. Call your Aunt Velma's house collect if you need anything."

Then, she stared into his eyes, bringing a hand to his still smooth cheek, her expression contemplative. "I'm not playing. Be

careful.” She'd been extra protective of him after Trenton, his other brother, died.

Now, his two eldest brothers were here, asking him, Vincent, to hang out with them tonight. For the first time—ever—in his entire life.

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Francelia Belton's love of short stories came from watching old *Twilight Zone* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* television shows in her youth. Her fiction has appeared in various publications, with a new short story coming out in the upcoming *Denver Noir* anthology by Akashic Books. Her short story “Knife Girl” was a finalist in the 2020-2021 ScreenCraft Cinematic Short Story Competition and a semi-finalist in the 2021 Outstanding Screenplays Shorts Competition. Her first collection, *Crime & Passion: Three Short Stories*, will be published before the end of the year. You can read more of her stories at <https://Francel.Be/Writing-Stories>.