

The First Two Pages of “Blindsided”

By Michael Bracken and James A. Hearn

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An Essay by Michael Bracken and James A. Hearn

A successful collaboration is when two writers join forces to seamlessly create something neither of them could have written alone. “Blindsided” is an example of that. Michael had the original idea of a football-themed story and had roughed out the opening scene before being sacked behind the written line of scrimmage. Despite living down the road from Baylor University and having a son who played college football, he knew nothing about the sport. So, he set the story aside. Then one evening, while at dinner with James and their respective spouses, Michael noticed something: James was wearing a football hoodie. In fact, James pretty much *always* wears a football hoodie bearing the Dallas Cowboys’ star. Either James had a limited wardrobe, or he was a fan of the game. In addition, James had already written “A Beretta, Burritos, and Bears,” a football-themed story, for Michael’s *Guns + Tacos* novella anthology series. Before finishing dessert, Michael and James had agreed to collaborate on “Blindsided.”

The effort presented us with a challenge: at no point in a co-authored story should a reader notice a change in voice. To guard against this danger, we passed the story back and forth numerous times, editing each other’s work along the way.

James focused particularly on football action, while Michael had charge of the story as a whole. We were guided by Michael's solid plotting that kept us firmly on task as each writer built on the other's work. When "Blindsided" was done, Michael did a final, solo edit to ensure the story had a clear voice. The final result, we hope, is a seamless story, the hallmark of a successful collaboration.

Though conventional wisdom is to never begin with backstory, we knew we had to introduce our protagonist right away, and to do that required some backstory. So, the first two paragraphs describe how Jeremy "Jumbo" Jones became an offensive lineman for a fictional college football team and establish that he is not a stereotypical football player. We explain Jeremy's position of left tackle, arguably the most important position on offense other than the quarterback. Jeremy's primary job is to protect someone in a vulnerable position: for a right-handed quarterback, Jeremy must keep the pocket "clean" or free of defenders rushing from the left, the QB's "blind side."

Everyone back home in Farmer's Bend, New York, always said Jeremy "Jumbo" Jones was born to play offensive line, even in Pee Wee football. Young Jeremy had wanted to play quarterback, like his hero Brett Favre, and could drop a dime to the back of the end zone at age ten. But the coaches took one look at the tall, lumbering youth and put him at left tackle to protect the quarterback's blind side. The position stuck through middle school, high school, and onto Williamsburg State University.

Playing left tackle for the Whalers on a full-ride scholarship and studying hard enough to earn grades many of his teammates received as gifts left Jeremy little time to socialize. He studied, practiced, ate,

set records in the weight room, and flattened any defenders who came near the quarterback.

Once we felt confident that readers knew Jeremy, it was time to introduce the story's catalyst, the event that changes the protagonist's world and propels the story forward. Amy, his cousin and a freshman at the college, has seemingly dropped off the face of the Earth, and Jeremy's mother insists he discover why.

Jeremy had just finished working off a pair of foot-long submarine sandwiches and was opening his locker when his mother phoned about his cousin Amy, a freshman. He stood in front of his locker with his cellphone pressed to his ear, straining to hear his mother's voice over the cacophony of his teammates.

"Your aunt's worried sick," his mother said. "She hasn't heard from Amy since last Saturday."

Jeremy had given his cousin a tour of the campus the previous spring when she was a high-school senior, but he'd had little contact with her since the school year started. Amy was usually sitting by herself in the student union with her nose in a book, or in the library studying. He said, "She's probably fine, Ma. You know how I was my first semester."

"And you haven't gotten any better about calling me, have you?" his mother said. "But Amy's been calling Aunt Chloe two or three times a week and now she's dropped off the face of the Earth."

"What do you want me to do about it, Ma?"

Jeremy could almost hear her eye roll over the phone. "What do you think? Check on your cousin. Tell her to call home."

Some of his teammates were giving Jeremy sidelong looks, so he wrapped up the conversation. "I'll check on Amy and call you back."

"I love—"

But he disconnected the call before she could finish.

In the following section, which wraps up our first scene and our first two pages, we introduce teammates who will play a part in a test of Jeremy's loyalties.

We learn about Jeremy's fellow offensive linemen (men who are closer to him than brothers) and about a new quarterback named Rex Chance. With Rex, the team is enjoying newfound success and the players have the run of the campus. Winning has brought a shot at the conference championship, a bowl game, and NFL scouts.

Terry Wilson, the team's starting left guard, snapped Jeremy with a towel. "Hey, mama's boy," Terry said, "you coming to the party tonight? It's gonna be epic!" He cracked open an imaginary beer and mimed chugging it.

As soon as Jeremy was reminded of the party, he forgot all about his mother's request. "Hell, yeah! I'll be there."

The Whalers were in a celebratory mood after that day's practice. It was a rare Saturday without a game, as they had played the previous Thursday against Northeastern Tech. The Whalers had upset the Hawks due to the outstanding play of quarterback Rex Chance, a recent transfer from a big-name school. Rex's precision passing had picked the Hawks apart, thanks to the clean pocket provided by Jeremy and the offensive line.

The entire school had been buzzing with excitement ever since the victory. And why not? The Whalers were playing in the Northern Atlantic Coast Conference championship for the first time in twenty years, and a victory meant an automatic berth to the Maple Bowl. For the school, that meant better funding from rich alumni. For the players, a bowl game meant national exposure and NFL scouts.

"Will there be any girls at the party?" asked Jeremy.

"Jumbo," said Terry, "you have no idea."

Thus, in our first two pages, we introduce a sympathetic protagonist, with loyalties to both his biological and team "families," and we lay the foundation for the conflict that arises when he is forced to choose between them.

While this essay is about the first two pages of "Blindsided," we think it's important to mention the story's ending. Both of our spouses (who read everything

we write) made it quite clear that we needed to cut several pages. We hope that our first two pages entice you to read “Blindsided,” and we hope you agree with our spouses that *they* chose just the right place to end the story.

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