

The First Two Pages: “The Lucky One” by Susan Alice Bickford
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An Essay By Susan Alice Bickford

In the summer, I set myself a challenge: transform a rambling, complex, character-filled novel I had set aside at 90,000 words—still growing—and turn it into a short story of 3,500 words or less.

Despite mothballing it, something about the premise—half-sisters switched at birth—still captivated me. I also loved my planned climax scene and felt I’d cheated myself out of the fun of writing that. Short stories are not my forte, but I also love a challenge. Could I squeeze this giant genie into a tiny bottle?

Spoiler alert: I did it. Initially titled “Treading Water,” my first draft was only 3,300-ish words. After several rounds of editing, at about 4,200 words, I declared it done and sent it to *The Saturday Evening Post*, and it was immediately published as [“The Lucky One”](#) in September.

Obviously, I had to kill many darlings in the process. In addition to simplifying the plot and background story, I decided there could be only two characters: Cornelia, who grew up wealthy and privileged in New York City, and her half-sister, Alison, who grew up at the opposite end of the economic scale in rural Central New York.

Now for the challenges of introducing them and creating a setting and a sense of the stakes involved. I decided to do something new for me: a prologue. Very simply, a prologue is when a story or book begins with a scene either set earlier or later than the flow of the story. For various reasons I won't go into, prologues are often frowned upon and discouraged by editors I have dealt with. My personal philosophy is: if it works, it works. I decided to give a prologue a try.

Rather than build up gradually to the climax, from the first event chronologically, I would start with the climax, the moment of reckoning:

“Are you a good swimmer, Alison?”

Hopefully, there is something foreboding about this innocuous question.

Building on that, I set the scene and add to the sense of danger:

Alison's head rolled to one side, and now she was gazing at the glassy water, reflecting the fading violet and gold tones of the twilight as it slid by the gunnel. Low in the mirrored sky was a bright glow: Venus, the Evening Star.

She tried to raise her head to look at the sky, but her muscles would not obey.

Time to introduce Cornelia. I asked an AI for plot advice. It suggested that the sisters realize they have so much in common and decide to support each other.

Gag.

A happy family reunion was not what I had in mind. Cornelia speaks:

“I'm sorry we didn't have time to get to know each other better. Unfortunately, I cannot afford to have the surprise appearance of a half-sister interfere with everything I have worked for. I'm not big

into sharing. My brother also found that out the hard way,” said the young woman. She made another powerful stroke with the paddle, adding a deft twist at the end to keep the canoe moving straight. “We’ll be at the deepest part of the lake in just a minute.”

And finally, the moment of decision for Alison:

Alison shifted her body weight to the right. Over they went.

Thus ends Page 1. From there, I stepped back in time and rebuilt the story. I had many edits and versions of the rest, but the first page remained largely untouched:

Here is the entire first page with the start of the remainder of the story.

“Are you a good swimmer, Alison?”

Slumped with her back against the bow, Alison Conover shifted her gaze from the bottom of the canoe to the young woman with the paddle at the stern. Her name was. . .

Alison’s head rolled to one side, and now she was gazing at the glassy water, reflecting the fading violet and gold tones of the twilight as it slid by the gunnel. Low in the mirrored sky was a bright glow: Venus, the Evening Star.

She tried to raise her head to look at the sky, but her muscles would not obey.

“I’m sorry we didn’t have time to get to know each other better. Unfortunately, I cannot afford to have the surprise appearance of a half-sister interfere with everything I have worked for. I’m not big into sharing. My brother also found that out the hard way,” said the young woman. She made another powerful stroke with the paddle, adding a deft twist at the end to keep the canoe moving straight. “We’ll be at the deepest part of the lake in just a minute.”

Cornelia. Last name. . . Something Dutch. . .

“We’re in the middle of the lake. Time to go.”

Lake. Lake Oriska. Cornelia Schuyler. Something in the drink. House on the lake. Big deck. This isn’t fair.

Time to remember how to swim.

Alison shifted her body weight to the right. Over they went.

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Alison arrived at the gate to the Schuyler compound promptly at 6:00 p.m. She had driven by on East Lake Road before, curious about the lucky people who lived there. Normally, she would have been required to press the call button on the device next to the gate, but today it was wide open.

The compound was impressive. No wonder her mother wanted to work here in the summers during her teenage years.

Once inside, a private roadway arched around the property, passing garages and barns and a few smaller cottages—presumably for the hired help or maybe for lower-echelon family members.

All seemed deserted, which was no surprise. It was only mid-June, and most summer residents on New York’s Finger Lakes didn’t show up before the July Fourth holiday.

Alison eyed the glimmering water through the trees. By July, the lake might be warm enough for swimming. The daytime temperatures were inviting now, with daylight stretching late into the evening, but she knew spring-fed Lake Oriska was deep—well over 200 feet at the center—which made for a chilly bathing experience, even at the shallow public beach.

Alison had paddled by the property before, and she recognized the large main house, with its long, gracious Craftsman-style lines, and the deep porch. Like most houses on the lake, the front faced the water, with the kitchen and utility rooms pointed toward the woods and the road. Alison parked in a circular area in back and walked around the perimeter.

She didn’t see any other cars, but she knew Cornelia Schuyler, the half-sister she was planning to meet for the first time, was here someplace.

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Susan Alice Bickford writes thrillers and suspense stories that are deeply embedded in the rural areas of New York State and New England, featuring resourceful female protagonists. Bickford’s debut novel, *A Short Time to Die*, was published in 2017 and was nominated for the 2018 Left Coast Crime Best Debut Novel. Her second novel, Edgar-nominated *Dread of Winter*, was released in October 2019. Her short stories have appeared in the anthologies *Fish Out of Water*, *Fishy Business*, *The Fish that Got Away*, and *Invasive Species*. Find out more at <https://susanalicebickford.com>.