

## **The First Two Pages: *Where the Bones Lie* by Nick Kolakowski (Datura Books)**

An Essay By Nick Kolakowski

When it comes to detective fiction, there's perhaps no older trope than the initial meeting between detective and client. The truly old-school version usually takes place in the detective's office, or the bar that serves as their office.

Oftentimes, the detective suspects from the outset that the client is lying about something. Money changes hands, a plan is agreed to, and the plot begins (along with the requisite chaos and killing).

Executed well, this scene can spark the engine's narrative in a smooth and efficient way, which is why the genre's writers continue to rely on it to this day. From the first moment I began plotting its twists and turns, I'd always envisioned my novel *Where the Bones Lie* as an homage to the detective novels I've loved my whole life, especially those set in mid-century California, and so I knew I was duty-bound to include some variation of the classic beginning—but I also faced some challenges.

For starters, my main character, Dash Fuller (nods to Dashiell Hammett and Sam Fuller in there) doesn't *have* an office. In fact, he's not even a detective in the purest sense—he's a former Hollywood fixer who was very good at finding people and uncovering secrets, until a guilty conscience compelled him to quit a year or so

before the narrative begins. Now he's trying to be a standup comic, an odd career choice that says more about his trauma than he'd care to admit in polite company.

As the book opens, Dash is meeting with his old boss, Manny, a fixer who's very much still in the game. My primary mission was to serve up as much as I could about their shared history without slowing down the narrative, and that meant choosing the right character details. Here are the first paragraphs:

Manny found me after my set on the Giggle Lounge's second stage, the smaller one where they dump the newbies and terminally unfunny. I was working on new material but nobody in the audience laughed until I made jokes about traffic. When all else fails, you can always joke about traffic and Angelenos will at least give you a chuckle, even the hipsters from Silver Lake who work from home and travel around on electric scooters.

"You really bombed," Manny said. He had followed me from the stage to the far end of the bar, where he cornered me against the wall—one of his classic moves, allowing him to use his massive girth to its most intimidating effect. "They pay you for that?"

"They pay me in alcohol," I said, shoving a free drink ticket at the bartender, who retaliated with a watered-down rum and Coke. "Why are you here, Manny? You finally develop a sense of humor?"

"I got a sense of humor. I hired you, remember?" He jabbed a finger at my neon-orange Hawaiian shirt. "I also remember when you, the great Dash Fuller, the terror of paparazzi everywhere, used to wear lovely suits instead of that abomination."

"Helps me blend with this crowd," I said, noting how Manny's two-piece Tom Ford suit was impeccable as usual, but his dress shirt was wrinkled around the collar. Given his intense dedication to always looking faultless—*my image is the job*, he liked to say—it was a startling flaw. Something big was distracting him.

Within 250 words, we have the sense that Manny is a guy who throws his weight around to get what he wants, that he's rude ("You really bombed"), and that

he's a bit vain about clothing—unless something important is throwing him off. We also learn that Dash was a fixer before he turned comedian, that he likes to drink, and that his new career choice isn't working out at all.

These are all seeds that will grow into major plot points later, and even though you might not pick up on everything on the first read, I really believe that every reader absorbs a lot of detail on a subconscious level.

The conversation continues:

“Maybe it's time for you to unleash the bespoke,” he said. “I have an urgent quest for you.”

“I quit, remember? I'd rather dunk my head in a barrel of fire ants.”

“Oh, stop being dramatic. We need someone who's not on the payroll. The scumbags are all over this one.”

“Not interested,” I said, draining the drink. Onstage, a shaggy dude in a Scooby-Doo t-shirt launched into his first joke of the night, about the ghost of Marlon Brando watching a Marvel movie. He was unfunny enough to make me feel better about my own performance.

“Yeah, like your standup career is going so well,” Manny snorted. “Come on, we both know you could use the cash. And you won't have to hurt anyone this time. Promise.”

I considered it. It was five days until the end of the month, and I was down to a couple hundred dollars in my bank account. I had originally planned to re-download the usual gig apps and spend fifteen hours a day delivering food and driving people around until I could cover my rent. I preferred gigging for ZoomFood, a local app that paid a great rate but forced its drivers to wear a purple vest and baseball cap stamped with its yellow ‘Z’ logo, a humiliating costume I kept wadded in the corner of my car trunk. A job with Manny could spare me that exhausting fate.

I didn't want to dip a toe back into his swamp.

But I didn't want to end up on Skid Row, either.

“Half in advance,” I said, already hating myself. “And if I don't like where the job is going, I'm keeping the cash and walking away. Can you live with that?”

Manny nodded. “It’ll have to do. But I’m not explaining the job here. Come outside with me.”

“Why? It’s a hundred degrees out.”

“More like eighty. Don’t tell me you’ve gone soft like all these twits in here.”

When I was writing the book, I submitted a draft to the editor of a prominent crime-fiction label that’ll go unnamed. He liked the narrative, although it wasn’t quite for him, and he pointed out one other thing besides: Dash isn’t very funny. Specifically, this editor called out the “fire ants” joke on this page as an example of that terminal un-funniness. *You have to punch it up*, he told me.

I knew this editor was right about the humor level—for someone who wanted to become a standup comedian, Dash couldn’t tell a solid, original joke. When I was writing the first draft, his punchlines were largely placeholders; I figured I’d come up with something more amusing later.

For a few days after that conversation with the editor, I tried elevating Dash’s humor, but it felt untrue to his personality. Then I realized something: it was okay that Dash wasn’t funny, that he told corny jokes at the wrong times, that his standup career was a total bust... it wasn’t what he was meant to do. No, Dash was a hunter of secrets and a finder of lost people, and his refusal to recognize that—to pursue this new career onstage despite his obvious deficits—adds a nice note of fission to the character.

I also wanted to give Dash some elevated stakes as quickly as possible. Sticking him with an empty bank account and a risk of eviction seemed a good way to do that, even if it’s a bit clichéd, especially for the detective genre; sometimes it seems as if virtually every fictional sleuth is down and out in some way. But building up a unique set of stakes can also take a lot of backstory and dialogue. In this instance, I was willing to use the cliché to move things along as quickly as possible—and besides, as Dash pursues his quarry, the stakes rapidly

escalate beyond merely paying rent. Within a few chapters, our anti-hero is going to be thoroughly entangled in questions of life, death, and major crime. I tried setting up the first two pages to get him (and his history) out of the proverbial gate as fast as possible.

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Nick Kolakowski is the author of several horror and crime novels, including *Where the Bones Lie* (Datura Books) and *Love & Bullets* (Shotgun Honey). His short stories and nonfiction essays have appeared in various anthologies and magazines, including *CrimeReads*, *Mystery Magazine*, *Dark Yonder*, and more. He lives and writes in New York City.