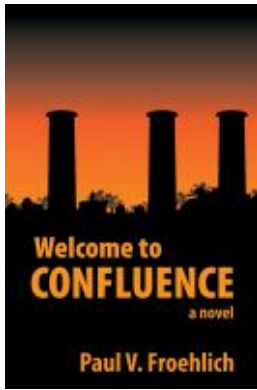




Welcome to
CONFLUENCE

a novel

Paul V. Froehlich



In the fictional Western Pennsylvania town of Confluence, it's been five years since the steel mills went quiet for good. Twentysomethings Sophia and Will are passionately at odds about saving their rusting hometown. When the town's secret benefactor dies, they suddenly find themselves battling gamblers, opportunists, and entrenched moneyed interests. Coming together, Sophia and Will struggle against fear and hope, conflict and courage, treachery and devotion, tragedy and redemption, and loss and love.

Welcome To Confluence

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WELCOME TO CONFLUENCE

PAUL V. FROEHLICH

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Chapter 1: Will

THE MAIL TRUCK WAS WAITING as Will Sokol pulled up to the post office. It was 4:02 a.m. The snow stopped, but thick, gray clouds formed a low ceiling that hung over the City of Confluence's rugged white hills.

"This is the third time this month, College Boy," snapped the mail truck driver. "I'm not going to take a hit for you again. Next time you keep me waiting, I'm going to dump everything on your doorstep and it's going to be your problem."

Will held his silence as he unlocked the loading dock door and pushed the half-dozen mail carts loaded with sacks of letters, flats, and parcels out of the truck and into the back end of the post office. The mail truck drove away, and Will hung up his coat, stretched, and let out a dramatic yawn. He jotted his initials and arrival time on the sign-in sheet, straightened his light blue postal uniform shirt and dark blue trousers, and went straight to work sorting parcels. He quickly scanned the addresses and instinctively tossed each parcel into the hamper of the assigned carrier without looking.

Will despised working in the post office. He hated everything about it—the monotonous work, ridiculous rules, and bickering workers. Every minute of his 36-hour postal workweek was wasted, he believed, stealing time from his truly important work, his computer projects.

He turned on the center overhead light, tuned the radio to the FM alternative rock station, and tossed more parcels into hampers. It was mindless work, but on some basic level, sorting mail provided Will with a sense of order and purpose. The two hours spent alone, before mail carriers and front desk clerks arrived, created time and space where he could think most clearly, when his best ideas came to him, as they germinated in his thoughts from articles he'd read in computer magazines and technology journals or seen on listserv discussions. He mentally worked through business problems and mapped foundational approaches to solving those problems. Later in the afternoon, when he wasn't working as a computer consultant at the local food bank, he refined his concepts on his home computer. He believed technology was his only lifeline in the dying mill town. Each business and technology proposal he wrote and submitted to public and private organizations was fundamentally sound. That's what the rejection letters said. Fundamentally sound, but lacking imagination and practical purposes.

Will emptied the first parcel cart and moved to another. He worked the 4-to-10 a.m. shift six days per week at the Confluence post office. Every fourth Saturday was an off day. Keeping him below 40 hours per week prevented him from achieving full-time status with maximum benefits. In order to get one of those jobs, Will had to wait for a clerk to retire or transfer, had to wait his turn, before he might have a chance to bid on a job vacancy. The union rules were ironclad on the matter.

The back door buzzer interrupted Will's thoughts. Knowing it was Fitz at the employee door, Will continued sorting parcels. The buzzer persisted for ten seconds. Will ignored it and sorted five more parcels before the buzzer went off again. Let him freeze, Will thought. Ten seconds more the buzzer sounded, followed by repeated short bursts. Will turned the radio dial back to the AM news/talk station, turned off the power switch, and went into the restroom to wash his hands. The buzzer went off in longer bursts and lasted more than a minute. Will looked in the mirror. He liked the new hair gel. It gave his hair a fuller, messier look while still appearing neat. Somehow, even with his over-sized designer eyeglasses and upside-down teardrop face, the new hair gel gave him a stronger-looking chin. I hope Sophia likes it, he thought, tucking in his shirt, and drying his hands as he opened the back door.

"Goddamn you! Why didn't you open the goddamn door!" screamed Fitz, pushing by Will and into the post office.

"I just opened it," answered Will.

"Didn't you hear the buzzer?"

"I was in the bathroom."

"I don't believe you were in the bathroom," Fitz snapped angrily. "I'm going to take your job, College Boy."

"You'd be doing me a favor," Will muttered.

"You darn well heard the buzzer and you left me standing in the cold." Fitz hung his coat and hat in his locker. "Wait until the postmaster hears about this!"

Will walked back to the parcel bins and resumed sorting packages. "If you're so important, why don't you have your own key?"

"Don't feel so high and mighty, College Boy," Fitz warned, rubbing his hands together. "You're not long for having that key." He pulled on his blue postal sweater, slipped his half-moon-shaped bifocals onto his nose from the chain around his neck, combed back his salt-and-pepper-colored hair, turned on the radio, and sat on the padded stool at the letter sorting station.

Fitz continued, "No sir, not when you can't show up to work on time. How many days this month have you been late? Five? Six? It is six. Six days late this month alone. We're not half-way through January. How do you keep your job, College Boy? Do you have compromising pictures?"

"Don't you worry about me, old man. I'll be fine." Will continued sorting packages. He'd been late just three days this month, he recalled, and for only a total of about six minutes.

Fitz picked up a stack of letters and sorted them into piles. "Sure, you'll be fine. College Boy will be fine. Living in a box under a bridge with your unfinished computer science degree, you'll be fine. That unsigned diploma will keep you plenty warm at night under the bridge, it will. You'll have plenty of company under the bridge with the rest of your loser generation."

The back door buzzer rang out in a two-second burst, and Will held the door open for two letter carriers.

Fitz kept it up with his new audience. "Joe, guess who was late again today. Sixth time this month. College Boy."

"Check the sign-in sheet. I was here at 4 o'clock exactly."

Said Fitz, "Joe, how long have you known Bill the driver? Twelve, thirteen years?"

"That's about right," said Joe the letter carrier.

"Now, in those thirteen years, have you known Bill ever to not tell the truth?"

"I can't recall a single time," said Joe.

The two carriers hung up their coats and went straight to work, sorting mail in their own mail delivery route stalls.

"Bill the driver told me College Boy kept him waiting six times this month. Six times! Can you believe it? Six times! Now, why do you suppose College Boy here keeps his job?"

"Did you ever think Bill the driver was waiting for me because he arrived early?" asked Will.

"No," said Fitz. "Now isn't that one of the most ridiculous statements of all time? When was the last time you heard of a mail truck driver being early? Especially in the middle of January. You may look smart with those big Clark Kent glasses and nerdy haircut, College Boy, but you say the dumbest things sometimes."

They continued sorting in silence for several minutes before one carrier asked, "Did you hear the fire call yesterday? They rushed Celik to the hospital."

Will stopped dead in his tracks and felt his heart pound. He thought, can it be true about Celik? Is my luck about to change? He continued sorting parcels, but slowed his pace in order to listen better and avoid making a sorting mistake.

"Yeah, a firefighter came to the counter and told us yesterday afternoon," said Fitz. "He said they hauled Celik out of one of his bars using a fork truck. He was in such bad shape they didn't think he'd last through the night."

Will finished the parcels and, in order to hear the conversation better, moved to carrying bundles of weekly grocery ads to each carrier stall.

Said Fitz, "I wonder what will happen to The Werks and his other watering holes. Plus, his video poker empire. You know he turns a \$2,500 weekly profit on each machine."

The back door buzzer sounded and Will opened the door for three more letter carriers.

Fitz continued, "Say he has about 100 machines, roughly, in all of his joints. What's that, about a quarter million a week? Tax free? That's a nice gig to have. Plus all those other gambling activities. Maybe I can do that in retirement. Just 57 days more."

Will went into the restroom to compose himself. I can't lose this opportunity, he thought. I have to find the cash somewhere, *somehow*. He splashed water on his face and patted his skin dry with paper towels. I can buy two video poker machines for \$5,000. Where am I going to find \$5,000 fast? He got an idea and walked straight into the lobby to use the public pay phone. He took several deep breaths to calm himself before phoning Sophia's house.

"Sophia, it's me, Will." He heard his heart pound.

"Will? It's 6:30 in the morning. What's wrong?" She seemed both concerned and perturbed.

"I'm calling about the \$10,000 grant for the inventory management program that came through. I need to take an advance against it. If that's okay."

Sophia paused for a few seconds. "What are you talking about?"

"I need to borrow \$5,000 against the grant. It's only a couple of weeks early. Something came up and I need the money."

Sophia's response was firm. "Absolutely not. First, we don't have the money yet, only a confirmation letter. Second, it's unethical. What do I tell my board? Third, why are you calling me at home at this hour of the morning? Do you even know what day this is?"

Will measured his breathing to collect himself. "The opportunity just presented itself and there's a limited time frame to take advantage of it. I need the money for less than a week...probably for only a couple of days."

"The answer is no, Will. Absolutely not. Don't ask me again. I have to go now, there's too much going on, with the governor coming this morning."

Will became angry for allowing himself to be vulnerable to Sophia.

Then she asked, "Where did this come from, Will? What happened that you need \$5,000 right away? Are you in some sort of trouble?"

Will hesitated. Should I tell her or not? If I tell her, she'll get angry and won't give me the money. If I don't tell her the truth, she'll find out somehow and I'll have to answer for it anyway. "Celik was rushed to the hospital. They don't know if—"

"Oh, my God! Uncle Ray!" exclaimed Sophia and hung up the phone.

Will slammed down the receiver of the payphone. He blew it. Not only did he blow his shot at the money, but he also blew any chance of dating Sophia. Things were going well with her, the only pretty girl who ever paid attention to him. Now he blew his chances with her. He lifted and slammed the phone receiver three times more, and returned to the back room of the post office to resume sorting flats. As his self-directed anger slowly faded, Will thought hard about ways to come up with \$5,000 to buy two video poker machines in order to finance his computer ventures.

Chapter 2: Sophia, Ray

WEARING PAJAMAS BUT NOW WIDE AWAKE, Sophia hung up with Will and scanned her appointment book. She called the office of her food bank board chairperson, who was chief cardiologist, and spoke with his assistant on duty. Sophia sipped coffee and waited on hold while the assistant retrieved the information. Celik was in grave condition, she learned, from years of abuse and neglect. Massive heart failure, unchecked diabetes, clear signs of leukemia, and more. Uncle Ray will be devastated, she thought. I'll have to keep his mind occupied.

Sophia pushed the speed dial button for Ray's home, but there was no answer. Seven a.m. He must be on his rounds already, she thought. She called several bars before tracking down Ray at Dave's Den. She tried to break the news about Celik to him gently. Ray sounded as if he were in shock.

"Uncle Ray, listen, I know how close you are to Celik. I wanted to make sure you're okay and to see if you need anything. Because I'm here for you. Call me if there's anything I can do, alright?"

"No, no, no. You'll never have to worry about me," Ray mumbled.

"I'll see you at the food bank later, and we'll talk then, alright?" asked Sophia.

Sophia hung up. Ray isn't well either, she thought. He's not eating, he lost weight, his color is awful, and he has that persistent cough. He needs to see a doctor. I'll make an appointment later.

She showered and got ready for work. It was a milestone day in the history of the food bank. Sophia prepared herself for the possibility—no, the likelihood—the governor would be a no-show today. Now, with the Celik situation, she faced the likelihood of replacing the food bank's biggest benefactor.

Sophia caught herself. Whenever she felt negative thoughts coming on, she rechanneled them into positive energy. The governor's representatives will be here instead, she thought. For sure, the TV and newspaper cameras will follow, which helps draw attention to our causes at the food bank. If I play it correctly, the publicity will lead to more donations. Especially dependable, sustainable corporate donations.

Corporations like efficiency stories. They like to know their gifts are being well managed.

She put on one of her best suits and applied light makeup for the media cameras. The phone rang and Sophia rushed to answer, thinking it was Ray calling. Instead, it was her mother offering well wishes for the day's event.

"Are you seeing anybody, yet," her mother asked. "You know that I worry about you. It's unhealthy for a young woman to be such a workaholic and neglect her personal life."

So early in the morning with the pressure, Sophia thought. "Thanks for calling, Mom, but I have to run now."

"It's not as simple for a woman, Sophia," her mother continued. "You're almost 28 years old and nearing your crossroads. Women have to decide between a career and a family before it's too late."

"Not now, mother, I have to go. I'll call you later, okay? Goodbye."

Sophia flung back her shoulder-length brown hair, grabbed her purse and work bag, and hurried outside to warm her red, two-seat Pontiac Fiero. I hope Will shows up today, she thought brushing snow from her car. He deserves the recognition. His ideas and hard work are the reason the food bank received honors in the first place. Even if he's wound a little tight, there's a certain quality about him. I wonder if he's in some sort of trouble. Why else would he call me at home at that hour of the morning, looking for \$5,000 if he wasn't in trouble? What can it be? Why is Will so desperate, and for that amount of money?

* * * * *

INSIDE A WOODEN PHONE BOOTH in a bar on The Flats, Ray Schirmherr felt like a stake just pierced his heart. This can't be, he thought. Not now. Not again. Not when things are going so good.

He hung up the phone with Sophia and tried collecting himself. His chest ached and he felt short of breath. He removed his work ball cap, ran his fingers through the last few strands of brown hair on his head, and pulled out a red handkerchief from his green work pants to mop his forehead and face.

Celik rushed to the hospital? What happened? What's wrong? Did he get hurt? Did he get sick? Maybe it's his heart. A man of his size, of his weight, it's hard on a body.

Ray sat alone in the phone booth to absorb the news. All he could do was worry.

I'm too old for this. Celik takes good care of me. He gave me a chance when the mill closed, when there were no jobs. Now what am I supposed to do? To manage his wheezing and his pain, Ray drew in shorter breaths. Maybe it's not so bad. Maybe they're exaggerating. Maybe it's all a bad scare.

Then Ray became angry.

Why am I feeling sorry for myself? That's just being selfish. I'm not the only one going to suffer over this. Everyone in this community is going to feel the pain. Celik's money keeps this town alive—handouts to cover police payroll, pave streets, buy schoolbooks, feed people through the food bank, you name it. Nobody knows that it's Celik because he doesn't want anybody to know. He just tells me to drop off the envelopes. Now it's happening all over again. The best thing for me to do right now is get back to work. That's what Celik would want me to do.

Ray checked the phone booth coin return slot for forgotten change and opened the door. He assured the bartender there was nothing to worry about, and resumed working on the video poker machines behind the curtain. Never before did Ray leave any poker machines unattended after starting the process of counting down points and balancing money. Now, he had to start all over again and keep the machines out of commission longer. Celik always said if you're not making money you're losing money.

Ray performed the same routine on each machine, removing and counting money, arranging bills into \$100 stacks, recording and comparing game counters versus accumulated cash, re-counting money and verifying a second time against machine point counts, counting and comparing money in winner pool envelopes and in envelopes specially marked "Royal Flush" taped inside the machine's back door, and completing entries in his cloth-bound ledger. Ray was careful and precise. Celik often remarked, "Ray, did you type this ledger? I never saw such perfect printing." Ray took great pride in his work. He performed the same task on each of Celik's 40 video poker machines located at The Werks tavern and at 10 other bars and clubs scattered throughout town. Now, shaken by the news, Ray found it impossible to concentrate.

* * * * *

SOPHIA DROVE FROM HER BROWNSTONE on The Patch to the food bank located on the grounds of the former steel mill. She dropped her things in the office and performed a quick walkthrough of the warehouse and production areas. Already, there was a buzz in the air as volunteers, wearing new green T-shirts emblazoned with the food bank logo, prepped the lines for the day's pantry runs.

Within the hour, a black sedan pulled up and out stepped two men wearing neatly trimmed black hair, horned-rimmed eyeglasses, grey flannel suits, white shirts, and power-red ties. Sophia greeted and escorted them to the office for a cup of coffee, but they made no pretense about becoming acquainted. Sophia led them on a tour of the food bank, pointing out it was a converted holding facility where finished steel billets were staged awaiting shipment. She walked the two men through the warehouse, pointing out receiving and pallet breakdown operations, perishable and non-perishable storage locations, the repackaging line, and staging areas for shipping to local pantries.

"Here's a great backdrop for the cameras," said Sophia, walking to the repackaging line. "The governor can work side-by-side with volunteers as they break down bulk packages into units for use by individual families. I'll introduce you to the two volunteers I picked to work with the governor."

The taller advance man said, "That won't be necessary. The governor wants to see the computer systems."

"Of course, what was I thinking?" said Sophia, forcing a smile. "If we're being recognized as the most efficient food bank in the country, then let's show computing and bar codes and automation processes, not manual labor by people. Let's go into the office."

Sophia led them back into the office. It was a makeshift room in the middle of the warehouse, crammed with five desks, two of them supporting desktop computer towers and large monitors. Thick computer printouts were stacked five high atop the filing cabinets, and two large, hand-drawn line graphs depicting donations and distributions were pinned to the bulletin board.

The taller advance men looked at the line graphs. "We won't use that background," he said.

"Is this your top donors list?" asked the shorter advance man, pointing to another print out. "Who's the anonymous donor at the top of the list?"

"It's a private individual who is extremely committed to the area, but one who prefers anonymity, which we respect. The governor surely honors

donor privacy, doesn't he? If you'd like, you can take our donors list with you. It's a public document."

The shorter advance man took out a pen and scribbled notes before leaving the office. The taller advance man helped himself to a cup of coffee and spoke, "A word of advice, Ms. Hrdinka. The governor has a great deal of empathy for the working families of this area. He understands they face challenging times, and is working with the legislature on a number of initiatives. He recognizes the great temptation to want to help them, regardless of the potential sources of assistance. Be careful with whom you associate, Ms. Hrdinka. It's not good for appearance sake and can only lead to trouble."

Sophia knew he alluded to Celik. She smiled wryly and answered, "That's thoughtful advice. I'll take that under advisement. Getting back to today's agenda, after the production line photos, I thought we could introduce the governor to the director of our home foreclosure prevention program. We've successfully turned around nearly 50 potential home foreclosures this past year. It's a program which—"

Interrupted the taller advance man, "The governor's schedule is full today. Perhaps some other time."

Sophia forced another smile and repeated, "Perhaps some other time."

The shorter advance man returned and opened his brief case. "The media are assembling outside now. Here's a copy of the governor's press release."

Sophia quickly scanned it. "It looks like you changed our text quite a bit."

"Some enhancements were made," answered the taller advance man.

Chapter 3: Will, Sophia, Ray

WILL AGAIN LEFT HIS POST OFFICE SORTING STATION for the lobby pay phone, picked up the receiver, hung it back up, and stared outside. *Think!* Where can I get \$5,000 fast? I don't want anything to do with the kind of people who usually have that amount of cash on hand. I don't trust those two Celik lackeys, Munk or Dutch. They'll steal my ideas and cut me out completely. My relatives and friends don't have it. Maybe I can refinance the house, get a home equity loan, or move some money around. No. That takes too long. *Damn!*

Will paced back and forth before picking up the phone receiver and slamming it down. He went back inside to his sorting station and found a letter on the counter addressed to him from a local angel investor. Another rejection slip, he thought. Will opened it and scanned the key words...viability issues...limited market potential...unmitigated risk factors...with regret....Will ripped the letter into small pieces and threw it into the trash. He started on another mail cart, breaking apart bundles of spring outdoor furniture catalogs and sorting them by carrier route.

Ned came over to pick up the catalogs for his route. "How's your mom doing?" he asked.

"About the same," Will answered. "The physical therapist says there's some progress, but I'm not seeing it. We have a nurse's aide with her when I'm not there. Thanks for asking."

Said Ned, "I know it must be hard, being the only caretaker. I was the only adult child living in the area, too, when my mother became sick. It can take a lot out of person."

"Thanks, Ned. We're doing okay right now."

It was six months since the stroke left Will's mother without use of her legs and left arm. Her face was frozen in a sad sigh of despair and her speech was slurred, but otherwise she retained her faculties.

Will sorted through the final bundles and arrived at a solution. I can use Dad's death benefit money and replace it in two weeks, he thought. Mom would kill me if she ever found out. She treats it like gold. "Your father worked over 30 years in the mill for that money," she always said. "He made sure he paid the policy first before anything else, even before buying groceries, because he wanted to make sure you and I were taken

care of in case something happened to him in the mill." Well, Dad died five years ago, and there's still \$20,000 in the bank, untouched, even when we need it. That's more than enough for four poker machines plus cash to pay off big winners. The poker machines will pay for themselves in less than two weeks. I'll pay back the money before Mom finds out. Will felt uneasy, but knew it was his only chance.

Will clocked out at 10 a.m. sharp. He figured he could make the bank withdrawal and arrive in plenty of time for Sophia's food bank event. He had to find a way to smooth things over with her.

* * * * *

THROUGH THE LOADING DOCK DOOR WINDOW, Sophia saw the crowd gathering. She was relieved to see Will in the front row. Ray was there, too, standing off to the side.

The governor's advance men came up to her. "It's time," they said and escorted Sophia outside. She noticed the TV crews were packing up their equipment.

"What's going on?" asked Sophia.

The advance men didn't answer. Up pulled a black limo and out bounded a boyish looking man dressed in a similarly styled gray flannel suit and power-red tie as the advance men.

"I'm Charles House, deputy assistant chief of staff for the governor," he said thrusting his hand toward Sophia. She kept her hands to her side.

"The governor sends his personal regrets. In response to some emergent needs in conducting the people's business, his schedule changed and he is unable to participate in today's activities."

Of course not, she thought, fuming inside. He never planned on coming because there's little political value in connecting with the common people in a non-election year.

"The governor asked me personally to meet with you today on his behalf. He was briefed on your outstanding progress, transforming this abandoned steel plant, this food bank, into the most productive and most cost-efficient operation of its kind in the nation. He's duly impressed."

Sophia feigned another smile. "I'm Sophia Hrdinka, executive director of the food bank. On behalf of all of the patrons, donors, volunteers, board of directors, and employees of the Confluence Food Bank, I'd like you to take back this personal message to the governor: We, too, regret his being a no-show. I take great pleasure in knowing you, Charles House, his deputy

assistant chief of staff, serving as his emissary, will provide a full brief of your visit here today. Frankly, the hungry people of this region look forward to the day when the country's most efficient food bank is completely irrelevant because they can afford to feed themselves. Please tell the governor if he truly cares about area voters, the place to start is investing in pragmatic, grassroots jobs programs and brownfield reclamation. Good day, sir."

Sophia turned and stalked away, entered the food bank, strode directly into the office, and shut the door behind her. Renee, her office assistant, wandered inside with a slice of cake. "It's over all ready? What happened? What's wrong?"

"We're in for tough times ahead," said Sophia. "You ought to start looking for another job."

* * * * *

RAY STOOD OFF TO THE SIDE, unable to hear the conversation between Sophia and the governor's people. From the way she held herself and then turned and stormed off, it was clear something went wrong. He worried about Sophia and searched for her in the office and through the warehouse, and found her outside standing on the loading dock alone with Will. Ray spotted a broom and methodically swept the concrete. He wanted Sophia to notice he was near but didn't want to appear to be nosy. She held herself perfectly still and talked in firm, hushed tones, and Ray noticed her stern glare as Will walked away. She's young and pretty, Ray thought, but she's tough as nails with a temper to boot. It's best to avoid her when she's angry.

Ray slowly made his way over to her. "Never mind those damned politicians, Sophia. They don't have any idea what you've gone through. It's a struggle each day for you and the rest of us, and it's a damn shame to be treated this way. For all you do, it's a rotten shame."

"Oh, that doesn't bother me in the least. I knew they would manipulate the story for their own personal gain. That's politics. The bright side is we benefit from the positive media coverage to help recruit donors and volunteers."

Ray felt himself getting angrier. "It's about doing things the right way. Those people, it's a shame. The rich and powerful. They do whatever the hell they want and get away with it." Ray coughed and cleared his throat.

"When one of us has success, they come in and take all the glory. There's nothing we can do about it. It's not right. It's a shame."

Sophia put her hand on Ray's shoulder. "Uncle Ray, I'm concerned about you. I want you to listen to me."

Ray took a deep breath and held back a cough.

"I know how much you depend on Celik, The Werks, and your routine. I know it's important for you to maintain a sense of normalcy. Uncle Ray, you need to understand things are about to change in a big way. I spoke with the doctor's office again this morning. Celik is in bad shape. He may be dying. Do you understand?"

Ray took another deep breath and muffled his cough, looking away. "I guess there's not much we can do."

"I know it's going to be hard for you. No matter how uncomfortable it is to hear, you have to listen, and you have to accept it. You need to grieve, accept it, let it go, and move on. It's the healthy thing to do."

"It's not that simple, Sophia. When something is a part of your life for many years...I don't know what I'm going to do now."

* * * * *

AFTER THE FOOD BANK EVENT, Ray dutifully continued his rounds in a daze, collecting video poker money from Celik's bars and clubs, but his head and his heart weren't in it.

Celik rushed to the hospital? This can't be real, he thought.

Every hour Ray called The Werks, Celik's main joint, but nobody picked up. He phoned Celik's other associates, Munk, Dutch, and Tony at their homes, but the phone calls rang unanswered. He tried the hospital but there was no information about Celik. The more Ray worried, the more he coughed, and the more he coughed, the more he became short of breath and his chest ached. He felt miserable and kept losing track when counting the video poker machine cash. As his workday dragged on, Ray worried more.

This can't be happening to me. This is just like before. What am I going to do? How am I going to make a living? Celik is good to me. He gave me a job when there were none. Fifteen thousand laid off from the mill and Celik cuts me a break. Now what am I going to do? Where am I going to go at 55 years old?

Maybe Celik isn't that sick. Maybe he has exhaustion, or the flu, or massive indigestion. A man of his size? The way he eats? He must be over

600 pounds. Don't big people get indigestion a lot? All the smoking, coughing, belching. He smells awful.

What happens if he's truly sick? Would The Werks close down? What happens if it's a serious heart attack? Or, say he becomes brain dead? Who takes charge? Celik never would allow Munk to run things. Munk would do something stupid like offering double daily numbers every Saturday. Celik trusts Dutch even less. She'd start taking bets on high school football like she's wanted to do for years. They don't understand that it's video poker bringing in the big money on a regular basis.

What if Celik dies? Lord, there would be chaos. Everything would shut down. It would be like before, like when the mill closed. I have a good life now. What happens to me? Where will I go? What will I do? What will this town do?

It was nearly 8 p.m. as Ray completed his final counts. He carried his vinyl bag containing the collected money and supplies to his Plymouth Reliant K-car. Ray drove toward the hospital and tried reassuring himself.

Celik will be okay. Celik will be fine. He'll get better and things will get back to normal. I'll work harder to make up for any lost time or money until he gets back. It all will work out.

Chapter 4: Ray

HOSPITALS MADE RAY UNCOMFORTABLE. Only bad things ever happen in hospitals, he believed. The shortness of breath returned and his throat and lungs burned from coughing. He took a deep breath and felt tightness in his chest and shoulders as he neared the emergency room desk. The night receptionist looked up from her paperwork at Ray's face, swollen and red from the heavy coughing and wheezing, and asked if he needed medical assistance before she checked her lists, made a phone call, and announced Celik was in ICU. She gave Ray verbal directions, looked closely at him, and then wrote the directions on a slip of paper. Ray thanked her, took the paper, and worried as he trudged in his work boots down the quiet corridor. He took his time to manage his breathing and avoid coughing.

What if Celik doesn't make it, he thought. Munk and Dutch will change things. That's what they'll do, all right. They'll close The Werks. I'll be out of work again. There's no reason to change anything. Everything was going fine until this. It's been a good five years. Good for Munk and good for Dutch, too. Good for everybody. There's no reason to change. Munk and Dutch have to know that. There's no reason to change anything right now.

He followed the written instructions and turned right at the end of the corridor, and then made a sharp left. He could see the ICU at the end of a short hallway behind sliding glass doors. The waiting room was empty, and as Ray sat down, he noticed Munk's work jacket slung over a chair and spotted Munk across the hall in a glass-enclosed conference room.

Munk sat straight and tall as he spoke, his dark brown hair brushed neatly into place. He fashions himself a cover model for a romance novel, Ray thought. I don't see it, but it's probably what got him elected union steward all those years. Sitting quietly alongside Munk was a silver-haired man with eyeglasses, a yellow necktie, and a white lab coat.

Across the table, looking like a couple interrupted from a formal dinner party, sat Dutch and Delores. Munk always joked that Dutch looked like a rundown, wooden-faced Charlie McCarthy puppet without the monocle. Dutch's reddish-brown hair was neatly trimmed and slicked to the side, as usual. She wore a black pinstripe suit and dark red tie with matching red handkerchief in her left breast suit pocket. Delores wore

heavy makeup, with bright blue eye shadow and thick lashes. She had on a white half-length fur coat atop a black dress with white pearls, her blond hair glancing off the shoulder. Both wore somber expressions and leaned back in their chairs, holding hands on Dutch's lap. A notepad and silver ballpoint pen rested on the table in front of Dutch.

The glass sealed in the conversation and Ray couldn't hear what they were saying. Munk spotted Ray, held up an index finger, and pointed for him to stay put in the waiting room.

Ray waited alone with his thoughts until his hips ached from sitting in one place. He stood and looked through the window. Munk was talking to Dutch and Delores, now, and the man Ray presumed to be a doctor was gone. Ray tapped on the glass. Munk looked up and held up his index finger again. Tired of sitting, Ray wandered down the hallway to walk off his stiffness when he bumped into a young nurse turning the corner.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"No, thanks, I'm just waiting."

"Who are you here to see?"

"Celik, Charles A. Celik."

"Well, Mr. Celik is right here. You can visit with him if you wish."

Ray's throat and chest tightened. He hesitated, not knowing what condition Celik might be in. The nurse led him down a short, adjoining hall and into a glass-enclosed room containing the biggest bed Ray ever saw. Ray hardly recognized him; Celik lie motionless, his face was puffy and ashen, his eye sockets were black as soot, and his eyes were locked wide open, staring into space. His white hair was matted against the pillow, and his patchy white beard sprouted wildly in all directions. The bed sheets formed a huge white mound, and his exposed flesh protruded down the side of the bed. Wires and hoses attached Celik to machines, pumps, and receptacles that consumed most of the remaining floor space in the room. Ray cleared his throat.

"There you are. You wandered off," came Munk's nasally voice from behind. He was tall, at nearly six feet four inches, about a half-foot taller than Ray, and regularly used his height to his advantage. Even in his three layers of shirts, coat, work pants, and boots, Munk appeared thin and never developed a middle-aged paunch.

"Did you ever see a bigger bed?" Munk asked. "They had to special order it. It took five hours for the bed to get here. He's breathing better, not laboring as much as before. They cleaned him, too. He was a mess when he arrived here."

They watched and listened to the machines for a few seconds before Munk continued, "Since Celik doesn't have any known family, I'm handling things with the docs, me and Dutch. You saw us talking with the cardiologist. That's probably his main problem right now, his heart, but it's not his only problem. He might have a few upstairs, too," Munk said, tapping his temple. "They're still running tests."

Ray cleared his throat. "What happened?"

"Tony found him sitting at the round booth, sitting upright, like usual, like nothing was wrong. You know, how sometimes lately he dozes off when you're in the middle of a conversation, how he sometimes stops breathing for a couple of seconds. Tony tried waking him, but he didn't respond, he didn't say anything. He just sat there with his eyeballs staring into space the same as he looks now. Tony said he stunk like you wouldn't believe. As if he died, you know what I mean? Tony called the ambulance. They had a heck of a time getting him out. They weighed him here. I don't know how. Do you know he weighs 678 pounds? I would have never guessed. Never. Maybe 620, tops. Anyway, they couldn't get a big enough stretcher to support him—it would have taken a dozen guys to carry him. The firefighters brought in some kind of a forklift, and broke through the front door frame to get him out of The Werks. They rolled him onto a pallet, took the forklift, and dumped him into the back of the ambulance."

Ray asked, "What's going to happen to The Werks, to us, you know, while he's here?"

"Don't worry about it. This is a temporary setback. I talked with Dutch about it. I know what to do. You shouldn't worry yourself about it."

But Ray was worried. "We should keep things the way they are," he said. "Everything's working fine now. There's no reason to change anything."

"Don't worry about it," repeated Munk. "The situation is under control."

Munk looked at Ray. "You don't look so good yourself. Your face is all red and splotchy and you sound like you're wheezing. Are you sweating?"

"I'm fine," said Ray. "Just a bit of a coughing spell."

They stood, watched, and listened for a few minutes as the machines recorded vital information and pumped oxygen, insulin, and medication into Celik.

Munk shook his head and nodded at Celik. "This is the direct result of negligence," he said, talking with his hands, which seemed smaller and

Welcome to Confluence

softer since his days working as a stacker in the mill. "Things should have been taken care of years ago. Instead, they were ignored. Now I have to clean up this mess. We'll be okay. I know what I'm doing. Everything will be fine. Don't worry about it."

Chapter 5: Ray

RAY LEFT THE HOSPITAL and drove straight to The Werks. Never before had he seen the place dark. For more than 50 years, throughout the morning, day, and night shifts, as the mill's furnaces lit up the sky, across the street, the lights inside of The Werks burned day and night. At the end of a hard shift, a steelworker could get an honest drink and a hot meal. Since the mill closed, The Werks became a refuge for laid-off workers to congregate and commiserate.

Taped to the cracked front door of The Werks was a cardboard sign with "Closed" scrawled across. Ray unlocked the door and managed to get inside through the broken doorframe. He carried his vinyl gym bag and carefully shuffled his feet through the darkness until he found the switch for the bar lights. Everything was normal—the bar was clean, the stools stood in a perfect line, the tables and chairs looked fully set up. Even Celik's corner booth looked cleaned and ready for business. Tony must have straightened things up after all of the commotion, Ray thought.

Since the mid-1960s, Celik was a fixture at The Werks, first as a customer, later as owner. After a while, when Celik took control of the place, he built a bedroom on the back so he never had to leave. Celik conducted business from the wide, corner booth in the front dining room. He was large, fiery, dirty, loud, obnoxious, and dangerous. When Celik wasn't chain-smoking cigars, he was eating. In addition to his dining table, he positioned two small tables close by. One table contained the food Celik was about to eat, the other table was for stacking dirty dishes. Input and output. Celik consumed a constant stream of food—burgers, steaks, chops, ribs, chicken, cheesesteak hoagies, boiled eggs, fried potatoes, fried bacon and egg sandwiches, and desserts like ice cream, pies, donuts, cookies, candy, feeding with one hand and gesturing with the other, bellowing orders and obscenities as he chewed, food spewing from his mouth and dripping from his gnarly, matted beard, burping and releasing gas, licking his fingers, and roaring with laughter at the reaction of others. To avoid getting sick to his stomach, Ray avoided looking directly at Celik while he ate. Now, in the hushed darkness of the room, Ray felt a deep sadness come over him.

He pushed the buttons to the office combination lock and went inside. The office was small and cramped, with barely space for the desk, chair, filing cabinet, and lockbox-style safe. From his gym bag, Ray pulled the ten annotated envelopes full of neatly wrapped bills from his collections and dropped them into the lock box slot. He looked at the remaining envelope marked "Ray Pay" containing ten \$20 bills, one bill as payment for each stop on his rounds. He decided against taking it home and instead dropped the "Ray Pay" envelope into the lock box, too, in case it was needed later. He kept the bar lights on as he locked the front door of The Werks behind him.

Ray slid back into his K-car and drove home up the Belgian block surface of Summit Street. Blowing snow covered the street, but there was enough traction for a skilled driver to pass with caution.

Munk said The Werks was going to open again tomorrow morning, Ray thought. Things will get back to normal then. I'll do my rounds Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, as usual, to keep things flowing smoothly.

As the road narrowed and became steeper, Ray snaked around the sunken Belgian blocks, the hidden potholes, and the parked cars with limp side mirrors. Near the top of Summit Street, he slowed and made a three-point turn in order to park facing downward along the concrete public steps.

Ray trudged in his boots across the street to retrieve the snow shovel from his front porch. He pushed the day's blown snow from his sidewalk, the scraping sound of the metal shovel against the concrete echoing down The Slopes in the frozen late night air. He tugged up his pants and caught his breath, finished clearing old Mrs. Crowley's walk next door, and shoveled two flights of steps that cascaded down Summit Street to The Flats below. As Ray finished, his cough returned, and he went inside, removed his boots and hat, and looked in the refrigerator. Nothing looked appealing.

He slumped into the recliner, tired and sore. For the first time in years, he thirsted for a cold beer.

I should have checked on Celik, he thought. I always check in. If I stopped inside The Werks and checked with him, then I might have seen that he was in trouble. Maybe I could have done something. Then maybe he's okay and we aren't in this mess. I don't know.

Ray mopped the sweat from his forehead and unbuttoned his shirt.

I don't trust Munk. He's up to no good. He pushed and pushed for Celik to give him a bigger piece. With Celik sick, Munk is going to try

something. I can feel it. Why didn't I say something? Why didn't I tell Munk to back off and to let things be?

He rubbed his tightened chest and tried to close his eyes, but his own coughing kept him awake.

Why did Dutch avoid talking to me at the hospital? She always has something to say. Instead, she just walked out without saying a word. Why was she in such a hurry? I can't worry about any of it right now. Everything will be okay. It's all a scare. I'll go see Celik in the hospital tomorrow. Celik will set everything straight. Ray dozed off in the recliner, his hands holding his chest.

Chapter 6: Will, Sophia

WITH HIS NEWLY PURCHASED VIDEO POKER MACHINES secured inside the food bank van parked on the narrow alley behind his house, Will locked himself in his bedroom. He sat at his desk and pulled out the list he created on his home computer months before of a dozen potential locations inside and outside of town to place the machines.

This is Celik's town and prospects are limited, he knew. One of the few steelworker bars Celik doesn't control might want a machine. Although my best shot is with joints appealing to a younger crowd.

He went through the list and thought about what to say, wrote a script, rehearsed it, edited it, and rehearsed it three more times before finally feeling ready. After drawing a deep breath and exhaling, Will dialed the taverns on the list. Eventually, he found three takers. Mac's Place, a steelworker bar, agreed to a 50-50 split on total revenues and took two machines. Two of the younger-crowd bars—The East Street Grille & Pub and The Electric Turtle—took one each, with Will getting a 60 percent share. Will promised to deliver and service the machines, and agreed to provide cash prizes. He also agreed to remove the machines immediately and take full responsibility if bars felt pressure from Celik or police.

Relieved and feeling cheerful, Will readied cash prize envelopes for each machine, unlocked his bedroom door, and walked downstairs into the living room where his mother was sitting in her wheelchair in front of the TV with an afghan on her lap and a shawl around her shoulders.

He kissed the top of her head, gave her a big hug, and called out playfully, "How's my girl!"

"Shh. My story's on."

Will leaned over and kissed her cheek. He turned up the TV volume and went into the kitchen to talk with Margie.

"I have a favor to ask. Can you watch Mom for a few hours more? I have some business errands to run."

Margie sighed. "That's twice this week, twice last week, and three times the previous week. I have my own family, you know. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up."

"I know, I know. This is important. I'll pay double for the extra time you spend today. I promise I'll find somebody else to help out."

"You're testing my patience, Will. Go ahead, but I'm leaving at exactly six o'clock."

"You're the best, Margie," Will said, kissed her on the cheek and skipped out the back door. He climbed into the driver's side of the food bank's delivery van and navigated the narrow back streets toward Mac's Place. It turned out to be a great day, he thought. He regretted borrowing the food bank van without Sophia's knowledge or consent. She never would allow it, not for transporting video poker machines. He knowingly and willingly crossed the line. It was clear now there was enough time to get a rental truck, but earlier in the day he worried there was too much to do. Barring traffic, bad weather, or other unavoidable delays, he can finish the machine installations, top off the gas and return the van to the food bank without anyone missing it.

The rest of the afternoon continued just as smooth. The machine installations proceeded quickly and without issue. Bar owners provided good, semi-private spaces, and Will hung around and watched as players tried them. On his way back to the food bank, he fueled the van, and reflected on what he accomplished. He felt highly satisfied. It turned out to be a great day.

Later, Will turned into the food bank parking lot and noticed the office lights still burning. He backed up the van to the loading dock, applied the parking break, and turned off the ignition. He hopped out, closed the door, and found Sophia standing there, waiting for him, arms crossed, and looking mad as hell.

"Did you have any problems moving your furniture, Will?"

"Sophia, I didn't move furniture."

"I know. I know exactly what you did. You lied to me and you deceived me."

Sophia narrowed her eyes and raised her voice. "You put the food bank at risk of being associated with illegitimate enterprises, with illegal gambling activities. Do you even know what a grievous offense this is? To jeopardize government funding, foundation assistance, corporate giving—for what? To feed your own lust for power, for greed?"

She caught him red-handed and there was nothing that Will could do but fess up. "Sophia, you're right. I needed to be upfront with you about my intentions to use the van. I'm truly sorry."

"How dare you put your gambling fantasy above community need!"

Will rubbed his forehead with annoyance. He was in no mood for a morality lecture, especially from someone who took money from Celik. But

now was not the time to earn debate points. "You're right, Sophia, I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too, Will. Sorry you have so much potential, so much talent, and you're wasting it on this boneheaded scheme of yours. Besides the fact that gambling is illegal, there's no redeeming social value whatsoever in what you're doing. How does it benefit the town? It's exploitation, a despicable exploitation, a manipulation of your community, of your own people."

Will felt his face turn red and his internal temperature rising. "Listen, you've made your point. I'm not responsible for anybody except myself. I have to do what's right for me. People are looking for a little amusement, to forget their problems for a while, and who knows, maybe get lucky and win a few bucks. Who am I to get in their way?"

"Stop being selfish, Will. Stop trying to justify a wrong. You know you're better than that."

Will felt himself losing control. "I'm not being selfish. It's not wrong. I'm just a businessman, giving people what they want. What's wrong with that? That's capitalism. That's America. If not me, than somebody else will do it."

"You know it's wrong, Will, by your sneaking around you knew it was wrong. Stop embarrassing yourself and admit it."

Will shot back, "No, I won't, because it's not wrong. Not being truthful with you, that's wrong, and I am sorry about that. I'm not sorry for trying to better myself, for trying to make something of myself. With nobody's help, I might add."

Sophia tilted her head to the side and replied, "You're right, Will. Nobody helped you. Nobody gave you a shot at trying your computer ideas. Nobody gave you a chance to try your concepts here at the food bank. Now, that same nobody is telling you don't bother coming around anymore. Because I can't allow the food bank to associate with gamblers."

Sophia took back the van keys from his hand. "Goodbye, Will."

Will's heart dropped. He stood silently as Sophia turned and walked away. He knew what he wanted to say, what he wanted to scream aloud: "Don't you understand! I'm doing this because it's the only path left in this town for our generation! There is no other hope! We have to grab this and ride it as fast and far as we can before everything crashes and burns! You, of all people, have to be able to see that, too!" Instead, he stood frozen and silently watched her disappear through the warehouse door.

Will turned and kicked the van tire hard. He marched over to his dad's 1980 gray Chevy Malibu, opened the front driver's side door and slammed it hard. He opened the door and slammed it three more times. Then he stalked out of range of the food bank security lights and into the darkness of the abandoned steel mill yard, his hard, fast breath steaming in the night air. He screamed to himself, how can I be so stupid, so shortsighted! There was enough time to rent a truck. Now I'm screwed.

"Why did I do something so idiotic!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. Will walked from the darkness back to his dad's car. He fired the car's ignition and drove toward home. I didn't have a choice, he thought. I didn't have time to rent a truck. Either I use the food bank van or I lose the opportunity. It's that simple. Now, I have to find a way to make everything work.

Will drove to his father's row house on The Flats. Each row house was indistinguishable to outsiders from the next except for the awnings or paint jobs or window treatments. He parked out front and went inside.

"She hasn't felt good since you left," Margie told him, already rising and putting on her coat. "I tried to put her to bed, but she wanted to stay up and see you."

"Thanks, Margie. I'll see you in the morning."

He closed and locked the door behind her. Will's mother was sitting up in the wheelchair in front of the TV in her bedroom. He kissed her on the cheek. "I wanted to stay up and see you," she told him earnestly.

"Yes, I know," Will answered. "Did you have a good day?"

"So-so. Not much different. Lots of aches and pains."

"It's a good day any time bad things don't happen," Will said. "The physical therapist will be here tomorrow. I'll try to stop by for that. Here, let's get you dressed and ready for bed." He pulled out a green flannel nightgown from her dresser and put it on the bed.

"No, the pink one. I want the pink one."

"Okay, the pink one it is," Will said. He lifted her from the wheelchair to the bed. She felt lighter to him than the 102 pounds recorded during her last doctor's visit. He helped dress her in the pink nightgown. She held him tight around the neck.

"I'm so proud of you," she told him. "You've grown into such a fine young man and done so well. Your father would be proud. He never wanted you to work in the mill. He always wanted better for you. He worked hard so you can have it easier than him. I wish he would have lived to see you finish college. He would have liked that."

"I know, Mom. Look, I know that you're not feeling well. You get some sleep and you'll feel better in the morning. We'll talk then, okay? Good night." Will kissed her on her forehead. "Here's the TV remote control. Not too loud, okay?"

He dimmed the lights and closed the door part way. In the kitchen, he made himself a ham and cheese sandwich, poured a glass of milk, and sat at the table with his feet resting on the opposite chair.

There was a limited opportunity, he thought. Acting quickly and decisively was critical to success. It was the right thing to do. I'll pay back the loan I took from Dad's account in about a week. Nobody will ever miss it. To get back in favor with Sophia, I'll donate a generous sum to the food bank. Four machines, \$250 gross revenue per machine, per day. After payouts and splitting revenue with the taverns, my gross is roughly \$750 per day. In about two years, I can raise over \$547,000. That's a good amount of seed money for some projects. To hell with all of those idiot angel investors and their rejection letters.

Will finished his sandwich and checked on his mother, who was clicking through the TV channels. He went into his bedroom and turned on the computer. He worked on his business plan for more than an hour before he unplugged the line from the telephone and plugged it into the back of the computer. He walked into the kitchen for another glass of milk, listening for the familiar screeching, and bong-bonging sounds of the modem connecting to his university electronic mail account. There was no response to the proposal he sent the previous week, and no new interesting posts on listserv accounts. He shut down the computer, reconnected the phone line, brushed his teeth, and went into his bedroom to sleep.

Twenty-thousand dollars turned into \$547,000, he thought. It's a nice return over two years. Twenty-thousand dollars isn't much money. Mom thinks it is. She's still counting in Depression-era dollars. "Dad's money," she calls it. She believes \$5,000 can pay for four years of college. I was lucky to finish three years without taking on debt. I was lucky to find a post office job, even with all of its mindless work rules and negative energy. Most of my high school classmates who might have followed their dads into the mill instead joined the military or moved away to find jobs. Those who stayed were sucked into the malaise. Just like their fathers.

Honestly, it's not the amount of money, it's the source of the money, where it came from, Dad's life insurance policy. What good is money—or any resource—if it isn't used? It's like the cans of vegetables, soups, and

pasta that Mom stockpiled and never used. What's the point of having it when it's not to be used? It makes no sense.

He rose from his bed and checked on his mother. She was sound asleep. He turned off the TV, returned to his bed, and his thoughts turned to Sophia.

The time spent working with her on the food bank project was the happiest of his life. They worked closely together for many long afternoons and nights. She was much more than a beautiful face and toned body. She was interesting and smart like nobody else Will knew. Analytical and creative. Left brain and right brain, unified by an uncommon sense, great business instincts, and strong core values. Those brown, smoky eyes and gorgeous smile. They spent a lot of time talking about her work with the food bank, why she returned to Confluence despite offers from headhunters to work and live in Washington, or the Silicon Valley, Austin, Denver, Boston, or elsewhere. He was fascinated by her analysis of the demise of the valley's steel-industrial base, her contempt for the conspiring corporate, government, and church elites who sold out the region to maximize personal profits at great human cost, her disdain for the power-hungry corruption and ineptitude of local labor and civic leaders, so busy squabbling over petty politics as to render themselves impotent, her beliefs in the power and goodness of the human spirit buried deep within the "current cloak of malaise," as she called it, and her burning quest to nurture the people's psyche back to health. And he often thought about what it would be like to sleep with her.

I blew it with her, he thought.

Will punched his pillow hard. Then he did it again and again.

How can I be so shortsighted? I should have rented a truck. I had the cash. I had the time. I should have thought it through more. Now it's hopeless. I'm screwed with her. He lied awake for a long time before falling asleep.

* * * * *

I'M SO ANGRY I could scratch his eyes out, Sophia screamed to herself. Why would he put the food bank at risk? Why would he do this *to me*? I can't stand to even think about him!

She stood inside the food bank warehouse, composing herself, before walking into the office where Renee waited with her coat on.

"Well?" What did he say?"

"He did it. He did it, just like I said. He took our van to haul video poker machines," said Sophia. "He's nothing but a wannabe gambling kingpin."

"Did he tell you straight out that he took the van?"

"Oh, sure. But how could he lie to me when I'm standing there confronting him face to face?"

"That's disappointing," said Renee. "At least he's honest, not like a lot of other guys."

"He knows how I feel about gambling. We talked about it before. And he goes and does this anyway. Why?"

"Why do men do anything they do? Their behavior defies description sometimes. You're still interested in him, aren't you?"

"I'm so angry right now... I don't want to talk about him."

"He is ambitious and confident, which is attractive in a man. He's kind of cute, too. Besides, I think he has a thing for you."

Sophia was taken aback. "What makes you say that?"

"The way he looks at you."

"You mean he checks me out?"

"No, not that way. It's different. It's the way his voice and demeanor change when you walk into a room. It's the way he'll steal a glance at you when you're working together at the computer, or when you're talking on the phone or walking through the warehouse. I wonder what he's thinking."

"He's probably plotting against me."

"Oh, Sophia, don't be so hard core about this. There obviously was a reason he jeopardized your trust and relationship. You have to find out why. You have to ask him."

"That's impossible since I banished him from the food bank."

"Wow. That's harsh."

Sophia dialed the phone. "Anyway, I don't have time to talk right now. I have to check on Ray. He's worried sick over Celik," she said.

Renee grabbed her purse, waved her hand, mouthed good night, and left.

The phone at The Werks didn't answer. Sophia called Ray's house but the phone didn't answer there either. Maybe he's at the hospital with Celik, she thought, scanning the piles of work folders on her desk. It was nearly 8 o'clock and she didn't feel like being alone at home, not tonight.

I'll dwell on the whole Will thing, she thought.

She sat down at her desk with her pile of papers.

If he truly is interested in me, why sneak around like he did? He knows how I feel about gambling. He knew I'd find out. Why do it anyway and jeopardize our relationship? It makes no sense.

She tried to put it out of her mind by going through the folders, but her mind and her heart weren't interested. She tried calling Ray's house again but he didn't pick up.

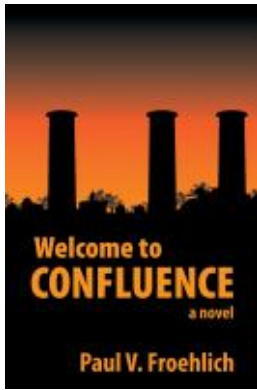
I'll check on him tomorrow morning, she thought.

She shut off the computer system that Will installed, turned on the security system that Will implemented, and drove to her home on The Patch knowing it would be a long night.

Inside her brownstone on The Patch, Sophia sunk into her couch feeling exhausted. The day's disappointments—the Celik news, the governor no-showing, and Will's violation of trust—made her weary, and she resolved to release the problems of the day to her subconscious mind and allow it to come up with a solution on its own. Sophia sat on her couch with pita bread and hummus and wine and listened to the phone ring out through to the answering machine. It was her mother calling, and Sophia was in no mood to answer her mother's usual questions. *Are you seeing anyone right now? Why not? Do you know it's not good for your health to spend all of your time on work? You're 28 years old. Time is running out. Most girls your age are already married and have given their parents grandchildren. You know with my condition, things can quickly deteriorate for me, don't you?*

Sophia heard it often enough that she knew what to expect and was comfortable handling those questions.

Mom is resilient and stubborn, she thought. I guess the apple doesn't fall from the tree, she smiled, and decided to return the call the following workday because her mother generally didn't pry as much when Sophia was at the office.



In the fictional Western Pennsylvania town of Confluence, it's been five years since the steel mills went quiet for good. Twentysomethings Sophia and Will are passionately at odds about saving their rusting hometown. When the town's secret benefactor dies, they suddenly find themselves battling gamblers, opportunists, and entrenched moneyed interests. Coming together, Sophia and Will struggle against fear and hope, conflict and courage, treachery and devotion, tragedy and redemption, and loss and love.

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