

The First Two Pages: “Red Flag” by Gregory S. Fallis
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An Essay by Gregory S. Fallis

“Red Flag” is the story of a young man who, having survived a mass murder, finds himself a couple of years later in a situation where he has a chance to possibly prevent a similar mass shooting. The would-be mass murderer has broken no law, so law enforcement can’t act. In fact, under existing state laws he’s legally eligible to buy a semi-automatic rifle and to openly carry it. The law would allow him to buy a semi-auto rifle, openly carry it to a public venue, and he wouldn’t violate any law until he aimed the weapon at his intended victims.

None of this is overtly presented in the first two pages of “Red Flag.”

The opening scene depicts the protagonist—Porter—sitting in a favorite coffee shop, reading a book, casually eavesdropping on a conversation at a nearby table. It’s his preferred coffee shop because the baristas “knew a bit of his history, didn’t make a fuss about it” and because it allowed him “to be around regular people without having to actually deal with them.” The coffee shop is a sort of sanctuary for him.

The conversation Porter overhears is between two young mothers, one of whom is worried about her daughter, who has become fascinated with a small ant colony on their sidewalk. The child has been feeding the ants because “they never get a day off” and she wants to help make their lives easier and better. Her mother finds the behavior

strange and is worried about her.

The story's opening scene is deliberately light and quiet, but it serves an important purpose. I wanted the reader to understand Porter is NOT regular people, that he has something in his past (surviving the mass murder) that sets him apart, and that while he's semi-comfortable in his self-isolation, he still feels a need to be near 'normal' people.

I also used the scene to introduce the theme of a mother worried about a child's strange behavior. Later, the reader learns of another mother who is worried about a child—in this case a woman who fears her stepson may be planning to commit a mass murder. Knowing Porter's history, she hopes he can help her find a way to prevent this from happening.

The scene also introduces the notion of somebody who wants to help, who is trying very hard to find some way to help, but doesn't quite know how to go about it. Although Porter never connects his efforts with those of the daughter who wants to make life easier for ants, he finds himself thinking of her and the ants periodically throughout the story. The reader, it's hoped, will see the connection.

Finally, I used the scene to establish the coffee shop as a haven of sorts for Porter. Near the end of the story, the reader learns that particular coffee shop is the target of the potential mass shooting.

The quietness and apparent triviality of the opening scene—the first two or three

pages of the story—eases the reader into a story that becomes unsettling and disturbing.

The First Two Pages of “Red Flag”

“I’m worried about Sophie.”

“You’re her mom. You’re supposed to worry about her. She’s what, six years old?”

Porter, alone at a table in the Cup & Bean Coffee Shop, stopped reading his book. He looked out the window; it was still raining softly.

“She’s feeding ants.”

“What do you mean, feeding ants?”

Porter risked a quick glance. Two women about his age, late 20s, casually dressed. Probably came straight from the fitness center down the street. That time of day, the clientele ran mostly to young mothers and students from the community college.

“She takes crumbs out to the sidewalk where there’s an ant nest...is that what you call it? A nest? Doesn’t matter. She drops the crumbs by the nest so the ants won’t have to work so hard to find food.”

“Aw, that’s really sort of sweet.”

Porter was a regular at the Cup & Bean. He frequented other neighborhood coffee shops, but the Cup & Bean was his base. It was close to his apartment, busy without being *busy*, quiet without being too quiet. The baristas knew him, knew a bit of his history, didn’t make a fuss about it. It was probably the only coffee shop in Lansing, Michigan that knew how to texture the milk to make the froth for a cortado.

Coffee shops gave him the chance to be around regular people without having to actually deal with them. They were also a great place to overhear conversations. Porter had become an enthusiastic eavesdropper. And the name Sophie was so close to Sofia, how could he *not* eavesdrop?

“Sophie says ants never get a day off from work. What sort of kid worries about the working hours of ants?”

The door opened. Adrian Beard walked in, wearing a suit and tie. He shook and folded his umbrella, spotted Porter, nodded, and stopped at the counter to order.

“I think it’s cute,” Sophie’s mom’s friend said.

“Cute,” Sophie’s mom said. “I think it’s weird. That’s all she’s interested in. Ants and bugs. It’s just...weird.”

“Thanks for meeting me,” Beard said. He hung his umbrella on the back of an unused chair. The barista brought him a large coffee and a cinnamon roll the size of a toaster.

“Right there,” Beard said, nodding at the roll, “that’s probably eighty percent of my allowed carbs.”

“Allowed by whom?” Porter asked.

“My doctor. My wife. Carb-haters, both of them. They conspire against me.”

Porter wasn’t entirely sure what carbohydrates did or why Beard’s wife and doctor might be opposed to them. He didn’t much care. Beard hadn’t come to the coffee shop to talk about his diet.

“So, what’s up?” Porter said.

“Got a situation,” Beard said. He studied the cinnamon roll for a moment before biting into it.

“How bad is it?” Porter asked.

Beard took a second bite. “Glad my wife isn’t here. Or my doctor. The situation? I don’t know how bad it is. Could be real bad.”

“She calls them ‘my ants’,” Sophie’s mom said. “I don’t know. You think I should have her see somebody?”

“I figure if a guy’s financial advisor wants to meet face to face,” Porter said, “it’s not for a friendly chat. So, how bad is it?”

Beard made a face. “No, it’s not...you’re fine. Your finances are fine. Better than fine. I wish I had your financial situation. No, this isn’t anything to do with you.”

“You wanted to meet me to talk about a situation that doesn’t have anything to do with me?” Porter said.

“Yes. Well, no. My situation has to do with your situation. Sort of. It’s got to do with what happened to you.”

After a moment, Porter said, “I’m sure you think you’re making sense.”

“Probably just a phase,” Sophie’s mom’s friend said. “She’ll grow out of it.”

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Gregory S. Fallis has been a medic in the military, a counselor in the Psych/Security unit of a prison for women, and a licensed private detective specializing in criminal defense investigation. He taught undergraduate courses in criminology and sociology at American University in DC and Fordham University in Manhattan. He’s published both fiction and nonfiction books dealing with aspects of criminality and investigation. He also spent a few years writing storylines for an online fantasy game, and for several

years he taught the advanced Mystery Writing workshop for the Gotham Writers Workshop. Now he just rides bikes and shoots photographs and talks to strangers.