

A WORKING MANUAL FOR ROMANCE REVISION

The 9-Draft Romance Revision *Workbook*

Nine focused passes. One job per draft. The actual edits I used to revise *Unassisted* from a contract pressure draft into the published Ice and Instinct opener.

09

FOCUSED PASSES

14

PRINTABLE PAGES

01

JOB PER DRAFT

00

Each pass gets one job. Stop when edits start to circle.

Revision fails the same way every time. You sit down to fix the chapter bothering you, and three hours later you have rewritten the dialogue, repaced the sex scene, second-guessed the third-act breakup, and changed your hero's eye color twice. The book is no closer to landing.

Do not polish the sentence if the scene is still lying about what the romance is.

Each pass in this workbook gets one job. That is the whole trick. Print one copy before a full-manuscript pass. Print single pages when a specific scene keeps resisting. The filled examples are real. They were the notes that pivoted Unassisted from one book into another.

IF YOU FEEL LOST

Start with Draft 1 and 2. A weak premise or soft barrier makes every later fix unstable.

IF SCENES FEEL FLAT

Start with Draft 3, 5, and 8. Flat romance lacks body evidence or character defense.

IF YOU KEEP TWEAKING

Start with Draft 9. Lateral edits mean the book is asking you to stop.

THE WORKING PATTERN

01 Diagnose the layer

Name the one problem this pass is allowed to solve.

02 Collect evidence

Mark chapters, lines, scenes, repeated gestures that prove the problem.

03 Choose the pass

Rewrite only the layer in front of you. Leave prettier sentences alone.

04 Stop clean

When edits circle back to where they started, close the file.

01/09

QUICK REFERENCE / MAP

The nine draft map.
The point is clean separation.

You may not need nine full drafts. Use this map as nine possible passes. The point is not the number. The point is which one job each pass is allowed to solve. The order below is the sequence Unassisted needed.

01

Premise Honesty

Find the romance you are actually writing, not the one the outline promised.

02

Real Barrier

Make the obstacle carry consequence, not only mood or delay.

03

Emotional Engine

Find the object, job, injury, room, or ritual that carries intimacy.

04

Starting Line

Open where the reader feels pressure, not where the writer needs setup.

05

Character Defense

Name how each lead stays safe, then make love break the defense.

06

Voice Behavior

Replace explained emotion with noticed detail, action, avoidance.

07

Truth Access

Let the couple speak honestly inside the rules that constrain them.

08

Physical Proof

Touch, silence, movement, image carry what explanation used to carry.

09

Stop Point

Notice when revision stops improving the book and starts disturbing it.

WHEN I RAN THIS ON UNASSISTED

Drafts 1 and 2 told me the premise was lying. Drafts 3 and 4 found the shape. Drafts 5 and 6 found the voices: Elena's clinical defense, Declan's stripped POV. Drafts 7 and 8 found the honesty: off the record permission, no flinch as proof. Draft 9 was the one where I almost broke the manuscript. I stopped just in time.

Premise and barrier.

DRAFT 1 / PREMISE HONESTY

What is the living pressure?

If you have to explain the setup before the romance sounds interesting, the premise may not be carrying enough pressure yet.

One-sentence promise

UNASSISTED *A hockey captain hiding a degenerating shoulder meets the new athletic therapist whose hands tell him the truth before her voice does.*

Scene that feels most alive

DRAFT 3 ENTRY *The first treatment session. Elena's palm on the posterior capsule. Declan does not flinch.*

Scene that exists only because the outline wanted it

CUT, DRAFT 3 *The press conference where management frames Elena as the leak. Felt important on the outline. Was external noise.*

DRAFT 2 / REAL BARRIER

What consequence is real?

A romance barrier has to cost something. If the couple could choose each other with no serious consequence, the book is delaying, not resisting.

What keeps them apart?

UNASSISTED *Morality clause. Licensing board. Therapist code. The kiss ends her career.*

What would each lead lose?

STAKES *Elena: license, second chance she rebuilt at thirty-one. Declan: the only person who treats his body honestly.*

What would a reader call fake?

CUT AS FAKE *A journalist who could simply cover a different team. No real cost. Replaced with morality clause.*

PREMISE EVOLUTION Contract of Ice to Unassisted

BEFORE External management pressure. A journalist investigates. Press conference frames her as the leak. Truth surfaces through institutional process.

AFTER A captain who has made himself unreadable meets a therapist whose clinical access makes him legible against his will. The romance happens in the body, in the way she does not flinch.

03/04 Engine and starting line.

A romance needs a repeated pressure system that carries plot and intimacy at the same time. Engines are sub-genre coded. Hockey romance: the rink, the injury, the dressing room. Small town: the bakery, the rent, the church. Dark romance: the deal, the debt, the door. In Unassisted the engine is the shoulder. Every rehab session does double work.

ENGINE IN UNASSISTED

The shoulder. A labral tear is plot (rehab schedule, season at stake, possible career end) AND intimacy (clinical touch, body honesty, the no-flinch test). Elena's medical vocabulary becomes the romantic register. He says *posterior capsule*. She hears him. She says *I think we have some work to do*. They both know what she means.

DRAFT 3 PIVOT, WORKING NOTES

Your book's repeated engine

Three scenes where it changes meaning

DRAFT 4 / STARTING LINE AUDIT

Where does the book really start?

Setup is useful to the writer. Pressure is useful to the reader. Cut toward the first moment that changes the relationship.

Current first scene

First real pressure

Pages before pressure

Setup to move later

New opening test

STARTING LINE EVOLUTION Where does the book really start?

BEFORE

Thirty pages of training camp setup before the injury. Beta reader margin note on page 4: when does the book start?

AFTER

"The shoulder lied at forty-five degrees. Declan rolled it through the first arc slow, controlled, the way the protocol sheet taped to the wall said to. The grind started. Not pain, exactly. Worse. A mechanical wrongness."

05/06 Character defense and voice.

Guarded characters get compelling when their defenses shape every choice on the page. Not when they tell the reader they are guarded. Not when the narration explains the wound. The defense has to be in the hands, the silences, the way they pour coffee. Below: Elena and Declan, the leads of *Unassisted*, both running their own version of "do not flinch."

LEAD A / ELENA MARLOWE

Defense profile

What do they do to stay safe?

FILLED *Clinical exactness. Medical vocabulary. Structured 12 to 18 word sentences. Self-correcting revision pattern: first thought, correction, real thought.*

What does love make harder to protect?

FILLED *Her professional register, the only register she trusts. Touching him as a therapist becomes touching him as a woman who knows where the damage lives.*

What would they never admit directly?

FILLED *That the institutional betrayal at sixteen taught her the seer becomes the problem. Softness is not absent. Softness is guarded.*

LEAD B / DECLAN ROURKE

Defense profile

What do they do to stay safe?

FILLED *Stillness. Watching. Says less than he knows. Catalogues rooms: exits, equipment, light. Reads deflection before words.*

What does love make harder to protect?

FILLED *The body he has been compensating for since the rookie year betrayal. Elena's hand on the posterior capsule asks him to stop guarding.*

What would they never admit directly?

FILLED *That his shoulder and his silence are the same defense. The labral tear is a man pretending nothing hurts for ten years.*

DRAFT 6 / DECLAN POV STRIP **Cut 40 percent of his internal monologue.**

BEFORE *He was nervous about the new therapist. He did not want her to see how badly he had been compensating. He felt exposed, the way he always felt exposed when someone read his body.*

AFTER **He set his bag down. Counted the protocol bullets. Twelve. He rolled the shoulder a quarter turn before she was looking. The grind was a quarter louder. He did not think about it. He thought about the way she had set her bag down. Both straps. Even tension.**

I do not write misunderstandings. If a conflict could be resolved by one clear conversation, it is not a conflict, it is a plot device dressed up in a fight. Forbidden romance has a different problem. The leads have real reasons not to say the true thing. Morality clause. Brother's best friend rule. The wedding next week. They also have to say true things or the book never lands. The off the record register is the way through.

*The confession is not always the scene.
Sometimes the scene is the permission to confess.*

How the register shifts

The shift from on the record (professional, careful) to off the record (true, specific) happens through a line, an acknowledgment, or a physical signal. In Unassisted it is often a pause before a clinical phrase, where Elena chooses to say something honest in medical vocabulary.

The off the record moment is not a device. It is the entire romance. The book is not about when Declan and Elena get physical. It is about when they have permission to be honest. That moment is worth twenty pages of buildup.

FILLED EXAMPLE / LATE ACT 2

Elena teaches Declan a 4-7-8 breathing count, framed as clinical pain management. She uses it on herself. The parallel is the permission. She is not telling him she struggles. She is teaching him her survival mechanism inside the only register that is hers.

"In four. Hold seven. Out eight. It is the count I use when I cannot sleep." She did not say cannot sleep at night. She did not say since I was sixteen. The count was the confession.

OFF THE RECORD TECHNIQUE, UNASSISTED

AUDIT

Where does on the record break?

What permission lets your couple tell the truth?

What rule are they still obeying?

What word, gesture, or pause signals the shift?

TEST

Off the record moment

- The character could have stayed inside the rule and chose not to.
- The honest line uses the language they trust, not the language they confess in.
- The other character recognizes the shift before answering.
- The next scene cannot be the same after this.

The body outruns the mind.

After Draft 7 builds the permission, Draft 8 cuts the explanation. Touch, silence, movement, image carry what dialogue used to carry. If your spice scenes work in isolation but the relationship is the same after, you have hot scenes and a flat romance. Not the same book.

THE NO-FLINCH MOMENT, UNASSISTED

She put her hand on his bad shoulder. Not as a therapist. As the woman who knew where the damage lived. He did not flinch. The absence moved through him like a tide. For three years his shoulder had flinched at every touch that was not his own. Her palm against the posterior capsule where the labral tear lived. No flinch.

THE SHOULDER IS THE EMOTIONAL EPICENTER

PHYSICAL PROOF TEST

What changed in the room?

- Touch changes trust, power, access, or restraint.
- Silence carries meaning instead of waiting for dialogue.
- Movement proves what the narration wants to explain.
- The aftermath changes the next scene.

Current explained emotion

Physical proof to replace it

CHAPTER 17 / THE FULL DOOR Draft 7 to Draft 8 / 1,300 words cut.

BEFORE 3,400 words. Anatomically correct, emotionally charged, fully narrated by two people thinking in complete sentences.

AFTER 2,100 words. Internal monologue fragmented. Sensory detail carries more weight than emotional analysis. The cut 1,300 words were Elena and Declan explaining to each other what was happening. You do not need to explain what is happening if you trust the reader to feel it.

After an intimate scene, ask what changed. Did trust change? Did power change? Did one guarded character let the other person closer? If not, the scene is hot but it is not yet doing story work.

Stop point.

The final pass is not the brave one. It is the one where you can tell the difference between better and different. You will reach a draft where every change you make on Tuesday gets reverted on Thursday. That draft is asking you to stop. The book is ready. You are not.

LATERAL EDIT DETECTOR

Mark each that applies.

- I changed a sentence and later restored the original.
- I am swapping synonyms without changing meaning.
- I am fixing discomfort that belongs to the scene.
- I am revising because I am afraid to stop.

Two or more checked: close the file.

READ ALOUD PASS

Mark only real problems.

Page or chapter

What broke when spoken aloud?

Fix or leave?

SIGNAL

MEANING

ACTION

SIGNAL	MEANING	ACTION
Scene still hides the truth	Real problem	Revise the layer
Sentence sounds clumsy aloud	Local problem	Fix once
Word change circles back	Lateral edit	Stop
Fear of release drives the note	Not craft	Close the file

THE MIRROR TEST FROM UNASSISTED

CH 1 OPEN "The shoulder lied at forty-five degrees."

CH 27 CLOSE "The shoulder that had lied at forty-five degrees told the truth at every angle now. Not because it was healed. Because the man wearing it had stopped asking it to lie."

SAME LOCATION, SAME MOTIF, TRANSFORMED MEANING. WHEN THE MIRROR LANDS ON ITS OWN, THE BOOK IS ASKING YOU TO STOP.

Cut

A scene being beautiful is not the same as belonging.

Deleted pages are not failures if they teach you what the book is not. Use this page when you are tempted to keep a scene the romance has outgrown.

CUT PRESSURE / CONTRACT OF ICE

External, institutional, news-cycle

Morality clause language at the table. A journalist investigating. Management framing the therapist as the leak in an emergency press conference. The captain suspecting her. The truth surfacing through institutional process.

The stakes were sharp, but the danger stayed outside the body.

FINAL PRESSURE / UNASSISTED

Internal, embodied, in the room

Declan's shoulder and Elena's clinical precision carrying the forbidden slow burn in the room. Touch, restraint, reaction, and consequence.

The barrier became touch, restraint, reaction, and consequence.

YOUR DELETED SCENE

What did it prove?

Scene title or chapter

Why you love it

Why the book may not need it

REPLACEMENT PRESSURE

What carries the job now?

Emotion the scene was trying to prove

Cleaner scene, object, gesture, or silence

Keep, cut, or repurpose?

FILLED EXAMPLE / THE BROTHER SUBPLOT

Draft 2 had a younger-brother subplot. Twelve thousand words of inherited talent and the loneliness of being the family success story. A Thanksgiving scene I cried at. Cut every word in Draft 3. Declan needed isolation: no family safety net, no parallel confidant, nobody who could receive the truth off the clock. The brother was structurally in the way of that isolation. I miss him the way you miss someone you used to know.

WORKING NOTES, DRAFT 3

Diagnose before you rewrite.

Use one copy per scene that feels almost right. Do not rewrite until the scene can answer these questions. Below: a filled example using the no-flinch moment from Unassisted.

SCENE IDENTITY

Chapter and scene

FILLED *Unassisted, Ch 15. The no-flinch moment.*

What changes by the end?

FILLED *Declan's body stops guarding for the first time in three years. Elena registers the absence and chooses not to name it.*

Whose body or silence carries the scene?

FILLED *Declan's shoulder. The decision not to flinch. Elena's silence after.*

SCENE PRESSURE

What does the POV character think this scene is about?

FILLED *Declan thinks the scene is a clinical assessment.*

What is it actually about?

FILLED *Declan deciding to let one person know exactly where the damage lives, and surviving the choice.*

What should be cut first?

FILLED *The interior line where Declan tells the reader he has been waiting for this. Cut. The body outruns the mind.*

TEST	YES / NO	EVIDENCE
The scene changes the relationship.		<i>Yes. Trust shifts from professional to personal without a sentence.</i>
The barrier is present without being explained.		<i>Yes. The morality clause is implicit in every clinical phrase.</i>
The emotion appears in action or image.		<i>Yes. The absence of the flinch carries the change.</i>
The next scene cannot be the same after this.		<i>Yes. Both characters share a fact neither can pretend not to know.</i>

Three or four answers yes: the scene is doing story work. Polish it. Two or fewer: the scene is decorative. Move the change in, or move the scene out.

12

Write in the pass before you rewrite the page.

Use this page after reading the filled examples. The example pages show the move. This page gives your manuscript room to answer back.

PASS	PROBLEM TO SOLVE	EVIDENCE FROM THE DRAFT	REVISION DECISION
01	PREMISE HONESTY _____ _____ _____	SCENE THAT PROVES IT _____ _____ _____	KEEP, CUT, OR CHANGE _____ _____ _____
02	REAL BARRIER _____ _____ _____	CONSEQUENCE ON PAGE _____ _____ _____	MAKE IT COST MORE _____ _____ _____
03	EMOTIONAL ENGINE _____ _____ _____	OBJECT, ROOM, RITUAL, BODY _____ _____ _____	REPEAT WITH NEW MEANING _____ _____ _____
04	STARTING LINE _____ _____ _____	FIRST REAL PRESSURE _____ _____ _____	OPEN LATER, SHARPER _____ _____ _____

RULE FOR THIS PAGE

Do not make prose decisions here. Make pressure decisions. The sentence can be beautiful after the scene knows what it is doing.

13

Track the character, the body, and the stop point.

This page is for the passes that are easy to overthink. Write the evidence first. If there is no evidence, the problem may be a feeling, not a revision task.

PASS	PROBLEM TO SOLVE	EVIDENCE FROM THE DRAFT	REVISION DECISION
05	CHARACTER DEFENSE _____ _____ _____ _____	GESTURE, AVOIDANCE, REGISTER _____ _____ _____ _____	MAKE LOVE TEST IT _____ _____ _____ _____
06	VOICE BEHAVIOR _____ _____ _____ _____	EXPLAINED EMOTION TO CUT _____ _____ _____ _____	REPLACE WITH BEHAVIOR _____ _____ _____ _____
07	TRUTH ACCESS _____ _____ _____ _____	RULE, PRIVACY, PERMISSION _____ _____ _____ _____	LET HONESTY HAPPEN SAFELY _____ _____ _____ _____
08	PHYSICAL PROOF _____ _____ _____ _____	TOUCH, SILENCE, MOVEMENT _____ _____ _____ _____	MAKE THE NEXT SCENE DIFFERENT _____ _____ _____ _____
09	STOP POINT _____ _____ _____ _____	LATERAL EDIT OR REAL ISSUE _____ _____ _____ _____	FIX ONCE OR CLOSE THE FILE _____ _____ _____ _____

Pick three. Then close the file.

A pass that tries to fix everything fixes almost nothing. Pick three. Define each. Mark the evidence. Then close the workbook and open the manuscript.

PASS	TARGET PROBLEM	CHAPTERS	EVIDENCE	DECISION
01				
02				
03				

FOR WRITERS OF

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The goal is not more revision. The goal is a manuscript that stops asking for the wrong kind of help. When you are tightening a comma for the third Tuesday in a row, the book is not the patient anymore. You are. Close the file. Open the next one.