

The First Two Pages: *Death in Disguise*

By Karen Neary Smithson

Writing the first two pages of my debut novel, *Death in Disguise*, was a challenge that I imagine most new writers face. I had read articles, listened to lectures, and enjoyed endless discussions with writer friends about the importance of the first pages of a novel. I came to realize it was vital to hook the reader early on. Originally, I'd started with the story's protagonist but then nixed that idea deciding the scene didn't have enough punch. So instead, I turned to a victim suffering at the hand of the malicious Father Clancy.

Tucked into a fetal position, Eliana winced as convulsions racked her thin body against the bedroom's scared floorboard. *I'm supposed to be going home*. Her mind raced, confused by the force that caused her muscles to contract and quiver. One thing was certain—it was the priest's handiwork.

The intent of the opening paragraph was to draw readers into the story by raising questions and hopefully their curiosity as well. Something is going on here and it's not good. I also immediately identified the culprit as a priest.

My aim was to reveal the villain's identity as the novel opened. This way readers would know the antagonist, hence triggering growing tension in scenes

between Father Clancy and the main characters. Also, I decided to begin the novel with a prologue which I used as a vehicle to foreshadow things to come.

I went back and forth as to whose voice would work best in conveying the scene. For at least two drafts, it was written from the priest's point of view. I wanted readers to get inside his head and catch an inkling of the obsession driving him to torment a trusting and unsuspecting girl. But when I switched it around, I was pleased to realize that Eliana's voice offered a stronger sense of the chaos engulfing her, which I liked better. I anticipated that readers would become drawn in by her confusion and mounting fear.

“This isn't what it seems.” His usual jovial voice sounded different. The singsong lilt had vanished, leaving a sharp, hard cadence. He grabbed her white-knuckled fist and stopped it from hammering against her chest. With a firm grasp, he straightened out her fingers and kissed her palm. “I'm actually doing you a favor.” The priest released her arm. She couldn't stop it from banging against the floor like a dead weight.

He slid closer and stroked her cheek. She wanted to slap his hand away, but the tingling in her arm, a new sensation, scared her. His fingertips swept across her cheek, brushed her lips, and then stopped at her dimpled chin and lingered there.

“You're so delicate and beautiful.” He sighed. “Perfect in fact.”

At this point, my objective was to show that the priest is in control. Eliana is physically incapacitated. However, the mention of the tingling in her arm, offers a clue that she's regaining some physical function. I wanted to build tension and hopefully a heightening of intrigue to urge the reader on. The paragraphs also

indicate that the priest harbors a sexual attraction toward Eliana. I thought the way he moves his fingers across her face would add a dash of creepiness.

Eliana imagined a trace of sadness clouding his eyes. It lasted only a second. He thrust his hand into the pocket of his black suit coat. "Here." He pulled out a rosary and dangled it in front of her before releasing the string of beads.

Through her eyes I wanted to develop a character who seemed to possess multiple layers of malignity but at the same time juxtapose actions that appeared to contradict his evil intent. During the scene I wanted to create a struggle not just between Father Clancy and Eliana but within the priest who seems resigned to fulfill his evil act.

The dresser drawer hung half-open, and its meager contents never made it to her satchel but lay strewn across the floor. She fingered a couple of the wooden beads with silent prayer then lifted the rosary over her head and placed it around her neck.

Eliana had been duped before at the hands of human traffickers, and now her trust has been shattered again by relying on a priest who represents her faith.

Though scared and confused, she doesn't waiver to defeat but clings to hope.

She wanted to cry, to scream, to squelch the ache for her mother's comforting arms, but most of all, she wanted to escape. She grit her teeth and crawled to the room's far wall and the window she'd opened when the rays of the morning sun filtered through the glass panes.

It'll be easy enough to slip out . . . if only . . .

She banished the negative thought before it fully developed. Dizziness and fear blurred her sight as she patted the cracked plaster wall until she smacked her hand against the rough-hewn, wooden sill.

“Eliana.” The priest’s voice sounded like thunder.

She curled her fingers around the molding and pulled upward. A gentle breeze touched her face as she rose on wobbly legs. She sensed his closeness and fumbled a sneaker-clad foot over the sill.

I wanted Eliana’s fright to be palpable but also the depth of her resolute spirit to be realized—the possibility that she might be able to escape her captor.

By the end of the prologue, Father Clancy’s cunning aptitude for evil is realized though not the motivation for his heinous acts. Hopefully, this will be the hook that will urge readers to turn to the next page.

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Karen Neary Smithson has been a child advocate, human rights commissioner, and an art educator. As an author of traditional and cozy mysteries, she finds writing magical. In addition to writing, she is a professional artist whose paintings are displayed in local galleries. An avid collector she focuses on African art, antiquities, ancient coins, and 20th-century prints. Karen has been known to pop up as an extra in Baltimore based movies and television programs. She lives with her husband and three showcats in Ellicott City, Maryland.