

The First Two Pages: *River of Secrets: A Wallace Hartman Mystery*

By Roger Johns (Minotaur Books)

PROLOGUE

Friday: June 1 Night

When he heard the key slide into the lock, he reached inside his shirt and ran a finger along the smooth edge of the tough plastic loop.

Heavy footfalls on the old hardwood floors told him one person—a sizable individual—had entered the kitchen through the side door. Expletives, followed by a muttered self-rebuke about having forgotten something, confirmed the new arrival's identity. Herbert Marioneaux was home.

The sound of a case being zippered open, along with the scuff and rustle of items shifted around on a table, pinpointed Herbert's location in the dining area of the large front room. Then the steady, rhythmic ticking of computer keys started. People could be so vulnerable when they were under the spell of some routine activity—something that put them at ease and commanded their undivided attention—but he knew that now was not the magic moment.

Herbert's booming voice broke the quiet. The call.

Ordinarily, this would have been an excellent time to shine. Pedestrians were known to step into fast-moving traffic once they became mesmerized by a call, but this was Herbert's nightly Skype session.

"You look lovely," Herbert said. "Yes, especially without your makeup."

Using the loud conversation as cover, he rose from his hiding place inside the spare bedroom and moved toward the hallway and waited. The intimate patter continued for several minutes.

Once the conversation ended, the keystrokes resumed along with the soft sound of easy-listening music and the shuffle of papers. After several more minutes, the time felt right.

He emerged from the dark room, taking care to avoid the creaky floorboards he had discovered in the hall while he waited for the man of the hour to return from a hard day of screwing the taxpayers.

Herbert sat at the dining table, facing away, staring intently at a laptop.

As he closed the distance between them, he slid his hand inside the front of his shirt. The floor groaned under his final step.

Herbert stiffened and turned.

He dropped the loop over Herbert's head and yanked hard on the free end.

ONE

Saturday: June 2 Morning

Wallace Hartman didn't fancy herself a burglar, but when Davis McCone called with larceny in his heart she jumped at the chance—even though she was a Baton Rouge police detective and she would be stealing from her own mother.

Uncle Davis. She had called him that when she was a young girl, although he wasn't really her uncle, just a good family friend. In fact, Davis was the man her mother had dated, before electing to marry Walter Hartman instead. They had all managed to stay friends, and Davis and his eventual wife, Gail, had been uncle and aunt to the Hartman children.

"Come have dinner with us tomorrow evening," Davis said.

"Us who?"

"Me and your mother."

"She didn't mention the two of you were having dinner."

"I only managed to talk her into it a little while ago. It's a birthday shindig."

"You know she doesn't like calling attention to her birthday."

"She enjoys acting like she doesn't like it."

"Why do you want me there? I'll just be a third wheel."

"Not a wheel . . . a thief. And bring Mason."

Mason Cunningham had entered Wallace's life several months ago as a DEA analyst pursuing an investigation that intertwined with one of her own. He had remained as much more than that. Since Thursday, Mason had been in DC. He was returning this afternoon.

"Okay. We'll be there," she said. "And just so I've got this straight, you actually want me to steal something for you?"

"You'll enjoy it. I promise. And your mother will be delighted. I promise that, as well."

There wasn't much Wallace wouldn't do for Davis. When Wallace's father had been killed, along with her husband and her elder brother, by a man who had made a vocation of drinking and driving,

her life had hit a wall. Wallace and her mother, Carol, and surviving brother, Lex, had all hit the wall. Carol had gone almost mute with terror, confessing to Wallace that she'd become afraid of her own shadow. That if so much could be taken so quickly, then nothing was safe.

Instead of becoming afraid, Wallace had become angry. Angry that the killer was given a slap on the wrist and put back on the street. Angry that those who killed with a bullet the size of a fingertip could be imprisoned for life, even executed, but those who killed with a bullet the size of a Buick were often dealt with as if they were the victims.

Davis and Gail had worked hard to provide a sense of stability for the remnants of Wallace's family. But it was Davis who had helped the most. He made sure friends and relatives came around to lift the burden of the day-to-day when necessary. He took time away from his law practice to make sure things that needed to be done got done.

Eventually, from somewhere deep inside, Carol found a way to cope. At first, she focused on putting one foot in front of the other, trying hard to impose some distance between herself and the devastating events. Then, one day, the dam broke and she began a period of proper grieving.

It had been painful to see, but Wallace took it as a sign that it was okay to begin the process of repairing and getting on with her own life. She considered herself to still be a work in progress, and she credited Davis and his wife with helping to make that progress possible.

Sitting on the back steps of her Garden District bungalow, a half-finished cup of coffee on the concrete step next to her, Wallace watched a pair of squirrels chase each other around the trunk and through the branches of the giant pecan tree that dominated the back of her lot. She marveled at the speed and agility of the chattering creatures as they made gravity-defying jumps through the leafy canopy.

As she reached for the book that lay next to her cup of coffee her phone buzzed again. It was Chief of Detectives Jason Burley, her boss. She felt sure he wasn't calling to invite her to a birthday dinner.

Art, thank you for having me on the blog, today. I have thoroughly enjoyed this chance to share some thoughts about the first two pages of my new book, *River of Secrets*—the second in the Wallace Hartman Mystery series.

In general, I find beginnings difficult and a bit frightening because so much is on the line. Consequently, I find myself working and reworking the opening, even after I'm hundreds of pages into later drafts of a book. Here's the story of how the first two pages of *River of Secrets* took shape.

WHY I USED A PROLOGUE

This is the first time I've used a prologue. The story originally began with what is now Chapter One—the conversation between the protagonist, Wallace Hartman, and Davis McCone, an old family friend who is trying to reignite a long-ago romance with Wallace's now widowed mother.

While I was thinking, in rather superficial ways, about *River of Secrets* as the second installment in a series, my editor's thinking ran deeper. She was focused on how readers respond to books in a series, so she suggested the addition of a prologue for two reasons.

Because my first book began with Wallace observing the aftermath of a truly disturbing murder, she felt readers who started the series with the first book would expect a continuity of technique and style in the second book, and that providing this would trigger a sense of familiarity that would, hopefully, motivate them to

read further.

She also felt that readers who came to the series by reading the second book first would catch the fever of the story more quickly if the crime at the heart of the mystery was seen early. It would act as a catalyst to provoke curiosity and suspicion and a sense of lurking danger.

Even the most casual comparison of the before and after versions of the first two pages will confirm just how right she was on both counts.

To achieve the goals set for me by my editor, I constructed the prologue so it would: (1) raise a series of dramatic questions to keep the reader engaged, (2) hook readers early by giving them a peek at what was at stake, and (3) show some critical facets of the personalities of the killer, the victim, and the protagonist, so readers would develop either an affinity for, revulsion to, or curiosity about these three characters.

DRAMATIC QUESTIONS

The beginning phrases of the opening sentence of the prologue raise a number of dramatic questions: Who is the “he” being referred to? Where is he that he would hear a key sliding into a lock? What is this tough plastic loop he has? Why does he run his finger along the edge of it?

My hope was that the reader would want to stick around to find out the answers.

THE HOOK

By the end of this first sentence, the reader has an inkling that whoever “he” is, he’s about to do something dangerous, and that this loop is about to be used to commit a crime. A lot of thought went into the choice of words to describe this.

The image of the man running his finger along the smooth edge of the loop creates a very different sensibility than would “the man tightened his grip on the loop.” The latter suggests a merely functional approach to what’s coming. The former conveys an almost affectionate appreciation for the capabilities of the loop and what he’s about to do with it. The latter image is commonplace and uninteresting, and suggests a simple thuggish character, while the former conjures a sense of unease because the reader senses that, whoever he is, he enjoys what he’s doing. All of these details about the killer will prove significant over the course of the story.

On a different level, the contrast between the innocuous sliding of a key into a lock and the strange, dangerous-seeming finger moving along the “smooth edge” of the “tough plastic loop” engenders foreboding because the reader sees that something awful is about to happen but the soon-to-be victim does not. It’s hard for the reader to look away from the impending horror that’s about to take the victim unawares.

INSIGHTS INTO THE PERSONALITIES OF THE VICTIM AND THE KILLER

It's important for the reader to understand, without being told, that: (1) the victim was complex, and (2) different people might legitimately have different views of him, depending on their point of view and what they knew about him and his life. Ambiguity is a key element of the victim's personality and of the story as a whole, and it's something that gets revisited several times, in different ways, all the way through the book.

The Victim

His "muttered self-rebuke about having forgotten something" tell us he's a man who's demanding of himself, a potentially good quality. When he tells his wife "You look lovely . . . Yes, especially without your makeup," he shows himself not to be a shallow man focused on superficial qualities, a trait that ought to make us like him.

But the killer refers to him with contempt, grouping him in with the inattentive legions of phone zombies who heedlessly wander into danger, and then refers to him derisively as "the man of the hour" who has just returned home "from a hard day of screwing the taxpayers." This last detail tells the reader the victim is a public servant, and it raises the specter of a political motive for the crime about to be committed.

The Killer

There are indications that he's thoughtful and observant: (1) "Heavy footfalls on the old hardwood floors told him one person—a sizable individual—had entered the kitchen through the side door," and (2) "People could be so vulnerable when they were under the spell of some routine activity".

We also learn that, despite his apparent fondness for violence, he's patient: (1) "he knew that now was not the magic moment," (2) "Ordinarily, this would have been an excellent time to shine . . . but," (3) "The intimate patter continued for several minutes," and (4) "After several more minutes, the time felt right."

There is also evidence he thinks ahead: "He emerged from the dark room, taking care to avoid the creaky floorboards he had discovered in the hall while he waited."

But, we also learn that he makes mistakes: "The floor groaned under his final step." In short, he's good at what he does and he enjoys what he does, but he's not perfect at it, so maybe he's not a professional.

The Protagonist

Chapter One is an abrupt shift from a horrific murder to a tender, wistful exchange between Wallace and Davis McCone—a man about whom she obviously cares a great deal, someone who was critically important to her and her family during a time of great crisis, and someone who has been important to her mother in

different ways over a period of many years.

The juxtaposition of the hard-edged opening scene against this rather benign conversation illustrates how fragile Wallace's world can be. She is having a sweet moment with positive implications for her and her mother, while several hours earlier, across town, a stunning act of violence was committed. The reader will intuit that the horror of the night before is about to disrupt the tranquility of Wallace's life. Before that happens, though, we learn some important things about Wallace.

The first sentence of Chapter One reveals that Wallace is a police detective. But the carefree tenor of her conversation with Davis lets the reader know that, despite her very intense, very dangerous occupation, she hasn't lost her capacity for lightheartedness.

Her more serious internal reflections that occur concurrently with this conversation tell us she understands that, even in the wake of devastating personal loss, recovery is possible. It may be difficult, but it's possible, and it will come in its own time.

Because readers know this about her, they will find her actions and responses believable and authentic when, several pages later, she is seen so capably dealing with the surviving members of the victim's family. It's also an important bit of foreshadowing.

#

Roger Johns is the author of the Wallace Hartman Mysteries from St. Martin's Press/Minotaur Books: *Dark River Rising* (2017) and *River of Secrets* (2018). He is the 2018 Georgia Author of the Year (Detective ▪ Mystery Category), a 2018 Killer Nashville Readers' Choice Award nominee, and a finalist for the 2018 Silver Falchion Award for best police procedural. His articles about writing and the writing life have appeared in *Career Author*, *Criminal Element*, and *Killer Nashville Articles*. Roger belongs to the Atlanta Writers Club, Sisters in Crime, International Thriller Writers, and Mystery Writers of America. He is a member of the ITW Fearless Bloggers and, along with four other crime fiction writers, he co-authors the MurderBooks blog at www.murder-books.com. Roger is a former corporate lawyer and retired college professor. He and his wife live near Atlanta, GA.