

## 12. THE VICTIM

My name is Wallace Simpson. I work as a translator of German technical manuals. My friend Nick meets me at Simon Says. He is with two students from George Mason. Lea is studying English Literature. Cheryl is studying sociology.

Cheryl has her German homework with her. She asks me about a word, "What is that?"

"I don't know. They don't really use that expression in modern German."

"It's in my textbook."

She then says something to Nick. She is changing the subject: "This whole talk of your perfect crime is sort of unnerving. Don't you ever consider things from the victim's side?"

Nick contradicts her, "This is just an intellectual game that we play. It's not like we're really criminals."

"There's this pretense of concern about the victim but in fact it's just a role that you end up playing so that you don't have to deal with the full impact of the psychological and physical damage."

"Wallace, I don't get it."

"It's a legal thing. Rather than admit how badly you've been fucked over, you agree to some legal settlement that supposed to make things right. You trade your victimhood for the right to get back in the game. And when you want to start over, you pull it out again."

Nick has his own turn, "Now there's this impetus to limit corporate liability. It's all in the name of the rights of the individual. But its purpose is totally the opposite."

I think that we are straying too far afield to interest our two coeds.

Nick gives it another try, "You can play the detective if you're all that sympathetic with the victim."

"It's just that the detective often encourages crime."

Cheryl seems a little miffed, "That's sounds like another excuse."

Lea's anger is more focused. She pulls me aside, "You really fucked me over. And then you threatened to kill me if I reported you. You hurt me physically and emotionally. I never got over it."

"I don't know what you are talking about. You are mistaking me for someone else."

"No, I'm sure that it was you."

"I barely recognize you. We just met."

"That will hardly stand up in a court of law."

"Are you telling me that you have evidence? I want to see it."

"I have emails. I have messages from my phone."

"I'm sorry if I did something to you. But I honestly have no idea what you are talking about." I am trying to be conciliatory. It isn't leading anywhere.

I wonder how far she is going to take this. It seems like a bluff. It's a little too late to do anything legal. Maybe she'll try to get revenge on her own. I don't want to piss her off too much.

Nick is sitting with me. The girls have gone away.

"They were trying to play with us. Where did you find those two?"

"Wallace, what are you talking about?"

“She said that I threatened to kill her.”

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“That’s what I said.”

“You’ve been a prick.”

“What do you mean?”

“You give everyone that scowl. You hate humanity. You treat women like shit.”

“No, I don’t. It sounds like your autobiography.”

Nick seems in on it. I can’t make heads or tails of any of it. If Lea wants something out of me, I don’t know what I can give her.

“She’ll work out her price.”

I have trouble sleeping that night. This is not like me. I don’t know for the life of me what is coming next. I have lost my independence. Everything depends on what Lea wants to do next.

Nick meets me the next night for dinner. We are eating late.

“Where’s Snow White and Rose Red.?”

“I haven’t seen them since they were with us last night..”

“I think that the witch got them, Nick.”

“You better hope that the witch has got them.”

I really hope that all our troubles are so easy to dispel. I want to destroy all my connections to Lea. I look through all my files and delete all references to her.

“It’s not that easy. The authorities can recover it. All of it. It still on the hard drive.”

I am starting to feel like a hardened criminal.

“Wallace, you’re acting self-righteous.”

I don’t want her to get to me. But she is freaking me out. She is like a phantom. I can sense her effects. But she is nowhere to be seen.

Her words echo inside me, “You fucked me over!”

The more that I think about her accusation, the more it seems substantial. I create a history to go along with her claim. It is now part of my history. I will have to trace my life back to the point where it makes sense again.

For her revenge to be a success, she will have to wait until I gain my triumph. Then she will have to appear like the lost bride of the dead. I have no hope.

“Don’t try to sabotage your success so that she might not show up. She will come back!”

“Nick, she doesn’t need a cheerleader.”

“I’m giving you the facts.”

“Your facts are not helping. I need to know more of what is really going on.”

Even if time moves forward, it is only going to move back.

I am in another place. She is sitting in a chair next to me.

“My name is Alea. My friends call me Lea.”

I think it better to remain more professional with her. I want to tell myself that there is nothing between us. But from the moment that she gets close to me, I can feel it. She takes off her shoes and rubs her feet into the carpet. There is this electricity between us. She pulls her sweater tight against her body. I look over at her blonder hair. Her perfume is driving me crazy.

I love her face. Her smile. I try to adjust my demeanor to keep that serious distance from

her.

“Do you like my story?”

“I’ve made a few suggestions.”

“Do you think that you can help me get it published.”

I want to do what I can. She needs a lot of work to get the right tone.

“That’s our goal!”

“What do I need to do?”

I see her with more passion in her life. I am asking her questions. I need to prompt her to get the right answers. I know from the beginning that she will be my downfall. She encourages me enough to get me going. She is curious in an intellectual sort of way. But she hold back so it all my doing. She can claim that she wanted nothing with me.

“He has an overactive imagination.”

She is pushing me away.

“Is something wrong?”

“You’re trying to control my mind. You just want me to give you the right answer. Your answer.”

There is no danger in her stories. I am trying to encourage her to include some. But she has made herself part of the story. Every time she gets herself in a threatening situation, the character bails. You can’t have a murder mystery with no murder.

“I’m trying to get into the psychology of my character. Write about their families. What makes them the way that they are. The traumas that mark their psyche.”

She needs something to get it all started. Some kind of complication.

“She needs an inheritance that she can’t touch.”

“So how does she get it?”

“She has to do away with someone.”

“You mean kill someone. Then you have to arrange some kind of punishment for him.”

“You have to let your character get away with it. At least for a little while.”

“Suspense.”

The more that she talks about the story, the more that I feel the suspense of being with her.

I bet if she had written *Romeo and Juliet* that Juliet would have never gotten together with Romeo for fear of disappointing her parents.

“Her parents would have just died if they had remained together.”

“Juliet ended up dying from that kind of attitude.”

“Oh!”

She is starting to get the point. But she is still trying to write my story from the victim’s point of view.

“What if you did something to get her pissed off? Made a pass at her. You might lose your job.”

“I work as a translator. How could I lose my job?”

“You could do some other job. Like be my boss.”

“I’m just helping you out with your stories.”

“Suppose that you were doing that just to get close to me.”

I am afraid that my motives are becoming transparent. She was trying to catch me at my game. I waited for her to continue.

“I think that you’re a cool guy. But I could never really go out with you. We simply don’t have that thing. It’s just not practical. It doesn’t go with the plan that I have for my life.”

“Maybe that’s why your characters don’t have that zing. They just stick to the plan that they have. They don’t understand what doesn’t fit in with the plan.”

“I thought that’s how everyone lives their life.”

“Suppose for the moment that your character goes to a bar where she’s never been before. And someone slips something in her drink.”

“Then she’s helpless.”

“And then she realizes that she knows the person that drugged her.”

“I don’t even see why she would go to a place like that in the first place. Doesn’t she know the risks that she’s facing?”

“Risk is part of her life. That’s where the adventure begins.”

“But it’s not much of an adventure. She’s already been drugged, and who knows what else has happened to her while she’s been out.”

She gives me the knowing look like it’s up to me to realize all the things that might have happened to her.

“You’re getting the hang of it. You can’t write a story without taking risks.”

She looks at me again. What the hell is she thinking?

“A penny for your thoughts,” I dare her.

“Oh nothing!”

I see her brain is working. It may be my undoing. Her perfume fills the air even after she is gone.

“I need another drink.”

The waiter obliges me with a scotch.

Alea is left to her own devices. She knows what she must do. Now is the time for the python to strike. As long as I am an unassuming translator, I have little opportunity to influence Alea. She is counting on a more involved history between us. That she is documenting in her story. I myself am waiting for my change in station. With a little power, I will have a few notches to fall. This no doubt will make for a much more interesting tale.

I remember Nick’s words. “She is turning the tables on you.” Indeed she is.

I need to make myself clear. I have the know-how. She is feeding me these pitiful story ideas. And I think that can do miles better myself. That’s exactly what I decide to do. Miles is a professor at George Mason. He receives a story from Leah. Leah struggles as a writer. But Miles is always trying to give her the benefit of the doubt. It is apparent that he has a crush on her. But he has done little to act on it.

He is losing his patience with her. He has offered her opportunity after opportunity to revise her stories. They all hang like a wet noodle. She is not grasping his instruction. He wants her to succeed. He is pulling her up. But she is resisting.

“You don’t like my stories.”

“That’s not true at all.”

He is mulling one of her stories. He comes to a turn that feels right. A teacher steals a

student's story idea as his own. He writes the story and receives acclaim. The student decides to blackmail the teacher and claim that the story is her own.

Miles constructs the confrontation between the teacher and the student.

"Professor Standsfield, that was my story."

"You're going to have a hard time proving it, Layla."

"What do you mean hard time? I have the story in my own hand."

"You never could have gotten your story published. I revised it. I turned it into something with life."

They are planning to adapt Professor Standsfield's story into a movie. He has already received an advance. He has the option for another novel. She wants that success as her own.

Things become worse. She threatens a sexual harassment suit.

"I have your emails to me. It's not as if they're harmless. You're asking me out to dinner."

"I was offering you extra help."

"You said that you could help me over dinner."

"I offered to help you some evening if that was convenient. I knew that you had a busy schedule. I suggested meeting while you were having dinner if that would help."

"I saw how you looked at me."

Standsfield realizes that he is a real jam. He can't have her yapping on about all the things that he's done to her. He is actually relishing his success. He decides that he has to shut her up. This becomes a veritable murder mystery.

Miles ends up having his novel published. But it has nowhere near the success that he chronicles about Professor Standsfield. Leah challenges Miles,

"You used details from my life."

"I did nothing of the sort. You gave me weak short stories. I gave the character in my novel real life. I understood her story. I noted how Standsfield manipulated her and used her ideas. This is totally the opposite of your case. There was little of merit in your stories. I gave you a voice when you had none."

She does not appreciate his criticism. She collects her stories with all the notes that she has prepared in revisions. She also thinks that she is being clever as she copies passages of Miles's novel in her handwriting. She wants to give the impression that he had seen the notes."

Miles was on to her forgery, "Leah, you forget that my commentary is on all the pages that I have actually seen. I would not have looked at your notes and returned them without marking them up."

"That is hardly true. You realized that you could steal the best ideas. So you pretended that you didn't see the pages."

Miles offers an air-tight argument, "Leah, the passages from my novel are so much better written. There is a coherence lacking in your prose. If you had revised your work to that level, it would have netted you a higher grade. Are you telling me that you would not have objected if I had returned the notes without commentary? Even you would have realized the difference. I hope that you do now after taking the time to copy the notes. I should have you expelled. But I wish that you have learned from what you have done."

Leah does not like the fact that she had been found out. She is exposed by Miles in such

an obvious manner. She is not going to let it be. Her reaction is the core of my mystery novel.

Alea reads my novel. She enjoys it.

“Leah really surprised me. She would never admit that she was a terrible writer. She was convinced that she could change the world so it would come around to her point of view. I don’t think that I could ever carry things that far. I hope someone would slap me if I ever became so bold.”

I need to meet with Nick. He agrees to have a drink at *Lessons*.

“Alea is being entirely too understanding about your novel. She could sue you already.”

“For what. I haven’t even published it. I don’t even have a publisher yet.”

“Just wait. She could halt publication.”

“I don’t use any of her ideas in the story.”

“You use the situation.”

“I use this situation. Are you going to sue me?”

Nick smiles ironically, “If it was worth my while.”

“You’re a real idiot. I’m helping her with her stories for free. There not that great.

There’s nothing usable in them. Now she’s going to sue me.”

“You’re taking advantage of your position. You’re taking private details from her life and putting them into your story. Your trying to gain some kind of advantage over her love life. You’re pestering the poor girl.”

I find Nick’s criticism overbearing and hardly apropos. On the other, this could explain Alea’s reluctance to meet further to discuss her stories. Perhaps she is scheming. She just needs a good plan.

The more that I consider Alea’s point of view, the more I see fault in my actions. The flaw in my argument is so big that you could drive a truck in. Alea has the truck in fourth gear, and it is speeding right at me.

I foresee life imitating fiction. Or more accurately life is imitating fiction imitating fiction. Each successive reminder is only making the seed grow faster in her. I have created a monster.

I work on translation all the next morning. Cheryl and Alea meet me for lunch.

“Professor Standsfield wants to do something nasty to Layla even before she catches him stealing her book.”

“Cheryl, that’s the idea,” Alea wanted her to be in the know.

“That’s why Leah’s plan is so transparent. Miles is much more self-conscious than Standsfield.”

“That may also make him worse. He may be distorting Leah’s case to his own advantage.”

I am starting to wonder if my novel is too convoluted with the story within the story. You start to say something that makes sense about Miles and then it seems to apply to Stansfield. And then it’s hard keeping track of who’s who.

“Wallace, I told you that I like it.”

“But don’t you think that Leah’s characterization is just an effort on the part of Miles to deny that he stole the story,” Cheryl offers her review.

“Cheryl, you don’t get it.”

“Cheryl may have a point.”

I am giving Alea the ammunition that she needs to destroy me. I want to be as critical about my novel as possible. But it may be exposing my own vulnerability.

At home, I again reflect upon my role as author. I have found a circumstance that seems most flattering to my point of view. I am helping the hapless Alea construct her stories free of charge out of the sessions that we conduct at a café. On another view, I am doing the same thing as her creative writing teacher in college. The former circumstance offers me more latitude. I can entertain my attraction for her with no apparent repercussions.

Nick adds another point of view, “I hate the fact that you got me up in the middle of the night. But I came to your rescue because I think that you’re screwed. You’ve been taking advantage of this girl in one way or another. She can’t out and out kill you. But with this novel she has a way to destroy your reputation. I think you’re using the novel to cover up what you really did to her.”

“What are you talking about? Besides, it’s not the middle of the night. It’s not even eleven.”

“*Mid night* that means middle of the night.”

“Back to Alea. I’ve been encouraging with her writing.”

“But you present these cases of writers in your story that seem fairly direct criticisms of her style.”

“I flatter her style.”

“So you can flatter her. You’ve admitted that her stories have nothing of real merit. Otherwise, you would steal from them.”

“They have a little merit.”

“That is your dilemma. If you now admit that they have a little merit, then you are admitting that you steal from them a little.”

“I would only steal from the stories if they contained a lot of merit.”

“Listen to yourself. You are admitting that you would steal from her.”

I laugh how he has twisted my words. He is a most assiduous prosecuting attorney.

“She is not going to get her day in court.”

“So she takes her day out of court. Either she’ll screw you legally or she’ll really screw with you. You don’t know what the hell you are dealing with.”

I have to take her into my confidence. She could bring down the mess of cards. I meet with her the next afternoon. We sit together in a park.”

“Wallace, it’s a great day. I’m so glad to be outside. I didn’t see you at George Mason today.”

“I didn’t have to teach.”

“It’s quite a ride to come into the city.”

“Transit makes it easy.”

“It doesn’t run all that late.”

“I normally finish at the college early enough.”

“Someone told me that you’re trying to learn German.”

“I already know a little. I want to do some work on Rilke’s influence on Pynchon.”

“That sounds fascinating. Have you had a chance to look at my stories?”

“I like the recent one that you handed me.”

“You’re just using flattery.”

“If I was, what would you make of it?”

“I’d think that you were trying to fool me about something. Maybe you want to take my ideas and use them as your own.”

“What gives you that idea?”

“It’s just a feeling that I get. Someone told me that you may get a movie deal.”

“Hardly. I’ve got a book in the works. I’ve talked with a publisher. They do have connections to a major Hollywood studio. That is all.”

She is seeming more than a little curious. I have to admit that her writing is masterful. I don’t want her to get over-confident. She will only use that as a weapon against me.

‘She wants to tell me about her new story. It is a revenge tale.

“This is about a girl turning the table on her oppressors.”

“You use the word in plural. She hunts down a number of people.”

“Something like that. More particularly she zeros in on a particular sort who symbolizes all the ways that guys have fucked with her over the years.”

“It sounds pretty wild. Is it based on something factual.”

“I haven’t decided.”

“Let me see it when you’ve got it going.”

“Why? So you can steal from it.”

“Pardon.”

“I’d love to when I get around to it.”

I am hearing things. The next day she comes to my office. She has actually started her story. This is too good to be true. I’ve had writer’s block for the last week. Now she is handing me the next chapter of my novel. I only wonder how I will be able to get away with this.

I look up from my reading, “This is brilliant.”

“You’re just saying that.” She is beaming. I feel as if I am watching a spring day bloom. I need to take advantage of this moment.

“I don’t want to cross the line, but how much of this story really is you.”

“All of it. That is what I love about it. And guy who’s fucked with me is you.”

“Pardon.”

“I’m just saying that I made most of it up. Sure some of it is based on me. I wish that I could say that some of it is based on you. But I did think about you when I was writing it.”

“I’m afraid now. There’s such venom in the portrait.”

“I think that she really likes him. But she can’t say anything because of who he is, his position and all. He’s like a father to her. That’s why he ends up taking advantage of her in the end.”

“I liked that little detail of how she puts her hair up in the end.”

“That’s where she is starting to get tough.”

I note that Alea has pulled her hair up. She is wearing cut off shorts. Cute shoes. I look back at the story.

“You’ve been working fast.”

“There’s not much else of excitement in my life.”



“I hope you don’t mind that I asked you to meet me in the park yesterday. It was such a nice day, and I had no reason to come in.”

“It was totally cool.”

I want to touch her. I squeeze the page harder. I need to call Nick.

“Nick, I don’t know what the fuck is going on. But I’m back at George Mason.

“What are you talking about? You never left there.”

I am getting confused. She has left the story with me. I have to figure out how to change the details so she will no longer recognize it as her own.

I get a knock on the door. It’s university police. He introduces himself and starts asking me some questions.

“A lot of people just think that we’re security guards. But we’re a police force. Just like the Virginia State Police.”

“I know that, officer. I know that more goes on here than being traffic cop.”

“There’s a girl who is thinking of filing harassment charges against you.”

“I just met with Alea yesterday. She gave me her new story. We got on great.”

I am feeling guilty about trying to steal her story ideas.

“It’s not Alea. It’s Cheryl.”

I never have shown any interest in Cheryl. That may be the problem. She may be trying to extort me. I think that she feels rejected. I explain the situation to the officer.

“I sometimes come across this type of situation. Student who try to use legal recourse for personal problems that they’re having. That’s why I came to see you.”

The next day I see Alea.

“Did the police come and see you?”

“Why?”

“Cheryl said some things to me. Actually, I said some things to Cheryl. I told her what to say to the police.”

“What do you mean? You helped her with her story?”

“I told her exactly what to say.”

“Why would you do that for her?”

“I want you to know what it feels like.”

“She could get in a lot of trouble for making a false report to the police.”

“It’s not false.”

“You said that you told her what to say.”

“I know what is going on.”

“Not in her case. Not it all.”

“But you do feel that way towards me.”

“I’ve never said anything.”

“I know.”

“Why didn’t *you* say something to the police?”

“It’s not the time. I’m just fucking with you!”

“The story deal is going far enough.”

“I haven’t even started! Cheryl’s a quiet girl. She sits in the back of class. She says “Wears glasses.” No one even sees her come or go. She’s hardly there. She the perfect victim

for you. No witness. No one can even corroborate her story. You can arrange attendance records so it appears that she isn't even there on the days it happens. You have all the bases covered. She's your prey. You don't even have to stalk. She's being served to you. You have to take it while you can.

"Sounds good. Only it never happened."

"No, Professor Simpson. She's a quiet girl. But she keeps copious notes of everything that you say in class and everything that you do outside. It's one story that you can't mess with. It's all there. It matches your syllabus. She's the perfect witness."

"Professor, your only hope is you have to get her notes. Break into her place and take them. Who's going to miss a notebook?"

"Alea, this is a good story. Maybe too good even for you."

"There's more. She's in her room when you break in. Now you have B&E in your charges. You've got to do something. Got to shut her up. You could scare her. But she has her notes. Or now you have them. Unless you burn them. That would solve everything. Except that you're there at that moment in her room. She could call the police. But she's scared. You've surprised her at just that moment. Surprised her in her own room. You have to do something quick or you're going to jail. No one's seen you come in the building. She doesn't have a roommate. This is your last chance to get a second chance."

"They'll ask you questions but no one will connect you to what happened. Unless she also has a diary. Where would she keep that? You don't have to worry about her talking to friends. She felt like killing herself when all this happened. She couldn't talk to anyone. She was afraid that her family would blame her. They don't worry about her much."

"They will miss her. That's true. But they will learn to get over her. Then there's you. If you don't do something quick, this will destroy everything that you have worked for. You won't even be able to publish that book based on my short stories."

"Professor, you see what is happening. You are the perfect suspect. You have motive and opportunity. But you are also an invisible suspect. No one even knows that you are here. You are totally free to do what you want. And you have something to take care of."

Alea is getting good. She has woven the perfect detective story. She has the critical scene with all the right ingredients. She has learned her craft. But she is trying to ensnare me in her trap. She thinks that she is good. I have to break her case against me. She has me in the room with the intended victim. I need an alibi. I need Nick.

"I can't help you."

"What do you mean? We were hanging out that night. I've got my credit card receipts. I can't have drunk that much. You were with me."

"Sorry, old boy. There is nothing that I can do."

"She's got to you, hasn't she. I don't know how."

I wonder if Nick is sleeping with her. That would explain his silence. All of this makes sense, Alea's story except that it didn't happen.

"What are you going to do, Professor. You're in my room now. Is it going to be a repeat of what happened before. Or are you going to try to get out of this one like you've got out of every nasty scrape before. I know that you're good. That's why I picked you. That's right. You're my perfect victim. Like a mouse who's heading for the cheese in a trap. You've got to

have it. And you're the rat. Do you want me, Professor. Am I going to be your last victim before you get caught?"

"I don't know what the hell you want. But your game has gone on far enough."

"Don't you like my body? You like my dress. It's low cut just for you. You love me. You love how I am. So despondent. I'm perfect for you. Your dream girl. Only, I'm untouchable. Here's your chance to touch me when no one else is around. No one to see you do it. No one to hear me scream."

"This is another one of your set ups."

"No, if you want me, I'm sacrificing myself for you. My tender legs are waiting for you kisses. You want to look me in the face as you climax. Isn't that what you want? But what is going to make you climax?"

She is right next to me now. Her perfume is overpowering. She knows exactly what I want.

"I'm not even taking notes on this one."

The door is directly in front of me. But she is in the way of the door. She know that she is preventing me from leaving.

This tale can only end badly. Badly for all of us.

"What do you want? The grade."

"I've already got the grade. I want to see you suffer. I want you to suffer like you made me suffer. I want you to suffer like you made Cheryl suffer. I want to destroy you before I destroy you."

"You're doing a good job."