

## 14. POISON

I feel fairly certain that I have been poisoned. I know there is no antidote. I have had a sore stomach all day. Alea is behind this. I have no doubt. I have twenty-four hours to live.

I am the sole witness against her. I was probably foolish to have put myself in this position. But it seems inevitable with her outlook that thing would end up like this. There are few options permitted for me. I would like to use my remaining time to find evidence against her. I wish that I could find an antidote even though I assume that there is not one. I am delaying.

I wonder whether I have always been her prime candidate to terminate. Has she been engaging me in a mind game? Trying to get me to commit myself. To say something incriminating. Just give her the excuse that she needed.

I suppose that I have been a threat from the beginning. Someone who could expose her identity for what it was—a fraud.

She and her friend, Cheryl, have been trying to entice men in compromising situations. Then they blackmail them. They soon realized that to keep doing this, they would have to enlist some serious muscle. To help in this endeavor, their friend Rich turns the screws when that sort of thing is called for.

They tried to intimidate me with Rich. Let's just say that Rich won't be doing any intimidating for a while. After that, they realized that things were serious.

I have been lulled by Alea. I have always felt that she liked me or at least admired me. Even now, I feel that she is reserving this special destiny for me along. I am deluded. She is on a murderous path from which there will be no end. The only way to stop her is to stop her permanently.

I wonder the source of her violent impulses. On her account, her life might have been directed to more elevated pursuits. She claims that I demonstrated to her that the only way to realize the intimacy that had evaded her was to share in the blood of her dying victims. If this is the cause, I am truly sorry.

I wonder how much credibility I can give her theory. I suppose that her blood lust originated in a time that predates our meeting. I do not want to even consider the possibility that my instruction could be the origin of such homicidal mania. It is not as if I advocate the supremacy of some elitist master class. Alea believes that my failure to advocate the rights of the victim is the primary reason that my thoughts are so venomous. Now she wants me to taste the fruits of my labor. I may truly know what it is like to be a victim.

“Professor, you treat life like a game. Everyone just becomes a pawn for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You break everything down into these stages all leading to some kind of paradise. It's your only concern, your own pleasure.”

I am replaying my conversations with Alea. Her words still echo with all the potency from when they were first spoken. I am attempting to discern some clue as to why she has turned out the way that she has.

“You preach about freedom to say whatever we feel.”

“Yeah, but words can create their own monsters.”

I fear that has come to identify too much with her world of ghosts and other phantasms. It gives her an immunity from having to answer for her actions.

“I am true to my only arbiter, the spirit world. It cannot be touched. It can only be apprehended.”

She feels that she is only a vessel for the wishes of her gods. She claims that she only responds to their commands. She is not the center of the world. She is only one of the satellites.

I want to pull her away from the orbit. That has been my intention all along. I wanted to show her how writing uncovers the network of connections implied by our actions.

“Wallace, I don’t need you telling me things. I have known that all along. That is the source of my power. I do the tiniest thing, and it has a ripple effect.”

“So do you have to respond for the ripple or for the tiniest thing?”

“That is entirely my prerogative.”

My fear is real. Now it is too real. It is in me. It makes me sick. It will make me die.

“You can’t threaten someone and not expect it to come back to you.”

“What if it’s an idle threat?”

“It isn’t.”

And now I know it is not.

Nick referred me to Alea. That may be behind all these plots and counter-plots. He must have seen that potential in her. He knew that it would become realized under my tutelage. In that he is the one who has to answer for what has happened.

“Nick, I need to see you.”

“That is how you begin every conversation. What is it this time?”

“I’ve been poisoned. I want to meet you somewhere different. *Lessons* is too public.”

We meet at an out of the way sandwich shop. It is close to my apartment. I walk over there.

“She’s gone far enough now,” I tell Nick.

“When she was talking about all that shit in Virginia, why didn’t you try to stop her?”

“I thought that it was all a joke. None of it seemed real.”

“Are you convinced now?”

“I don’t think that I will really believe it until I feel the pangs of death.”

“When will that be?”

“In about twenty two hours.”

“You’re not in a hospital.”

“I need to find out what she really did.”

Nick wants to counsel me, “You’re acting as if this is an intellectual puzzle. You solve it, and you’re cured. This is physical. That’s her confusion—mind and body.”

I imagine her before me at this moment taunting me.

“Why are you doing this to me, Alea?”

“You are doing this to yourself. It is a consequence of your own words.”

I simply want to escape the executioner’s sentence.

“Wallace, where are you?” Nick brings me back to the world.

“I’m zoning out.”

“I hope it’s not the poison.”

I have the same hope. If I was her, I would be long gone by now. What if she is still somewhere in the city. Wouldn't she want to be there at the moment that I expire.

"Are you going to eat something?"

"What good would it be?"

"It might counteract the poison. You're still alive. Aren't you hungry?"

"I'm not really thinking about food."

"What are you thinking about?"

"You. What is your connection to her?"

"She was one of your students. I know her through you."

"That's not the case. You recommended me to her. You told her that I could help her with her writing."

"That's what you did. You helped her with her writing."

"That's not what I'm asking."

"She was one of your students. She met us out one night. We all started hanging out together."

"You knew her first."

"It's not some kind of game," Nick protests. "It doesn't make any difference when we met."

"No, it does."

"I met her at a bookstore."

"Are you sure? First you said that you met her through me."

"I'm not the one you should be interrogating. I'm not on trial here."

"Maybe you should be. Your story is inconsistent."

"I may have met her in the park or coming out of some building."

"You can't have met her in more than one place."

"I may have seen her hundreds of times. Then there was that one time that I really noticed her. Before that she could have been that girl in the crowd. Or a friend of a friend."

"Which friend?"

"Wallace, you're going crazy before you die. Stop this."

He knew something. The more that I questioned him, the greater became his resistance.

"What are you hiding from me?"

"I don't know anything. Wallace, nothing in my brain can possibly save you now."

That last sentence seems too reminiscent of something that Alea might say. I am trying to keep my wits about me. I am going down fast.

I suppose that Nick is only acting like I am. Alea is trying to shift the blame to me. And I am doing the same with regards to Nick. I am still convinced that he knows something. How to break him down.

"Nick, just do what you can. Some little thing might do the trick."

I realize that my desperation is only diluting my questioning. I need something that I can use to pressure him. His elusive character has made him so proficient at obtaining his ends. Nick's strategy actually seems in error. He is making me more suspicious rather than trying to throw me off the trail.

I realize that I have been getting nowhere with him. That doesn't mean that he won't

yield results. I just have to be more clever with him.

I have wasted another hour. I am no closer to my goal. Time is running out. I want to sleep. Just to get an edge. But I am afraid that it will be a sleep from which I don't wake up. As the night sets in, I will have to keep alert. I get some coffee. I hope that it does not accelerate the effects of the poison. This is the worst feeling. I can't even thinking about anything without it adding to my helplessness. She has devised the perfect torture. I am my torturer.

I return home in the hope that a rest might make me better able to cope. I sit in a comfortable chair. Silence. I start to doze off. I wake at three in the morning. I feel like life is already over. There are eighteen hours left. No signs of relief.

I need someone to lean on. Someone who I can push that will give up Alea. I realize what she is doing. She is contradicting Nick's theory. She is making me think like a killer. I have to follow my lead. To want to kill, I have to desire something. That is what she is telling me. I must learn to want Alea.

I have always been attracted by her puzzle. But it is not really a physical attraction. I am more attracted to Cheryl for that matter. But the puzzle is a good starting place. What is the source of her mystery? Her attraction to danger. At any moment, she is willing to give into her desires.

She hides in plain sight where no one will even think of looking.

"I have what you want. What every woman has."

I cannot search randomly. I cannot sneak into every bedroom, knock on every door, search every face for the answer. I need to pull that hanging thread—but it's too far in the distance.

I have been sitting in the dark for an hour. It is almost 4 AM. I am running out of time. Time is passing so quickly, and I have so little to spare. I am swiftly learning Alea's lesson. We first lose ourselves in the tender touch of desire. But as the night wears on, the tenderness gives way to this fierce coveting. We want what we cannot have. We seek our solitary satisfaction at any cost.

I know what I have to do. But I am paralyzed by my realization. I am turning into a killer even as all my resources are drained.

In what time that remains, I work to prepare my list of suspects. I have excluded Nick for the moment. He has only caused me grief.

- Kevin            If he's not dead, he's off with the CIA somewhere.
- Caroline        If she's got her money, she's off on some tropical island spending it.
- Cheryl           She's a weak link. If she knows what's good for her, she would have disappeared long ago.
- Brian            If there ever was a Brian, he's in this on a need to know basis—useless.

The list seems useless. It only confirms to me that I have no chance. I have to follow my hunches. I remember the restaurant where Caroline dined with Kevin. It is simple to figure out where the dessert place is near there. I stake it out. It doesn't open until 7AM. I can't eat. I'm living on coffee. I luck out when some guy who fits the description of Brian walks in around 9AM..

“You’re a friend of Alea’s.”

“Yes, I am. Who are you?”

“Alea’s trying to kill me.”

“What am I supposed to do about it?”

“I’ll beat the shit out of you if you don’t tell me what I need to know.”

In my condition, my comment only seems like a joke. He laughs.

“I’m dying. She’s poisoned me.”

“You need to sit down, and calm down.”

I sit down and tell him my story.

“I really need your help.”

“I don’t know how to find Alea. I really don’t know her that well. But I know Cheryl really well. Everyone does. She’ll be at work at 11. I also have some info about Kevin. He was with Alea one time, and I needed a mechanic. He gave me his number on the back of a credit card receipt”

“I thought that you don’t have a car.”

“I’m looking to buy one. I needed to have it checked out.”

We go back to Brian’s. The receipt is for a clothing place. Kevin bought a suit there.

“Could you call the credit card company, and get his number?”

I was begging the sales clerk.

“There not going to give it to us.”

He is an older gentleman. He has been working there a long time.

“Wait a second, he needed the stuff altered. We definitely have a record of him being here.”

He opens up this book and find the number.

“Brian, we need to go there.”

It’s an accounting firm. We walk in. We tell the secretary that it’s urgent.

“I’ve been poisoned.”

“Kevin isn’t going to be in until this afternoon. He has an important meeting.”

We’ve hit a dead end.

“Cheryl should be on soon.”

We run over to where she is working. She is just putting on her apron.

“Professor Simpson, what are you doing here? You’re following me. I feel flattered.”

“We’re actually looking for Alea.”

“I have no idea where she is.”

“Do you know Kevin? We were just at his office.”

“I don’t really know him. But Alea talked about him. He actually eats at the Fisherman’s Wharf every day. She met him there a couple of times.

“Where is that?” I ask

“It’s way across town.”

Brian tells me that he has an appointment, “You’re on your own.”

Cheryl has more info, “You won’t be able to walk there. You’ll need a cab. It’s near the Marriott.”

I get a cab. It is almost 1. The luncheon hour is almost over. The cabbie almost gets in

an accident. He jumps out of the cab and is screaming at the other car.

“I have to get somewhere.”

“Hold on,” he yells at me.

“You get back in here, or your fare is going to walk.” In the state that I am in, I feel like crawling.

I finally make it to the restaurant. I can see a party getting up. I run over to them.

“Kevin.”

A conservatively dressed gentleman talks to me, “I’m Kevin.”

“You’re not dead.”

He gives me the strangest look.

“I thought Caroline tried to kill you.”

“She’s at work right now in Alexandria.”

“I thought she hated you.”

“Who gave you that idea?”

“Alea.”

“Who are you?”

“That doesn’t matter much. Are you still having an affair with Alea?”

“She’s a friend of the family. I know her father.”

“Cheryl said that you were meeting her for lunch.”

“I was doing her taxes. I’m really busy so I met with her at lunch.”

“Didn’t she just try to get in touch with you?”

“How do you know that?”

“I just know.”

“She wanted to get dinner reservations for tonight. At this new restaurant at 8. And it’s really chic. Everyone wants to go there. It’s almost impossible to get in. But I’m their accountant. I called up there for her.”

“At 8.”

“Yeah.”

I told him that I thought that I was being poisoned. I told him my story.

“You better catch her tonight. I think that she’s going away somewhere.”

It is almost 2 now. I have 6 hours until the reservation, and 7 hours to live.

“Look it, Wallace, you need to clean up if you’re going to be ready for tonight.”

I can see myself in a mirror. I look like a mess.

“Wallace, I feel bad for you. I know a doctor that can look you over.”

He takes out his cell and makes a few calls.

“Here, take this.”

He writes down a number and an address. Kevin hardly seems like the ex-CIA assassin from Alea’s story.

“The doctor’s not going to kill me.”

“Not as far as I know.”

I get to the doctor’s office. I give my name. The room is crowded, but I am brought right in.

“Kevin told me it was an emergency.”

“It’s great that someone can still get results these days.”

He checks my blood pressure and heart rate. He takes some blood. Checks my breathing.

“Professor Simpson, you just look run down. We’ll have to wait on the blood test. Give me a couple of hours.”

“She said it was an undetectable poison.”

“You actually talked to her.”

“She left me this cryptic message.”

“Really.”

He smiles.

“I really am worried. I’ve had this stomach ache all day.”

He gave me something for stress.

“Call back in a two hours, and we’ll have the results.”

I am feeling no better. I find a drug store nearby. I take the prescription. The recommended dose. I am shaking. It is going to be a long two hours.

I am facing the inevitable end by myself. It is almost four by now. I will not know anything until after 6. The poison is working its way through the blood. She had all these accomplices. They have brought me to this doctors because he is sealing my fate. I will not live out the night.

I think about when I have to surprise her. She is sitting pretty. I am a total mess.

I try to catch my wits. I know where to find Alea. And there is nothing more that she can do to me now.

*“Wallace, I can refuse you the antidote.”*

I am still going to have to wait it out. I don’t want to make it worse. I figure that I will check into a hotel. I find a room at the Windsor Inn. I pull down the covers and fall asleep. I feel so tired. I am unsure if I am going to make it out of this one.

When I wake up, the room is dark. I look at the clock. It says 3. I have slept all night. I missed Alea at the restaurant. I am still alive.

I hear some noises in the hallway. I can’t keep awake. I drift off. When I wake up, it is 5 PM. I am sure that I have not slept all night. My stomach still aches.

I call Nick, “Where are you?”

“At the office. Where the hell are you?”

“I can’t really say right now.”

“I thought that you needed my help.”

I remember the doctor. He told me that he was going to rush the blood test. I am not even sure if I am going to catch him. I get his service. They tell me that they will try to reach him.

“It’s a life or death emergency.”

I am too weak to convey my sense of desperation. I hear a knock at the door.

“Who is it?”

“Hotel security.”

I open the door.

“There was a woman looking for you?”

Has Alea got a jump on me? Probably one of her CIA contacts.

“What did she want?”

“She asked to come up. But you did not answer your phone. She asked us to check on you. She said that you were very sick.”

Her concern seemed pretty misplaced at this point. First, she wanted to poison me. Now she wants to rescue me. That seemed highly contradictory. Maybe she only wanted to finish the job.

*“Wallace, you have never been good at this sort of thing.”*

*“What are you talking about, Alea?”*

*“Trust issues.”*

*I have no idea why she was telling me this after she had poisoned me. I assume that the prescription is giving me some kind of insight into her motives.”*

*“Wallace, you are so funny. You think that you were going to escape that easily.*

*“My stomach is no longer hurting me.”*

*“Hurting you? You are numb all over.”*

I get a call from the doctor’s office. They tell me that I have received the wrong prescription.

“We got the results of the blood test. This is going to be worse for you. This is irreversible.”

Nick has the answer. I need to find him if I am ever going to make sense what has happened to me.

“She is still telling you that crazy poison story. Your mind is playing tricks with you.”

“The doctor says that I am all messed up.”

“You are going love crazy.”

“I do not even like her. I never have.”

Nick starts to laugh. He has been doing this all along. I am sure that they are working together.

“There is someone who you need to see who can help with this.”

He sends me to a herbal doctor. I feel as if he is playing along with me.

“Who told you to come here?”

“Nick said that you could help.”

“Nick told me that you are a hypochondriac who is letting his love-sickness get a hold of him.”

“I have been poisoned.”

At that moment, I passed out from my pain.

“What did I tell you, my friend? This is nothing.”

I woke up back at Nick’s. I had no idea how I had made it here.

“Alea brought you back here. She told me that you had an adverse reaction to some soup that you had for lunch yesterday.”

“That is not at all what happened. She is trying to poison me. I have a fever. Look at my face.”

*“If that was poison, then you would be dead.”*

*“Tell her to up here right now.”*

*“I cannot do that. She left.”*



*"You said that she was downstairs."*

I look at the clock. It is now 6:30. Where did the hour go? I get dressed and start to make my way to the restaurant. I decide to take the train over there. The stomach pain has subsided.

*"Do you think that she is doing this on her own?"*

*"What is this about?"*

*"This has always been about Eva. You killed her. And the police were going to let you off. They had no evidence. I had everything that I needed."*

*"Nick, you did it to Eva. It was one of your sick games. I don't know if you were trying to hurt her. Or were you trying to mess with me."*

*"Wallace, you really think that you are that important."*

*I had no idea what he meant. I was the one who had been poisoned. This was no longer about my sense of self-importance. I have been poisoned.*

I was out for a couple of hours. I looked at my watch. I had an idea. I needed to review those photos of Alea. That held the key. Something that she wanted to say to me. Or perhaps, she had been revealing something important about herself. How had she involved me in all this?

*"Wallace, you were going to make sure that I did not get into the Creative Writing Department."*

*"I have nothing to do with that. I am teaching German."*

*"You were my teacher."*

*"That is the past. I had some problems, and I needed to leave the department. I teach German to business people."*

*"Wallace, you are lying to me. You are head of the department. I applied to grad school. And you have been trying to sabotage my portfolio. You stole my story ideas. And you replaced some of your old stories."*

*"What are you talking about, Alea?"*

*"I am not making up things."*

*"You and Nick have been trying to screw with me."*

I get to the restaurant just after 8. I see her sitting down. The hostess block my path. I point to Alea.

*"There's my date."*

I can see the back of her head. I walk over and tap her on the shoulder.

*"What do you want, sir?"*

I am not sure. This is Alea. But she seems to have no recognition of me.

*"I'm Nick. Don't you know me?"*

*The Chair calls me in.*

*"This Alea woman has been saying unflattering things about you."*

*"I don't know who you are talking about. You handled her application. You told me not to accept her."*

*Wallace, I knew that you would never be able to find an antidote. None exists. The more that you want to live, the worse that the poison affects the body."*

*"Are you telling me to surrender?"*

*"That may be your only choice at this point?"*

*“How can you call that a choice?”*

She was telling me what was the antidote. I needed to realize it for myself. This was not going to be as difficult as I thought.

*I imagined Eva appearing. And her gentle touch seemed to bring me back from oblivion.*

*“I was never right for Nick. He knew that I had money. And he tried to drain it all from me.”*

“Wallace, you were such an appealing person when you were teaching at George Mason. Then you lost your job. You were scrounging around to survive. Doing technical writing and teaching German. This was not at all satisfying to me. I wanted more.”

*“I got sent back to that horrendous kitchen. I had real hopes for myself. I was a good writer, and you destroyed me.”*

*“What kind of childhood did you have?”*

*“I got ran out of the town where I grew up.”*

*“How did that happen?”*

*“I knew too much .”*

*“And that is why you tried to poison me.”*

“You need to quit doing this to me, Wallace.”

“Why are you trying to poison me?”

“You are doing all of this to yourself.”

“This is some evil spirit stuff.”

“I cannot control all of this on my own.”

I felt that this was some kind of weakness in myself. I could feel the poison work its way deeper and deeper inside.

*“You will not accept any blame for these terrible thing.”*

*“Alea, I had nothing to do with the thing that happened in your life.”*

*“But you were willing to steal my ideas and take them as your own. This was my pain.”*

Where had Nick found her? Somehow, she had learned my stories and transformed them into her own.

“Wallace, we have the prescription for you.”

The doctor had phoned in the remedy. I hope to pick it up. But the pain was now so debilitating. It kept going in waves. I would be OK for a little while. Now, it was unbearable.

“Nick, I need you to get my prescription.”

“That is not going to happen.”

“What do you mean?”

“You brought this on yourself. I cannot help you.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I am saying it like it is. I wish that I could help. But there is nothing that I can do.”

“There is a prescription.”

“She found a secret poison. The medicine is not going to work.”

“You are not a chemist.”

Nick was challenging me.

“I wanted to prove to you that I could succeed.”

“How?”

“They will find no poison in your system. You will expire by respiratory failure.”

“Alea, what is this voodoo shit that you tried to play on me.”

“You are so open to suggestion.”

“What does this mean?”

“You are feeling all guilty about Eva.”

“I am so sick. This needs to stop.”

***She has found the revision that gives power to her story. I love the angle about poison. I wished that I had come up with it myself.***

***“The whole respiratory system shuts down completely. The pain is intense. And then nothing. Do you understand nothingness?”***

***What was she asking me? Nothingness could not be understood.***

“Wallace, you may be the well-known novelist, but I have a better imagination.”

“Nick, you do not know how to apply yourself. That was always your weakness. And you have blamed that on me. That is why Eva left you.”

“I have an idea for a story.”

“All of us have ideas. I have no shortages of ideas. I don’t know where to take them.”

“There is no antidote for that.”

“How can you say that?”

“Look at yourself. What have you become?”

“I am just like you.”

Alea had such a sense of self-hatred. It showed in her stories. I needed to offer her an antidote. That would give her stories more humanity. But she was convinced that I was stealing her ideas.

“That is why I want you dead.”

“You’re not going to do anything about it.”

I had the perfect poison story. I needed to figure out what do to finish it. It was too good to leave without an ending.

“What do you recommend Nick?”

“Wallace, you have to do die to be reborn.”

“That is not going to work.”

“I do not want you looking at me like that.”

“All you do is perform. The way that you shake it.”

“I am trying to get free from this prison that you have created for me.”

***“I had spent all this time trying to create this perfect character. He haunted me. I needed to destroy him.”***

I woke up in the middle of the night with the worst stomach ache.

“Honey, come back to bed.”

“How did you get in here?”

“You gave me a key.”

I was sure that she had put something in my food.

“Come back to bed. You will be okay.