

Poisoned

by Beverly Barton, 1946-2011

Published: 2012

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I've been poisoned!

There could be no other explanation for what had happened to her. The recurring nausea, the horrific abdominal cramping, the blurred vision, the dizziness and mental confusion were a result of poison. It had been a deliberate, premeditated murder attempt. She had lived in fear for such a long time, watching her back, playing it safe, afraid to trust.

Apparently her drink had been doctored. Why hadn't she been more careful? Had she been a fool to trust Jed Merrill?

“Olivia? Olivia...”

His voice came from far away, as if echoing through a long tunnel. Where was he? How close? Could she escape before he found her?

I have to keep moving. Must get away. I can't let him catch me.

Darkness surrounded her. She couldn't see where she was, let alone where she was going. But she couldn't stop long enough to get her bearings. If she slowed down, he would catch her. He was close. She could hear his approaching footsteps. She could almost feel his hot breath on her neck.

Suddenly flashes of light zipped past her. Car headlights maybe? They had been moving fast, revealing nothing, not giving her a clue about her location.

For the life of her, she couldn't remember leaving her apartment, had no idea how she'd gotten here, wherever the hell here was.

Winded and exhausted, Olivia paused long enough to suck in some deep breaths. Easing backward, hoping to hide in the murky shadows, she encountered a solid wall behind her, firm and yet giving, as if the surface was padded. She couldn't stay here for long, just another minute at most. If she lingered, he would catch up with her. What would he do to her? Shoot her? Strangle her? Break her neck with those big, powerful hands that had only recently caressed every inch of her body?

Damn you, Jed Merrill. Damn your black-hearted soul. I trusted you. I believed you really cared.

Why was he following her? He had already poisoned her, hadn't he? She was probably dying. If she couldn't find a way to get to a hospital soon, someone would find her dead body lying in the ditch. Maybe that was why he was coming after her, in order to dispose of her body once she was dead. He could toss her in the river or in the landfill or bury her somewhere out in the woods.

“Olivia, can you hear me?”

Oh, God... oh, God. Jed was talking to her, his voice distinct, close, as if he was standing right beside her. With trembling fingers, she felt all around her, floating her hands in front of her and then on either side. Nothing. No Jed. No one. Just black emptiness.

And then he closed his hand around hers. For a split second, she didn't move, didn't breathe, and couldn't make her body obey her mind's commands.

“No,” she cried as she jerked her hand free of his gentle hold.

“Olivia, honey, don't fight me,” he told her, his baritone voice Bourbon smooth and dripping with Southern charm.

Without hesitation, she turned and ran. Her legs felt as if she had heavy weights around her ankles. Tired. Listless. Her lungs aching. Her heartbeat wild. Tears trickled down her cheeks, dripped off her nose, and moistened her parched lips. She had to stop again, just for a few minutes, to catch her breath, to regroup, to figure out where she was and how to get to the nearest hospital.

Lights appeared again, closer, dimmer, nonthreatening. She moved toward them. Streetlights? She had to be careful, had to weigh the odds, had to decide if going out into the open was worth the risk. But what if she could find someone to help her, someone driving by or walking by, someone who could call 911? If only she could remember how long ago it had been since she had drunk the champagne and ingested the poison now killing her by slow, painful degrees.

Think, damn it, think. Try to remember.

She and Jed had been celebrating. He had brought the champagne with him. She had prepared dinner. No... she hadn't had time to cook. She had picked up takeout on her way home from work. Had they eaten first, before Jed opened the bubbly? Yes, she thought they had. Vague memories of the two of them sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace, the food spread out on a tray, drifted through her mind. The jumble of memories and odd thoughts drifted through a hazy fog as if her mind wouldn't allow her to see clearly.

What were we celebrating?

Olivia stumbled, barely managing to maintain her balance, and then continued running.

She remembered Jed making a toast, could see him smiling, could feel his lips against hers. His taste lingered, stronger than the taste of the champagne. Had she been given a promotion at work? Had he? No, she didn't think so. Had one of them been given a pay raise? Won an award?

She shook her head.

Dalton!

Oh, my God, that was it. Dalton was in jail. The fact that he was behind bars was reason enough to celebrate.

How long would it take for his case to come to trial? Weeks? Months? Years? Until she testified and he was convicted, she would be in danger. He couldn't allow her to live, to testify against him.

Olivia stumbled again, the earth beneath her feet slick and damp. When she looked down, she couldn't see her feet, only the wet pavement glistening with iridescent moisture created by rain and oily road sludge. She didn't recognize the street, couldn't identify a single building, but she could hear the hum of motors and the drone of faraway voices.

"Help me... please, somebody, help me."

"Olivia." Jed's voice surrounded her, coming from every direction, but she couldn't see him.

Why was Jed trying to kill her?

Wasn't it obvious? He was on Dalton's payroll. A dirty cop. No, please, God, no. Not Jed. Not the man she loved, the man she trusted. But what other explanation could there be? Jed had poisoned her. And now he was following her, waiting for her to die so he could get rid of her body.

Barely able to stand, her throat dry, her limbs heavy with exhaustion, she struggled to make her way across the street toward the well-lit building. One you-can-do-this trudging step at a time, she pushed herself to keep moving. The cold nighttime rain pelted her face and soaked through her clothes. As she reached the double glass doors of the building and reached out to grab the door handle, a bone-rattling chill shook her from head to toe.

The pain in her belly hit with brutal force. She doubled over in agony as sour bile rose up her esophagus and coated her mouth with a bitter metallic taste. Her stomach tightened. She retched several times before the poisonous gold liquid spewed out of her mouth and coated the concrete sidewalk. As the pain subsided, she managed to stand up, her pulse drumming wildly in her ears. She was sick. She was cold. She was wet.

With an unsteady hand, she reached for the door handle and pulled on it.

Locked.

No, please. It can't be locked. I have to get inside. I need help. And I need it now.

She jerked on the door handle again and again before giving up and pounding on the door with weak, trembling fists.

"Please, somebody help me."

No response. No one was coming to help her. She couldn't stay here. She had to keep moving. She needed to go to the hospital, needed to be there now if she had any hope of surviving.

Call for help!

Dear God, why hadn't she thought of that before now? Standing under the canopy over the building's entrance so that she was temporarily out of the rain, she searched her pockets for her phone. Where was it? She usually kept it in her purse, but she hadn't brought a purse with her. Had she left the phone back at her apartment?

Olivia gazed through the heavy downpour and tried to figure out exactly where she was. If she was only a few blocks from her apartment, why was everything around her so unfamiliar? She couldn't possibly have run far enough to have left her own neighborhood. The darkness combined with the rain made everything look different. That had to be what was wrong. In the daylight, with the sun shining, she would know exactly where she was. Her apartment was only blocks from downtown Florence, Alabama, and a stone's throw from the UNA campus. Although it was the middle of the night, surely someone was out and about, someone would drive by soon, someone would hear her cries. But Florence was a typical small Southern city where on a weeknight most good folks were in bed this time of night, not out prowling the streets, not even the college students.

Realizing how vulnerable she was there in front of the brightly lit building, Olivia ventured out into the rain. Her brisk walk turned into a slow run as she made her way up the sidewalk and turned onto a gloomy side street. Her gaze hampered by the relentless downpour, she didn't see the sidewalk café until she stumbled over a metal chair. Barely managing to stay on her feet, she grabbed the back of the chair to steady herself. A twinkling neon light in the café window cast multicolored flashes of illumination across the sidewalk and the half-dozen black metal chairs and three small glass-and-metal tables.

She had to stop. She couldn't go any farther. Olivia chose a chair in the corner and dragged it to the most obscure area of the outdoor café that she could find. Halfway hidden behind a huge potted plant and partially sheltered by the building's overhang, she slumped down into the chair. Bracing her elbows on her knees, she leaned over and supported her pounding head between her open palms. She massaged her throbbing temples with her fingertips.

How had she gotten herself into such a horrible predicament? Olivia Lynn Warren had lived an uneventful, vanilla, white-bread life. A good girl from a good family, an honor student, graduated magna cum laude, paid her taxes, went to church, obeyed traffic laws, had never even gotten a speeding ticket.

Cramps twisted her belly as nausea threatened. She needed a bathroom. She needed to rid her body of the poison. Unable to stop the flow of tears, her emotions raw, Olivia leaned her head back against the brick wall behind her and took

several deep breaths. The nausea subsided, at least temporarily, and the gripping pain in her belly eased up enough so that she could bear it.

Olivia tried to remember that night—weeks or months ago—when she had been in the wrong place at the wrong time and witnessed a murder. From that moment on, her life had been an upside-down whirlwind of disaster, Jed Merrill the only good thing that had come out of so much bad. But now, Jed had turned against her. He had poisoned her.

Why couldn't she remember? Had the poison affected her brain?

But she hadn't forgotten everything. She remembered some things, mostly bits and pieces. And the things she did remember seemed to be all mixed up together, making it difficult for her to form a correct timeline.

Olivia remembered Amber Carr. Amber had hired their decorating firm to redo her living room, dining room and perform an extensive kitchen remodel. Olivia had been fresh out of college, a first year resident with the firm, and eager to prove herself. From the moment Mrs. Carr had walked into Downtown Interiors and spotted Olivia, the two had hit it off like a house afire. Amber had been only a few years older than Olivia and they found they had a great deal in common... except for Amber's husband, a wealthy businessman twenty-five years Amber's senior. Everyone in Florence knew Dalton Carr, one of the areas few multimillionaires.

If only she hadn't stopped by the Carr's home that Friday evening. But Amber had been eager to see the swatches for the draperies and Olivia's boss had been eager to please her wealthiest client. When she arrived at the lakefront mansion, Olivia had found the front door wide open and upon entering the marble-floored foyer, she'd heard loud voices. Amber was screeching at her husband and he was bellowing obscenities at her.

Why didn't I just turn around and leave before they knew I was there?

When Olivia heard the first shot, she hadn't recognized the sound, but when Amber had screamed, "No, please, Dalton," Olivia had acted on impulse. She had dropped the material swatches, frantically raked through her purse for her cell phone and had been unable to catch her bag as it slipped out of her hand and plunged down on top of the swatches. She had dialed 911 as she'd run toward the sound of Amber's pleading cries. Just as she reached the entrance to the downstairs master bedroom, Dalton Carr had fired another shot. Olivia had stood there, frozen to the spot, unable to move or speak as Dalton stood over his wife and shot her for the third time, that time at point-blank range.

As if sensing her presence, Dalton had turned and stared at Olivia, and then pointed the pistol directly at her. The 911 operator's voice had come in clearly on her cell phone, clear enough so that Dalton heard the woman. Olivia had turned and run back through the house and out onto the driveway. But before she could reach her car, Dalton Carr had come out of the house, gun in hand, and almost caught up with her as she fled. Her car keys had been inside her purse in the Carr's foyer. She'd had no choice but try to escape on foot.

Olivia moaned as the memories of that night bombarded her foggy brain. Dalton had chased her. He had shot at her. But what had happened after that? Why couldn't she remember?

Hunching over, cuddling herself by wrapping her arms around her wet, aching body and bringing up her knees, Olivia huddled in the dismal corner as she prayed for someone to help her.

She had prayed that night, too, prayed for someone to save her from Dalton Carr.

Jed had saved her.

“You were my hero that night,” she had told him later.

Unlike tonight, that night she had kept her cell phone with her. While running away from Dalton, she had spoken to the 911 operator. She had told the woman what had happened and that she was being chased by the killer. She had run for her life, pleading with God not to let her die, hiding in the darkness, afraid to breathe.

“Miss, you’re safe.” His soothing voice had calmed her. “We have Mr. Carr in custody. He can’t hurt you.”

She had looked up into the most striking blue-gray eyes she had ever seen and instantly believed the man who was lifting her up and into his arms. Apparently, she had passed out then and when she came to hours later, she had found herself in a hospital room, Jed Merrill sitting at her bedside.

“Hello,” he’d said. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“Do you remember what happened?”

She had nodded. “I—I ran from Dalton Carr after I saw him kill his wife. He chased me. I stumbled and fell. My knees hurt and—” She had lifted her right hand and encountered a large bandage over her left shoulder. “He shot me!”

“The bullet went straight through and the doctors say there won’t be any permanent damage.”

“You were there, weren’t you? You’re the one who saved me.”

He had shrugged. “I found you hiding in the bushes on the lawn of a house about three blocks from the Carr home. I followed the blood trail.”

“Who are you?”

“Sorry, I should have already introduced myself. I’m Lieutenant Jed Merrill with the Florence Police Department. I’m heading up the Amber Carr murder investigation.”

Days later when she had been released from the hospital, Jed had taken her home and explained that although the Florence P.D. didn’t have the resources to assign someone to guard her 24/7, he planned to make sure she was safe.

“Dalton Carr is out on bond until the trial,” Jed had explained. “He hasn’t made any threats against you. Guess he’s too smart for that, but you need to be careful and take every precaution. I want you to know that I’ll do my level best to keep an eye on you.”

The sudden roar of a truck passing by on Court Street, a block away, brought Olivia from the past to the present. How long had it been since that day when she’d been released from the hospital and found out that her life was still in danger? It couldn’t have been that long ago, not if Dalton Carr had yet to be tried and convicted of his wife’s murder. But for some reason, it felt like years ago. That

wasn't possible. If Dalton had hired Jed to kill her that had to mean she hadn't testified against him yet.

Shivering from the cold March breeze whipping around her damp body, she hugged herself tightly as she scanned the area in every direction. The rain had let up and was now only a misty drizzle. She needed to get up and start moving, to keep running. It was only a matter of time before Jed found her. He was good at tracking, good at figuring out what the other guy was going to do, good at his job as a police detective.

And he had been a good friend to her. Her protector. Her lover.

She loved Jed. And he loved her.

No, it was all pretense on his part. He doesn't love me. He poisoned the champagne. Did he? Are you sure? Maybe the poison wasn't in the champagne. But if he didn't poison me, who did? And why is Jed chasing me?

Are you sure Jed is the man hunting you?

Yes, she was sure because she recognized his voice, the only voice she could hear out there in the wet, foggy darkness.

Olivia forced herself up and onto her feet. Simply standing was a monumental task. She swayed, dizziness spinning her head. Somewhere nearby a dog barked and then another farther away answered the first one's howl. In the eerie silence that followed, she heard footsteps again, faint at first, and then coming closer and closer.

Struggling with every step she took, she moved away from the shadowy corner of the café and inched her way along the buildings until she reached the entrance to the alley. A streetlight shone dimly into the backstreet, giving her a semiclear view, enough to see that if she entered the narrow passage, she wouldn't be trapped. The alley went straight through and came out on the other side. Keeping close to the wall, she crept silently along the paved path until she reached a large Dumpster blocking her way. The stench of garbage assailed her senses and once again nausea threatened. Holding her breath until she slipped past the full Dumpster, she managed not to vomit.

Winded, her sides aching, every muscle in her body rioting, Olivia paused halfway into the alley, pressed her back against the damp stone wall and listened. The sound of her labored breaths echoed inside her head. And the distinct tapping of footsteps drew nearer.

Dear God, he was in the alley behind her. What was she going to do? She couldn't run, could barely walk. If only she had some way to protect herself.

She had taken the self-defense classes Jed had insisted on and she had kept the small handgun he had bought for her and taught her how to use. But the gun was locked away in her apartment and if he caught her, she didn't have the strength to fight him. If she hadn't been poisoned...

Why would Jed have signed her up for self-defense classes if he hadn't wanted her to be able to protect herself? And why would he have bought her a pistol and given her lessons at a local firing range if he had been planning to kill her? It didn't make any sense.

"I love your hair," he had told her as he had lifted a strand and wound it around his finger.

“I’m not a natural blonde, you know. I was when I was a child, but underneath this expensive dye job, it’s a mousy brown.”

He had laughed and kissed her. “Anything else about you fake?” He had caressed her, skimming his hand over first one breast and then the other, running his fingers down across her belly and cupping her mound with gentle possessiveness.

“What do you think?” she had teased him.

“I think everything else is one hundred percent real, but before I make a definite decision, I believe further investigation is in order.”

That had been the first time they had made love, the night she had realized she was madly in love with her knight in shining armor. They hadn’t said I love you then. Not until months later.

Months? How many months?

“Olivia,” he called to her.

It was Jed’s voice. He was the man in the alley behind her, the man who had been chasing her.

You love him. He loves you. You trust him. You know he would never hurt you. Listen to your heart. What if the poison had been in the food? What if someone at the restaurant...? No, that doesn’t make any sense, either.

“Jed,” she cried out to him. “Help me, Jed. I’m so sick. I’ve been poisoned.”

She crumpled down onto the damp pavement, drew her legs up and bowed her head as she waited for Jed. Was he her rescuer, her true hero? Or was he her killer?

“I’m here, honey. Everything is going to be all right.”

She could make out only a man’s silhouette as he approached, but the moment he took her hand in his and she felt the tender strength of his touch, she closed her eyes and sighed. He took her in his arms, lifted her, carried her, held her close.

“Poisoned,” she repeated. “Hospital.”

“Hush, Olivia. Hush, sweetheart. Just relax and rest. You’re going to be fine. I promise.”

Jed Merrill kept his promises. Always. He was a man of honor and integrity. He would never hurt her. Why had she ever thought he had poisoned her? It was the champagne. He had brought a bottle of expensive Dom Pérignon. She remembered he had opened the bottle and poured the bubbly wine into their glasses.

“Here’s to us, to our future together.”

She’d been so happy. They had been celebrating something important. But what?

Somehow, somehow, someone had poisoned her. The only person she knew who wanted her dead was Dalton Carr. Without her eyewitness testimony, the D.A.’s case wouldn’t be as strong and there was a chance Dalton would be found not guilty.

“Jed,” she managed to whisper his name.

“Don’t talk. Just rest.”

“Poison. Who?”

Jed didn't answer her. But she could hear him talking to someone else. She couldn't make out what they were saying. Who was he talking to?

Oh, God, she was sleepy. So sleepy. Was she dying?

I don't want to die. I want to live. I'm young and in love. I have my whole life ahead of me. Jed and I are going to get married.

A shudder racked Olivia from head to toe. Gentle hands lifted a blanket up and over her, tucking it around her shoulders. She sighed as sleep overcame her. Her last coherent thought was the memory of Jed proposing, her accepting, him putting a ring on her finger, and then popping open the champagne.

They had been celebrating their engagement.

Olivia woke to morning sunlight winking through the partially closed blinds at the double windows. She stretched languidly, but paused midstretch when she realized just how sore her body was, from throat to rib cage to abdomen. And then she realized she was not at home, not in her own bed, and she wasn't at Jed's place, either. Glancing around the room, scanning the pale walls, the tiled floor, the IV bag hanging beside the bed, and the hustle and bustle of people outside her half-open door, Olivia knew she was in the hospital.

What was she doing here?

She had been sick, so very sick. Had someone really poisoned her? Had she run from her apartment? Had Jed chased her through downtown Florence? Had he saved her, brought her here to the hospital?

Olivia found the buttons on the remote that controlled her bed and lifted the head of the bed into a sitting position. Looking down at herself, she found she was wearing the ever-fashionable hospital gown and the IV was hooked up to a needle in her left hand. For the first time in hours—maybe days—her mind was clear and her memory intact.

The door swung open and Jed, carrying a foam cup filled with hot coffee, came into her room. The moment he saw that she was awake, he rushed over to her, set his coffee on the bedside table and eased down next to her.

"Good morning, beautiful," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been hit by a Mack truck," she told him.

"Not a Mack truck, just a wicked bout of food poisoning."

"Food poisoning?"

"Apparently the takeout you picked up for our dinner took you out. Or possibly something you ate for lunch."

"You're okay, aren't you?"

"I'm fine because we didn't eat the same thing. I ate beef. You ate chicken. And I didn't eat any dessert with the cream sauce. Honey, don't you remember waking up around two o'clock with severe vomiting and—?"

"Yes, I remember now. I started vomiting and had diarrhea. I had chills and a fever and a horrible headache."

"I finally managed to persuade you to let me take you to the E.R. around eight o'clock yesterday morning. We were lucky. You were only slightly dehydrated." He glanced at the IV bag and then back at Olivia. "It was killing me to see you in so much pain."

“Jed, I—I must have had some crazy dreams or something. I didn’t run away from you, did I?”

“You couldn’t have run away if you’d wanted to, honey. You were really out of it.” He caressed her cheek. “Hell of way to end our engagement celebration.”

“How long have I been in the hospital?”

“Almost twenty-four hours. You’ve been asleep most of that time, coming to now and then, and talking crazy.”

“You’ve been here the whole time, haven’t you?”

“Where else would I be?”

She leaned into Jed, placing her head on his chest and wrapping her arms around his waist. He embraced her carefully. “Did I accuse you of poisoning me?” She tried to laugh, but couldn’t.

Jed kissed the top of her head. “You kept saying something about poison, but then you mumbled a lot of gibberish.”

“Dalton Carr is dead, isn’t he?”

Jed cupped her chin and lifted it so that she had to look up at him. “You were having a nightmare about Dalton Carr? Oh, Olivia, I’m sorry. I thought you had moved past the horror of what happened to you back then.”

“I thought so, too.” She tried to smile, but the effort failed. “I testified, didn’t I? He was convicted of second-degree murder. That was nearly two years ago. And he committed suicide in jail before he could be transferred to prison.”

Olivia closed her eyes and clung to Jed, shivering as the memories exploded inside her. In her drug-induced sleep, her mind had combined various aspects of her life—her near-death experience the night Dalton had tried to kill her, the fear she had lived with until after the trial, her relationship with Jed that had grown slowly from friendship into passion, their engagement celebration and her battle with food poisoning.

Opening her eyes, she gazed up at Jed. “I love you. And I’m sorry that in my crazy dreams I thought you had poisoned me.”

He lowered his head and kissed her. Sweetly. Gently. “You had a difficult time trusting anyone after what happened. Even me. Maybe this was your subconscious way of working out the last of your trust issues and completely letting go of the all-too-real nightmare Dalton Carr put you through.”

Maybe Jed was right. Maybe it had taken being poisoned—even if it was food poisoning—to cleanse her mind and heart from the fear and distrust that had poisoned her life for the past few years. Now she truly was free. Free to move forward into the future with the man she loved, the man she knew she could trust completely.

