

ARSENIC AND OLD CAKE

BY

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"I think your ulcers are back, Mike."

Those words were exactly what Mike Hammond didn't want to hear. He didn't have any time to be nursing stomach ulcers again. Not with his career in full swing and his one year anniversary coming up.

"Are you sure, Dr. Myers?"

"Well, I can't say for sure until we do some tests," was the reply. "I'll schedule you for an upper GI."

Today was Wednesday and this was Atlanta. Mike knew that it would take at least two days to get an appointment for something like that and his anniversary was on Friday. He was taking the whole day off from work to spend with Janeece. They were planning a quiet day at home and a romantic dinner to start what he hoped would be a very relaxing evening together. The last thing he wanted to do was interrupt their special day off to come in for an upper GI.

"Could we make it next week?" he asked.

Dr. Myers eyed the handsome TV news anchorman and thought he didn't look like anything was seriously wrong, yet. He'd been Mike's doctor for the last seven years anyway and this man wasn't one to screw up his priorities. Still, he had to ask why.

"Next week?"

Mike nodded. "Janeece and I are celebrating our first anniversary day after tomorrow. I know there's no chance of my getting in for the upper GI tomorrow before that and I don't want to screw up Friday. We're kind of taking the whole day off. Just the two of us."

Dr. Myers laughed. "Okay. I don't think you're going to get any worse before next week. Just wait here and I'll have my nurse schedule this for you."

Mike smiled at him. "Thanks, Jay."

They were on a first name basis after seven years as doctor and patient. Not to mention the time five years ago when Mike had almost died from bleeding ulcers and Dr. Myers had tended to him like he was his only patient. That really endeared him to Mike. In a busy city like Atlanta, with as many patients as he probably saw, Mike knew this was something above and beyond the call of duty.

He got dressed while he was waiting for his appointment at the diagnostic center. Mike was the six o'clock anchor of WCIS news and he was the most popular on air personality in middle Georgia. He'd been with the station for ten years and had worked his way up from the eleven o'clock news to the morning show to the noon broadcast, before finally winning the job he wanted most.

Mike was a handsome man. He was almost six feet tall and he kept himself in shape by running two miles every morning. He had sandy brown hair and nice blue eyes. His complexion was olive toned and his features were rugged, but they still retained enough of his boyish appearance to make him easy on the eyes without needing a lot of make up. He was thirty-eight years old, a graduate of Texas A&M with a degree in journalism, and his warm tenor voice gave his audience something as nice to listen to as his appearance did in giving them something to look at. In fact, year before last, he had been named the Sexiest Bachelor in Georgia. It was an honor that still embarrassed him whenever anyone asked him about it.

He had just put his shoes back on when Dr. Myers returned with a piece of paper bearing the appointment date and time for the upper GI. Mike smiled when he read it. Monday morning at ten o'clock. Perfect!

"And here's a prescription for Omeprazole," Dr. Myers said, handing him another piece of paper. "You start back on that today and if your symptoms don't improve call me."

Mike was familiar with Omeprazole. It was what he'd taken when he battled ulcers a few years ago. The purple capsules worked magic then. Surely they would do their stuff now.

"And you can always go to the ER if you need to," Dr. Myers told him

Mike smiled at him. "Thanks, Jay."

"That's what a doctor is for."

Mike shook his head. "You're my friend as much as you're my doctor."

"Then that's what a friend is for."

Mike gave him a hug. He liked being friends with the people he needed in his life and his doctor was certainly among that crowd. Coming from Texas, he had been raised in a very close family and the community where he grew up was small; everybody knew everybody else and if they didn't then they knew your mama. Even with a flashy career and in a big place like Atlanta, the small town boy was very much alive in him.

"So tell me how married life is treating you?" Dr. Myers asked.

Mike beamed. "It's everything I was hoping it would be. Janeece is the best thing that ever happened to me. I feel like I don't know how I got along without her. She tends to my every need. She even gives me massages and pedicures."

Dr. Myers had to laugh inwardly. The first year of marriage was usually always a honeymoon period. He wondered what Mike would have to say once the children started coming and they had less time for each other.

"I really want to take care of Janeece too," Mike went on. "She's had such a hard time."

Dr. Myers frowned. "How so?"

"Well, her first marriage was to her high school sweetheart and he died suddenly after only a year," Mike replied.

"How did he die?" Dr. Myers asked.

"Cancer," Mike answered. "He was diagnosed with liver cancer only three months after they got married and he died right around their first anniversary."

"That's tragic!"

Mike nodded. "I know. She couldn't bring herself to even think about marrying again until we met. She grieved for over ten years for that man."

Now the doctor's smile returned. "I guess it just goes to show that there really is someone special out there for everybody."

Mike nodded again, smiling himself. "It certainly feels that way. My wife is the most special woman I've ever met. I can't wait to start a family with her."

They continued chatting while walking out of the exam room. Dr. Myers promised to call him as soon as he had the results of the upper GI and he made Mike promise to call him if he got any worse or if he needed anything. They parted where the corridor in the office forked. Mike headed for the cashier and Dr. Myers headed for his office.

Dr. Gordon Wakeman was coming out of an exam room when he spotted his colleague chatting with Mike Hammond just a few feet away from him. Everybody in Atlanta knew who Mike Hammond was and he hadn't known until just now that Mike was a patient in their practice. He saw his partner and the newsman part and Dr. Myers was walking toward him.

"I didn't know you treated a celebrity," Dr. Wakeman said.

Dr. Myers laughed. His partner was an older man with thirty years under his belt and they had only been in practice together for about two years. He had been absorbed into the Wakeman Group with three other doctors when his first practice dissolved after a hospital closing in Atlanta.

"Mike is a nice guy," he said.

"He isn't ill, is he?" Dr. Wakeman asked.

"He had ulcers a few years ago and I think they're back," Dr. Myers explained. "I scheduled him for an upper GI." He laughed. "He wanted to wait until next week to have it because his first anniversary is Friday."

Dr. Wakeman thought for a moment and recalled reading in the society section of the Constitution that Mike Hammond had gotten hitched. Then a frown crossed his brow when he recalled who Mike had married.

"What's wrong?" Dr. Myers asked, noting his partner's frown.

"Mike Hammond married Janeece Alexander, didn't he?" he asked.

Dr. Myers nodded. "Yeah, do you know her?"

He sighed. "I was her first husband's doctor."

"Really?" Dr. Myers shook his head. "Mike was just telling me about how he died from cancer and Janeece grieved for him for over a decade."

Dr. Wakeman's eyebrows shot upward. He gave his younger colleague a look filled with concern and Dr. Myers was startled by it.

“What’s wrong, Gordon?”

Because his office was only a couple of doors down, Dr. Wakeman took his partner by the arm and led him into it. He closed the door behind them when they entered.

Dr. Myers was beginning to feel alarmed. “What’s the matter?”

“Janeece Hammond’s first husband did not die from cancer,” Dr. Wakeman told him. “He died from what I thought was a GI bleed.”

Now Dr. Myers’ alarm was on the rise. “Go on.”

“Tom Alexander was a healthy young man; a football player,” Dr. Wakeman explained. “He had just graduated from accounting school when he married Janeece. They were high school sweethearts or something like it.”

That part of the story was ringing true. Dr. Myers didn’t have to prompt him to continue.

“I had been his doctor since he was a teenager. That boy was fit as a fiddle but less than six months after his marriage he started coming in with stomach problems.”

“What kind of stomach problems?” Dr. Myers was frowning now.

“Persistent nausea and vomiting,” he replied. “The boy had a queasy stomach all the time and nothing I gave him short of Promethazine gave him any relief. He would get better for a few days and then get worse again. We did an upper GI that was inconclusive and then an EGD that showed his stomach was burned and red on the inside. I assumed it was some sort of bacterial gastritis that he couldn’t shake and put him on some heavy duty antibiotics. A few days later I got a call that he was in the ER at Grady with anemia second to GI bleeding. He died before we could get enough blood pumped into him to save his life.” He shook his head. “The boy was only twenty-five.”

Dr. Myers ran the scenario in his head as soon as Dr. Wakeman finished the story. It made sense. GI bleeding brought on by gastritis was common and in extreme cases death was not out of the question. What didn’t make sense was that Mike had just told him Janeece’s first husband died of cancer. Liver cancer, to be exact. He related this to Dr. Wakeman and it produced almost a scowl on the older doctor’s face.

“There’s something rotten in Denmark here,” Dr. Wakeman said. “I never understood how a healthy young man like Tom Alexander couldn’t beat a case of bacterial gastritis.”

“But why would she lie about it to Mike?” Dr. Myers wondered out loud.

Dr. Wakeman had a sneaking suspicion that he didn’t want to verbalize until he had to. He headed toward his desk and picked up the phone.

“I’m gonna place a call to Grady.”

“For what?”

Dr. Wakeman dialed as he replied: “To satisfy my curiosity.”

Feeling his alarm turn into a shred of fear, coupled with a truckload of curiosity, Dr. Myers could only guess what was going on. One thing he enjoyed about working with older doctors was that they seldom left any stones unturned. They had seen everything, twice, and when something didn’t compute or they encountered a mystery they hadn’t solved before there was no rest for them until the matter was settled.

“Tissue bank,” Dr. Wakeman said into the receiver. A second passed. “This is Dr. Wakeman. I had a patient there about ten years ago named Tom Alexander who had some biopsies done during an EGD. Do you still have those tissues archived?”

Dr. Myers’ feet felt a little lightness underneath his feet. Surely his partner wasn’t thinking...

“You do? Fantastic,” Dr. Wakeman decreed. “I want you to send one to the lab and tell them to run a toxicology study on it. Tell them I want the results stat.” He nodded at the phone. “Thank you.” And then he hung up. He looked at Dr. Myers. “Did you draw any blood on Mike Hammond today?”

Dr. Myers nodded. “I did a CBC and an H. Pylori test.”

“Send the red topped tube to the lab and order a toxicology screen on it,” Dr. Wakeman told him.

Dr. Myers nodded. “Okay.”

“And tell them you want the results stat.”

Dr. Myers was expecting that one.

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Mike got home a little after eight. He was feeling like hell. His stomach was in a knot and he hadn’t been able to keep down anything stronger than Gatorade all afternoon. He’d had the Omeprazole scrip

filled on his way back to the studio after leaving Dr. Myers and he took one as soon as he got them. In the past these had worked fine. He supposed he was just being impatient now. Medicine took a while to work, he knew, but six hours was pushing it in his opinion.

Janeece was waiting for him in the kitchen when he walked in from the garage. She gave him a startled look when she saw how pale he was.

"Honey, what's wrong?" she asked.

He cleared his throat. "Nausea. I can't shake it."

"What did the doctor say?"

"He thinks my ulcers are back and he gave me some medicine," he replied. "I'm having an upper GI on Monday too."

She put her arms around him and hugged him tightly. Then she kissed him full on the lips. "I'll take care of you, angel."

Mike thought for the millionth time how lucky he was. Janeece was calling him an angel and he was the one who'd been blessed with celestial tidings. Yes, he was the luckiest man he knew.

Janeece was also a knockout. That's what drew him to her in the beginning. She was a petite five foot four and she had flowing blonde hair that hung down her back in sweeping locks. Her figure was dainty and prim. She was so beautiful to look at that he got horny every time he eyed her. She had an oval face and almond shaped brown eyes. Her cheeks were perfectly rounded and her lips were like thin slices of tangerine. She was lightly tanned. When she moved it was like liquid flowing and she always wore something smart, wonderfully color coordinated for her skin and hair. This evening it was a beige sundress that accentuated her curvy hips. Even with his stomach in revolt, he felt a familiar hardening in his pants.

Meeting Janeece had changed his life. He was covering a charity auction at a church in Roswell and she was one of the event's organizers. Her family had belonged to the church for a couple of generations and even though her mother had actually spearheaded the auction, as a benefit to purchase cell phones for the troops in Iraq, Mike found himself wanting only to interview the pretty blonde lady who kept giving him subtle glances, and he had noticed them.

He left the auction short about five hundred bucks and carrying her phone number in his pocket. They started dating the next weekend. She lived in Cumming, in a house she bought after her first husband's tragic death, because she couldn't bear to live in the home she shared with him alone, and Mike had fallen in love with her as soon as she told him the story. He couldn't fathom someone so sweet and so gentle having to endure the loss of her high school sweetheart just a year after she married him. To have spent all those years alone, mourning a man she'd loved since being a teenager, was such a shame to Mike. She deserved happiness and he wanted to see that she got it.

They were married six months after they met. It was a big wedding at the church in Roswell and his status as one of Atlanta's leading citizens afforded them a lot of press coverage for the event. He loved sporting his beautiful new bride on his arm everywhere they went and he was so in love with Janeece that he couldn't imagine a life without her. He moved in with her at the house in Cumming and they made so many plans. They wanted to be married at least a year before they started a family. Being in their late thirties, they were well aware the children would have to start coming soon, because Mike didn't want to be seventy when he retired due to having kids to put through college into his golden years. Most men his age already had their kids nearly grown but he was glad now that he hadn't tied the knot any sooner in life. Janeece was the only woman for him. The only woman he wanted to bear his children.

Now their first anniversary was upon them and they were talking seriously about planning for their first child. Mike couldn't have been happier, until now when the ulcers were rearing their ugly heads again. He couldn't understand why he was getting ulcers again either. Before, he had blamed them on the stress of being single with all the demands of living an adult life coupled with a high profile job that demanded so much of his time and energy. Now he was happy and content. He had a wife he loved dearly. A nice home. A wonderful job. They were planning to start a family. Why should he be bothered with ulcers at this stage in his life?

"Come on, honey."

Janeece led him into their den and he sat down on the love seat they always shared. He smiled when she removed his shoes and propped his feet up on the ottoman for him. He was so lucky to have her. She was so good. So good.

"I'll make you a nice light dinner," she offered.

Frowning, he caught her hand and kissed it. "Baby, I don't think my stomach can handle anything to eat tonight."

She put her hand to his cheek and stroked it. "Then I'll make you a cup of chamomile tea with some honey to sweeten it. That will soothe your stomach."

Putting his hand over his twisting stomach, he willed it to settle down and kissed her hand again. "Okay, baby. That sounds great."

Mike turned on the television while Janeece went into the kitchen. He heard her running water into the electric kettle and then the tinkling of dishes as she took down a cup and saucer. He could smell the lovely aroma of the tea when she brewed it. So many couples nowadays never had the time for such loving gestures as this in their lives because they both had busy careers. Here, Mike knew that he was lucky again. Janeece didn't have to work. Her first husband had named her as the beneficiary on his life insurance. The sum had been almost half a million dollars. Tom was an accountant and Mike guessed that was why he planned for the future as well as he had. Janeece was well taken care of after he died and the money had grown thanks to high interest investments.

Mike was glad she didn't have to work. She enjoyed her volunteering at her church and she seemed to live to take care of him. He had a good paying job and, although he told himself that he wasn't competing with Tom, he did take out a million dollar life insurance policy to take care of Janeece and the kids (?) if anything, God forbid, happened to him. In today's economy, it only made good sense to plan for things like that and he felt more responsible now that he had a wife to consider.

Janeece came in a few moments later carrying the tea tray. She poured him a cup of the steaming liquid and he watched her stir in a teaspoon of honey to sweeten it. He took it from her outstretched hand and put it to his lips. His stomach rolled and ached when he inhaled the aroma but no way was he going to not drink at least a little of it. Janeece had made this for him. She made it with love. No sour stomach would deprive him of that.

While he sipped a little of his tea, Janeece removed his socks and rubbed his feet for him. He felt so tired but he knew this was in large part due to how rough he felt. Surely his medicine would kick in and make him feel more like himself. It had to. Day after tomorrow was their anniversary. Their first anniversary. It was to be a special occasion and he intended to enjoy it to the fullest.

"I think you'll be feeling back to normal in no time," Janeece said.

He smiled at her. "I'm planning to be in tip top shape by Friday."

"I was thinking," she said, "instead of us going out Friday evening, why don't I make us a romantic dinner here at home."

Mike frowned at her. "I don't want you to have to cook on our anniversary."

"I'd love to!" she said brightly. "You know you love my lasagna and I love making it for you."

The mere mention of lasagna right now gave his stomach a violent turn but he successfully fought it back. The tea was indeed beginning to soothe him. Or maybe the medicine was kicking in. Either one, he didn't care as long as something worked.

"I thought we'd stay in all day on Friday," she told him, smiling that seductive smile that always got him to agree with anything she wanted to do.

"Okay," he relented. "Make me lasagna for our anniversary."

She let out a short laugh and refilled his tea cup for him. "You know I only want to make you happy, sweetheart."

He reached out and stroked her cheek again. God, how he loved her. He couldn't wait to have a family with this woman. If she was half as good a mother as she was a wife, their child was going to be the luckiest baby in the whole world.

"And we do have that piece of our wedding cake in the freezer to enjoy for dessert," she added.

Mike couldn't figure that one out. He thought that after a year a slice of wedding cake that had been frozen for all these months would be about as tasty as piece of cardboard with icing spread on it. But if Janeece wanted it he wasn't about to contrary her.

"That sounds wonderful," he said with a smile.

"By the way," she said. "Mother and I are going down to Macon tomorrow for an Eastern Star meeting. I might not be home until four or five."

"No worries," he told her. "I might have a late evening at the studio anyway. I have to get some things done so that I can take off on Friday."

The evening wore on and Mike began feeling much better by the time they went to bed. His stomach was still slightly queasy but not nearly as bad as earlier when he'd arrived home. The medicine was evidently doing its thing quite well.

They made love for a while before they fell asleep. She had stopped taking birth control a few weeks ago, to get her body ready to ovulate and hopefully conceive a child. Mike always loved sex with Janeece. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever laid his eyes on and making love with her was like a blissful jaunt into the most comfortable place imaginable.

As he dozed off, he again thanked God for giving him Janeece. She was everything he had waited for and he hoped and prayed that he made her only half as happy as she made him.

"Good night, my love," she said into his ear.

He purred softly as he felt her hair against his chest. This was as close to heaven as he could imagine.

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Dr. Wakeman was waiting for Dr. Myers the next morning when the younger doctor came in after making rounds at the hospital. He ushered him into his office and on his desk were the lab reports on Mike Hammond's blood work and the one he had ordered on Tom Alexander's archived biopsy.

"I hope you don't mind that I pulled yours up with mine," he said.

Dr. Myers shook his head, sitting up at attention. "What did you find out?"

Dr. Wakeman slid them both across for him to see. "Look for yourself."

Putting the reports side by side, Dr. Myers could feel the blood draining from his face as he read the results. The toxicology report on Tom Alexander's biopsy showed abnormally high levels of arsenic in the tissue. Mike Hammond's blood showed the same. Both men had been poisoned! Except one was still living.

"Oh my God!" he exclaimed.

Dr. Wakeman was shaking his head. "I always thought there was something odd about Tom Alexander's death. Now I know it for sure."

"What should we do?" Dr. Myers asked him.

He raised his eyebrows. "I say we call the police."

But Dr. Myers shook his head. "I think we should call Mike Hammond in first and explain this all to him."

Dr. Wakeman could see his reasoning. Mike Hammond was a powerful force in local news and if they stirred up this hornet's nest without bringing him in on the scene beforehand, things could get very dicey indeed.

He slid the phone toward his colleague. "Call Mike Hammond."

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Mike was feeling much better that morning. His stomach wasn't what he could call right, but it was a lot calmer and he managed to drink a cup of coffee without discomfort before he went for his two mile run.

The running always made him feel wonderful. This morning it was draining and he knew it was because he'd been sick, but he was soaked with perspiration and it was still pouring from his body when he got back home and into the coolness of the air conditioning.

Janeece had left with her mother while he was out for his run. As he showered, he recalled their lovemaking from the night before. It was always such a rush to make love with her. She could do things to him that no one else had ever done before. He knew that it was true love between them or the passion he'd felt from the first time he saw her wouldn't still be burning as brightly as it was.

He had just toweled himself dry from the shower when he heard his cell phone ringing. Walking naked into the bedroom, he caught it just before it went to voice mail and he was pleased to hear Dr. Myers on the line.

"Good morning, Jay."

"Mike, how are you feeling today?" Dr. Myers asked him, his tone serious.

"Much better," he replied. "I'm not back to my old self but I think the medicine you gave me is working now."

Dr. Myers disregarded this information. "Mike, I need you to come in right away. It's an urgent matter."

Mike frowned. "Can't you tell me on the phone?"

"No." The doctor's voice was firm. "Come in as soon as you can get here."

"Okay," he relented. "I'll be there in an hour."

He rang off and set about getting dressed for this impromptu return visit. All he could think as he got ready to leave was that he hoped nothing out of the ordinary had turned up from his blood work.

Tomorrow was his anniversary and nothing could be allowed to spoil that.

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Mike could barely believe what he was hearing. This was the last thing he'd expected. His mind kept flitting back to last night and the sweet love he and Janeece had made. How could she possibly be poisoning him?

Even more astounding was the toxicology report on her first husband's tissue biopsy. Arsenic! This was fast turning into a nightmare. His eyes filled with tears as he listened and he appreciated the comforting squeeze that Jay gave his hand.

"I just cannot believe it," he said at last. "We're so happy together."

Dr. Wakeman felt his heart go out to this young man. He hadn't wanted this to be the case but the facts were too precise to be chalked up to coincidence.

"Mike, she lied to you about how her first husband died," Dr. Wakeman said. "That's what brought this whole thing about."

"And Dr. Wakeman was Tom Alexander's physician," Dr. Myers added.

Mike knew it was an ugly picture they were painting. It just didn't add up though. He and Janeece were in love. They were the picture of happiness. They were planning to start a family, for God's sake! How could she be poisoning him?

"But I'm better today," he said to them both.

Dr. Myers gave him the most sympathetic smile he could muster. "Mike, arsenic is a poison that works in an insidious manner. Your body fights off its effects for a while."

"But it's building up in your tissues all the time that you're being exposed to it," Dr. Wakeman added. "This is exactly what happened with Tom Alexander. He would come in sick and then get better, and then he'd be sick again. It kept on and on until he ended up bleeding to death from his gastrointestinal system."

Mike shook his head. "But why didn't you discover he'd been poisoned back then?"

"Arsenic poisoning isn't something you're going to find unless you're specifically looking for it," Dr. Wakeman answered him. "Gastritis made perfect sense after the EGD."

"And there are so many things bacterially that can cause gastritis and sometimes these organisms are resistant to many antibiotics," Dr. Myers continued.

"I wouldn't have suspected poisoning at all if I hadn't seen you in the hall with Dr. Myers yesterday," Dr. Wakeman went on. "We got to talking and the subject of your marriage to Janeece Alexander came up and then Dr. Myers told me about how she'd told you her first husband died of cancer. And that was not the case."

"So Dr. Wakeman ordered the lab work on Tom's archived biopsy tissue and I ordered the same on the blood we drew on you yesterday morning," Dr. Myers said. "We had to verify this one way or another. You're my patient, Mike. You're also my friend."

Tears started spilling down Mike's cheeks. He couldn't control them. He was hearing the death knell of the life he loved with Janeece. The woman he met, fell in love with, married, and had been planning a future with...until this morning. They were right. It all made too much sense for it to be a coincidence.

"You know we have no choice but to call the police," Dr. Wakeman said to him.

Mike sucked in a broken breath. Trying to stem his tears, he accepted the offer of a tissue from Jay and he wiped his eyes hurriedly. The older doctor was right. They had no choice. If a homicide had been committed, and he had been the intended victim of another, there was nothing left to do. But Janeece...a killer?

"I just can't understand why," he said through his tears.

Dr. Wakeman pursed his lips. "I seem to remember there being a sizable life insurance policy that Tom had taken on himself. I would imagine that Janeece was the beneficiary."

He hated saying those words right then. Mike was in a state of grief and this would no doubt be accompanied by all its phases. Yet someone had to keep a perspective here and if he could put enough

common sense to the answers he was giving Mike's questions, perhaps it would help him to deal with all this in the coming weeks.

"She did inherit all the money from his insurance," Mike told them. "Almost half a million dollars."

Jay chose his words carefully. "And do you have something similar?"

He nodded with a heavy heart. He would rather have told them anything but the truth on this one but it would serve no purpose. His own life insurance policy was double what Tom's had been. From all his years as a journalist he had learned one thing about money; it was a powerful motivator for people to do all sorts of things. Even kill.

"I'll call the authorities," Dr. Wakeman said, reaching for the phone.

Mike held up a shaking hand. "I think I should do that."

The two doctors looked at him. They felt terrible for breaking his heart like this but it was a matter of life and death. One man was already dead! At least Mike's life had been saved.

"Mike, why don't you let us make the call?" Dr. Myers said to him. "You're going to have a hard enough time for the next bit."

He shook his head, his tears drying, and a new resolve was gripping him. It was he who had started this entire chapter in his life on the day he first met Janeece. It only seemed fitting to him that he also be the one to bring it to an end.

"No, I'll do it myself," he said. "I'll call a friend of mine who is a detective as soon as I get home."

The doctors didn't really like this development but they could see that he was serious.

"Okay, but you tell your friend to get in touch with us as soon as you finish talking to him," Dr. Wakeman instructed.

Mike was nodding as he got to his feet. "I will."

"And don't eat or drink anything else she gives you," Dr. Myers told him. "I mean it, Mike."

"I won't," he promised. "She's in Macon with her mother today anyway."

They were both glad to hear that. The fact that Mike was feeling better meant that his body was thwarting the arsenic for now. A strong, healthy man like himself would need several doses of the poison, given at intervals, for it to be fatal. Dr. Wakeman knew this from Tom Alexander's example. As long as Mike didn't receive any more, he should be fine in a few days time.

"I'll be in touch later," Mike said, heading for the door now.

Dr. Myers stood up. "If I don't hear from you by this evening, I'm calling you."

"You will," Mike assured him. "You will."

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Mike called in sick to work as he drove home from the doctor's office. His mind was whirling with thoughts and emotions. A maelstrom of this nature had never gripped him before. Tears were coursing down his cheeks and later he didn't understand how he got himself back home without crashing into something. All he knew was that he needed to be alone for a while. Just long enough to get his thoughts together before he made another move.

He had a knot in his stomach the size of Texas. To even consider the notion that Janeece was poisoning him gave him jolts equivalent to touching a live electric wire. He loved her so much. How could she be doing this to him? And for money? Was one million dollars all he was worth to her? Was that the price tag she put on their life together? Did she not love him at all? What kind of a person could do something like this? Not once, but twice? He just couldn't get a total from the sum of all these parts.

The lie she told him about Tom's death was the thing that made all the other evidence stick together. If only she had been honest that GI bleeding was what took her first husband's life, he might not be able to believe any of this right now. Not even the toxicology reports. Many times in his career in news he had covered stories concerning murderers and their victims. Most of the time murder was a crime of passion; something committed in the heat of a moment where anger or jealousy or depravity drove the outcome. This was worse. Far worse. Janeece was slowly poisoning him, the same way she slowly poisoned Tom Alexander, and it was not a crime of passion. This was cold, calculating evil at work. Such knowledge made him shiver.

And the way she behaved. As if she loved him more than anything else in the world. He felt physically ill, and not from poison, as he thought over last night and the love they made before falling asleep. He

could easily feel the touch of her hands as she'd rubbed his feet for him when he got home from work. Her soft skin next to his own on all those lovely nights together. All lies!

Betrayal was the emotion he felt more than anything else. It was even greater than the horror over knowing that he was being poisoned. His entire life was a lie. Realizing this was far worse than anything else in this nightmare. His heart ached with grief at the discovery that everything was a facade. There would be no happily ever after. Not with Janeece. No children. No beautiful family to come home to. It was all just a dream. An impossible dream.

When he arrived home, he sat in his car in the garage for a few minutes before he went inside. Looking up at the house, knowing that Janeece bought it with the spoils of Tom Alexander's murder, he wondered what plans she had for the insurance money from his death. It made him tingle with horror from head to toe to think that she was slowly killing him and already plotting her next move. Betrayed and broken hearted, his mind went spinning again with the events from the morning. Janeece, his beautiful wife, didn't love him at all. She wanted to kill him. One million dollars in insurance money would be the trophy for her efforts.

This knowledge, above all else, drove him as he went inside the house and sat down at their kitchen table where he buried his face in his hands and wept so bitterly that his body was soon wracked with sobs. This was like a death to him. An end to every plan and every dream he'd made with Janeece. Dreams that only he believed would come true. Janeece had dreams of her own, and they involved seeing him push up daisies for hers to come true.

No! He wouldn't let his grief rule him now. He couldn't. If he did that, she would win regardless of the outcome. If Janeece was indeed the cold blooded killer that it seemed she was, then he deserved more than a broken heart as his prize for winning the game. There was also a part of him that felt he owed it to Tom Alexander to make Janeece know what it felt like to be betrayed by someone who loved you. Poor Tom. He would never know that she was about to meet the end of her homicidal game. He had never even known that she killed him. Yes, Tom deserved justice. Just as he deserved the same for all the wasted time and all the futile love he had spent on Janeece.

Mike got up from the table and went to the sink where he wet a paper towel and wiped his face. He blew his nose and drew in a deep, cleansing breath. No more tears, he told himself. Not one more. Not for himself. If he was going to cry again because of this tragedy, it would be for the children he wanted to have that would never be born and it would be for Tom Alexander.

Opening the cabinet beneath the sink where the garbage can sat, he reached to throw away the paper towel and when he did he saw something that gave him goose flesh. Behind a bottle of dishwashing liquid, in brazen sight, was a box of rat poison. He knew before he took it in his hand what Janeece had bought this for. They didn't have rats.

He read the label, saw the skull and crossbones warning on the box, and then spotted what he was looking for. Active ingredient: arsenic.

"Damn you," he breathed in disgust.

And that's when he knew what he was going to do. That moment was the defining instance in this nightmarish day.

Mike put the box of rat poison back where he found it and then he slowly walked to the refrigerator. It was one of those big side by side models with the freezer on the left. This is the door that he opened and he spotted what he was looking for immediately. The left over wedge of wedding cake from what had just hours ago been the happiest day of his life.

He took it out of the freezer and placed the plate on which it sat, covered with cling film, on the bar so that it could thaw.

*

With no word by three-thirty, Dr. Myers called Mike. He answered on the second ring.

"Mike, is everything okay?" he asked.

"Oh yes," Mike assured him. "I'm getting things squared away here."

"Have you called your friend with the police department yet?"

"I'll be doing that in the next little bit," Mike assured him.

Dr. Myers didn't like the sound of that. "Mike..."

"I promise," he said. "I'm taking care of everything."

"Okay," Dr. Myers relented. "But you call me as soon as you talk to your friend."

"Will do. Talk to you in a bit, Jay."

"Be careful."

"You can count on that."

*

It was four o'clock when Janeece got home from having spent the day in Macon with her mother. She frowned when she saw Mike's BMW sitting in the garage as she drove in beside it.

She found him sitting in the den, wearing blue jeans with a white button down shirt and he was barefoot. He was looking at her high school year book.

"Hi sweetheart," she said with a smile to her greeting.

He winked at her. "Welcome home."

"Did you not feel like going in to work today?" she asked.

He sighed. "I just decided to take an extra day off."

She leaned over and kissed him. "Starting our anniversary weekend early?"

He nodded. "You could say that."

She gestured to the book in his lap. "Why are you looking at my senior year book?"

He raised it up a tad. "You never told me you were voted the most likely to succeed in your class."

She gave a slight laugh. "That was a long time ago, honey."

"And I love the quote you gave them for it," he said.

She glanced down. Beneath her photo for the honor, in quotation marks, it read: 'My goal is to one day be independently wealthy.'

"Oh gosh," she said with another slight laugh. "That was indeed a long time ago."

Mike closed the book and squeezed her hand. "I've got a surprise for you."

She grinned happily. "What is it?"

He stood up and put his hands on her shoulders. "I made dinner for you tonight."

Janeece looked surprised. "You did."

"Yep." He kissed her. "Consider it my first anniversary gift to you."

Janeece laughed as he led her into the kitchen. He gallantly pulled out her chair for her and seated her as if he were a waiter in the finest restaurant in Atlanta. There were linen napkins laid out and the table had been set with wine glasses and silverware that was arranged like a pro. She was impressed.

Mike poured them both a glass of red wine. Then he went to the oven and took out two plates on which were steaming helpings of sirloin steak, green beans, and small ears of corn. He took his own seat as he put her plate in front of her.

"Bon appetit, Madame."

She gave him a bright smile. "This looks and smells wonderful. Thank you, darling."

They made small talk about her day with her mother as they ate. Mike's stomach was still somewhat gentle but he managed to eat without any difficulties. He kept watching Janeece's expression as they chatted and he couldn't believe how smooth she was. Like nothing out of the ordinary was going on at all. Diabolical.

"That was delicious!" she congratulated him as soon as they swallowed their last bites.

He smiled at her. "Thank you, my love. Wait till you see what we're having for dessert."

She couldn't suppress a giggle as she watched him clear away their plates. Then he opened the refrigerator and took out two dessert plates on which sat the wedge of their wedding cake, sliced into two pieces. She made a sad face as he brought them to the table and sat back down.

"I was saving this for tomorrow night," she said.

Mike reached for her hand and touched it. "We'll have something even more special then. I thought this would be a nice touch to set the stage for tomorrow."

Janeece looked intrigued. "What are you planning for tomorrow?"

Mike shook his head like a patient parent. "You shall just have to wait and see."

She picked up her dessert fork and took a small bite from the dry cake. The icing was still sweet but the cake was past it. Still, this was a special occasion.

"Dr. Myers called me to come back in this morning," Mike said, taking a bite of his own cake.

She nodded at his words. "What for?"

He dropped the first bomb. "Why did you lie to me about how your first husband died?"

She paused, her fork halfway between the cake and her mouth, but only for a second. "I beg your pardon?"

"Dr. Myers' partner is a Dr. Wakeman," he told her.

Her bite of cake in her mouth, she froze again, but again only for a second. "Oh really?"

"Really," Mike said. "They were talking after Dr. Wakeman saw Jay walking me out yesterday. Tom didn't die from liver cancer."

She made a small frown. "He must not remember. It was ten years ago."

"Oh, he remembers," Mike went on. "It seems my symptoms are similar to the ones Tom was having when he first became ill."

Janeece kept eating as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on. She even took a sip of her wine. Casually. Nonchalantly. Mike wanted to reach out and slap her.

"You'll never guess what else," he said.

She eyed him suspiciously now. "What else?"

"Dr. Wakeman has never stopped wondering how a healthy young man like Tom could have succumbed to a case of bacterial gastritis," he calmly went on. "Do you remember Tom having an EGD when they were trying to find out what was wrong with him?"

She shrugged slightly and went back to her cake. "He had a lot of tests."

"Well, one of them was an EGD and they took some biopsies of his stomach tissue during it," Mike said. "Those tissues have been archived at Grady ever since."

She frowned down at the two or three bites of wedding cake left on her plate. "Is that so?"

"Yes," Mike replied. "So Dr. Wakeman, still curious about what made Tom sick enough at his stomach to bleed to death, called Grady and had the lab there run a toxicology screen on the biopsy samples. Dr. Myers had another one done on the blood they drew from me yesterday morning."

She looked him dead in the eye. Her expression had turned to stone. "And?"

"And it seems that Tom and I share something other than you," he said. "There are high levels of arsenic in my blood and in Tom's biopsy tissues."

She swallowed. Hard. "What are you saying, Mike?"

He rose from the table and walked over to the sink. Janeece watched him lean over as he opened the cabinet below it and when he walked back to the table he was carrying the box of rat poison. He sat it down with a thud beside her arm.

"We don't have rats," he informed her.

She looked up at him with a questioning frown having replaced her stony expression. "You don't think that I -"

"Why did you do it, Janeece?" he cut her off.

She gaped at him and her face became a mask of feigned shock. "Mike, this is obscene!"

"Yes, it is," he agreed. "That's why I made dinner for you tonight, my love."

She gasped. Her eyes fell to the remainder of wedding cake in front of her. Then they darted to the sink where he had taken the dinner plates. Their next stop was the box of rat poison beside her left arm. Lastly, they fell on him.

"You wouldn't!"

She leaped up from the table and dashed into the laundry room where there was a half bath. Hearing her heave and wretch, Mike couldn't suppress a truly amused laugh. He waited until he heard the toilet flush and then he walked to where she had gone and met her coming out of the bathroom, wiping her face with a wet cloth.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "I didn't put the rat poison in your food."

She gave him a wild eyed stare. "Then why...did you...?" she stammered.

He folded his arms across his chest and faced her squarely. "Because I wanted you to know how it feels to think that someone you're supposed to love has poisoned you."

She let out a piercing shriek and came at him with arms flailing. Mike had to grab her and spin her around, pinning her arms to her sides, to gain control of the situation. She squirmed in his grasp and kept right on shrieking until he gave her a violent shake that caused her teeth to clatter.

"Let go of me!" she demanded.

"Not until you've met our guest."

Mike turned around, his arms still tightly around her, and forcibly walked her back into the kitchen. A man in a brown suit, about Mike's age, was standing just inside the door that led out to the garage. She

went rigid in Mike's grasp as this man came toward them and took a small flip-pad out of his inner jacket pocket.

"My darling, this is Detective Jerry Trainer," Mike said.

Detective Trainer opened his pad. "Janeece Hammond, I'm placing you under arrest for the murder of Tom Alexander and for the attempted murder of Mike Hammond. You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right..."

*

Mike was sitting on the sofa in his den with Dr. Myers beside him. Janeece had been taken away by Jerry Trainer. The worst day in his life was coming to a close but the worst chapter was undoubtedly just beginning.

"Thank you for coming out here to be with me, Jay," he said.

Dr. Myers gave him a sympathetic smile. "I had a feeling you'd need a friend to be with you tonight."

He nodded. "Yeah, that's just exactly what I need."

"Why did you do it this way, Mike?" Dr. Myers asked him.

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "I did it for myself and I did it for Tom Alexander," he replied in a weary voice.

"But why?" Dr. Myers persisted.

He set his jaw firmly. "Because I wanted her to have just one minute of being as afraid as I was after you told me what was happening."

Dr. Myers put his arm around Mike's shoulders and squeezed him. "Well, I think you're a very brave man."

Mike shuddered. "I feel like a fool."

Dr. Myers squeezed him again. "Come on and let's get out of here. I don't think you need to stay here tonight."

Looking around the room he once had loved as being a part of his happy new life, Mike nodded slowly and said: "Yeah, I don't think I want to live here anymore."

*

Nine months later Janeece was found guilty on one charge of first degree murder in the death of Tom Alexander and a second charge of attempted murder in the poisoning of Mike Hammond. Her attorney had mounted a vigorous defense but the forensic evidence was too much to overcome. She was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Mike was in the courtroom on the day she was sentenced. She didn't even look at him. He thought this was just as well. He didn't have anything else to say to her and he had gone over the details of their marriage so many times by then that nothing needed to be added. The whole affair was over.

Well, almost over.

They were divorced two months after she began serving her sentence. Mike was awarded the house and the entirety of their monetary assets. The original five hundred thousand dollars Janeece had received from Tom's insurance policy of course went back to the insurance company, but the interest and subsequent proceeds it generated went to Mike. He used it to set up a scholarship fund in Tom's name. He sold the house in Cumming and bought himself a smaller place in Roswell. It appeared that everything was over and done with where the Janeece escapade was concerned.

Mike had taken a leave of absence from WCIS following Janeece's arrest. After her conviction and sentencing he notified his supervisor that he would not be returning. The media coverage had been so great during the whole thing that he was a little soured on his own profession because of it. Instead he decided to write a book about what he went through. He felt he owed it to himself to use the book as a kind of therapy to put the whole thing to rest, and he wanted to do something greater than the scholarship fund to keep Tom's memory alive. He also began making plans to move back to Texas. Georgia just wasn't a place he wanted to call home anymore.

When Mike's book came out it was a bestseller. He sold the film rights to it a few months later. The money he made from the whole project was more than ample justification for his having written it and he felt that he deserved a happily ever after moment in the end anyway. The therapy he hoped to gain from writing it all down as a biographical study of a criminal mind was another plus for him. Janeece never

admitted to any wrongdoing of any kind, so he decided in the end that money had to be her sole motivator. He even used the quote she gave her high school year book staff, beneath her photo as most like to succeed, as the lead-in line for the book.

He did get some criticism for the title he chose. He didn't see anything wrong with it. When he went on a national talk show right after the book came out, he was asked about his choice for the name of the book and if he felt that he'd made of light of the situation by using it.

"No," he honestly replied. "I think Arsenic and Old Cake just about sums it up for me."

The studio audience gave him a standing ovation.

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