

LIAR'S POKER

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Lyla Dechanet offered to make a fresh pot of coffee. Assistant District Attorney Marie Deguerre declined and homicide Detective Rex Wilde said he'd be fine with leftover java from breakfast. He needed a jolt not a treat. He thought he saw a subtle grimace jump like a static electric shock from the new widow's aquamarine eyes to her cardinal red lips. He wondered which she found more distasteful, the notion of ten-hours-old coffee or the aftermath of shooting her husband.

Wilde chastened himself for the insensitivity of this train of thought. He could only imagine how traumatic it must be for a woman with a PhD in French Impressionism to be violently assaulted by her husband, shoot him in self-defense, then be subjected to suspicion and ceaseless interrogation by the New Orleans authorities. To Wilde it seemed perfectly natural for a woman in her situation to try to sweep the chaos under a carpet of everyday minutia--making coffee, applying makeup, dabbing spot remover on fresh blood stains.

Lyla nuked the coffee in the same mug she'd given Wilde that morning . It had become a familiar sight over the course of the day as Wilde had made her drill down through every angle of her statement. She had not complained, as most witnesses do, about his incessant and repetitive digging at details. He found her grace under pressure both impressive and strangely attractive.

Lyla set his coffee on the table before him, then turned to ADA Deguerre. "You're sure you don't want anything? Iced tea?"

"I'm fine," said Marie. She sat stiffly, forced by professional circumstance to be in the same room with Wilde, for whom her disdain was apparent.

It had been a year and a half since their one-night stand, which he'd come to think of as their one-night cringe. They'd found each other attractive enough at the Superior Court holiday party but later, in her apartment, he'd rushed things, souring her romantic fantasy. Too much eggnog, too little finesse. Unluckily for them both, instead of booting him out, she'd honored the implicit social contract she'd made by sliding her hand up his inseam in the courthouse elevator.

But she'd made no bones about her feelings the following morning. *Did you learn to have sex in a wrestling academy? Pin me for a two-count, then it's over? Can you name one thing you did*

last night that you can imagine, in your wildest dreams, that a woman might enjoy? Since then, they'd seen each other only in passing until this case had forced them to work together. It wasn't pleasant.

Lyla took a small saucepan of boiling water off the stove and dipped a teabag up and down, watching the color darken. Wilde assumed she was steeping the tea more for the break than the drink. The ADA had worn her out and, apparently, wasn't done. Wilde thought Marie could have covered the necessary ground in half the time. He had already collected and scrutinized Lyla's police statement, after all. But Marie Deguerre seemed determined to rub Lyla's nose in the nightmare, seemingly grilling her for sport.

"Do you know why Lousianans don't sweeten their tea like other Southerners do?" asked Lyla.

"No," said Marie in a tone that said she didn't care.

"It's the Baptists. They don't drink alcohol, so they can't quench their thirst with sweet juleps and daiquiris like Louisiana Catholics. It's our sacramental wine."

Marie sighed impatiently, eschewing Creole courtliness. "If you're ready, Dr. Dechanet, I'd like to get back to your statement."

Lyla's smile turned grim and she took her time pouring her tea into a glass of ice, then stirring in a few teaspoons of sugar, before resuming her seat at the table.

"As you wish," she said.

Marie adjusted the elastic band on her long black braid before tossing it over the back of her chair.

"What did you do when you got the lab results."

"I didn't know what to do. When they tell you your husband laced your coffee with a lethal dose of pentobarbitol you...." Lyla shook her head at a loss for words.

The ADA's skepticism was obvious. "You what?"

"I just knew I had to get out of here."

"Any idea where he got the drug?" asked Wilde, trying to move things along.

Lyla shook her head.

"We don't know that he did," snapped Marie, giving him an icy glare to remind him that this was *her* interview and his participation was even less welcome than his presence. "Someone else could have drugged her coffee."

It was just Wilde's luck that Marie had been the one to draw the case when the 911 call had come in.

"No one else was here," said Lyla.

"Except you, of course," said Marie.

Lyla looked confused by this.

Marie clearly suspected Lyla of lying, of having faked her own poisoning to saddle Henry with intent to commit murder, even before the attack with the poker. Marie was a bulldog when she went on the offensive. Wilde was well acquainted with the bite of her animus.

"Why would you even think to take the coffee to a lab for testing?" asked Marie.

"It was the taste," said Lyla. "Something was off."

The ADA didn't respond, presumably hoping the silence would rattle Lyle into confessing. But Lyla waited her out, focusing on a cuticle. After a long awkward moment, Marie abandoned the attempt.

"Your husband makes a bad cup of coffee; you jump to the conclusion that he's trying to poison you," said Marie. "There's a hole in that logic. And I don't like holes. Most people would suspect bad coffee, not lethal drugs."

Wilde feared that Marie intended to keep at it all night.

"I'm not most people, Ms. Deguerre. My *grand-mère* was a Voodoo mambo. She made her living mixing gris-gris for people to feed to sick relatives, would-be lovers, rivals or wayward husbands. I was raised to be wary of evil powders in my food."

Lyla stood and walked to the kitchen window. She stared out at a vertical sliver of sunset that painted the narrow gap between two double-gallery houses across the street.

"Henry had been acting strange," she said. "He'd wanted to come out to NOLA for a new start. He had this big business idea. Said the Cajun *bon temps* were a metaphor for our future. But something happened and the good times never got rolling. For the last couple of weeks, he wouldn't look me in the eye when we talked. It felt like he was covering something up, I don't know what. He never talked business with me. But that morning, when he brought me coffee and toast, he made a big deal out of making me promise to finish it, like it was something the doctor ordered that I didn't want to take. It didn't feel right."

Marie drummed her fingers on the table, mulling this over. "Did Henry ever threaten or assault you before?"

"No. At least, not physically. But emotionally? He could be brutal. He knew me inside and out. He knew just what to say to stab me deeper than any blade. He didn't need his hands."

"Why would a man who'd never hit you try to poison you?" Marie's tone was accusatory.

Wilde saw Lyla's lip tremble and felt an urge to protect her from the onslaught. In the wake of a soul-rattling experience, Wilde had grilled her for seven hours and now Marie was closing in on her third. It had been a merciless day.

"That's what I keep asking myself," said Lyla. "We had our quarrels, but I always thought that, deep down, he loved me."

"Nonetheless, you suspected him."

"It wasn't that thought out. The coffee smelled off, that's all. I had a lunch date with an old college friend who teaches chem at Tulane, so I packed it up and took it with me. It was no more than an afterthought until the tox screen came back."

"So you came home to confront him?"

"I came home to grab some clothes, to get out of here. I threw some stuff in an overnight bag and was heading out the door when he walked in. He saw the bag and went berserk. He grabbed me and threw me across the room. I smashed into the wall and fell. He was shouting and bouncing around and then he grabbed the poker and..."

The rest of her story seemed too painful to verbalize. She closed her eyes as if to force back tears.

Wilde knew he was skating on thin ice but he couldn't stand to watch Lyla in pain. "Look, Marie. We've been through this a half-dozen times. Her story hasn't budged. The crime scene appears to support her sequence of events. Can't we call it a day?"

Marie shot him a glance that could have seared his eyeballs. Then she turned back to Lyla.

"Why was the gun in the living room?" she said.

"He always kept it there, in the side table," said Lyla.

"How did you manage to get it?"

"I don't know. I was on the floor; he was across the room. He came at me with the poker and I went for the gun. It just went off."

"Just went off? All by itself? And just happened to be a fatal head shot?"

"I don't know. It happened so fast."

"Not too fast to flip the safety off."

"The safety?"

"It had to be off for the gun to fire."

"I don't know. I don't know anything about guns."

"Maybe it was already off," suggested Wilde.

Marie grimaced. "Why don't you go wait outside, Detective Wilde."

Wilde was on the back patio, staring through a pair of field glasses, when he heard Marie's car roar to life on the street. It had been a year and a half since he'd followed her to her apartment and she still hadn't gotten her muffler fixed. A moment later, the porch door opened and Lyla came out to join him. She looked drained but relieved that the night's ordeal was over.

"Those were Henry's binocs," she said.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to intrude." He put them back in their waterproof case on the patio table.

"I didn't mean it that way. They just jogged an image in my head, that's all. He used to sit out here bird-watching. We're under some kind of migratory flight path or something. What were you looking at?"

"The Crab Nebula," he said. "It kind of hides in Orion."

"So you're an astronomer, too."

"I took a few classes in college."

"A real Renaissance man," she said. "I like looking into the sky. It's the only place you can look back in time. You see a star but you know it isn't there anymore. It's moved on. What you see is just a memory. I've known people like that. You look in their eyes and they've moved on. The person you thought you knew isn't there anymore. I get the feeling you're not like that, are you Detective Wilde? You seem like the kind of guy who knows who he is and sticks to it."

He wasn't sure what she was getting at, so he changed the subject.

"Call me Rex."

"All right. Rex."

He liked the way she voiced his name, letting the sibilance linger as if enjoying the feeling on her tongue.

"Now that the Coroner's guys are gone I'm releasing the scene," he said. "You can have your house back."

He watched her eyebrows twitch as she pondered this for a moment.

"I hadn't really thought about staying in the house after this," she said. "Is that what most people do?"

"A lot of people can't afford to do anything else. I can give you the name of a crime scene cleaner if you like."

"People specialize in that?"

"Sure. They have to go through training and State licensing to dispose of biological waste."

She shivered. He wasn't sure if it was from the image or the cold, but he put his jacket around her shoulders and that seemed to comfort her.

"Do you have some place to stay?" he asked.

"I know a guest house over by Bayou St. John. I guess I could get a room there until I figure things out."

"No relatives? Friends?"

"After the day I've had, I couldn't face telling the story to one more person."

"Sorry," he said.

"Oh, I didn't mind telling you. But that ADA...." Lyla shook her head. "I can see why you two don't get along."

"You could tell, huh?"

"I thought it was sweet, you trying to protect me."

"You're not the only one who wanted to get this over with," he said.

She pulled his jacket closed across her chest as if it were a blanket.

"I know it sounds ridiculous, considering," she said, "but... I'm going to miss him. Not that things have been all that great for the last few years. Neither one of us was very happy, always on the move, pursuing his next grand scheme or running away from the last one. I must have threatened to leave him a dozen times. But even when he was a shit, he had some kind of hook in me. The highs softened the lows. Like I was an addict. Pretty dumb for a woman with a doctorate, right? If I'd left him, he'd still be alive."

"Don't think like that."

"Why not? He wouldn't have drugged my coffee. I wouldn't have tried to run. We wouldn't have fought. He wouldn't have grabbed the poker. I wouldn't have had to... do what I did."

"None of this would have happened if he'd just let you walk out. But I'm guessing he was possessive. I see that all the time on the job. Guy claims he killed his wife or his girlfriend because he loved her too much to let her go. If Henry can't have you, no one can. Well, that's on him, not you. He got what he deserved."

"And I didn't?"

The bone structure of her face carved the moon-shadows into a living skull.

"I don't think you deserved any of this," he said.

"You don't even know me."

"In my line of work, you learn to read people pretty quick. I know you better than you think."

A shadow of a smile curled her lip. "What do you know?"

"I know you're a good woman who got tied up with a bad guy who made you suffer when he was alive and didn't stop when he died."

"Your friend from the DA's office doesn't think I'm such a good woman."

He was reminded of his fling with Marie and the head-on collision that ensued. He tried to quash the fear of a repeat with Lyla.

"Marie's just being thorough," he said. "Sometimes that means pursuing unlikely theories to rule them out."

Lyla looked up and the moonlight washed the shadows off her face. A solitary tear rolled down her cheek, leaving a glistening trail. The glow of her skin and the grace of her expression reminded him of a white marble angel he remembered from his honeymoon in Barcelona. That seemed a lifetime ago. And a marriage ago.

"Listen," he said, weighing his words carefully. "If you need a shoulder to cry on or an ear to fill... I mean, I know we've only known each other a few days but... given everything that's happened... for the most part, your friends are probably going to shy away, like what happened to you might be contagious. It's not their fault; people just don't know how to act in situations like this. They don't know what to say. I've had a lot of experience with this kind of thing. Too much, maybe. But if you need someone...."

She turned to face him. "Rex..." Her tone was indecisive, as if she, too, was balancing her words on a scale. He steeled himself to be told that he'd overstepped a boundary. He started wording an apology.

"Could you just hold me for a minute?" She said it in a tiny voice, like a little girl's.

It took a moment for her words to register, then he closed his arms around her, drawing her in. Her warmth triggered an image of the two of them embracing on a secluded beach, up to their ankles in the surf, her cotton sundress flapping like a flag in the offshore breeze. This surprised him. He rarely entertained fantasies. Something about this woman was pushing buttons he'd thought were long frozen in the off position. He hadn't felt like this since he'd fallen in love with his ex-wife. The timing of this attraction could hardly be more inappropriate, but there was nothing he could do about his feelings beyond hiding them.

He looked down at her head resting against him and felt her tears soak through his shirt. He knew she'd need time to process the enormity of what had befallen her, if that was even possible. She'd have to work her way through a deep morass of grief and guilt and mistrust and shame and fear and regret. But one day she'd be ready to risk becoming involved with another man, and he could see himself being there when she was. He let his lips graze her hair, now silver in the gleam of the gibbous moon.

She turned her face up to him. Was she offering her lips? He fought off the hope. The idea was too perverse, the circumstances too wrong. What kind of animal was he to imagine taking advantage of a fresh widow's grief? As he scolded himself, she slid her hand up his back to cradle the nape of his neck. He felt frozen in time and space. Then she pulled him into a kiss.

In a dream state, he let the tip of his tongue slip out to brush her lip. Her head jerked away as if she'd been Tasered.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know why I did that."

"I'm the one who should know better," he said.

"But I'm the one who did it. Am I a terrible person?"

"You're still in shock. You're under enormous stress. You're grieving. You're vulnerable. I should have been more sensitive."

"I may be in shock," she said, "but I'm not grieving. And I'm a big girl." She held his gaze for a moment, then kissed him again. It still felt tentative, as if she were dipping a toe to test the temperature of the pool. Except this time her lips parted first. He felt like a cad but he didn't want it to end. She pulled away and took his hand.

"Come on, star gazer," she said.

She led him off the patio into the darkness of the garden. She pulled him down to lie beside her on a small patch of lawn. He stared into an inky night sky and heard the loud, sharp squawk of a yellow-crowned night-heron. He wondered what it was doing so far from the bayou, whether it was as far off course as he felt.

"You must think I'm horribly crass after what happened," she said.

He started to argue, but she put her finger to his lips.

"Let me finish," she continued. "I am sorry he's dead, but I'm not sorry he's gone. The truth is, he was a cruel, selfish man. He didn't care about my opinions or my feelings. He just wanted to dangle my cleavage in front of potential 'investors' as a distraction while he sold them some sort of worthless bill of goods."

"What was his game?"

"I don't know. He never talked about how he duped them, just about how stupid they were to fall for it. He could be a real charmer when we were with people, treated me like a queen. Then we'd get home and Dr. Jekyll turned Hyde. I'd be a tramp with a PhD worth dick, an egotistical whore, trailer trash in a fancy dress. Maybe he was bipolar, I don't know. He'd go up and down like a yoyo until he'd reach a point where there was no up anymore. So we'd move and start over. Boston, New York, Milwaukee, Chicago, Kansas City, Denver, Vegas and finally here in the Shangri-la of Dixieland and drive-thru daiquiris. But his plans didn't work out here either. And he took it out on me. He'd walk through that door and become a verbal shredding machine, tearing me down as if that were the only way he could build himself up. He was relentless."

She rolled onto her side and hiked herself up on her elbow to look into Wilde's eyes.

"Kind of like this diatribe," she added.

He smiled. "Not a problem. That's what I'm here for. To help you get over him."

"I'm long over him," she said, tracing his lips with the tip of her finger. "What I need is someone to help me forget him."

She leaned over and kissed Wilde again. This time there was no uncertainty, no mistaking where they were headed.

Three hours later they lay naked in his bed. Lyla slept peacefully, her head on his chest. He watched her eyes ricochet wildly beneath their lids in REM sleep. He pushed a strand of hair from the gentle curve of her unfurrowed brow and wondered how Henry could have mistreated a woman like this. She had brains, beauty, charm, sensuality and humor--everything he could imagine loving in a woman. He found it bewildering that anyone would want to kill Lyla.

Wilde held her through the night, feeling the softness of her breast against his ribs, her breath on his skin. He could happily lie with her beside him for the rest of his life.

Dawn was lighting the room when she opened her eyes. She saw him watching her and smiled.

"What a lovely sight to wake to," she said. "I was worried last night had been a dream."

"I was afraid you might regret it."

"Just the opposite. Have you been up long?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Poor baby." She gave him a soft sympathy kiss. "Did I keep you awake?"

"In a way." He grabbed his phone and showed her the text he'd received in the night.

Her prints were all over the poker, wrote Marie. Only one set of his, all bloody.

"That woman's out to get me," said Lyla. "I swear to God, he tried to kill me."

"The only way his prints could have been bloody," said Wilde, "is if he grabbed the poker after he was shot, which would have been quite a feat, considering how that head shot killed him before he hit the floor."

She looked up at him, tears streaming down her face.

"Please, Rex. You have to believe me."

He searched her eyes for truth, torn between longing and logic. For a moment he wavered, then he bent to give her a gentle kiss. She deepened it, and he let her.

"Last night was heaven," he said. "But the stars have moved on. I look in your eyes and the person I thought I could love isn't there anymore. All I see is a memory. And a botched cover-up."

THE END