



## **WHEREFORE ART THOU, ROMEO?**

**by**

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**Tonya Martin handed the pet carrier over to Dr. Larabee and then turned to face the examining room window. “I can’t watch,” she said, her voice shaky.**

**“No, of course not.” The lady doctor sighed. “Tonya, you’re doing the right thing. There’s no point in letting him suffer anymore.”**

**Tonya nodded mutely. She didn’t have a choice, but it still hurt like hell.**

**Dr. Larabee quietly left the room to perform the dreaded task.**

**Tonya stared out the window. It was a beautiful spring morning. She turned her attention to the ladybug that was slowly zigzagging its way up the worn screen.**

**Twelve and a half years. Was that a long life for a cat? She wished now that she had kept Romeo indoors at night.**

Her vision blurred. She wiped her eyes and focused on the ladybug again. Out in the waiting area, a miniature canine of some sort was yapping its head off. Romeo demanded attention in a much quieter fashion. He was not a complainer. But the Russian Blue had a curiosity that could not be squelched – and it had proved to be his undoing.

Poison. It had damaged his liver and kidneys and by the time Tonya had noticed the effects, it was too late to reverse them. There was no telling where he had been exposed to the deadly stuff. Romeo's territory had extended far and wide.

Just as the ladybug reached the top of the screen, Dr. Larabee re-entered the room. She set the carrier down gently on the examining table.

Tonya walked over to it, but didn't look at the still form inside. She met the doctor's sympathetic gaze with tear filled eyes.

“You gave him a wonderful life, Tonya – and a merciful death.”

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That cat was her best friend. He'd given her a reason to get up in the morning and an excuse to come home in the evenings during her nasty divorce. He never gave any unwanted advice or made any judgments about her bad taste in men – and he hadn't seemed to mind the six months her house had resembled a war zone.

Handsome, green-eyed Romeo had never seen her faults.

Tonya decided to bury him on her uncle's farm, an hour away from Georgetown. She hadn't been able to find a box to fit his long, lanky frame, so, after holding him close for a minute and stroking his plush, silvery fur, she'd wrapped him in his favorite Road Runner blanket. (Romeo had insisted on watching cartoons.)

Uncle Ward didn't ridicule her tears, and insisted on digging the grave over by the red barn, underneath the sycamore tree. Tonya placed Romeo's favorite toys in the deep hole with him. Then she whispered a final goodbye and let her uncle cover him up with the dark, fertile soil.

She took that whole Friday off – much to her lawyer boss's irritation.

Why was she getting all worked up over the loss of a *cat*, for God's sake?

**Tonya wanted to tell Jerry to go screw himself. Instead, she reminded him of all the personal days she'd saved up over the past six years, and then abruptly hung up the phone.**

**She didn't return to Georgetown until the following evening.**

**After parking her Camry in the detached garage, Tonya reluctantly approached her Colonial-style brick townhouse. She dropped her keys twice before realizing she'd neglected to lock the front door. No wonder.**

**Tonya stepped into the open, two-story foyer and paused, listening to the silence.**

**No happy feline bounded down the stairs to greet her. She closed the door, nearly choking on the hard lump in her throat.**

**"Wherefore art thou, Romeo?"**

**She was going to lose it if she didn't find something to do, and quick. Or maybe she would take a little white pill and go to bed early – after eating a goliath amount of chocolate-chip ice cream.**

**Around 9:30, she went upstairs and collapsed – fully clothed – across her brass bed, falling asleep before her yawn was even finished.**

**Bells woke her. Jingling bells, soft at first and then ringing louder. She was surprised the sound had penetrated her deep, dreamless sleep.**

**Then it hit her – that was Romeo's catnip mouse toy – the one she'd forgotten about. It hung from an elastic string, and was tied around the doorknob of the downstairs coat closet.**

**Tonya sprang off the bed, instantly awake, and rushed out of the room to the top of the carpeted steps.**

**The noise stopped.**

**"Romeo?"**

**She was halfway down the moonlit stairs when a shadowy movement caught her eye. Tonya froze as a man in black moved forward into the pale light. He wore a ski mask.**

**A scream stuck in her throat as she tried to get her legs to move. They wouldn't.**

The stranger swung the catnip toy back and forth, making the bells jingle.

“You miss your little friend, don’t you, Tonya?” He sounded smug. “Well, I’m here now, and you’re gonna love me more.”

*Son of a bitch.*

Tonya whirled around and forced her numb legs into action – but she wasn’t fast enough.

The man lunged, grabbing her ankles and making her fall forward onto the stairs.

This time she let loose a scream that should’ve blown off the roof.

The intruder flipped her over and stood straddling her. His thin lips curved into a sadistic smile. He didn’t see the dark shape flying through the air towards him, coming from the top of the stairs.

But Tonya saw it. She watched it hit the bastard full in the face.

Her ears were assaulted by the bloodcurdling shrieks of both man and beast. The intruder and his attacker tumbled backwards down the curving stairs.

The man hit the tile floor, unconscious. The rescuer disappeared.

Later, when the police were ready to haul away the injured stalker, one of the officers asked Tonya where her “hero” had run off to.

“My Romeo?” she asked, smiling. “Oh, he’s around here somewhere. I’m sure of it.”

**THE END**